A multi-disciplinary approach to Copernicus’s momentous transformation from geocentric to heliocentric cosmology.

In 1984, Noel Swerdlow and Otto Neugebauer argued that Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) explained planetary motion by using mathematical devices and astronomical models originally developed by Islamic astronomers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Was this a parallel development, or did Copernicus somehow learn of the work of his predecessors, and if so, how? And if Copernicus did use material from the Islamic world, how then should we understand the European context of his innovative cosmology? Although Copernicus’s work has been subject to a number of excellent studies, there has been little attention paid to the sources and diverse cultures that might have inspired him.

Foregrounding the importance of interactions between Islamic and European astronomers and philosophers, Before Copernicus explores the multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual context of learning on the eve of the Copernican revolution, determining the relationship between Copernicus and his predecessors. Essays by Christopher Celentze and Nancy Bisaha delve into the European cultural and intellectual contexts of the fifteenth century, revealing both the profound differences between “them” and “us,” and the nascent attitudes that would mark the turn to modernity. Michael Shank, F. Jamil Ragep, Sally Ragep, and Robert Morrison depict the vibrant and creative work of astronomers in the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish worlds. In other essays, Rivka Feldhay, Raz Chen-Morris, and Edith Sylla demonstrate the importance of shifting outlooks that were critical for the emergence of a new worldview.

Highlighting the often-neglected intercultural exchange between Islam and early modern Europe, Before Copernicus reimagines the scientific revolution in a global context.

“These scholars are the best in their fields. Their essays are well-researched, up-to-date historiographically, and interestingly written. This volume could prove controversial, but by exposing the contested issues more clearly, it will greatly enhance the scholarly conversation.”

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“Before Copernicus is of potentially great importance to the larger field of the history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century science and the interaction between the Islamic and Western intellectual worlds. Although many books have been written about individual parts of this story no one has tried to put this all together before.”

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