

# Kühne, Andreas / Metze, Gudula

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## The Early Copernican Biographies and Portraits

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Andreas Kühne (Munich, Germany), Gudula Metze (Munich, Germany)

## THE EARLY COPERNICAN BIOGRAPHIES AND PORTRAITS

### I 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 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup>, 1543<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup>, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> NCG, vol. VI/1, no. 194, p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> G. J. Rheticus, *Ephemerides novae sev expositio positvs divmvi sidervm ...*, Bl. Aij<sup>v</sup>–A4<sup>v</sup>.

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*<sup>1</sup>, which was edited by Broscius. 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 Starowolski<sup>2</sup> and Marcin Radyński<sup>3</sup>, 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<sup>4</sup>. The main source was Rheticus's *Narratio prima* and his *Ephemerides* for the year 1550. Also the other authors of the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Nordic War (1700–1721), an unknown number of documents, records and letters were destroyed. Being 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<sup>5</sup>, 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 Füßl that *the degree of mythologization*

<sup>1</sup> J. Broscius, *Epistolae ad naturam ordinarum figurarum plenius intelligendam pertinentes*, ...

<sup>2</sup> S. Starowolski, *Simonis Starowolski scriptorum polonicorum 'EKATONTÀΣ*.

<sup>3</sup> M. Radyński, *De vita et scriptis Nicolai Copernici* ...

<sup>4</sup> M. Adam, *Vitae germanorum superiori* ...

<sup>5</sup> P. L. Rose, *Copernicus and Urbino* ...

increases, the poorer the historical sources are<sup>1</sup>. 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> century some new myths were added, like that of the *engineer* Copernicus, who had built water-pipes in Frauenburg<sup>2</sup>.

Christoph Hartknoch (1644–1687), a professor at a grammar school in Thorn and the most important chronicler of Prussia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 claims. It contains no new or revised knowledge in reference to biographical facts, but it has, as Hippler 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*<sup>4</sup>.

A new method of biographically approaching the life and work of Copernicus was introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 Gotthelf 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, 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

<sup>1</sup> W. Füßl, *Zwischen Mythologisierung und Dekonstruktion ...*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> See J. H. Zernecke, *Thornische Chronica in welcher die Geschichte dieser Stadt ...*, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> K. Forstreuter, *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, p. 717.

<sup>4</sup> F. Hippler, *Die Biographen des Nikolaus Copernicus*, pp. 197–198.



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*<sup>1</sup>. Hagiographical biographies of Copernicus for the ideological purposes of the Enlightenment reached their summit in the extensive Copernicus biography by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg<sup>2</sup>. 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 '80s of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 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 17<sup>th</sup> century. This becomes clear with the Dutch author and historian Isaac Bullart, who stated in his *opinion de Copernic: dès qu'il l'eut une fois avancée, il la soustint avec autant de*

<sup>1</sup> L. v. Baczko, *Kleine Schriften aus dem Gebiete der Geschichte ...*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> G. C. Lichtenberg, *Nicolaus Copernicus*.

vigueur que d'obstination, & la rendit si plausible, qu'elle partage encore aujourd'hui, & met en trouble toute l'Ecole des Mathematiques<sup>1</sup>. 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*<sup>2</sup>.

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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, 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 18<sup>th</sup> century were mostly free of nationalistic prejudices and misinterpretations, this tendency gained momentum during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally it dominated the Copernicus research during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 *Erm-länder*, 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 stadt im königlichen pohnischen Preussen*<sup>3</sup>. 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.

<sup>1</sup> I. J. Bullart, *Academie des Sciences et des Arts Contenant les Vies ...*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. von Ziegler u. Kliphausen, *Täglicher Schau=Platz der Zeit*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> J. F. Buddeus, *Allgemeines Historisches Lexicon*, p. 734 [*Copernicus (Nicolaus), a famous mathematician, philosopher and doctor was born in Thorn, a city in Royal Polish Prussia*].

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 (...)*<sup>1</sup>. But even here we are only dealing with a legitimate political localization, and not with a 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>. 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 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Grabowski<sup>3</sup> may be mentioned. Grabowski is also the author of one of the first articles in which the Polish descent of Copernicus was *proved*<sup>4</sup>. 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 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 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*

<sup>1</sup> S. Starowolski, *Simonis Starovolsci scriptorum polonicorum 'EKATONTÅΣ*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> S. Sheets–Pyenson, *The Directions for Scientific Biography ...*, p. 399.

