Center of Gravity and a Characterization of Parabolas

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Abstract. Archimedes determined the center of gravity of a parabolic section as follows. For a parabolic section between a parabola and any chord AB on the parabola, let us denote by P the point on the parabola where the tangent is parallel to AB and by V the point where the line through P parallel to the axis of the parabola meets the chord AB. Then the center G of gravity of the section lies on PV called the axis of the parabolic section with PG = \frac{3}{5}PV. In this paper, we study strictly locally convex plane curves satisfying the above center of gravity properties. As a result, we prove that among strictly locally convex plane curves, those properties characterize parabolas.

1. Introduction

Archimedes found some interesting area properties of parabolas. Consider the region bounded by a parabola and a chord AB. Let P be the point on the parabola where the tangent is parallel to the chord AB. The parallel line through P to the axis of the parabola meets the chord AB at a point V. Then, he proved that the

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area of the parabolic region is \( \frac{4}{3} \) times the area of triangle \( \triangle ABP \) whose base is the chord and the third vertex is \( P \).

Furthermore, he showed that the center \( G \) of gravity of the parabolic section lies on the segment \( PV \) called the axis of the parabolic section with \( PG = \frac{2}{3} PV \).

For the proofs of Archimedes, see Chapter 7 of [25].

Recently, two of the present authors showed that among strictly convex plane curves, the above area properties of parabolic sections characterize parabolas. More precisely, they proved as follows ([18]).

**Proposition 1.** Let \( X \) be a strictly convex curve in the plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \). Then \( X \) is a parabola if and only if it satisfies

(C): For a point \( P \) on \( X \) and a chord \( AB \) of \( X \) parallel to the tangent of \( X \) at \( P \), the area of the region bounded by the curve and \( AB \) is \( \frac{4}{3} \) times the area of triangle \( \triangle ABP \).

Actually, in [18], they established five characterizations of parabolas, which are the converses of well-known properties of parabolas originally due to Archimedes ([25]). In [21], they gave some characterizations of parabolas using area of triangles associated with a plane curve, which are generalizations of some results in [23]. See also [10, 11, 12] for some generalizations of results in [21].

In [16] and [17], two of the present authors proved the higher dimensional analogues of some results in [18]. Some characteristic properties of hyperspheres, ellipsoids, elliptic hyperboloids, hypercylinders and \( W \)-curves in the \((n + 1)\)-dimensional Euclidean space \( \mathbb{E}^{n+1} \) were given in [1, 4, 6, 7, 13, 15, 22]. In [19], some characterizations for hyperbolic spaces embedded in the Minkowski space were established.

For some characterizations of parabolas or conic sections by properties of tangent lines, see [8] and [20]. In [14], using curvature function \( \kappa \) and support function \( h \) of a plane curve, the first and second authors of the present paper gave a characterization of ellipses and hyperbolas centered at the origin.

Among the graphs of functions, Á. Bénya et al. proved some characterizations of parabolas ([2, 3]). B. Richmond and T. Richmond established a dozen characterizations of parabolas using elementary techniques ([24]). In their paper, parabola means the graph of a quadratic polynomial in one variable.

In this paper, we study strictly locally convex plane curves satisfying the above mentioned properties on the center of gravity. Recall that a regular plane curve \( X : I \to \mathbb{R}^2 \) in the plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \), where \( I \) is an open interval, is called convex if, for all \( s \in I \) the trace \( X(I) \) of \( X \) lies entirely on one side of the closed half-plane determined by the tangent line at \( s \) ([5]). A regular plane curve \( X : I \to \mathbb{R}^2 \) is called locally convex if, for each \( s \in I \) there exists an open subinterval \( J \subset I \) containing \( s \) such that the curve \( X|_J \) restricted to \( J \) is a convex curve.

Hereafter, we will say that a locally convex curve \( X \) in the plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \) is strictly locally convex if the curve is smooth (that is, of class \( C^{(3)} \)) and is of positive curvature \( \kappa \) with respect to the unit normal \( N \) pointing to the convex side. Hence,
in this case we have \( \kappa(s) = \langle X''(s), N(X(s)) \rangle > 0 \), where \( X(s) \) is an arc-length parametrization of \( X \).

