

SAW Conference on Writing histories of ancient mathematics – Reflecting on past practices and opening the future, 18th-21st centuries

24-28 Octobre, 2016

organized by Karine Chemla, Agathe Keller, Christine Proust and the SAW group
Université Paris Diderot, Condorcet Building room 366A Klimt- 9:30 am to 5:30 pm

The historiographic effects of categorizing knowledge

Friday October 28th, 2016

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The Historiography of Ancient Exact Sciences and the Demarcation Problem

Abstract – Two exemplary works in the history of the exact sciences, namely Otto Neugebauer’s *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* (Dover Press, 1957, 1969 2nd ed) and Olaf Pedersen’s *Early Physics and Astronomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1974, 1993 2nd ed), represent different approaches to the history of science, in particular, how historical evidence of the mathematical sciences on both sides of the Mediterranean was to be read and understood. Whereas they differed on the role of the Greeks in the “invention” of science, as well as on the question of rationality in Near Eastern science, at the heart of both presentations lies an image of science’s identity and purpose across history and culture. Neugebauer and Pedersen’s historiographies of science were, therefore, in different respects both implicated in the so-called demarcation problem, which, in the course of 20th century philosophy of science, aimed to define and differentiate science from other forms of knowledge. This paper will trace the significance of ancient Near Eastern evidence in the context of this debate in the historiography of science, and especially, how the opposition between Greek and Babylonian science manifested a 20th century emphasis on the demarcation problem.