Br. Cathol. Hist. (2020), *vol.* 35(2), *pp.* 145–168 © The Author(s), 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Trustees of the Catholic Record Society.
doi:10.1017/bch.2020.16

Sir Thomas Tresham and the Christian Cabala

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The Christian Cabala, a Christianised version of Jewish mysticism originating in Renaissance Italy, reached England in the early sixteenth century and was met with a variety of responses from English Catholics in the Reformation period. While 'cabala' was used as a slur by both Protestant and Catholic polemicists, Robert Persons drew positively from the work of the Italian cabalist Pietro Galatino, and in 1597 Sir Thomas Tresham, then a prisoner at Ely, described in detail a complex cabalistic design to decorate a window. While the Christian Cabala was only one source of inspiration for Tresham, he was sufficiently confident in his cabalistic knowledge to attempt manipulations of names of God in his designs for the window at Ely and to insert measurements of cabalistic significance in the gardens on his Lyveden estate. Persons's and Tresham's willingness to draw on Christian cabalism even after its papal condemnation suggests the intellectual independence of English Catholics, who were prepared to make use of esoteric traditions to bolster their faith. The evidence for experiments with cabalism by a few English Catholics highlights the need for further re-evaluation of the significance of esoteric traditions within the English Counter-Reformation and the eclectic nature of post-Reformation English Catholic mysticism.

Keywords: Christian Cabala, Sir Thomas Tresham, Esotericism, Mysticism

The Northamptonshire recusant Sir Thomas Tresham (1543–1605) is perhaps best known today for his idiosyncratic architectural use of number symbolism in buildings such as Rushton Triangular Lodge and Lyveden New Bield. However, in interpretation of Tresham's creations, the link between Tresham's interest in numerology and Christianised versions of the Jewish Kabbalah has largely passed unnoticed, as has English Catholic interest in the 'Christian Cabala' more generally.[1] In the 1970s, Frances Yates portrayed Counter-Reformation Catholicism, especially where driven by the Jesuits, as

* This article is based on a paper entitled 'Esoteric Recusancy in the Elizabethan Age: The Occult Architecture of Sir Thomas Tresham', which I delivered at the 'Visions of Enchantment' conference at the University of Cambridge on 18 March 2014.

[1] In this article I use the Latinised spelling 'Cabala' to refer to the Christian tradition of interpreting the Hebrew Kabbalah (which was often only tenuously related to the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah), and 'Kabbalah' to refer to the tradition as practised within Judaism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2020.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the enemy of esoteric and mystical traditions,[2] and this perception of Counter-Reformation Catholicism as authoritarian, militant and essentially anti-mystical coloured much subsequent scholarship. Yet more recent research by Alexandra Walsham, Francis Young, Liam Temple and others has highlighted the extent of continuing English Catholic interest in both esoteric and mystical traditions,[3] and the Christian Cabala was no exception.

This article explores the place of the Christian Cabala in early modern England and the responses of Sir Thomas Tresham and other sixteenth-century English Catholics to the Cabala, before going on to consider in detail the only surviving example of Tresham's cabalistic writings, the lengthy description of the 'painted devices' he commissioned for the long gallery of the Bishop's Palace in Ely in 1597.[4] Tresham's interest in the Cabala may have been inspired by the writings of the Jesuit Robert Persons, which stimulated Tresham's own research. There is no sign in his writings that Tresham was aware that the Cabala was regarded with suspicion in Rome – evidence, perhaps, that insulation from the Catholic world allowed cabalism to flourish not only among English Protestants (as David Katz has argued[5]) but also with some Catholics.

Two years after Tresham's death, the Catholic convert William Alabaster wrote a work of Christian cabalist mysticism that was condemned by Rome and made Alabaster a fugitive, spelling the end of English Catholic experiments with cabalism. Nevertheless, for a brief period a small minority of English Catholics searching for a mystical tradition sought solace in the Christian Cabala, thereby revealing a spiritually experimental streak among some sixteenth-century English Catholics that should challenge any notion that all Catholics were intellectually or culturally conservative because they adhered to the faith of medieval England. The phenomenon of English Catholic cabalism highlights the diversity among Catholics, who cannot be characterised as an intellectually or spiritually monolithic group.

As well as challenging assumptions about the conservative cultural agenda of English Catholics, ongoing Catholic interest in this aspect of humanistic learning points to an ambiguity in the English Counter-Reformation, which simultaneously revered the late medieval past

[2] Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 62–63, 170.
[3] Alexandra Walsham, 'Miracles and the Counter Reformation Mission to England', *The Historical Journal* 46 (2003): 779–815; Francis Young, *English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553–1829* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 38–40, 157–62; Francis Young, *Magic as a Political Crime in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 87–118; Liam P. Temple, *Mysticism in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2019), 19–44.
[4] The British Library, London (hereafter BL) MS Add. 39831, fols 5r–13r.
[5] David S. Katz, 'Christian and Jew in Early Modern English Perspective', *Jewish History* 8 (1994): 55–72, at 59.

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and embraced the 'new' Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. For Tresham, his conspicuous performative orthodoxy did not equate to intellectual or spiritual conservatism. Godfrey Anstruther's view of Tresham as an 'old school' recusant who expressed his frustration with the limitations imposed on him by the Elizabethan state through eccentric architecture now seems a very limited characterisation of a man of extraordinary creativity.[6] Similarly, in the light of what his interest in the Cabala reveals of Tresham's intellectual adventurousness and flexibility, Paula Henderson's suggestion that Tresham would not have decorated his garden at Lyveden with mythological figures because he was 'so vehement a Roman Catholic' is in danger of stereotyping the nature of Tresham's devotion.[7] As Temple has recently shown, as a result of the disruption of the Reformation, the medieval English mystical tradition was virtually forgotten until its rediscovery by Augustine Baker in the seventeenth century.[8] In the meantime, Tresham's Christian cabalism was one idiosyncratic response to the need for a Catholic mystical tradition. It was, moreover, a response that may have emerged from pre-Reformation developments among England's early humanists, who began to become aware of Christian Cabalism in the 1520s.

The Christian Cabala and numerology in sixteenth-century England

Sixteenth-century England was (at least officially) a country without Jewish people, and had been since the thirteenth century. Virtually all knowledge of the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah reached England at third hand, from Continental Christian authors who interpreted Jewish texts and traditions, often in creative ways that bore little relation to Jewish tradition.[9] The word 'cabala' had at least three

[6] Godfrey Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden: A Recusant Family* (Newport: R. H. Johns, 1953), 277.

[7] Paula Henderson, 'Clinging to the Past: Medievalism in the English "Renaissance" Garden' in Alexander Samson, ed. *Locus Amoenus: Gardens and Horticulture in the Renaissance* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 42–69 at 64.

[8] Temple, *Mysticism in Early Modern England*, 25–32.

[9] On the Christian Cabala see Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944); Werner L. Gundersheimer, 'Erasmus, Humanism, and the Christian Cabala', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26 (1963): 38–52; François Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964); Moshe Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretation of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance,' in B. D. Cooperman, ed. *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 186–242; W. K. Percival, 'The Reception of Hebrew in Sixteenth-Century Europe: the impact of the Cabala', *Historiographia Linguistica* 11 (1984): 21–38; J. Dan, ed. *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and their Christian Interpreters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1997); Philip Beitchmann, *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Geshichte der christlichen Kabbala* (Stuttgart: Fromann Holzboog, 2012–15), 4 vols; Peter J. Forshaw, 'Christian Kabbalah' in Glenn A. Magee, ed. *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 143–55.

