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Notes and Documents

John Dee's "Brytanici Imperii Limites"

KEN MACMILLAN

John Dee's (1527–1609) manuscript compilation "Brytanici Imperii Limites," acquired by the British Library in 1976, plays a vital role in completing our knowledge of the imperial writings prepared by Dee in the late 1570s.¹ Scholars have long known about Dee's *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (1576–77), "Of Famous and Rich Discoveries" (1577), and "A brief Remembraunce of Sondrye foreyne Regions, discovered, inhabited, and partlie Conquered by the Subjects of this Brytish Monarchie" (1580?).² But in his diary and his short autobiography, Dee mentions other related materials presented to Queen Elizabeth and her senior advisers. These are referred to as the queen's "title to Greenland, Estetiland and Friseland," declared to Elizabeth and Secretary of State Sir Francis Walsingham in November 1577; "Her Majesties Title Royall, to many forayn countries, Kingdomes, and provinces," and "Imperium Brytanicum," both declared in 1578; and "two rolls of the Quene's Majesties title," presented to the queen and the Lord Treasurer, William Cecil, Lord Burghley in 1580.³ For many years it was assumed that these had not survived or were alternate names for works already known.⁴ Now that we have Dee's "Limites," much more is known about Dee's audiences with the Crown. In his

1. John Dee, "Brytanici Imperii Limites," B[ritish] L[ibrary], Additional MS. 59681. In all quotations, original spelling has been retained but abbreviations have been silently expanded.
2. John Dee, *General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (London, 1577; STC 6459). For the circumstances surrounding its preparation, see David Gwyn, "John Dee's Arte of Navigation," *The Book Collector* 34 (1985): 309–22. The unpublished texts are held in the British Library: "Of Famous and Rich Discoveries," BL, Cotton MS. Vitellius C.VII, fols. 26–269; and "A brief Remembraunce of Sondrye foreyne Regions," BL, Cotton MS. Augustus I.I.Iv.
3. John Dee, *The Private Diary of Dr. John Dee*, ed. J. O. Halliwell (New York, 1842), 4–9. See also John Dee, "The Compendius Rehearsal exhibited to her most gracious majesty at Hampton Court," BL, Cotton MS. Vitellius C.VII, fols. 2–13; and John Dee, *A Letter, Containing a Most Brief Discourse Apologeticall* (STC 6460), where the materials provided to the queen are listed at sigs. A4r–B1v.
4. They are assumed lost or destroyed by Nicholas H. Clulee; see *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London, 1988), 180–87. Halliwell believed "Imperium Brytanicum" to be *Memorials (Private Diary, 4n)*.

recent monograph on Dee, William Sherman briefly describes the contents of “*Limites*,” but important questions remain regarding production and dating, and the way the four documents contained in the compilation fit into Dee’s larger imperial canon.⁵

“*Limites*” is a small quarto volume with a vellum binding. It contains ninety-four numbered and lined pages of single-spaced text, followed by about the same number of blank pages. The British Library catalogue indicates that the compilation was made in 1593 by someone other than Dee. The dating is supported by an examination of the two distinct watermarks showing that the paper was made after 1591.⁶ Further proof is found within “*Limites*” itself, where pedigrees of English and Spanish kings are given up to 1593 (pp. 90–91). This date puts the preparation of the compilation just after Dee presented his “*Compendius Rehearsal*” to two of the queen’s gentlemen on 9 November 1592, from which he had hoped to remind the Crown of his service in exchange for a living. At that meeting, Dee pointed to a table upon which were laid the “two parchment great Rolls full written,” which he had prepared more than a decade earlier, and said that he was once offered £100 for them.⁷ In response, the gentlemen, probably at the command of Elizabeth, returned three weeks later (2 December) and gave Dee the same amount in gold and silver, for which Dee acknowledged his satisfaction.⁸