For a smooth function \( f : I \to \mathbb{R} \) defined on an open interval, we will also say that \( f \) is strictly convex if the graph of \( f \) has positive curvature \( \kappa \) with respect to the upward unit normal \( N \). This condition is equivalent to the positivity of \( f''(x) \) on \( I \).

First of all, in Section 2 we prove the following:

**Theorem 2.** Let \( X \) be a strictly locally convex plane curve in the plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \). For a fixed point \( P \) on \( X \) and a sufficiently small \( h > 0 \), we denote by \( l \) the parallel line through \( P + hN(P) \) to the tangent \( t \) of the curve \( X \) at \( P \). If we let \( d_P(h) \) the distance from the center \( G \) of gravity of the section of \( X \) cut off by \( l \) to the tangent \( t \) of the curve \( X \) at \( P \), then we have

\[
\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{d_P(h)}{h} = \frac{3}{5}.
\]  

Without the help of Proposition 1, in Section 3 we prove the following characterization theorem for parabolas with axis parallel to the \( y \)-axis, that is, the graph of a quadratic function.

**Theorem 3.** Let \( X \) be the graph of a strictly convex function \( g : I \to \mathbb{R} \) in the \( uv \)-plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \) with the upward unit normal \( N \). For a fixed point \( P = (u, g(u)) \) on \( X \) and a sufficiently small \( h > 0 \), we denote by \( l \) (resp., \( V \)) the parallel line through \( P + hN(P) \) to the tangent \( t \) of the curve \( X \) at \( P \) (resp., the point where the parallel line through \( P \) to the \( v \)-axis meets \( l \)). Then \( X \) is an open arc of a parabola with axis parallel to the \( v \)-axis if and only if it satisfies

\[(D) : \text{For a fixed point } P \text{ on } X \text{ and a sufficiently small } h > 0, \text{ the center } G \text{ of gravity of the section of } X \text{ cut off by } l \text{ to the tangent } t \text{ of the curve } X \text{ at } P \text{ lies on the segment } PV \text{ with}

\[
PG = \frac{3}{5}PV,
\]

where we denote by \( PV \) both of the segment and its length.

Note that if \( X \) is an open arc of a parabola with axis which is not parallel to the \( v \)-axis (for example, the graph of \( g \) given in (3.23) with \( \alpha \neq 0 \)), then it does not satisfy Condition \( (D) \).

Finally using Proposition 1, in Section 4 we prove the following characterization theorem for parabolas.

**Theorem 4.** Let \( X \) be a strictly locally convex plane curve in the plane \( \mathbb{R}^2 \). For a fixed point \( P \) on \( X \) and a sufficiently small \( h > 0 \), we denote by \( l \) the parallel line through \( P + hN(P) \) to the tangent \( t \) of the curve \( X \) at \( P \). We let \( d_P(h) \) the distance from the center \( G \) of gravity of the section of \( X \) cut off by \( l \) to the tangent \( t \) of the curve \( X \) at \( P \). Then \( X \) is an open arc of a parabola if and only if it satisfies
For a fixed point $P$ on $X$ and a sufficiently small $h > 0$, we have

\begin{equation}
\tag{1.3}
d_P(h) = \frac{3}{5} h.
\end{equation}

In [9], using the results in this paper and the centroids of triangles associated with a strictly convex curve, some characterizations of parabolas were established.

Throughout this article, all curves are of class $C^3$ and connected, unless otherwise mentioned.

2. Preliminaries and Theorem 2

Suppose that $X$ is a strictly locally convex curve in the plane $\mathbb{R}^2$ with the unit normal $N$ pointing to the convex side. For a fixed point $P \in X$, and for a sufficiently small $h > 0$, consider the parallel line $l$ through $P + hN(P)$ to the tangent $t$ of $X$ at $P$. Let's denote by $A$ and $B$ the points where the line $l$ intersects the curve $X$.

