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Numbers

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With 24 Illustrations

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Preface to the English Edition

A book about numbers sounds rather dull. This one is not. Instead it is a lively story about one thread of mathematics—the concept of "number"—told by eight authors and organized into a historical narrative that leads the reader from ancient Egypt to the late twentieth century. It is a story that begins with some of the simplest ideas of mathematics and ends with some of the most complex. It is a story that mathematicians, both amateur and professional, ought to know.

Why write about numbers? Mathematicians have always found it difficult to develop broad perspective about their subject. While we each view our specialty as having roots in the past, and sometimes having connections to other specialties in the present, we seldom see the panorama of mathematical development over thousands of years. *Numbers* attempts to give that broad perspective, from hieroglyphs to K-theory, from Dedekind cuts to nonstandard analysis. Who first used the standard notation for π (and who made it standard)? Who were the "quaternionists" (and can their zeal for quaternions tell us anything about the recent controversy concerning Chaos)? What happened to the endless supply of "hypercomplex numbers" or to quaternionic function theory? How can the study of maps from projective space to itself give information about algebras? How did mathematicians resurrect the "ghosts of departed quantities" by reintroducing infinitesimals after 200 years? How can games be numbers and numbers be games? This is mathematical culture, but it's not the sort of culture one finds in scholarly tomes; it's lively culture, meant to entertain as well as to inform.

This is not a book for the faint-hearted, however. While it starts with material that every undergraduate could (and should) learn, the reader is progressively challenged as the chapters progress into the twentieth century. The chapters often tell about people and events, but they primarily tell about mathematics. Undergraduates can certainly read large parts of this book, but mastering the material in late chapters requires work, even for mature mathematicians. This is a book that can be read on several levels, by amateurs and professionals alike.

The German edition of this book, *Zahlen,* has been quite successful. There was a temptation to abbreviate the English language translation by making it less complete and more compact. We have instead tried to produce a faithful translation of the entire original, which can serve as a scholarly reference as well as casual reading. For this reason, quotations are included along with translations and references to source material in foreign languages are included along with additional references (usually more recent) in English.

Translations seldom come into the world without some labor pains. Authors and translators never agree completely, especially when there are eight authors and one translator, all of whom speak both languages. My job was to act as referee in questions of language and style, and I did so in a way that likely made neither side happy. I apologize to all.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague, Max Zorn, for his helpful advice about terminology, especially his insistence on the word "octonions" rather than "octaves."

March 1990 John Ewing

Preface to Second Edition

The welcome which has been given to this book on numbers has pleasantly surprised the authors and the editor. The scepticism which some of us had felt about its concept has been dispelled by the reactions of students, colleagues and reviewers. We are therefore very glad to bring out a second edition—much sooner than had been expected. We have willingly taken up the suggestion of readers to include an additional chapter by J. NEUKIRCH on p-adic numbers. The chapter containing the theorems of FROBENIUS and HOPF has been enlarged to include the GELFAND–MAZUR theorem. We have also carefully revised all the other chapters and made some improvements in many places. In doing so we have been able to take account of many helpful comments made by readers for which we take this opportunity of thanking them. P. ULLRICH of Münster who had already prepared the name and subject indexes for the first edition has again helped us with the preparation of the second edition and deserves our thanks.

Oberwolfach, March 1988 Authors and Publisher

Preface to First Edition

The *basic mathematical knowledge* acquired by every mathematician in the course of his studies develops into a unified whole only through an awareness of the multiplicity of relationships between the individual mathematical theories. Interrelationships between the different mathematical disciplines often reveal themselves by studying historical development. One of the main underlying aims of this series is to make the reader aware that mathematics does not consist of isolated theories, developed side by side, but should be looked upon as an organic whole.

The present book on numbers represents a departure from the other volumes of the series inasmuch as seven authors and an editor have together contributed thirteen chapters. In conversations with one another the authors agreed on their contributions, and the editor endeavored to bring them into harmony by reading the contributions with a critical eye and holding subsequent discussions with the authors. The other volumes of the series can be studied independently of this one.

While it is impossible to name here all those who have helped us by their comments, we should nevertheless like to mention particularly Herr Gericke (of Freiburg) who helped us on many occasions to present the historical development in its true perspective.

K. Peters (at that time with Springer-Verlag) played a vital part in arranging the first meeting between the publisher and the authors. The meetings were made possible by the financial support of the Volkswagen Foundation and Springer-Verlag, as well as by the hospitality of the Mathematical Research Institute in Oberwolfach.

To all of these we extend our gratitude.

Oberwolfach, July 1983 Authors and Editor

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