<sup>3</sup> A. Grabowski, *Starożytności historyczne polskie*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Grabowski, *Jeszcze jeden dowód, że rodzina Kopernika była polską*.

that Copernicus was a Polish compatriot<sup>1</sup>. A two-volume collection of his works printed in Warsaw in 1857 includes among others the articles *O rodzinach współczesnych i zażytych w Krakowie z Kopernikami*<sup>2</sup> and *Kopernik gehört nicht in die Walhalla*<sup>3</sup>.

On the German side, by comparison, nationalistic argumentation at this time was moderate. Leopold Prowe in writing his Copernicus biography<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>. 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*<sup>6</sup>, published in the *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands* [Journal for History and Archaeology of Warmia], 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 idle, 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 traced back to Slavic or German roots – essentially this comes to nothing*<sup>7</sup>.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century among Polish authors, the polemic 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<sup>8</sup>. 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 propagandistic. But increased nationalism about Copernicus showed itself in the Polish Pavilion during the Parisian World Exhibition in

<sup>1</sup> F. Hipler, *Die Biographien des Nikolaus Copernicus*, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> A. Krzyżanowski, *O rodzinach współczesnych i zażytych w Krakowie z Kopernikami*.

<sup>3</sup> A. Krzyżanowski, *Kopernik w Walhalli*.

<sup>4</sup> L. Prowe, *Nicolaus Copernicus*.

<sup>5</sup> L. Prowe, *De Nicolai Copernici patria*.

<sup>6</sup> J. Watterich, *Nikolaus Koppernik ein Deutscher*.

<sup>7</sup> F. Hipler, *Die Biographien des Nikolaus Copernicus*, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> L. A. Birkenmajer, *Mikołaj Kopernik jako uczony, twórca i obywatel* and L. A. Birkenmajer, *Nicolaus Copernicus und der deutsche Ritterorden*.

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*<sup>1</sup>. In a culmination of this tendency, numerous journalistic and pseudo-scientific articles were published in association with the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Copernicus in 1943. These claimed that Copernicus was a *Volksdeutscher*<sup>2</sup>. Even the serious research about Copernicus did not remain free from this interpretation<sup>3</sup>. But most of the low-level, nationalistic propagandistic literature normally was not written by academic authors<sup>4</sup>. 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. Remmert<sup>5</sup>, 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*<sup>6</sup> 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 leads 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*<sup>7</sup>. Today, since national contrasts in Europe are losing more and more of their importance, the questions about Copernicus's genealogical tree and nationality should finally belong to the past. Instead, the important scientist acts as a model and *connecting link between two neighbouring nations*<sup>8</sup>, and because of this a new generation of authors may bring about a new style in writing biographies.

<sup>1</sup> A. Kühn & G. Lockemann, *Copernicus – ein deutscher Forscher!*

<sup>2</sup> E. g. B. Payr, *Nikolaus Copernicus – der Deutsche*.

<sup>3</sup> E. g. E. Brachvogel, *Die Abstammung des Koppernikus*, F. Schwarz, *Koppernikus-Bildnisse*.

<sup>4</sup> E. g. O. Karstädt, *Koppernick war kein Pole*.

<sup>5</sup> V. R. Remmert, *In the service of the Reich ...*

<sup>6</sup> V. R. Remmert, *In the service of the Reich ...*, p. 336.

<sup>7</sup> W. Hartner, *Nicolaus Copernicus*, p. 400.

<sup>8</sup> W. Hartner, *Nicolaus Copernicus*, p. 400.



## II The Change in Copernicus-Portraits to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century\*

Alongside the first biographical writings about Copernicus in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century there developed an interest in how the ever more famous astronomer might have looked. A few decades after his death there were no pictures of him extant which had demonstrably originated during his lifetime. Whether the portraits of Copernicus that have come down to us render his likeness reliably is uncertain. Therefore scholars keep searching for evidence in works of art dating back to Copernicus's lifetime<sup>1</sup> or even in the remains that have recently been excavated in the Frombork Cathedral.

