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The reception of Copernicus as reflected in biographies **

(1) Problems of the early modern Copernicus biographies

The biographer of a person who was living in the 19th or 20th century is usually confronted with an abundance of material that he has to choose, sort and evaluate in order to separate substantial from insubstantial information. Nicolaus Copernicus's early biographers, in contrast, had a rather small amount of biographical material that, in addition, sometimes seemed to be of questionable value or veracity. These meagre and dubious sources were determined by several events that mostly occurred in the first hundred years after Copernicus's death and have a continuing influence up to now.

Copernicus's only disciple, Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514–1576), knew many details of his teacher's life and a letter from Copernicus's friend and Confrater Tiedemann Giese, dated July 26th, 1543,¹ tells us that Rheticus had written a biography or at least made a draft of one shortly after Copernicus's death. For unknown reasons, this manuscript has neither been printed nor even found. A few published biographical notes, for example, in Rheticus's preface referring to the *Ephemerides* of 1551,² give us an impression of how much information about Copernicus's life has been lost.

Johannes Broscius (1581–1652) had also planned another and probably more important Copernicus biography, which he never wrote. Broscius, a doctor, theologian, astronomer at the University of Cracow and head of the Cracow observatory, travelled before 1612 to Prussia and Warmia in order to gather unknown material related to Copernicus's life. The reason for this trip was the search for the original manuscript of the seven odes, *Septem sidera*. A handwritten copy of these odes was kept at the University of Cracow at that time, and according to Broscius's own findings, the text with an unknown authorship was ascribed to Copernicus.

Simon Rudnicus (1552–1621), at that time bishop of Warmia, allowed Broscius to take several letters and documents to Cracow in order to analyze and publish them. But only three letters from this material were actually printed. These are included in the anthology, *Epistolae ad naturam ordinarum figurarum plenius intelligendam pertinentes*, which was edited by Broscius.³ His manuscript, *Tabulae astronomicae*, includes notes that tell us, for example, that he knew about sources related to Copernicus's student years in Cracow (e. g. the fact, that Albert Blar, a humanist from Brudzewo [1446–1496], was one of his teachers). The whole "Copernican collection", including the scientific correspondence, was lost after Broscius's death. Only the early biographers, Szymon Starowolski⁴ and Marcin Radymiński,⁵ included some of Broscius's notes in their Copernicus biographies.

The first Copernicus biography published in the German-speaking countries appears in *Vitae Germanorum* by Melchior Adam († 1622) in 1615. It is hardly more than a fragmentary compilation of a few printed sources.⁶ The main source was Rheticus's *Narratio prima* and his *Ephemerides* for

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¹ *NCG*, vol. VI/1, no. 194, p. 359.

² Rheticus 1550, Bl. Aij^r–A4^v.

³ Broscius 1615.

⁴ Starowolski 1627.

⁵ Radymiński 1658.

⁶ Adam 1615.

the year 1550. Also the other authors of the 17th century, such as Girolamo Ghilini (1589–1668), Isaac Bullart (1599–1672) and Lorenzo Crasso (ca. 1625 – ca. 1655), made little effort to use unpublished sources in their Copernicus biographies.

Due to various war activities in Prussia at this time it was even more difficult to look for Copernican “Reliquiae”. After Prussia’s and Warmia’s invasion by Swedish troops during the 30 Years’ War and during the 2nd Nordic War (1700–1721), an unknown number of documents, records and letters were destroyed. Confronted by the consequent lack of sources, early biographers had to fill out their scanty knowledge of certain parts in Copernicus’s life by either following characteristic biographical patterns or contriving myths and by pure speculation.

Copernicus’s life was hardly typical for a scholar in the Renaissance. It is true that Bernardino Baldi, as shown by Rose,⁷ often modelled his biographies on those of Giorgio Vasari’s (1511–1575) paradigmatic artist biographies in his *Vite dei matematici*. But Copernicus’s way of life and his distance from the European humanistic centers made it difficult to apply any biographical patterns. Of course, the early biographies point out the return of central ideas, such as a genuine desire for erudition, constancy in study, and imperturbable diligence in the elaboration of his work with God’s help. But these formulations are not specific enough to derive from them a model of Copernicus biographies.

