

## KABBALISM IN J. ROMBERCH'S *CONGESTORIUM* AND ITS CONTEXT: AN APPROACH\*

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### ABSTRACT

In the Renaissance, a great evolution took place in many disciplines related to very diverse fields of knowledge. Among them were the arts of memory and Christian Hebraism, whose development went hand in hand with Christian Kabbalism and other speculative sciences. Both disciplines had long previous traditions and some previous contact, starting with Raimundus Lullus, but it is from the first years of the 16th century that mnemonics and Kabbalistic studies appear to converge on certain authors. This may be the case of Johannes Romberch, author of the *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae* (1520), who makes very particular mention of Kabbalah in this well-known treatise. This paper aims to be an approach to the points of contact established in the *Congestorium* to later develop a comparative study.

**Keywords:** Kabbalism; *Congestorium*; memory; Reuchlin; Romberch

### 1. Introduction

When Romberch (*ca.* 1485–1533), a German Dominican friar,<sup>1</sup> wrote his *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae*, he decided to include Kabbalah in it for several reasons, one of which is announced in an introductory epistle addressed to Johannes Grevembroch, to whom the work was dedicated: Romberch was writing *ad instar notariorum*.<sup>2</sup> This means that Romberch faced the difficulty for including the main sources he was able to find to build his own work in a way that even the most unorthodox texts fit in his historical context: that of a Dominican friar in Cologne, educated among scholastic theologians

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\* This research has been made possible by support from the Ministerio Español de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades and from the European Regional Development Fund. Research Project FFI2017-82101-P: “Texts and images from memory II: Rhetoric and Memory arts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries”.

<sup>1</sup> For some biographical notes on Romberch, see section 4.

<sup>2</sup> Romberch (1520: 6r). There are two editions of the *Congestorium* (1520 and 1533); we cite the first one, published in Venice by Georgius de Rusconibus, given that there are not significant differences between them.

and about to fall under the Inquisitor's influence. From this specific point of view,<sup>3</sup> we will take the first steps to understand the scope of Romberch's compositional method in the *Congestorium* and whether that was the reason he included doctrines outside the scholastic canon.

We will analyse Kabbalah from Romberch's point of view and investigate why he preserved mentions of it even if he had an opportunity to omit them, inasmuch as he wrote his work in 1513 but it remained unpublished until 1520. In order to have a wide view of the *Congestorium* and its author, we will deeply review historical context, considering both Kabbalah's treatment by Dominican friars and *Congestorium's* compositional stage.

The whole work is conceived from a Dominican perspective. This is why the multi-form disciplines of Kabbalah and alchemy are taken as a unit and understood as a Neoplatonic phenomenon (as would be labelled in the modern-day scholarly discussion) – as they were also treated by Italian Renaissance authors. It is in these terms that Kabbalah and alchemy are mentioned in other Dominican texts from the same period, such as Hoogstraaten's *Erronee assertiones* (1517).<sup>4</sup> We think that this consideration may be the result of a lack of deep knowledge and of a conscious will to inflict some kind of *damnatio memoriae*, which may also be the cause for the rejection of Jewish tradition among ecclesiastics. That would explain why Romberch (and even the Inquisitor Hoogstraaten) refer to Kabbalah as a single phenomenon and appear to believe what Kabbalists claim about their doctrines, namely that they were revealed to Moses and transmitted orally, but never written down.

## 2. Kabbalism, Hebrew studies, and Reuchlin

Historical context is the main clue to understand the whole event, since *Congestorium's* writing process was completed in 1513,<sup>5</sup> just before one of the great social and religious persecutions of Jews during the Renaissance period. Thus, it is indispensable to locate Kabbalistic studies in the early years of the 16th century, focusing specially on the figure of the Christian Kabbalist Johannes Reuchlin and on his role in relation to the Dominicans – and chiefly to our treatise writer, Johannes Romberch, who participated in the Reuchlin affair as the Inquisitor's attorney.<sup>6</sup>

Kabbalah ('what is received' or, etymologically, 'tradition') is, following Alba Cecilia,<sup>7</sup> a mystical, theosophical and esoteric doctrine born in the heart of occidental medieval Judaism during the 12th century. It is mystical because it searches for a way to somehow meet God based on contemplation and illumination; it is theosophical for being inter-

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<sup>3</sup> About Jewish conditions and considerations in this period, see Nissan, Shemesh (2010), who explain some of the clichés related to Jewish people and thought from a Christian perspective.

