

# *An Alchemical Nexus in Seventeenth-Century Norwich*

*By Chris Wood*

The seventeenth century saw incredible changes across Europe. In England, religious tensions and the gap between King and Parliament combined to send the country into the chaos of the Civil Wars. At the same time, the Empire was beginning and globalisation taking off, accompanied by scientific advances and a growing questioning of traditional religion. Rosicrucians sought an esoteric enlightenment; Quakers, Levellers and Ranters sought a new, democratised Protestantism; and Deists sought to relegate God to the background.

It was a century when dies were cast, distinctions made, and attitudes changed. The Ouroboros shed its skin: alchemy became chemistry and natural philosophy became reductionist science; the shed skins were beautiful, though lifeless representations of the wonders of Nature. But the change was not clear until later. One place where key actors in the drama came together was England's second city, Norwich.

## *The Dee Legacy*

Arthur Dee, born in 1579, was the eldest son of Dr. John Dee, the celebrated Elizabethan astrologer, occultist, mathematician, and advocate of Empire. Arthur was in Germany, Poland and Bohemia with his father and his dubious collaborator in angelic workings, Edward Kelley, and was trained in the work of scrying.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of Arthur's adult life has gradually been assembled over the years, and he certainly pursued an active and practical interest in alchemy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wooley, Benjamin (2001) *The Queen's Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr Dee*, HarperCollins.

<sup>2</sup> Appleby, John H. (1977) Arthur Dee and Johannes Bánfi Hunyades: Further Information on their Alchemical and Professional Activities, *Ambix* 24(2), pp. 96-109; \_ (1979) Some of Arthur Dee's

Arthur Dee was well-connected and, despite some apparent irregularities in his medical accreditation,<sup>3</sup> became physician to Queen Anne by 1615. King James recommended him to agents of Tsar Mikhail Romanov of Russia, who were in London seeking a physician for their employer.<sup>4</sup> He took up this position in 1621, aged 42. He received considerable largess at the Russian court and lived in Moscow for fourteen years, with plenty of time to pursue his Hermetic interests.

Whilst in Moscow, Arthur Dee wrote, in Latin, *Fasciculus Chemicus*, a treatise on the production of the Philosopher's Stone (i.e. the substance capable of being 'projected' onto base metal to turn it into gold), which was published in Paris in 1631. It was later translated into English by Elias Ashmole, using the near-anagrammatic pseudonym of James Hasolle (1650).<sup>5</sup> Dee was not enthusiastic about it being translated into English, as he could not see how its availability to the "vulgar" who could not read Latin would be of any value, when many of those who could derided alchemy.<sup>6</sup> He expanded this work in his unpublished *Arca Arcanorum* in 1634.<sup>7</sup>

Dee's wife, Isabella died in 1634 and he sought to be released from his position and return to England. This transpired the following year and, with the Tsar's recommendation, Dee took up the position of 'physician extraordinary' to King Charles I in November 1635.<sup>8</sup>

In 1640, Arthur Dee gave a crystal that had been used by his father (received allegedly from the Angel Uriel) and Edward Kelley to Nicholas Culpeper, in return for the latter curing Arthur of a liver complaint. Culpeper used the crystal's curative properties, but put it aside as it promoted lethargy and had the tendency to manifest a lewd demon. It was bought from Culpeper's widow by

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Associations Before Visiting Russia Clarified, Including Two Letters from Sir Theodore Mayerne, *Ambix* 26(1), pp. 1-15; \_ (2004) Dee, Arthur, in Matthew, H.C.G., & Harrison, Brian (eds.) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* Vol. 15, OUP, pp. 664-5. Rady, Martyn (1994) A Transylvanian Alchemist in Seventeenth-Century London, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 72(1), pp. 140-151.

<sup>3</sup> He had letters patent from the University of Basel but appears not to have followed the normal route to get those recognised in England. See Appleby (2004) in note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Figurowski, N.A. (1965) The Alchemist and Physician Arthur Dee, *Ambix* 13(1), pp. 35-51.

<sup>5</sup> Hasolle, James (i.e. Elias Ashmole) (trans.) (1650) *Fasciculus Chemicus: or Chymical Collections*, Richard Mynne. Abraham, Lyndy (ed.) (1997) *Arthur Dee: Fasciculus Chemicus, Translated by Elias Ashmole*, Garland.

