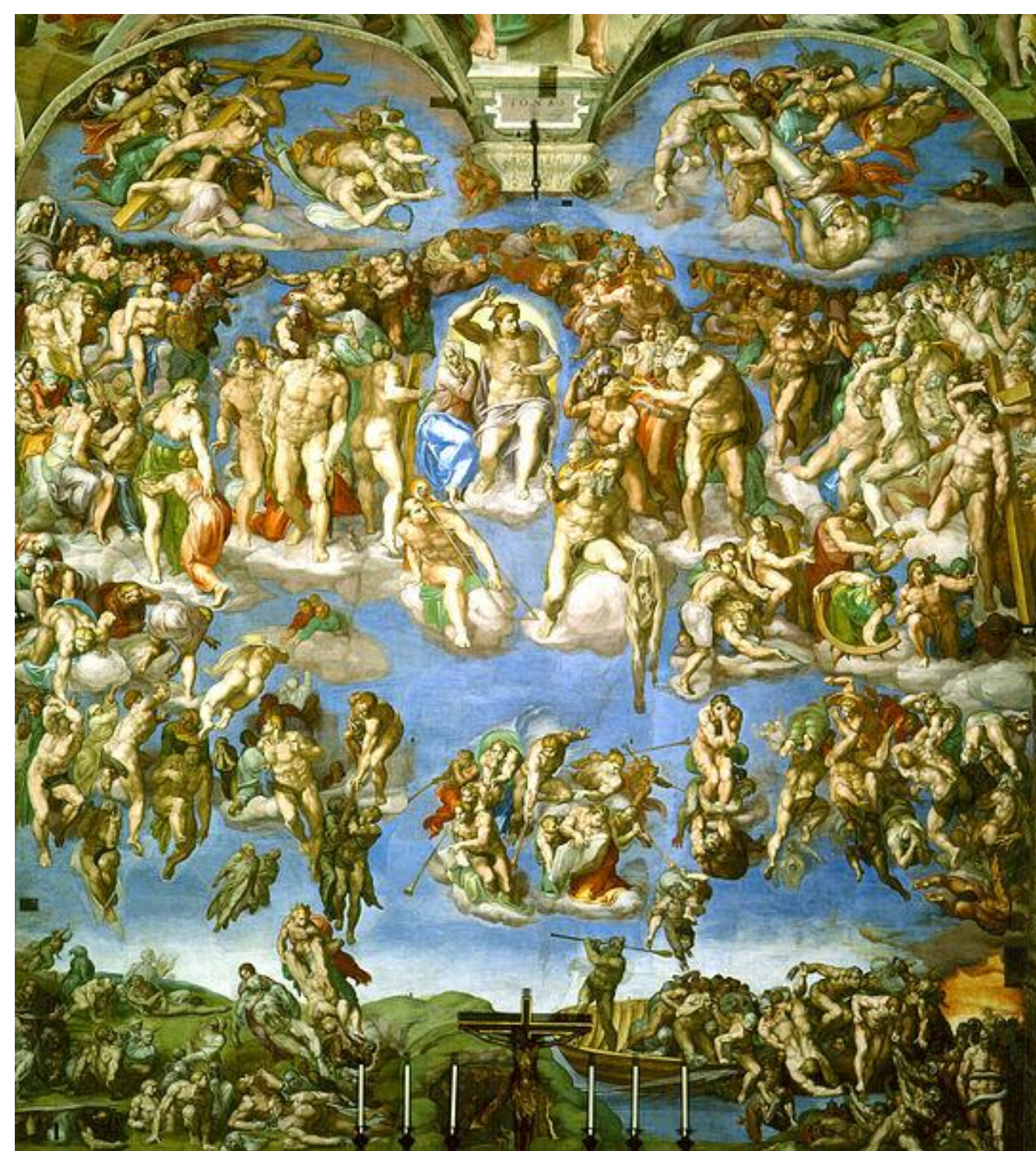


# Michelangelo, Copernicus and the Sistine Chapel: the *Last Judgment* Decoded

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## The Fresco and its Meaning

In Michelangelo's fresco of the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, Rome (commissioned by Pope Clement VII in 1533), Christ is unusually depicted as a beardless, Apollonian 'sun-god' in a cosmic circular design.