<sup>4</sup> Hoogstraaten (1517). This pamphlet, whose prologue is signed by Romberch, is a defence of orthodox beliefs. In it, Hoogstraaten denied having attacked Reuchlin and Jewish doctrine, and he also identifies some mistakes in their faith.

<sup>5</sup> This is the date we find in the *conclusio operis*, but we suspect that some passages were modified after that moment as a result of Romberch's trip to Italy.

<sup>6</sup> On this series of judicial processes, see Merino Jerez (2021). The affair is briefly discussed also here below, see p. 135–136.

<sup>7</sup> Alba Cecilia (2005).

ested in divine nature; and it is esoteric because there is mysticism in it – its learning is restricted to a few people who meet certain requirements. As described previously, Kabbalah emerged in the north of modern Spain or in Provence at the end of the 12th century, and the spirit of the Kabbalah spread rapidly throughout Europe. Only a century later, the word *Kabbalah* began to be used in reference to the whole of Jewish knowledge, symbols, terms and worldview.<sup>8</sup> We will use the term in this later sense, as it is how other Dominicans in this period used it, proving that they do not mention a specific book, author or school of thought.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the 15th century, Jewish people had been expelled from Spain, and Italy became one of the most important centres of studies of Judaism.<sup>10</sup> In fact, a very well-known Italian Hebraist was Cardinal Domenico Grimani, who would also take part in the Reuchlin affair in 1514.<sup>11</sup> In any case, during the Renaissance, Kabbalah became, in a way, a fashion for some Christian scholars, especially in the Medici circle. From that moment on, we can properly speak of a Christian Kabbalah, which would later spread based on the studies of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), one of the most important rabbis of his time and often considered the father of modern Kabbalah.

Modern authors like Von Balthasar<sup>12</sup> have praised the Catholic engagement with Kabbalah during the Renaissance with figures such as Johannes Reuchlin<sup>13</sup> in Germany and Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola in Italy. Reuchlin, considered father of Christian Kabbalah,<sup>14</sup> claimed that this interest in the teaching of Jewish doctrine was pursued by humanists in such a way that everything could be arranged with Christian faith. Nevertheless, some Christian authors had already studied Jewish texts before, among whom the Dominican friars Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas are worth mentioning, both likely inspired by Maimonides.<sup>15</sup> Albert the Great was, in fact, known for having written a few works on Kabbalah, and its impact on some of his other works is evident. Although both masters wrote very authoritative studies among Dominicans, dedicating some lines to Reuchlin (1455–1522) will be worth it, because he was truly significant in this field as well as fundamental to understanding our study on the *Congestorium*, due to his role in that story.

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<sup>8</sup> Alba Cecilia (2005).

<sup>9</sup> The relationship between *ars memoriae* and Kabbalism has often been mentioned by modern authors like Rossi (1960), Yates (1966), Carruthers (1990) or even Lina Bolzoni in her studies on G. Camillo's theatre.

<sup>10</sup> Merino Jerez (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Romberch (1520: 3r) himself gives some clues on this aspect of Grimani's Hebraism, as he highlighted the Hebrew books in his library in an epistle dedicated to Grimani: *bibliothecam graiorum et hebreorum libris refertissimam, ut linguae latiae infinita illic recondita volumina subiticeamus (quae vel nusquam vel rariter alibi habentur), non immerito latinae, graecae et hebraicae linguarum tibi notissimarum argumentum existentium.*

<sup>12</sup> Von Balthasar (2011). He had already analysed these topics before (Von Balthasar 2001), but in a less complex way.

<sup>13</sup> About Reuchlin and his works, see Zika (1976), who studies his *De verbo mirifico*, Evans (1985) on his *Ars praedicandi* and Burianek (1989) about his *De arte cabbalistica*.

<sup>14</sup> As Claro (2009) shows, this interpretation of Kabbalah differs from the traditional one due to its eclecticism: Kabbalism, (Neo)Platonism, Pythagorism, Orfism and even alchemy.

<sup>15</sup> An example of this could be the interpretation of the ten ways to demonstrate God's existence explained by Thomas Aquinas.