Did the gentlemen purchase the two rolls and have them turned by a copyist into a volume more suited for library storage? Or was this payment for a copy of the two rolls to be produced by Dee himself? The entire manuscript is written in the same hand in a very clear script, and the penmanship is consistent with Dee’s most careful style. A comparison of the handwriting in “*Limites*” to that used in Dee’s “*Thalattokratia Brettaniki*” (“The British Sea Sovereignty”), which is appended to the British Library’s copy of *Memorials*, and in “*Discoveries*,” both of which are almost certainly in Dee’s hand, reveals similarities in letter structure and the use of alternate fonts to distinguish between English and Latin.⁹ If Dee was not himself the scribe, it is possible that the task of transcrib-

5. W. H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst, Mass., 1995), 183–89.
6. The first symbol is a lion crossmark with the letters “GB” in the corner, similar to the watermark of paper made in Mantua ca. 1589–93 (Gerhard Piccard, *Wasserzeichen Raubtiere* [Stuttgart, 1987], nos. III.1565–69). The second is a crossbow, also made in Mantua in 1591 (Piccard, *Wasserzeichen Werzeug und Waffen* [Stuttgart, 1980], no. XI.2129).
7. “*Compendius Rehearsal*,” fol. 7v.
8. *Ibid.*, fol. 13.
9. The copy of *Memorials* is BL, Department of Rare Books, shelfmark C.21.e.12. The “*Synopsis*” is BL, Cotton MS. Charter XIII, art. 39, reproduced in Sherman, *John Dee*, 110–12.

ing the rolls was given to a personal amanuensis, who might have learned to imitate his master's hand. But Dee was probably directly involved in the process of transcribing the rolls. It seems likely that Dee would have been paid his £100 for recent services rendered rather than for the rolls themselves or for work he had completed fifteen years before. Nor would a mere copyist employed by the Crown have seen fit to update the pedigree to 1593.

A note in Lord Burghley's hand kept among the British Library's Lansdowne manuscripts indicates that "Limites" came into state custody shortly after its preparation. The note is entitled "A Summary of Mr Dees book" and contains a brief statement of King Arthur's conquests, corresponding to a large portion of "Limites," and two pedigree charts exactly like those in "Limites" (pp. 17–18, 26–60, 77, 90–91).¹⁰ Burghley's document is undated, and Graham Yewbrey assumed that it was prepared from one of the "great rolls" of 1580, at the same time questioning why this was referred to as a "book."¹¹ The answer is that Burghley's summary was not of the 1580 roll but rather of the 1593 "Limites." In the Lansdowne papers, the summary is situated among manuscripts dating between 1593 and 1597, a placement consistent with the 1593 date. The fact that Burghley read and summarized the compilation suggests that this information was still of some value to the state. At this time, England was still deeply involved in the Anglo-Spanish War and was receiving challenges to its traditional sea sovereignty from Spain, France, Scotland, and the Hanseatic League. These were topics that Dee touched upon in "Limites" and that he addressed more specifically in his "Thalattokratia Brettaniki" of 1597.¹² One wonders if Dee's 1593 "Limites" reminded the Crown of his knowledge in this area and encouraged them to commission (through Edward Dyer, the Elizabethan favorite to whom the treatise was addressed) the 1597 work, when the conflict over sea sovereignty had reached a crisis.

The date of 1593 and strong suppositions about the preparation and custody of "Limites" does nothing to help us understand the dating of the four distinct documents that make up the compilation, which were undoubtedly prepared more than a decade before they were bound together. The first two documents are brief treatises, written in Latin, explaining the current geographical knowledge of the North Atlantic. In the first, "Concerning a reformed location for the island of Estotilant [*sic*] & the region of Drogio" (pp. 4–5), Dee described the lands

10. BL, Lansdowne MS. 94, fols. 121–22.

11. Graham Yewbrey, "A Redated Manuscript of John Dee," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 1 (1977): 253.

12. On the "Thalattokratia Brettaniki," see Sherman, *John Dee*, 192–200.

of Estotiland (northeast Canada), Drogió (an island off Labrador), and the new found land of America (or, as he called it, “Atlantis”). In the second, “Concerning this example of geographical reform” (pp. 7–9), Dee explained the nature of the geographical reformation begun by his “singular good friends” Gerard Mercator and Abraham Ortelius. Although neither of these documents is dated, internal evidence and our knowledge of Dee’s activities make dating possible. In the second document, Dee wrote that a more comprehensive account of his brief arguments was undertaken “lately in a large book in our vulgar tongue,” a clear reference to “Discoveries,” completed in June 1577. Dee corresponded with both Mercator and Ortelius concerning the North Atlantic region during the writing of “Discoveries,” matters that were, therefore, fresh on his mind.¹³ This dates the documents after June 1577.

