

The Three Problems of Antiquity

Hippocrates' squaring of a particular lune in the Great Theorem of our first chapter of Dunham's book is just the beginning of a discussion about three famous problems on which ancient Greek mathematicians worked. These three problems are:

- (a) Can every circle be squared using only compass and straightedge?
- (b) Can every cube be doubled using only compass and straightedge?
- (c) Can every angle be trisected using only compass and straightedge?

We will find that the answer to each of these questions is actually "no", and that the negative answer is potentially the more interesting answer for this question. As the Greek mathematicians explored these problems, they also began to change the questions slightly as they asked them. Changing the question slightly in order to get a related answer is a very common mathematical method of today, and one of the best ways to begin to chip away at a difficult mathematical problem.

In this section, we will explore briefly the solution to the circle squaring problem, and we will also look at the cube doubling problem. In the next section, we will tackle the angle trisection problem.

Readings

First Reading: Dunham, Chapter 1, pages 20 - 26

Second Reading: Doubling the Cube

Third Reading: A Method of Duplicating the Cube

Questions

Question 1 How many stories are told in the readings about how the cube doubling problem originated?

given

Question 2 What geometric subject did Menaechmus discover while trying to duplicate the cube?

Multiple Choice:

- (a) Conic sections. ✓
- (b) Calculus.
- (c) Formulas for volumes of pyramids.
- (d) Formulas for slopes of lines.

Learning outcomes:

Author(s):

See Doubling the Cube at http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/HistTopics/Doubling_the_cube.html

See A Method of Duplicating the Cube at <https://www.maa.org/sites/default/files/Graef32917.pdf>