

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

March 16th, 2015

Jed Buchwald (California Institute of Technology)

*Hieroglyphs, astronomy and religion in the in Napoleonic and restoration France, or
the Dendera Affair*

Abstract – In 1802 the artist Vivant Denon published a drawing of an Egyptian ceiling from the temple of Dendera, far up the Nile. Done during the Napoleonic expedition, Denon's drawing of what appeared to be a zodiac caused an immediate uproar in Paris, as arguments flew back and forth over its age. Some asserted its immense antiquity, others, particularly after the Concordat with the Catholic Church, bitterly insisted on Biblical authority. Press censorship under Napoleon's chief of police, Fouché, soon dampened discussion. Then, in 1822, the Dendera zodiac, sawn and exploded out of its original location by a French archaeological vandal, appeared in Restoration Paris, reigniting antagonisms during a period of intense religious, ideological and political controversy. The "Dendera Affair" opens a window onto many aspects of Empire and Restoration scientific and intellectual culture, most notably the issue of who could speak with authority about antiquity: scientists like Fourier and Biot, who differed angrily with one another, but for whom the Dendera zodiac was nevertheless an image of the Egyptian sky untouched by human imagination, or philologists and linguists, such as the young Champollion, who saw the zodiac as a literary creation embedded deeply within Egyptian culture.