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Copernicus' Revolution

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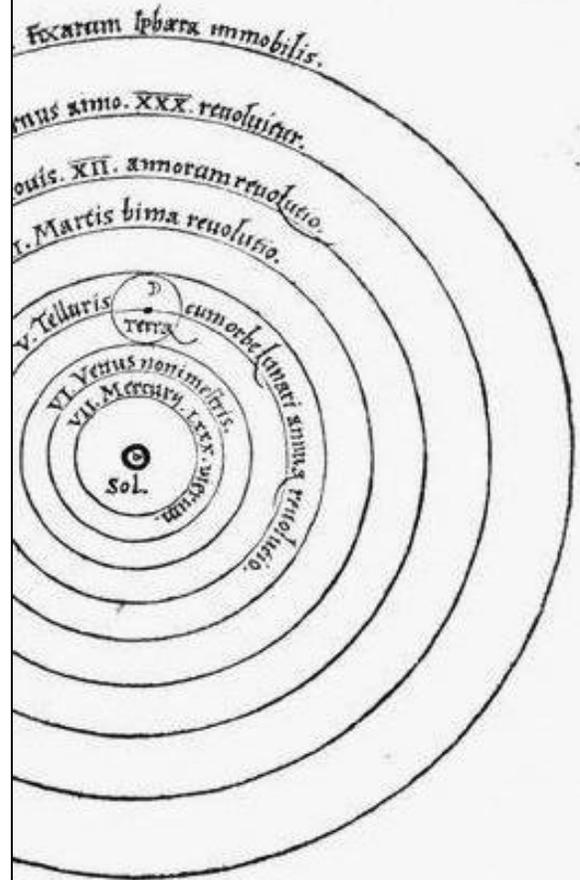
When the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* [On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres] in 1543 under the Nuremberg im-print of Johann Petreius, he set in motion a radical change in humanity's view of itself. No longer could the Earth be viewed as the center of everything. Instead, it took its place as one of several planets orbiting the Sun. That Sun in turn ultimately became a star among millions in a galaxy that was itself one of an untold number in the universe.

Lehigh University is fortunate to own a copy of this seminal work in science. It is certainly the capstone in any history of science collection, and not only does the Uni-versity own the first edition, but also the second edition published in Basel in 1566, along with a number of works by other early astronomers such as Brahe, Kepler and Apian.

Recently Owen Gingerich, who bears the title senior astronomer emeritus at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and research professor of astronomy and of the history of science at Harvard University has provided new tools for the examination of the meaning of Copernicus' work.

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LA I COPERNICI
orbe lunari tanquam epicyclo contineri
Venus nono mense reducitur, Sextum
us tenet, octuaginta dierum spacio circū
omnium residet Sol. Quis enim in hoc



apadem hanc in alio uel meliori loco po
simul possit illuminare? Si quidem non
mundi, alij mentem, alij rectorem uo
ilem Deum, Sophoclis Electra intuentē
quam in folio regali Sol residens circum
orum familiam. Tellus quoq; minime
erio, sed ut Aristoteles de animalibus
ra cognationē habet. Concipit interea à
tur annuo partu. Inuenimus igitur sub
hac



In 2002 he published *An Annotated Census of Copernicus' De Revolutionibus* (Nuremberg, 1543 and Basel, 1566) (Leiden: Brill) [Lehigh call no. SC Ref 016.52 G492a] which lists all known copies, with annotations. It shows, for example,

that the only other copies of the 1543 edition in Pennsylvania are to be found at Haverford College and Carnegie-Mellon University.

In addition, earlier this year he issued a fascinating account of his decades-long chase after copies of the two editions in *The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus* (New York: Walker, 2004) [Lehigh call no. 520 G492b].

It is a fascinating biblio-detective story about searches in libraries in North America in Europe, about discoveries of ownership and annotation, about theft and (occasionally) recovery, and about who read this book and why.

The bones of the search are in the *Annotated Census*; the flesh is to be found in *The Book Nobody Read*. In the process of his research Gingerich discovered that the canard Arthur Koestler delivered in his 1959 best-selling history of early astronomy, *The Sleepwalkers*, that the Copernicus was “a book that nobody read,” is far from being true. To judge from the number of copies annotated, sometimes extensively, many people read it.

In fact, in a sense it is being read today at Lehigh. *De Revolutionibus* is the focus of a seminar being taught jointly this semester by Alex Levine in philosophy and Gary DeLeo in physics. It is being taken by about twenty students.

The title of the seminar is “The Problem of the Planets.” In the syllabus the course purpose is explained this way: “this course will explore the scientific, historical, and philosophical implications of Copernicus’s proposal, with special emphasis on his solution to the age-old problem of planetary motion.”

One of the topics the students are examining are the two pages annotated in the Lehigh copy. Although Gingerich’s *Census* records the existence of these contem-

porary commentaries, he offers no thoughts on who might have penned them. Perhaps some of the students in the seminar will make useful discoveries.

The course also makes use of a book on astronomical instruments by Tycho Brahe, which is owned by Lehigh as well. Both of these and others are available to readers who visit Special Collections. The Copernicus and Brahe may also be visited at a special web site created for the course. It is located at the URL listed below, and also through links on the Library Services home page. Both books have been digitized in their entirety. Please pay them a visit.

—P.A.M.

<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/planets/>

Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Curator of Special Collections, or Ilhan Citak, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Other times call for an appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 758-6091; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.

