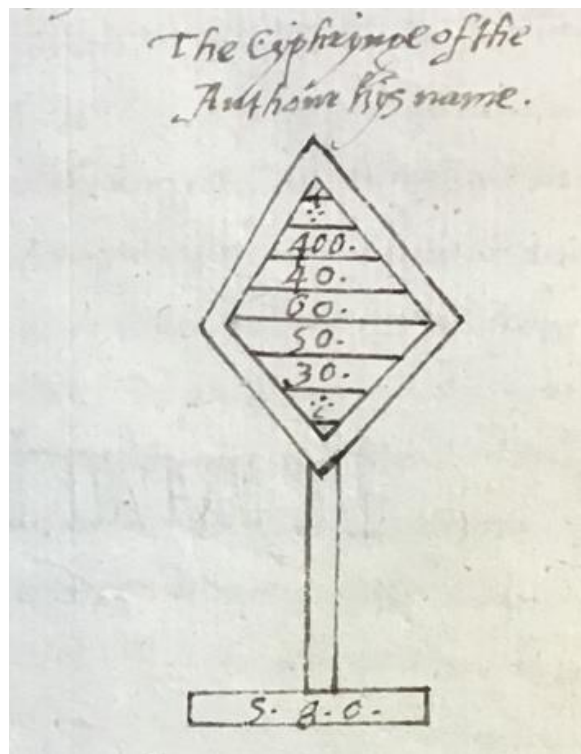


The Authorship of New College MS 303

Ffyve hundreth, eight tymes tenne yn all.
If ye can ioyne to gether well,
By addyng thereto poynts vocall,
The Authours name ye then ca[n] tell.

This provocative verse appears in New College MS 303, a book of prose and poetry written by an Elizabethan Catholic, accompanying an unusual figure: a diamond shape connected to a base by a long line, the whole somewhat reminiscent of a fire screen. In the middle of the diamond, five numbers are ranged below each other—400, 40, 60, 50, and 30—which add up in total to the number written on the figure's base, 580.



'The Cyphrynge of the Authour hys name', from New College Library, Oxford, MS 303, p. 165

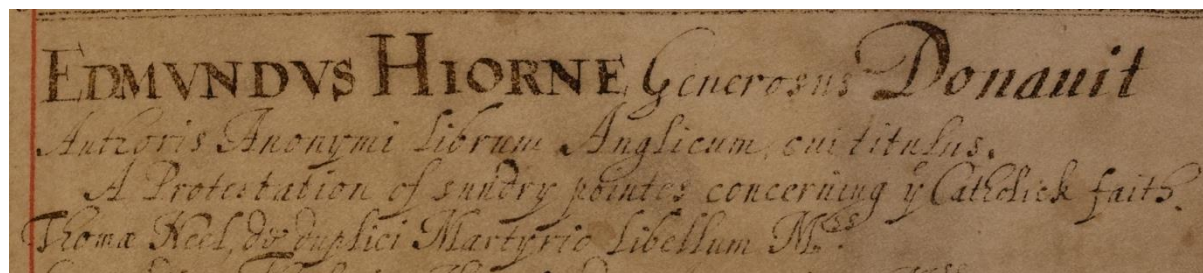
A clue to this enigma comes in the author's comment that a potential codebreaker should add 'thereto poynts vocall'. Here, 'vocall' means 'vowel', suggesting the answer lies in biblical Hebrew, a language where scribes and readers have to add vowels.¹ Hebrew is a language where individual letters are replete with meaning, and the sum directs us towards *gematria*, the system by which Hebrew letters are conventionally used to express particular numbers.² According to this system, 400 equates to ט (tav), 40 to מ (mem), 60 to ס (samekh), 50 to נ (nun), 30 to ל (lamed): or, transliterated into English, T, M, S, N, L. A knowledge of common English names suggested adding '[h]o' and 'a' to 'TMS', to read 'Thomas'. 'NL' was a little less straightforward, but a guess of 'Neal' was inspired by the Elizabethan Hebraist of that name.

Many thanks to Katie McKeogh and William Poole; to Christopher Skelton-Foord and the staff of New College Library; and to Shiran Avni and Jacob Wiseman for help with Hebrew.

¹ *OED*, 'vocal', *adj.* A II 9–10 and *n.* B 1. 4

² Neal is using the method known as *Mispar Hekbrehi* (absolute or normative value): see David Derovan, Gershom Scholem, and Moshe Idel, 'Gematria', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd edn, vol. 7 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007); online edition consulted.

