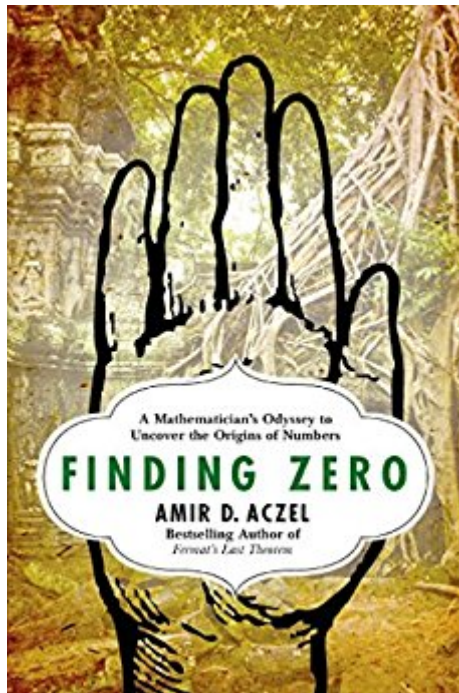


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Finding Zero: A Mathematician's Odyssey To Uncover The Origins Of Numbers



Synopsis

The invention of numerals is perhaps the greatest abstraction the human mind has ever created. Virtually everything in our lives is digital, numerical, or quantified. The story of how and where we got these numerals, which we so depend on, has for thousands of years been shrouded in mystery. Finding Zero is an adventure filled saga of Amir Aczel's lifelong obsession: to find the original sources of our numerals. Aczel has doggedly crisscrossed the ancient world, scouring dusty, moldy texts, cross examining so-called scholars who offered wildly differing sets of facts, and ultimately penetrating deep into a Cambodian jungle to find a definitive proof. Here, he takes the reader along for the ride. The history begins with the early Babylonian cuneiform numbers, followed by the later Greek and Roman letter numerals. Then Aczel asks the key question: where do the numbers we use today, the so-called Hindu-Arabic numerals, come from? It is this search that leads him to explore uncharted territory, to go on a grand quest into India, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and ultimately into the wilds of Cambodia. There he is blown away to find the earliest zero "the keystone of our entire system of numbers" on a crumbling, vine-covered wall of a seventh-century temple adorned with eaten-away erotic sculptures. While on this odyssey, Aczel meets a host of fascinating characters: academics in search of truth, jungle trekkers looking for adventure, surprisingly honest politicians, shameless smugglers, and treacherous archaeological thieves "who finally reveal where our numbers come from.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Amir D. Aczel's *Finding Zero* presents the reader with a number of challenges: 1. Poor style 2. Parochial travelogue 3. Disturbing juxtaposition of 'East' and 'West' 4. Dated attitude to Hindu and Jain erotic art...as well as the suggestive art of Angkor Wat 5. Fascinating history of the search for Zero

The last of these, and the main reason for reading the book, is in fact not a challenge at all, but for those interested in the history of mathematics and the origin of one of the most important discoveries in human history a pure pleasure. However, readers are required to wade through a considerable amount of embarrassment to get there. Firstly, there is the style. It isn't simply that the sentences are inelegant, but immature and stilted. Mr. Aczel was in serious need of editorial aid in this respect. As a travelogue, the reader is treated to a series of shockingly naïve attitudes to travel in the 'East' where the author is frequently shocked by the sex trade/sex slavery, pickpockets, corrupt officials, and the general shocking customs of the countries he finds himself in. Beyond this there is the vulgar attempt to correct Western arrogance about the history of science in general and the origin of Zero in particular--most of these references are very dated. Nor does the author go into the problematic designation of the scientific method originated in the 17th Century in Europe and the methodologies used in the 'East' so as to formalize the process by which conclusions are arrived at. Aczel simply offers a criticism of Western arrogance with no details and comparisons that analyse the methodologies being contrasted.

No one who cares about mathematics at all is ignorant of the importance of the invention of zero. (The strains of the Schoolhouse Rock song "My Hero, Zero" sound in my head even as I write these words.) I was always taught that the concept of zero was an Indian invention that ultimately made its way into the Arabic numerals and, so, to the West. Though Mr. Aczel doesn't completely upset the apple cart with his new book, *Finding Zero*, he attempts to tell a story that is deeper and more interesting than the one zero usually gets in histories of mathematics. In some ways, he succeeds. Mr. Aczel does two things of importance in this book. First, he argues that the concept of zero would likely never have been developed in Western Europe. Essentially, he believes that the concept of zero developed out of the different logic that comes from historical Buddhism and Hinduism. Whereas Greek logic, for example, depended highly on an either/or

system (exemplified through proof by contradiction), Buddhist and Hindu logic developed from a true, not true, both, neither logic that laid the groundwork for concepts like zero and infinity. Second, he pushes the development of the concept of zero further to the East than India. In fact, he argues that it comes from Southeast Asia, as his search takes him to Thailand and, ultimately, to Cambodia. He is searching for a seventh-century stele called K-127, which records the earliest known use of a modern zero. Discovered in 1929 by a man named George Coedes, it disappeared during the wars of the sixties and seventies. In fact, it is Mr. Aczel's search for this stele that drives most of this book and this is one place where the book falls short. Much of it turns out to be a travelogue of his journey to the stele.

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