

Biography Activity

The Enlightenment and Revolutions

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543)

Nicolaus Copernicus was a Polish astronomer whose masterpiece, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, changed people’s perception of the universe. As a university student preparing to be a church staff member, Copernicus studied law, medicine, and math as well as astrology and astronomy (which were considered parts of the same subject). In the early 1500s, astronomers could not answer questions about the sequence of the planets and variations in their brightness. Copernicus worked out a theory that planets move around the Sun. He waited to publish for over three decades to make sure his ideas were sound. Initially, his work was criticized because it contradicted the accepted notion of a geocentric universe. According to legend, Copernicus died shortly after he received the first copy of his book.



More About the Image: This engraving of Copernicus may have been made in the 1600s by French artist Pierre Gassendi.

1. Identifying Central Issues For what new idea is Copernicus famous?

2. Interpreting Significance Before Copernicus developed his theory, people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. How do you think people’s perceptions of themselves changed after Copernicus?