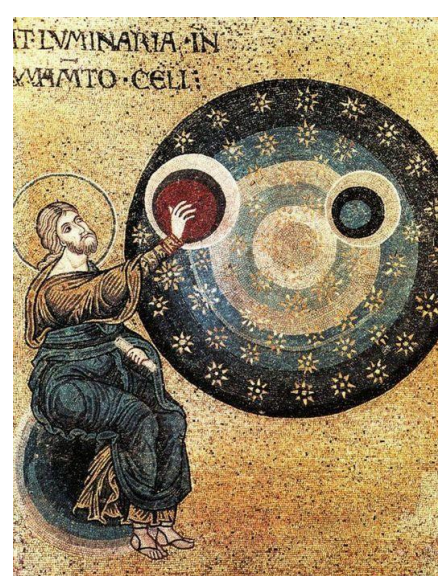


It is argued here that the work reflects Copernicus' theory of the sun-centred universe - an interpretation rejected by scholars because the *Last Judgment* (painted 1536-1541) predates Copernicus' theory, published in *Revolutions*, 1543.

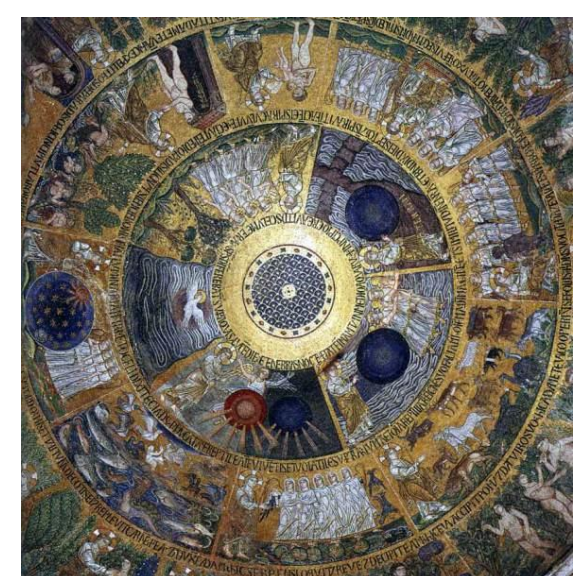
Set against the context of Biblical cosmology and iconography, especially in the Creation and Last Judgment (the Beginning and End of the Universe), it is shown that the fresco does indeed reflect Copernican heliocentricity, with the knowledge, consent and approval of Popes Clement VII and Paul III.

## Traditional links - Astronomy & Iconography

Links between cosmology and theology are evident in the Bible, from the accounts of the creation in Genesis onwards - and reflected in art.



