

Matter 9

Summary

The Numerical Basis of Edwaerd Mallan's Auras

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Report

THE NUMERICAL BASIS OF EDWAERD
MALLAN'S AURAS

By T. L. Charters, *Historian*

Edwaerd Mallan was the stage name of the Victorian-age spiritualist Edward Mallan¹ (1832-1889), who was renowned during the latter period of his life for possessing the ability to see the "aura" of individuals.

Mallan was born into a wealthy family in Derby, where his grandfather had established a successful

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furniture manufactory. Being a younger son, Mallan did not perceive his future to be in industry so, having something of an adventurous streak, he set about building a career dealing in antiquities; these, he acquired on extensive travels abroad.

After two profitable visits to the Near East 1855-1857, a third outing barely broke even. Competition from collectors on the continent² was by now increasing, so Mallan determined to explore opportunities elsewhere. To this end, he visited the Gulf of Guinea in 1860.

Although Mallan's trip to Africa proved lucrative, he had the misfortune to contract malaria. Relapses of this illness were to dog him for the remainder of his days and ultimately lead to his death at the relatively young age of 57.

Disliking Africa, Mallan's next target was India. The exotic treasures he brought back in 1862 were regarded in high esteem by his clients, so in 1863 he embarked on a second expedition. Most of the trade in antiquities at this time was by sea, so Mallan reasoned that little of exceptional quality remained in the vicinity of the ports. He hypothesised that superior pieces awaited further inland that might be bought in abundance at a low price.

His journey took him from Bombay northeast to Lucknow, thence northwest into the Himalayan foothills. There, in temples and other holy places, he found many objects of great age that would have been prized by collectors in England. The locals declined to part with them at any price,

however, because they venerated them as part of their faith.

Mallan was disappointed by this result but was struck by a sudden revelation³. There were parts of India where for millennia Hinduism had reigned supreme but which were now the dominion of Islam. Far from a reluctance to sell items dating from ancient times, these followers of Mohammed might even be pleased to have the opportunity to do so.

Mallan headed northwest to Kashmir and the city of Srinagar. It was here where he was to make the discovery that would define the rest of his life.

His account of what happened changed markedly over the years as he introduced elements of showmanship into his retellings. Two early sources^{4,5} and a slightly later one⁶ suggest that the following is a plausible summary of what occurred.

After advertising that he was in the market for antiquities, for the first two weeks Mallan was only offered inferior examples. He had expected this, and on each occasion gently explained through his interpreter that he was seeking artefacts of a higher standard. In the third week, an item of astounding quality was brought to his lodgings by an old man⁷. It was a bowl, which Mallan immediately recognised as being corded ware of what we would now call the late Chalcolithic period, some two millennia B.C..

The bowl had been kept in an exceptional state, so Mallan did not hesitate to make an offer for it.

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This was rebuffed. The bowl, it seemed, had a story behind it, which the old man believed increased its value. It was said that in the past, those who drank from the bowl would gain the ability to see the human soul.

Mallan asked how the old man had come by the bowl, which (its absent mystical properties aside) was in superlative condition given its considerable age. He was told that it was given to the old man's grandfather as a wedding present by a wealthy merchant, but that the old man didn't know much about it beyond this⁸.

Intrigued, Mallan increased his offer and purchased the bowl.

Mallan was not a believer in the supernatural, but the old man's story had sufficiently impressed him that he supposed there might be a scientific basis to it. Perhaps, he conjectured, it had once contained a drug or narcotic of some kind. He decided to use himself as the subject of a series of experiments to uncover the bowl's secrets.

To this end, that evening at his lodgings he poured a cupful of water into the bowl. Next morning, he drank it. He was unsurprised to learn that this had no appreciable effect on him. He repeated the experiment using milk, but the result once more met with his pessimistic expectations.

In analysing the bowl visually, he noticed that there were sand-like grains embedded within by time, like sugar crystals left too long in a sugar pot⁹. He reasoned that the purported powers of the

bowl might have originated with these grains, but they wouldn't yield to his physical attempts to release them. He determined that a solvent would be required. He first tried warm water, but the grains remained in place. It is unclear whether he also tried boiling water, which might have damaged the bowl, but he did also try a saline solution.

