

## Copernicus and the Problem of Astrology: Some Remarks on the State of the Question

*Thursday, 28 September 2023 10:05 (45 minutes)*

One of many vexatious problems in Copernican scholarship is the question of Copernicus's views concerning astrology. Historians have tended to interpret the absence of direct evidence on this matter as evidence that Copernicus either rejected astrology altogether or simply chose to remain silent on the question. In 1990, I associated myself with this majority view in a study of Copernicus's preface to his main work. However, by 1992, my understanding began to change when I first began to study some of the extant astrological prognostications of Domenico Maria da Novara (1454-1504). This shift in my own views also caused me to rethink the chronology of my long-term project on the reception of Copernicus's theory—initially conceived as beginning with the publication of *De revolutionibus* in 1543. Instead, I became persuaded that the extensive prognostication literature of the late 15th and early 16th centuries deserved to be foregrounded together with the importance of Copernicus's experience as a student in Bologna (1496-1500) living and working with that city's leading astrological prognosticator, Domenico Maria da Novara.

In *The Copernican Question* (2011), I proposed the hypothesis that Copernicus's central problem originated in the context of a highly-charged debate about the conceptual foundations of astronomy and astrology which involved the uncertain order of Venus and Mercury with respect to the Sun. This debate commenced in 1496 with the posthumous publication of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*—just a month or two before Copernicus arrived in Bologna to commence his legal studies. And Pico's learned, scholarly study quickly acquired an overtly political character when, in 1497, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) denounced astrology and its practitioners in a vernacular work based explicitly upon Pico's *Disputations* but directed to a much wider audience.

Early critical reactions to this reconstruction resulted in an extensive exchange of views in 2012-13. In December, 2013, I presented still further evidence for my reconstruction in a lecture titled *Copernicus and the Astrologers*, originally delivered at the Dibner Library in Washington, D.C and published in 2016. Since then, still further interesting questions have been raised by other scholars and it is to those that the principal part of my presentation will be directed.

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