

How Did the Renaissance Change Man's View of the World?

The Renaissance was a period of big change in European history. It was a time of intellectual excitement, when art and literature blossomed and groundbreaking scientific advances were made. Over the course of about 300 years, the Renaissance spread from its home base in Italy to western and northern Europe. The effect was like a sunrise making its way across the land.

To understand the changes the Renaissance produced, it helps to review what European society was like before it arrived. The time period before the Renaissance is usually called the **Middle Ages**, which stretched from the fall of the Roman Empire around 500 CE to about 1350. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope were the primary players in Europe. The custodians of culture – that is, the people who owned most of the books and made handwritten copies of the Bible – were priests who often lived a closed existence inside the walls of **monasteries**. Schools were few. **Illiteracy** was widespread. Most of the population, more than 85 percent, was peasant farmers called **serfs** who worked for a lord and his estate. Serfs were little more than slaves. Both serfs and their masters looked to the Catholic Church and the Bible to explain the world. The art and literature that existed focused on Jesus Christ and the sins of mankind.

In the 1300s, important changes began to happen. Improved farming methods helped

peasants become more self-sufficient. More and more serfs gained their freedom and no longer depended on lords. Some freed serfs migrated to towns, where they took up trades. The number of merchants and bankers increased. Since these people needed to have an education to effectively carry on their work, literacy spread. Eventually, educated people began to question the teachings of the Church. A movement called **humanism** developed, which praised the beauty and intelligence of the individual.

As more people became educated, human-



ism worked its way into the arts, literature, the sciences, and medicine. This early Renaissance movement was especially vigorous in the city-states of Italy – places like Rome, Venice, Florence, and Milan. The invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s gave the Renaissance and humanism even more momentum. Primarily, the Renaissance was an upper-middle class movement, but thanks to the mechanization of printing, shopkeepers and street

sweepers were able to afford books and articles that discussed the new ideas spreading across Europe. As a result, people started to look at themselves and their world in a new way.

But what, exactly, was this new way? Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *How did the Renaissance change man's view of the world?*

Document A

Sources: Images: *Madonna Enthroned Between Two Angels* by Duccio di Buoninsegna, late 13th century; *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, early 16th century.
Text: Theodore Rabb, *The Last Days of the Renaissance & The March to Modernity*, Basic Books, 2006.

Note: Duccio Di Bouninsegna's painting shows The Mother Mary on a throne with the baby Jesus on her lap. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is believed to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a wealthy Florentine merchant.



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The [clearest] evidence of the break with medieval culture comes from the visual arts. [It] was the essence of the Renaissance.... One begins to know the names of the artists ... feel stronger emotions in the subjects ... see well-defined landscapes, natural folds in drapery, and three-dimensional figures; and one begins to notice the emphasis on symbolic representation giving way to depictions of recognizable scenes ... the new artistic styles would echo the broader movements and interests of the new age.... Neither the techniques nor the forms of artistic expression were to be the same again.

Document B

Source: Excerpt from an English play called *Everyman*, written by an unknown author in 1485.

Note: Though written in 1485, which was during the Renaissance period, these lines carry a message right out of the Middle Ages.

*“Ye [man] think sin in the beginning full sweet,
Which in the end causeth thy soul to weep,
When the body lieth in clay.
Here shall you see how fellowship and jollity,
Both strength, pleasure, and beauty,
Will fade from thee as flower in May.
For ye shall hear, how our Heaven-King
Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning: *
Give audience, and hear what he doth say.”*

*Judgement Day

Source: Excerpt from Act II, Scene II of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, 1601.

*“What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty! in form and moving how
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the
world! the paragon* of animals!”*

*perfect model

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Document C

Source: Drawings of the universe by Claudius Ptolemy (circa 100 CE) and Nicolaus Copernicus (circa 1500).

Note: Ptolemy (tol-eh-mee) was a Roman astronomer who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, shortly after the time of Jesus. He developed a theory of the universe that was adopted by most scholars during the Middle Ages. The Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus lived from 1473 to 1543. Relying mostly on mathematics and observation, he developed a different understanding of the universe. Geocentric means "earth-centered" and heliocentric means "sun-centered."