We denote by $S_P(h)$ (respectively, $R_P(h)$) the area of the region bounded by the curve $X$ and chord $AB$ (respectively, of the rectangle with a side $AB$ and another one on the tangent $t$ of $X$ at $P$ with height $h > 0$). We also denote by $L_P(h)$ the length of the chord $AB$. Then we have $R_P(h) = hL_P(h)$.

We may adopt a coordinate system $(x,y)$ of $\mathbb{R}^2$ in such a way that $P$ is taken to be the origin $(0,0)$ and the $x$-axis is the tangent line of $X$ at $P$. Furthermore, we may assume that $X$ is locally the graph of a non-negative strictly convex function $f : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$.

For a sufficiently small $h > 0$, we have

\begin{align}
S_P(h) &= \int_{f(x)<h} \{h - f(x)\} \, dx,
R_P(h) &= hL_P(h) = h \int_{f(x)<h} 1 \, dx.
\end{align}

The integration is taken on the interval $I_P(h) = \{x \in \mathbb{R} | f(x) < h\}$.

On the other hand, we also have

\[ S_P(h) = \int_{y=0}^{h} L_P(y) \, dy, \]

which shows that

\begin{equation}
\tag{2.2}
S_P'(h) = L_P(h).
\end{equation}

First of all, we need the following lemma ([18]), which is useful in this article.
Lemma 5. Suppose that $X$ is a strictly locally convex curve in the plane $\mathbb{R}^2$ with the unit normal $N$ pointing to the convex side. Then we have

$$\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{1}{\sqrt{h}} L_P(h) = \frac{2\sqrt{2}}{\sqrt{\kappa(P)}},$$

where $\kappa(P)$ is the curvature of $X$ at $P$ with respect to the unit normal $N$.

From Lemma 5, we get a geometric meaning of curvature $\kappa(P)$ of a locally strictly convex plane curve $X$ at a point $P \in M$. That is, we obtain

$$\kappa(P) = \lim_{h \to 0} \frac{8h}{L_P(h)^2}.$$

Now, we give a proof of Theorem 2.

Let us denote by $d_P(h)$ the distance from the center $G$ of gravity of the section of $X$ cut off by $l$ to the tangent $t$ of the curve $X$ at $P$. Note that the curve $X$ is of class $C^3$. If we adopt a coordinate system $(x, y)$ of $\mathbb{R}^2$ as in the beginning of this section, then the curve $X$ is locally the graph of a non-negative strictly convex $C^3$ function $f : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$. Hence, the Taylor’s formula of $f(x)$ is given by

$$f(x) = ax^2 + f_3(x),$$

where $a = f''(0)/2$, and $f_3(x)$ is an $O(|x|^3)$ function. Since $\kappa(P) = 2a > 0$, we see that $a$ is positive.

From the definition of $d_P(h)$, we have

$$S_P(h)d_P(h) = \phi(h),$$

where we put

$$\phi(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{f(x) < h} \{h^2 - f(x)^2\} dx.$$

We decompose $\phi(h) = \phi_1(h) - \phi_2(h)$ as follows:

$$\phi_1(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{f(x) < h} h^2 dx, \quad \phi_2(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{f(x) < h} f(x)^2 dx.$$

It follows from the definition of $L_P(h)$ that

$$\phi_1(h) = \frac{1}{2} h^2 L_P(h).$$

Hence, Lemma 5 shows that

$$\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{\phi_1(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}} = \frac{\sqrt{2}}{\sqrt{\kappa(P)}}.$$
Lemma 6. For the limit of $\frac{\phi_2(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}}$ as $h$ tends to 0, we get

\begin{equation}
\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{\phi_2(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}} = \frac{\sqrt{2}}{5 \sqrt{\kappa(P)}}.
\end{equation}

**Proof.** If we put $g(x) = f(x)^2$, then we have from (2.5)

\begin{equation}
g(x) = a^2 x^4 + f_3(x),
\end{equation}

where $f_3(x)$ is an $O(|x|^3)$ function. We let $x = \sqrt{h} \xi$. Then, together with (2.5), (2.8) gives

\begin{equation}
\frac{\phi_2(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}} = \frac{1}{2h^2 \sqrt{h}} \int_{f(x)<h} g(x)dx
\end{equation}

\begin{equation}
= \frac{1}{2h^2} \int_{a^2 < g_3(\sqrt{h} \xi) < 1} g(\sqrt{h} \xi) d\xi,
\end{equation}

where we denote $g_3(\sqrt{h} \xi) = \frac{f_3(\sqrt{h} \xi)}{h}$.