The date can be further pinpointed by our knowledge that Elizabeth was the intended audience of these two documents. In the last document in “Limites,” Dee wrote that he had previously presented to the queen a “latin Annotation upon Estotiland,” a reference to the first document (p. 65). Near the end of the second document, Dee also made reference to an accompanying map, which does not survive, but detailed study provided by Sherman suggests that it was a polar projection, similar to the map Dee prepared for Humphrey Gilbert in 1582, with the figure of Elizabeth in crown and sword, superimposed on the Pacific Ocean as a compass.¹⁴ In the text, Dee charted the northern regions of the world to be explored. His cardinal references were based on the queen’s body, using phrases such as “on the left hand side of your majesty’s throne,” “under your Crown,” and “at the right side of your Majesty,” clear indications that Elizabeth was the audience (pp. 8–9). In his diary, Dee recorded that between 22 and 28 November 1577, he traveled to Windsor and had three meetings with Elizabeth and Walsingham, during which he “declared to the Quene her title to Greenland, Estetiland and Friseland.”¹⁵ It thus seems likely that these declarations represented both of the short pieces included in “Limites,” which dates the documents around early November 1577 and suggests the subject of Dee’s meeting with Elizabeth at this time. These declarations came three weeks after Gilbert consulted with Dee and then submitted to Elizabeth his “Discourse how to annoy

13. Mercator’s letter (in Dutch) was copied directly into “Discoveries,” fols. 264–69. It has been translated and examined by E. G. R. Taylor, “A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator to John Dee,” *Imago Mundi* 13 (1956): 56–68. Dee’s letter to Ortelius, dated 16 January 1576/7, is in *Abrahami Ortelii . . . Epistulae (1524–1628)*, ed. Joannes Henricus Hessels (London, 1887), 1:67.
14. The Gilbert map is in D. B. Quinn, *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612*, 5 vols. (London, 1979), 3:495. See Sherman, *John Dee*, 184, 191–92.
15. *Private Diary*, 4.

the King of Spain," in which he suggested the settling of America to serve as a naval base for an offensive against Spanish interests in Newfoundland and the Caribbean.¹⁶

The third document in "Limes" is an eight-page treatise, "Unto your Majesties tytle Royall to these forene Regions, & Ilands," dated "Anno: 1578 Maii 4" (pp. 13–21, date on p. 21). In this document, Dee briefly gives historical evidence of the queen's title to overseas territories, using the travels and conquests of King Arthur, St. Brendan, King Malgo, Lord Madoc, the Cabots, and Frobisher's voyages up to 1577. Planning for Frobisher's 1578 voyage began at the end of May, consistent with Dee's dating of the manuscript. This document shares numerous similarities with the "Brief Remembrance." Yewbrey has taken Dee's omission of the 1578 Frobisher voyage as evidence that the "Brief Remembrance" was prepared in May 1578 rather than 1580, the date that appears on the manuscript.¹⁷ Other historians have assumed that the "Brief Remembrance" was at some point presented to Queen Elizabeth as one of the great rolls.¹⁸ The presence of the third document in "Limes" helps to show that both assumptions are probably incorrect. At the beginning of the document, Dee wrote that he was addressing "your lawfull Tytle (Our most gracious soveraigne Quene Elizabeth)" (p. 13); "Brief Remembrance" contains virtually the same opening, but the corresponding passage reads "our Soveraigne Elizabeth her most Gracious Majestie."¹⁹ This suggests that while the document in "Limes" was written expressly for the queen in May 1578, the "Brief Remembrance" was made by Dee for a third party, likely in 1580 as the manuscript attests. Dee was probably not too concerned that the 1580 version was not updated to include Frobisher's final voyage or Drake's circumnavigation. Furthermore, in "Limes" Dee indicates that the two rolls were "Longe" (p. 75), while the "Brief Remembrance," written on the verso of a map of the northern hemisphere, is rectangular but not long. The "Brief Remembrance," therefore, was likely never presented to Queen Elizabeth.