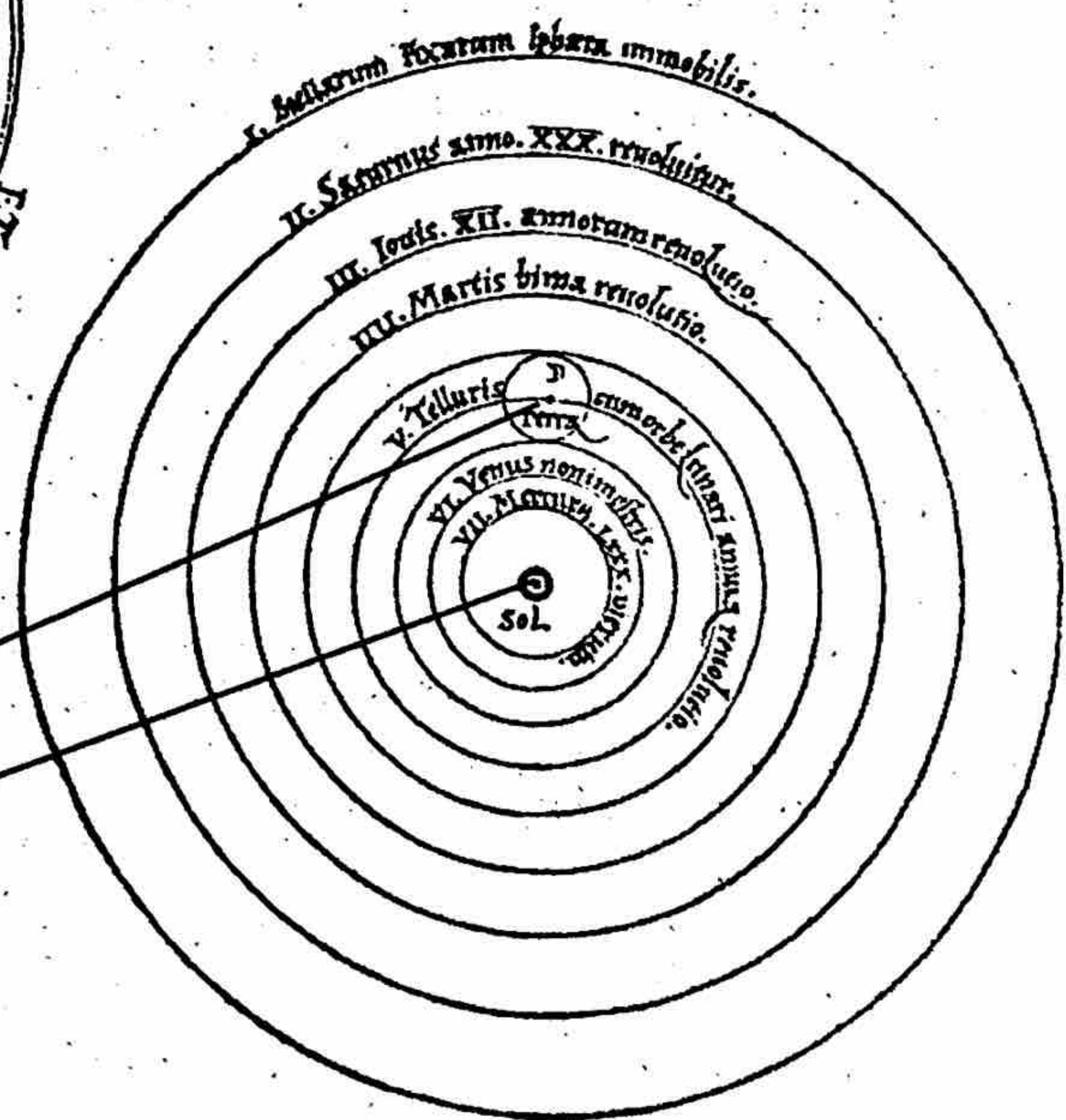
The Geocentric Universe of Ptolemy



Note: The Latin in the outer sphere can be translated "The Empire of Heaven and the Home of God and the Elect."

