

Jesper Lützen
University of Copenhagen

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Why was Wantzel overlooked for a century?

In 1837 Pierre Wantzel proved that the classical problems of the duplication of the cube and the trisection of the angle cannot be solved by ruler and compass. In modern books on the history of mathematics he is given credit for this contribution. However in his own time and for the following century his proof was hardly noticed. In the talk I shall analyze the reason for this neglect. I shall argue that a main reason was the fact that such impossibility results were not really important in the problem oriented quantitative mathematical paradigm that still prevailed at the beginning of the 19th century.

I shall show that in connection with the problem of the insolvability of the quintic by radicals Abel was aware of this fact, and explicitly tried to change the way the problem was posed, in such a way that his impossibility theorem could count as a solution of the problem. I shall argue that impossibility only became fully integrated in mathematics towards the end of the 19th century.