God Creating the Universe, Monreale, 1175



Creation cycle, St Mark's Venice, 1215-80

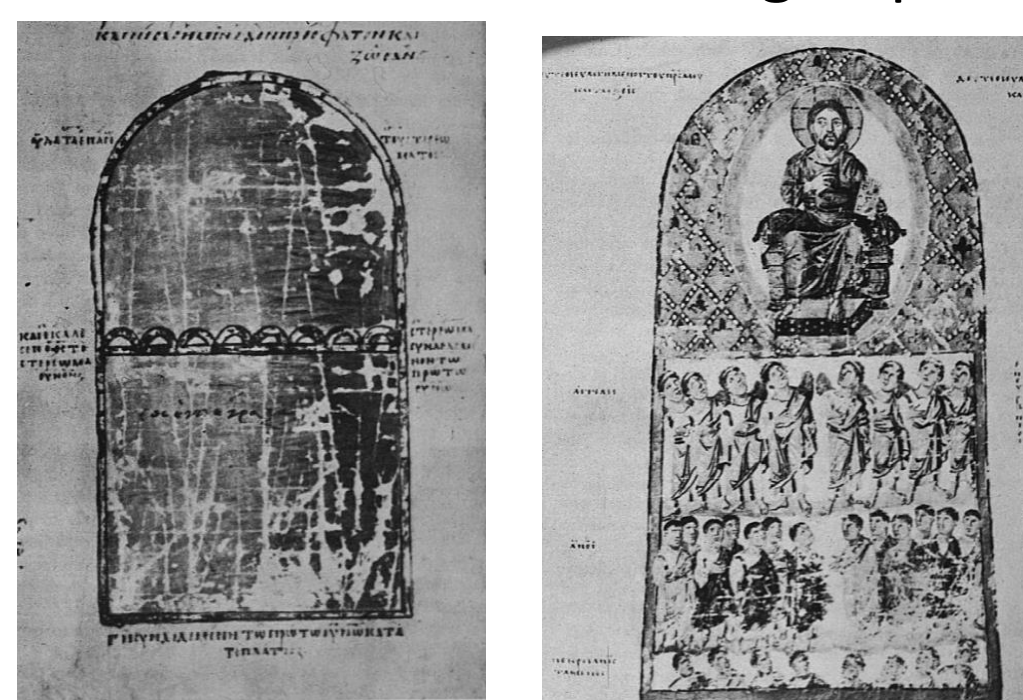


Galla Placidia, Ravenna, c. 425

Ecclesiastical domed architecture is based on natural eye observation of the flat earth surmounted by the starry dome of heaven (Isaiah 40:22).

## Cosmology and the Last Judgment

The *Last Judgment* scene depicts the three parts of the universe (Heaven, Earth and Hell) - with Christ above the hierarchy of saints, angels, saved and damned. The 'Good' go up to Heaven, while 'sinners' go down to Hell.

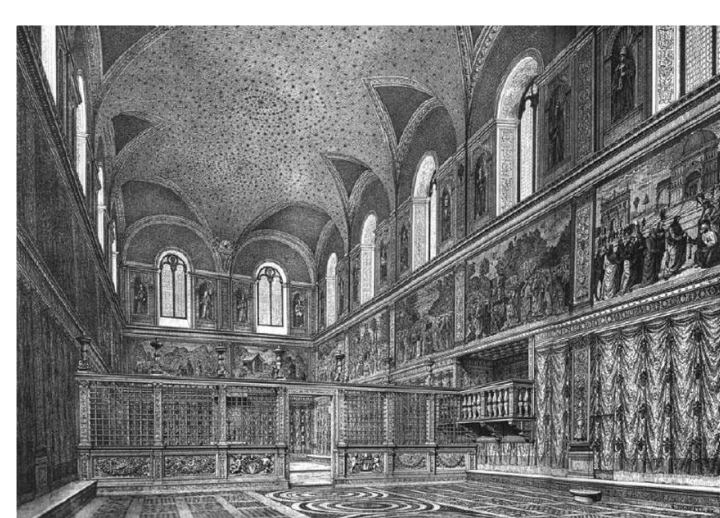


The 6th century manuscript, *Christian Topography*, by Cosmas Indicopleustes, shows a diagram of the universe (on left), as well as an image of the Last Judgment (right) with Christ at the top of layers of saints and damned.

The correspondence is obvious. The *Last Judgment* scene was ordered by linking it to the cosmological view of the universe. The approach is ubiquitous - from the great cathedrals (Vezelay, Autun, Notre Dame Paris, Bourges); to Italo-Byzantine mosaics and frescoes (Torcello, Florence); and later Renaissance versions (Giotto, Fra Angelico).

