

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Savile, Henry

Born Bradley, Yorkshire, England, 30 November 1549

Died Eton, Berkshire, England, 19 February 1622

Henry Savile is known today primarily for his endowment of the Savilian Chair of Geometry and Chair of Astronomy at Oxford; in his day he was also noted for an Oxford series of lectures on the *Almagest*

Savile, son of Henry and Elizabeth (née Ramsden) Savile, matriculated at Brasenose College, Oxford, circa 1561, and in 1565 he became a fellow of Merton College. Savile established his scholarly reputation in the 1570s with a brilliant series of lectures on the *Almagest*. The lectures are impressive in their use of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance sources—notably including Nicolaus Copernicus to elucidate the text of Ptolemy's classic work. Savile was ambivalent about the controversy over the Copernican theory. "Is it not all one," he famously replied to a colleague who asked about the movement of the Earth, "sitting at dinner whether my table be brought to me, or I go to my table, so I eat my meat?" Nonetheless, his lectures did much to revitalize the teaching of mathematics in Oxford

From 1578 to 1582, Savile toured the Continent, visiting numerous European astronomers and scholars. After returning from his travels, he was appointed Greek tutor to Elizabeth I. Handsome and eloquent, Savile proved to be a masterful courtier. His qualities won him academic favors. In 1585, he was elected warden of Merton College, and 10 years later, despite considerable obstacles, he became provost of Eton while retaining his Merton post. Savile was an autocratic, if effective, administrator; under his leadership both Merton and Eton enjoyed an academic resurgence. Savile's His own academic pursuits were as much historical and philological as they were astronomical. His later scholarship centered on ancient texts—the *Histories of Tacitus*, the works of Saint Chrysostom, and portions of the authorized version of the Bible. Yet he maintained a strong belief in the value of mathematical science, generously endowing the Savilian Chairs of Geometry and Chair of Astronomy at Oxford University in 1619. These professorships have been historically significant, having been held by Christopher Wren, David Gregory, James Bradley, Charles Pritchard, Herbert Turner (astronomy), and Edmond Halley (geometry), among others.

Keith Snedegar

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