Given that the Catholic reception of Kabbalah began in earnest with della Mirandola,<sup>16</sup> it is affirmed that practical Kabbalah was a welcome addition to improve other Christian interpretative systems. In any case, we must add here that re-interpretation is not exclusive to Kabbalah; in fact, it is characteristic of Jewish doctrine, as it is also present, for example, in *Midrashim*. Johannes Reuchlin, considered della Mirandola's heir, improved many resources for studying Hebrew grammar (see his *De rudimentis Hebraicis*, 1506). Reuchlin conducted some research into the available Kabbalistic texts and published two works that were for use by Christians: *De verbo mirifico* (1494) and *De arte cabbalistica* (1509). Moreover, he wrote a book on preaching, *Liber congestorum de arte praedicandi*,<sup>17</sup> for the Dominican order in 1502.<sup>18</sup> In both *De verbo* and in *De arte*, he defends Kabbalah as a tool for evangelization, not only picking up hermeneutic strategies from it, but also embracing its full significance.

According to López Muñoz (2000), Reuchlin appears to be more like a medieval than a Renaissance man because of his indefinite, mixed ideas and his reformist manners. For example, Reuchlin still considers memory as the greatest quality from a moral point of view, as we read in the *Congestorium*,<sup>19</sup> but in many other treatises as well, such as by Publicius, Albertus Carrara or Mateolus da Verona.<sup>20</sup> To sum up, Reuchlin's texts can be understood as a kind of transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance. In any event, Kabbalistic studies flourished among Christians at the end of the Middle Ages, when Hebrew began to be openly taught,<sup>21</sup> especially in the circles that would later form the nucleus of Italian Renaissance.

We must highlight that the kind of Kabbalism we are referring to is fundamentally based on that of Abraham Abulafia,<sup>22</sup> probably the closest to Romberch's conception of the system, at least as we see it. As Moshe Idel has explained, this Kabbalism is based on the combination, disposition and use of letters. It is quite possible that neither Romberch nor the Inquisitor (nor his group) had in-depth knowledge of any text on this topic. We think that they founded their accusations on reductionist stereotypes. Thus, Kabbalism would be simply a re-reading and a re-interpretation of the Scriptures. Inquisition sought

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<sup>16</sup> In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), he suggests that Kabbalistic books contained the mystery of Trinity and the Incarnation of the Word. This idea of Trinity is also found in Raimundus Lullus's texts.

<sup>17</sup> It is a very brief opusculum on preaching that reformulates the doctrine of that period's Church, affirming that preachers had to be ready to speak in public with a good memory, somewhat in the manner of ecclesiastic orators. Thus, anyone may become a good preacher by natural disposition, learning, imitation and practise, especially referring to memory. We will give great importance to this title, as it may have been an inspiration for the title of Romberch's work, since both share the use of that neologism formed from the Latin verb *congero* ('accumulate').

<sup>18</sup> That date is found in the colophon, but in the epistle that opens the treatise, we can read '1503'. There is also an independent edition published in 1508. We must say that this text was used by Dominicans in Cologne for studying until at least 1507.

<sup>19</sup> Concretely, it is explained in Romberch (1520: V–VI).

<sup>20</sup> These perspectives were studied by Carruthers (1990).

<sup>21</sup> In 1514, Pope Leo X, had just founded a chair of Hebrew at the University of Rome and was granting licenses for printing Hebrew books in Rome and Venice. Many grammars studying Hebrew were published at this time, not only Reuchlin's, but also Bibliander's (1535) and many others studied by Percival (1984).

<sup>22</sup> Moshe Idel has published numerous works in this field, especially mentioning Abulafia's interpretations. In fact, he explains how Abulafia founded the so-called 'Prophetic Kabbalah' and how he interpreted the tetragrammaton as a sign. See e.g. Idel (2005, 2010 and 2011).

to avoid these practices – rejecting any kind of wide readings, not only with Kabbalism, but also in other fields like paganism, alchemy or witchcraft.

Now, we reach the cornerstone of this study: by publishing his books, Johannes Reuchlin opposed the Dominicans of the University of Cologne, making many powerful enemies (such as the Inquisitor himself), and a few scholars had to rise to clean his name.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Reuchlin is cited as a source by Romberch, who openly objected the usage of Hebrew texts.

### 3. Kabbalah and *ars memoriae*

While Kabbalistic studies and commentaries were being developed among Hebrews at the beginning of 16th century, among preachers and secular people, *ars memorativa* became important enough to turn into an independent discipline. *Ars memorativa*<sup>24</sup> had been a fundamental part of some preaching treatises (for example, Reuchlin's). At that time, one of the variants of the system particularly flourished among Dominicans: *ars memorativa per locos et imagines*.<sup>25</sup> It is a set of mnemonic techniques based on the transformation of memories into images (*imagines*)<sup>26</sup> through different strategies and their subsequent orderly location in places (*loci*) arranged for it. The aim is that, when these mental spaces are mentally crossed by the user, the vision of those images will bring them back before the mind's eye.

