

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

---

**From the Selected Works of Mattias K Polborn**

---

2008

## An ancient rejection letter

Mattias K Polborn



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/polborn/17/>

## Preface

I have recently found an ancient scroll in my crawl space. It turned out to be a rejection letter from the editor of an ancient scientific journal, Geometrica, addressed to Ptolemaeus of Alexandria, the famous geographer. It is a remarkable document that shows how little scientific publishing has changed since ancient times.

## The document (translated)

From: Anencephalos

Editor, Geometrica

GEOMETRIKA: A MOST PRESTIGIOUS JOURNAL WITH REALLY SPECIAL REFEREES

To: Ptolemaeus

University of Alexandria

Dear Professor Ptolemaeus,

I am writing regarding the paper “An argument that the Earth is round, and a method to determine its circumference” that you recently submitted for publication in Geometrica.

I have now heard back from three excellent referees who are all experts in the field. I summarize their reactions below.

Referee 1 is negative and recommends strongly against publication of your paper. He/she/it feels that the idea that the Earth is round is both (i) too simple and well known to be really surprising and worth of publication, and (ii) utterly deceptive, misleading and wrong.

He/she/it is also not impressed by your argument that your theory can explain why one sees the mast of an approaching ship before seeing the rump. As he writes, “*An argument that would explain why one could see the anchor and submerged parts of a ship **before** seeing the mast would be truly innovative and surprising. Ideally, such an argument would be based on the well-established flatness of Earth as a starting point. Such a paper might well be deserving of publication in Geometrica. In contrast, the author’s argument seems like a shallow magician’s trick and is not at all convincing.*”

He also feels that your argument lacks generality because it does not apply to ships that have no mast, for example, rowing boats or submarines. (I have no clue what submarines are, but it sounds good). In this regard, he/she/it feels that your paper lacks a rigorous terminology for the classification of maritime transportation vehicles, and I concur with that assessment.

Referee 2 is mildly positive. His main point of criticism is that, from the abstract of

your paper, he thought that you would tackle the problem of squaring the circle (I am, frankly, at a loss of why he reads this in your abstract, but since he is a brilliant expert, I will take his word for it).

He concludes that your paper in its current form is unpublishable in *Geometrica*, but that he would be open to a revision that demonstrates how your result of the roundness of Earth helps for solving the truly important problem of squaring the circle, especially if you appropriately connected that revision with his own pathbreaking contributions to this fundamental question.

Referee 3 feels that the general idea that objects have shapes is already well-known in the literature, and that the result in your paper that the Earth is of round shape is too specific to justify publication in a general interest journal such as *Geometrica*.

He writes, *“I was initially positively inclined toward this paper, but after reading it a second and third time, as well as showing it to my dog, I became less than enthusiastic. I went around my house and garden and found a number of objects that were not round. Thus, even taking the author’s claim that the Earth is round at face value, I am not convinced that a paper of so little generality would be of interest to the readers of Geometrica.”*

Personally, I was initially favorably inclined toward your paper, but the comments of the referees have convinced me to reject your paper. In particular, I concur with Referee 1’s assessment that your paper lacks a consistent terminology for maritime transportation vehicles, and Referee 3’s assessment that articles of limited generality are more appropriately placed in field journals.

I am sorry to bring you what must be disappointing news. Please keep in mind that we can only publish less than 8 percent of submissions. I also hope that the brilliant comments of the referees will help you to revise this paper for a submission to a more appropriate field journal, such as *Forms of Miscellaneous Objects* or *Maritime Inquiries*. On the bright side, I feel that you must now be in the mood of refereeing a few papers for our great journal. I will not tell you, which, if any, of the attached papers is authored by referees 1 to 3, but you can of course guess. I would have liked to receive your reports on these papers by yesterday, so you can also consider this letter as your first reminder notice for these reports.

Sincerely,

Anencephalos  
Editor of *Geometrica*