

Third Motion

Nearly every interpretation of how Copernicus' ideas were accepted in Europe revolves around the "Wittenburg Interpretation." Generally, astronomers at Wittenburg accepted Copernicus' mathematical models, but ultimately rejected his cosmology. As Rheticus, who visited and perhaps worked with Copernicus, eventually taught at Wittenburg, this is not too surprising. At least one man interpreted Copernicus' ideas differently. Leoninus accepted only Copernicus' notion of the "third-motion" which holds the Earth's axis constant with respect to the fixed stars that were observable.

Leoninus moved back and forth between the Netherlands and German attempting to avoid the more dangerous aspects of the Dutch Revolt. A Catholic, Leoninus first attempted to find a job in Rome by publishing his arguments with a title page and dedication to the Pope. In it, Leoninus postulated that the earth was not in rotation, but agreed with Copernicus that the Earth's axis was. This explained the precession of the equinoxes. He also hoped that his work would aid the reform of the Julian Calendar and fix the correct date of Christmas—the winter solstice.

Leoninus was also a very pious man. These views probably shaped his interpretation. He rejected explanations of God's omnipotence by Aristotelian means. He studied the wonder of God's creation to understand its mysteries, or at least address them. He hoped his contribution to the reformation of the calendar would also lead to Christian unity between the Catholics and the Protestants, an issue of great concern for the Catholic Leoninus living in the tumultuous protestant uprising in the Netherlands.

Interestingly enough, this idea of Christian unity drove Leoninus to republish his work after returning from Rome. This second edition was dedicated to the (newly) protestant government in the Netherlands. All mentions of the Pope and the original title page were removed and replaced. Again,

Leoninus was using his interpretation of the heaven's based on one-third of Copernicus' motions to attempt to close the growing chasm between the Protestants and Catholics. From his model he also calculated the vernal equinox and the obliquity of the ecliptic at the time of the biblical creation and deluge. Like many of his contemporaries, Leoninus was concerned with the end of the world. Given the tumult in Europe in general and the Netherlands in particular, it is easy to see how Leoninus believed that the apocalypse was near.

Leoninus' interpretation of Copernicus and the ultimate rejection or acceptance of his ideas is quite different from that which Rheticus and others taught at Wittenburg, but it may not be a singular event. As scholars discover more sources, the idea that Copernicus was widely and mathematically accepted may prove to be false. Much of the interpretation and use of Copernicus seems to be based on the motivation for studying astronomy. Astronomers at Wittenburg wanted to understand all observable movements, chart courses, predict events and understand the workings of the universe. Leoninus on the other hand saw astronomy as a way to contemplate the mysteries of that universe, and by association the mysteries of God. They rejected Copernicus' cosmology, as did Leoninus, Leoninus, however, went a step farther and rejected some of the mathematical models. When viewed in that light, perhaps Leoninus' interpretations of Copernicus might be seen as just an extreme version of the selected acceptance of Copernicus by the Wittenburg astronomers.

The new theories were used as a means of more accurately predicting the coming apocalypse, that at least seems like a common purpose shared by Leoninus and Rheticus. What is striking here is that Leoninus never gained any prominence for his astronomical knowledge, which seems to be quite broad for someone of his position. Finding sources from other amateur astrologers in Europe who were not working under the influence of the Dutch Revolt, may lead to a different understanding of Copernicus' ideas at the time. If Leoninus is any indication, it is probable that, outside academic settings, Copernicus' models were used and interpreted in quite different ways.