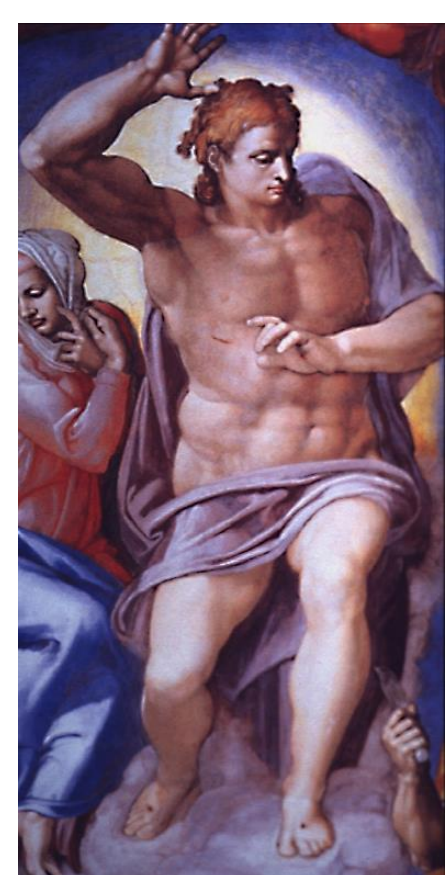
## The Sistine Chapel

The Chapel was built in 1475 to the same measurements as the Temple of Solomon - created, in turn, to the same proportions as the Universe (1 Kings 6). The original ceiling decoration was a starry vault of heaven.



## Tradition and Innovation in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*

Traditional features remain in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, but a huge circular movement overrules the established layered design.



A central 'Sun-Christ' (who resembles a classical Apollo) appears in the centre with a mêlée of saints, angels, saved and damned twisting and turning all around him in a huge circular motion from the top to the bottom of the immense fresco.

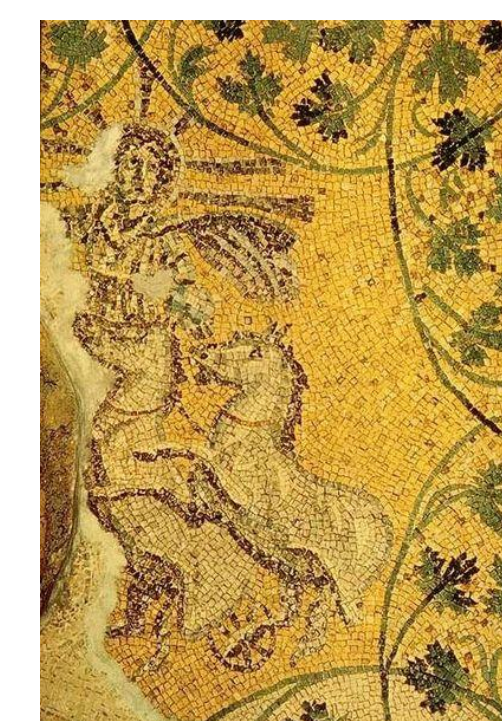


## Michelangelo's sources and influences

### Religious - Christ as light and the sun

The identification of Christ with the Sun as expressed in the Bible would have influenced the artist and his patrons. It also characterised the Catholic Reformation, with which Michelangelo was involved.

- I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall ... have the light of life (John 8:12)
- I am come as a light into the world (John 12:46)
- The Lord God is a sun and a shield (Psalm 18:11)
- The sun of righteousness shall arise (Malachi 4:2)



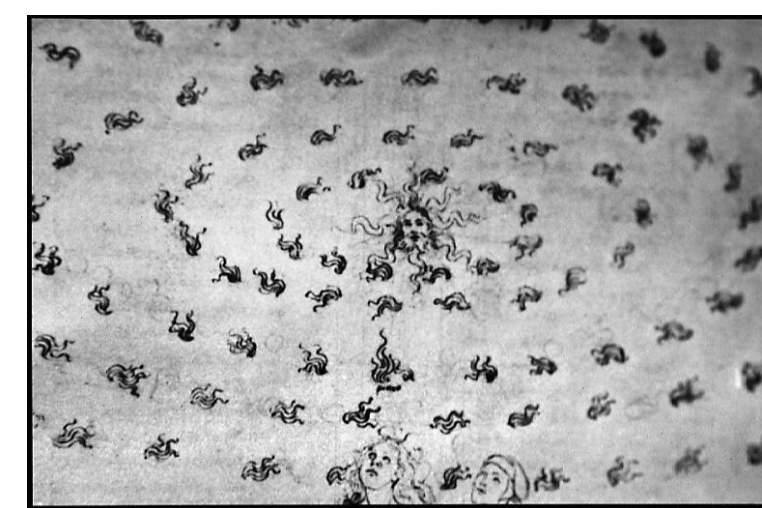
Christ as the Sun, 3rd cent, Vatican

### Literary - Dante's cosmology; Michelangelo's poems

Dante described God as the Sun ('No object in all the universe is more worthy to be made the symbol of God than the sun', *Convivio* 3, 12) - as shown in illustrations by Giovanni di Paolo and Botticelli.