<sup>6</sup> Josten, C. H. (ed.) (1967) *Elias Ashmole: His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work*, Volume II, OUP, p. 505. [Letters also available at <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.]

<sup>7</sup> Now in the British Library (Sloane MS 1876). Appleby (2004) in note 2.

<sup>8</sup> Appleby (1979; 2004) in note 2.

William Lilly, who experimented with it in the company of Elias Ashmole. The Wellcome Trust bought it in 1933 and it is now in London's Science Museum.<sup>9</sup>

At some point in the 1640s, Dee 'retired' to Norwich to practise medicine in less exalted company and continue his alchemical pursuits.<sup>10</sup> It appears that John Dee had made at least two visits to Norfolk and corresponded with people in the county, so that Arthur may well have had connections with people interested in Hermeticism and alchemy in Norwich before his move.<sup>11</sup>

He died in September 1651, aged 72, and was buried at St. George Tombland, the parish in which he lived alongside certain other influential people.

### *The Thomas Browne Affair*

In 1637, another doctor had moved to Norwich, also taking up residence in the Parish of St. George, Tombland. This man was Thomas Browne (1605-1682), who had trained in Oxford, Montpellier, Padua and Leiden. He moved to Norwich straight after his doctor's credentials (being from another country) were approved. He lived on or adjacent to Tombland, possibly lodging initially with family members.<sup>12</sup> Certainly he was near-neighbour at

*Sir Thomas Browne,  
engraved by Robert White  
(Wellcome Collection CC BY)*



<sup>9</sup> Appleby (1977) in note 2.

<sup>10</sup> Exactly how much later is unclear. Appleby (2004; see note 2) says the move occurred around 1646 (and definitely after 1641). In 1659, Thomas Browne stated in a letter to Elias Ashmole, that Dee had "lived many years and died in Norwich" (Josten (1967), Volume II, pp. 754-6; see note 6).

<sup>11</sup> Rye, Walter (1926) Dr. John Dee and his connection with Norfolk, *Some Historical Essays Chiefly Related to Norfolk* Part III, pp. 199-204.

<sup>12</sup> Barbour, Reid (2013) *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life*, OUP. Reynolds, Matthew (2005) *Godly Reformers and their Opponents in Early Modern England: Religion in Norwich c. 1560-1643*, Boydell, pp. 207-8. Rye, Walter (1906) What brought Sir Thomas Browne to Norwich? *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany* (Seconds Series) Part 1, pp. 83-5. \_ (1928) Sir Thomas Browne, his Descent and Arms, and his possible

least to Alderman William Browne, who had a brother Edward, both drapers, and he had uncles by those names about whom little is known (although they would have been born in Cheshire, as was his father).<sup>13</sup> Browne is also, however, a name with a pedigree in Norwich, going back to the influential Le Brun family of the thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

By 1650, he was living with his wife, Dorothy, and their family in a large house on the Haymarket,<sup>15</sup> in the Parish of St. Peter Mancroft, the church in which he is buried. Browne was knighted by chance during King Charles II's visit to Norwich in 1671; the Mayor declined the honour and Browne was proposed instead.

Browne's father (also Thomas) had initially apprenticed him as a mercer and he is likely to have attended one of the mercers' grammar schools in London. John Dee had connections to the Mercers' Company, to which he donated copies of his books.<sup>16</sup> An interest in John Dee may have been instilled early in Browne, and in any case he was clearly curious about alchemy and the Hermetic arts, so that, whatever Browne's reasons for moving to Norwich, making the acquaintance of Dee's son when such close neighbours comes as no surprise. It seems they became good friends and, when Arthur Dee died in 1651, he left his alchemical papers to Browne.

Browne certainly became a key agent in the dissemination of alchemical knowledge in Norfolk and further afield. He was in correspondence about the Dees with Elias Ashmole, who sought the papers Browne had been bequeathed,<sup>17</sup> and Browne discussed alchemy and shared manuscripts with a patient of his, Robert Paston, of Oxnead Hall near Aylsham.<sup>18</sup>

But what was the nature of Thomas Browne's alchemical interest?

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family connection with the family of Dr. Dee, the mystic, *Some Historical Essays Chiefly Related to Norfolk* Part VI, H.W. Hunt, pp. 449-54.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Charles (1904) *The Pedigree of Sir Thomas Browne*, *Norfolk Archaeology* XV, pp. 109-13.