Following these initial failures, Mallan contemplated the matter. If the bowl had the reputation it did then other people would also have subjected it to study and would also have attempted to dissolve the grains. Was he therefore wasting his time, and the grains weren't grains at all but a part of the fabric of the pottery?

It then occurred to him that earlier investigators might not have tried alcohol as a solvent, its consumption being against the religious texts of both Muslims and Hindus. For medicinal purposes, he had brought with him to India a bottle of French brandy, a quantity of which he was now willing to spare to stem his curiosity. He poured some neat into the bowl and, upon stirring it, was excited to observe that it did indeed dissolve the grains.

Once all the grains had been absorbed into the alcohol, Mallan drank it.

He noticed no immediate effects, other than those normally associated with French brandy, so concluded that the sand-like grains were not responsible for whatever properties the bowl might once have possessed. At this point, he gave up on the idea of trying to uncover its secrets.

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It was when he went for supper that evening that the effects of consuming the dissolved grains became all-too apparent.

Above the heads of all those in attendance floated strange symbols, visible only to Mallan. They had no physical presence – he couldn't touch them and they didn't catch on door frames as people passed through – but they were universal. They had the look of being printed, rather than handwritten, and they always faced Mallan whatever the orientation of those to whom they were invisibly attached.

It seems that upon witnessing this scene, Mallan was seized by both a sense of wonder and a sense of panic. He went outside and discovered that the illusion extended to strangers. He sketched copies of the symbols, lest the ability to discern them desert him. Alas, these have not survived to the present day

The ability did not desert him, however; indeed, it was to remain with him for life.

Over the course of the next few weeks (and in some cases, years), Mallan ascertained that the sets of symbols he saw shared a number of common properties. On a trip to the United States in 1874, he elaborated in an interview with the noted philosopher C. K. Coops¹⁰ the

following series of observations about what by now he called *auras*¹¹:

- They were visible even in complete darkness.
- They were always in focus, even when he looked through a lens.
- They were opaque, rather than transparent.
- They were made up of individual print-like symbols that didn't vary in "typeface" whatever written language was used by their bearers.
- Their symbols were always blue with a black border.
- They appeared to be unique. No two auras were exactly the same.
- They were possessed by human beings only. Each person had exactly one aura, regardless of whether he was a new-born baby or a centenarian.
- They had no mass, passing through solid objects unhindered.
- They were occluded by physical objects. If someone was leaning against a wall, only half his aura might be in view.
- They were subject to the laws of perspective. At the same rate that a man diminished in size with distance, so did his aura.
- They always floated the same, fixed distance above the scalp of the person who bore them, regardless of how large or small that

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person might be. It made no difference whether the person being observed, or Mallan himself, was standing, in repose or even upside-down.

- The moment a person died his aura disappeared¹².
- Auras did not appear in photographs, reflections or Mallan's dreams. As a consequence, he never knew whether he himself bore an aura.
- Identical twins did not have identical auras, although they were largely similar.
- Mallan also did not know whether Siamese twins would show one aura or two.

Mallan came to regard this change in his perception as both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing, because he could identify different individuals by a mere glance; it was a curse, because the mass of auras he saw in crowded places obscured large parts of his field of vision. On the whole, though, he felt that its positive effects far outweighed its negative effects, so he embraced the condition rather than seek a cure.

Upon his return to England from India, Mallan sold all the items he had procured excepting the corded ware bowl, which he kept for himself¹³. The sale attracted great interest

and realised a substantial profit. Although the temptation to return to India must have been great, Mallan nevertheless elected for a change of career at this point. G. S. Clarke speculates that health issues arising from malaria might have been the fundamental cause, but concedes that Mallan's visual problems among crowds could also have been a factor¹⁴.

Restyling himself as Edwaerd Mallan, Mallan set about establishing for himself a reputation as a spiritualist. Unlike other spiritualists of the time, he did not speak to the dead nor disgorge what would now be called ectoplasm. Rather, he would perform various acts of identification for private and public audiences.