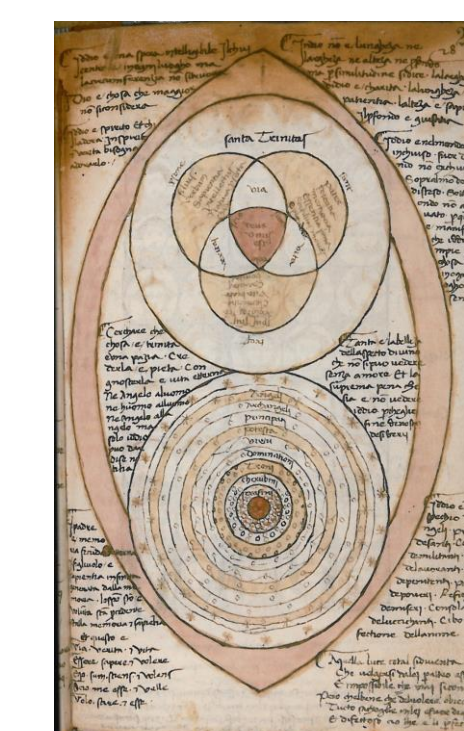
Giovanni di Paolo, 1450



Botticelli, 1490s

Dante was aware of the idea of a spherical earth but combining a geocentric system with ascent to Heaven and descent to Hell makes Hell the centre of the universe. Dante overcame this by having separate centres for the terrestrial system (Satan in Hell, *Inferno* XXXIV) and for the celestial universe (a point of light, *Paradiso* XXXIII).

Michelangelo was an expert on Dante and references to Christ as the Sun are also featured in his own poetry and poems by Vittoria Colonna ('He is the Sun whose brilliance blinds our eyes').



Dante's dual system, Buonaccorsi, 1440

### Philosophical - Neoplatonic sun-symbolism

Michelangelo was also greatly influenced by the revival of Plato's works in Renaissance Florence and, as protégé of Lorenzo de' Medici (as was Clement VII Medici), would have been familiar with the Neoplatonism of Ficino and his circle. Links with Christianity were emphasised, including the symbolic identification of Sun and Deity (from Plato, *Republic* VI) as well as circular cosmology.



Raphael, Plato (holding the *Timaeus*), 1510



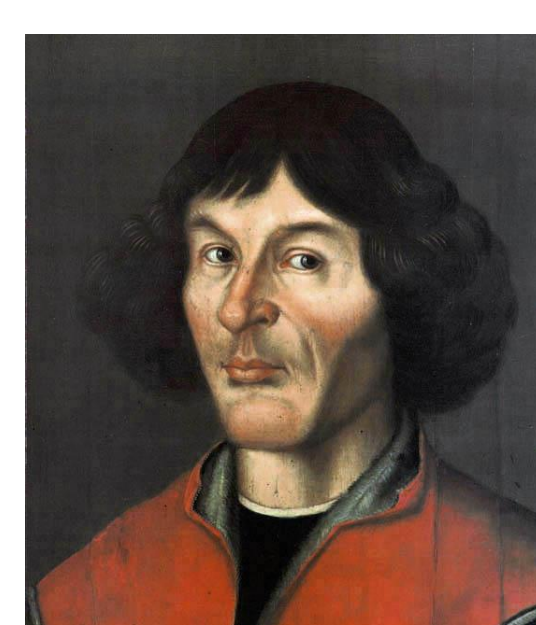
Ficino, Landino, and Poliziano

- [Plato] explains the whole thing and ... compares the Sun and God to each other (*Republic* VI)
- The sun was the first to be created ... placed at the centre of the sky ... It sits, as if occupying a rock in the manner of a king (Ficino, *De Sole*).

