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The Leiden interpretation of Copernicus' theory of the universe

AS IS WELL KNOWN, during the first half-century after the publication of Copernicus' *De revolutionibus*, his ideas met with little acclaim. Although many astronomers adopted his new planetary theories, they were reluctant to accept the motion of the earth or the heliocentric order of the universe. Robert Westman called this attitude the 'Wittenberg interpretation' of Copernicus' theory.

In this paper, I want to investigate the attitude of the scholars at Leiden university (founded 1575) viz-a-viz Copernicus' theories. It will be shown that they were not primarily interested in 'saving the phenomena' by planetary theories, but rather in saving the harmonious order of the universe. Although most of them did not accept full heliocentrism, this attitude made them look favourably upon some other elements of Copernicus' description of the cosmos, notably the diurnal rotation of the earth and the heliocentric orbits of Venus and Mercury.

Leiden University was free from ecclesiastical control and instead dominated by humanist scholarship. Hence, scholars from Leiden, and Dutch scholars in general, may have felt more free in dealing with innovations in cosmology than their counterparts from Wittenberg or elsewhere.¹

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¹ For the detailed description of the subject under discussion, see Rienk Vermij, *The Calvinist Copernicans: The reception of the new astronomy in the Dutch Republic, 1575–1750*. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2002 (pp. x + 438), especially p. 18–52.