A contemporary account¹⁵ of an exhibition he performed at the Brighton Pavilion in 1877 serves as an example typical of his set. He began by inviting a small number of impressionable young women and cynical older men onto the stage, instructing them to stand behind a long curtain that extended just above head-height. An older woman was asked to join Mallan to verify that he could not see either through or (with the aid of a booster step, her use of which was played for amusement) over the curtain. The people behind the curtain were then asked to move around into different positions. A stage hand began to open the curtain from one end, stopping before each person was revealed. Without approaching the curtain, Mallan reliably identified whether the person next

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behind it was male or female, whereupon the curtain was moved on to show that his guess was correct. In one instance, he commended the ingenuity of the volunteers, for there was both a man and a woman occupying the same space. The audience was much impressed by this.

A series of further demonstrations of his abilities followed, growing in sophistication. He arranged a set of volunteers by height, for example. One such demonstration of particular noteworthiness from the perspective of this monograph involved instructing volunteers to line up in any order they chose behind the curtain, then to come out individually when he waved a union flag above their head. He proceeded to use this method to call them out in age order, youngest first.

Mallan ended his act by taking note of the names of every member of the audience from the back row, which he wrote down in a notebook alongside a number of "arcane symbols". Facing away from them, these audience members were instructed to change seats with one another, leading to great mirth among those uninvolved because of the implied impropriety. Once they were in place, Mallan instructed that the house lights be extinguished, cautioning people to hold onto their valuables in case the person sitting next to them was a thief. The Pavilion did not have electric lighting yet, so the procedure must have taken some time, adding to the tension. With the room in total darkness, a small, bull's-eye lantern

was lit close to Mallan and shone upon him, such that the audience could see him but he could not see the audience. Mallan then turned around and mounted the booster step. Thereupon, in consultation with his notes (which he had light enough to read), he correctly identified exactly which member of the audience was seated where. This feat was greeted with thunderous applause.

At most of his performances, Mallan afterwards destroyed the notes of names that he took, but occasionally, at private events, he let the host retain the paper as a memento. A handful of these notes have survived to the present day, and it is regarding these that the remainder of this monograph is concerned¹⁶.

It might be assumed that the symbols which Mallan claimed that he could see would be alphabetical in nature but, as Mallan himself seems to have realised (but not revealed), this is not the case. The symbols are, in fact, numerical. There are ten of them, representing the numerals 1 to 9 and 0. As we shall shortly see, the presence of 0 is of particular and important interest.

Mallan invariably drew the symbols using diagonal lines. His renditions of them are consistent and have been reproduced for this monograph by a professional draughtsman¹⁷ as shown in Figure 1.

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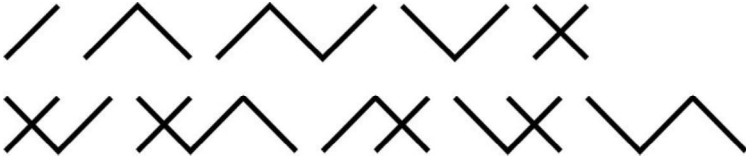


Figure 1

Mallan's symbols.

Top line: 1 2 3 4 5. Bottom line: 6 7 8 9 0.

So as to avoid typographical complications, henceforth these will be transcribed herein using the characters / and \ and the letter X.

Mallan left no hint with regards as to how he interpreted the symbols as digits, always writing them as he saw them rather than in translated form. However, the sequence can readily be reconstructed using the following logic:

/ 1 This is the easiest mark to make for a right-handed person.

/\ 2 Two continuous strokes to represent the number 2 seems natural.

/\/ 3 Ditto three strokes.

V 4 Those familiar with Roman numerals might assume that V should represent 5, but I argue that it does not. Rather than continue with a wavy line of four strokes, which is easy to over-extend and might be mistaken for two 2s, the designer of this system dropped the first stroke from 3 to deliver 4.

X 5 This symbol is the crux of the system. Again, there is a disparity with Roman numerals. X here is used as an anchor symbol and is combined with the symbols for 1 to 4 to give the symbols for 6 to 9.

X/ 6 The symbol for 5 combined with the symbol for 1 gives the symbol for 6 (6 being 5+1).

