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Nathaniel Torporley and his Diclides Coelometricae (1602)—A Preliminary Investigation

Torporley is perhaps one of the more interesting and enigmatic mathematical figures of 15th and 16th century England. Attracting the patronage of Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, Torporley served as personal secretary to François Viète, and was a mathematical colleague and trusted friend of Thomas Harriot. He was chosen by Harriot to prepare his manuscripts for posthumous publication.

Yet he was also a figure of controversy. Delambre in his *Astronomie Moderne* (1821) refers to the tables presented in *Diclides* as “the most obscure and incommensurable that ever were made”. Two decades later Augustus De Morgan in *The Penny Cyclopaedia* (1838) and again in a note to the *Philosophical Magazine and Journal* (1843) both praises and condemns *Diclides*, giving the work credit for discovering the essence of Napier’s Rules twelve years before Napier, while at the same time describing it as “the greatest burlesque on mnemonics we ever saw”.

The language, forms of expression and the Latin usage are indeed close to impenetrable. Even the title of the work is obscure and the mathematics filled with everything from rebuses to verse. De Morgan abandoned his attempt to explain this work with the comment that “those who like such questions may find out the meanings of the other parts of the tables”. I will describe the nature of this enigmatic work and share such progress in deciphering and decoding the *Diclides* as I have made at this time.