Basically, we know today hardly more than the humanist Nicodemus Frischlin (1547–1590), who, in a poetic description of the *Carmen de Astronomico Horologio Argentoratensi*, the famous astronomical clock (completed in 1574) in Strasbourg Cathedral, praised Copernicus' red mouth and his beautiful eyes and hair. In the portrait of Copernicus on the case of this clock (fig. 1). Frischlin found these features so aptly depicted that he did not shun the comparison with the works of Apelles: *Quem cernis viuo retinet Copernicus ore / Cui decus eximium formae par fecit imago, / Os rubeum, pulchrique oculi, pulchrique capilli, / Cultaque Apellaeas imitantia membra figuras*<sup>2</sup>. Although Frischlin made use of current rhetorical *topoi* the portrait thus praised by him shows distinctly individual traits. It seems not to be a portrait of the typified kind which in the age of Copernicus was still frequent, especially in prints.

The painter of the Strasbourg portrait of Copernicus was the Swiss artist Tobias Stimmer (1539–1584), who from 1571 to 1574 had created the pictorial adornment of the Strasbourg Cathedral's astronomical clock and thus also the full-length portrait of Copernicus which is fastened to it. This portrait shows the astronomer from Frauenburg as a man of middle age with hair falling in curls down to his chin. He is wearing a gown with a narrow fur collar. In his left hand he is holding a lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis* L.) which can be interpreted as an attribute of his medical profession<sup>3</sup>. His right hand rests on a plate bearing an inscription that will be discussed below. The only hint of Copernicus's astronomical research is given by the mathematical instruments placed on a shelf on the picture's lower margin: compasses, cone, quadrant and celestial globe. There is no hint of the heliocentric theory in Stimmer's painting.

Perhaps the painting in Strasbourg Cathedral also provided a widely circulating woodcut which again and again served as a model for new portraits of Copernicus (fig. 2).

\* The second part of this article is mainly the contribution of Gudula Metzke.

<sup>1</sup> In recent years for instance J. Wasiutyński, *The Solar Mystery ...* and M. Kokowski, *The Current Quests for Copernicus's Grave ...*

<sup>2</sup> N. Frischlin, *Carmen de Astronomico Horologio Argentoratensi*, fol. Gij<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> For instance W. v. Brunn, *Geschichtliches vom Mäiglöckchen*, pp. 8–9, pp. 32–36 and P. Itterheim, *Kopernikus und das Mäiglöckchen*.

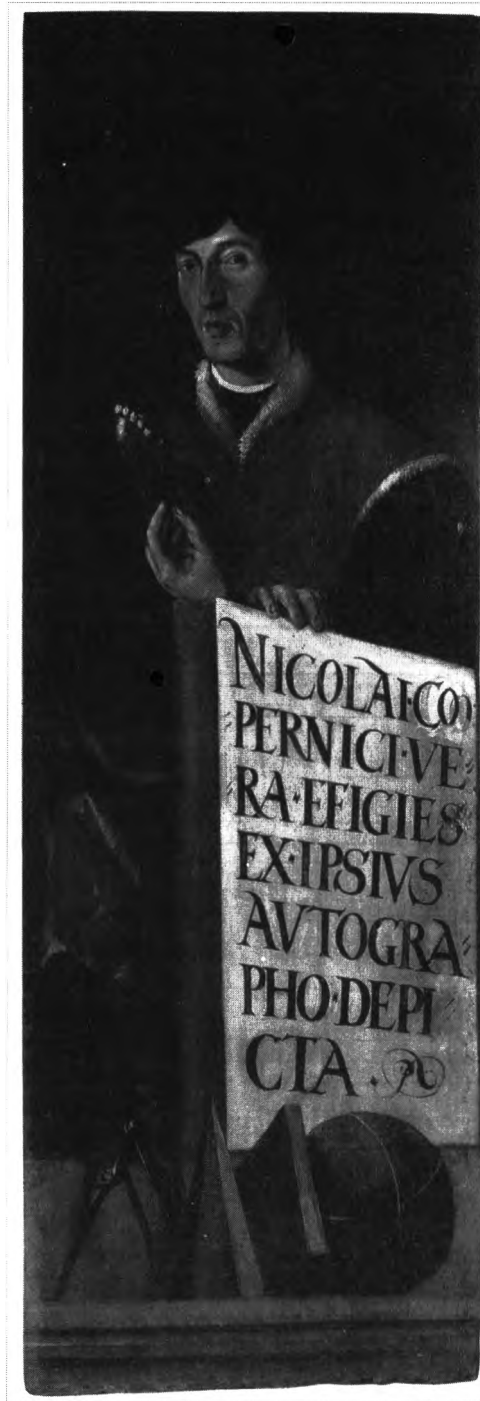


Fig. 1: Tobias Stimmer's portrait of Copernicus, part of the decoration of the astronomical clock in Strasbourg Cathedral (1571–1574)