Current studies of Kabbalah and memory began with Frances Yates,<sup>27</sup> who demonstrated the existent relationship between Neoplatonic philosophy and Kabbalistic ideas and its role in *ars memoriae*. These two disciplines have a certain hidden character in common: the art of memory generates a personal and non-transferable system that enables the creation of an internal language. In addition, treatises do not offer complete information, but are instead, in a way, cryptic, because teachers lived mainly on the payments of their students, so they sought to guarantee their books' sales, at least once they were published as independent books. The simplest way to guarantee book sales was precisely not to include many examples or detailed explanations of the application of the systems, resulting in works that could not (and even today cannot) be fully understood.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, the theologian Pietro Galatino (1460–1530) wrote an apology for Reuchlin and his Catholic usage of Kabbalah called *De arcanis Catholicae veritatis* (1516).

<sup>24</sup> Rhetorical art of memory in its variant *per locos et imagines* was widespread and well-known among Dominicans thanks to what Albert and Thomas had written on it and to its relation with preaching and rhetoric (Yates 1966). Rossi (1960) and Merino Jerez (2002) have demonstrated that this art of memory can be understood as a visual interpretative system quite close to linguistics.

<sup>25</sup> As Yates (1966) or Rossi (1960) have already proved, there were many systems that dealt with artificial memory. Here, we are studying only those that follow the path of ancient arts of memory, taken in a Ciceronian rhetorical sense.

<sup>26</sup> Although it may be widely discussed, we posit that the letters mentioned by treatise writers like Romberch, Publicius or Jacobus Ragone are images of the letters and not the letters themselves, so we can understand them as a kind of image.

<sup>27</sup> Yates (1966: 86). Furthermore, Nelson Novoa (2009) studied a purely Sephardic art of memory, following Yates. We also follow her considerations of Kabbalism regarding arts of memory, as she bases her theories in combinational systems.

There are several examples in the *Congestorium*, but the case of Publicius's quadrangle<sup>28</sup> is the most obvious, as it evinces many similarities to the Lullist<sup>29</sup> combinatorial system, which would definitely flourish on memory systems with Giordano Bruno.<sup>30</sup>

One of the meeting points between these two disciplines, always referring to Abulafia's method, is the recombination of letters, syllables or words to give rise to new meanings, interpretations, or creative possibilities. At this point, the main difference lies in the fact that, in Kabbalism, the attribution of new meanings is constant and offers interpretations for several meanings that can even coexist. On the other hand, for a user of mnemonics, images must have a clear meaning and be univocal, so it cannot be altered in the short term – that is, if the first attributed meaning is still functional. Thus, the main difference in this point is that, although these combinatorial systems are similar in their formulation, they have different purposes: ecstatic techniques in Kabbalism, a system of thought in Lullus's texts, a way to design images for memory in the *Congestorium*, and mnemonic purposes with a magical basis in Bruno's proposals. Thus, Romberch would be one more author in this stream of thought that unites the arts of memory and Neoplatonic Kabbalism.

Romberch recognises another similarity: the need for initiation.<sup>31</sup> This fact is closely related to Judaism, inasmuch as knowledge has been revealed only to a few initiates – or so claimed the Kabbalists.<sup>32</sup> Given that arts of memory are not fully written down (that is, a teacher must introduce a novice to the technique), both disciplines would have, in the eyes of the Inquisition, an initiatory character.

To summarize, the similarities between Abulafia's Kabbalah and art of memory reside in the fact that the interpretations or uses of the logical system are personal and non-transferable, but at the same time reinterpretable (with the exception mentioned above). Additionally, meditation is essential for the functioning of art<sup>33</sup> – a key element in many mysticisms, but one that, in the cases of Abulafia's Kabbalah and art of memory, is necessary to achieve one's objectives.

Finally, here we must also mention sefirot doctrine, which consists of approaching linguistics through letters by re-combination, which is exactly what must be done in Publicius's and Romberch's *artes memorativae*, using the wheels in the quadrangle as well as Romberch's simplified version. Thus, from this point of view, Kabbalism would be a kind of theosophy associated to a certain language conception, the same concep-

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<sup>28</sup> Romberch, in the thirteenth chapter of the third book of his *Congestorium*, attempts to reproduce and give an explanation on Publicius's quadrangle. It may not be the most accurate, but it is a good attempt, given that Romberch himself recognises that he has not been able to fully understand his predecessor's text (see Romberch 1520: 48r and the following). This can be also used as a proof of the obscurity of these works and the need for an oral explanation by their authors.