Since $f_3(x)$ is an $O(|x|^3)$ function, we have for some constant $C_1$

\begin{equation}
|g_3(\sqrt{h} \xi)| \leq C_1 \sqrt{h} |\xi|^3.
\end{equation}

We also obtain from (2.12) that

\begin{equation}
\frac{|g(\sqrt{h} \xi) - a^2 h^2 \xi^4|}{h^2} \leq C_2 \sqrt{h} |\xi|^3
\end{equation}

where $C_2$ is a constant.

If we let $h \to 0$, it follows from (2.13)-(2.15) that

\begin{equation}
\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{\phi_2(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}} = \frac{1}{2} \int_{a^2 < 1} a^2 \xi^4 d\xi
\end{equation}

\begin{equation}
= \frac{1}{5 \sqrt{a}}
\end{equation}

This completes the proof of Lemma 6. \qed

Together with (2.10), Lemma 6 shows that

\begin{equation}
\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{\phi(h)}{h^2 \sqrt{h}} = \frac{4\sqrt{2}}{5 \sqrt{\kappa(P)}}.
\end{equation}

Since $S_P' (h) = L_P (h)$, it follows from Lemma 5 that

\begin{equation}
\lim_{h \to 0} \frac{1}{h \sqrt{h}} S_P (h) = \frac{4\sqrt{2}}{3 \sqrt{\kappa(P)}}.
\end{equation}
Thus, together with (2.17) and (2.18), (2.6) completes the proof of Theorem 2.

3. Proof of Theorem 3

In this section, we give a proof of Theorem 3.

Let $X$ be the graph of a strictly convex function $g : I \to \mathbb{R}$ in the $uv$-plane $\mathbb{R}^2$ with the upward unit normal $N$.

For a fixed point $P = (b, c) \in X$ with $c = g(b)$, we denote by $\theta$ the angle between the normal $N(P)$ and the positive $v$-axis. Then we have $g'(b) = \tan \theta$ and $V = (b, c + wh)$ for sufficiently small $h > 0$, where $w = \sqrt{1 + g'(b)^2} = \sec \theta$.

By a change of coordinates in the plane $\mathbb{R}^2$ given by

\begin{align*}
    u &= x \cos \theta - y \sin \theta + b, \\
    v &= x \sin \theta + y \cos \theta + c,
\end{align*}

the graph $X : v = g(u), u \in I$ is represented by $X : y = f(x), x \in J, P$ by the origin and $V$ by the point $(\alpha h, h)$, where $\alpha = \tan \theta$.

Since $f(0) = f'(0) = 0$, the Taylor’s formula of $f(x)$ is given by

\begin{equation}
    f(x) = ax^2 + f_3(x),
\end{equation}

where $a = f''(0)/2$, and $f_3(x)$ is an $O(|x|^3)$ function. Since $\kappa(P) = 2a > 0$, we see that $a$ is positive.

For a sufficiently small $h > 0$, it follows from the definition of the center $G = (\bar{x}_P(h), \bar{y}_P(h))$ of gravity of the section of $X$ cut off by the parallel line $l$ through $P + hN(P)$ to the tangent $t$ of $X$ at $P$ that

\begin{align*}
    \bar{y}_P(h)S_P(h) &= \phi(h), \\
    \bar{x}_P(h)S_P(h) &= \psi(h),
\end{align*}

where we put

\begin{equation}
    \phi(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{f(x) < h} (h^2 - f(x)^2) \, dx
\end{equation}

and

\begin{equation}
    \psi(h) = \int_{f(x) < h} \{x(h - f(x))\} \, dx.
\end{equation}