Supporting evidence comes from an entry in the Benefactors' Book of New College Library, to which this manuscript was donated by Edmund Hiorne in 1639.³ This records the donation, though does not itemise its contents in full, describing only two of its tracts.⁴



Entry regarding the donation in the Benefactors' Book
New College Library, Oxford, BT1.4.6 (= formerly, New College Archives, Oxford, 3582), f. 81r

Of these, 'A Protestation of sundry pointes concerning ye Catholick faith' is described as anonymous, while 'de duplici martyrio Libellum' is attributed to Neal, here spelt 'Neel'. This may suggest that the cipher had been cracked by a previous reader—perhaps Hiorne or the register's compiler—but could simply record personal knowledge that Neal had authored the short treatise on martyrdom. The latter possibility seems more likely, given that the cipher strongly suggests Neal's responsibility for all the manuscript's contents.⁵

Neal's association with New College MS 303 is further consolidated by the shape of the figure above. This evokes a section of the Hebrew *sefirot* or Tree of Life: a mystical diagram of nodes and lines, the former symbolising different aspects of God, existence and the soul, and the latter indicating the relationship between these. In Lurianic Kabbalism, which Neal is drawing on here, each line of the *sefirot* is associated with a letter of the alphabet. Tracing the five consonants of Neal's name—*tav*, *mem*, *samekh*, *nun*, *lamed*, as listed above, with the addition of *yod*—gives the shape in the image at the beginning.⁶ By signalling that a vowel sound is needed, *yod* can be read as another way of adding 'poynts vocall'.⁷ Just as the number of 580 sums Neal up, this fortuitously elegant section of the *sefirot* sets out a diagram of him.

Neal was born around 1519, and educated at Winchester College and New College.⁸ He taught Hebrew in Oxford in the 1540s and was ordained in 1546, but spent time in Paris during

³ Neal's manuscript was in Oxford at the time of its binding. The binder's waste bound at the front and back of the volume comes from John Thornborough's *The last will and testament of Jesus Christ, touching the blessed sacrament of his body, and blood*, printed in Oxford by William Turner in 1630 (at the front, signatures L1 and L4; at the back, K1, K3 and K4). Three other volumes from the college library, BT1.48.1 and BT1.85.13,14, preserve waste from the same book (see William Poole, '[Deciphering the Title-Page of a Book of William Thorne of New College, Regius Professor of Hebrew, and King James Bible Translator](#)', *New College Notes* 1 (2012), no. 9, at footnote 15) suggesting they were bound as part of the same consignment.

⁴ For a fuller list of contents, see Henricus O. Coxe, *Catalogus codicum MSS. qui in collegiis aulisque Oxoniensibus hodie adservantur*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1852), I, 109, and the facsimile reprint of the annotated Bodleian copy (Wakefield: E. P. Publishing, 1972).

⁵ See William Poole, '[The Receipt of Manuscripts in New College Library 1624–1832](#)', *New College Notes* 8 (2017), no. 11, at pp. 3–4. This article also discusses post-Reformation donations to the college library by other Catholics. Hiorne's signature appears at the front of MS 303.

⁶ I am most grateful to Shiran Avni for making this suggestion. For a diagram, see David A. Cooper, *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* (this edn, New York: Riverhead, 1997) at p. 87. This is also reproduced in Jerome M. Levi, 'Structuralism and Kabbalah: Sciences of Mysticism or Mystifications of Science?', *Anthropological Quarterly* 82 (4) (2009), 929–84, at p. 959.

⁷ On consonantal vowel markers, see Lily Kahn, *The Routledge Introductory Course in Biblical Hebrew* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 7.

⁸ Except where otherwise referenced, biographical information comes from the articles on Neal by G. Lloyd Jones and W. A. Shaw in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), and Thomas Neal (*sic*), '[Thomas Neal \(c. 1519–c. 1590\): Catholic, Priest, Scholar](#)', *New College Notes* 14 (2020), no. 1.

Edward VI's reign. Returning to England under Mary I, he became chaplain to Edmund Bonner, bishop of London, and rector of Thenford, Northamptonshire, in 1566. In 1559, just after Elizabeth I came to the throne, he was appointed Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford. During his time there, he was associated at various points with Christ Church, Hart Hall—now Hertford College—and New College; the latter institutions hosted several other religious conservatives and Catholics in his time.⁹ In August 1566, Neal played a leading role in the celebrations surrounding the Queen's visit to Oxford. A manuscript which he presented to Elizabeth features a running commentary on the tour, in the form of an imaginary dialogue in Latin verse between her and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and chancellor of the university, and is adorned with early images of the university's colleges and schools, drawn by John Bereblock.¹⁰ Suggestively, given Neal's use of the *sefirot* in his later cipher, the manuscript includes an image representing Hebrew scholarship as a thriving tree; it accompanies a verse praising Elizabeth for her encouragement of Hebrew studies in Oxford.¹¹

The playful deferences of this occasion belied Oxford's religious turmoil. Many of the university's most talented members had either moved abroad at the start of Elizabeth's reign or were planning such a move, as England became increasingly hostile to Catholics.¹² Though Neal tried to accommodate himself to the Elizabethan settlement for a time, he resigned his professorship only three years after he had welcomed Elizabeth to Oxford, and moved to the nearby village of Cassington. A memorial brass to him survives in Cassington church, for which he appears to have written the text himself. This concludes with the date of 1590, Neal's age at the time—71—and the reflection: 'While still healthy, I placed these verses here for myself, so that an image of my death might thereby be seen by me in advance. *Even if he kills me, I shall still put my hope in him.*'¹³ The date of Neal's actual death is not known, but around 1604 he was cited as an eye-witness to the Nag's Head consecration: the spurious Catholic claim that Elizabeth's first Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, was consecrated irregularly in the Nag's Head inn. For this and other reasons, early modern biographical notices of Neal are easy to find—yet no biographer mentions the present manuscript.¹⁴

