

Remembering David E. Pingree

On 11 November 2005, at the age of 72, David E. Pingree passed away. With the passing of this one man, the academic world lost a philologist, historian, mathematician, anthropologist, intellectual detective, and true gentleman. Pingree's interests ranged from the exact sciences, such as mathematics and astronomy, to the not so exact sciences, such as astrology and divination; they spanned the lands from India to Europe, and the times of ancient Mesopotamia to the Renaissance. Because Pingree treated so many areas that spread across such diverse cultures, languages and times, it is nearly impossible for any single individual to do justice to his work. The following, then, can only hope to provide a few of the pieces in the intricate mosaic that was David Pingree's life.

Pingree was born on 2 January 1933 in New Haven, Connecticut. His family moved to Massachusetts when he was a teenager, where he attended high school at Phillips Academy. At an early age he already showed an interest in mathematics and the classics, and it was while still in high school that he began teaching himself Sanskrit -- just one of the numerous language he would come to master in order to pursue his interests. After high school, Pingree attended Harvard University for both his undergraduate and graduate work. He received his B.S. degree in 1954 and then went on to complete his PhD in 1960, writing his dissertation, *Materials for the Study of the Transmission of Greek Astrology to India*, under Daniel Ingalls and the renowned historian of ancient mathematics, Otto Neugebauer, with whom Pingree would later work as a colleague at Brown University. In 1958, while still pursuing his graduate degree, Pingree traveled to India to further his study of Sanskrit and while there studied informally with a modern Indian astrologer at Poona. After completing his PhD, Pingree remained at Harvard three more years as a member of its Society of Fellows before moving to the University of Chicago to accept the position of Research Associate at the Oriental Institute. In 1971, his former advisor, Otto Neugebauer, successfully recruited Pingree to succeed him in Brown University's Department of the History of Mathematics, of which in 1986 Pingree himself became Chairman and where he remained until his death.

A few words should be said about Brown's Department of the History of Mathematics and its own history, since it so closely reflected the interests of Pingree and of which, in a very real sense, Pingree was the embodiment. It was founded in 1947 by Otto Neugebauer and had among its faculty such notable figures as Abraham Sachs, Gerald Toomer, and of course Pingree himself. In the 1970s when the department was at its height, the faculty dealt with the exact sciences found as far east as India and as far west as England (with only East Asia—China and Japan—being outside its linguistic control) and covering a period of time beginning around 2000 BCE and extending into the present. At the time of Pingree's death, the department was the only history of mathematics department in the world, and Pingree its only full (and full-time) professor. Sadly, then, Pingree's disappearance also seems to mark the disappearance of the world's only history of mathematics department.

Like the department itself, Pingree devoted himself to the study of the exact sciences, such as mathematics, mathematical astronomy and astral omens. He was also acutely interested in the transmission of those sciences across cultural and linguistic boundaries. His interest in the transmission of the exact sciences came from two fronts or, perhaps more correctly, his interest represents two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, he was concerned with how one culture might appropriate, and so alter, the science of another (earlier) culture in order to make that earlier scientific knowledge more accessible to the recipient culture. On the other hand, Pingree was also interested in how scientific

texts surviving from a later culture might be used to reconstruct or cast light on our fragmentary records of earlier sciences. In this quest, Pingree would, with equal facility use ancient Greek works to clarify Babylonian texts on divination, turn to Arabic treatises to illuminate early Greek astronomical and astrological texts, seek Sanskrit texts to explain Arabic astronomy, or track the appearance of Indian astronomy in medieval Europe.

In order to undertake his work Pingree, while still a Junior Fellow at Harvard, began collecting books and cataloguing manuscripts that dealt with ancient astronomy and astrology. In fact when the *Harvard Crimson* profiled the young Pingree in 1963 they described him as “sitting on a small pile of books which take up most of the space in his room.” His enthusiasm for ancient books and manuscripts continued, and he estimated that his own personal library contained around 20,000 works on Mesopotamian, Indian, Greek, Latin and Near Eastern exact sciences. In fact, his personal library is considered by many to be one of the best of its kind in the world, and scholars from across the world came to Brown not only to study with Pingree, but also to use his private collection. In addition to collecting books and manuscripts Pingree also played an integral role in cataloguing and preserving South Asian manuscripts. Thus in 1995, he helped found the American Committee for South Asian Manuscripts, whose goal is to catalogue and put onto microform the some 35,000 Arabic, Persian, and Indian manuscripts in North America. Along with cataloguing thousands of manuscripts, Pingree also edited and published numerous Sanskrit astronomical tables.

In addition to his cataloguing efforts, Pingree’s research led to literally hundreds of publications. The broadly diverse scope of his writings can be seen immediately from a few titles of his many books: *Babylonian Planetary Omens*, *Census of the Exact Sciences in Sanskrit*, *Arabic Astronomy in Sanskrit*, *The Latin Picatrix* (the Latin translation of the Arabic *Ghayat al-hakim*, ‘The Aim of the Wise’ [ca. 1000], which is a synopsis of earlier works on astrological magic) and *Levi ben Gerson’s Prognostication for the Conjunction of 1345*. In all, Pingree authored or co-authored over 40 books and nearly 250 articles. The most complete bibliography (as of July 2003) can be found at the end of *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honour of David Pingree* (ed. Charles Burnett, et al., Leiden, 2004).

The significance of Pingree’s work is amply testified to by the outstanding recognition he received. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship. He was elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society, the Institute for Advanced Study, and was appointed an A. D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University. Certainly, however, the greatest significance of Pingree’s work is the impression it has left on countless scholars and the field in general. He will be sorely missed.

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<http://www.browndailyherald.com/media/paper472/news/2005/11/18/CampusNews/Only-FullTime.Prof.In.Dept.Of.History.Of.Mathematics.Dies.At.72-1110353.shtml?nrewrite&sourcedomain=www.browndailyherald.com>; R. P. Morin’s “An Indiana Jones of Mathematics” in *The George Street Journal* http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George_Street_Journal/Pingree.html; and *The Harvard Crimson*, published 23 February 1963
<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=491857>.)



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