First of all, we get

**Lemma 7.** If we let $I_P(h) = \{x | f(x) < h\} = (x_1(h), x_2(h))$, then we have

\begin{equation}
    \phi'(h) = h(x_2(h) - x_1(h)) = hL_P(h)
\end{equation}
and

\begin{equation}
\psi'(h) = \frac{1}{2} \{x_2(h)^2 - x_1(h)^2\}. \tag{3.7}
\end{equation}

**Proof.** If we put \( \bar{f}(x) = f(x)^2 \) and \( k = h^2 \), then we have

\begin{equation}
2\phi(h) = \int_{f(x)^2 < h^2} \{h^2 - f(x)^2\} dx
\end{equation}

\begin{equation}
= \int_{f(x) < k} \{k - \bar{f}(x)\} dx. \tag{3.8}
\end{equation}

We denote by \( \bar{S}_P(k) \) the area of the region bounded by the graph of \( y = \bar{f}(x) \) and the line \( y = k \). Then (3.8) shows that

\begin{equation}
2\phi(h) = \bar{S}_P(k). \tag{3.9}
\end{equation}

It follows from (2.2) that

\begin{equation}
\frac{d}{dk} \bar{S}_P(k) = \bar{L}_P(k), \tag{3.10}
\end{equation}

where \( \bar{L}_P(k) \) denotes the length of the interval \( \bar{I}_P(k) = \{x \in \mathbb{R} | \bar{f}(x) < k\} \).

Since \( k = h^2 \), \( \bar{I}_P(k) \) coincides with the interval \( I_P(h) = \{x \in \mathbb{R} | f(x) < h\} \).

Hence we get \( \bar{L}_P(k) = L_P(h) \). This, together with (3.9) and (3.10) shows that

\begin{equation}
\phi'(h) = hL_P(h), \tag{3.11}
\end{equation}

which completes the proof of (3.6).

Finally, note that \( \psi(h) \) is also given by

\begin{equation}
\psi(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{y=0}^{h} \{x_2(y)^2 - x_1(y)^2\} dy, \tag{3.12}
\end{equation}

which shows that (3.7) holds.

This completes the proof of Lemma 7. \( \square \)

We, now, suppose that \( X \) satisfies Condition \((D)\). Then for each sufficiently small \( h > 0 \), \( V = (ah, h) \). Hence, we obtain \( G = \frac{3}{5} (ah, h) \). Therefore we get from (3.3) that

\begin{equation}
\frac{3}{5} hS_P(h) = \phi(h) \tag{3.13}
\end{equation}

and

\begin{equation}
\frac{3}{5} ahS_P(h) = \psi(h). \tag{3.14}
\end{equation}
It also follows from (3.13) and (3.14) that

\begin{equation}
\psi(h) = \alpha \phi(h).
\end{equation}

By differentiating (3.13) with respect to $h$, (3.6) shows that

\begin{equation}
S_P(h) = \frac{2}{3} h L_P(h).
\end{equation}

Differentiating (3.16) with respect to $h$ yields

\begin{equation}
2h L_P'(h) = L_P(h).
\end{equation}

Integrating (3.17) shows that

\begin{equation}
L_P(h) = C(P) \sqrt{h},
\end{equation}

where $C(P)$ is a constant. Hence, it follows from Lemma 5 that

\begin{equation}
L_P(h) = \frac{2}{\sqrt{a}} \sqrt{h},
\end{equation}

from which we get

\begin{equation}
x_2(h) - x_1(h) = \frac{2}{\sqrt{a}} \sqrt{h}.
\end{equation}

Now, differentiating (3.15) and applying Lemma 7 show that

\begin{equation}
x_2(h) + x_1(h) = 2\alpha h.
\end{equation}

Hence, we get from (3.20) and (3.21) that

\begin{equation}
x_1(h) = \alpha h - \frac{1}{\sqrt{a}} \sqrt{h}, \quad x_2(h) = \alpha h + \frac{1}{\sqrt{a}} \sqrt{h}.
\end{equation}