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meanings in sixteenth-century England. It referred to the unwritten religious traditions of the Jews and, by extension, any unwritten religious tradition. However, 'cabala' could also mean a secret doctrine, with its attendant esoteric and occult associations. The secret connotations of 'cabala' in turn gave rise to the third meaning of the term: a secret political grouping, the origin of the later term 'cabal'.[10]

In Judaism, the meaning of Kabbalah goes far beyond the manipulation of Hebrew letters in order to expose additional levels of meaning in words and phrases from the Torah, and the term refers to an entire tradition of mystical theology. Outside of Judaism, however, Kabbalah is 'popularly supposed' to be three specific techniques of re-arranging Hebrew letters in order to discover new meanings. *Gematria* assigns numerical values to Hebrew letters, and therefore to words (revealing which words are interchangeable in meaning because they add up to the same numbers). *Notarikon* derives new words from the initial letters of phrases from the Torah, especially names for God, while *temurah* involves altering the sequence of Hebrew letters in a word in a specific sequence in order to reveal new words within a word. While these techniques are 'kabbalistic' (influenced by Jewish mysticism), they are not Kabbalah in the strict sense.[11] Nevertheless, this instrumentalisation of the Jewish Kabbalah as a tool of biblical exegesis was at the core of the Christian Cabala.

In spite of pervasive antisemitism, the idea that Christians might have something to learn from Jewish traditions was one that never entirely disappeared in medieval Europe, but the serious study of Hebrew by Christian scholars began only in the late fifteenth century with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522) and Egidio da Viterbo (1472–1532). From the very beginning, Christian scholars of Hebrew were interested in more than just reading the Old Testament in its original language; they also cherished the belief that an ancient secret wisdom might be found in extra-biblical Hebrew writings. As Brian Copenhaver and Daniel Kokin have shown, in the early years of the sixteenth century an ecstatic Christian Cabalism enjoyed considerable prestige, even at the papal court.[12] These explorations came to an abrupt end in the 1550s with the papacy of Pope Paul IV, who instituted virulently antisemitic policies amid fear that study of the Jewish Kabbalah might produce heresy, against the background of an advancing Protestant Reformation.[13]

[10] For an early instance of the political use of the word see BL MS Cotton Caligula E. vii, fol. 174v, William Herle to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, 18 May 1580: '… he had his secret cabala … to undermyne your estate'.
[11] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 100.
[12] Brian Copenhaver and Daniel Stein Kokin, 'Egidio da Viterbo's *Book on Hebrew Letters*: Christian Kabbalah in Papal Rome', *Renaissance Quarterly* 67 (2014): 1–42.
[13] Katz, 'Christian and Jew', 58.

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Gareth Lloyd Jones has portrayed the impact of this esoteric strand of Renaissance Hebraism on England as limited, arguing that the English humanists of the early sixteenth century 'were not entirely unsympathetic' to the Christian Cabala, but regarded it as a 'blind alley'.[14] It was only after the accession of Elizabeth I that interest in the Cabala was rekindled. Even then, according to Lloyd Jones, it was largely confined to one man – the mathematician and astrologer John Dee.[15] In fact, the story of Christian cabalism in England was rather richer than this. A visit by one of Europe's most prominent and notorious Christian cabalists in 1510 may have stimulated some interest. The humanist, Hebrew scholar and cabalist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), later notorious as the author of *De occulta philosophia libri tres* ('Three books of occult philosophy'), paid a brief visit to London. He stayed with the leading English humanist John Colet (1467–1519), dean of St Paul's, with whom he was studying the letters of St Paul. Agrippa later confessed that 'I was then conducting quite other and most secret business among the Britons'.[16]

Although there is now no way of knowing what this secret English mission was, Agrippa was at a crucial stage in his career. Jean Catilinet, provincial superior of the Franciscans in Burgundy, had recently accused Agrippa of being a 'judaizing heretic', based on Agrippa's lectures on Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* ('Of the wonder-working word') at the University of Dôle in 1507–9.[17] Agrippa wrote a reply to Catilinet from London, defending his use of the Cabala and, in particular, Reuchlin's argument that the five-letter Hebrew name of Jesus, the pentagrammaton, could be used as a linguistic demonstration of the identity of the Messiah.[18] English humanists of the early sixteenth century took a keen interest in Reuchlin. In 1514, during his period as Professor of Greek at Cambridge, Erasmus wrote to Reuchlin, telling him that his colleagues John Fisher, bishop of Rochester (1469–1535) and John Colet supported him against Dominican critics of Reuchlin's orthodoxy.[19] It is conceivable that Agrippa came to England partly because he knew there were some individuals sympathetic to his advocacy for the Christian Cabala.

[14] Gareth Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 168.
[15] *Ibid.*, 168–74.
[16] '*apud Britannos longe aliud occultissimum quoddam tunc agebam negotium*'; quoted in M. Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa: The Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 20.
[17] On Agrippa's dispute with Catilinet see Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 18–21.
[18] Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Henrici Cornelii Agrippae Expostulatio super expositione sua in librum de verbo mirifico cum Ioanne Catilineti fratrum Franciscanorum* in *Opera* (Lyon, 1530), 2:508–12.
[19] Gundesheimer, 'Erasmus, Humanism and the Christian Cabala', 44.

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In 1515, Fisher pleaded with Erasmus to let him have copies of any new books by Reuchlin. Fisher regarded Reuchlin as even more learned than Erasmus, and the only man who approached the learning of Pico della Mirandola, the father of Christian Cabala. Fisher even expressed a desire to visit Reuchlin, if only he were not prevented from doing so by his episcopal duties.[20] Fisher's enthusiasm for Reuchlin is significant in the light of later English Catholic interest in the Christian Cabala, since unlike Colet and Erasmus, Fisher, who was created a cardinal by Pope Paul III shortly before his execution, became a Catholic martyr for his refusal to accept the royal supremacy. His writings therefore mattered a great deal to later English Catholics. In 1521 Fisher made one of the first references to the Cabala in English, in a sermon against Martin Luther. Fisher was defending the church's use of extra-biblical traditions against Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura*. In Fisher's usage, 'cabala' meant the non-scriptural religious tradition of the Jews. According to his argument, the Jews' use of the Cabala provided a precedent for the church's claim to have inherited teachings of the Apostles that were not explicitly articulated within the Bible:

> That ... which the master of Jews calleth Cabala ... is derived from man to man, by mouth only and not by writing. After this the second person the Son of God our Saviour Christ Jesu was sent by his Father into this world to instruct man, both by himself and by his apostles, the which were conversant with him ... from the beginning. These blessed apostles left unto us also many things by mouth which is not written in the Bible.[21]

However, later in his sermon Fisher hinted at a second sense of the term 'cabala', its association with secret knowledge, when he described the Cabala as 'secret eruditions':

> So then I say what we have to confirm: those things that be taught us by the church. First the prophets that were instructed by the Father, almighty God, and also their Cabala; that is to say their secret eruditions not written in the Bible. Secondly the apostles, which were instructed by our saviour Christ Jesu, and also their traditions not written in the Bible. Thirdly the holy fathers and doctors of the church, that were informed by the Holy Spirit of truth, as well in their expositions of scripture, as also by their general assembles and councils had heretofore.[22]

The Reformation produced a wave of English Protestant interest in the theological and spiritual potential of the Cabala because cabalistic knowledge derived from the words of Scripture themselves.[23]

[20] Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew*, 97.
[21] John Fisher, *The sermon of Ioh[a]n the bysshop of Rochester made agayn the p[er]nicious doctryn of Martin luther* (London, 1521), unpaginated.
[22] *Ibid*.
[23] On English Protestant interest in the Cabala see Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew*, 168–74; Deborah Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157–94.

