

The Copernican Revolution

With a work published in 1543 and dedicated to Pope Paul III, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) laid the foundations for modern astronomy. Copernicus lived in Italy from 1496-1504. Studying texts of ancient astronomy, which had been made available by the Humanists, and comparing his ideas with those of Italian scholars, he became convinced of the erroneousness of the Ptolemaic system, until then considered incontrovertible. He placed the sun instead of the earth at the center of the cosmos and developed an astronomical model of great mathematical precision. This showed that the center of the earth was not the center of the universe but only the center of the moon's orbit, and that the earth made a complete turn around its own axis in twenty-four hours. At first, Copernicus's theories, which may not have been completely understood, encountered no theological opposition. But in the last two decades of the century, they became the center of intellectual and religious controversy in Europe.