



# 'The Lord of the smoking mirror': Objects associated with John Dee in the British Museum

Silke Ackermann, Louise Devoy

Department of Prehistory and Europe, The British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Six objects associated with the magic practices of John Dee have been held within the collections of the British Museum for many decades. These objects include three wax seals, an obsidian mirror, a gold disc and a crystal ball. In this paper we review the provenance and possible association of these artefacts with Dee by comparing their features to the descriptions and diagrams set out in Dee's manuscripts. Although we come to the conclusion that a direct link between these objects and Dee remains to be proven, we also uncover a complex world of collectors whose avid interest in Dee contributed to the collection of objects assembled today, which continue to reinforce Dee's reputation as a magician.

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## 1. Introduction

### Scene: In the Round Reading Room of the British Museum

Dee's mirror. I glanced along the body, but the black mirror was nowhere to be seen. They'd stretched him naked on his back, his body arched over arms bound beneath him. Blood had pooled and thickened on the shelf top, dripping in slow, steady drops. Just below his ribcage, a wide slash gaped across his abdomen like an obscene mouth... She'd killed him to consecrate the mirror. (J. L. Carrell, *The Shakespeare curse*, 2010, p. 335)

Apart from being the subject of countless scholarly publications, the character of John Dee—and especially his dealings with magic—continues to fascinate the wider public. In the last few years alone he has appeared in numerous films and books, from the crystal-gazing magus seen in *Elizabeth: the Golden Age*<sup>1</sup> to the cautious sage trying to prevent Shakespeare from invoking evil spirits in his plays, as told in Carrell's novel quoted above. The same appeal can be witnessed in the British Museum, where gallery talks and lectures on

John Dee are regularly oversubscribed and where ever so often visitors request a viewing of the 'secret room' of Dee's divination tools. Sadly, such a treasure trove does not exist, but we do indeed have a small group of objects associated with John Dee: three inscribed wax discs (reg. no. 1838,1232.90.a–c),<sup>2</sup> an obsidian mirror with a matching case (reg. no. P&E 1966, 1001.1), a gold disc inscribed with a diagram of the 'vision of the four castles' (reg. no. P&E 1942, 0506.1) and a crystal ball or 'shew stone' (reg. no. P&E SLCups.232)—all of which are on display<sup>3</sup> and can be viewed online ([British Museum, 2011](http://britishmuseum.org)). But if one were to examine the 'biography' of these diverse objects, which have entered the museum by different routes at different times over the past 250 years, one would find that their provenance and association with Dee is by no means as secure as one might think. This paper aims to trace the life story of these artefacts from their origins to their eventual display at the British Museum (Fig. 1).

## 2. The three wax discs

In the collection of the British Museum are three wax discs: a larger one with a diameter of 23 cm (reg. no. P&E 1838,

E-mail addresses: [sackermann@britishmuseum.org](mailto:sackermann@britishmuseum.org) (S. Ackermann), [ldevoy@britishmuseum.org](mailto:ldevoy@britishmuseum.org) (L. Devoy)

<sup>1</sup> 2007, directed by Shekhar Kapur and produced by Universal Pictures and Working Title Films.

<sup>2</sup> In the older literature these objects are also referred to as OA. 105–07.

<sup>3</sup> British Museum, Room 1 (Enlightenment), floor case 20.



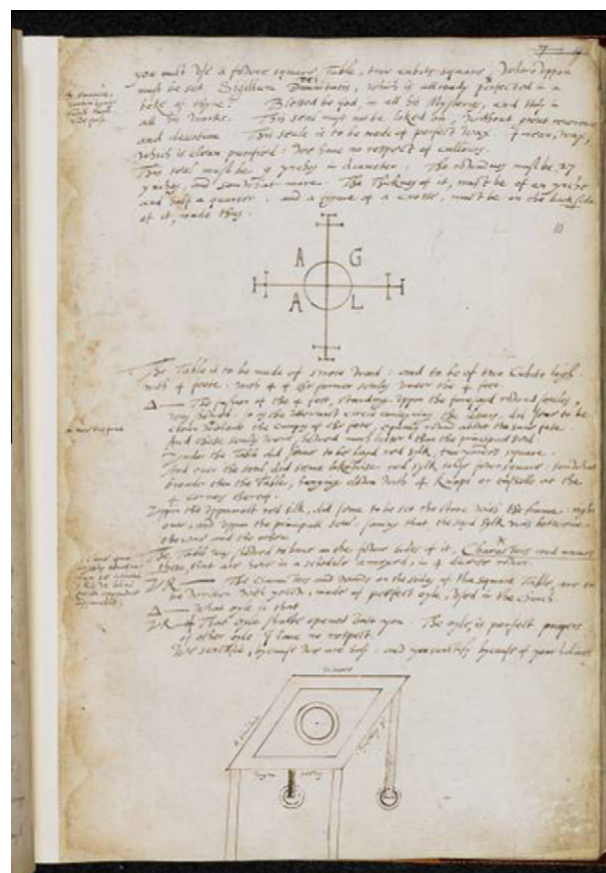
**Fig. 1.** The group of Dee-associated artefacts (reg. nos. from left to right: P&E 1966,1001.1; P&E SLCups 232; P&E 1838,1232.90.c (damaged), P&E 1838,1232.90.b (complete), P&E 1838,1232.90a (large); P&E 1942,0506.1). ©Trustees of the British Museum (image reference AN37447001)