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The Reformation's renewed emphasis on studying the word of God produced a surge of interest in the Hebrew Bible and in the Hebrew language, then widely considered to be God's original language of creation.[24] John Gordon, dean of Salisbury, informed King James in 1605 that it could be proved from the Cabala that Britain was the land of God's chosen people, since the Hebrew words *brit*, *an* and *iah* (making *britaniah*) meant 'covenant', 'there' and 'God'.[25] Similarly, the French author George Marcelline in his *Les trophées du roi Iacques I. de la Grande Bretaigne* (translated in 1610 as *The Triumphs of King James the First*) drew on cabalistic numerology to argue that James's position as the 107th king of Scotland meant that he would found the New Jerusalem.[26] Furthermore, in 1613 Michael Drayton argued that the learning of the ancient British druids exactly mirrored Cabalistic wisdom.[27] For Protestants with a mystical bent, the Christian Cabala gave access to a hidden level of meaning in Scripture without the need to invoke the extra-biblical traditions that Protestants generally rejected.

However, while the Cabala was attractive to some Protestants, many English Protestants viewed numerology in general as a relic of Catholic superstition, expunging it from techniques of scriptural exegesis. In this sense, an ostentatious preoccupation with religious or mystical numerology might mark someone out as a Catholic, or at least as someone attached to pre-Reformation modes of thought. On the other hand, many Protestants remained intrigued by numerology outside of the fields of theology and biblical exegesis, and the extent of its rejection from Protestant society should not be overstated.[28] Many English poets of the sixteenth century made extensive use of numerology, and it even found its way into Protestant prayer books.[29]

English Catholics were divided in their attitudes to the study of Hebrew and the Cabala. Thomas Neale (1519–c. 1590), who was appointed Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford in 1559, had been ordained priest in Mary's reign and may have said mass in private. His Catholic sympathies are clearly revealed in a memorial brass in

[24] Katz, 'Christian and Jew', 58.
[25] Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts* (London: Routledge, 1994), 48.
[26] *Ibid.*, 148.
[27] *Ibid.*, 55.
[28] Jonathan Willis, *The Reformation of the Decalogue: Religious Identity and the Ten Commandments in England, c. 1495–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 53–5.
[29] P. J. Klemp, 'Numerology and English Renaissance Literature: Twentieth Century Studies', *Bulletin of Bibliography* 40 (1983): 231–41; Colin B. Anderson and Jo B. Atkinson, 'Anne Wheathill's *A Handfull of Holesome (though Homelie) Hearbs* (1584): The First English Gentlewoman's Prayer Book', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* (hereafter *SCJ*) 27:3 (1996): 659–72 at 669–72; Colin B. Anderson and Jo B. Atkinson, 'Numerical Patterning in Anne Wheathill's *A Handfull of Holesome (though Homelie) Hearbs* (1584)', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 40:1 (1998): 1–25.

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Cassington church in which Neale asked for prayers.[30] Yet given papal condemnation of 'judaizing' practices, some English Catholics were wary of Hebrew studies and took a negative view of the Cabala in the second half of the sixteenth century. Gregory Martin (c. 1542–82), the translator of the Rheims New Testament, who taught Hebrew at the English College, Douai from 1573,[31] rejected Fisher's argument that the unwritten teachings of the Apostles, inherited by the church as the magisterium, were a kind of 'cabala'. Instead, he accused Protestant heretics of inventing their own traditions or 'cabala', deploying the word as a derogatory term.[32] The Jesuit Robert Persons (1546–1610), on the other hand, was more positive. In his *Christian Directorie* (1585), Persons noted that 'Rabbi Hacadosch proveth by Cabala out of many places of Scripture, not only that the mother of Messias shall be a virgin, but also that her name shall be Mary'.[33] 'Rabbi Hacadosch' was the second-century redactor of the Mishnah, Judah ha-Nasi, who in several traditional rabbinic tales conducts friendly conversations with a Roman emperor called Antoninus.[34]

Reuchlin identified Judah ha-Nasi as the originator of a proof of God's Trinitarian nature derived from the sacred four-letter name of God, the tetragrammaton. In his *De arte cabalistica* ('Of the cabalistic art', 1517), Reuchlin wrote that 'When questioned by Antoninus the Roman about the sacred names, Rabbi Hakados replied that the name of twelve letters flows from the tetragrammaton, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, from which is derived the name of forty-two letters which is thus pronounced, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, three in one and one in three'.[35] A fuller description of Rabbi Hakodos's interview with Antoninus was included in *Opus de arcanis catholicae veritatis* ('Work concerning the secrets of Catholic truth') by the Italian Franciscan friar Pietro Colonna Galatino (1460–1540). Galatino's work was largely a digest of the work of other Christian cabalists, but Persons's comment seems to derive from a particular passage of Galatino's work in which Rabbi Hakodos identifies the 'prophetess'

[30] Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 48–50.
[31] Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew*, 151.
[32] Gregory Martin, trans., *The Nevv Testament of Iesus Christ, translated faithfully into English, out of the authentical Latin* (Rheims, 1582), 565–6.
[33] Robert Persons, *A Christian directorie guiding men to their saluation* (Rouen, 1585), 208.
[34] Willem F. Smelik, *Rabbis, Language and Translation in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 454–63.
[35] Johann Reuchlin, *De arte Cabalistica* (Hagenau, 1517), sig. Oiiir: *… ubi ad quaestione[m] Antonini Romani de sacrosanctis no[min]ibus r[espo]ndit Rab Hakados q[uo]d ex tetragra[m]mato fluit nome[n] xii literar[um] … pater filius & sp[irit]us sanct[us]. Ex q[u]o derivate[ur] nomen quadragi[n]ta duaru[m] literaru[m] q[u]od ita p[ro]nu[n]ciat[ur] … Pater deus, filius deus, spirit[us] sanctus deus, tres in uno & unus in tribus.* The same passage is also found in Pietro Galatino, *Opus de arcanis catholicae veritatis* (Basel, 1550), 89.

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of Isaiah 8 as the mother of the Messiah, supporting his claim with numerous scriptural quotations (here omitted):

> Rabbi Hakodos, in the third book of his petition, which is inscribed *Gale razeya*, that is 'Revealer of hidden things', responded thus when he was asked by Antoninus, consul of the city of Rome, 'Who is that prophetess whom Isaiah remembers, when he says in the eighth chapter, "And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son?"' He replied thus: 'Oftentimes I was undecided and concerned about that question; this prophetess is the mother of the King Messiah; she is the mistress and teacher of all the prophets'.[36]

Persons did not give an altogether accurate account of Galatino's argument (Galatino's Rabbi Hakodos does not derive the name 'Mary' for the 'prophetess'). However, Galatino's *Opus* remains the most likely source for Persons's acquaintance with the Christian Cabala, and provides a precedent for Tresham's much more detailed use of Galatino a few years later.

Another English Catholic associated with cabalism, and also with the Tresham family, was Reginald Pole. Galatino was responsible for reviving the medieval prophet Joachim of Fiore's idea that a perfectly holy 'angelic pope' would unite the Christian world and inaugurate a new world and a new church, although this time supported by cabalistic evidence.[37] Some people thought the angelic pope would succeed Pope Julius III, who died in 1555, and Pole was one of the principal contenders for the papacy at this time. A scandal erupted, however, when Pole's secretary Alvise Priuli was found with a book of prophecies (possibly by Galatino) that foretold that Pole would be the angelic pope.[38] Pole had an interest in oriental languages, and acted as a patron to the Syrian monk Moses of Mardin, who accompanied him when he set out for England after he was appointed papal legate to reconcile England to the Holy See. Robert Wilkinson has also suggested that Pole may have patronised the cabalist Guillaume Postel (1510–81).[39]

Pole remained a much-admired figure among English recusants long after his death in 1558. Although Sir Thomas Tresham's grandfather (also Sir Thomas Tresham) was chosen and appointed lord prior of the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem in England in

[36] Galatino, *Opus*, 542: *Rabbenu Hakados … in tertia eius libri petitione, qui …* Gale razeya*, id est, Reuelator arcanorum inscribitur, ab Antonino urbis Romae consule interrogatus. Quae sit prophetissa illa de qua Isaias meminit, cum dixit octauo capite, Et accessi ad prophetissam, & concepit & peperit filium. Ita respondit, Saepe numero in hac quaestione suspensus fui & anxius … Haec prophetissa est mater Regis Messię … Ipsa est omnium prophetarum domina & magistra.*

[37] M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 442–7; Robert J. Wilkinson, *Orientalism, Aramaic and Kabbalah in the Catholic Reformation: the first printing of the Syriac New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 58–61.

