

PIETRO DANIEL OMODEO

AND P.J.J.M. BAKKER



Copernicus in the Cultural Debates of the Renaissance

Reception, Legacy, Transformation

By

Pietro Daniel Omodeo



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List of Abbreviations of Journals and Reference Books

ADB	<i>Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie</i>
AIMSS	<i>Annali dell'Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza di Firenze</i>
B&C	<i>Bruniana & Campanelliana</i>
BJHS	<i>The British Journal for the History of Science</i>
BOL	<i>Bruno, Opere latine conscripta</i>
BP	<i>Bibliografia Polska</i>
DBI	<i>Dizionario biografico degli Italiani</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
EN	<i>Galileo, Opere: Edizione nazionale</i>
ESM	<i>Early Science and Medicine</i>
FP	<i>La France Protestante</i> (reprint G�n�ve, 2004)
GA	<i>Copernicus, Gesamtausgabe</i>
Gal.	<i>Galilaeana. Journal of Galilean Studies</i>
GCFI	<i>Giornale critico della filosofia italiana</i>
JHA	<i>Journal for the History of Astronomy</i>
JHI	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
JWCI	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
KGW	<i>Kepler, Gesammelte Werke</i> (M�nchen, 1937–)
MBW	<i>Melanchtons Briefwechsel</i> (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1977–)
MFCG	<i>Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeitr�ge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft</i>
NDB	<i>Neue Deutsche Biographie</i>
Nunc.	<i>Nuncius. Journal of the History of Science</i>
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
PAPS	<i>Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society</i>
PSB	<i>Polski S�ownik Biograficzny</i>
RSF	<i>Rivista di storia della filosofia</i>
SHPS	<i>Studies in History and Philosophy of Science</i>
TAPS	<i>Transactions of the American Philosophical Society</i>
VA	<i>Vistas in Astronomy</i>
Zedler	<i>Johann Heinrich Zedler, Grosses vollst�ndiges Universal-Lexicon</i>

Other Abbreviations

app.	appendix
coll.	library or archive classification/shelf-mark/call number
n.	number
fn.	footnote
th.	thesis
s.v.	<i>sub voce</i>

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Introduction

In his famous *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (*Advice on Establishing a Library*, 1627), the Paris Librarian Gabriel Naudé included Nicholas Copernicus among the authors that a good furnished library ought to include, notwithstanding the fact that the Catholic Church had prohibited any support for the physical reality of the heliocentric system since 1616. Naudé insisted that Copernicus, followed by Kepler and Galileo, had thoroughly changed astronomy (*Copernic, Kepler et Galilaeus ont tout changé l'astronomie*).¹ Contrary to the views of Roman censorship and projects aiming at “selective libraries,” such as that of the Jesuit Antonio Possevino, Naudé argued that all those who innovated (*innové*) our knowledge (*és Sciences*) or modified any respect of it (*changé quelque chose*) merit a place in a good library, even though they cast doubt on ideas that were held for irrefutable by the ancients and those who followed them uncritically.² He even listed Copernicus among scientific innovators who brought precious novelties (*Est quoque cunctarum novitas gratissima rerum*).³ In a rather libertine *esprit*, Naudé did not exclude from his ideal library all “heresiarchs,” like Luther, Melanchthon and Calvin, arguing that wrong opinions should be transmitted as well, at least in order to rebut them.⁴ He also encouraged the acquisition of “rare” books, for which reason he mentioned the Copernican philosopher and heretic Giordano Bruno along with Girolamo Cardano and Pietro Pomponazzi.⁵ More in general, Naudé encouraged the dissemination of the “Moderns,” including Averroists (such as Zabarella, Achillini, and Nifo), Montaigne, Charron and Bacon, since only a “pedant” could deny the value of their works.⁶ Thus, all “innovators” deserve a special place in the pantheon of culture. These are the “Novators who build upon new principles or else reestablish those of the ancients, Empedocles, Epicurus, Philolaus, Pythagoras, and Democritus, for philosophy.”⁷ Apart maybe from Empedocles, the philosophers on whom Naudé judges the *novateurs* to base their new philosophies are directly or indirectly relevant for the natural debates hinging on Copernicus during the Renaissance. In fact, Pythagoras and Philolaus were

1 Naudé, *Advis*, 42.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 43. The quotation is from Ovid.

4 Ibid., 46–48.

5 Ibid., 45.

6 Ibid., 56–57.

7 Ibid., 65. Cf. Engl. ed., 41.

generally seen as ancient supporters of the heliocentric model and the atomists were treated in connection with Copernicus in many intellectual circles.

Naudé's perspective offers a synthesis of a widespread image of Copernicus at the beginning of the seventeenth century, that is, an image resulting from the debates that I am going to reconstruct in this book on the early reception of Copernicus. With Naudé, Copernicus potentially enters as a protagonist of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. This image accords with one of the most widespread representations of Copernicus, if not the historical *cliché* concerning his person and work. However, the present research on the reception, presence, influence and transformation of Copernicus in the scientific and cultural debates of the Renaissance aims to reconstruct how differently his person and his work were perceived in different moments and in different environments throughout the sixteenth century.

Copernicus's achievement as an astronomer who profoundly changed his discipline occurred in an exceptional period of transition in the European history, when natural investigation flourished and rapidly developed in many fields with unprecedented impetus. This age of "Renaissance" paved the way for crucial scientific, philosophical and cultural developments, not last the scientific habitus, celebrated in later centuries as a unique trait of modernity *tout court*. Yet, it is undeniable that the medieval roots are no less important to understand the epoch than the new prospects it disclosed. What's more, humanists and Renaissance scholars tended to conceive of their activity as a commitment to the rebirth of classical Antiquity, a fact that accounts for the constant entanglement of innovation and tradition that so distinguishes their age.

As I intend to show, this profound ambiguity also affects Copernicus and his reception. Much like many works of those times, his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, 1543), and the discussions it provoked, were marked by an inner tension between *new* and *old*, i.e., in this case, by the exploration of new conceptual worlds, on the one hand, and the hope and declared intention to reestablish some ancient and almost mythical wisdom, on the other. Thus, I am going to assess the multifariousness of the cultural environment in which Copernicus lived and was received, and more precisely of the "century" that began with the first circulation of his ideas, at the outset of the sixteenth century, and ended about 1616 with the Catholic interdiction of the heliocentric system.

Fifty years ago, Thomas Kuhn had very much in mind the effects produced by Copernicus when he published his theory of scientific revolutions, according to which scientific advancement is a discontinuous process in which apparently stable systems of knowledge, or, as he called them, "paradigms,"