EARTH
SUN

The Heliocentric Universe of Copernicus



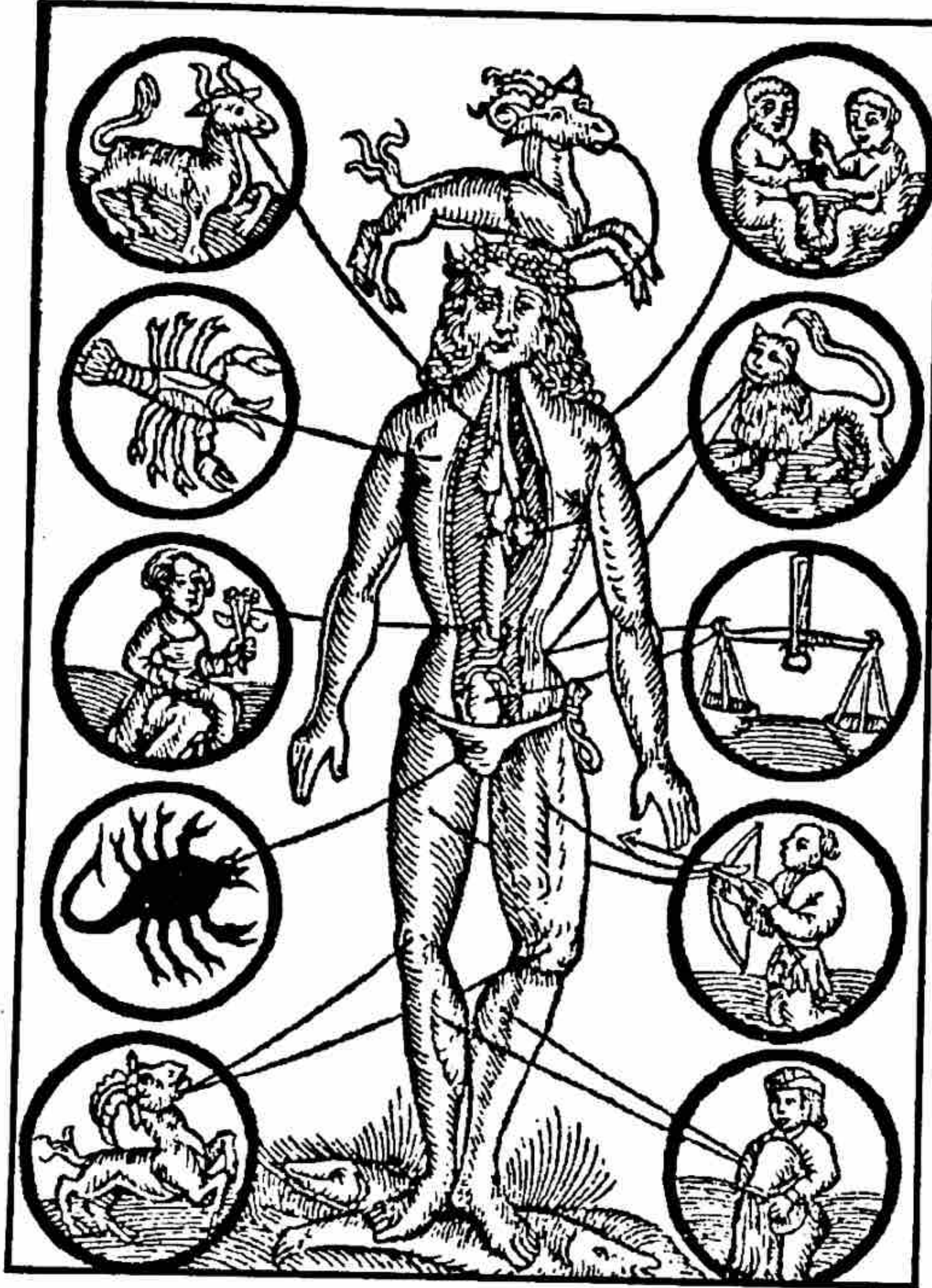
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Document D

Source: A woodcut called "Zodiac Man" from a book by German astronomer Johann Regiomontanus, 1512, and a woodcut from the anatomy book *On the Makeup of the Human Body* by Belgian physician Andreas Vesalius, 1543.

Note: The image on the left reflects the Middle Ages belief that each sign of the zodiac* governed a certain part of the body. For example, the constellation of stars called Aries the Ram controlled the head. The illustration on the right was based on the research done by Andreas Vesalius, who dissected human corpses to better explain the human body.

*The zodiac is a band of 12 constellations (stars) that stretch across the sky.



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