[38] Thomas F. Mayer, *Reginald Pole: Prince and Prophet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 199–200.

[39] Wilkinson, *Orientalism*, 73, 115.

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December 1557 by Queen Mary, Thomas F. Mayer believed that Tresham was 'in part Pole's choice' for the post. This was on the basis that one of Pole's chaplains, Luigi Schiffanoia, moved into Tresham's service after Tresham became prior. Whether or not he was directly involved in the appointment, Pole preached at Tresham's installation and, most importantly, Pole's personal device appeared over the door of the Hospitallers' church in Smithfield, St Sepulchre, indicating that Pole was responsible for restoring the church.[40] This device was described in around 1580 by Francis Thynne as the cardinal's motto, in the form of a globe, with a serpent twisted round it and a white dove on the serpent's head, with the words *prudens simplicitas* ('prudent simplicity') attached. Pole's motto was 'Be ye therefore wise as serpents and innocent as doves'.[41] Thynne noted that this device also appeared on Pole's tomb in the corona of Canterbury Cathedral designed by Dominick Lampson, along with the Hebrew tetragrammaton.[42]

Virtually the same emblem, albeit without the Latin mottoes, appears on Tresham's Triangular Lodge at Rushton: a snake coiled around a globe, with a dove perched on its head. The emblem at Rushton has been interpreted as both a 'dove with ouroboros' (which seems inaccurate, since the serpent is not swallowing its own tail),[43] and as a reference to Satan's dominion over the world (the serpent) and the Virgin Mary (the dove) as the one who crushes the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15).[44] This latter interpretation is more convincing, and it is borne out by Tresham's commentary on his Ely designs:

> Where the white dove bearing a green branch of olive sitteth upon the serpent head, with this [*illeg.*]: *ipsa conteret caput tuum* ['she will bruise your head']. This therein is to be noted, that our translation hath *ipsa*, but other will have it *ipse*. Howsoever it be, the sense little differeth for it thereby intended Christ, who is *semen virginis* ['seed of the virgin'], wherefore with the translation as it is, or as others (envying at the Blessed Virgin's glory) would have it, nay came justly [*illeg.*] thereat. For nay will deny but that she brought into this world the olive branch of mercy which undoubtedly declared the inundating[45] to be past, and crushed the head of the serpent, who by seducing of a woman, formerly brought us *nostris* bondage.[46]

Nevertheless, the accidental use of exactly the same emblem by Dominick Lampson, the designer of Pole's tomb, and Sir Thomas Tresham seems unlikely. In addition to this theological meaning, it is also conceivable that Tresham intended the image as some sort of

[40] Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, 285.
[41] *Estote ergo prudentes sicut serpentes, et simplices sicut columbae* (Matthew 10:16).
[42] John Edwards, *Archbishop Pole* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 241.
[43] Marsha K. Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 245.
[44] Mark Girouard, *Rushton Triangular Lodge* (London: English Heritage, 2004), 13–14.
[45] Noah's flood.
[46] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 10v.

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commemoration of his grandfather, and indeed of Pole. On the other hand, it is possible that Pole himself intended his personal device to have a double meaning: as a reference to his motto from Matthew's Gospel as well as an apocalyptic allusion to the Virgin Mary's victory over Satan.

Sir Thomas Tresham's numerology and the Christian Cabala

The discovery of an enormous collection of manuscripts belonging to Sir Thomas Tresham in a wall cavity at Rushton Hall in 1828 means that he is one of the best documented figures of the Elizabethan Catholic community. Tresham's papers now run to eleven manuscript volumes in the British Library.[47] In addition, the Brudenell Manuscript in Oxford's Bodleian Library, though Tresham was not the scribe, has been associated convincingly with Sir Thomas Tresham and his preoccupations.[48] However, the richness of the evidence belies the need for extensive interpretation, owing to Tresham's fondness for bewilderingly complex symbolism. Interpretation of Tresham's numerological and geometrical preoccupations has generally concentrated on his use of biblical imagery and the Church Fathers. For Sandeep Kaushik, Tresham's use of emblems was 'impenetrably obscure',[49] while Mary Hazard considered that Tresham 'carries … his numerology to eccentric extreme' at Rushton in a way that was 'exponentially complex'.[50]

In the last two decades Mark Girouard and Gerard Kilroy, in particular, have undertaken extensive work to unravel the symbolic schemes in Tresham's architecture,[51] and scholars continue to debate the meanings of Tresham's architecture. Kristen Fairey has done much to elucidate the symbolism of Tresham's lost Hawkfield Lodge, interpreting the hexagonal building as a possible allegory of the *Hexaemeron* (six days of creation) as well as the sacrament of baptism.[52] Other recent developments in this field have included Lucy Gent's argument that Tresham drew on his knowledge of rhetoric to set forth rhetorical arguments in brick and stone, and Susan

[47] BL MSS Add. 39828–39838.
[48] Bodleian MS Eng. Th. b. 1–2. The case that the Brudenell Manuscript forms part of Tresham's corpus is made by Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 13–14.
[49] Sandeep Kaushik, 'Resistance, Loyalty and Recusant Politics', *Midland History* 21:1 (1996): 37–72, at 48.
[50] Mary E. Hazard, *Elizabethan Silent Language* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 139.
[51] Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall, 1540–1640* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 218–39; Girouard, *Rushton Triangular Lodge*; Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, 138–40.
[52] Kristen Fairey, '*Tres testimonium dant*: Resurrecting the Hawkfield Lodge at Rushton as Part of Sir Thomas Tresham's Architectural Testament', *Architectural History* 58 (2015), 55–82 at 76–8.

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Cogan's argument that Tresham's Triangular Lodge and its surrounding landscape represented not only the Trinity but also the 'shield of the Trinity' as an armorial badge for God.[53] Katie McKeogh has also put forward a novel interpretation of some of Tresham's numerology on the Triangular Lodge that is discussed further below.[54] So great was Tresham's love of complex and multilayered symbolism that interpreting his architecture is not a question of alighting on the 'right' explanation, and it is not the argument of this article that cabalistic interpretation of Tresham's symbolic schemes in any way supplants biblical, Patristic and rhetorical interpretations; it simply adds to them.

The beginnings of the study of numerology in early modern England can be traced back to the publication of Alastair Fowler's *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* in 1964.[55] However, scholars who considered Tresham's architecture concentrated at first on the heraldic and religious imagery rather the details of Tresham's numerology.[56] In the 1990s Mark Bradshaw noticed that an aerial photograph taken in 1944, possibly as German Luftwaffe reconnaissance, revealed traces of a remarkable symbolic garden constructed by Tresham.[57] In 2008, as a consequence of the National Trust's ongoing archaeological investigations of Tresham's gardens at Lyveden, Andrew Eburne drew attention to the importance of cabalistic numerology to Tresham's choice of proportions for the gardens,[58] and Gerard Kilroy has recognised Tresham's interest in geometrical codes.[59] It is now quite clear from Tresham's writings that his architecture was not an outlet for his frustrations but an end in itself, a mystical activity in its own right and not just a hidden means of expressing a forbidden Catholic faith.

