

An incunable edition of the most widely used Renaissance astronomical text.

Sacro Bosco, Johannes de. *Sphaera Mundi*. Venice: [Bonetus Locatellus] for Octavianus Scotus, 1490. 9 1/16 inches (230 mm), [96]pp.

The *Sphere* of Sacrobosco was the best-known European astronomical treatise of its time. As supplemented by the various pedagogical tracts present in this edition (as in many others), it formed the standard university textbook for three centuries. Next to nothing is known of the life of the author: documentary evidence is virtually nonexistent. Sacrobosco is thought to have been British, the Latin disguising the vernacular name John of Holywood, and is known to have been buried at Paris circa 1236. As a mathematician, he wrote treatises on the calendar and on the superiority of Arabic numbers to Roman for calculation. His chief work, however, was astronomical, applying mathematical rather than astrological or metaphysical methods to the study of the planets and the stars. In four chapters, the *Tractatus de spera* covers the basic elements of cosmology and astronomy, the general structure of the universe, the circles of the celestial sphere, eclipses, and the orbits of the planets.

Hundreds of medieval manuscripts of the text survive. The first printed versions appeared in Ferrara and in Venice in 1472: priority remains uncertain. Over the next two centuries, at least 160 editions were published. This 1490 printing is one of twelve Venetian incunable editions. It retains the illustrations of the Venice 1488 edition drawn by Ioannes Lucilius Santritter of Heilbronn, and cut by one of the great engravers of the time, Hieronymus de Sanctis. The initials of their first names (I and H) may be seen on the ring on **Spread 10 (right)**. The device (O.S.M.) of the publisher Octavius Scotus de Modoetia, printed in red, appears on **Spread 52 (right)**—Modeotia is Monza. As befits a textbook, this copy has been extensively annotated by a contemporary reader.

This edition, like most published in Venice, also contains the *Disputationes contra Cremonensia deliramenta* of Johannes Regiomontanus, a critique (in the form of a dialogue) of the “crazy” theories attributed to the 12th century scholar Gerardus

Cremonensis, whose *Theoria planetarum* (of which a 1472 Venetian edition may be seen on rarebookroom.org), an elementary introduction to theoretical astronomy was still used in the fifteenth century. This text was first published by Regiomontanus himself, in Nuremberg, in 1474 or 1475. Here it opens on **Spread 26 (right)**.

The last treatise, beginning on **Spread 35 (left)**, is the *Theoricae novae planetarum* of George Peurbach, an illustrated description of Ptolomaic planetary models—Sacrobosco had used Arabic sources, but not Ptolemy. Peurbach's text was first published in 1474 by Regiomontanus from notes he had taken at his lectures in Vienna in 1454. As in some earlier Venetian editions, a few woodcuts are colored by hand in red and ochre, probably by using a template.

Sacrobosco's text was translated into English by Lynn Thorndike in his *The Sphere of Sacrobosco and its commentators* (University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 118–42. Regiomontanus' treatise has not been translated into English. Peurbach's *Theoricae* is available in an English version by E.J. Aiton in *Osiris*, New series, vol. 3 (1987), pp. 5–43. This copy bears the signature and bookplate on **Spread 2 (left)** of the American agricultural chemist Charles Albert Browne (1870–1947), and it is bound in plain limp vellum.

This volume is now in the Cecil H. Green Library, which comprises roughly a third of the Stanford University Libraries' 8.5 million volumes. The Green Library houses special collections amounting to a quarter million rare volumes; among the rarities are an extensive collection of Aldine editions and numerous incunables.