

Conference “Mistakes and the study of manuscripts” 2016

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Distinguishing between temporal layers of discrepancies

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Mistakes and the edition of mathematical letters of early modern period

Abstract – Correspondences play a key role in the circulation of early modern mathematics. For the historian, the material of mathematical letters consists of autograph letters, manuscript copies, minutes and printed texts. The study and the comparison of these various sources often reveal mistakes, errors and erasures of different types that may result from the elaboration of the mathematical content, for instance in autograph letters, but also from the copy or the edition process in manuscript copies, minutes and printed texts. Moreover, it is often an issue at stake to determine which kind of errors one is confronted with, especially when only a printed edition is available. In my talk, I will present some examples of such mistakes in mathematical letters mainly excerpted from Descartes’ correspondence. In this case, for several letters, the material at hand only consists of the printed edition of Descartes’ letters by Clerselier.