<sup>29</sup> Raimundus Lullus, who clearly influenced arts of memory, was related to Kabbalah, since Lullus' works and Kabbalism were born in the same period and in the same place, and both have quite similar logical systems (at least in these processes) as Claro (2009: 740) recognised.

<sup>30</sup> Both Yates (1966: chapters IX–XIV) and Bruno's modern edition of memory texts (Matteoli, Sturlese, Tirinnanzi 2004) offer wider explanations of this idea.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. below n. 42.

<sup>32</sup> As Claro (2009) states in a few passages of his work, rabbis often restrict Kabbalist studies to men over 40 years, but this was not always the case. We think that Romberch might be alluding to these men with the words *digniorum auribus*, as we will see, because that was the only limitation imposed in Kabbalism throughout the Late Middle Ages.

<sup>33</sup> On the medieval scholastic concept of *meditatio*, see Carruthers (1990).

tion that can be found in *memoria verborum*: that we must elaborate our own personal language raising different relationships between reality (signified) and its representation (signifier-*imago*) in the most precise way, fetching univocal connections.

#### 4. *Congestorium*: A case study

Johannes Host von Romberch<sup>34</sup> was born in the 1480s in Kierspe, near Cologne, where he entered a convent of the Dominican Order. Somehow, he fell into the orbit of influence of Inquisitor Jacob Hoogstraaten. Thus, he was sent on a six-year journey throughout Italy.<sup>35</sup> First, he went to Rome, where he took part in the Reuchlin affair as the Inquisitor's attorney. This judicial process is worth a brief pause, since it is one of the key points in our study: Reuchlin seems to have been a defender of what the Inquisition rejected.

In 1509, Johannes Reuchlin openly opposed the confiscation of Hebrew books, thereby earning the enmity of several important figures, such as the Inquisitor himself or Arnold von Tongeren, Romberch's master. That same year, Reuchlin published his *De arte cabbalistica* and in 1511, his *Speculum oculare*, which would be the target of continuous attacks by the Dominicans, led by Hoogstraaten. Reuchlin's public condemnations engendered a bitter conflict between two factions: those in favour of the Inquisitor and those in favour of Reuchlin.

The judicial process triggered by the Inquisitor began in Mainz in October 1513, and the inquiry was opened in December. It was at this time that Romberch was sent to Rome. In March 1514, the case was resolved with an acquittal for Reuchlin. A new set of judges, Grimani among them, was summoned to elucidate an appeal by the Dominicans. In any case, Hoogstraaten seems to have interceded for the Pope to postpone his decision and, after a long period of uncertainty and accusations by both parties, on June 23rd, 1520, the Pope finally condemned Reuchlin.<sup>36</sup>

Romberch's role in the affair appears to have been secondary from the moment Reuchlin first emerged victorious. In any case, it cannot be forgotten that he acted in the shadow of the Inquisitor and was likely driven by his master. After such a process, he never concealed his role in the affair, nor did he fail to show his sympathy for Reuchlin or his familiarity with the Inquisitor's faction. Moreover, his name and his work appear to be registered in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* in 1557 for reasons that we still do not know, but that may be related to the affair.

In the light of these events, Romberch's *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae* is noteworthy. The history of this treatise is marked by two defining milestones in the life of its author, as its composition was finished on 11th November 1513, when Romberch was still in Cologne, but it was not published until July 1520, when he was about to leave Italy

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<sup>34</sup> These biographical notes and the explanation of the process have been taken from Merino Jerez (2020 and 2021), Vasoli (2007) and the author's epistles in the *Congestorium*. Some information about the way images work in this treatise will be found in Báez Rubi (2005), especially about those related to Lullism.

<sup>35</sup> This journey is reflected in the epistles included in the *Alberti Magni Commentaria* and in the one addressed to García de Loaysa in the *Congestorium* itself.

<sup>36</sup> Merino Jerez (2020 and 2021) gives a more detailed description of the process.



and Reuchlin was condemned. In any case, the decision to publish the work predates the Inquisitor's rehabilitation, although we do not know when it reached Romberch's ears. When Romberch wrote his *Congestorium*, he was not yet involved in Reuchlin's process. In this work, there are traces of disciplines far removed from the Dominican scholastic canon – or even rejected by the Inquisition – such as allusions to alchemy or Kabbalah, and especially Reuchlin. Romberch points to Reuchlin as one of the sources of his treatise,<sup>37</sup> although he had only written very hackneyed precepts on memory. Furthermore, *congestorium* was a neologism, probably of his own creation, but, if we pay attention to the full title of Reuchlin's work (*Liber congestorum de arte praedicandi*), it appears that our author's admiration or respect for his (later) judicial adversary is unmistakable. Regarding both titles, it is easy to think at least of inspiration.

