

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

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**Historical approaches to ancient mathematics and astral sciences in the early  
modern period**

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*Dechales's History of Mathematics*

**Abstract** – The Jesuit C.F. Milliet Dechales (1621-1678) is the author of one of the most famous and popular early modern mathematical encyclopedias, *Cursus seu mundus mathematicus* (1674, enlarged edition 1690). It opens with a substantial, over a hundred-folio-page long „Proemial Treatise“ (*Tractatus proemialis*) devoted to the „progress of mathematics“. Likely one of the most comprehensive histories of mathematics antedating Montucla's 18th-century masterpiece, it is organized by subfields and covers the gamut of mixed mathematics—astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, mechanics, optics, music, geography and navigation, and architecture. The many early modern historical narratives about the mathematical sciences, from Regiomontanus's *Oratio* (1464) onwards, have been aptly characterized stressing their literary form and goals rather than their historical content. Rhetoric, humanistic topoi, and philosophical filiations turned the histories of mathematics into powerful tools for different purposes. They provided legitimation to the mathematical sciences as well as to their teachers and authors, but also contributed to define the role and boundaries of the discipline. Using Dechales's account we will analyze the role mathematics played in the 17th-century Jesuit educational agenda.