





Abacus

The Chinese developed the abacus, a counting device, during the Song Dynasty. By the fourteenth century, the Chinese *suanpan*, or abacus, was perfected and given the form it still has today. The instrument consisted of a rectangular wooden frame with parallel rods or wires, each of which has strung on it seven flattened beads, or counters. The rods are separated into upper and lower parts by a crossbar. Two beads on each rod are above the bar, and five are below it. On a standard abacus, each bead above the crosspiece is worth five units, and each below is worth one. The rungs from right to left indicate units—tens, hundreds, and so on. With this instrument the Chinese could easily add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Brilliantly simple in design, this instrument makes addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division remarkably fast. The abacus became the basic calculating device in Asia and the Near East, and it is still widely used for commercial purposes.