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1-2020

### A Historical Activity Adding Irrational Numbers

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#### Recommended Citation

Huffman, Cynthia J. Ph.D., "A Historical Activity Adding Irrational Numbers" (2020). *Faculty Submissions*. 1.

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# A Historical Activity on Adding Certain Irrational Numbers

by

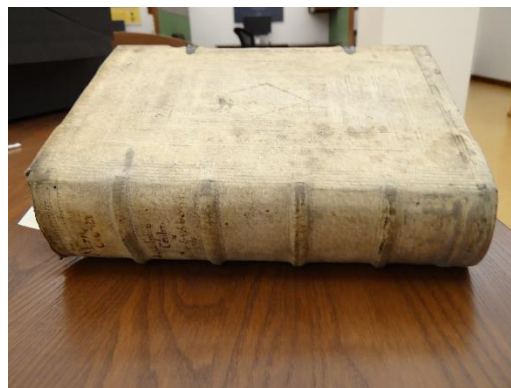
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## Description

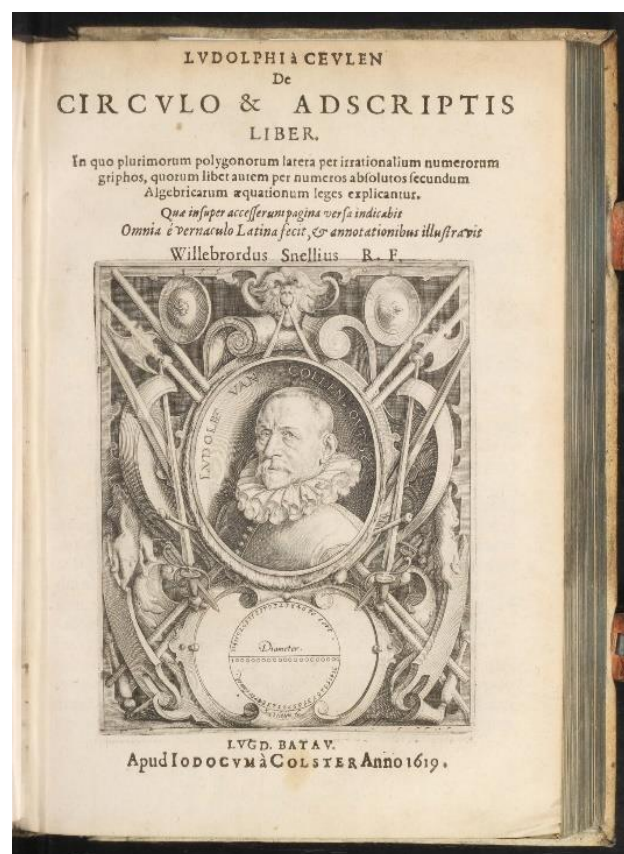
In this activity, students will follow and then analyze work by mathematician and fencing master Ludolph Van Ceulen (1540-1610) on adding similar radical numbers, like  $2\sqrt{3} + 5\sqrt{3}$ . His method is quite different from the method currently in use in the secondary school curriculum and College Algebra, in that he does not first simplify the square root expressions before adding them. This activity could be used with high school or College Algebra students after they have learned the current method, in order to reinforce their understanding of radicals. The activity would also be appropriate to use with pre-service mathematics teachers or in a history of math class or in a math circle. It demonstrates that there may be more than one algorithm or technique for performing arithmetic operations, and that mathematics, including arithmetic, develops and evolves over time.

## Historical Background

We will be analyzing a primary source that was published in 1619 in Latin. *Surdorum quadraticorum arithmetica* (Arithmetic of Square Roots) is a work by the mathematician and fencing master [Ludolph Van Ceulen](#) (1540-1610), which was translated into Latin by his student [Willebrord Snell](#) (1580-1626). It was published after the death of Van Ceulen, along with the Snell's modification and Latin translation *De Circulo* of Van Ceulen's *Vanden Circkel*, which was published in 1596. Below are two pictures of the book at the [Linda Hall Library](#) in Kansas City, MO.



