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Paper Title :

« History of Mathematics, the Crisis of the European Sciences and The Humboldtian Tradition »

Abstract (no more than 250 words) :

This paper explores how different responses to the crisis of the humanistic sciences in the 1930s hinged upon different conceptions of history of mathematics. Distinctive positions in the German intellectual field at the time will be shown to reflect alternative ways to deal with tensions previously generated by the attempt to meet the challenges posed by comparisons between cultures in mathematics.

On the one hand, the editors of the pioneering series *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik* (1929-1936), the mathematicians Otto Neugebauer and Otto Toeplitz, and the classical philologist and philosopher, Julius Stenzel, envisaged history of mathematics as a way to « bridge the gap between the so-called humanistic sciences and the apparently so unhistorical ‘exact sciences’ ». On the other hand, Edmund Husserl concurrently dismissed what he termed « romantic » factual history, presumably fascinated with extra-European mathematics, in favor of some kind of « inner history », opposing the Greek breakthrough to universal validity to the so-called self-enclosed cultural particularity of all other historical peoples.

Both stances will be contrasted by tracing out how they connected – whether faithfully or not – with the Humboldtian brand of nineteenth-century comparative historiography of mathematics, practised by Hermann Hankel in the early 1870s. Confronted with newly available Eastern sources and ethnographic data of mathematical relevancy, history of mathematics then emerged as a professionalized subfield within German academia, while prompting thorough reflection on the nature of history writing in a context of structuring polarities (history vs. geography (ethnography), philology vs. mathematics).