Fig. 2: The woodcut in Reusner's "Icones" (1587)

This woodcut appeared for the first time in Nicolaus Reusner's (1545–1602) *Icones*, a collection of portraits of famous personalities with eulogies and summary biographies, printed in Strasbourg in 1587<sup>1</sup>. Copernicus can be seen as a half-length portrait slightly turned aside. The fur collar we know from his likeness on the Strasbourg clock has been replaced by a fabric collar with a rim characteristically bent upwards. Besides the lily of the valley Copernicus holds another plant in his hand. There is no hint of his astronomical work to be found in the picture, but the caption below makes a short reference to the Copernican System. Usually, the most of the woodcuts in the *Icones* are attributed to Christoph Murer (1558–1614)<sup>2</sup>, though it is generally assumed that Murer's model probably was a portrait from the legacy of Tobias Stimmer, who had died three years before the *Icones* appeared in print. After Stimmer's death his drafts and originals had passed into the possession of Bernhard Jobin, the publisher of the *Icones*<sup>3</sup>, and in the dedication prefixed to the *Icones* Reusner names Stimmer as the author of most of the originals<sup>4</sup>. Yet Stimmer himself also qualifies for the possible authorship of the Copernicus portrait, especially since the printing block that had been used for the print in the *Icones* has obviously been re-worked<sup>5</sup>. Originally the Copernicus portrait had an oval frame, which is still discernible in the lower corners of the picture. Compared to this Copernicus portrait, which had a wide circulation, the oil painting on the case of the astronomical clock in Strasbourg was for a long time far less known. On the other hand it is of key importance since it is the earliest exactly datable portrait of Copernicus who, when it was painted, had already been dead for three decades. Above all it was the inscription on Stimmer's painting that was crucial for the ensuing discussion about the origin of the Copernicus portraits. The inscription, which proved so rich in consequences, is to be found on the painted slab of stone placed aslant in front of the astronomer's figure. The original to which it refers promises the highest degree of authenticity in that it is *ex ipsius autographo depicta*. What this phrase actually means remains a matter of debate. Either the enigmatic words hint at a self-portrait of Copernicus or – as Schwarz suggested – at a portrait he himself had authorized<sup>6</sup>.

Such questions have been considered since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the iconography of Copernicus became a matter of scholarly research. On the occasion of Copernicus's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1873 there appeared several voluminous publications on his portraits. The first broadly based treatments of this matter we owe to Ignacy X. Polkowski<sup>7</sup>, Franz Hipler<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> N. Reusner, *Icones sive imagines virorum literis illustrium*, fol. GVi<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Thöne 1935, S. 29–30. As to the portrait of Copernicus, already in the 1930's Batowski threw Murer's name into the discussion (Z. Batowski, *Wizerunki Kopernika*, p. 8)

<sup>3</sup> N. Reusner, *Icones sive imagines virorum literis illustrium*, p. 442.

<sup>4</sup> N. Reusner, *Icones sive imagines virorum literis illustrium*, fol. X iiiij<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> F. W. H. Hollstein, *Hollstein's German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts 1400–1700*, p. 168, no. 75.

<sup>6</sup> F. Schwarz, *Kopernikus-Bildnisse*.

<sup>7</sup> X. I. Polkowski, *Album wydane staraniem Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk w Poznaniu w czterechsetną rocznicę urodzin Mikołaja Kopernika* and X. I. Polkowski, *Wizerunki Mikołaja Kopernika*.

