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Nicolaus Copernicus at the Bishops' Castle in Lidzbark Warmiński

Abstract

The article focuses on Nicolaus Copernicus's stay at the Bishops' Castle in Lidzbark Warmiński in the years 1503–1512. The astronomer's residency in Lidzbark was inextricably tied with his uncle, Łukasz Watzenrode – bishop of Warmia in the years 1498–1512. In that time, the main occupation of Copernicus was advising his uncle. He also found time for scientific studies – the Lidzbark Castle was where Copernicus created his treaty titled *On the Hypotheses of Celestial Motions* (*Copernici de hypothesebus mottum coelestium*), which constitutes the foundation of the scholar's magnum opus. The astronomer sent the finished work to authorities in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. Moreover, he translated – into Latin – letters of the Greek philosopher Theophylact Simocatta's, made a now-lost map (1510) of Warmia and the western borders of Royal Prussia, and – after leaving the castle in 1528 – worked on his treatise on coin. The death of his uncle, in 1512, marks the end of Copernicus's permanent stay in the walls of Lidzbark Castle. From that time, he visited the castle only sporadically – mainly as a physician.

Nicolaus Copernicus spent, in total, over 10 years at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński.¹ In terms of

time spent, it is the third (after Toruń and Frombork) place of permanent residence for Nicolaus Copernicus. His longest stay (1503–1512) at the castle in Lidzbark is inextricably linked with his uncle, Łukasz Watzenrode – the Bishop of Warmia from 1489 to 1512. Bishop Watzenrode was one of the most outstanding men of his era, advising kings John I Albert and Alexander Jagiellon. He is ranked among the architects of the Polish Middle Ages. Posterity² remembered Watzenrode “as a learned, pious man, proficient in multiple languages and leading such an exemplary life that no one ever saw him as much as laugh”.³



Fig. 1 Portraits of Łukasz Watzenrode and Nicolaus Copernicus at the “Great Residents of the Lidzbark Castle” („Wielcy mieszkańcy zamku lidzbarskiego”) exhibition at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński; picture by D. Zawada.

¹ K. Mikulski, *Mikołaj Kopernik w Lidzbarku Warmińskim* [w:] J. Bednarska (red.), *Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne Seria: Studia* 5, Białystok 2020, s. 17.

² K. Wróblewska, *Łukasz Watzenrode jako fundator dzieł sztuki: (z zagadnień mecenatu artystycznego na Warmii z przełomu XV i XVI stulecia)* [w:] J. Jasiński (red.), *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 1, s. 149–157.

³ M. Oesterreich, T. Treter, M. Treter, *Kronika Lidzbarska*, Olsztyn 2008, s. 51.

In 1495⁴ – after the death of Copernicus's mother, Barbara – his uncle took care of Nicolaus and his brother Andreas. It was then that Copernicus first arrived at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński. His stay was to prepare him for departure to study in Italy and to settle matters which concerned assuming the position of a Warmian canon (in which, thanks to his uncle's efforts, he succeeded some years later). In 1496, Copernicus left the castle to study. He briefly returned there in 1501⁵, often traveling to Frombork, where he sought permission to continue his Italian studies – he obtained the consent on the condition that he would undertake medical studies. From 1503⁶ began a nearly ten-year period of Copernicus's stay at Lidzbark Castle. The period was extremely important and creatively productive for the astronomer.

The main structure of the castle has not undergone major changes since Nicolaus Copernicus's time there. Architectural elements such as the *dansker* (latrine tower) and buildings attached to the main castle body were dismantled. The southern and northern outer baileys no longer exist (in the form extant during Copernicus's time). The rooms inhabited by Nicolaus Copernicus are indicated to be on the first floor of the castle in the north wing (currently, due to the demolition of a partition wall, it is a single room). As living quarters, Copernicus's uncle designated the last bay of the great refectory, creating the so-called Sybil's chamber, and adapted a small room in the main tower of the castle. A chamber known as the oratory was decorated with religious paintings and the coats of arms of the bishop and Warmia. These paintings can still be admired today.

During the years 1503–1512, Lidzbark Castle became Nicolaus Copernicus's permanent place of residence. In this period, the astronomer's main occupation was advising his uncle, which involved frequent trips to Prussian *sejmiki*



Fig. 2 A miniature of the Lidzbark Warmiński castle as it appeared in the 16th century – in the times of Nicolaus Copernicus; picture by D. Zawada.

(regional diets; sg. *sejmik*) and Polish *sejmy* (parliaments; sg. *sejm*) in Piotrków; (Copernicus, along with his uncle, participated in the coronation of Sigismund I the Old, attended the assembly of the estates in Grudziądz, and visited Kraków and Piotrków). These activities did not prevent Copernicus from pursuing his passion – astronomy. It was at Lidzbark Castle, between 1503 and 1506⁷, that he created the work titled *Nicolai Copernici de hypothesibus motuum coelestium a se constitutis commentariolus* (also known simply as the *Commentariolus*, or *Little Commentary*). It was a small, eight-leaf manuscript in which Copernicus presented his astronomical ideas – including the most important one: about the central position of the sun in the solar system. The latter became known as his third assumption – that all the spheres revolve about the Sun as their center, and, therefore, that it is the Sun's vicinity that contains the centre of the universe. He sent the finished work to authorities in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. Despite the lack of surviving records of the reviewer's opinions, it can be assumed that they were positive and convinced Copernicus to continue his research. One memento of this work at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński is, perhaps, a compass-made graffito (consisting of a neat circle containing five further circles inside) discovered on the western wall of the cloister in 2015.⁸ Can the graffito be attributed

⁴ K. Mikulski, *Mikołaj...*, s. 9.