Van Ceulen's parents were not wealthy and had a large family to support, so Ludolph did not receive a university education. Although born in Germany, as an adult, Van Ceulen lived in the Netherlands. Beginning about the time he was 26, he made his living teaching mathematics. Van Ceulen had 5 children with his first wife before she died and then he married a woman with 8 children. When he was 40, he opened a fencing school in Delft. So, in addition to being a mathematician, he was also a fencing master. A few years later Archimedes' method of approximating  $\pi$  was translated from the Greek for him, and Van Ceulen proceeded to use the technique to improve on approximations of  $\pi$ , publishing *Vanden Circkel* in 1596 in which he approximated  $\pi$  to 20 decimal places. The title page of the 1619 Latin edition of Van Ceulen's *De Circulo* is below.



The engraving on the title page is the same one used for the 1596 Dutch original. Notice that below the portrait of Van Ceulen is a circle with diameter of  $10^{20}$ . Along the top and bottom semicircles is printed 314159265358979323846 te cort (too short) and 314159265358979323847 te lanck (too long). These bounds for  $\pi$  were the best ones available when *Vanden Circkel* was published in 1596.



For his first example, Van Ceulen states that  $\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12} = \sqrt{147}$ .

**TASK 1:** a) Does this solution seem obvious to you? YES or NO

b) Does this solution seem reasonable to you at first glance? YES or NO

c) Check if it is reasonable that  $\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12} = \sqrt{147}$  by using a calculator.

$$\sqrt{75} \approx \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \quad \sqrt{12} \approx \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

$$\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12} \approx \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \quad \sqrt{147} \approx \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

d) Verify  $\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12} = \sqrt{147}$  by simplifying the radicals and then adding.

**TASK 2:** Van Ceulen goes on to explain his method for adding  $\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12}$ . Follow along by filling in the blanks.

a) First, add  $75 + 12 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ .

b) Next, compute the product  $75 \times 12 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

c) Multiply the product from part b) by 4.  $\underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

d) Find the square root of your solution to part c).  $\underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

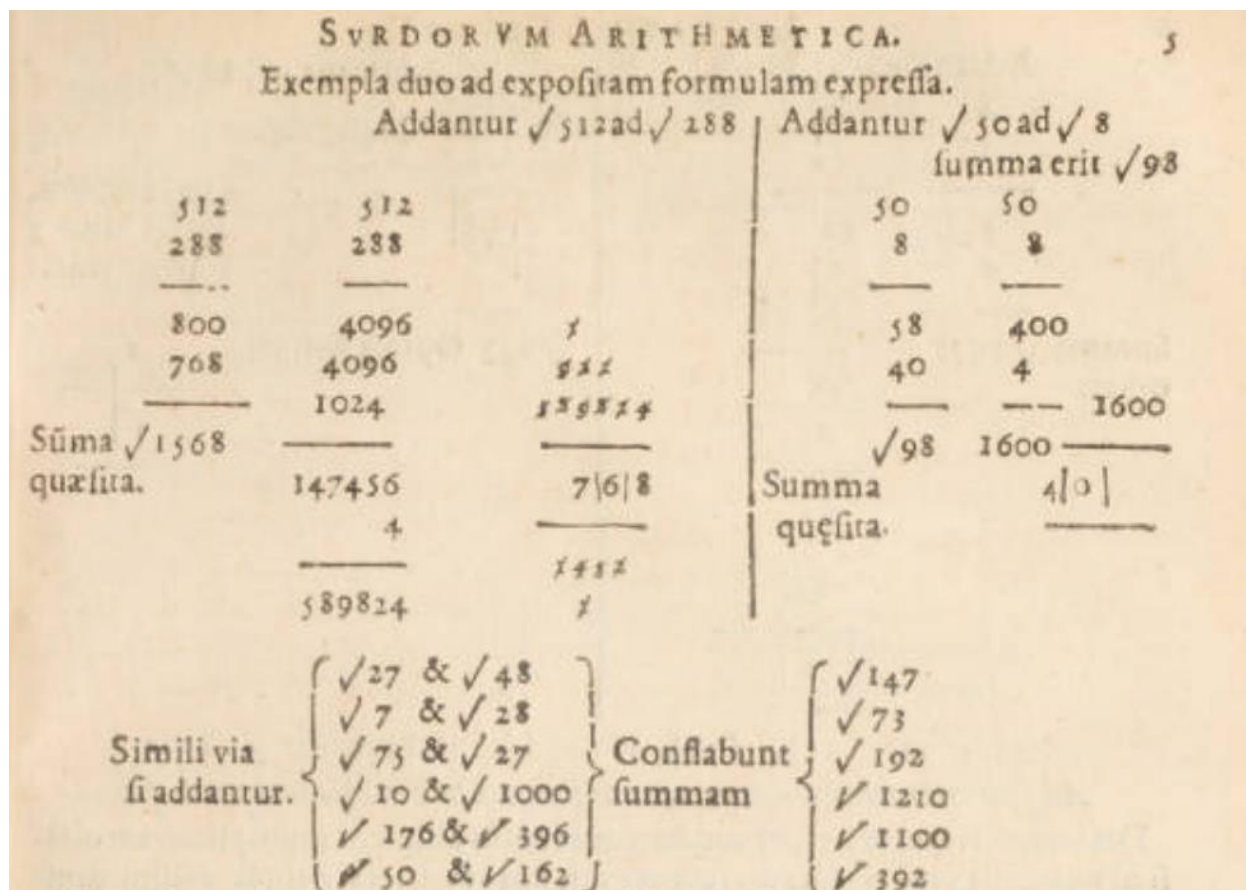
e) Add your answer to part a) with your answer to part d).  $\underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