<sup>14</sup> Stone, Nick (2017) *The early site: The Chapel and College of St. Mary in the Fields*, <https://assemblyhousetrust.org.uk/the-early-site/>.

<sup>15</sup> Opposite the site of this house is a statue by Henry Pegram, erected in 1905, accompanied since 2005 by a set of artworks by Anne and Patrick Poirier. These include an eye, looking towards the place his house once stood, and a brain, all arranged in a *quincunx*, the pattern of five.

<sup>16</sup> Barbour (2013) in note 11.

<sup>17</sup> Josten, C. H. (ed.) (1967) *Elias Ashmole: His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work*, 5 volumes, OUP. [Letters also available at <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>]

<sup>18</sup> See below. Bucklow, Spike (2018) *The Anatomy of Riches: Sir Robert Paston's Treasure*, Reaktion. Gwynn, Lucy (2016) *The Library of Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682)*, PhD thesis at Queen Mary University London; available from: <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/>.

Modern writers on Browne tend to fall into two generalised camps: those for whom he was a proto-scientist and who dismiss the ‘mystical’ side of his life,<sup>19</sup> and those for whom the Hermetic matters the most.<sup>20</sup> Actually, he stood in the middle.

He espoused a “dual reality”, allowing religion and natural philosophy their respective domains of truth, set out in his first published work, *Religio Medici* (‘The Religion of a Doctor’), a “religio-scientific romanticism” with the “creative unity which it imposes on apparently irreconcilable modes of thought”.<sup>21</sup> Browne was a true Renaissance philosopher, before the division of reductionist science from broader natural philosophy, and before chemistry was refined from alchemy.

*Religio Medici* was published officially in 1643, spurred by the unauthorised publication of a privately circulated version. It was not meant for public consumption originally, but it set the scene for Browne’s later writings.

Following *Religio Medici*, his most well-known work is probably *Pseudoxia Epidemica, Or, Enquiries into very many received tenets and commonly presumed truths*, commonly known as ‘*Vulgar Errors*’, published in 1646. In this, Browne sought to shine the light of reason on many popular beliefs and superstitions, from the idea that badgers had the legs on one side of their bodies shorter than those on the other, the better to run along hillsides or ploughed furrows, to the prejudice that Jews had a distinctive smell. Browne was religiously tolerant and was in any case able to disprove the latter by reason! A lesser-known work is *Musaeum Clausum*, a catalogue of books, pictures, antiquities and other rarities that were either lost or impossible, from “A large Ostridges Egg, whereon is neatly and fully wrought that famous Battel of Alcazar, in which three Kings lost their lives” to “*Josephus* in Hebrew, written by himself”, although some were things not then existing, but which might be useful, such as a submarine herbal. This tract was only published in 1684, after Browne’s death. His last work, *Christian Morals*, was also published posthumously, indeed not until 1716, and is perhaps a later-life, philosophical postscript to *Religio Medici*.

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. Aldersley-Williams, Hugh (2015) *The Adventures of Sir Thomas Browne in the 21st Century*, Granta.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Faulkner, Kevin (2002) Scintillae marginila: Sparkling margins - Alchemical and Hermetic thought in the literary works of Sir Thomas Browne, paper at ‘The Rising Dawn!: The contribution of alchemy to Medieval Medicine and Intellectual Life’, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine & University of East Anglia 21-22 March 2002. Available at: [http://www.levity.com/alchemy/sir\\_thomas\\_browne.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/sir_thomas_browne.html) .

<sup>21</sup> Green, Peter (1959) *Sir Thomas Browne*, Longmans, Green (p. 11).

Browne's interests were broad, from antiquities to natural history (especially botany), medicine to cosmology. He conducted many experiments to prove or disprove ideas that were then current, or indeed to investigate things further. Not all of them would have met with modern standards of health and safety, nor indeed animal welfare, and he was as interested in what animals tasted like as in other aspects of their nature!<sup>22</sup> Whether any of these experiments were clearly alchemical is unclear, but his interest in alchemy as part of natural philosophy is certain from his library and his correspondence with the likes of Elias Ashmole and Robert Paston<sup>23</sup>, and there is telling posthumous evidence.

