

# From Ptolemy to Kepler

Astronomy 101  
Syracuse University, Fall 2020  
Walter Freeman

September 22, 2020

*“Nature ... is inexorable and immutable; she never transgresses the laws imposed upon her, or cares a whit whether her abstruse reasons and methods of operation are understandable to humans. For that reason it appears that nothing physical which sense-experience sets before our eyes, or which necessary demonstrations prove to us, ought to be called in question (much less condemned) upon the testimony of biblical passages which may have some different meaning beneath their words. For the Bible is not chained in every expression to conditions as strict as those which govern all physical effects; nor is God any less excellently revealed in Nature’s actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible.”*

–Galileo Galilei, to the Grand Duchess Christina (1615)

*“Philosophy is written in this grand book – I mean the universe – which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one is wandering about in a dark labyrinth.”*

–Galileo Galilei, *The Assayer* (1623)

- Project 2 due before class Thursday
- Reviewing groups will be posted Tuesday night or Wednesday morning
  - If you are slightly late, don't sweat it
  - If you are so late that you inconvenience the reviewing group, write them and let them know why

# Writing assignment

For those who missed it, your first draft of your first paper is due next Monday.

- You'll send it to a student who will give you feedback; you'll have a few more days to digest their feedback and submit a final draft
- Potential for significant extra credit
- Some special assignments for particular calendars; read the whole thing

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- Some special assignments for particular calendars; read the whole thing
- Creativity is good – there are lots of things you can write about besides the ones I've used as examples

The insanity that disrupted my work schedule at the beginning of the semester is done, and I can now predict when I'm free. :)

So I will be having discussion hours:

- Mondays, 9:00-11:00 AM, on the steps of Hendricks Chapel and on Zoom
- Tuesdays, 4:00-5:30 PM, on the steps of Hendricks Chapel and on Zoom
- Fridays, 9:00-11:00 AM, on the steps of Hendricks Chapel and on Zoom

Come say hi!

We are now able to predict the motions of most of the stuff in the night sky:

- the distant stars
- the Sun
- the Moon
- **not** the planets!

# A word on archaeoastronomy

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Many of them were extremely clever in different ways, discovering all sorts of things about the stars before they were known to “modern astronomy”.

- Chinese astronomers kept meticulous records, and thanks to them we know details of the 1066 supernova
- There are suggestions that the Australian Aboriginals knew about red-giant pulsation
- Pacific Islanders’ talents at celestial navigation allowed them to travel long distances over open ocean

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Instead we’re going to focus on the specific narrative that led, ultimately, to modern science – from Alexandria (Egypt), through the Islamic world, to Renaissance Europe.

# Where we've come from, and where we're going

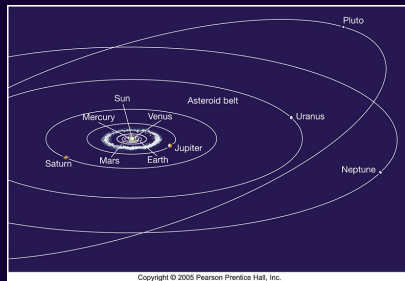
We've casually mixed together ancient and modern perspectives:

## The celestial sphere model



- Heavenly bodies stuck to spheres
- Spheres all turn around Earth
- Planets, Sun, and Moon all have their own spheres
- “Epicycles” needed to get planets right

## The heliocentric model



- Earth is one of many planets, all orbiting the Sun
- The Earth rotates on its axis
- The stars are very far away and don't move
- Modern perspective

How did this shift in perspective happen?

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How was it part of the emergence of modern  
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... and what else did we learn about the sky in the  
process?

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- used **mathematics** in these models
- recognized that any model had to agree with observation



The Greeks realized that images of the Moon during an eclipse looked like this.

What might they learn from this?