X/ 7 Likewise, the symbol for 7 is the symbol for 5 followed by the symbol for 2.

/X 8 This symbol is comprised of the symbols for 5 and 3, but their combined length seems to have required a foreshortening. This has been accomplished by dropping the final stroke of the 3 and crossing the second stroke to give the 5 element¹⁸.

\X 9 The symbol for 4 is crossed to indicate that 5 must be added to it to give the symbol for 9. This may have been done for aesthetic reasons to mirror the symbol for 8, or for ease of writing.

\/ 0 As the only remaining symbol, this must represent 0. It is a reflection of the symbol for 3, but this does not seem to carry significance.

In the extant examples of Mallan's use of these symbols, it is rare that he transcribed more than three per person. However, the note in the possession of the Wilmington family includes a dedication to Hiram H. Wilmington followed by a transcription of a full aura representing the number 99,349,610,255 using the above transla-

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tion. The body of the note associates 255 with Mr Wilmington's name. This suggests that Mallan saw for each individual an 11-digit aura and that the chance two individuals from a small group would share the final three digits was low. Therefore, either: there was more variance in the rightmost symbols of each aura; or the entire pattern was essentially random and Mallan sometimes chose the leftmost characters. Without further examples of a complete aura there is insufficient evidence either way.

Recalling the part of Mallan's act in which he identified participants by age, however, it would seem that an aura's symbols were not purely random but were ordered in some manner that reflected each individual's date of birth. Either lower numbers were associated with younger people or they were associated with older people; as we shall see later, the latter is actually the case, but to show this we must first establish a separate line of reasoning. This conveniently arises from a consideration of the pressing matter concerning the symbol representing O.

The presence of a symbol for the concept of O is, dare I say it, exciting. To understand why, we must turn our attention to corded ware. Although the present whereabouts of Mallan's corded ware bowl is unknown, other

examples of corded ware abound. The style gave its name to a pre-Bronze Age culture that stretched across northern Europe from the low countries deep into what is today the U.S.S.R.¹⁹, but corded ware was also manufactured by the Yamnaya culture of the Pontic Steppe, which ranged south of this territory from the foothills of the Carpathians to the foothills of the Urals²⁰.

Corded ware is so named because impressions in the pottery look to have been made by pressing cord or rope²¹ into the clay (or, more likely, *vice-versa*, using a cord frame as a mould). Typically, pieces exhibit several rows of short, diagonal lines, although sometimes the rows are empty and sometimes the rows are themselves diagonal. Most often, the diagonal lines resemble a / character, running from southwest to northeast (so to speak); very occasionally, they resemble a \ character, running from northwest to southeast.

Although the vast majority of the diagonal lines seen on corded ware are purely decorative, most vessels of Yamnaya provenance also present a small sequence of other, more deliberate impressions. These occur only once on each pot and have been interpreted by archaeologists to be makers' marks²². This could well be true, because the marks look strikingly close to Mallan's symbols.

Figure 2 shows a particularly fine example, at present in the collection of the Staatliches Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin. The maker's mark clearly reads: "X/ \ X/ \ / \ X / X / X" or

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60721988 in conventional Arabic numerals. Note that because the sequence is preceded by a long series of / marks, one or more 1s may precede the other eight symbols²³.

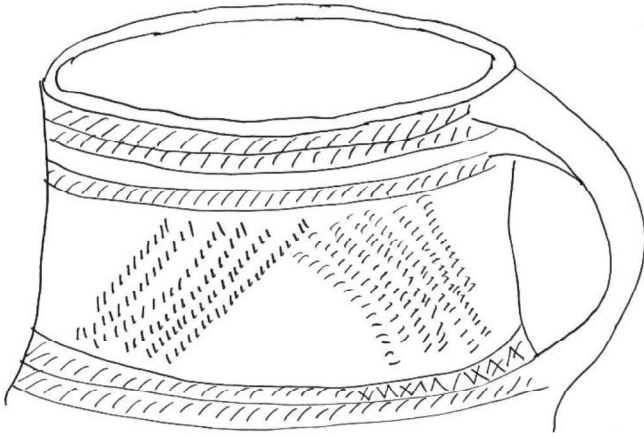


Figure 2

Sketch of a Yamnaya corded ware jug.
Maker's mark on penultimate row to the right.

