

Eudoxus, Archimedes and exhaustion methods

Juan Segurola

Core question

How could mathematicians reason rigorously about areas, volumes and ratios that could not be captured by a finite elementary construction?

Historical and evolutionary context

Greek mathematicians confronted problems that resisted simple arithmetic or geometric decomposition: curved areas, volumes and ratios involving incommensurable magnitudes. Traditions associated with Eudoxus supplied a general theory of proportion and methods that could bound a magnitude ever more tightly. Archimedes later deployed related exhaustion arguments with exceptional power, including in work on circles, spheres and parabolic segments.

Calling these techniques “calculus before calculus” is tempting but distorting. They did not use the symbolic functions, derivatives, integrals or explicit limit formalism of early modern and nineteenth-century mathematics.

What could communities know before this transition?

Approximation was possible, and geometric intuition could suggest results. The difficulty was proving results for magnitudes that required potentially unbounded refinement.

What changed?

Exhaustion methods converted approximation into rigorous argument. By assuming a difference remained and showing that repeated subdivision would make the remaining difference smaller than an allowable magnitude, mathematicians could rule out alternatives and establish equality.

Archimedes also used mechanical reasoning heuristically in some investigations, then presented geometrical demonstrations. That distinction between discovery and proof is epistemically important.

Why could this capability emerge?

It depended on a culture of proof already demanding explicit justification, combined with sustained work on ratio, geometry and incommensurability. It also required accepting that a finite written proof could govern a process conceptually extendable without fixed end.

What later forms of knowledge did it enable?

The results became part of the mathematical inheritance later studied in Arabic and Latin traditions and revisited by early modern mathematicians. They provided historical precedents for rigorous reasoning about continuous magnitudes, even though modern calculus emerged from a different conceptual and symbolic environment.

New limits and risks

Retrospective terminology can erase genuine differences. An exhaustion argument is not simply an integral in antique notation. Treating it that way makes history look inevitably directed toward modern mathematics.

What changed in the architecture of human knowledge?

Proof became capable of controlling **indefinite refinement**. Humans could establish exact claims about continuous magnitudes without physically completing infinitely many operations.

Loss, exclusion and uncertainty

Eudoxus' own works do not survive directly in the way Archimedes' treatises do, so attribution depends on later testimony. The lineage between ancient exhaustion and modern limit concepts is historically mediated rather than continuous.

Dependency map

- DIRECT ← PIO-023 Deductive proof: what Greek geometers added
- INDIRECT → PIO-025 Aristarchus and Solar-System scale
- RETROSPECTIVE → PIO-054 Calculus, limits and infinitesimals

References

1. Winters, N. L. Method and Style in Archimedes' *Quadrature of the Parabola*. *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 79, 15 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00407-025-00352-w>
2. Netz, R. *The Works of Archimedes, Volume 1: The Two Books On the Sphere and the Cylinder*. Cambridge University Press (2004).
3. Knorr, W. R. *The Ancient Tradition of Geometric Problems*. Birkhäuser (1986).