Universität Regensburg

FAKULTÄT FÜR PHILOSOPHIE, KUNST-, GESCHICHTS- UND GESELLSCHAFTSWISSENSCHAFTEN
Professur für Wissenschaftsgeschichte

GASTVORTRAG

Mittwoch, 17. Mai 2017, 18 Uhr c.t.
Raum: VG 2.45

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Going in Circles: Reassembling the Airy Transit Circle and its History

The Airy Transit Circle is remembered as the telescope that used to define the Greenwich Prime Meridian (longitude zero of the world). Through the exhibitions at the museum of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, visitors and tourists are also reminded of the instrument's contribution to time determination and distribution. While the history of the instrument is mainly framed through these two narratives, the paper presented here highlights how the transit circle was interpreted in different ways by the individuals who interacted with the instrument. First, through the analysis of the construction process of the transit circle (1847-1850), the paper highlights how George Airy (Astronomer Royal at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, and designer of the transit circle), the instrument makers (Charles May and William Simms), astronomers (e.g. John Herschel and Richard Sheepshanks) and the Admiralty (the source of funding for the Observatory) interpreted the transit circle in multiple distinct ways, but came to a common understanding through Airy's efforts. Second, the analysis of the maintenance of the instrument throughout its first 30 years demonstrates various interpretations of the Transit Circle by members of the Observatory staff. The paper examines how the assistants in charge of the instrument, the labourer/carpenter, and the (human) computers of the Observatory framed the instrument through their interactions with it as reported through their correspondence with George Airy. Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates the multiple ways in which a scientific instrument can be interpreted by its users, as well as the differences between the historical and the contemporary framings of scientific instruments.

Daniel Belteki is a second year PhD student in History of Science at the University of Kent. His research focuses on the history of astronomy, the history of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, and the history of the Airy Transit Circle. He holds a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (University of East Anglia), and an MA in European Studies on Society, Science and Technology (Maastricht University). He assisted in the Transit of Venus 1874 digitisation project (a collaboration between the University of Kent and the Cambridge University Library), and recently finished an internship at the Royal Museums Greenwich where he carried out research on the internal galvanic system of the Observatory connecting the astronomical instruments and the clocks together.

Zum Gastvortrag ergeht herzliche Einladung