That a primitive people such as the Yamnaya would have written numerals at all at a time when cuneiform script was yet to be developed in Mesopotamia is itself remarkable, but the use of a positional notation with a symbol to represent the concept of zero is no less than astounding. There is no evidence elsewhere that zero was used before the first millennium B.C., but Yamnaya corded ware shows that it was invented some three thousand years earlier. This is potentially of huge historical significance; researchers are urged to invest

time considering the broader implications of this discovery.

One of the rarer pieces of corded ware that has its cord marks appearing as \ rather than / can be found on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; it is sketched in Figure 3. The item, which is a beaker, has been reconstructed from a number of sherds. It also bears a maker's mark, although because this continues on a missing sherd its left-most symbols are absent. The symbols that remain are \ /X \ / \X, which are mirror-images of / \ X / \ \ X /, or 2 7 0 6. This suggests that the maker was left-handed and found mirror-writing more convenient. Whatever the rationale, it would seem that the maker's mark is reversed, and so begins 6072. This is the same opening series of digits used on the pot in Berlin. From this intelligence, we can deduce that makers' marks are numbers and that the positional notation they employ is the same as we use today, with units to the right and increasingly higher powers of ten to the left.

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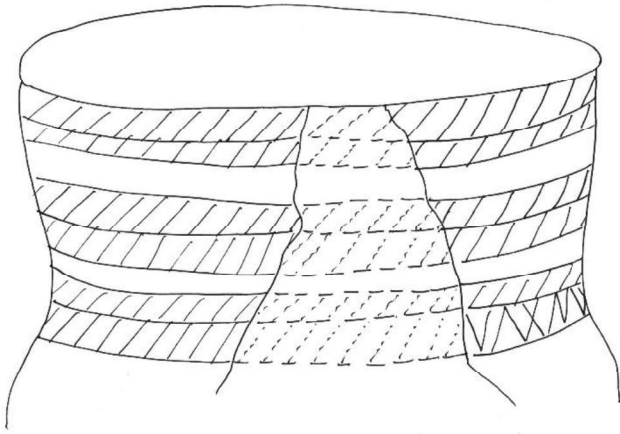


Figure 3

Sketch of a Yamnaya corded ware jug.
Partial maker's mark on bottom row to the right.

Almost all makers' marks on Yamnaya corded ware begin with X/ \/, to the extent that archaeologists inferred that X/ \/ was an indicator that what followed was a maker's mark²⁴. There is a single exception: a late example found in sediment extracted from the Volga river during a dredging exercise in 1928. This piece, now in the State Museum of Ceramics, Kuskovo, begins with the symbols X/ /, or 61 in Arabic numerals. Because other artefacts found in the same dredging operation can be dated very accurately, we can therefore safely conclude that earlier makers' marks are lower than later makers' marks; that is, the numbers they represent increase over time rather than decrease over time.

What are we to make of these discoveries? This essay is not the place to speculate; its purpose is simply to present the evidence and from this ascertain the fundamentals from which more able researchers can begin their investigations.

It would seem that the ability Edward Mallan gained when he supped from an ancient vessel in 1863 was that of being able to read a kind of label that is invisibly attached to every human being at birth²⁵. He called these "auras", but in fact they were numbers displayed using a positional notation in base ten and featuring a symbol for 0. The earlier an individual's date of birth, the lower their number. At the time when corded ware was made, the values on these labels were in the 60 millions; by Mallan's time, they had reached close to a hundred milliard. It would therefore not be unreasonable to suppose that every human being was somehow allocated such a number incrementally at birth.

This raises a final question, determining the answer to which I leave to others.

By whom?

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¹ This and the other biographical details noted in this manuscript are drawn chiefly from G. S. Clarke's *The Life of Edwaerd Mallan* (Clerkenwell, 1902).

² He had a particularly acrimonious relationship with D. D. von Groß of Düsseldorf, who alleged that Mallan had substituted a Biblical-era necklace with a modern copy.

