

Revue d'Histoire des Mathématiques



Charles
Hermite
(1822-1901)

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SOCIÉTÉ MATHÉMATIQUE DE FRANCE

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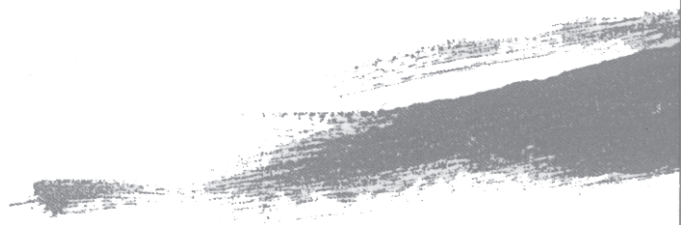
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ÉDITORIAL

“We are all Hermite’s heirs,” claimed Cyparissos Stephanos (1857–1917), who studied with Hermite in Paris in the 1880s and became professor of mathematics at the University of Athens.¹

And that would probably be even truer today. The databases MathSciNet and zbMATH contain more than 5,500 articles published between, say, 1950 and 2024, whose *title* includes the name “Hermite” and more than 6,000 articles whose title includes the derived adjective “Hermitian”. They belong to an impressive variety of fields, from number theory to numerical analysis, from linear algebra to computer science, from functional analysis to probability theory, from fluid mechanics to partial or ordinary differential equations and special functions. There are Hermite inequalities and a Hermite constant, Hermite polynomials, Hermite schemes, Hermitian forms, matrices or varieties.

Hermite’s career, however, was not a smooth one.² Hermite was born in Dieuze (Lorraine) on December 24, 1822 as the son of a merchant family. He studied in Nancy, then in Paris and was admitted at the École polytechnique in 1842, without distinction (ranking 68th out of 134). He left the Polytechnique only a year later, both because of a disability that made him ineligible for the usual careers open to Polytechnique students, and because Joseph Liouville, who taught there, advised him to concentrate on his main passion, mathematics. Indeed, by this time, Hermite was already publishing on topics that would occupy him for the rest of his life: algebraic equations (with a proof of the impossibility of solving the general quintic equation by radicals) and elliptic functions and their generalization (which brought him

¹ See PHILI (Christine), Sur le développement des mathématiques en Grèce durant la période 1850-1950, *Istorico-matematicheskie issledovania*, 3 (1997), pp. 80-102, quote p. 85.

² On Hermite’s life, aside the substantial introduction by his son-in-law Émile Picard to Hermite’s complete works, one can mention among his numerous obituaries: NOETHER (Max), Charles Hermite, *Mathematische Annalen*, 55 (1902), pp. 337-385 and DARBOUX (Gaston), Notice historique sur Charles Hermite [1905], in *Éloges académiques et discours*, Paris: Hermann, 1912, pp. 117-172. In addition, two books have been devoted to Hermite’s scientific biography: OZHIGOVA (Elena Petrovna), *Charles Hermite*, Leningrad: Nauka, 1982 (in Russian) and BREZINSKI (Claude), *Charles Hermite, père de l’analyse moderne*, Paris: Société française d’histoire des sciences et des techniques, 1990.