



Adolph Zeising: The Life and Work of a German Intellectual



Roger Herz-Fischler

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MAA REVIEW

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A great deal of nonsense has been written about the so-called golden ratio, $(1 + \sqrt{5})/2$, often called Φ : how it was built into the Great Pyramid, how it determines the prettiest rectangle and where people's navels are situated, and so on. (For anti-nonsense, see George Markowsky's "Misconceptions about the Golden Ratio", *College Math. J.* **23** (1992) #1, 2-19, his review of Mario Livio's *The Golden Ratio* in *Notices of the AMS* **52** (2005) #3, 344-347, or my [Numerology](#), MAA, 1997, Ch. 29.)

Given the human hunger for marvels, fictitious or otherwise, golden numberism might inevitably have arisen, but the person who got the ball rolling was Adolph Zeising (1810-1876) in an 1854 book whose translated title is *An Exposition of a New Theory of the Proportions of the Human Body*.

Roger Herz-Fischler, author of *A Mathematical History of the Golden Number* (1987, Dover reprint, 1998) and *The Shape of the Great Pyramid* (Wilfrid Laurier U. Press, 2000) decided to find out everything he could about Zeising, and this book reports his findings. Zeising was German, taught school for a time, and from 1853 until his death had sufficient means to be an independent scholar. He wrote poems, novels, and plays and works on philosophy, literature, and esthetics. He reviewed books, translated Xenophon, and evidently kept very busy. He is remembered today only as the father of golden numberism.

The book is scholarly and as thorough as is possible, with a complete bibliography of Zeising's known works. It is not for light leisure reading, but it is sure to be the chief source of Zeisingiana from now on. The extensive German quotations are for the most part not translated into English. Other than his works on the golden ratio, Zeising's writings were not much noticed by his contemporaries, nor was he. The book can induce melancholy reflections on the futility of much of