

Seki Kowa Biography

Seki Kowa

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Biography

Until the seventeenth century, mathematics in Japan was a subject known almost exclusively among the upper class. Like art, music, and poetry, it was primarily a leisure time activity with little practical application. That situation was changed by Seki Kowa, also known as Seki Takakazu, a man whose influence was so powerful that he eventually became known as the Sacred Mathematician.

Very little information about Seki's life is available. He is thought to have been born in Huzioka, Japan, in about 1642 to the Nagaakira family. He was adopted by the Seki family, however, and took their name. One fact that is known about his life is that he worked in the office of clothing and furnishings in the Tokugawa shogunate. He died in the city of Edo (now Tokyo) on October 24, 1708.

Seki was a remarkable mathematician who made a number of discoveries that, unknown to him, had already been made in Europe. He probably made other discoveries before those of his European contemporaries. For example, he apparently found a method for solving linear equations even earlier than did the German mathematician Gottfried Leibniz, who is usually given credit for its discovery.

Seki also developed a method for calculating the value of π and obtained a result that is correct to 18 places. He learned how to use rectangles to estimate the length of an arc and cubes to estimate the volume of a sphere. He also made fundamental discoveries in calculus.

For all of his own accomplishments, Seki may have been even more influential because of his opening of the subject of mathematics to the general public. He developed a terminology and a system for expressing mathematical ideas in Japanese that had not been available previously. He also encouraged the teaching of mathematics among people of all classes and wrote books that could be used for instruction. Seki Kowa well deserves the title of the Great Popularizer of mathematics in Japan.