The third document in "Limes" was probably commissioned by the Crown sometime in April 1578. In his "Compendius Rehearsal," Dee recorded that "Her Majesties Title Royall" was "fayre written for her Majesty's use and by her Majesty's commandements—Anno 1578."²⁰ Dee also noted that this document

16. *Private Diary*, 3. Gilbert's discourse is in the Public Record Office, SP 12/118, 12 (1).

17. Yewbrey, "Redated Manuscript," 249–53.

18. For example, E. G. R. Taylor, *Tudor Geography, 1485–1583* (London, 1930), 135.

19. BL, Cotton MS. Augustus I.I.Iv.

20. "Compendius Rehearsal," fol. 8v.

was written on “12 velam skyns of parchment,” something much larger than the third document, which likely filled only one or at most two vellum sheets. In 1597, Dee wrote that the “Brytanici Imperii Limites,” the exact title of the fourth and final document in “Limites” and one long enough to fill a dozen vellum sheets, was “compiled speedily at her majesty’s commandment.”²¹ On both occasions, Dee was probably referring to the third and fourth documents in “Limites” together, which were written as companion pieces. At the end of the third document, which Dee probably presented to the Crown shortly after its completion on 4 May, he wrote that more evidence was “shortly to be recorded” (p. 21). This was likely because Dee was required to work “speedily,” and he needed to give the Crown something to work with while he took more time to prepare the fourth, much longer and more comprehensive, document. The third document came at a good time, because at the end of May 1578 Frobisher was given instructions to settle some men on a small island off Baffin Island, now known as Kodlunarn, and the following month Gilbert was issued a royal letter to settle land in North America.

This brings us to the fourth document in “Limites,” which was, I have suggested, a companion piece to the third document. It is the “Brytanici Imperii Limites” proper, which fills approximately seventy manuscript pages and gives the name to the compilation. This document, possibly prefaced with another copy of the third document, was what occupied the majority of the twelve “full written” vellum skins of parchment given to the Crown in August 1578. This immediately presents a problem, because the fourth document is signed “Your Majesties most humble and Obedient servant, John Dee, Anno Domini 1576; July 22” (p. 74). This date would place its production just before *Memorials*, which was completed in August 1576, and would make it the earliest of Dee’s writings on the queen’s title to overseas territories. This date is certainly wrong. The fourth document was written as an addition to the third document, dating it 22 July 1578, not 1576.

The evidence for this redating is considerable. To begin with, in his diary Dee wrote that he traveled to Norwich, where the queen was then in residence, with his work entitled “Imperium Brytanicum,” a clear reference to the fourth document, on 5 August 1578.²² Within the manuscript itself, Dee makes explicit reference to *Memorials*, to its non-surviving sequel “The Brytish Complement,” and to “Discoveries,” which makes it clear that the document in “Limites” came after all of these (p. 73). The third document ends, as we have seen, with an as-

21. BL, Royal MS. 7.C.XVI, fol. 161.

22. *Private Diary*, 4. Sherman has shown that the queen was at Norwich (*John Dee*, 182).

surance that more evidence was soon to be recorded, and an early line in the fourth document reads: "Heere now *in this other parte*, I entend to recorde that which appertaineth *to continewe the memorie of your Majesties just title Royall*" (p. 25, emphasis mine). This suggests that it is the second of two parts and that it was written shortly after the first. Near the end of the fourth document, Dee indicates that it is an "appendix," presumably to the third document, and he argues that the recovery of the British Empire was fully justified by "these 2 recordes brieflie"—that is, by the third and fourth documents together (p. 73). Dee also included in the fourth document a letter he received from Mercator that was explicitly dated "1577" (pp. 58–60). Finally, it seems likely that the manuscripts would have been compiled in the order in which they were written. The evidence thus makes it necessary to redate the fourth document to 1578 and to put it and the third document together. The simple transcription error of turning a questionable-looking "8" into a "6" probably accounts for the misdating of the fourth document in "Limites."²³