In addition to Andrew Eburne, another scholar who has linked Tresham's architecture to cabalism is Marsha Schuchard, in the context of an argument that James VI and I imported mystical Masonic ideas from Scotland to England. Schuchard made the case that

[53] Lucy Gent, 'Elizabethan Architecture: A View from Rhetoric', *Elizabethan Architecture* 57 (2014): 73–108, at 73–80; Susan M. Cogan, 'Building the Badge of God: Architectural Representations of Persecution and Coexistence in Post-Reformation England', *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 107 (2016): 165–92.

[54] Katie McKeogh, 'Sir Thomas Tresham (1543–1605) and Early Modern Catholic Culture and Identity, 1580–1610' (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2017), 189–91.

[55] Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

[56] See John Summerson, 'Three Elizabethan Architects', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1957), 202–28 at 218–19; Gyles Isham, 'Sir Thomas Tresham and his Buildings', *Reports and Papers of the Northamptonshire Antiquarian Society* 65:2 (1966): 1–37; Malcolm Airs, *The Making of the English Country House, 1500–1640* (London: Architectural Press, 1975), 5–6, 14.

[57] Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life*, 381 n.189.

[58] Andrew Eburne, 'The Passion of Sir Thomas Tresham: New Light on the Gardens and Lodge at Lyveden', *Garden History* 36 (2008): 114–34.

[59] Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, 136–8; Gerard Kilroy, 'Sir Thomas Tresham: his emblem', *Emblematica* 17 (2009): 149–79.

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Tresham shared with the Scottish Freemasons a 'belief in the magical significance of architecture'. She noted that Tresham's Triangular Lodge (1593) 'featured carved emblems of mystical geometry and theosophical Cabala', although she traced these to the Spanish Jesuit Francisco de Ribeira, whose *De templo* (Antwerp, 1593) explored the symbolic significance of various objects in Solomon's Temple.[60] Schuchard's attribution of Tresham's ideas to Ribeira is rendered less likely, however, by the fact that the edition of Ribeira's *De templo* that Tresham owned was not published until 1603.[61]

Schuchard's assertion that 'Among his Protestant neighbors, rumors circulated that he practised black magic and used the emblematic stone carvings as talismans' is unsupported by any real evidence (nor is her assertion that Tresham was interested in Scottish Freemasonry).[62] Elizabeth's government apparently encouraged reports that the Jesuits considered Tresham an 'atheist'[63] – a term that, at the time, was sometimes applied to individuals interested in occult knowledge, but could also mean anyone who lived as if there were no God or, indeed, lived outside of the community.[64] Tresham's interest in geometry was so intense that his library even had a special section devoted to trigonometry.[65] There is no clear evidence Tresham was ever suspected of magic, but the idea is scarcely implausible; others with similar interests were routinely subject to such suspicions.[66] One such individual was John Fletcher (d. 1613), a fellow of Gonville and Caius College who was mentioned by Andrew Downes in correspondence with Tresham during the latter's imprisonment at Ely, perhaps because Tresham was seeking Fletcher's assistance as a mathematical adviser.[67] Fletcher was an astrologer as well as a mathematician whose occult interests gained him notoriety.[68]

The evidence for Tresham's interest in the Cabala is primarily to be found in his written designs for now lost paintings for the long gallery in the Bishop's Palace in Ely, Cambridgeshire. While I have described in detail the evidence for the creation of Tresham's Ely paintings as

[60] Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision*, 244–46.
[61] Nicholas Barker and David Quentin, *The Library of Thomas Tresham and Thomas Brudenell* (London: Roxburghe Club, 2006), 384, no. 1509.
[62] Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision*, 244–46.
[63] P. Renold, ed. *The Wisbech Stirs, 1595–1598* (London: Catholic Record Society, 1958), 255.
[64] For a discussion of concerns about 'atheism' and its meaning in early modern England see Kenneth Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England 1580–1720: The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 14–40.
[65] Barker and Quentin, *Library of Thomas Tresham*, 113–5.
[66] J. Peter Zetterburg, 'The Mistaking of "the Mathematicks" for Magic in Tudor and Stuart England', *SCJ* 11 (1980): 83–97.
[67] BL MS Add. 39828, fols 143r–v.
[68] Mordechai Feingold, 'The Occult Tradition in the English Universities of the Renaissance: A Reassessment' in Brian Vickers, ed. *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 73–94 at 81–2.

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well as their architectural setting,[69] a detailed analysis of Tresham's account of the meaning of the paintings, with a specific focus on Tresham's knowledge of the Cabala, is also needed. Lisa McClain has argued that incarcerated Catholics in post-Reformation England transformed their cells 'into Catholic spaces where Catholics could worship, reinforce their sense of Catholic identity, and create new forms of Catholic community and fellowship'.[70] Tresham's decision to decorate the west end of the long gallery at Ely, which was effectively his personal cell for long periods between 1588 and 1597, was a statement of personal and religious identity. The notes Tresham drew up on 25 July 1597 describing the 'painted devices' he had commissioned for the west window of Bishop Goodrich's long gallery are his lengthiest surviving justification for a scheme of architectural symbolism among his papers. Probably painted on removable cloths that were pinned or glued to stonework, and more ephemeral than buildings like Rushton Triangular Lodge, Lyveden New Bield and Hawkfield Lodge, the decorative scheme at Ely was no less convoluted. Tresham reported that his fellow prisoners had attempted to decorate their personal areas with overt statements of Catholic identity, without success: 'And where some of my fellows having the crucifix painted in their chambers, the same was in their absence washed out and purposely defaced, yet their arms, inscriptions, etc. to remain'.[71] On one level, therefore, Tresham's designs at Ely were supposed to fool, or perhaps confuse his gaolers – but their purpose went far beyond this, into the realm of mystical meditation.

Some scholars have associated the survival of English Catholicism in Reformation England with occult knowledge. Thus Roberta Albrecht has argued that 'visual codes' from 'occult memory systems' allowed 'the "magic" of Roman Catholic rituals' to survive in seventeenth-century England.[72] Yet there is limited evidence for this view, and Tresham's decision to draw on the 'occult memory system' of the Christian Cabala for Catholic symbolism was unusual, and perhaps surprising. Catholic interest in the Cabala in England had hitherto been confined to Erasmian humanists in the early sixteenth century, and Tresham had a low opinion of Erasmus, contrasting him unfavourably as 'resolute in no way' with Sir Thomas More who was 'resolute in every way'.[73] The Cabala was by no means Tresham's only inspiration; as Girouard, Kilroy and McKeogh have

[69] Francis Young, 'The Bishop's Palace at Ely as a Prison for Recusants', *Recusant History* (hereafter *RH*) 32 (2014): 195–216, at 206–10.
[70] Lisa McClain, 'Without Church, Cathedral, or Shrine: the search for religious space among Catholics in England, 1559–1625', *SCJ* 33 (2002): 381–99, at 391.
[71] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 5r.
[72] Roberta Albrecht, *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), 41.
[73] Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, 124–5.

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shown, he drew on Scripture, the Fathers and non-cabalistic numerology, as well as widely recognised emblematic animals and even rebuses.