The plate on Browne's coffin bears an inscription which concludes: "*hoc loculo indormiens, corporis spagyrici pulvere plumbum in aurum convertit.*" This translates as: "Sleeping in this coffin, by the dust of his alchemic body, he converts the lead into gold".<sup>24</sup>

## *Witchcraft*

There is however one event in Browne's life that is difficult for both camps: his appearance in 1662 as an expert witness in the trial in Bury St. Edmunds of two women from Lowestoft accused of witchcraft.<sup>25</sup> The reductionists can't believe he believes in witches at all and those of a magical persuasion find it an act of betrayal. It was a seminal case as well: quite late (well after Matthew Hopkins' depredations) and influential, being taken as precedent in the famous trial in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692-3.

Browne seemed disinterested in the human impact of his words. Whilst he testified as a doctor that the reported symptoms of the allegedly bewitched could be explained by natural causes, he also said that it would be typical of the Devil to make evil look like natural causes. He went on, gratuitously it appears, to relate a case from Denmark that had similarities. The defendants were convicted and hung.

As Geis and Bunn<sup>26</sup> conclude, "Browne was a pedant" who avoided controversy. Most of the "vulgar errors" he exploded were not of great import. He kept his head down on controversial matters, like King and Parliament, and would not challenge anything that was considered part and parcel of Anglican

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<sup>22</sup> Aldersley-Williams (2015) in note 19.

<sup>23</sup> Josten, C. H. (ed.) (1967) in note 17. Bucklow (2018) in note 18.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, Charles (1905) *Souvenir of Sir Thomas Browne*, Jarrold.

<sup>25</sup> Barbour (2013) in note 12. Aldersley-Williams (2015) in note 19. Geis, Gilbert, & Bunn, Ivan (1997) *A Trial of Witches: A Seventeenth-century Witchcraft Prosecution*, Routledge.

<sup>26</sup> See note 25.

faith, like the existence of malevolent witches, whilst going to obsessive lengths to prove or disprove inconsequential things. On one level, this is hardly surprising. Browne saw how families were torn apart by the English Civil Wars and he had studied in Padua just 32 years after the judicial torture and murder of Giordano Bruno (whose name, Browne may perhaps have felt, brought things uncomfortably close to home). But then he was himself party to the judicial murder of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender...

## *Quincunx*

Perhaps the most interesting of Browne's writings are two published together in 1658, but not generally seen as connected until the 1950s. That they are a pair is clear from analysis of structure and hints of each in the other, and their complementarity in a philosophical, spiritual, and indeed alchemical sense.<sup>27</sup>

*Hydriotaphia, Urne Buriall* takes its stimulus from the discovery of a number of cremation urns near Great Walsingham. Browne takes these to be probably Roman (they are now thought to have been Anglo-Saxon<sup>28</sup>), but this is not important as they are the start of a meditation on death and return to the womb of the Earth. On the face of it, the essay is a *memento mori*, but having gone down into the Earth reduced to ashes, the subject matter springs into new life and order in *The Garden of Cyrus*, the dissolution and then reintegration of the life force in a new pattern.<sup>29</sup> The starting point for this second work is the supposed ancient ideal pattern for planting trees in orchards so that they receive the most light. This pattern is the '*Quincunx*' – a pattern of five. In a seemingly confused stream of consciousness, Browne expounds on the wondrous order of nature, specifically a fivefold order. However, he alternates between the pattern of five dots on a die, preferably as a lozenge or rhombus (although he also talks about pyramids seen in plan, requiring a regular pattern), and five-fold patterns in general. He even talks about the significance of the *hexagonal* cells made by bees in a honeycomb, before at last mentioning that there are rhomboid parts too (these are the pyramidal ends to the cells – each side of the pyramids being a rhombus – that interlock with the next comb just as the cells interlock lengthwise within the comb<sup>30</sup>)! Yet the lozenge