With reference to individual biographical myths, the example of Copernicus verifies the statement of Wilhelm Fühl that “the degree of mythologization increases, the poorer the historical sources are”.⁸ Except Szymon Starowolski and Johannes Broscius, all early biographers used only printed material and sometimes quoted each other almost verbatim. Thus numerous Copernicus myths were handed down until the 20th century. Some of the most often repeated false statements are that Copernicus was a doctor of medicine; that “Varmia” is the capital of Ermland; that Copernicus was an enthusiastic follower of the Polish Crown; that he had taught as a professor in Rome at the “Sapienza”; that he had never refused the poor medical help, and so on. In the 18th century some new myths were added, like that of the “engineer” Copernicus, who had built water-pipes in Frauenburg.⁹

Christoph Hartknoch (1644–1687), a professor at a grammar school in Thorn and the most important chronicler of Prussia in the 17th century,¹⁰ was one of the first historians in the German-speaking countries who recognized the necessity of criticizing the historical sources. But important questions, e. g., why Copernicus’s findings were relatively wide-spread amongst scholars before his main work was printed; why he made only few astronomical observations; why he so vehemently denied the imputation of the hypothetical nature of his cosmological model, and so on, were investigated by neither Christoph Hartknoch nor his contemporaries. In general, it may be stated that the increasing number of Copernicus biographies in the 17th century was not matched by the relevance of their content. Amongst numerous biographical works, which were only of local historical importance, there are, of course, exceptions like the Copernicus biography by Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). This biography is properly seen as the first extensive explanation of the life and work of the astronomer that also satisfies scientific standards. It contains no new or revised knowledge in reference to biographical facts, but it has, as Hipler writes,

nevertheless still important merits and contains published material diligently collected, with love, taste and a well-founded knowledge of astronomical science, assembled to a well-formed and commendable picture of life.¹¹

A new method of biographically approaching the life and work of Copernicus was introduced in the 18th century by authors of the Enlightenment such as Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Alexandre Savérien (1720–1805), Ludwig v. Baczko (1756–1823) and Abraham Gottlieb Kästner (1719–1800). True, their biographies do not normally include more facts, nor are they better informed; but they do use a different procedure by seeing themselves as scholars in Copernicus’ succession. The authors of the Enlightenment differ from the early biographers,

⁷ Rose 1974, pp. 387–389.

⁸ Fühl 1998, p. 64.

⁹ Jacob Heinrich Zerneck 1727, p. 81.

¹⁰ Forstreuter, 1966.

¹¹ Hipler 1873, pp. 197–198.

who either were Copernicans or anti-Copernicans or abstained from any cosmological statement. For this new generation of authors Copernicus's work, his courage and lack of prejudice were a shining example. They praised the astronomer mostly because of his work's functional and structural comparability with their own learned activities. This did not make Copernicus seem more objective, but stylized the ingenious "star watcher" even more than the early chroniclers had done. A description of Copernicus as being a deeply religious Catholic, which we can find in Bernardino Baldi as well as Galileo, is naturally missing in the biographical works of the Enlightenment authors. Only Ludwig v. Baczko, who inclined towards Enlightenment tendencies and who — although he was a Catholic living in Protestant Prussia — stated that Copernicus "was enthusiastically devoted to his church and that he completed his duties with precision".¹² Hagiographical biographies of Copernicus for the ideological purposes of the Enlightenment reached their summit in the extensive Copernicus biography by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg.¹³ The Enlightenment impulse later decreased in favour of the use of the biography for nationalistic purposes.

It was a totally new species of source- and text-critical historians in the last third of the 19th century who took important steps in drawing a more objective picture of the historical Copernicus. The Copernicus researchers, Leopold Prowe (1821–1887), Franz Hipler (1836–1898) and Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer (1855–1929), traced the origins of the mistakes and clichés that blocked access to Copernicus. By discovering new sources, they could often help to destroy conventional myths.

