

Nicolas Copernicus

The man who believed the planets orbited the sun

By Kellie Rankey

It was a somber event. In 1543, two months after writing his novel *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (*The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*), a great astronomer had died. But who was this man you may ask? It was Nicolas Copernicus. He was born in 1473 in Torun, Poland, where he primarily studied astronomy and astrology at the University of Cracow. He matriculated in 1496 in the University of Bologna to study both canon and civil law. There, he lodged with and worked as an assistant to Domenico Maria the Ferrarese of Novara, professor of mathematics, astrology, and the official compiler of prognostications for the university. This education would assist him in later creating a theory, and one with such difference from those at the time that it would change the face of astronomy and astrology.

After many years of study, he put forth his theory. It advocated that the universe was heliocentric, meaning the sun was at the center. This is what he based his book on. His friend Rheticus had persuaded him to write it, and when Copernicus did, it became his monumental work. Yet even though this was one of many things that made him well known, he still had a large mistake in it: the distances between planets are not the same and their orbits of the sun are not perfect circles. But that wasn't known back when he wrote the book, so it was considered correct by many. It was based mainly on Ptolemy's book *Almagest*.

The main theory at the time had been that the sun circled the Earth, not the other way around. Even the best astronomers believed this to be true. And because they were the best, Copernicus was made to be a fool by others around him. This was not an unusual thing that would happen when someone stated a new theory, especially one that is quite different from those at the time. But when normal civilians heard of his theory and learned of his knowledge, they came to respect him. Nicolas Copernicus was an amazing astronomer in his own time that lived from 1473 to 1543, being dead at 70 years, which may have been quite a long time then. He decided that all the planets circled the sun, which is common knowledge today. If he had not proposed this theory, we might have still believed that the sun circled Earth.