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Greek thinkers:

- saw the behavior of nature as *something we can understand*
- proposed **models** for things in nature
- used **mathematics** in these models
- Believed in the transcendent Truth and Beauty of mathematical perfection
- “Circles are the most perfect shape, thus things in the sky must go in circles”
- **Increasingly saw astronomy as a separate discipline from natural philosophy (argh!)**

## Natural philosophy

- Concerned with the fundamental Truth of things
- Very concerned with logic, for instance
- Saw the heavens as mostly outside their purview
- Figuring out where the planets are is grunt work!

## Greek astronomy

- Concerned with *predicting* the motions of stars and planets
- Not all that concerned with the *transcendent Truth* of their models
- ”... but do we get the right answer?”
- Known mostly from Ptolemy’s *Almagest*

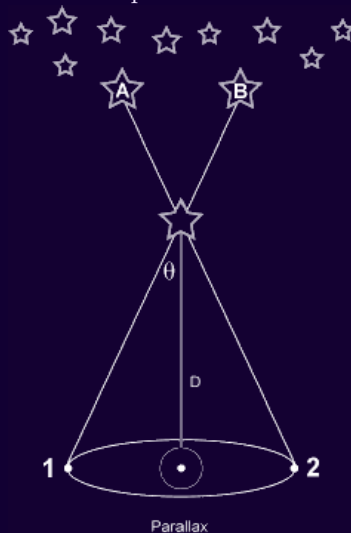


# Observational facts at the time

Everything we already learned:

- Motion of the stars
- Phases of the Moon
- Seasons
- Eclipses, etc.

No stellar parallax:



# Observational facts at the time – the hard one

## Retrograde motion of planets:



# Ptolemy and his model

Claudius Ptolemy lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the 2nd century CE.

This was a place and time where cultures met: Ancient Egypt, the Greek tradition and culture, and the Roman Empire.

He was a nuts-and-bolts guy – on the “astronomy” side of the philosophy/astronomy divide.

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That doesn't sound Greek – it's not. This name comes from Arabic, as do many others!

# Ptolemaic model

Remember this? Ptolemy was the one who introduced it.

*Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum.*



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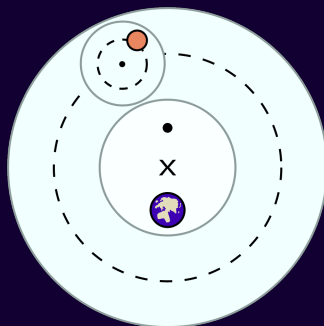
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- Everything is attached to crystal spheres which spin in a uniform, perfect way around the Earth...
- ... well, sort of: the Earth isn't *quite* at the center of the planet-spheres
- ... well, sort of: they don't turn *quite* uniformly, but with a fudge that keeps the perfection of "circles"

# Epicycles

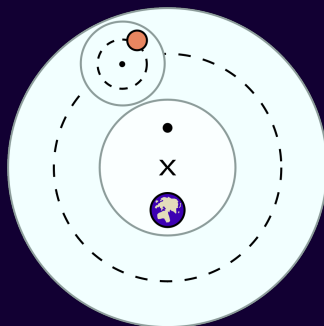
This still fails to reproduce retrograde motion. What's the solution?  
More circles!



These circles-on-circles are called “epicycles”. The center of the epicycle rotates not-quite-uniformly about a point not-quite-at-Earth, and then the planet rotates in a circle along the epicycle.

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Confused? Let's watch this in action: <https://youtu.be/utH-GHH1FT8?t=64>



# The model in the Almagest

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# The model in the *Almagest*

This model had a huge number of moving pieces: cycles on top of cycles, different centers and motion-fudges for each planet...

... but it WORKED. Ptolemy published tables in the *Almagest* that could be used to predict, with astonishing precision, where the planets would be – even if he needed dozens of epicycles in total to do it.