(2) The Copernicus biographies as a forum for discussions about the new cosmology

The authors of the 16th century who had mentioned Copernicus in their biographical collections (i.e. Paolo Giovio and Nicolaus Reusner) avoided commenting on his astronomical knowledge and presented his work in a larger historical and contemporary context. If they judged at all, they referred in general to the undisputed scientific qualities of the astronomer, his industriousness and his religiousness. Even Bernardino Baldi did not mention his own point of view of Copernican astronomy, in spite of his clearly formulated admiration for the Prussian scholar.

This judgement-free description was contradicted by several authors in the first half of the 17th century, among them Johannes Broscius, Galileo Galilei, Pierre Gassendi and Marcin Radymiński. They all had Catholic roots but did not conform to the official doctrine of the Vatican, and they viewed the Copernican works as a scientific truth, not as a hypothesis. Nicolaus Mulerius (1564–1630), who declared support for Copernicanism already during his university studies in Leiden in the 1680s, was an exception because of his Calvinistic family and education.

The majority of non-astronomical and non-mathematically educated scholars had a neutral attitude until the end of the 17th century. This becomes clear with the Dutch author and historian Isaac Bullart, who stated in his "opinion de Copernic":

dés qu'il l'eut une fois avancée, il la soustint avec autant de vigueur que d'obstination, & la rendit si plausible, qu'elle partage encore aujourd'huy, & met en trouble toute l'Ecole des Mathematiques.¹⁴

Explicitly formulated anti-Copernican convictions are at this point only expressed by such outsiders as Heinrich Anshelm von Ziegler und Kliphausen (1663–1696). Von Ziegler swore to his readers in his *Schau-Platz* of 1695, which acted as scientific entertainment, that "one could hardly bear such false opinions without blasphemy".¹⁵

The general enforcement of the heliocentric doctrine at universities and, last but not least, in the awareness of the educated bourgeoisie took place in the first half of the 18th century. Though the philosopher and mathematician Christian Wolff (1679–1754) had to be somewhat cautious when teaching his Copernican point of view at the beginning of his academic career, this no longer played a role in the following generation. For Enlightenment scholars such as Johann Christian Gottsched,

¹² Baczko 1796, p. 139.

¹³ Lichtenberg 1800.

¹⁴ Bullart 1682, p. 76.

¹⁵ Ziegler 1695, p. 43.

Johann Gottfried Herder and Alexandre Savérien, heliocentrism was a scientific fact that they no longer needed to defend in their Copernicus biographies. Beyond this, the scientifically educated during the Enlightenment saw themselves in the direct tradition of Copernicus when it came to formulating their own scientific conceptions. Their belief that Copernicus had helped to break through to rationality, that is to truth against falsity necessarily let him seem a mastermind and key figure in enlightened thinking.

(3) The use of the Copernicus biography for national propaganda purposes

Although the early Copernicus biographies until the end of the 18th century were mostly free of nationalistic prejudices and misinterpretations, this tendency gained momentum during the 19th century, and finally it dominated the Copernicus research during the first half of the 20th century. The nationalistic functionalization superseded the important question of how Copernicus was seen in early modern society and how and to what extent his reputation as a scholar, a doctor and high administrative officer were influenced by the political and economic situation in eastern Prussia.

The early biographers, in contrast, did not question Copernicus's national origin or his affiliation in their descriptions. For them, Copernicus is an "Ermländer", a "Prussian", the son of a highly esteemed family from Thorn. In an article of 1709 probably written by Johann Franz Buddeus (1667–1729), which can be found in the *Allgemeines Historisches Lexicon*, it is correctly stated that

Copernicus (Nicolaus) ein berühmter mathematicus, philosophus und medicus, ward gebohren zu Thoren, einer stad im königlichen pohlischen Preussen [Copernicus (Nicolaus), a famous mathematician, philosopher and doctor was born in Thorn, a city in Royal Polish Prussia].¹⁶

The distance from Copernicus's native country to education centres located in the West and South of Europe is often emphasized in order to make the meaning and singularity of his life's work shine in a brighter light.