Having declared that Romberch was somehow forced to encounter Kabbalism through Reuchlin's trial, the main fact is that the affair was never a hindrance for him to preserve references to Kabbalah and Reuchlin in the text, nor to include a brief description of alchemy. Romberch did not reformulate or remove these allusions, even if he had an opportunity, since the *Congestorium* was published seven years after being written once the litigation had finished.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the most famous Hebraist in Rome was Domenico Grimani, whom we have mentioned before as a member of the court in the affair. Furthermore, our author dedicated his work to him,<sup>39</sup> so there was a relationship between them that causes us to think that this dedication is not just a kind of safeguard regarding all this process. It is likely that Hoogstraaten had lost both his influence and his position when Romberch took his work to Georgius de Rusconibus's printing house, so he might have maintained his text for this reason, as he did not feel Inquisitor's pressure. But in July 1520 the tables turned. In any case, at that moment, it would appear that everything about the *Congestorium* publishing was already complete and irreversible.

### a) Concerning Kabbalah

The eighth chapter of Romberch's second book, which deals with the exemplification of fictitious mnemonic places (*loci*), contains a few lines about the importance of order in not getting lost in the recovery of memories when travelling through those mental places. Continuous training in the technique is important for performing this task optimally. As

<sup>37</sup> In the epistle addressed to Domenico Grimani, Romberch (1520: 2v) says: *Inter quos Seneca, Tullius, Quintilianus, Stephanus de Lauro, Franciscus Petrarcha, Mateolus Veronensis, Jacobus Publicius, insuper Petrus Ravennas, legum doctor, Joannes Surgant, Joannes Roechlin, Georgius Resch, Georgius Sibuti praecipui sunt quos viderim et quamplures aliorum libros de hac arte impressos legerim.* (Bold is ours.)

<sup>38</sup> Here we would like to add another hypothesis, namely that Romberch made some changes to his text after travelling to Rome, as he refers to his lack of money, which he especially suffered around 1517, and he also included some jesting related to Italian people, but this is something we still have to demonstrate.

<sup>39</sup> One of the three epistles that we find in the front pages of the *Congestorium* is addressed to Domenico Grimani; there we can read: *a palatio tuo discessus nulla ratio erat, sed et aulas tuas omnium veterum hystoriis exornatissimas, bibliothecam graiorum et hebreorum libris refertissimam, ut linguae latiae infinita illic recondita volumina subteceamus (quae vel nusquam vel rariter alibi habentur), non immerito latinae, graecae et hebraicae linguarum tibi notissimarum argumentum existentium* (Romberch 1520: 3r).



a last guidance, Romberch advises attending oral lessons from art teachers and, as a model of this practice, he adduces the following example (Romberch 1520: 30v [II, 8]):<sup>40</sup>

*Nosti siquidem quaedam praecepta a Deo Iudeis per scripta tradita quae vulgus ligarent, alia autem per Cabalam, quam receptionem aiunt, sola traditione digniorum auribus indita. Et, ut Christi verbum est, non eadem apostolis non eadem item discipulis et non eadem vulgaribus, eorum siquidem erat nosse mysterium regni Dei.*<sup>41</sup>

In these lines, we find an allusion to both Kabbalah and common Kabbalistic practices as we think that Romberch understood them to be, i.e. oral commentaries on sacred texts. Romberch's language is completely aseptic and condemns neither Kabbalah nor exegetical practices as we would expect him to do, attending to his context. Romberch even compares it with his own discipline, so our hypothesis is that he approved of its usage in a Neoplatonic sense. Finally, Romberch adds that each person receives hidden knowledge (*secreta*, meaning 'not evident') in a different way. Following this idea, we find a second passage that alludes to the need for the aural element<sup>42</sup> to acquire different types of knowledge:

*Sunt namque plurima saepenumero secreta litteris propter indignos non committenda, sed verbatim quibus ea favemus communicanda* (Romberch 1520: 23r [II, 5]).<sup>43</sup>

Here the typical form of transmission of Kabbalah is described, so we could consider it as a veiled mention, together with another allusion to Solomon as the author of *Ecclesiastes* just a few lines above. The fact of considering Solomon to be the author of this book is also characteristic of Kabbalistic use, since Christian theologians considered that this book was merely a second-hand collection of Solomon's doctrine. As Claro (2009: 349) points out, Solomon's *Book of Proverbs* was even condemned by the Inquisition.