A possible influence of Giordano Bruno on Tresham may be evident in Tresham's apparent belief in a distinct 'figurative sense' or means by which images could transmit meaning in a special way. Tresham declared that 'in impresses is observed to be so put down as differ from vulgar apprehension and yet will readily be interpreted by men of skill, especially if skilled in that wherein the impress or figurative sense[74] reacheth unto'. Tresham also referred to his entire decorative scheme at Ely as 'now perfectly in my memory',[75] suggesting that the act of encoding his theology in geometrical shapes and images helped him to memorise it, and even that the images were meant to be memorised. Tresham owned two works by Giordano Bruno on artificial memory, *De umbris idearum* ('On the shadows of ideas', 1582) and *Recens et completa ars reminiscendi* ('The recent and complete art of memory', 1583).[76]

Like many well-read individuals of his era, Tresham's library included a number of works on esoteric subjects. He owned the works of mystical Platonists, such as the *Ars magna* ('Great art') of Ramon Llull and the first volume of the 1576 edition of the works of Marsilio Ficino.[77] Tresham also owned four works by the advocate of natural magic Giovanni Battista della Porta, *De humana physiognomia* ('Of human physiognomy', 1601), *De refractione opticis parte* ('Of the refraction of the optical part', 1593), *Magiae naturalis* ('Natural magic', 1591) and *De furtivis literarum notis* ('Of the notes of secret letters', 1591).[78] Della Porta's work on cryptography and secret writing, *De furtivis literarum notis*, may have appealed to Tresham on account of his interest in codes and concealed messages. Tresham owned Agrippa's *De vanitate scientiarum* ('Of the vanity of the sciences', 1530) as well as the second volume of Agrippa's complete works (1550), containing the *Expostulatio* in which Agrippa had defended the Catholic orthodoxy of Reuchlin and the pentagrammaton during his visit to England.[79]

Like Persons, Tresham seems to have derived his knowledge of the Cabala primarily from Galatino's *Opus*, although the 1550 Basel edition of this book, which was the one Tresham owned, also included the three books of Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* as an appendix.[80]

[74] The edge of the manuscript is damaged and the reading 'sence' is here conjectured from 'senc-'.
[75] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 5v.
[76] Barker and Quentin, *Library of Thomas Tresham*, 237 nos 345–6.
[77] *Ibid.*, 340 no. 1149, 283 no. 707.
[78] *Ibid.*, 379, nos 1453–6.
[79] *Ibid.*, 194, nos 15–16.
[80] *Ibid.*, 292, no. 775.

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Galatino's book was probably more widely read by European Catholics than Reuchlin's original works, since it functioned as a digest of Reuchlin and Egidio da Viterbo and functioned as an apologetic work that could be deployed to refute Jewish claims. Indeed, Wilkinson notes that Galatino plagiarized large parts of Egidio's *Libellus de litteris sanctis* ('Little book concerning sacred letters', 1517). This important work contained the idea, especially important to John Dee, that the Hebrew alphabet and Hebrew names were not man-made but rather directly created by God. The Hebrew language thus offered privileged access to reality.[81]

Tresham's 'painted devices' at Ely

Sir Thomas Tresham was deeply involved in the Jesuit mission to England, of which Robert Persons was the leader, and his life was profoundly changed when he received another Jesuit, Edmund Campion, as a guest in his house at Hoxton in 1580.[82] Tresham was subsequently put on trial for refusing to swear that Campion had not been in his house, and then imprisoned in the Fleet. Between 1581 and 1597 Tresham was in custody, first at the bishop of Lincoln's palace at Buckden and then at the bishop of Ely's palace at Ely, although he also enjoyed long periods of relative freedom on bond.[83] However, Tresham's imprisonment forced him to seek consolation in a rich interior life of mystical reflection. A strange experience occurred during Tresham's third imprisonment in Ely Palace in 1593:

> I usually having my servants (here allowed me) to read nightly an hour to me after supper, it fortuned that Fulkes my then servant reading in *The Christian Resolution* in the treatise of proof that there is a God, etc.,[84] there was upon a wainscot table at that instant three loud knocks (as if it had been with an iron hammer) given to the great amazing of me and my two servants Fulkes and Hilton.[85]

Tresham interpreted the three knocks as a message from God, but there is insufficient evidence to show that the incident led to the building of the Triangular Lodge at Rushton, perhaps Tresham's best known contribution to architecture. Tresham was, in any case, already preoccupied with the number three on account of his surname, which contained the Latin word for three, *tres*. The medieval coat of arms of the Tresham family featured a homophonic visual pun in the form of three trefoils – themselves a traditional emblem of the Trinity.

[81] Wilkinson, *Orientalism*, 42–3.
[82] Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, 126–32.
[83] Young, 'The Bishop's Palace at Ely', 204–8.
[84] The book was Robert Persons, *A Booke of Christian Exercise, appertaining to resolution* (London, 1584). Tresham's copy still survives in the library at Deene Park. Barker and Quentin, *Library of Thomas Tresham*, 366, no. 1355.
[85] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 13v.

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Tresham's Triangular Lodge celebrated the number three, as well as the Eucharist, in every way imaginable; the lodge had three storeys, each side of the building was thirty-three feet long, and each side had three gables and three windows. The lodge was prominently decorated with emblems from the Book of Revelation (known to Catholics as the Apocalypse): a seven-branched candlestick for the 'seven lamps of fire' burning before God's throne (Apocalypse 4:5), and seven eyes in a heptagon, representing the lamb with seven eyes who stands by the throne (Apocalypse 5:6). It is possible that even Tresham's decision to make the triangular building a rabbit warrener's lodge had apocalyptic significance, a case that has been made by David and Margarita Stocker.[86] Rabbits had apocalyptic associations, since they lived in burrows, from which they emerged like the bodies of the resurrected on the Day of Judgement.[87] Overall, however, as Kilroy has shown, the imagery of the Triangular Lodge is focused on the Eucharist, making it 'an encrypted Eucharistic space'.[88]

Although the apocalyptic symbolism of the Triangular Lodge chimes with Galatino's apocalyptic preoccupations (a frequent feature of Renaissance Christian cabalists)[89], the lodge reveals no obvious knowledge of cabalism on Tresham's part. The number 5555 that appears above the door seems to be a fairly simple instance of numerology based on counting the number of letters in a word. In his later notes, Tresham described the number twenty-five as 'a quadrate number of Jesus as of Maria';[90] in other words, 'Jesus' and 'Maria' both contain five letters, and five multiplied by itself ('quadrate') is twenty-five. On this reading, '5555' simply represents the words 'Jesus Maria Jesus Maria'. Recently, Katie McKeogh has suggested that other enigmatic four-digit numbers that feature on the lodge are in fact sums of two digits each; added together, these numbers yield the total number of letters in the Latin Vulgate verses to which they refer. For example, the number 3898 above the image of a seven-branched candlestick should be taken as 38 + 98 = 136; 136 is the number of letters in the Vulgate version of Zechariah 4:2: 'and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof'.[91]

[86] David Stocker and Margarita Stocker, 'Sacred Profanity: The Theology of Rabbit Breeding and the Symbolic Landscape of the Warren', *World Archaeology* 28 (1996): 265–72.
[87] *Ibid.*, 270.
[88] Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, 140.
[89] Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew*, 180.
[90] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 7r.
[91] *Vidit ecce candelabrum aureum totum et lampas ejus super caput ipsius et septem lucernæ ejus super illud et septem in fusoria lucernis quæ erant super caput ejus*. McKeogh, 'Sir Thomas Tresham', 189–90.

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If McKeogh's interpretation is correct, this is a numerological technique that has no obvious connection with the Christian Cabala, which seems to have been unknown to Tresham in 1593. Instead, Tresham's book collection on geometry, including a previously unknown copy of Euclid's *Elements* in Cambridge University Library, annotated by Tresham in 1587,[92] provides the most plausible context for the design of the Triangular Lodge. Surviving yet undated correspondence between Tresham at Ely and Andrew Downes, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, suggests that Tresham was seeking the advice of a mathematician for his architectural plans,[93] and perhaps for the Triangular Lodge. Yet it is easy to see, given his interests, why Tresham would have been attracted to the more complex numerology of the Hebrew Cabala, especially the art of *gematria* in which individual letters are assigned numerical values. Tresham seems to have encountered *gematria* at some time between the completion of the Triangular Lodge in 1593 and 1597, when he made the notes that contain the evidence of his cabalistic knowledge.