The only early biographer who stressed Copernicus's engagement for the Polish side during the arguments between the Teutonic Order and the Polish Crown was the Cracow polymath, Szymon Starowolski (1588–1656), who declared:

Et viuens quidem Theutonicorum Cruciferorum Magistrum inimicum sensit, quod bona Episcopatus illius ab eo iniuste possessa mandato Regio reciperet, restitueretque Ecclesiae [...]¹⁷

But even here we are only dealing with a legitimate political localization, and not with nationalism in a modern sense.

In the Copernicus biography written by the Cracow historian, Marcin Radyński (1754–1817) in 1658, there is no indication that Copernicus opposed the Teutonic Order. Only the biographical collection, *Życia Sławnych Polaków* (1788) by Józef Konstantin Bogusławski (1754–1817), edited before the Second Polish Division, takes a nationalist view. A second revised edition including an unchanged Copernicus biography was printed in 1814 in Wilna after the Polish Divisions. With this work, Bogusławski pursued plans similar to the numerous biographies of important Polish scholars and writers, which were written later. As Susan Sheets-Pyenson has written, nationalist tendencies were generally included in some part of the biographies edited in the 19th century:

As part of the same development, science biographies began being written to serve the aspiration of a nascent class of professional scientists, who readily confounded individual subjects with their own nationalist or ideological preoccupations.¹⁸

Concerning the particular political situation of Poland, occupied by Russia, Germany and Austria, biographies had a great importance as an instrument maintaining national feeling. National self-confidence should be invigorated by reference to important prominent personalities of the past. The

¹⁶ Buddeus 1709, p. 734.

¹⁷ Starowolski 1627, p. 160.

¹⁸ Sheets-Pyenson 1990, p. 399.

correctness of the reported biographical facts accordingly took second place. Bogusławski, who represents the beginning of this trend, treated the nationalistic aspect in a restrained way in the case of Copernicus. Only in the course of the 19th century did the nationalistic component of the Copernicus biographies come to the fore. More tendentious than Bogusławski's work were later historical collections and encyclopaedias about the erstwhile Poland. As an example, a book by Ambroży Grabowski¹⁹ may be mentioned. Grabowski is also the author of one of the first articles in which the Polish descent of Copernicus was "proved".²⁰ Another instrument of national stocktaking were journeys to areas that, completely or partly, formerly belonged to Poland. In particular Warmia and parts of East Prussia were scenes of important military and political fortunes of the Polish Kingdom in the 15th and 16th century.

A new quality and sharpness of nationalistic propaganda were reached in the writings of the Warsaw university professor, Adrian Krzyżanowski († 1852), who was "not afraid of even long travels to find evidence for his thesis" that Copernicus was a Polish compatriot.²¹ A two-volume collection of his works printed in Warsaw in 1857 includes among others the articles "O rodzinach społecznych i zażyłych w Krakowie z Kopernikami" [About the Cracowian families related to Copernicus]²² and "Kopernik gehört nicht in die Walhalla" [Copernikus does not belong to Valhalla].²³

On the German side, by comparison, nationalistic argumentation at this time was moderate. Leopold Prowe in writing his Copernicus biography²⁴ painted a picture of the era of humanism in Cracow, Upper Italy and Ermland that naturally gave no room for national rankings. Although he explicitly pointed out his position as a Protestant and member of the German majority in East Prussia, this usually did not affect the balance of his historical assessment. Elsewhere and in former times, Prowe was not devoid of national tendencies.²⁵ These are more strongly emphasized in the works of Johann Watterich (1826–1904), who taught at the Catholic "Hosianum" at Braunsberg and co-founded the "Ermländischer Geschichtsverein" [Historical Association of Ermland]. With the article "Nikolaus Kopernik ein Deutscher" [Nicolaus Copernicus a German], published in the *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands* [Journal for History and Archaeology of Warmia],²⁶ he created the prototype of the much later enthroned German nationalistic acquisition of Copernicus. On the other hand, the attitude of the Ermland historian and Catholic theologian Franz Hipler almost seems to point in a modern direction, as he writes:

It seems to me that the whole dispute about the fact, whether the father of our solar system was a Polish or a German citizen, is therefore in vain, because the question is improperly formulated, so that we have facts that prove nothing. If Thorn or the Kulm area was originally and genuinely Polish or not, if the name Kopernik could be traced back to Slavic or German roots — essentially this comes to nothing.²⁷

In the first half of the 20th century among Polish authors, the polemical and nationalistic tendencies of the biographic works about Copernicus became less violent after the Polish Republic was founded and some cultural self-confidence was recovered. The outstanding historical works by Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer, and in these the objectivity of his methodological stringency, were dominant for a long time.²⁸ The extensive Copernicus biography by Jeremy Wasiutyński, which was intended for a large audience, devoted much space to the national question, but nonetheless took care to avoid being

¹⁹ Grabowski 1842.

²⁰ Grabowski 1851.

²¹ Hipler 1873, p. 201.

²² Krzyżanowski 1841.

²³ Krzyżanowski 1843.

²⁴ Prowe 1883–1884.

²⁵ Prowe 1860.

²⁶ Watterich 1859.

²⁷ Hipler 1873, p. 205.

²⁸ Birkenmajer 1923 and 1937.

propagandistic.²⁹ But increased nationalism about Copernicus showed itself in the Polish Pavilion during the Parisian World Exhibition in 1937, where Copernicus was named as one of the seven most important Polish scientists. The official German scientific community responded to this claim in a common declaration of the Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte [Association of German Natural Scientists and Physicians] and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Medizin, Naturwissenschaft und Technik [German Society for the History of Medicine, Natural Sciences and Technology], that protested against the “further attempt to remove Copernick from his place in German cultural life and to classify him as being of Polish culture”.³⁰ In a culmination of this tendency, numerous journalistic and pseudo-scientific articles were published in association with the 400th anniversary of the death of Copernicus in 1943. These claimed that Copernicus was a “Volksdeutscher”.³¹ Even the serious research about Copernicus did not remain free from this interpretation.³² But most of the low-level, nationalistic propagandistic literature normally was not written by academic authors.³³ Differentiation between serious and popular literature should be made also for methodological reasons, to avoid such statements as that in a recently published article by Volker R. Remmert³⁴, who denounced the whole of German research about Copernicus between 1933 and 1945 as ideological and written “in aid of the Reich”. Sentences like “The German Copernicus symbolized the goal of the German expansion to the East”³⁵ are simply not historically accurate.

A modern view of the many tendentious articles about Copernicus from German and Polish points of view should free itself from ideological blinkers. It can only confirm what Willy Hartner said with remarkable clearness in the 1960s, that actually the diligence of the Copernicus researchers

often results not in the pursuit of objective truth, but instead in the deeply regrettable national contrasts that have existed between Poland and Germany for a long time. Both sides tried to prove that Copernicus felt national German or national Polish, ignoring the fact that the few preserved documents lead only to one conclusion: Copernicus was a man who always obeyed the law and who spoke out vehemently against every encroachment coming from the Teutonic Order or from Poland.³⁶

Today, since national contrasts in Europe are losing more and more of their importance, the questions about Copernicus’s family tree and nationality should finally belong to the past. Instead, the important scientist acts as a model and “connecting link between two neighbouring nations”,³⁷ and because of this a new generation of authors may bring about a new style in writing biographies.

²⁹ Wasiutyński 1938.

³⁰ Kühn and Lockemann 1937, p. 490.

³¹ E. g. Payr 1937, p. 7.

³² E. g. Brachvogel 1937, Schmauch 1943, pp. 61–95.

³³ E. g. Karstädt 1939–40, pp. 253–256.

³⁴ Remmert 2001.

³⁵ Remmert 2001, p. 336.

³⁶ Hartner 1960, p. 400.

³⁷ Hartner 1960, p. 400.

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