

Niccolò Fontana Tartaglia Biography

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Biography

Born at Brescia, Lombardy, Tartaglia was brought up in poverty and was largely self-educated. At the age of twelve, he received a saber cut on his face when French soldiers invaded the town. Although his mother nursed him back to health, the wound left him with a permanent stammer and the nickname Tartaglia, which means stutterer. For whatever reason, he preferred to use the name Tartaglia, rather than his family name of Fontana. At the age of fourteen he was tutored in the writing of the alphabet, but by the time he had reached the letter "k," he was no longer able to pay the teacher. Undaunted, he taught himself Latin, Greek, mathematics and physics, developing an immense knowledge of these subjects. He moved to Verona, Italy, in 1516, becoming a teacher of the abacus. Tartaglia left the position to teach mathematics at various universities in northern Italy; he arrived in Venice, Italy, in 1534, where he remained for the rest of his life. He became engrossed in his favorite pastime--using his mathematical skills to solve military problems. In 1537 he published a book on artillery science and the theory of projectiles, resulting in what is today called Tartaglia's theorem: the trajectory of a projectile is a curved line everywhere, and the maximum range at any speed of its projection is obtained with a firing elevation of forty-five degrees.

In mathematics, Tartaglia focused his efforts toward the solution of cubic equations, and discovered a method for the solution of two special types of cubics. When pressed by fellow mathematician Girolamo Cardano for the method, Tartaglia reluctantly revealed it after having him swear to secrecy. Six years later, in 1545, Cardano broke his promise and published Tartaglia's method as part of his solution for the general cubic equation; the betrayal by Cardano angered Tartaglia for the rest of his life. Tartaglia was also responsible for the first Italian translation of Euclid's *Elements* as well as a paper on the numerical operations of Italian arithmetic, the life of the people, the customs of merchants, and their efforts at improving arithmetic. Although Tartaglia is remembered as one of the greatest mathematicians of sixteenth-century Italy, he died alone and penniless in 1557.