Ficino's *De Sole* was required reading when Copernicus studied in Krakow.

### Scientific - Nicholas Copernicus and others

*De Revolutionibus* was published in 1543, so it is true that Michelangelo could not have read the book before completing the fresco. However, it was not necessary then (as now), for anyone to read the book in order to grasp the idea of the sun-centred universe. In addition, the publication of *Revolutions* actually coincided with Copernicus' death aged 70, so that date obviously has little to do with the date of origin of his ideas.

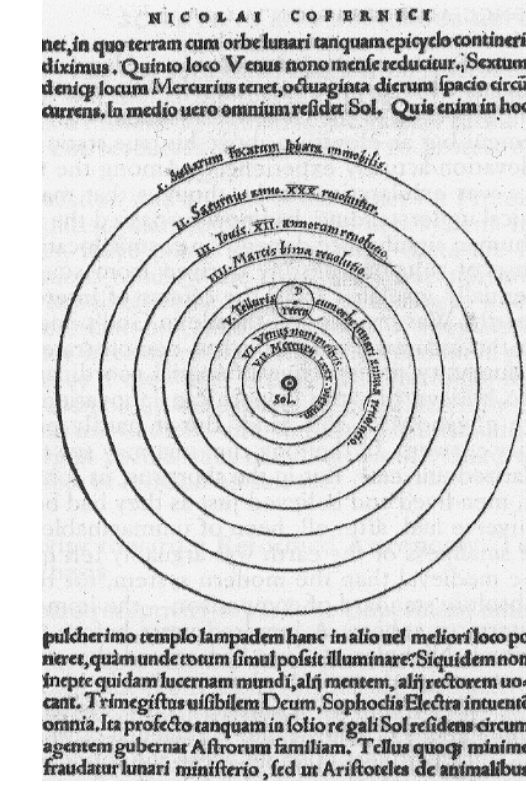


Nicholas Copernicus 1473-1543

Copernicus acknowledged his debt to ancient (Aristarchus) and recent (Buridan, Oresme and Cusanus) proponents of the heliocentric theory. He was also influenced by the writings of Ficino and Christian and neoplatonic sun-symbolism. He was not heretical but a canon of the Catholic Church. He credited God with the creation of the universe, albeit a sun-centred one.



In the midst of all assuredly dwells the Sun. ... who would place this illuminary in any better position ... some call him the Light of the World .... So he remains, governing the family of Heavenly bodies which circles around him. (*Revolutions* 1:10)



## Copernican Heliocentricity

### Michelangelo and Copernicus

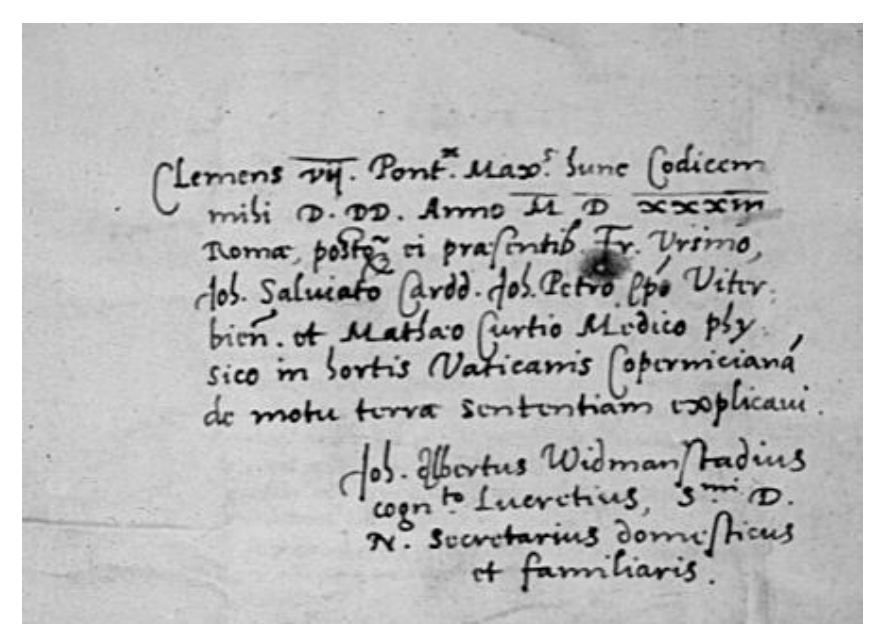
Just two years older than Michelangelo (b 1475), Copernicus (b 1473) spent seven years studying in Italy. They were both in Bologna in 1496, and in Rome in 1500 when Copernicus gave public lectures. Copernicus was recognized as a leading astronomer and his ideas were known in the 1520s and 30s (*Commentariolus*; *Letter to Werner*). His theory made swift progress amongst learned scholars who were not shocked by his ideas. Publication had been eagerly awaited for some time.