Given that Tresham was listening to the words of Robert Persons when he received the revelation that prompted him to build the Triangular Lodge, it is possible that it was via reading about Persons's interest in the Cabala that Tresham came to the works of Galatino and Reuchlin for himself. Certainly, Tresham's knowledge of the Cabala was wholly derivative, and he had no real knowledge of Hebrew; he never wrote Hebrew letters, preferring to transliterate them. John Dee, by contrast, was not just familiar with Reuchlin and Galatino, but also owned Hebrew works and was capable of writing Hebrew.[94] Nevertheless, Tresham understood some of the basic principles of the Cabala as expounded by these Christian writers and was able to deploy cabalistic ideas as part of his decorative scheme at Ely.

On 25 March 1597, which was both the Feast of the Annunciation and Good Friday, Tresham decided to commission paintings for one side of the west window of the long gallery in Ely Palace, where he was enduring his fourth and final imprisonment. Tresham attached great significance to the fact that 25 March 1597 marked two major days of the Christian calendar, and at this time he was also much preoccupied with a particular verse of the Vulgate Bible, 1 Corinthians 1:18, which he inscribed in a copy of the 1589 edition of Antonio of Nebrissa's *Dictionarium latino-hispanicum* ('Latin-Spanish dictionary'): 'The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

[92] Joe Jarrett, 'Sir Thomas Tresham's *Elements of Geometrie*', *Notes and Queries* 61 (2014): 214–16.
[93] BL MS Add. 39828, fols 143r–v, discussed in McKeogh, 'Sir Thomas Tresham', 78–9.
[94] Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels*, 162–5.

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May I never boast except in the cross. Thomas Tresham, at Ely, 1597'.[95] Tresham included the verse in the uppermost frieze around his banqueting house at Lyveden.[96] The total length of the exterior walls of each of the arms forming Lyveden's cruciform shape is twenty-five feet, recalling Tresham's preoccupation with the number twenty-five as five times five, 'a quadrate number of Jesus as of Maria'. However, Lyveden was also apparently dependent on factors of three: each arm of the cruciform building is 81 feet long (three to power of four), while each side of the moat is 243 feet (three to the power of five).

Andrew Eburne noted that although the total length of the ornamental garden at Lyveden was 324 feet (mirroring the 324 letters that would have originally appeared on the frieze around the banqueting house), the length of the perimeter walk around the garden was 326 feet. This is the gematrial number value of Reuchlin's pentagrammaton IHSVH (I = 10, H = 5, V = 6, S = 300).[97] It could also be significant that 324 feet equates to 108 yards, whose digit sum is 18, the square root of 324 and also the number of the biblical verse inscribed around the banqueting house. The pentagrammaton was the central idea of Christian Cabala. In *De verbo mirifico*, Reuchlin argued that the holiest name of God יהוה (*yod–heh–vav–heh*, the tetragrammaton) became the Hebrew equivalent of 'Jesus' (יהשוה, *yod–heh–shin–vav–heh*, the pentagrammaton) when the letter *shin* ש was added. Within the Hebrew Cabala, *shin* refers to activation, realisation, and perfection, and therefore its addition to the tetragrammaton could be interpreted as the name of the Messiah, who accomplishes God's kingdom on earth.[98] Reuchlin's approach demonstrated little actual understanding of Hebrew, where the name of Jesus, *Yehoshua*, does not contain the same letters as the tetragrammaton,[99] but this did not stop Reuchlin's argument becoming an immensely influential one.

The letter *shin* acquired great significance for the Christian cabalists, because it made the difference between the four-letter name of God and the five-letter name of the Messiah. Tresham made notes on *galat[inus] liber 2*, the second book of Galatino's *Opus*, which dealt specifically with the issue of how the Cabala could prove the triune

[95] Barker and Quentin, *Library of Thomas Tresham*, 50: *T[homae] Tresami et amicorum. Credo. sobrie, iuste, pie. Verbum crucis pereuntibus stultitia est. mihi absit gloriari nisi in cruce. T[homas] T[resham] eli[ensi] 1597.*

[96] *Verbum autem crucis pereuntibus stultitia est. Mihi autem absit gloriari nisi in cruce.*

[97] Eburne, 'Passion of Sir Thomas Tresham', 129.

[98] Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Angels and Demons: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 158. On the pentagrammaton, see also Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, 'History and Prehistory of the Cabala of JHSUH', in Giovanni Busi, ed. *Hebrew to Latin, Latin to Hebrew: The Mirroring of Two Cultures in the Age of Humanism* (Berlin/Turin: Nino Aragno, 2006), 223–41.

[99] David H. Price, 'Christian Humanism and the Representation of Judaism: Johannes Reuchlin and the Discovery of Hebrew', *Arthuriana* 19 (2009): 80–96, at 83.

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nature of God. Tresham noted in Latin 'how tetragrammaton and IHS are derived': 'Iod, he, van, he. The name of God of four letters [*or* four sides], that is tetragrammaton (the great name of God) attributed to the Son … As the Son proceeds from the Father, in the same way is his name produced from the Father'.[100] The final form that Tresham's tribute to the pentagrammaton took in his decorations at Ely was characteristically obscure and indirect. Instead of inscribing the Hebrew name of the Messiah itself, he placed a large Hebrew *shin* in the centre of one of his triangles, which also contained letters standing for the original Hebrew meaning of the name of God, 'I am who I am'. To a Christian cabalist, the meaning of the insertion of *shin* next to these words would have been obvious:[101]

> The … Triangle is perpendicularly divided with small red lines whereby it is distributed into 6; in the centre thereof is a large Hebrew *shin*, which comprehendeth them all and as aforesaid there fitly placed the figure of the Trinity. And upon 3 of these red lines is in white letters 'e. a. e.', being in Hebrew the beginning of the said words *ehich, asser, ehich* (viz. *sum qui sum*). In the mid of the words and letters is *shin*.

However, Tresham's notes on Galatino also provide a hint that he was formulating his own mystical ideas. At the top of the folio on which he described the production of the pentagrammaton, Tresham wrote the names of three of the four elements: *terra*, *aqua*, *ignis* (earth, water, fire). This seems be a reference to a passage in which Galatino describes the role of the name of God in ensuring the peaceful co-existence of incompatible elements in creation: 'Rabbi Iohanan says this: It is written in Job 25, "He has made peace in his high places. For the firmament is of water, and the stars of fire, yet they do not disrupt one another"'.[102] By writing the three elements at the top of the folio, Tresham seems to be alluding to this Judaic cosmology, in which the earth is beneath a dome of water (the firmament), above which are located the stars. It is not difficult to see why a tripartite cosmology might have appealed to Tresham, obsessed as he was with the number three, instead of the Aristotelian cosmology of the four elements. One of the features of Christian Cabala, as Yates argued, was its claim to provide a complete philosophy that could replace Scholasticism.[103]

[100] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 24r: *iod, he, van, he. Nomen quadrilator[e]m* [sic. for *quadrilitterarum*?]*, id est Tetragrammaton (illud magnum nomen dei) attributum filio … ut filius procedit a patre, sic et nomen eius a patre producatur.*

[101] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 9r.

[102] Galatino, *Opus*, 169: *Hinc dixit R. Iohanan. Scriptum est Iob 25. Fecit pacem in sublimibus suis. Firmamentum enim est de aqua, & stellae de igne, non tamen dirumpunt se alterutrum.*

[103] Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 27. On the other hand, Tresham continued to use distinctively Scholastic terminology in his notes, for example BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 5v: 'SUM being the most appropriate name to God, implying *necessitas essendi*, *eternitas et immutabilitas*.'