Zygmunt Batowski<sup>2</sup>. Polkowski first published, along with a volume of commentaries, the richly illustrated *Copernicus–Album* (1873) which he also intended to serve as a guide for contemporary artists. In 1875, this lavish edition was followed by a copious portrait catalogue<sup>3</sup>. In the same year there appeared a paper by Franz Hipler which established an order of the most important Copernicus Portraits according to their iconographical relationship and presented the pictures within the context of relevant sources<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, in 1933 Zygmunt Batowski published a monograph on the most important Copernicus portraits. Like the earlier publications, his book is dominated by the search for the prototype of the extant portraits of Copernicus though he also considers the basic features of the portraits' iconographical development<sup>5</sup>. Roughly the same can be said of Friedrich Schwarz's study, which was published on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Copernicus's death<sup>6</sup>. At the same time Zinner published a paper, which also dealt with the modifications in the Copernican iconography<sup>7</sup>. To his considerations Zinner prefixed a catalogue of all pictorial representations of Copernicus that he himself had seen or found mentioned in literature, stringently ordered according to their iconographical dependence, in which he differed from Polkowski. In his catalogue Zinner gives an impression of the profusion of Copernicus portraits, especially since he also includes representations of a later date, but in some cases his descriptions are so terse that it is hardly possible to identify the respective portraits.

It has not always been a prime interest of scholars to deal with the received likenesses of Copernicus when they considered the reception of his astronomical theory. In some cases research has been influenced by political premises. For instance, Friedrich Schwarz, who had written on the Copernicus portraits' *pedigree*, published his results with slight changes for a second time in 1943<sup>8</sup>. This paper as well as that of Eberhard Freiherr Schenk zu Schweinsberg, which appeared at the same time<sup>9</sup>, despite their being basically scientific, contain many propositions which clearly served the German National Socialist propaganda. It was not least for this reason that after World War II in both parts of Germany the subject of the Copernicus portraits remained untouched for quite some time. Only on the occasion of Copernicus's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday was the topic again seriously addressed: Kurt Forstreuter took up the thread of earlier research, his contribution being mainly restricted to an

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<sup>1</sup> F. Hipler, *Die Porträts des Nikolaus Kopernikus*, pp. 73–152.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Batowski, *Wizerunki Kopernika*.

<sup>3</sup> X. I. Polkowski, *Wizerunki Mikołaja Kopernika*.

<sup>4</sup> F. Hipler, *Die Porträts des Nikolaus Kopernikus*.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Batowski, *Wizerunki Kopernika*.

<sup>6</sup> F. Schwarz, *Kopernikus–Bildnisse*.

<sup>7</sup> E. Zinner, *Entstehung und Ausbreitung der copernicanischen Lehre*.

<sup>8</sup> F. Schwarz, *Wie sah Kopernikus aus?*

<sup>9</sup> E. Schenk zu Schweinsberg, *Kopernikus–Bildnisse*.



inventory<sup>1</sup>. Some years later, Erich Sommerfeld published a paper in which he postulated the existence of several-self portraits of Copernicus without being able to provide convincing new arguments<sup>2</sup>. On the occasion of a Copernicus exhibition in Schweinfurt there appeared a paper by Georg Drescher that treated in detail a Copernicus portrait preserved in the Schweinfurt City Archive<sup>3</sup>. In Poland, on the other hand, many more of papers and monographs on the Copernicus iconography were published. In particular, several studies on the technical characteristics of the earliest extant portraits should be mentioned here<sup>4</sup>. Yet even here only little attention was paid to the way in which the changes in the rendering of Copernicus's likeness were related to the reception and acceptance of his teachings as they are mirrored for instance in the early biographies of Copernicus. An element of the German complete Nicolaus Copernicus edition is a comprehensive, annotated catalogue of portraits of Copernicus, which appeared in 2004 supplementing a volume of Copernicus biographies dating from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to 1800<sup>5</sup>. This catalogue also makes a contribution to the long neglected study of pictorial representations as a part of the history of natural sciences and technology and especially to the iconography of astronomy, a subject which in recent years has found more attention among scholars<sup>6</sup>.