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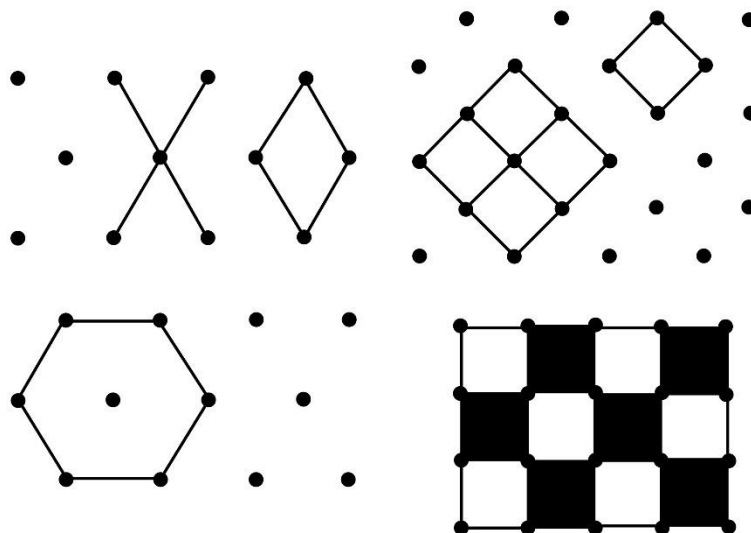
<sup>27</sup> Green, Peter (1959) *Sir Thomas Browne*, Longmans, Green. Huntley, Frank Livingstone (1956) *Sir Thomas Browne: The relationship of Urn Burial and The Garden of Cyrus*, *Studies in Philology* 53(2) pp. 204-19.

<sup>28</sup> NHER Number: 2030: [www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk).

<sup>29</sup> Green (1959) in note 27.

<sup>30</sup> Edwardes, Tickner (1908) *The Lore of the Honey-Bee*, Second Edition, Methuen, pp. 206-11.

pattern can just as easily be seen as one of hexagons (which therefore gives seven dots), and the regular pattern as a square net.

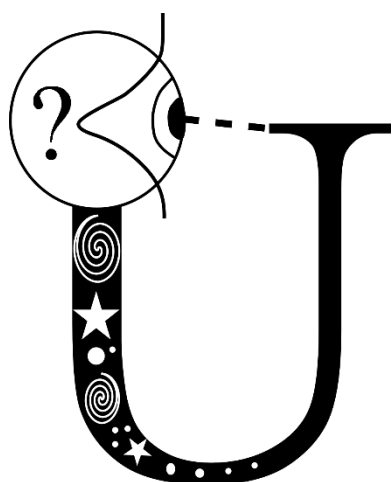


In fact there are hints that more is hidden here than is immediately obvious.

Huntley<sup>31</sup> emphasises the importance of the circle in Browne’s writings –

the circle of birth, life, death and resurrection, and circles within circles, microcosm and macrocosm, with humanity circling within the circle of the Universe, within the circle of God, who, according to the anonymous Hermetic conception, is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

We are very close here, of course, to the image of the Ouroboros, the serpent biting its own tail that symbolises the cycle of life and death and eternity. It is also the World Serpent, encircling and empowering the world, and the Universe becoming aware of itself.<sup>32</sup>



*The Participatory Universe*  
after John Archibald Wheeler



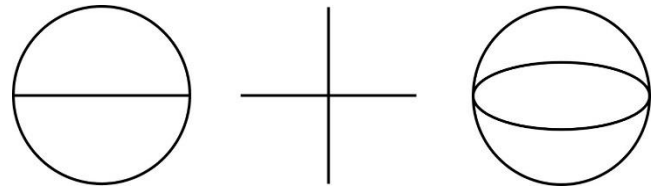
*Ouroboros with label “The All is One”*  
from *Cleopatra the Alchemist*, Chrysopoea  
of Cleopatra, 3<sup>rd</sup> century Egypt

<sup>31</sup> Huntley, Frank Livingstone (1953) Sir Thomas Browne and the metaphor of the circle, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14(3), pp. 353-64.

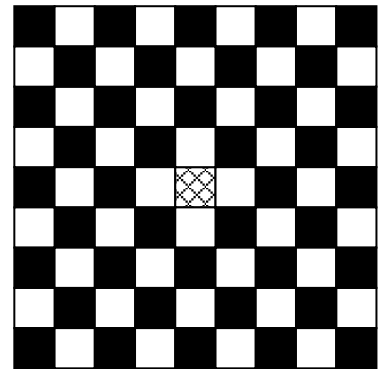
<sup>32</sup> Wood, Chris (2014) Curiosity, Original Sin, and the Reality Trap, *Quest* 177, pp. 31-33. John Archibald Wheeler (1980) Beyond the Black Hole, in Henry Woolf (ed.) *Some Strangeness in the Proportion: A Centennial Symposium to Celebrate the Achievements of Albert Einstein*, Addison-Wesley, pp. 341-75.