⁹ On Neal's connection with New College, see William Poole, 'Early Oxford Hebraism and the King James Translators (1586–1617): The View from New College', in *Labourers in the Vineyard of the Lord: Erudition and the Making of the King James Version of the Bible*, ed. Mordechai Feingold (Leiden: Brill, 2018), ch. 3, at pp.61–2. On New College's strongly Catholic character in the early post-Reformation period, see Penry Williams's chapter, 'From the Reformation to the Era of Reform, 1530–1850', in *New College, Oxford, 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: New College, 1979), ch. 2, at pp. 46–51; on other Catholics associated with the College, see Katie McKeogh, '[The Papists of New College: I](#)', *New College Notes* 14 (2020), no. 4; William Poole, '[The 1588 Donations of Thomas Martin, Lawyer and Recusant](#)', *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 3; David Parrott, '[New College and the Reformation](#)', *New College Notes* 9 (2018), no. 3; and Jan Machielsen, '[Thomas Stapleton's First Polemic: An Impact Case Study](#)', *New College Notes* 5 (2014), no. 10. On Neal's residence at Hart Hall/Hertford College, and the institution's Catholic leanings in this period, see Sidney Graves Hamilton, *Hertford College* (1903: this edn, London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1998), pp. 15–21.

¹⁰ '*Collegiorum Scholarumque Publicarum Academia Oxoniensis Topographica Delineatio*', in *John Nichols's The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth I: A New Edition of the Early Modern Sources*, vol. I: 1533–1571, ed. Elizabeth Goldring, Faith Eales, Elizabeth Clarke, Jayne Elizabeth Archer, Gabriel Heaton, and Sarah Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 490–516. One contemporary copy (Bodleian Library, MS Bod 13 Part A i-iv, 1–21) is reproduced in facsimile in *Queen Elizabeth's Book of Oxford*, ed. Louise Durning, trans. Sarah Knight and Helen Spurling (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2006).

¹¹ See *Queen Elizabeth's Book*, ed. Durning, pp.30–32, 117, and <<https://treasures.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/treasures/tree-of-hebrew-learning/>> (Accessed: 12 July 2021). The same image figures in another manuscript presented to Elizabeth by Neal on the same occasion, a Latin translation from the Hebrew of Rabbi David Kimhi's commentaries on the minor prophets (British Library MS Royal 2 D.xxii), f. 1.

¹² See Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), ch. 2.

¹³ For a photograph of the memorial brass, see Kilroy, *Campion*, pp.49–50: Kilroy also transcribes and translates the inscription, and his translation has been used. The italicised portion quotes Job 13:15.

¹⁴ See ODNB sources.

The title to the first item in MS 303 reads in full: ‘A protestation of sundrie pointes concerning the Catholike feithe. made by an ealderlie Inglish man beyonde the sea, yn the tyme of hys traveile there,¹⁵ towards the openyng and discharge of hys conscience, betwene god. and the Wordle [*sic*: world]. yn stede of hys last will & testament. now latelie confirmed, proved, and alowed by sufficient authoritie of the seid Catholike churche, and published after the deathe of the Authoure thereof, through the helpe of hys factours and agents, upon especiall trust com[m]itted unto them yn yt behalfe. Anno d[om]ini 1.5.8.4.’ (p. 6) Like Neal’s memorial tablet, this bespeaks its author’s preoccupation with his own demise, but also implies that he was envisaging print-publication for his work: either at one of the clandestine recusant presses in England, or those used by English Catholic communities on the continent.¹⁶ If any of the manuscript’s contents were printed, no copies appear to survive; one can guess that Neal’s heterogeneous, highly personal writings would have been deemed inappropriate for wider distribution. Yet those same features testify powerfully to Neal’s Catholicism: an impetus towards secrecy, but also a reason to bear witness.¹⁷

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¹⁵ Though this journey is otherwise unrecorded, Neal is known to have spent at least two periods abroad: the first during Edward VI’s reign (see above) and the second in the 1570s, when the Douai Diaries list him as having arrived at the college on 1 June 1578 and leaving for England on 7 January 1580 (Thomas Francis Knox, ed., *The First and Second Diaries of the English College at Douay* (London: David Nutt, 1878), pp. 142, 159). The first of these entries also yields the information that Neal had been imprisoned.

¹⁶ See Alexandra Walsham, “‘Domme Preachers’?: Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print’, *Past & Present* 168 (2000), 72–123; a later version of this article was published as ‘Dumb Preachers: Catholicism and the Culture of Print’, ch. 8 of *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

¹⁷ I am currently writing on Neal at greater length for an essay-collection edited by Earle Havens and Mark Rankin, *The Elizabethan Catholic Underground* [projected title]. On the interest in Christianised Jewish mysticism among British Catholics, see Francis Young, ‘Sir Thomas Tresham and the Christian Cabala’, *British Catholic History* 35 (2) (2020), 145–68. Young discusses Neal at pp. 151–2.