

SAW Seminar:

History and Philosophy of Mathematics

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Transfers and transformations of numerals. The brothers Humboldt at the crossroads of disciplines (1819-1835)

Abstract: In 1819 Alexander von Humboldt presented his "Considérations générales sur les signes numériques des peuples" before the Paris Academy. Based upon a collection of data he had received from the various ethnographers and linguists in his scientific network, Alexander developed in this fragment a hypothetical history of the genesis of the hindu-arabic numeration system. The fragment would be reworked and updated in 1829 but it would remain but a fragment of a bigger, unfinished project. Nevertheless, the sketch would prove to be an important source of inspiration for the linguistic studies of his brother Wilhem (1830-1835) on the one hand, and for the prudent beginnings of a history of mathematics (Rosen, Woepcke, Nesselmann) on the other hand. Especially the reflections on the transfer and the transformation of numerals proved to be stimulating and led to the more general question of transfer between cultures and of contact between languages, problems that are still highly topical today.