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Something different! Delighted to announce that a paper I wrote 22 years ago (!) on a supposed portrait of English scientist Thomas Harriot (c1560-1621) is finally online: TL;DR: Sorry but there's no real evidence that the portrait is Harriot ... hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03839673

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

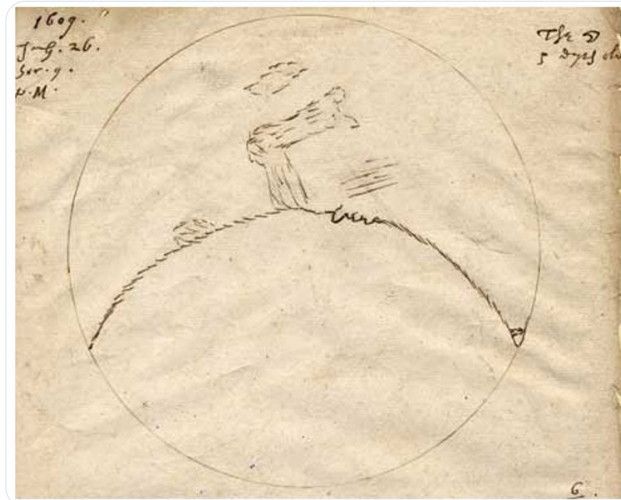
J.M. Dudley ¹ [Details](#)

1 FEMTO-ST - Franche-Comté Électronique Mécanique, Thermique et Optique - Sciences et Technologies (UMR 6174)

Abstract : This article is an extended reprint of one published at the invitation of the late Professor Gordon Batho (1929-2013) in *The Harrioteer: The Newsletter of the Thomas Harriot Seminar, University of Durham*, April 2000. The article discusses the provenance of a famous portrait displayed at Trinity College, Oxford, which is widely described as being of the celebrated English mathematician Thomas Harriot (c.1560-1621). However, as we discuss here, the evidence for this attribution is weak, and unless additional information becomes available, the only conclusion to be drawn is that no documented portrait of Harriot survives.



Harriot was a polymath. He produced the first telescopic drawing of the moon before Galileo, he discovered the law of refraction before Snell or Descartes, and he explored Virginia, learning Algonquian to translate. It would be nice to know what he looked like.



It was @libroraptor who first got me interested in Harriot. And even 22 years ago, books and websites were often reproducing a portrait from the University of Oxford which was “claimed to be” Harriot. This wording intrigued me, so I started to look into it.

The portrait was bequeathed to Trinity College Oxford by James Ingram but there is no provenance before 1850 and no knowledge of painter or sitter. But the 20th century saw the portrait (left) linked to an engraving by Francis Delaram (right) of a man with a calculating board.

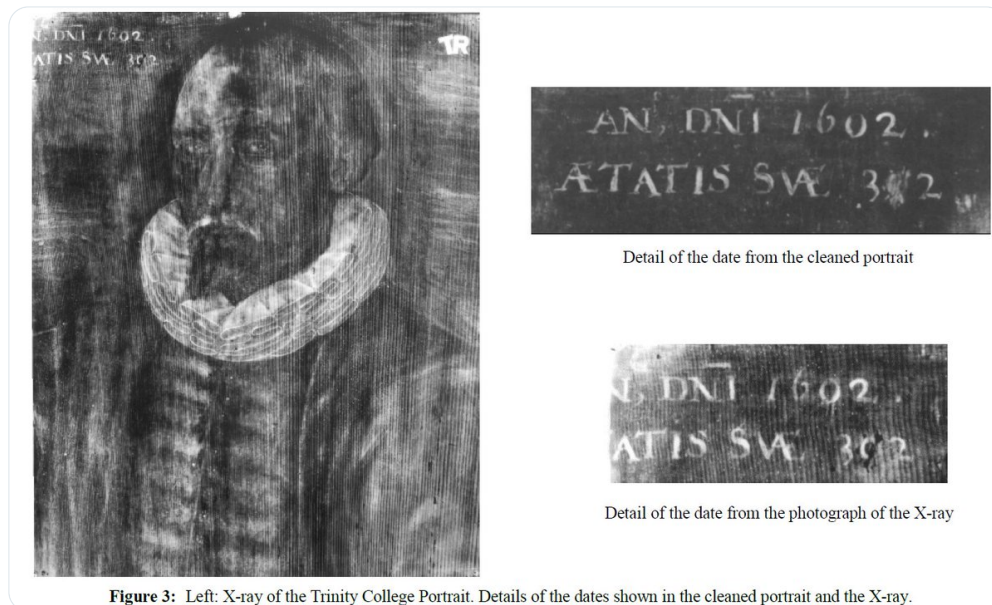


The rather odd story of the association between the Trinity College painting and the Delaram engraving (and the connection with Harriot) was explained in 1955 in *Engraving in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries* by Arthur M. Hind (1880-1957)

“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 Harriot, 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 Harriot’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 thought of Harriot because the calculating board suggests a mathematician and the verse suggests a friend of Chapman (Harriot was both). But it's tenuous. And the resemblance with the portrait is wishful thinking - bearded men with ruffs were very common at the time!

Harriot's age of 42 on the Oxford portrait did fit but whilst AN° DNI. 1602. ÆTATIS SVÆ 42 was correct at the time Hind's book, in 1957 the portrait was cleaned and it was discovered that the inscription had been modified. It was later X-rayed in 1964.

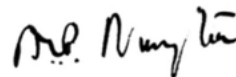


The results of all this were discussed between the President of Trinity College Arthur Norrington and the Director of the National Portrait Gallery David Piper. The "Harriot" age of 42 appears to have been a later overpainting and Piper states that this seems to rule out Harriot.

25 November 1964.

I am sorry the x-ray has not produced an important result. I am a bit puzzled by what you say. 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. I suppose this is by the alteration from 30 to 32, which you mention. This does seem to fix the date of birth of the subject at 1570.

Yours sincerely,



1st December, 1964.

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.

Yours sincerely,



So unfortunately there appears to be no reason to associate the Oxford portrait with Harriot which is a shame because it would be nice to have a face to put to a great scientist and explorer. Still when all this is taken together it's a nice story!

This was actually published in April 2000 in the Thomas Harriot Seminar Newsletter but since this is hard to find I have placed it online at HAL. Associating the portrait with Harriot is harmless enough, but it's important to understand it is not really supported by any evidence.

The Harrioteer

The Newsletter of the Thomas Harriot Seminar
April 2000



A TALE OF TWO PORTRAITS: A NOTE ON TWO ALLEGED IMAGES OF THOMAS HARRIOT

J. M. DUDLEY

And I'd really like to thank @libroraptor again as well as @MatthewSteggle who was at Oxford 22 years ago and who helped dig things out from dusty places, and Clare Hopkins from Trinity College for the encouragement to get this story out there in 2022!

@libroraptor @MatthewSteggle @threadreaderapp unroll

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