³ This is how he described it in his 1886 lecture to the Oxford Union, according to the diary of one who was present in the audience, the hon. James Landish.

⁴ A letter dated 8th October, 1863, sent by Mallan from Delhi to his second-eldest brother, Thomas Mallan, outlines the general sequence of events.

⁵ Specific, but limited details appear in the formal documents that Mallan composed to authenticate the provenance of his finds in preparation for their sale to collectors.

⁶ An extensive monograph entitled آثار باستانی تاشکند, published in 1869 by the Persian (today, Iranian) academic, Ibrahim bin Javad, concerns the antiquities of Tashkent, a city in the present-day U.S.S.R.. Ibn Javad went to Srinagar as part of his research, his visit coinciding with that of Mallan. In a long digression, he describes two encounters he had with the man, one before and one after his change.

⁷ Mallan would later claim it was a young woman, before settling on a street urchin who had found the piece while scavenging in a rubbish tip.

⁸ Beginning in 1878, Mallan introduced a new element to his story, in which a fakir had told him that the bowl had been found on the shores of the Caspian Sea and carried to Maracanda (Samarkand) by the armies of Alexander the Great. There it had been lost, centuries later, when Islam reached those lands.

⁹ This simile is present in all three sources.

¹⁰ C. K. Coops *On Labels and Identity* (Boston, Massachusetts, 1876).

¹¹ An aura in Mallan's terms is a unified collection of symbols. As an analogy, an aura is akin to a word and a symbol is akin to a letter of that word.

¹² Mallan professed to have seen this happen when visiting a hospital in London. He embellished it over the years, and by 1888 was claiming that he had come across a knife fight in the street which he had personally intervened in to bring to an end, unfortunately too late for one young man; Mallan accompanied him to hospital in an ambulance, but upon arrival he bled to death in Mallan's arms.

¹³ It appears to have been Mallan's hope that the secrets of the bowl's grains would yield to scientific analysis, but his application to them of French brandy had evidently proven too effective. Mallan paid for a chemist, W. D. D. Halfeld, to undertake a detailed study of the bowl, but it ended fruitlessly.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.* G. S. Clarke, p182.

¹⁵ Taken from the early edition of the *Brighton Herald*, 27th October, 1877. In later editions, it was replaced by an article about the Brighton Aquarium.

¹⁶ The most substantial such note is pinned to the wall of the main dining room of Rules restaurant in Maiden Lane, London. A number of shorter notes that have been consulted in this research are in the possession of the Strachey family. A single note possessed by the Wilmington family of Connecticut proved invaluable.

¹⁷ Mr Nigel Buchanan of Crawley.

¹⁸ In an informal test of fifteen right-handed adults: twelve found /X easier to write than X/V; two found it harder; one found them to be about the same level of difficulty.

¹⁹ M. C. Burkitt *Prehistory: A Study of Early Cultures in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin* (Cambridge, The University Press, 1925).

²⁰ S. P. Tolstov *The Early Culture of Khwarizm* pp 92-99 *Antiquity* Volume XX, issue 78 (Cambridge, June 1946).

²¹ The term *corded ware* is a translation of the German *Schnurkeramik* introduced by F. Klopffleisch.

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²² W. Hauptmann *Der Marken der Weiblichen Hersteller auf Schnurkeramik* (Berlin, 1937).

²³ Preceding other symbols with so many occurrences of the symbol for 1 is troublesome. The issue could be happily resolved by hypothesising that the / symbol means 0, rather than 1, although this does not sit well with the interpretation of the other symbols used in Mallan's auras.

²⁴ J-E Chrétian *Premières Marques de Potiers* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1949).

²⁵ Or possibly before birth; Mallan could not see into the wombs of pregnant women.

Notes

This monograph was discovered as a set of loose-leaf papers in a folder during the relocation of the collection of Birmingham Central Library to a new building in 1973. A note handwritten on the folder states that it is a rejected article that was submitted to *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* in 1951.

Few of the books or articles referenced by this research have been catalogued either by the British Library or the Library of Congress. The same can also be said of several of their indicated authors.

The identity of T. L. Charters is unknown.