The conclusion that the earth was not at centre eventually shattered theological understanding about creation, the place of humanity in the universe and the location of Heaven and Hell, causing the Church to prohibit its teaching, but not at the time when Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgment*. *Revolutions* was not banned until 1616, seventy-three years after its publication and the death of its author.

### The Meeting in the Vatican Garden

What is more, and what proves that it was neither impossible nor heretical for Copernicus' ideas to have influenced Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, is the fact that Pope Clement VII showed a great deal of interest in the heliocentric theory long before its publication. In [June] 1533, he asked Albert Widmanstadt (associate of Copernicus) to explain the heliocentric theory to him and other Church dignitaries.

The event was recorded on a manuscript to mark the occasion: *Clement VII Supreme Pontiff presented this codex to me as a gift AD 1533, in Rome, after I had ... explained to him in the garden of the Vatican, Copernicus' teaching concerning the motion of the earth* (Staatsbibliothek, Munich).



Far from it being 'impossible' for Michelangelo to have heard of Copernican heliocentricity in the 1530s, it seems highly unlikely that he would not have known of the idea being discussed in the Vatican. Clement VII commissioned fresco immediately afterwards (September 1533).

After Clement VII died in 1534, Paul III continued the project and on 1 Nov 1536, Cardinal Schönberg wrote to Copernicus, urging him to publish his theory (as the fresco got underway). Following Copernicus' *Narratio Prima* (1540) *Revolutions* (published 1543) was actually dedicated to Pope Paul III. Michelangelo's revolutionary design for the Sistine *Last Judgment* clearly related to Copernican heliocentricity with Vatican knowledge and approval.

## Conclusions - Sun and Deity

Michelangelo was nurtured on Ficino, Dante and Catholic thought - and commissioned to paint a cosmological subject at the time of the initial acceptance of Copernican heliocentricity in the upper reaches of the Catholic Church, as evidenced in the fresco.

The depiction of Christ as the Sun in the centre of the circular format meant that the complex scene was still ordered by relating it to the view of the cosmos, it was simply that the cosmology had changed. The heliocentric theory was the logical approach to the age-old identification of God with the Sun. Humanity had been removed from the centre of the universe; but God was more logically placed there instead. The traditional analogy between Sun and Deity was vindicated at last.

### Additional note: The Centre of the Universe

But where is the precise centre of the circle - and why? A rotating plumb-line affixed to a specific point would have been used to achieve this, but it is not centred on Christ's head, heart or hand as might be expected. It is on Christ's right thigh, as in the description of the Christ of Judgment: 'And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS ... standing in the Sun' (Revelation 19:16f).



**Christ is depicted (theologically, neoplatonically and scientifically) as King of Kings and Lords of Lords, the Sun, the centre of the Universe.**

This is a summary of my book where all the ideas and conclusions as stated above are examined and illustrated in full.

Shrimplin, Valerie, *Sun-symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2000.

Summary at: Gresham College lecture (video and transcript) <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/michelangelo-copernicus-and-the-sistine-chapel>

Wikimedia comms (for illustrations)

And see also: [www.valerishrimplin.com](http://www.valerishrimplin.com)