

20230616 – Dissecting “Who are you, Diophantus?”; a collage by Mark Sanders – after a poem by Sarah Glaz.

### **Who are you, Diophantus?**

*I searched for you along the crowded streets of  
Alexandria. From the Sun Gate to the Moon Gate,*

These lines reference the Canopus Way, later Alexandria’s Fouad Street; the world’s oldest planned street that’s still inhabited today. Planned around 331BCE by Greek architect Dinocrates of Rhodes ; later relating to Alexander’s supposed reincarnation from the Egyptian sun god, Horus; the street spans the city from the east by the Sun Gate, stretching to the Moon Gate in the west. The image of the street, to the right of the collage, is of Fouad Street, positioned to commence at the port of Alexandria, featured in the map segment in the centre of the picture. At the bottom right corner of the collage, at the “end” of Fouad Street, is an image of a Tarot card: The Moon; representative, of course, of the Moon Gate. Additionally, The Moon card is said to signify the life of the Imagination apart from the spirit... “The Moon’s light can bring clarity and understanding and, should you allow, your intuition to guide you through the darkness”. Diophantus could be said to have been working in that “time of darkness” in terms of available knowledge, allowing his own intuition to guide him. The figure to the top left is William Blake’s “The Sun At His Eastern Gate”. Its inclusion is explicit.

*from lake Mariotis to the sea — I could not find  
you anywhere. Who dropped you in the roiling  
cauldron of Alexandria’s decline,*

Another explicit image which relates to more than one line in the poem, The rocks and sea with lava flow and flames towards the top right.

*obliterating all  
traces of your life? What alien civilization beamed  
you to earth bearing the gift of algebraic symbols,*

Diophantus has been called “The Father of Algebra”. The equation figuring in the middle of the collage is derived from a verse puzzle epitaph written by Metrodorus, likely in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, which calculates Diophantus’s age: “This tomb holds Diophantus. Ah, how great a marvel! the tomb tells scientifically the measure of his life. God granted him to be a boy for the sixth part of his life, and adding a twelfth part to this, he clothed his cheeks with down; He lit him the light of wedlock after a seventh part, and five years after his marriage He granted him a son. Alas! late-born wretched child; after attaining the measure of half his father's life, chill Fate took him. After consoling his grief by this science of numbers for four years he ended his life.”

*and lifted you back home without leaving a mark?  
Not even in my dreams, can I see clearly the hand*

The backdrop, top and bottom, is a fragmented image of a hand; recognizable, but distorted from some distant time.

*that wrote the 13 books of Arithmetica.*

The cover image from the 1621 edition of Arithmetica is being held aloft by the Sun figure.

*6 books  
survived: 189 problems, forged in time's fire,  
translated, retranslated, commented on. A molten  
sea*

The rocks, sea, lava image again.

*from which the siren song of number theory  
urges the initiated, in every generation, to dive in:*

*Book II.8: To divide a given square  
number into two squares....*

*Reflections from the depth offer the brightest  
lights, ideas never seen before. Resurface, if you  
can, stepping into the future, holding them high.*

Again, Blake's Sun figure holding Diophantus's "Arithmetica" aloft.

A number of references are made in this poem to the lack of information regarding the life and background of Diophantus; indeed, the title itself, "Who are you, Diophantus?" The image, bottom left sees Diophantus cast as the Lone Ranger, whose masked anonymity gave rise to the phrase "Who was that masked man?!", so little was known about his identity. Additionally, here, he bears the wings of the Sumatran Swallowtail butterfly – *Papilio Diophantus*.