

Birkenmajer's Copernicus

Translator's Preface

In 1900 in Cracow under the auspices of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer published the first of a projected two-part work on Nicholas Copernicus: *Mikołaj Kopernik*. The first part contained materials and studies toward a biography of Copernicus (*Część pierwsza: Studya nad pracami Kopernika oraz materiały biograficzne*). Birkenmajer came to the conclusion that the projected two-part work was premature. Instead of the second part, he published years later a second work entitled *Stromata Copernicana (A Miscellaneous Collection of Copernicana, Cracow, 1924)*. Jerzy Dobrzycki and Owen Gingerich supervised a partial translation into English of the 1900 publication: *Nicholas Copernicus, Part One, Studies on the Works of Copernicus and Biographical Materials (1973)*. Zofia Potkowska, Zofia Piekarec, Jerzy Dobrzycki, and Michał Rozbicki distributed among themselves twenty-three of Birkenmajer's thirty-four chapters and translated them. In addition to translating chapters ten and eleven himself, Dobrzycki supervised the translation of the more technical and mathematical sections, and Gingerich, as the information preceding the table of contents indicates, did some rough editing of the English. The translation provides no commentary. It is available from Bell and Howell Learning and Information, Ann Arbor, Michigan (formerly University Microfilms International). There is supposedly a German translation of Birkenmajer's work, but I have been unable to locate it. Birkenmajer himself translated the summary of his principal results into French, and I have also consulted it for my translation into English.

In an important retrospective article entitled “The Copernican Quinquecentennial and its Predecessors, Historical Insights and National Agendas,” *Osiris*, 2d series, 14 (1999) 37-60 at p. 41, Owen Gingerich explained that Birkenmajer was apparently encouraged to write a Polish biography to counter the three-volume German work by Leopold Prowe. Gingerich described the result as “a somewhat episodic, rambling compendium of interesting, erudite, and often quite original Copernican scholarship.” We may elaborate that aside from providing a great deal of useful information, Birkenmajer made several discoveries, and contributed the last and most comprehensive nineteenth-century interpretation of Copernicus’s achievements. Outside of Poland the work has been virtually ignored, and I have seen hardly any references to the translation. In other words, it has been almost completely neglected by non-Polish scholars.

I have selected ten chapters and Birkenmajer’s summary of his principal results for translation. Owen Gingerich has given me permission to use the 1973 translation. In consultation with two Polish scholars from Łódź, Elżbieta Jung and Robert Podkoński, both expert editors of Latin texts, experienced in archival research, and extraordinarily competent in English, I have undertaken a fresh translation of selected chapters in the hope that Birkenmajer’s most important results will become more widely known. Birkenmajer’s Polish was very formal, and he often included details in the body of his text that we today would place in footnotes. I have simplified Birkenmajer’s Polish where I could do so without distorting his meaning, and I have placed many of the details from the body of the text in footnotes (in Arabic numerals), and transferred his own footnotes to endnotes (in lower-case Roman numerals). Where for purposes of clarification I have interjected a comment, it is always placed in brackets followed by my

initials *AG*. Other interjections, such as to standard modern editions of Copernicus's works, are also placed in brackets.

The commentary, still in preparation, will provide where possible the present location of the sources that Birkenmajer cited, translations or summaries of Greek and Latin texts that Birkenmajer quoted, and information from Birkenmajer's later publications, especially from *Stromata*, that constitute his own later revisions. Some of Birkenmajer's assertions and conclusions are now out of date or erroneous. I supplement or correct his judgments where scholarly consensus has changed, or where new facts have been unearthed. Altogether the translation and commentary will provide scholars with the most up-to-date information about Copernicus's achievement with references to the relevant scholarly literature.

I owe debts to many scholars, but six in particular have provided suggestions and assistance in various forms: Owen Gingerich, Robert S. Westman, Michael Shank, Dilwyn Knox, Noel Swerdlow, and Andreas Kühne. Other debts I acknowledge in the commentary. To all of them I am grateful, and ask for their indulgence concerning any misunderstandings on my part and errors that remain. Several individuals at Stonehill College provided financial and technical assistance without which I could not have undertaken the project.

André Goddu

Stonehill College

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