⁵ K. Mikulski, *Mikołaj...*, s. 12.

⁶ K. Mikulski, *Mikołaj...*, s. 14.

⁷ L. Satora, *Mały Komentarzyk Mikołaja Kopernika – analiza z perspektywy współczesnego recenzenta*, artykuł niepublikowany.

⁸ A. Szweida, *Jeszcze o graffitach w krużgankach zamku biskupiego w Lidzbarku Warmińskim* [w:] J. Bednarska (red.), *Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne Seria: Studia 5*, Białystok 2020, s. 45–64.



Fig. 3 Graffito, made with a compass, (a neat circle, with five more circles arranged inside) discovered in 2015 on the cloister's western wall; photograph by Damian Kwiecień – Gorek Restauro.

to Copernicus? That much seems very likely. Interestingly, another inscription with the name Mikołaj was found on the northern wall of the cloister, but graphological analysis ruled out Copernicus.

Another work written by Copernicus within the walls of Lidzbark Castle was a Latin translation of letters by the Greek philosopher Theophylact Simocatta. In the preface to this work, he thanked his uncle for his efforts, writing: "For every effort of this kind or the fruit of my small abilities should rightly be considered your property".

One work by Copernicus that is no longer extant, likely created in Lidzbark Castle, would have been a map of Warmia and the western borders of Royal Prussia made in 1510⁹. The map was once sought by the Teutonic knightly order and, on their orders, by Fabian von Lossainen. These efforts were unsuccessful, however.

It was not until 1507 that Copernicus was permanently assigned to Lidzbark Castle to serve

Bishop Łukasz Watzenrode. His primary duty was to care for his uncle's health. The cathedral chapter had compelled Copernicus to study medicine, conditioning upon it their consent to his further studies in Italy. The justification mentioned that he could, in the future, be a useful medical advisor to our Most Reverend Superior and the gentlemen of the chapter.

Notably, the scholar unsuccessfully tried to cure his brother, Andreas, of syphilis – an ailment shared also by the aforementioned Fabian von Lossainen, Bishop Watzenrode's successor to the episcopal throne. Similarly, Copernicus gave advice concerning an expected plague in 1519 and treated Bishop Maurice Ferber for kidney stones. In 1541, Copernicus was summoned by Albert Hohenzollern to try to cure his advisor, Georg von Kunheim – an effort in which the scholar ultimately succeeded.

With his uncle's death in 1512, Copernicus's period of permanent residence within the walls of Lidzbark Castle came to an end. From then on, he visited the castle only sporadically – mainly as a physician.

The longer of Copernicus's stays at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński were related to his work on the treatise on money. The scholar worked on this piece with Bishop Maurice Ferber in 1528.

The last recorded visit of Nicolaus Copernicus to Lidzbark Warmiński took place in 1538, when the scholar accompanied Johannes Dantiscus on a tour of Warmia. The astronomer's deteriorating health and a conflict with the bishop may have influenced his decision to cease visits to the Lidzbark residence.

Conclusion

Nicolaus Copernicus is undoubtedly the most recognizable figure to ever reside at the castle in Lidzbark Warmiński. However, his relatively long stay in therein had been, until recently, marginalized and overshadowed by others – Toruń, Frombork, or Olsztyn. And yet, the works

⁹ K. Mikulski, *Mikołaj...*, s. 15.

created in the castle (especially the *Commentariolus*) testify that the Lidzbark residence played a decisive role in the scholar choosing his life's purpose – a life ultimately devoted to astronomy and science.

The atmosphere at the court of Bishop Łukasz Watzenrode, despite the uncle's apodictic nature, was clearly conducive to creative activities. It can safely be said that, during Copernicus's stay, the castle in Lidzbark was a place which fully propagated Renaissance trends and ideas, and that the astronomer undoubtedly exemplified them. Perhaps the scholar's most interesting (one might even say: pioneering) action was sending his work, the *Commentariolus*, to the most important scientific centers of contemporary Europe to gather opinions on the results he obtained. This practice, after all, remains one of the most crucial stages in the development of science.

The Bishops' Museum in Lidzbark Warmiński undertakes activities aimed at disseminating knowledge about Nicolaus Copernicus's stay at the castle. To this end, it organizes educational workshops, annual celebrations of the scholar's birthday, and scientific conferences. The most recent event, titled "The Astronomical Achievements of Nicolaus Copernicus During His Stay at the Bishops' Castle in Lidzbark Warmiński", managed to gather eminent experts on the astronomer's life, who thoroughly examined Copernicus's achievements at the Lidzbark residence.

Literature

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