

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Ramus, Peter [Petrus]

Born Cuts, (Oise), France, 1515

Died Paris, France, 26 August 1572

Peter Ramus rejected scholasticism and outlined new ways to view and to teach knowledge, influencing astronomy's transition from medieval to modern form. He was born into an impoverished noble family originally from Liège. There appears to have been little that was unusual about Ramus's early education. At around 12, after two unsuccessful attempts to enter the University of Paris, he enrolled at the Collège de Navarre, where he earned money working as a servant to wealthier peers. Having to attend school as a day student, however, meant that Ramus did not complete his master of arts until he was 21. Of particular benefit was the friendship that Ramus then forged with his later patron, Charles de Guise, who was to become Cardinal of Lorraine and, eventually, of Guise. The support of Guise disappeared after Ramus's conversion to Protestantism around 1562, but the long and active intervention of the cardinal on Ramus's behalf was responsible for much of the fame he gained during his life.

Ramus's career began sedately enough as an instructor at the Collège du Mans, but he soon moved, with his longtime collaborator in rhetoric, Omer Talon, to the Collège de l'Ave Maria, also in Paris. There, in 1543, Ramus published the first of many attacks on Aristotelian and scholastic education that would make him notorious and that led directly or indirectly to his death. Ramus's assertion that the medieval approach to learning, with its long tradition of minutely analyzing and carefully commenting on selected classical authors, was bankrupt proved scandalous to the faculty of Paris, and in short order they secured a ban on his teaching of dialectic (the rhetorical practice of logical principles).

This edict simply led Ramus to concentrate his efforts on the instruction of eloquence and mathematics. He was forced to teach himself the latter subject, since it had been minimal in his university curriculum. But taken together, the two apparently disparate disciplines reveal exactly how much of Ramus's work remains entrenched in premodern modes of thought. To Ramus, the study of numbers and the study of literature were but two aspects of one unified and coherent body of knowledge, which in all its facets was directed only at "disputing well," as he put it in his 1543 *Structure of Dialectic*.

The prospects of Ramus began to improve in 1545 when he was invited to become an instructor at the more prestigious Collège de Presles, where Talon again joined him. Ramus was shortly thereafter promoted to principal of the school, and in 1547, following the succession of Henry II to the throne and the subsequent elevation of Charles de Guise in the estimation of the court, all restrictions on Ramus's teaching were lifted; he was left entirely free to comment on the entire range of university subjects. In 1551, he was made a regius professor of eloquence and philosophy, the only time these two fields were combined under one title. In 1565, he was chosen dean of the regius professors, who came collectively to be called the Collège de France.

and who, as a body, had been intended by Francis I to represent a humanistic alternative to the resolutely scholastic education of the University of Paris. After this, his fortunes began to decline, falling slowly at first and then precipitously. Suspected even in the late 1550s of being a secret Protestant, Ramus had to flee Paris for Fontainebleau under royal protection during the religious troubles of 1562. He returned in 1563, but having made his conversion public in the intervening year, Ramus entered the city this time without the critical support of Guise. Harried by a growing number of antagonists, Ramus left Paris again in 1567 and once more took refuge with a sympathetic member of the royal family.

From 1568 to 1570, Ramus toured the prominent Protestant centers of learning in Germany and Switzerland. During these years, too, he began to broaden his vision of pedagogical reform and wrote on subjects ranging from theology to astronomy. He found the academic atmospheres of Heidelberg and Geneva, though, uncertain at best and returned to Paris for the last time in 1570. The royal family, especially the queen mother, continued to defend Ramus publicly, but he was murdered during the massacre of Saint Bartholomew

Ramus does not directly affect the history of astronomy, but his work was influential throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and America in a surprising number of ways. The topical organization of many modern encyclopedias can be traced to his interest in systematic thought, and Francis Bacon's search for an inductive method is in part attributable to his own youthful interest in Ramus's writing. Primarily, Ramus advocated a regular approach to the study of any given subject. He believed that all realms of knowledge could be construed schematically, and that any discipline of learning would conform to three "laws" of universality, homogeneity, and generality. In other words, a "natural method" of learning would be observably true in every posited application of the art or science, specific in its description, and arranged in such a way as to exhibit the general truths on which it was based

Ramus considered astronomy a branch of physics and, as such, part of the quadrivium of the university curriculum. Characteristically, he did develop a chart of physics in which the stars (still very much after the manner of Aristotle) were classified as elements of

constant simple matter, opposed to the immaterial essences of God and intelligence. Beyond this, Ramus seems merely to have appreciated astronomy as an application of mathematics, though he was critical of both Nicolaus Copernicus and Ptolemy for propounding their respective theories of the Solar System without observation. Copernicus thus had violated the first law of method. It is, in the end, one of the most telling marks of Ramus's influence that Johannes Kepler later claimed, with evident pride, that his own work had at last satisfied the demands of Ramus on astronomy.

H. Clark Maddux

Alternate name

Ramée, Pierre de la

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