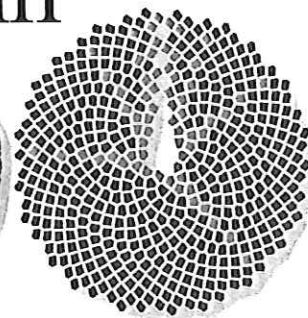
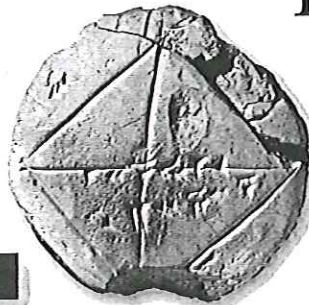


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math

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key breakthroughs

richard elwes

Quercus

Contents

Introduction	6	27 Polyhedra	112
1 The evolution of counting	8	28 Tessellations	116
2 Tallies	12	29 Kepler's laws	120
3 Place-value notation	16	30 Projective geometry	124
4 Area and volume	20	31 Coordinates	128
5 Pythagoras' theorem	24	32 Calculus	132
6 Irrational numbers	28	33 Differential geometry	136
7 Zeno's paradoxes	32	34 Polar coordinates	140
8 The Platonic solids	36	35 Normal distribution	144
9 Logic	40	36 Graph theory	148
10 Euclidean geometry	44	37 Exponentiation	152
11 Prime numbers	48	38 Euler characteristic	156
12 The area of a circle	52	39 Conditional probability	160
13 Conic sections	56	40 Fundamental theorem of algebra	164
14 Trigonometry	60	41 Fourier analysis	168
15 Perfect numbers	64	42 The real numbers	172
16 Diophantine equations	68	43 The unsolvability of the quintic	176
17 Hindu-Arabic numerals	72	44 The Navier-Stokes equations	180
18 Modular arithmetic	76	45 Curvature	184
19 Negative numbers	80	46 Hyperbolic geometry	188
20 Algebra	84	47 Constructible numbers	192
21 Combinatorics	88	48 Transcendental numbers	196
22 The Fibonacci sequence	92	49 Polytopes	200
23 The harmonic series	96	50 Riemann's zeta function	204
24 Cubic and quartic equations	100	51 Jordan curve theorem	208
25 The complex numbers	104	52 Classification of surfaces	212
26 Logarithms	108	53 Cardinal numbers	216

112	54	Wallpaper groups	220	80	Non-standard analysis	324
116	55	Digital geometry	224	81	Hilbert's tenth problem	328
120	56	Russell's paradox	228	82	The game of Life	332
124	57	Special relativity	232	83	Complexity theory	336
128	58	The three-body problem	236	84	The traveling salesman problem	340
132	59	Waring's problem	240	85	Chaos theory	344
136	60	Markov processes	244	86	Four color theorem	348
140	61	General relativity	248	87	Public key cryptography	352
144	62	Fractals	252	88	Elliptic curves	356
148	63	Abstract algebra	256	89	Weaire-Phelan foam	360
152	64	Knot polynomials	260	90	Quantum computing	364
156	65	Quantum mechanics	264	91	Fermat's Last Theorem	368
160	66	Quantum field theory	268	92	Kepler's conjecture	372
	67	Ramsey theory	272	93	Catalan's conjecture	376
164	68	Gödel's incompleteness theorem	276	94	Poincaré's conjecture	380
168	69	Turing machines	280	95	Constellations of primes	384
172	70	Numerical analysis	284	96	The classification of finite simple groups	388
176	71	Information theory	288	97	Langlands program	392
180	72	Arrow's impossibility theorem	292	98	Reverse mathematics	396
184	73	Game theory	296	99	Partitions	400
188	74	Exotic spheres	300	100	Sudoku	404
192	75	Randomness	304		Glossary	408
196	76	The continuum hypothesis	308		Index	411
200	77	Singularity theory	312			
204	78	Quasicrystals	316			
208	79	Friendship theorem	320			
212						
216						

Reverse mathematics

BREAKTHROUGH REVERSE MATHEMATICIANS INVESTIGATE HOW THE FACTS AND THEOREMS OF MAINSTREAM MATHEMATICS RELATE TO THE UNDERLYING LOGICAL SYSTEMS BEING USED.

DISCOVERER GERHARD GENTZEN (1909–45), HARVEY FRIEDMAN (1948–), STEPHEN SIMPSON (1948–).

LEGACY FRIEDMAN'S SEEMINGLY SIMPLE STATEMENTS ABOUT WHOLE NUMBERS WHICH REQUIRE THE STRONGEST LOGICAL AXIOMS THREATENS TO USHER UNPROVABILITY IN TO THE HEART OF MATHEMATICS.

Gödel's incompleteness theorems (see page 277) turned the world of mathematical logic upside-down. It meant that the long-held goal of a single set of laws underlying the arithmetic of the whole numbers had to be abandoned. In the years since, proof theorists have compared the strengths of different logical laws for arithmetic, while reverse mathematicians have asked which laws are required to prove specific theorems. One of the most spectacular discoveries involves statements that are not provable within any of the usual logical frameworks.

The standard laws for describing the whole numbers are those of Peano arithmetic, named after its inventor, the 19th-century logician Giuseppe Peano. This is a list of seven simple axioms, which largely seem to be statements of the obvious. For example, if x and y are unequal numbers, then so are $x + 1$ and $y + 1$. It had once been hoped that Peano's laws might provide a solid underpinning for the whole of mathematics. But in 1931, Gödel's incompleteness theorem killed that idea stone dead. Despite being incomplete, it seemed adequate for most practical purposes.

Even if it was technically incomplete, one might at least hope that Peano arithmetic should be consistent, meaning that it doesn't contain any hidden contradictions. If it is to be any use at all, then following the rules of Peano arithmetic should never produce a nonsensical outcome such as $1 + 2 = 4$.

OPPOSITE A reverse mathematician aims to reconstruct a logical framework by examining its mathematical consequences. Just as the patterns within a stained-glass window produce a complex interplay of colored light, so the relationship between the logical laws of numbers and the theorems that mathematicians prove about them is far from straightforward.