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If Tresham's thoughts were heading in the direction of a threefold cosmos, then he was delving further into esoteric realms. The existence of three elements and three parts of the cosmos would suggest a correspondence with the threefold nature of God himself. As Antoine Faivre has argued, a belief in cosmic correspondences between higher and lower levels of being is one of the six fundamental characteristics of western esotericism.[104] Whether Tresham meant anything of this sort must remain speculation, but Tresham was certainly developing a competent working knowledge of the Cabala. In addition to his wordplay on Reuchlin's pentagrammaton, Tresham was mastering the cabalistic technique of *gematria*, in which Hebrew letters are assigned numerical values. In one passage he writes of a twelve-letter name of God that consists of the combination of the Hebrew names for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit:[105]

> The words *Tres unum sunt* ['Three are one'], being 3 in number, and every word consisting of 4 letters (in the whole 12) doth not all only in words manifest the Unity in Trinity, but also apteth with the number, *nomen dei duodecim literarum* ['The name of God of twelve letters'], wherein is particularised *Pater, Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus*. *Pater* in the Hebrew writing with 2 letters, *Filius* with other 2 *et Spiritus Sanctus* with 8 letters, so in all 12 letters.

The name of God of twelve letters is described by both Reuchlin and Galatino. It seems most likely, however, that Tresham drew his description from Galatino's text,[106] since Tresham's reference to *dii* ('gods') is an allusion to the debate about whether the Hebrew word *elohim* should be translated literally as 'gods' or as 'God'. This is discussed at length by Galatino in his *Opus*, and referenced explicitly in Tresham's notes.[107] Tresham assigns numerical values to the names of the persons of the Trinity:[108]

> ... 46 *Pater*; 316 *Filius et* 86 *Spiritus Sanctus*, all this ending in 6, wherefore I rather made choosing of 86 for *Spiritus Sanctus* than of 7 or of 50 being appropriate to the Holy Ghost. *Elohim*: plural number, yet (*dii*) yet I yield with the verb in the singular number ... *el* (*deus clementissimus* ['most merciful God']), the singular number.[109]

However, although Galatino assigned numerical values to Hebrew letters, the gematrial values of words given by Tresham are his own calculations, since they appear nowhere in Galatino's work.[110]

[104] Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10.
[105] BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 6v.
[106] Galatino, *Opus*, 136.
[107] Galatino, *Opus*, 70–4; BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 31r.
[108] For Tresham's notes on *gematria* from Galatino see BL MS Add. 39831, fol. 31v.
[109] BL Add. MS 39831, fol. 9r.
[110] Galatino, *Opus*, 483.

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Tresham's plans, assuming they were indeed executed, must have produced a remarkably dense symbolic scheme. As Kilroy has remarked, 'The detailed intricacy of this [scheme] would hardly be believed if it were not for the autograph evidence of the manuscript'.[111] No obvious traces of the painting that Tresham commissioned at Ely survive, although his description is so precise that the window he decorated can be identified with certainty. In 2013 The King's School, Ely, which acquired the lease of the Bishop's Palace in 2010, commissioned Hirst Conservation to investigate the area around the window. The conservator, Paul D'Armada, made fifteen investigative holes in the plaster around the window on 30 and 31 October 2013. The fabric of the building was found to be much altered, although the conservator did discover traces of a bitumen-like substance on one area of stonework dating back to the sixteenth century.[112] One possible interpretation of this residue, although by no means the only one, is that cloth or canvas on which Tresham's decorations were drawn were stuck onto the stonework. Richard L. Williams has plausibly theorised that the decorations were done on cloth, given Tresham's allusions to 'cloths' in his manuscript.[113]

Although Tresham's Ely designs no longer survive, they undoubtedly fed into the design of the garden and banqueting house at Lyveden, which he began in the same year as the work at Ely (1597). Eburne's discovery that Lyveden New Bield sits in what might be called a 'cabalistic landscape', based on the numerical value of the pentagrammaton, reveals that Tresham's numerological ideas were becoming more sophisticated with each attempt he made to put them into practice. However, no notes as detailed as those for the Ely paintings survive for Tresham's design of other projects such as Rushton and Lyveden, and while some illuminating notes on the construction of these buildings survive,[114] their interior meaning must be inferred. Tresham's likely deployment of cabalistic numerology at Lyveden, for example, can only be inferred via physical measurement.

Conclusion

Pre-Reformation English humanists such as John Colet and John Fisher displayed some degree of interest in the Christian Cabala from

[111] Kilroy, 'Sir Thomas Tresham', 154.
[112] Young, 'The Bishop's Palace at Ely', 210.
[113] Richard L. Williams, 'Forbidden Sacred Spaces in Reformation England', in A. Spicer and S. Hamilton, eds. *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 95–114, at 108.
[114] See BL MS Add. 39828, fol. 291r on Lyveden's Doric frieze and BL MS Add. 39829, fols 47v and 48v on the construction of the Triangular Lodge.

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the 1520s, an interest taken up in the late sixteenth century by Robert Persons and Sir Thomas Tresham, in spite of a climate of hostility to Christian cabalism within Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Tresham became interested in the Cabala between the building of his Triangular Lodge in 1593 and the building of Lyveden New Bield in 1597, incorporating cabalistic material into the garden design at Lyveden and his detailed designs for paintings in the long gallery of the Bishop's Palace at Ely. Tresham's knowledge of cabalism has hitherto passed largely unnoticed by Tresham scholars, and the realisation that Tresham was drawing on this source towards the end of his life adds an additional tool for the interpretation of his sometimes enigmatic numerology.

Tresham's Catholic cabalistic architecture represented a survival of pre-Reformation humanistic learning into a recusant context, as well as a foray by an English Catholic into esoteric ideas. More than anything, it reveals Tresham as an adventurous and independent thinker who was unconstrained by the prevailing prejudice against anything of Jewish origin in sixteenth-century Catholicism. Tresham was not the last English Catholic Hebraist. In the seventeenth century Thomas Fairfax and Edward Slaughter continued the tradition of Hebrew studies.[115] However, the proscription of William Alabaster's controversial cabalistic work *Apparatus in revelationem Jesu Christi* ('Preparation against the revelation of Jesus Christ', 1607) by the Congregation of the Index in 1610 tarnished the reputation of cabalistic mysticism within the English Catholic community, especially when Alabaster reverted to Protestantism soon afterwards.[116] Rome's rejection of Alabaster's cabalistic mysticism was one manifestation of a growing suspicion of mysticism in the seventeenth century that crossed confessional boundaries. Anti-mystical polemicists such as Isaac Casaubon rejected the Renaissance humanist notion that mystical traditions like the Cabala encoded secret wisdom, portraying them instead as pagan fantasies that polluted the Christian faith.[117] This argument was linked to continuing agendas of religious reform but also emerged from a rejection of magical tendencies in the study of the natural world and a belief that mystical 'enthusiasm' represented a mental disorder.[118]

The interest shown by Persons and Tresham in the Christian Cabala conspicuously subverts Yates's view of the Jesuits as opponents of

[115] Geoffrey Holt, 'Two Seventeenth Century Hebrew Scholars: Thomas Fairfax and Edward Slaughter', *RH* 22 (1995): 482–500.
[116] William Alabaster, *Apparatus in revelationem Jesu Christi* (Antwerp: Arnold Conincx, 1607); Robert V. Caro, 'William Alabaster: Rhetor, Mediator, Devotional Poet', *RH* 19 (1988): 62–79, 155–70.
[117] Temple, *Mysticism in Early Modern England*, 78–9.
[118] Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven, NY: Yale University Press, 2020), 8.

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esoteric traditions, insofar as Persons was himself a Jesuit and Tresham was a layman who came under heavy Jesuit influence. Persons's and Tresham's interest in the Cabala challenges stereotyped views of English Catholics as embattled cultural conservatives, and shows that they were just as capable of experimenting with 'dangerous' mystical ideas as the 'Protestant' cabalist John Dee. At least some English Catholics were open to Renaissance learning such as the Christian Cabala, rather than expending all of their energy on political resistance to Elizabeth's regime.

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