Huntley<sup>33</sup> goes on to examine Browne's references, in these essays, to circles, crosses and "right lines". The crossed circle is the Greek *theta* ( $\Theta$ ), symbol of death, but if conceived of as two circles interlocked at 90°, it is also a *Quincunx* cross, the intersection of the perfection of God (circle) and corporality and death (line).



Here too is the creative web, the result of forces interacting in nature or polarities in magic that create a new reality. Here is the game-board and the fishing net, the interference pattern and the collapse of the quantum wave-form. Random equilibrium (formlessness) is disturbed by a disequilibrium or asymmetry and the result is a pattern, a form. Disturb that form again and, after a period of chaos, a new pattern emerges.<sup>34</sup> The point is that this works not only on physical and chemical levels, but also on societal, intellectual and spiritual ones. And magical: we pull at the threads in the Web of Wyrd, so creating asymmetries, and new patterns form.



It is also imperative to keep disturbing the equilibrium, otherwise the pattern we have formed becomes our reality, such that we are trapped. We need structure to build, but we must never lose sight of the gaps in the net: the holes, the portals to the abyss of formlessness, that hold out the promise of evolution, of breaking down the structure to create something new. In magic, in alchemy, the holes are more important than the net. That this is also lurking behind the trees that seem to obscure the orchard in *The Garden of Cyrus* is perhaps indicated by its discussion of nets and reticulations, which includes mention of Christ looking through a lattice.

Spike Bucklow applies the spirit of the *Quincunx* to an enigmatic still-life, known today as *The Paston Treasure*, painted under the auspices of Sir Robert Paston in about 1664.<sup>35</sup> It hangs in Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, where it has recently been the focus of a major international exhibition, bringing together many of the objects featured in the painting and telling the stories of the people with whom they were associated and the decline in the Pastons' wealth and status.

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<sup>33</sup> Huntley (1956) in note 27.

<sup>34</sup> Ball, Philip (1998) *The Self-made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature*, OUP. Close, Frank (2000) *Lucifer's Legacy: The Meaning of Asymmetry*, OUP.

<sup>35</sup> Bucklow, Spike (2018) *The Anatomy of Riches: Sir Robert Paston's Treasure*, Reaktion.

At once a way of showing off the family's collection of *exotica* and a symbol of the futility of possessions, it is also a *memento mori*, and an enigma. The name of the artist is not known, although clearly of the Dutch school, and there are mysteries, not least why a silver dish should have been painted over and replaced by an unknown woman, who was in turn replaced by a lozenge-shaped clock, which looks for all the world like a funerary hatchment.

Amongst the fascinating symbols and meanings in this painting is a particular oddity. The treasured objects are set out to display them all clearly, with minimal overlapping, rather than in a 'natural' placing, but they are touching, and also reflect each other's colours. Just as with *The Garden of Cyrus*, order arises out of chaos. Moreover, this arrangement, Bucklow realises, is like the mutual reflections that would be evident were the nodes in Browne's *Quincunx* imagined as dew-drops on a spider's web or pearls on Indra's web. It is the spaces in between that allow us to see the treasures, the darkness that allows us to see the stars.<sup>36</sup>

Sir Robert Paston (1631-83) was a patient and friend of Sir Thomas Browne,<sup>37</sup> and an alchemist. He may have wanted to create gold, but his interest appears to have been philosophical as well.

He was also an Original Fellow of the Royal Society, along with such men as Elias Ashmole, John Aubrey and John Evelyn, although he was expelled in 1682, as the society distanced itself from its origins.

As Bucklow puts it: "the Norwich science of Arthur Dee, Thomas Browne and Robert Paston was quietly sidelined by the London science of the Royal Society".<sup>38</sup>

This Norwich triptych was a late flowering of a way of thinking that was being superseded – but which left its seeds in literature, art and the very fabric of a city.



**Robert Paston, 1st Earl of Yarmouth (1631-1683), engraved by Burnet Reading, late 18th or early 19th century, after a painting by an unknown artist (c. 1670)**

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, chapter seven.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Paston outlived Thomas Browne by less than five months.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 226.

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