
Sacred Numerals Across Cultures and Epochs

Matluba Sadullaeva Akhrorovna

PhD, Associate Professor, Asia International University

msadullaeva85@gmail.com

Article information:

Manuscript received: 28 Jul 2025; **Accepted:** 27 Aug 2025; **Published:** 23 Sep 2025

Abstract: This article examines how different cultures have understood numbers not merely as instruments for calculation, but as symbolic keys to cosmic order, divine mysteries, and human existence. Ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan viewed numbers as sacred, while in Greece the Pythagoreans developed the most sophisticated philosophy of number, treating it as the foundation of the universe. Early Christian theology and Byzantine thought inherited and reinterpreted this legacy, giving symbolic weight to numbers such as 3, 7, 12, and 15. In later centuries, the symbolic vision gave way to a more abstract mathematical one, beginning with Descartes, when infinity and precision became central concepts. The article also highlights parallels from Islamic, Hindu, and Chinese traditions, showing how numbers across cultures have shaped not only mathematics but also the ways people perceive harmony, truth, and the divine.

Keywords: Pythagoreanism, sacred numbers, mystical numerology, ancient philosophy, Christian theology, medieval worldview, Descartes, Islamic symbolism, Hindu cosmology, Chinese numerology.

Introduction. Throughout history, numbers have been regarded as symbols of hidden meaning as much as tools of calculation. In Babylon, Egypt, Canaan, and the Roman Empire, whole systems of sacred numbers were established (Eliade, 1991). Nowhere, however, did the mystical philosophy of number reach greater development than in ancient Greece with the Pythagoreans. They saw number as the very principle of reality — the synthesis of the finite and the infinite, the material and the divine (Burkert, 1972). Pythagoras taught that all things exist not from number, but in accordance with it. “One” represented unity and perfection; “two” symbolized chaos and opposition; “three” embodied completeness and harmony; and “ten” was revered as the perfect number (Klein, 1968).

According to Aristotle, the Pythagoreans considered even and odd to be the ultimate principles: the even related to the infinite, the odd to the limit (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.5, 986a).

Numbers were not only quantitative but also qualitative, with geometric forms attached to them — one as a point, two as a line, three as a triangle, and four as a pyramid. They believed that the cosmos was harmony itself, a vast instrument resonating through number, where truth was inseparable from numerical order (Guthrie, 1987). For them, mathematics was inseparable from music, transforming knowledge into a cosmic symphony (Kirk & Raven, 1983).

These ideas passed into early Christian thought. Apologists and theologians reinterpreted numerical symbolism in the light of revelation, where ordinary numbers revealed divine mysteries (Lossky, 1976). In Byzantium, influenced by Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, sacred numerology became part of theological and educational practice (Pelikan, 1971). Numbers such as 3, 7, and 12 acquired

particular importance. The number three reflected both the Trinity and the triadic structure of the soul (Augustine, *De Trinitate*). Seven symbolized completeness — the seven days of creation, seven virtues, seven sacraments, seven tones of Gregorian chant (Eco, 1997). Twelve stood for the people of God — the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, symbols of the renewed humanity and the Church (Biedermann, 1994). Even the number fifteen carried meaning in medieval thought, associated with calendrical cycles, steps of the Jerusalem Temple, and Marian devotion (Lossky, 1976).

Pythagoras said: “Archives and principles do not lend themselves to clear exposition in words, because they are difficult to understand and difficult to express, and therefore, for the sake of clarity of teaching, one must resort to numbers” (Лосев, 1980, p. 766). The numerological ideas of early Christian apologists, philosophers and theologians largely determined the specifics of the medieval understanding of numbers in both the West and the East. “If we see everything in God and relate everything to him,” said the apologists, “then we read the highest expression of meaning in ordinary objects” (Хейзинга, 1988, p. 540).

Islamic tradition likewise emphasizes the symbolic dimension of numbers. The number one signifies the divine unity of God (*Tawhid*), while three often structures ritual repetitions. Seven represents spiritual perfection, reflected in seven heavens and seven circumambulations of the Kaaba (Nasr, 2007). The number ninety-nine corresponds to the Beautiful Names of Allah, while forty marks periods of testing and transformation, such as the Prophet’s seclusion in the cave of Hira (Schimmel, 1992).

In Hindu cosmology, numbers have an equally central role. The sacred number 108 is found in prayer beads, rituals, and cosmological models (Zimmer, 1946). Four represents the Vedas, the aims of life, and the stages of human existence, while three signifies the Trimurti — Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (Flood, 1996). Ancient Vedic texts also frequently highlight the symbolism of 7 and 10 (Gonda, 1963).

