

Seminar SAW: History of Mathematics, History of Economical and Financial Practices
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Constructions and excavations

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Bricks real and imaginary: The altar constructions of the Sulbasūtras

The Śulbasūtras form a portion of the corpus of ritual texts from ancient India. Generally dated to 800-200 BCE, the texts present the methods needed to construct various arenas and fire altars used in the rituals. The Śulbasūtras constitute the earliest systematic presentation of mathematical knowledge in India.

The Śulbasūtras contain instructions for constructing a number of different fire altars made from burnt bricks. The texts themselves provide evidence of knowledge of brick technology, whereas older ritual texts sometimes talk about bricks in a more abstract way indicating that perhaps the authors did not master brick technology. This raises the question of who used the texts, and whether there is a distinction between ritualistic expert and craftsman skilled in brick technology.

An overview of some fire altars and the configurations of bricks used to construct them will be given. There will also be a discussion of the use of specifically square bricks for some altars, a requirement that is harder to achieve than when the use of rectangular bricks is allowed.