

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

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Historiography of ancient mathematics and astral sciences, with a focus of China, and the Indian subcontinent: The beginnings of professionalization

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Old Truths for Tomorrow: Sketching Professional, Popular and Amateur Histories of Ancient Mathematics in the Soviet Union

Abstract - Throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, the Russian language publications on the history of ancient mathematics proliferated, aiming at teachers, students and historians of mathematics as well as generally cultivating a mathematical culture among their audience. But how was the “mathematical culture” and the narratives about the past mathematical knowledge used to build a communist future? In this talk I explore three prominent functions of the professional, popular and amateur histories of ancient mathematics: ideological, pedagogical and disciplinary myth-making. I start with an overview of the Moscow school of the history of mathematics in a larger context, from the rise of the Soviet version of science studies, “naukovedenie,” to the generational struggle within the mathematical community, the infamous “Luzin affair.” Next, I analyze the pedagogical and political stakes behind a set of texts dedicated to teaching and popularizing the history of ancient mathematics in the post-war period. Finally, I show the interplay between the new discipline of computer science in search of its own origin story and the Soviet claims on the ancient knowledge of medieval Central Asian mathematics, in a volatile region on the eve of the war in Afghanistan.