f) Finally, write your answer to part e) under a radical,  $\sqrt{75} + \sqrt{12} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$

g) Did Van Ceulen's method give the correct answer? YES or NO







**TASK 3:** Above is an image from page 5 of Van Ceulen's *Surdorum Arithmetica* with several examples (2 worked out and 6 with just the solution) of adding similar radicals. Pick one of these and carry out the addition using Van Ceulen's method by filling in the blanks below.

- First, add the radicands \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_.
- Next, compute the product \_\_\_\_\_  $\times$  \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_
- Multiply the product from part b) by 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- Find the square root of your solution to part c). \_\_\_\_\_
- Add your answer to part a) with your answer to part d) . \_\_\_\_\_
- Finally, write your answer to part e) under a radical,  
 $\sqrt{\text{_____}} + \sqrt{\text{_____}} = \sqrt{\text{_____}}$
- Did Van Ceulen's method give the correct answer? YES or NO

TASK 4: Make up your own example (be sure that the radicals you pick are similar when simplified) and carry out the addition using Van Ceulen's method by filling in the blanks below.

- The example is  $\sqrt{\quad} + \sqrt{\quad}$
- First, add the radicands  $\quad + \quad = \quad$ .
- Next, compute the product of the radicands  $\quad \times \quad = \quad$
- Multiply the product from part c) by 4.  $\quad$
- Find the square root of your solution to part d).  $\quad$
- Add your answer to part b) with your answer to part e) .  $\quad$
- Finally, write your answer to part f) under a radical,  
 $\sqrt{\quad} + \sqrt{\quad} = \sqrt{\quad}$
- Did Van Ceulen's method give the correct answer? YES or NO

TASK 5: Now that we have seen that Van Ceulen's method works for several examples, let us prove that it will always work by applying it to the general case  $a\sqrt{c} + b\sqrt{c}$ , where  $a, b, c$  are positive integers. Before we get started, we need each term in the sum written as Van Ceulen would have them. So, we need each term written as the square root of a single number, not as an integer multiple of a square root.

- The general case, in the form Van Ceulen would have used, is  $\sqrt{\quad} + \sqrt{\quad}$ , where  $a, b, c$  are positive integers.
- First, add the radicands  $\quad + \quad$
- Next, compute the product of the radicands  $a^2c \times \quad = \quad$
- Multiply the product from part c) by 4.  $\quad$
- Find the square root of your solution to part d).  $\quad$
- Add your answer to part b) with your answer to part e) .  $\quad$
- Finally, write your answer to part f) under a radical,  
 $\sqrt{\quad} + \sqrt{\quad} = \sqrt{\quad} = (\quad + \quad)\sqrt{c} = a\sqrt{c} + b\sqrt{c}$
- Did Van Ceulen's method give the correct answer? YES or NO



## REFERENCES:

- Ludolph Van Ceulen, MacTutor History of Mathematics Archive, [http://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Van\\_Ceulen.html](http://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Van_Ceulen.html)
- *Surdorum quadraticorum arithmetica* (Arithmetic of Square Roots), digital scan, Linda Hall Library, <http://lhdigital.lindahall.org/cdm/ref/collection/math/id/14975>

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