

Seminar SAW

Seminar Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in the ancient world 2015-2016

organized by
Karine Chemla, Matthieu Husson, Agathe Keller, Christine Proust and the SAW group

Université Paris Diderot, Condorcet Building
room 483A
9:30 am to 5:30 pm

<http://sawerc.hypotheses.org/seminars/internal-seminar-historiography-2015>

Programme

December 18th, 2015 – History of mathematics and the astral sciences in the ancient world in a context of professionalisation. The case of Mesopotamia

Presentation – This session examines some of the first works on the history of mathematics and astral sciences in Mesopotamia, in the context of professionalization of history of science by the late 19th century and early 20th century. In which intellectual context and in which milieus did the interest for cuneiform mathematical and astronomical sources emerge? How did the different protagonists of the early historiography of cuneiform mathematics and astral sciences approach these sources? Which assumptions did they bring to their study? Which topics did they favor?

Martina Schneider/Pierre Chaigneau, *Chaldean/Babylonian mathematics according to Hankel and Cantor*

John Steele, *Abraham Sachs and the History of Babylonian science*

Teije de Jong, *The rediscovery of Babylonian Astronomy: a historiographic narrative*

Victor Gysembergh, *"Greek" science, "Babylonian" science? A vexata quaestio in the historiography of science*

Martina Schneider (Mainz Universität) & **Pierre Chaigneau** (SAW Project, SPHERE Université Paris Diderot)

Chaldean/Babylonian mathematics according to Hankel and Cantor

Abstract – At a time when little was excavated and known in Assyriology, Hankel and Cantor, interested in the history of mathematics, set out to write about mathematics of the “Chaldeans” or “Babylonians”. What were their sources? How did they use them? What kind of mathematics were they interested in? How did they represent these cultures, in what terms: linguistic, geographical, racial, and/or ethnical?

Teije de Jong (University of Amsterdam)

The rediscovery of Babylonian Astronomy: a historiographic narrative

Abstract – In this paper I will discuss the rediscovery of Babylonian mathematical astronomy by the Jesuits J.N. Strassmaier (1846-1920) and J. Epping (1835-1894) and the subsequent more extensive studies by their colleague F.X. Kugler S.J. (1862-1929) in the period 1880 - 1930. This early phase of the study of Babylonian astronomy took place at the Jesuit colleges in Blijenbeek, Exaeten and Valkenburg in the Netherlands. During his career Kugler pioneered virtually every aspect of Babylonian astronomy and he contributed to several disciplines in which Babylonian astronomy played a role. He also became involved in a number of personal and scientific controversies. Well-known is his crusade against Panbabylonism, a school of thought that tried to show that the most important mythologies and world religions originated from an ancient system of astral myths diffused from Babylon. When in the early 1930's Otto Neugebauer (1899-1990) entered the field of Babylonian mathematical astronomy this pioneering phase had come to an end.

John Steele (Brown University)

Abraham Sachs and the History of Babylonian science

Abstract – The meeting between Abraham Sachs and Otto Neugebauer which led to Sachs taking up a position at Brown first as Neugebauer's assistant and then as a fellow professor in the Department for the History of Mathematics marks a crucial turning point in the study of the Babylonian exact sciences. Although Sachs's contributions to the field have often been hidden to outsiders by the shadow of Neugebauer, Sachs made significant contributions to the study of Babylonian mathematics and astronomy in his own right. This paper will explore those contributions and compare the work and approach of the philologist-who-learned-science Sachs with those of the mathematician-who-learned-philology Neugebauer.

Victor Gysembergh (Université de Reims)

"Greek" science, "Babylonian" science? A vexata quaestio in the historiography of science

Abstract – My talk will focus on three instances of the reception of cuneiform texts on Mesopotamian science by scholars of ancient Greece. I will begin with Franz Boll's collaboration (ca. 1900-1922) with Assyriologist Carl Bezold on Greek and Mesopotamian astral sciences. I will continue with J.K. Fotheringham's assessment of « The Indebtedness of Greek to Chaldaean Astronomy » (1928). Finally, this will lead me to the exceptional group of scholars which formed around the journal *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik* (1929-1938), including students of ancient Greek science and philosophy such as Fotheringham, O. Neugebauer, J. Stenzel, O. Toeplitz and O. Becker.