To limit the investigation in time until the year 1800 makes sense for the catalogue of the portraits as well as for the edition of the biographies, because until that date all important types of the Copernicus portrait had appeared. It is true that, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, portraits of Copernicus were produced in rich profusion, but compared to the older portraits they did not bring much innovation. Generally excluded from the catalogue are portraits on coins and memorial medals, which without exception were created after paintings or prints respectively. For the same reason the catalogue comprises no Copernicus Sculptures – besides the first ones were made in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The catalogue starts with the already mentioned likenesses on the Strasbourg astronomical clock and in Reusner's *Icones*. Both portraits characterize Copernicus as a physician by adding medical herbs as attributes although it was his astronomical research that found him a place in the iconographical programme of the clock as well as in the *Icones*-collection of portraits. Conrad Dasypodius (1532–1601), the mathematician and astronomer mainly in charge of the construction of the Strasbourg clock and also responsible for its iconographical programme, spoke in a description of the clock about *the*

<sup>1</sup> K. Forstreuter, *Bemerkungen zu den ältesten Bildern und Biographien von Copernicus*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*.

<sup>3</sup> G. Drescher, *Frühe Copernicus-Porträts*.

<sup>4</sup> For instance J. Flik, *Portret Mikołaja Kopernika ...* and J. Flik & J. Kruszelnicka, *Epitafium Mikołaja Kopernika w bazylice katedralnej św. Janów w Toruniu*.

<sup>5</sup> NCG, vol. IX.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, A. Arnulf, *Das Titelbild der Tabulae Rudolphinae des Johannes Kepler*, S. Krifka, *Zur Ikonographie der Astronomie*, G. Nonnoi, *Images, Models and Symbols in Copernican Propaganda* as well as V. Remmert, *Widmung, Welterklärung und Wissenschaftslegitimierung ...*.

likeness of the magnificent and learned mathematician Nicolaus Copernicus, executed true to life, (...) which I received from the Right Honourable and highly learned doctor Tidemann Giese of Danzig and after which Tobias Stimmer created his painting in the most diligent and acute manner, a painting we have put in this place in commemoration, for there is nothing on this clock which does not have its own meaning and purpose.<sup>1</sup> Tiedemann Giese, who is named here as a source, was a nephew of Copernicus's friend and confrere whose name was also Tiedemann Giese (1480–1550) and who later became bishop of Warmia. Thus Giese the Younger, who allegedly provided the original, may generally have had access to a likeness of the astronomer from his uncle's legacy<sup>2</sup>. But Dasypodius does not speak of a self-portrait of the astronomer and he also does not mention the inscription of the Copernicus portrait on the Strasbourg clock.

Strasbourg left aside, speculations about one or more self-portraits first appear in a text by Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), who in 1584 dedicated a poem called *In D. Nicolai Copernici Toronensis effigiem, quam ipsemet sua manu e speculo depinxisse dicitur* to a now lost Copernicus portrait in his own possession<sup>3</sup>. Pierre Gassendi in his biography of Copernicus is the first to dwell extensively on the latter's alleged artistic ambitions. He says: *Cùm parteis verò omneis Matheseos curaret, tum Perspectivæ speciatim incubuit, eiusque occasione Picturam tum addidicit, tum eò vsque calluit, vt perhibeatur etiam se ad speculum eximiè pinxisse. Consilium autem pingendi ex eo cepit, quòd peregrinationem, ac potissimùm in Italiam cogitans, in animo haberet, non modò adumbrare, sed graphicè etiam, quantum posset, exprime-re quicquid occurreret obseruatu dignum*<sup>4</sup>. Brahe's and Gassendi's stories of Copernicus having painted a portrait of himself in front of the mirror has been judged in various ways in the secondary literature on the Copernicus iconography. Hipler<sup>5</sup>, Batowski<sup>6</sup> and Sommerfeld<sup>7</sup> argue in favour of the actual existence of such a likeness, whereas Schwarz decidedly opposes this hypothesis and interprets the inscription on the Strasbourg painting as referring to a drawing which Copernicus authenticated with his own signature<sup>8</sup>. But also this interpretation remains pure speculation.

So far, attempts at identifying extant likenesses with the alleged self-portrait have been unsuccessful. Usually those self-portraits are looked for among a comparatively small group of likenesses which are closely related to the portrait in Reusner's *Icones* or to Stimmer's painting on the Strasbourg

<sup>1</sup> C. Dasypodius, *Warhafftige Außlegung ...*, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> E. Brachvogel, *Die Bildnisse der ermländischen Bischöfe*, p. 596

<sup>3</sup> T. Brahe, *Tychonis Brahe Dani opera omnia*, pp. 270–271.