There is also an image that may have a relation to Kabbalism (when Romberch introduces an example of how to build an image for theology), although we cannot be completely sure of its interpretation: *ut pro theologia consumatum egregiumque aliquem theo-*

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<sup>40</sup> Henceforth, we will cite the treatise with a Roman numeral referring to the number of the book, and an Arabic numeral that will correspond to the chapter. We have also developed Romberch's simplification of the diphthong *ae* in *e* and we have adapted the spelling to classical Latin. The punctuation in the text is also ours.

<sup>41</sup> "Well, you know that God taught the Jews by means of writing some precepts that bound the common people; but others were taught through the Kabbalah, which they call 'reception', because it contains precepts that are only transmitted orally to the worthiest ears. And, as with the word of Christ, the apostles, disciples and general people did not receive it in the same and only way, because it was their own task to know the mystery of God's kingdom." All translations of Romberch's work are ours.

<sup>42</sup> Ears and orality had a close relation in Antiquity, hence oral recitation and the importance of verse, rhythm and music. The explanation is found in Hor. *Ars* 180–182: *segnius iritant animos demissa per aurem / quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus et quae / ipse sibi tradit spectator*. In fact, ears are the symbol of memory in some Medieval treatises, cf. *Tractatus solemnns artis memorativae* (ca. 1459; available in [https://search.wellcomelibrary.org/iii/encore/record/C\\_\\_Rb1893481?lang=eng](https://search.wellcomelibrary.org/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1893481?lang=eng) [accessed on December 10, 2021]), f. 22r: *memoria artificialis est artificium quoddam quo naturalis memoria praeceptoris voce confirmatur*; and also when Romberch (1520: 57r [III, 17]) links gesture and qualities.

<sup>43</sup> "Indeed, there are often many secrets that should not be put in writing because they are unworthy, but must be communicated orally to those who we desire."

*logum qui Dei figuram pedibus conculcet* (Romberch 1520: 69v [IV, 3]). We think that Romberch is stating that God is the basis for theology studies, but as it involves God and feet, it could also be related to Jewish mysticism, according to Wolfson.<sup>44</sup> In any case, we think that this hypothesis can be dismissed because Romberch might have not known of this relation and it would not have been comprehensible for other Dominicans, so the image would not work as a memory image because the memory encoded in it could not be returned.

### b) Alchemy in the *Congestorium*

If we look through the seventeenth chapter of the third book (Romberch 1520: 56v), we will discover in alchemy another evidence of Romberch's aseptic purpose in writing: the aforementioned *ad instar notariorum*. Romberch considers alchemy as an authentic art – though difficult and complex, as he himself has been able to realise and prove.<sup>45</sup> To define it, he makes the following statement:

*Sicuti enimvero astronomi eo ordine singulos planetas singulis deputant diebus, ita alchymistae planetarum nominibus metalla nominant; et reliquas sui artificii instrumentorum et rerum significationes obscurioribus quibusdam voculis adeo obtenebrescunt, ut vel raro eis Sol et Luna sua verum emittant splendorem; quare et paene omnes in tenebris ambulant et, quia noctem verterunt in diem et post tenebras sperant lucem, sola spe foventur. Quamquam non ignorem artem veram esse, est tamen tempus breve, experimentum fallax, ars vero difficilis, ut et ipse experiri contuitus sum.*<sup>46</sup>

This chapter is about making images through metalepsis, movements and badges or emblems; therefore, Romberch explains metalepsis with some examples from tradition (like using a golden mouth instead of 'trickery'), from metallurgy (gold for 'Sunday') and, finally, from astronomy (a metal for a day).<sup>47</sup> Finally, we think that there is a translation of the concepts from astronomy to alchemy and, thus, planets come to be designated with names of metals.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, we are told that alchemists hide the real names of the

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<sup>44</sup> Wolfson (1992) studies different ways to interpret images of God's feet from mystic perspectives and to relate them to knowledge of God.

<sup>45</sup> Following Arola (2021), we consider two periods in alchemy. The first one, up to the 15th century, is related to physics and philosophy. It consists of research on the indivisible parts of the world and its origin. That is likely what Albert the Great practised. The second is related to creating gold and discovering the world order, in either a literal or metaphorical way. When Romberch wrote this, alchemy was evolving as a discipline from philosophical speculation to an esoteric technique based on transmutation. We think that Romberch refers to a middle stage of the process.

