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A Tale of Two Portraits.
A Note on Two Alleged Images of Thomas Harriot

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In the President's Room of Trinity College, Oxford, there hangs a portrait of a bearded man holding a pomander.[1] This portrait (shown as Figure 1 below) was part of the estate bequeathed to Trinity College by James Ingram (1774-1850), who was the College President from 1824 until his death. There appears to be no provenance for the portrait before 1850, and neither the identity of painter nor sitter appear in any of Ingram's records.

Figure 1: The cleaned portrait to be found in the President's Room of Trinity College, Oxford.

Figure 2: The Delaram engraving

In the twentieth century, however, a strong association has developed between the Trinity College portrait and an engraved portrait by Francis Delaram (1590-1627), shown as Figure 2 above.[2] The engraving is dated 1620, and shows a bearded man with a calculating board such as the *Scacchiac Abacus* ("Napier's Bones") described by John Napier (1550–1617) in his *Rabdologia* (Edinburgh, 1617).[3] There are some lines of verse by George Chapman below, but nothing in them to explicitly identify the sitter. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that they are both the same man, *viz.* the English mathematician Thomas Harriot (c.1560-1621), and the Trinity College portrait so called has been reproduced in several works of biography.[4]

1. *Illustrated Catalogue of a Loan Collection of Portraits of Historical Personages who died prior to the year 1625*, exhibited in the Examination Schools, Oxford, 1904, no. 78; and Mrs Reginald Lane-Poole, *Catalogue of Portraits in the possession of the University, Colleges, City and County of Oxford*, Oxford, Vol. III, no. 16, 1925: p. 128.
2. The British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings. Catalogued in Sidney Colvin, *Early Engraving and Engravers in England (1545-1695)*, London, 1905. Reprinted in Arthur M. Hind, *Engraving in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Cambridge University Press, 1955: Vol. II, p. 227, Pl. 130 (c).
3. The portrait was once called *John Napier of Merchiston*, although, as Hind notes, this is impossible since Napier was dead when the engraving was made in 1620. Furthermore, the engraved portrait bears no resemblance to the official oil painting of Napier belonging to the University of Edinburgh.
4. See for example, Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning—The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*, J. Cape, London, 1992: Pl. 9.

The development of the association between the Trinity College painting and the Delaram engraving (and the connection with Harriot) was explained in 1955 in *Engraving in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries* by Arthur M. Hind (1880-1957).

> *"In 1904 the late Mr T. W. Jackson directed my attention to an anonymous painting in the President's House, Trinity College, Oxford, on account of its likeness to the Delaram. It is inscribed AN° DNI. 1602. ÆTATIS SVÆ 42. Personally I would not accept the identity of sitter in these two portraits, even granted the difference of age between the original of the painting (aged forty-two), and that of the engraving, which seems that of an older man. I can see very little in common but the brow, the width between the eyes, and something of the forehead. And if it be granted that the Delaram shows an older man, it is difficult to see how his hair should be lower on the forehead than in the painting. Nevertheless the identity of the two portraits has been accepted and amplified in an article by Jean Robertson (Mrs J. S. Bromley) in Some Additional Poems by George Chapman (Bibliographical Society, London, 1941). The further step which she takes is to suggest that the Oxford painting, and therefore in her opinion the Delaram engraving, represent Thomas Hariot, author of the Brief and True Report of Virginia published in De Bry's America (1590), and a distinguished astronomer and mathematician (especially known for his advance in the study of Algebra). The date on the picture and age of the sitter (1602, aged forty-two) does tally with Hariot's life (b. 1560, d. 1621), but unless this is supported by a stronger confirmation of the identity of the two sitters, it is a dangerous conjecture."*

Robertson's reasons for proposing Harriot as the sitter of both portraits are simple.[5] Firstly, on the basis of the calculating board and the Chapman verse in the engraving, she surmised that Delaram's sitter was a mathematician well-known to Chapman, which does suggest Harriot as a possibility.[6] Then, on the basis of the agreement between the dates on the Trinity College portrait and Harriot's life, and the similarities that she perceived between the engraving and the portrait, she suggested that both portraits were of Harriot. It is apparent, however, that Hind was not so convinced.

