

The first printed edition of Euclid's most famous work

Euclid, *Preclarissimus liber elementorum Euclidid perspicacissimi, in artem Geometrie incipit quafoelicissime*. Venice: Erhard Ratdolt, 1482. 12 5/8 inches x 9 1/8 inches (320 x 232 mm), 276 pages. Woodcut border (first page), diagrams, and initial letters.

Like the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, Euclid's *Elements* owes its authority, its fame, and its enduring position as a textbook to the fact that it offers a clear and logical summation of all previous knowledge in its field. A Greek mathematician in Alexandria, Euclid compiled his *Elements* around 300 BC. Its thirteen books give a consistent presentation to all of Greek mathematical thought since Pythagoras. One theorem follows another, with a storyteller's logic, in a sequence of definitions, postulates, and consequences. There are chapters on plane geometry, the theory of proportion, irrational quantities, and the five regular solids.

Ratdolt's edition was the first mathematical work to be put in print: it is also one of the first to be illustrated with mathematical figures—and finally, it is an exceptionally beautiful book, the wide outer margins being perfectly proportioned to the geometrical diagrams. As with many Greek classical texts intended for practical use, there are two “first printings” of Euclid's *Elements*. The *editio princeps* of the work is the present Latin translation, dating from the twelfth century. Mathematicians had to wait another 55 years for the *editio princeps* of the original Greek.

This copy, from the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, is bound in twentieth-century blind-stamped brown morocco and bears a University of California bookplate indicating that the volume was the “Gift of Julius Wangenheim '87.”

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