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Abstract for an Invited Paper
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Beller Lectureship: From Artefacts to Atoms: The Origins and Early Years of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM)

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The BIPM was founded by the Metre Convention in 1875. Its main task was to maintain and disseminate the units of length and mass using the new International Prototypes of the Metre and Kilogram. My talk will be based on the opening chapters of my book “From Artefacts to Atoms” which recount the story of the Metre Convention and the creation of the BIPM at the Pavillon de Breteuil in Sèvres on the outskirts of Paris, as the first international scientific institute. I shall include a brief outline of the sometimes acrimonious discussions at the Diplomatic Conference of the Metre, which opened on 1 March 1875 and concluded with the signing of the Convention on 20 May, of the construction of a new laboratory building, recruitment of staff, purchase of instruments and equipment and the beginning of scientific work. There was no precedent for any of this, success was due to the wisdom and foresight of those who drafted the Convention and to the founder Members of the International Committee for Weights and Measures overseeing the BIPM and to the high quality of the original scientific staff. However, success came at a price, the decision to define the Metre at 0 °C, for example, led to much ill health in the early years among the staff from working in cold damp laboratories, an aspect of metrology that is easy to forget these days.

¹The author is Emeritus Director of the BIPM