One major piece of evidence in Robertson's favour was the fact that the dates of the Trinity College portrait corresponded so well with Harriot. However, whilst the inscription of "AN° DNI. 1602. ÆTATIS SVÆ 42" was correct at the time of Robertson's article and Hind's book, in 1957, the then President of Trinity College Sir Arthur Lionel Pugh Norrington (1899-1982) had the portrait cleaned, and it was discovered that the inscription had been modified. Cleaning revealed the original inscription to be "AN° DNI. 1602 ÆTATIS SVÆ 3 2."[7] In 1964, Norrington had it X-rayed at the National Portrait Gallery,[8] and in a letter dated 25 November 1964 to Sir David Piper (1918-1990), the then Director of the National Portrait Gallery, he wrote:

> *"Before I had the picture cleaned by Buttery in 1957, the age was clearly given as 42, and as the date of the picture is given as 1602, this, of course, fitted in with Harriot's date. Buttery's cleaning revealed the age as 32, and he wrote to me to say that he was convinced that this new figure was the genuine and original one, and that the figure 42 was a much later over-painting in the 18th or early 19th century. All the same, there was something odd, because there is now a curiously wide gap between the 3 and the 2 …This does seem to fix the date of birth of the subject at 1570."*

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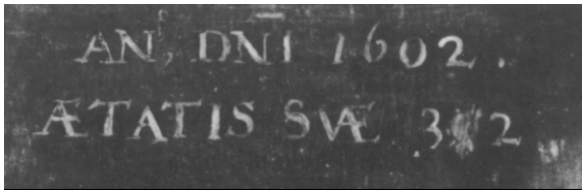
5. J. Robertson, "Some Additional Poems by George Chapman," *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society, The Library*, Vol. XXII (1941): p. 168.
6. Chapman had previously dedicated a long poem to Harriot which was appended to *Achilles Shield* (1598), reprinted in *The Works of George Chapman: Poems and Minor Translations*, with an Introduction by Algernon Charles Swinburne, Chatto and Windus, London, 1875; and wrote favourably of him in *The Preface to The Reader* printed with the *Iliads of Homer* (c. 1611), reprinted in *Chapman's Homer, The Iliad, The Odyssey and The Lesser Homerica*, Edited with Introductions etc., by Allardyce Nicoll, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957. Note that the verses in the Delaram engraving are not to be found included as part of these dedications.
7. The space between the 3 and the 2 is in the cleaned inscription.
8. The National Portrait Gallery holds photographs of the cleaned portrait (negative no. 11821), and the X-ray (negative no. 11824).

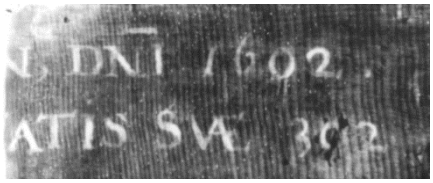
In a letter to Norrington dated 1 December 1964, Piper provides more details about the results of the X-ray examination:

> *"The X-ray reveals the figure 30 with the 0 crossed out and the still visible 2 added in alongside. I would think this is the basic and contemporary inscription although I agree with you that it is very odd. I would think that the alteration is more or less coeval with the first thought of 30 but why on earth, if so, whoever did it did not paint the 2 over the painted out 0 rather than alongside it I cannot begin to explain. The date and age do however seem to rule out any possibility of Harriot."*

For completeness, Figure 3 shows the X-ray of the Trinity College portrait and details of the dates of the cleaned portrait and the X-ray.



Detail of the date from the cleaned portrait



Detail of the date from the photograph of the X-ray

Figure 3: Left: X-ray of the Trinity College Portrait. Details of the dates shown in the cleaned portrait and the X-ray.

Thus, based on the dates in the inscription, there appears to be no reason to associate the Trinity College portrait with Harriot. This also discredits a major piece of evidence in Robertson's argument. Nonetheless, it is true that Delaram's sitter does appear to be someone who in 1620, was familiar with the use of calculating boards, and who was probably well-known to George Chapman. However, whilst this would indeed apply to Harriot, it is impossible to conclude that it would uniquely apply to him, since Napier's calculating boards were readily adopted and widely used immediately after their invention, and Chapman's activities in the seventeenth century are not well-documented. Unfortunately, unless additional evidence surfaces, the only conclusions to be drawn are that no documented portrait of Harriot survives, and that there is no face that one can put to the writings and the many other works of one of England's greatest renaissance scientists.

Acknowledgements

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