# What do you think about this?

A: This is far too complicated to be Truth; the Universe shouldn't be this hard

B: Some things are complicated; if this gets the right answer, then it is True

C: Truth is overrated; what matters is whether a model is useful for what it was designed to do

D: There is an abstract truth about nature, and a true model might predict other things we didn't expect

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E: Epicycles are just alternative facts!

# From Egypt to Europe by way of the Islamic world

Alexandria in Egypt was the center of learning in the Western world ... until it wasn't.

The great Library at Alexandria was burned (everyone blames everyone else for this), and Alexandria declined as a center of scholarship.

Knowledge of the Greco-Roman astronomical texts passed East to the Arabs. They accumulated a great deal of knowledge about the motions of the sky; they named many of the stars, refined Ptolemy's model, and made enormous strides in *mathematics* (Arabic numerals, *al-jabr* (algebra), etc.)

# The state of Europe, pre-Renaissance

Europe didn't really have much of a natural-philosophic or scientific tradition from the fall of the Roman Empire to c. 1400; Europeans were more concerned with theology.

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“How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” (not quite)

# Copernicus (Polish/German, 1473-1543)

Ptolemy's model still worked – *brilliantly*. It was only off by a few degrees in a thousand years.

People had started to be dissatisfied with the complexity of it. It just *felt* inelegant!

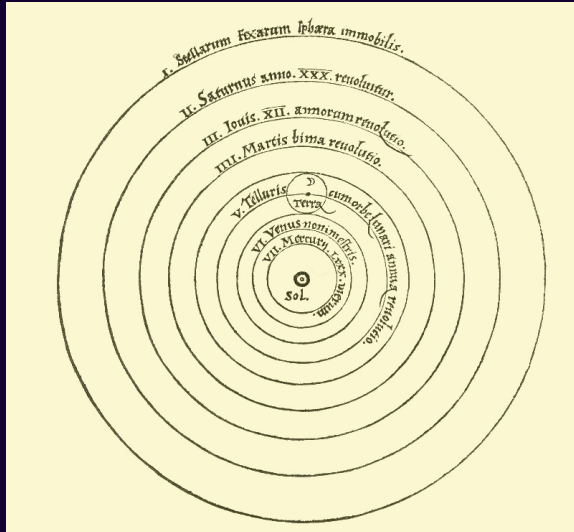
Enter Copernicus. He proposed that, instead, everything orbits the Sun in perfect circles.

- Ptolemy's model was *geocentric* – the Earth is at the center
- Copernicus' model was *heliocentric* – the Sun is at the center

This allowed him to explain retrograde motion – *without* epicycles!  
(This is next week's lab.)



# The philosophy of Copernicanism



The publisher added a preface to his book, saying, essentially:

*"This is unusual. But it is just mathematics; it should be judged on whether or not it makes accurate predictions; this is separate from whether it contains actual philosophical truth!"*

# The reality of Copernican heliocentrism

How should we judge Copernicus' model?

- ... by its simplicity?
- ... by its elegance?
- ... by the precision of its predictions?
- ... by whether it predicted something new?
- ... by whether it inspired people in the future?
- ... some other standard?

Whoops.

## Whoops.

Copernicus' model was actually *less precise* than Ptolemy's at predicting celestial motion. You could fix it up with epicycles, but not even all that well...

# Enter Galileo

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**There are things orbiting Jupiter!** These are the four largest moons of Jupiter, called the “Galilean moons” after their discoverer.

