

# Abacus Encyclopedia Article

## Abacus

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# Abacus

Although the exact time of its discovery is not truly known, the abacus is believed to have originated in the Middle East (in the region of modern-day Iraq) around 3000 B.C. Later, the abacus was used by the Hindus, and later still by the ancient Greeks and Romans of the Classical Period. It is thought that Arabic traders brought the abacus to the Orient, where its use spread widely. Around 1000 A.D., Pope Sylvester II (930-1003) led a reintroduction of the abacus to Europe, but its use died out once again beginning in the 1200s, when Arabic numerals gained popular use. By the 1800s, when Frenchman Jean Victor Poncelet (1788-1867) brought an abacus from Russia to France, it was looked on as a quaint amusement. But in some areas of China, Japan and the Middle East, the abacus is still frequently used today. The abacus was intended to assist shopkeepers, tax collectors and merchants who had previously kept track of their accounts using small pebbles or stones. In fact, the word "calculate" comes from the Latin word *calculi*, meaning pebbles. The earliest abacus was probably a wooden tablet sprinkled with sand. Marks made in the sand could be wiped clean and re-used as often as required. Modern day versions of the abacus usually contain thirteen columns of beads strung on rods or wires set in a rectangular frame. Beginning with the rightmost column and working left, the columns represent ones, tens, hundreds and so forth, up to the trillions. Although the abacus is generally used for quick addition and subtraction operations only, experienced users are able to multiply, divide and calculate square or cube roots about as quickly as electronic calculators. In 1946 in Tokyo, Japan, a contest was held between a Japanese abacus and the latest model electric calculating machine and surprisingly enough, the abacus decisively won the match. More recently, the abacus has been used in schools to help students learn place values of the numbering system and in some cases has been a valuable aid in teaching blind children arithmetic.