<sup>4</sup> P. Gassendi, *Nicolai Copernici Varmiensis Canonici, Astronomi illvstris vita*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> F. Hipler, *Die Biographen des Nikolaus Copernicus*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Batowski, *Wizerunki Kopernika*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*.

<sup>8</sup> F. Schwarz, *Kopernikus-Bildnisse*, p. 152

astronomical clock. As in Reusner's *Icones* Copernicus is represented here by a half-length portrait with the lily of the valley as an attribute. His folded arms, which on the portrait in the *Icones* are intersected by the margin, are fully visible. Perhaps here we have a type of portrait as it might have been used as a model by Tobias Stimmer. Yet that Stimmer might have worked after an engraving on which according to Sommerfeld the hand holding the lily of the valley has its fingernails on the inside – seems to us as incredible as his hypothesis that Copernicus himself as a dilettante was the author of this crude print (fig. 3)<sup>1</sup>.



Fig. 3: Copernicus with a lily of the valley (engraving, around 1600)

Gassendi did not doubt Copernicus's artistic gifts but had nothing to say about the alleged self-portrait's appearance and expressly warned his readers that the portrait prefixed to his Copernicus biography (fig. 4) might possibly not resemble the astronomer's self-portrait: *Nescio verò an sperandum sit, vt similis quoque sit illi, quàm pinxisse olim sua ipse manu dicitur, & qua donatus Tycho ipsam in Musæo Vraniburgico collocauit.*<sup>2</sup> As a model for this

<sup>1</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> P. Gassendi, *Nicolai Copernici Varmiensis Canonici, Astronomi illustris vita*, p. 37.

likeness he chose an often-copied Copernicus portrait which, like all previous representations, shows the astronomer as a physician with medical herbs: an engraving of high quality in the tradition of the woodcut portrait of Reusner's *Icones* which Jean-Jacques Boissard (1528–1602) had compiled and edited<sup>1</sup>.



Fig. 4: The engraving in Gassendi's Copernicus biography (1654)

Yet the portrait which Gassendi published in his Copernicus biography gives only Copernicus's features and hair according to the handed-down scheme. Now the astronomer is clad in a representative cloak with a broad fur collar. Instead of a lily of the valley he holds in his hand a heliocentric tellurium. This new portrait scheme was preceded by representations which gave Copernicus as full-length portrait together with other astronomers. Interestingly, the most important innovations had sprung from purely fantasy portraits whose creators obviously were not familiar with the usual iconographical scheme of Copernicus with the lily of the valley.

The Copernicus portrait by Jacob van Meurs (1619/20–1680) in Gassendi's work is a successful synthesis of the traditional scheme and later pictorial inventions. Just as the frontispiece of the 1635 Strasbourg edition of Galilei's

<sup>1</sup> Boissard J. J., *Icones quinquaginta virorum illustrium doctrina ...* p. 314.

*Systema Cosmicvm* showed Copernicus disputing with Aristotle und Ptolemy, so van Meurs in his engraving links the physiognomy which is regarded as authentic with an easily comprehensible reference to the heliocentric system, thus taking into consideration the increased reception and recognition of Copernicus's theses. Van Meurs took the figure of Copernicus out of the scenic context so characteristic for older representations which had shown Copernicus with a model of his system and presented him instead in monumental isolation as a half-length portrait. With this portrait he created a new scheme of representation which through copies was soon to be widely circulated.

It is astonishing that the epitaph in St. John's church in Toruń, donated no later than 1589, remained relatively unknown although it incorporates one of the earliest likenesses of Copernicus (fig. 5). On this half-length portrait Copernicus stands with folded hands opposite to the viewer. His devotion is aimed at the crucifix which, together with a death's head and several bones, is placed on a table in front of him. His work as an astronomer – although not his heliocentric system – is hinted at by a pair of compasses and an armillary sphere on a shelf in the background.