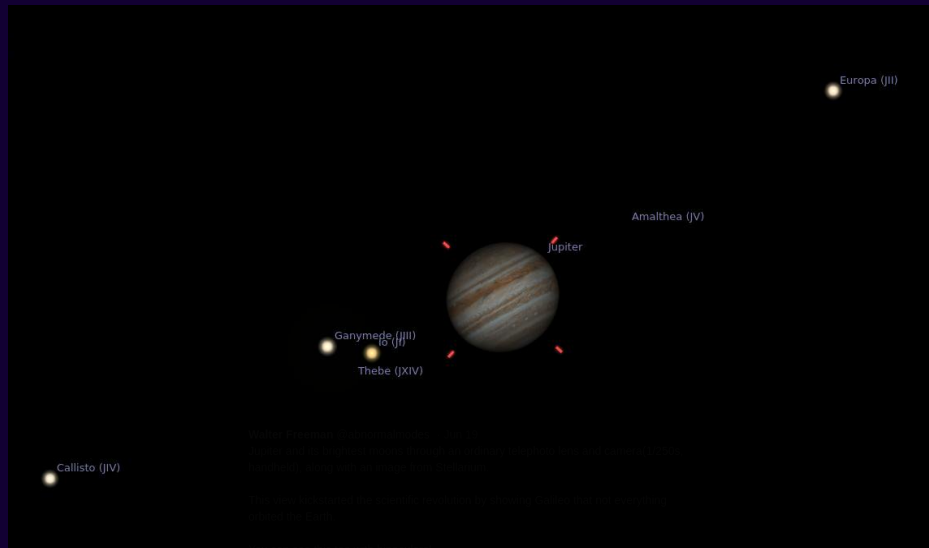
- If things orbit Jupiter, then not everything orbits the Earth! We are not the center of everything!
- This was a huge shakeup – to philosophy, and to *religion*!



*Liverpool, NY (just north of Syracuse); 10:22 PM, June 18, 2019*

*500mm f/5.6 lens with 1.4x teleconverter; ISO 500, 1/250, f/8 (moons brightened significantly in post)*





*Image capture from Stellarium*

*Liverpool, NY; 10:22 PM, June 18, 2019*



*Labrador Hollow, NY (20 miles SSE of Syracuse); 9:54 PM, September 19, 2020*

*500mm f/5.6 lens with 1.4x teleconverter; ISO 800, 1/100, f/8 (moons brightened in post)*

*Image shot over water; I suspect the refraction from the turbulent air may have caused a lot of blur ("twinkling")*



*Image capture from Stellarium*

*Labrador Hollow, 9:54 PM, September 19, 2020*

# The “Galileo Affair”

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- He argued that the moons of Jupiter, along with the phases of Venus, proved the Earth moved.
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- The Church un-banned his books and heliocentrism in 1835.



# Where we've come from, and where we're going

Galileo's work began a shift from *astronomy* to *astrophysics*.

## (Ancient) Astronomy

- Predicts the motion of things
- Not that concerned with their nature
- An exercise in calculation

## Astrophysics

- Concerned with understanding the *nature* of things in the sky
- “What are they and by what rules do they operate?”
- Predict their motion by understanding their nature

There's a reason you are taking this class in the physics building!

... but it doesn't quite work!

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What would be the best next step? How would you proceed, if you were an astronomer at the time?

# Three of these happened!

- Someone made impressively precise measurements of the motions of the planets
- Someone doublechecked Copernicus' math:
  - ... they found that a different arrangement of circles *almost* matched the data
  - ... but it was off by one-eighth of a degree!
- They found *another* heliocentric model, not using circles (!), that fit *perfectly*

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- Next time: this story, and a full transition to modern science

# Summary

- Ancient Greeks separated philosophy from astronomy:
  - Philosophy: what is Truth?
  - Astronomy: how can I calculate when Venus will rise?
- Ptolemy's geocentric model
  - Planets carried on “epicycles”, circles revolving on circles, around the Earth at the center
  - The Sun, the Moon, and the stars are also all on spheres revolving around the Earth
  - Very complicated, but gave accurate predictions
- Copernican heliocentric model
  - Planets and the Earth orbit the Sun
  - Simpler – gets retrograde motion right without epicycles
  - ... not as precise!
- Galileo's contribution
  - Used the telescope for astronomy for the first time
  - Observed the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus
  - Argued for a sun-centric model
  - Was accused of being a heretic; he's stepped on powerful toes!