

Hands, sticks, and boards: how did ancient peoples count?

Over the past few thousand years, different civilizations around the globe developed unique ways of using numbers, which ultimately inspired the one we use today.

As people counted, they kept track using their fingers and toes, or by making marks on suitable objects: ancient animal bones have been found marked with notches, like a rather grim tally chart. The problem with keeping a tally (making one mark for each object counted) is that you can run out of space quite quickly.



The Sumerians

About 6,000 years ago

The Sumerian people were great inventors. They came up with the wheel, farming, and even writing. As their region, Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), grew larger and more powerful, Sumerian culture spread far and wide, and they needed to keep a record of very large numbers. They used a system that was based on the number 60. Today, our mathematical order is based on 10, but the Sumerian 60 didn't vanish completely—see if you can find it later in the book.



The Babylonians

About 4,000 years ago

All of Mesopotamia had been conquered by a different people: the Babylonians. Babylon became the capital city of southern Mesopotamia for more than 1,000 years. The Babylonians used the same written language invented by the Sumerians, called cuneiform, and also counted using base 60.



The ancient Chinese

About 3,500 years ago

Some of the earliest civilizations counted using small objects such as sticks. They could move them from one pile to another to make these tally marks either smaller or bigger. Instead of having one stick per object, the ancient Chinese began to display numbers larger than 5 by changing the position of the sticks.



The ancient Romans

About 2,500 years ago

One of the most famous number systems is the one that was used in ancient Rome. The Roman numerals were images of what your hands look like when you count to 10. But this system did not work well for bigger numbers that needed more than two hands.

The Romans therefore used counting boards, or abacuses, to help with their sums. Little stones or "counters" were moved around a board until their final position showed the right answer.