1232.90.a) and two smaller ones with a diameter of 12.5 cm (reg. no. P&E 1838, 1232.90.b–c). The size of, and inscriptions on, these ‘seals’ bear a striking similarity to the instructions given by the angel Uriel during a session held on the afternoon of Saturday 10 March 1582, as recorded by Dee:

Uriel: ...you must use a fowre square Table, two cubits square: Where uppon must be set Sigillum Divinitatis Dei... which is already perfected in a boke of thynke: Blessed be God, in all his Mysteries, and Holy in all his works. This seal must not be looked on, without great reverence and devotion. This seale is to be made of perfect wax. I mean, wax, which is clean purified: we have no respect of cullours. This seal must be 9 ynches in diameter: The rowndnes must be 27 ynches, and somewhat more. The Thicknes of it, must be of an ynche and half a quarter, and a figure of a crosse, must be on the back side of it, made thus [diagram of AGLA inscribed in crosses sketched by Dee]. (British Library, MS Sloane 3188, fol. 10r)

The great seal was to be placed in the centre of a table made from sweetwood with the four legs balanced on smaller versions of the seal, as sketched by Dee on the same page (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup>

Further instructions on how the diagrams should be inscribed on the seals were given by the angel Michael a little later (British Library, MS Sloane 3188, fol. 17r–20v). First, an outward circle divided into 40 equal parts to represent the true circle of God’s eternity had to be inscribed. Dee then records that 40 white creatures in long white silk robes appeared and fell to their knees in front of Michael. One by one, the creatures opened their breasts to reveal combinations of letters and number such as G9, 7n and 22 h. After the session had ended, Uriel reappeared to the scribe, Edward Kelley (also known as Talbot), and instructed Dee to make some corrections to the seal as the scribe had omitted to declare all the required knowledge (ibid., fol. 20v). Michael then continued with his instructions and described a series of nested heptagons, each one containing abbreviations or the full names of angels that Dee is instructed to record on the seal (ibid., fol. 20v–29v). The resulting seal, which is sketched on fol. 30r of the same manuscript, first gives the names associated with a vision of gold baskets. These names are not written in full, but are inscribed as capital letters accompanied by crosses, as instructed by Michael. This is followed by letters inscribed around the perimeter of the first heptagon which give the names of angels when arranged in a square pattern of seven by seven. Underneath



**Fig. 2.** The AGLA cross and table of seals, as sketched by Dee (British Library, MS Sloane 3188, fol. 10r). ©The British Library Board (MS Sloane 3188)

each side lie angelic names. The next inward entwined shape features the names of young women dressed in green silk in the triangular corners, while the names around the sides are those of young men who appeared bearing pieces of purified metals such as gold, silver, copper and mercury. Then there are two groups of children: girls in white silk robes in the penultimate heptagon, followed by little boys in purple silk robes forming the names on the innermost shape. For the central space, Michael’s instructions are more complex. The letters for one name, Zabathiel, are written around the innermost heptagon, with an abbreviation for the last two letters. Five remaining names are used to encircle a pentagram which features a central cross surrounded by the seventh name, Levanael. Uriel concludes the vision with an explanation: ‘These Angels are the angells of the 7 Circles of Heven, governing the Lightes of the .7. Circles’ (ibid., fol. 29v) (Figs. 3–5).

As close comparison shows, the inscriptions on the great wax disc are virtually identical with the diagram in Dee’s manuscript. The only difference is the number of crosses inscribed on the arms of the two heptagons: on the wax disc the number has been increased. The two small discs are more worn and have sections which are either illegible or have broken off at some point in their history. Nevertheless, one can still find a few minor differences between the Sigillum Dei diagram and the engravings on the small seals. For example, there are faint concentric rings within the outer circle and around the central pentagram, as well as a reduced number of serifs and crosses, although the letters H and Z still have

<sup>4</sup> This wooden table does not appear to have survived, but a marble copy is on display at the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford (inv. no. 15449). According to Bennett (1999) the table was probably produced after the publication of Casaubon (1659), which featured an engraving of the diagram seen on the table. The object was originally presented to the Bodleian Library in 1750 by Richard Rawlinson, who claimed that the table had once belonged to the astrologer William Lilly (1602–1681).

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