

Section 1.1

Egypt and Babylon

Who: Farmers, merchants, priests, and scribes

What: The origins of mathematics

When: 30,000 BC to 800 BC.

Scientists speculate that man has existed for hundreds of thousands of years. But it was not until fairly late in our development as a species that we created civilization. Tools, the alphabet, money, and farming are all thought to be discovered/developed around the same time, roughly 4000 BC to 5000 BC. However, in 1937 a wolf's bone was found in the former Czechoslovakia that had evidence of counting from 30,000 BC. On this bone were 55 notches, arranged by fives, in two groups (one containing 35 notches, the other 20). This suggests that man has had the ability to count long before he could write, farm, or build. It has been argued in fact, that mathematics predates mankind. Many animal species appear to have primitive counting abilities.

However, mathematics as an intellectual endeavor developed roughly along with language and writing. The first mathematical activities were counting, measuring, surveying, and building. But that is not to say that early man did not have an interest in abstract mathematics. On a Babylonian tablet dated around 1600 BC is found evidence of Pythagorean triples, factoring, and even equation solving.

From the ancient Egyptians, we have the two oldest mathematical documents in existence. A pair of papyrus scrolls (one from around 2000 BC the other from 1700 BC) serve as essentially a manual on Egyptian mathematics.