Fig. 5: The Copernicus epitaph in St. John's church in Toruń



The painting that in 1677 was donated to the chapter of Warmia in Frombork (Frauenburg) can be discerned as a variant of the portrait on the epitaph. Here, also, Copernicus is depicted with folded hands, but the crucifix and bones are lacking. They have been replaced by the compasses and the armillary sphere. The shadow below the nose of Copernicus that can be seen on the epitaph has interestingly been turned into a moustache. This moustache, which to no small degree accords with the then current fashion, can also be found on the copies done after the Frombork (Frauenburg) painting of 1677. This whole group of portraits falls into the category of the *Copernicus in his youth* to which all the likenesses belong which have been mentioned here so far. In literature this term has come to designate the most extensive and most important category of portraits of Copernicus whose physiognomic traits are painted in exemplary fashion on the Strasbourg astronomical clock.



Fig. 6: Copernicus with a book (etching, around 1600)

How to classify an etching of which only three copies are extant, showing Copernicus as a half-length figure, seems at first sight to be less clear (fig. 6). The astronomer is propping his forearms on a *parapetto* on the print's lower margin. In his left hand he is holding a book, being conventionally a scholar's

attribute. His right hand is resting on his left forearm. His hands and face are made particularly conspicuous by an excessive accentuation of anatomical details. The deeply furrowed face with its heavy lids seem to indicate the advanced age of the portrayed. Sommerfeld therefore took the drawing that served as a model for this print to be a self-portrait of Copernicus which shows him, marked by illness and old age, near the end of his life<sup>1</sup>.

Although Sommerfeld's thesis has been widely disregarded by other authors, the provenance of this rather amateurishly executed print seemed to guarantee a certain authenticity, for one of the three prints was found in the manuscript of *De revolutionibus*, which has been kept in the Biblioteka Jagiellońska of Cracow since 1956. Yet it remains unclear at which time this etching, which can no longer be localized, had been added to the manuscript. Since the portrait was created most probably around 1600 this connexion was obviously established long after the death of Copernicus. Besides, it is only at first sight that the print constitutes a type in its own right. Notwithstanding the conspicuous accentuation of single parts of the body, this likeness also follows the type *Copernicus in his youth*. The folded arms refer to the mentioned group of portraits with the lily of the valley also exhibiting this feature.

Whether there is a likeness of the aged Copernicus at all remains a matter of dispute. The so-called *portrait of Copernicus as an old man* (fig. 7) which in 1939 came into the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Posen (today: Muzeum Narodowe in Poznań) shows only a remote phenotypical resemblance to the *Portrait of Copernicus in his youth*<sup>2</sup>. This head-and-shoulders portrait (lost since 1944) shows an old man with lean features turned half right. The inscription below the upper margin refers to Nicolaus Copernicus. The head is longer and the hair is shorter and smoother than on the portraits mentioned so far. Also the clothing – Copernicus wearing a dark gown with a narrow fur collar under which a white cloth collar can be seen – does not agree with the clothing in the other group of portraits. This clearly speaks against the thesis of Sommerfeld, who regards this likeness only as a modification of the usual scheme<sup>3</sup>. While the *Copernicus in his youth* can be traced back to the astronomer's closer milieu there is no evidence of the Poznań portrait's existence prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To date it back to the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup> remains hypothetical. An earlier original<sup>5</sup> cannot be proved, so that some authors like Batowski do not accept the painting as a portrait of Copernicus<sup>6</sup>.

Even more important than the question of whether Copernicus really might have appeared as he is represented on the type *Copernicus in his youth* and the type *Copernicus as an old man* is the role those types played in the development and differentiation of the Copernicus iconography. The *Coperni-*

<sup>1</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. Schwarz, *Kopernikus-Bildnisse*, pp. 162–164.

<sup>3</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> E. Sommerfeld, *Die Selbstbildnisse des Nicolaus Copernicus*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> F. Schwarz, *Kopernikus-Bildnisse*, pp. 166–170.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Batowski, *Wizerunki Kopernika*, p. 69.

*cus as an old man* type comprises only a small and clear-cut group of portraits<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the *Copernicus in his youth* type in its different variants changed according to the growing reception of the heliocentric system, yet in its basic aspects remained true to the allegedly authentic scheme. So for generations the type *Copernicus in his youth* was to inform the conception of what Copernicus looked like and is serving this purpose even today.



Fig. 7: The alleged Copernicus portrait formerly in Poznań

<sup>1</sup> Some Copernicus portraits from the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the likeness by Jan Krystian Gładysz, 1762–1830 (*Uczony i jego pracownia ...*, p. 106) seem possibly orientated towards the *Copernicus as an old man* type.

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