<sup>46</sup> "For, just as astronomers, following this order, attribute each planet to each of the days, so the alchemists also call metals with the names of the planets, and the other meanings of the instruments and objects of their art obscure them with certain words too gloomy up to the point that even the Sun and its Moon will rarely emit for them their true brilliance. For this reason, almost everyone among them walks in the dark and, as they have turned night into day and await the light after the darkness, they harbour only that hope. And although I am not unaware that it is a true art; however, our time is short, the attempt is deceptive, and the technique is difficult, as I have also been able to observe."

<sup>47</sup> There is not any written example for this, but it is easy to think, for the case, of mercury for meaning 'Wednesday'.

<sup>48</sup> Once again, as we cannot find a model written in the text, but we can form or imagine, for example, 'mercury' (metal) to designate 'Mercury' (planet).

things that they employ for their intentions and purposes to make everything so obscure that nobody can reach it. This intention of obscuring and darkening the texts or resources can be seen in the use of the lexicon in this passage, intermingling terms that refer to light (*splendorem* or *lucem*) with others that allude to darkness (*tenebras* or *noctem*). Especially at the end of this text, a very ambiguous language is exploited, since the author does not make clear whether he truly practised alchemy at some point in his life (which is, in fact, what we understand, that he did in fact practise it, although he is coy about saying so).

## 5. Conclusions

As I have sought to prove, Johannes Romberch fulfilled the promise he had anticipated in the epistle addressed to his friend: he wrote the *Congestorium ad instar notariorum*. This means that he did so as aseptically as possible, seeking to include all the sources and all the knowledge available to him in such a way that it offers a very broad and complete vision of the mnemonics of its time. This assertion is why he even included a few mentions of Kabbalism and alchemy, which are unorthodox arts (at least from a Dominican point of view) and were censored in other writings. Following this idea, we must add that Romberch did not excessively stress religious aspects or the usage of the art of memory for preaching, which occurred far more frequently in other similar texts of the same period, such as J. Aguilera's or I. Philippus's arts of memory. Moreover, this desire for asepticism led the author to preserve some references in the text that are not salient, although they may seem striking from the current perspective, but they have a place in Romberch's conception of his *Congestorium*. Our thesis is that Romberch uses both Kabbalah and alchemy in a technical, non-theological and non-ideological way and that he treats them as Neoplatonic phenomena. From this perspective (his *congerere ad instar notariorum*), there are no apparent reasons in the *Congestorium* to justify the presence of Romberch and his work in the *Index*; which encourages us to continue investigating both the work and the life path of its author. Furthermore, we assume it cannot be said that either Romberch or his *Congestorium* is unorthodox or heretical. Moreover, we have determined a new starting point from which to study to what extent Romberch was willing to accept theories external to Dominican doctrine, such as Petrus Ravenna's examples of naked women, or those related to combination wheels and their subsequent implementations. This last thought could be useful in analysing whether there was a propensity among Dominican authors to accept ideas from humanism, a tendency that we have also observed in Iohannes Cochlaeus, a musician from this same period.

Romberch's case is just one example of how, in matters where seemingly opposite realities are interwoven, there are many nuances that depend largely on the observer's eyes, depending on what one is looking for. And this can be seen very clearly in the ambiguity of Romberch's lexicon, which leaves to the reader's imagination whether he has taken part in practices such as kabbalism or alchemy, especially because he does not give us a clear definition of any of them.

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## KABALA V CONGESTORIU J. ROMBERCHA A JEJÍ KONTEXT: NÁSTIN

V období renesance nastal ohromný rozvoj v mnoha disciplínách, které spadají do velmi rozdílných oblastí vědění. Byly mezi nimi umění paměti a křesťanská hebraistika, jejíž vývoj šel ruku v ruce se zájmem křesťanů o kabalou a další spekulativní vědy. Obě disciplíny navazovaly na dlouhou předchozí tradici a už dříve byly v jakémsi kontaktu, počínaje Raimundem Lullem, ale teprve od samého počátku 16. století se zdá, že se určití autoři zabývali mnemonikou a studiem kabaly zároveň. Mezi ně by mohl patřit autor díla *Congestorium artificiosae memoriae* (1520) Johannes Romberch, který v tomto dobře známém spisu na kabalou velmi specificky naráží. Cílem tohoto článku je prvotní nástin kontaktů zachycených v *Congestoriu*, který by později mohl být rozvinut do komparativní studie.

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