Chinese culture developed its own numerological language, often grounded in phonetic associations. The number eight, whose pronunciation resembles the word for prosperity (*fa*), is considered extremely auspicious (Yau, 2001). By contrast, four is avoided due to its similarity to the word for death. Six symbolizes smoothness, nine longevity, and certain number combinations convey cultural messages — 520 is read as “I love you,” and 1314 as “a lifetime together” (Yang, 2013).

With the rise of modern science, this symbolic worldview shifted. Descartes and later thinkers approached number as abstraction, as a means of representing infinity, continuity, and precise relations (Descartes, 1637/1954). The mystical aura of numbers gave way to analytic geometry, algebra, and calculus, transforming Western thought and making mathematics the foundation of modern science (Kline, 1972). Yet, symbolic numerology never completely disappeared. In literature, art, religion, and folklore, numbers continue to carry echoes of their ancient meanings, reminding us of humanity’s enduring search for harmony and order (Campbell, 2001).

In conclusion, numbers have always meant more than counting. For Pythagoreans, they were eternal truths; for Christian and medieval thinkers, symbols of divine mysteries; for Islamic, Hindu, and Chinese traditions, bridges between human life and cosmic order. Even in the modern era of abstraction, traces of these symbolic associations remain. The history of numbers is thus also the history of how cultures have sought to understand the universe — through faith, imagination, and reason alike.

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle. *Metaphysics*.
2. Biedermann, H. (1994). *Dictionary of Symbolism*. Oxford University Press.
3. Burkert, W. (1972). *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*. Harvard University Press.
4. Campbell, J. (2001). *The Power of Myth*. Anchor.
5. Descartes, R. (1637/1954). *Discourse on Method*. Liberal Arts Press.

6. Eco, U. (1997). *The Search for the Perfect Language*. Blackwell.
7. Eliade, M. (1991). *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Princeton University Press.
8. Kirk, G. S., & Raven, J. E. (1983). *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Klein, J. (1968). *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*. MIT Press.
10. Kline, M. (1972). *Mathematical Thought from Ancient to Modern Times*. Oxford University Press.
11. Лосев, А. Ф. (1980). *История античной эстетики*. Москва: Искусство.
12. Lossky, V. (1976). *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
13. Nasr, S. H. (2007). *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. SUNY Press.
14. Schimmel, A. (1992). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.
15. Yang, L. (2013). *Numerology in Chinese Culture*. Beijing University Press.
16. Yau, O. H. (2001). *Chinese Society and Culture*. Routledge.
17. Zimmer, H. (1946). *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Princeton University Press.
18. Хейзинга, Й. (1988). *Осень Средневековья*. Москва: Наука.

Other used literature

1. Sadullayeva M.A. Digital culture as a humanitarian phenomenon. // EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD). -Volume: 5 | Issue: 10 | October, 2020. – PP.231-235. (09.00.00; №12; 14. Indexed by Index Copernicus; Researchbib)
2. Sadullayeva M.A. Falsafada ramzning gnoseologik tahlili. // International journal of education, Social science and humanities. - Finland, 2024. – Volume 12. Issue 1. – PP.186-197. (09.00.00; №. Indexed by Researchbib)
3. Sadullayeva M.A. Philosophy of numbers in Eastern and Sufi literature. // Imom Buxoriy saboqlari. – Samarqand, 2023. - №1. – B.109-112. (09.00.00; №9)
4. Sadullayeva M.A. Number as the essence of things: philosophy of Western and central Asian scientists. // Imom Buxoriy saboqlari. – Samarqand, 2024. - №1. – B.48-51. (09.00.00; №9)
5. Sadullayeva M.A. Number as the essence of things:Pythagorean philosophy. Ijtimoiy-gumanitar fanlarning dolzarb muammolari.- Toshkent, 2024.- № 10.-140-145.
6. Sadullayeva M.A. Islamic architecture and its symbolic language of numbers. // International Book Edition of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States «BEST YOUNG SCIENTIST – 2020». March, 13-17. 2020. – PP.116-120
7. Sadullayeva M.A. Analysis of symbol in the history of philosophy. // Proceedings of International Conference on Scientific Research in Natural and Social Sciences - Toronto, Canada. - 5th July, 2024. -PP.202-205.
8. Sadullayeva M.A. Exploring the role of numbers in William Blake's visionary works. Journal of scientific research, modern views and innovations. Vol.1, Number 4. 2025.