Since $I_P(h) = (x_1(h), x_2(h))$, we obtain from (3.22) that the graph $X : y = f(x)$ is given by

\begin{equation}
f(x) = \begin{cases} 
\frac{1}{2a\alpha^2} \{2a\alpha x + 1 - \sqrt{4a\alpha x + 1}\}, & \text{if } \alpha \neq 0, \\
\frac{1}{a\alpha^2}, & \text{if } \alpha = 0.
\end{cases}
\end{equation}

It follows from (3.23) that $X$ is an open arc of the parabola defined by

\begin{equation}
a x^2 - 2a\alpha xy + a\alpha^2 y^2 - y = 0.
\end{equation}

Note that if $\alpha \neq 0$, the function $f(x)$ in (3.23) is defined on an interval $J$ such that

$J \subset (-\infty, -1/(4\alpha a))$ or $J \subset (-1/(4\alpha a), \infty)$ according to the sign of $\alpha$. 
Finally, we use the following coordinate change from (3.1):

\begin{align}
    x &= u \cos \theta + v \sin \theta - b \cos \theta - c \sin \theta, \\
    y &= -u \sin \theta + v \cos \theta + b \sin \theta - c \cos \theta.
\end{align}

Then, after a long calculation we see that the curve $X : v = g(u)$ is an open arc of the parabola determined by the following quadratic polynomial

\begin{align}
g(u) &= \begin{cases} 
    a(w^3(u - b)^2 + \alpha(u - b) + c), & \text{if } \alpha \neq 0, \\
    a(u - b)^2 + c, & \text{if } \alpha = 0.
\end{cases}
\end{align}

Note that $g(b) = c, g'(b) = \alpha$ and $\kappa(P) = 2a$. This completes the proof of the if part of Theorem 3.

It is elementary to show the only if part of Theorem 3, or see Chapter 7 of [25], which is originally due to Archimedes. This completes the proof of Theorem 3.

4. Proof of Theorem 4

In this section, using Proposition 1, we give the proof of Theorem 4.

Let $X$ be a strictly locally convex plane curve in the plane $\mathbb{R}^2$ with the unit normal $N$ pointing to the convex side. For a fixed point $P$ on $X$ and a sufficiently small $h > 0$, we denote by $l$ the parallel line through $P + hN(P)$ to the tangent $t$ of the curve $X$ at $P$. We let $d_P(h)$ the distance from the center $G$ of gravity of the section of $X$ cut off by $l$ to the tangent $t$ of the curve $X$ at $P$.

First, suppose that $X$ satisfies Condition $(E)$. For a fixed point $P \in X$, we adopt a coordinate system $(x, y)$ of $\mathbb{R}^2$ as in the beginning of Section 2. Then the curve $X$ is locally the graph of a non-negative strictly convex $C^{(3)}$ function $f : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$. Hence, the Taylor’s formula of $f(x)$ is given by

\begin{align}
f(x) &= ax^2 + f_3(x),
\end{align}

where $a = f''(0)/2$, and $f_3(x)$ is an $O(|x|^3)$ function. Since $\kappa(P) = 2a > 0$, we see that $a$ is positive.

It follows from $(E)$ and the definition of $d_P(h)$ that

\begin{align}
    \frac{3}{5} hS_P(h) = \phi(h),
\end{align}

where we put

\begin{align}
    \phi(h) = \frac{1}{2} \int_{f(x)<h} \{h^2 - f(x)^2\} dx.
\end{align}

If we differentiate $\phi(h)$ with respect to $h$, then Lemma 7 shows that

\begin{align}
    \phi'(h) = hL_P(h).
\end{align}
By differentiating both sides of (4.2) with respect to $h$, we get from (4.4) and (2.2) that

\[(4.5) \quad S_P(h) = \frac{2}{3} h L_P(h),\]

which shows that the curve $X$ satisfies Condition $(C)$ in Proposition 1. Note that the argument in the proof of Proposition 1 given by [18] can be applied even if the curve $X$ is a strictly locally convex plane curve. This completes the proof of the if part of Theorem 4.

For a proof of the only if part of Theorem 4, see Chapter 7 of [25], which is originally due to Archimedes. This completes the proof of Theorem 4.

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