

SAW Three-Month Workshop:

Mathematical Practices in relation to the Astral Sciences

Abstract

February 20, 2015

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Some precisions for a philology of numbers in cuneiform mathematics and astronomy

Abstract: In this short talk, I sketch the history of the notation for transcribing and translating numbers written in sexagesimal place value notation (SPVN), as described by Neugebauer in a paper from 1933 and consistently used in his editions. The aim is to understand why and to what extent he took for granted the uniformity of the practices with SPVN numbers in mathematical texts from the Old-Babylonian (OB) period and astronomical texts from the Seleucid period. Doing so, I found useful to discuss four radically different ways of writing numbers and quantities in cuneiform sources, with a special emphasis on pieces of evidence suggesting that the handling of SPVN in astronomical Seleucid texts, points toward a practice with numbers radically new from the OB one. Indeed, when the SPVN in OB material is always a floating notation, the tabular arrangement of some astronomical tablets from the Seleucid period as well as three distinct uses of the so-called "zero" allow to speak of a new kind of SPVN.