

*Copernicia*

*Palmae*

[*Areaceae*]

*Copernicia* commemorates a Polish astronomer, mathematician, physician, lawyer and translator, Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) who is viewed as the founder of modern astronomy. (His nationality whether Polish or German is still debated today.) He was a canon at the cathedral at Frauenburg (now Frombork in northern Poland), as was one of his siblings his brother Andreas. From one of the cathedral's turrets, when his duties permitted, and without the aid of a telescope (such instruments would not have been built and used by astronomers before the early 1600s) he made his astronomical observations and calculations. These were completed in 1530 and it is suggested that this is when the subject of astronomy was born. His, for that time, outlandish theory that the earth rotated once on its axis daily and moved round the sun once annually was in stark contrast to Ptolemy's (c. 90-168) belief (the Egyptian astronomer and geographer) which had been generally accepted since 150 AD that everything revolved around the earth. Meanwhile his formal duties at the cathedral involved him in diplomatic travel, administering taxation, considering monetary reform as part of which he proposed a theory which would provide the basis for that familiar today as Gresham's Law (*When there is a legal tender currency, bad money drives good money out of circulation*) and, with his legal training, dispensing justice. From 1516-1521 he was responsible for the defence of Olsztyn (now in northern Poland) and successfully led the Polish royal troops against the Teutonic Order. With regard to his prime interest astronomy however, for the last decades of his life he resisted formal publication until just before his death. His papers circulated among his friends and rumours of the theories gradually permeated Europe – while he honed his heliocentric ideas further. In 1533 he lectured on them in Rome to audiences which included Pope Clement VII (1478-1534) and some of his cardinals. In 1536 Copernicus received a request for a copy of papers from the distinguished Roman Catholic Archbishop of Capua, Nikolaus Cardinal von Schönberg (1472-1537) (authorities debate today whether this was to encourage or contain the startling revelations). Pressure on Copernicus to publish only increased further from all over Europe. But it took the arrival and subsequent urging of the Austrian astronomer and mathematician, Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514-1574) to finally persuade the canon to allow his definitive version of his major work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (by now six volumes) to be published in 1543. Legend now takes over in that one of the story's surrounding Copernicus' death contends that he received the first copy of the first edition on his death bed (having suffered a coma and stroke) and with this printed copy it is told he died peacefully. He was buried in Frombork Cathedral and he died without seeing the religious and political disruption with which his theory was initially greeted.