

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

Making sense of the diversity of mathematics

Thursday October 27th, 2016

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David Eugene Smith and the writing of the history of mathematics: number stories

Abstract – David Eugene Smith (Cortland 1860 – New-York 1944) was a key actor in an international network in which the history of mathematics took shape in the early 20th century. A great traveler and an avid collector, he was involved in the main programs in the United States for popularizing “oriental mathematics”, to use his own words. At the same time, he was in charge of the education of mathematics teachers in various institutions, including Columbia University. His first and main concern was the improvement of mathematics education. At the core of Smith's interests for collections, for the history of mathematics, and for teaching, was his predilection for arithmetic, and more specifically, for numbers.

This paper analyses Smith's specific way of writing the history of mathematics. It examines how his history writing draws on his collections of books and instruments, how this history is dependent on the mathematical curricula practiced in North American high schools in the early 20th century, and how his discourses incorporated the new mathematical sources imported through translations from various parts of the world. This analysis is based on one of the most popular among Smith's books, that is, *History of Mathematics* (volume I, 1923, volume II, 1925). A specific attention is devoted to the way in which Smith deals with classifications of numbers in his book. The particular case of cuneiform sources is considered in detail.