

BABYLONIAN NUMBERS

In this activity we will work with the Babylonian system, which is of base 60:

1	𐎶	11	𐎶𐎵	21	𐎶𐎵𐎶	31	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵	41	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵𐎶	51	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵
2	𐎶𐎶	12	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶	22	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶	32	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	42	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	52	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
3	𐎶𐎶𐎶	13	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶	23	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	33	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	43	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	53	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
4	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	14	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	24	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	34	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	44	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	54	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
5	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	15	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	25	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	35	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	45	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	55	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
6	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	16	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	26	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	36	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	46	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	56	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
7	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	17	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	27	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	37	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	47	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	57	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
8	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	18	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	28	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	38	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	48	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	58	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
9	𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	19	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	29	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	39	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	49	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶	59	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶
10	𐎶	20	𐎶𐎵	30	𐎶𐎵𐎶	40	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵	50	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵𐎶		

Look at the clay tablet in Figure 1 below. This tablet has unknown origins in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), which means that it was smuggled illegally out of some archaeological site there and subsequently sold to private collectors in the West. From its shape and writing style, archaeologists believe that it was created in southern Mesopotamia around 1800 –1600 BC.



FIGURE 1. YBC 7289, The Yale Collection.

a) Spot all the numbers on the tablet.

b) Try to read off all these numbers.

Hint

c) There are 3 different numbers on the tablet:

i. The one on the top left corner is a number.

ii. The first row of digits is another number.

iii. The second row of digits is the third number.

Find the decimal representation of these three numbers.

Hint

d) Do you recognize the number in the first row?

e) The number on the top left corner is the length of one side of the engraved square. What is the number in the second row?

f) Do a quick search on when Pythagoras lived. Is the well-known theorem rightly credited to him?

Solution: The number in the first row is $\sqrt{2}$. The number on the top left corner is 30. The number in the second row is $30\sqrt{2}$, i.e. the length of the diagonal of a square of side length 30. This demonstrates that the Babylonians were aware of the “Pythagorean” Theorem, which was discovered by Pythagoras more than 1000 years later! The students had already had practice from a previous activity in the same course in converting n -ary representations of numbers into the decimal expansion for various bases n before tackling this problem.