These "2 recordes" were presented to Elizabeth about 5 August 1578 as the two rolls, written on twelve vellum skins of parchment. We know that these rolls were to some extent the content of "Limites" because the final twenty pages in the manuscript compilation, the last part of the fourth document, comprise additions to the text, which once "were noted in the margents of the Longe Rolle" (p. 75). This would have been Dee (or the amanuensis) writing in 1593, explaining that the change in format required a different presentation for the supplemental material. These rolls were returned to Dee after the meetings in August 1578 and were presented to Elizabeth again two years later. Dee wrote that on 3 October 1580 he "delivered [his] two rolls of the Quene's Majesties title" to Elizabeth and Lord Burghley. Because we know that these rolls were first presented in 1578, this means that no new material was offered to Elizabeth at this time. The meeting of October 1580 occurred shortly after Francis Drake returned from his voyage around the world, bringing with him reports of land claimed in the name of Elizabeth, especially "Nova Albion," present-day California (or, as Samuel Bawlf and others have recently suggested, more northerly seacoasts),²⁴ and a store of commodities taken from Spanish settlements, particularly in the West Indies and South America. The Spanish ambassador resident in England,

23. This error qualifies but does not change the argument that Dee or his amanuensis transcribed the manuscripts, although it does strengthen the case that an amanuensis was involved. Given that this was by far the largest document in the compilation, it is not surprising that the erroneous date of 1576 was copied onto the title page.
24. Samuel R. Bawlf, *Sir Francis Drake's Secret Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America, A.D. 1579* (Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, 2001).

Bernardino de Mendoza, immediately lodged a formal complaint with Elizabeth, alleging that these territories belonged to the king of Spain by virtue of first discovery and the papal bull of donation.²⁵ As England's foremost expert on the subject of overseas territories, Dee was ordered to court, and he brought with him the 1578 material for his audience with the Crown.



This compilation of Dee's writings allows us to answer a number of bibliographical questions regarding his efforts on behalf of the British Empire. There is strong evidence that Dee or his amanuensis prepared the manuscript compilation in 1593 and gave it to the Crown, in whose custody it remained for an indeterminate period. While in state possession, "Limites" was read by Lord Burghley, who took notes on its contents, which suggests that the material remained valuable to the state. The manuscripts themselves, dating between about November 1577 and July 1578, represent all of the written material prepared by Dee expressly for Queen Elizabeth and her senior advisers regarding her title to new found lands.²⁶ That is to say, based on Dee's reporting of his own writings on empire, Dee's imperial writings for the English Crown are now extant in their entirety.²⁷ Only the appearance of the two great rolls prepared in 1578 would shed more light on this reconstruction of Dee's imperial works.

It is important that the works in this compilation were prepared a number of years before Richard Hakluyt presented his "Discourse of Western Planting" (1584) to Elizabeth, which historians have long thought to be the inaugural work of British imperial propaganda.²⁸ Dee's "Limites" must now be given pride of

25. See *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series (Spanish), 1580–86*, nos. 44–50, passim; and BL, Add. MS. 28420. See also E. P. Cheyney, "International Law under Queen Elizabeth," *English Historical Review* 20 (1905): 659–60.
26. As Sherman shows, Dee probably also included maps with his treatises, which were not reproduced in "Limites," most likely because the new format made such inclusion difficult. See *John Dee*, 184–86, 189–92; and Sherman, "Putting the British Seas on the Map: John Dee's Imperial Cartography," *Cartographica* 35 (1998): 1–10.
27. This statement requires two qualifications: The first five chapters of "Discoveries" are not extant, although they were summarized by Samuel Purchas in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625), 1:1–48. Second, Dee apparently prepared a document in 1579 entitled "De imperatoris nomine, authority, et potentia" [On the name, authority, and power of the emperor], only the title of which is known to survive ("Compendium Rehearsal," fol. 8v); whether or not this was part of Dee's imperial program is unknown.
28. *A particuler discourse concerninge the greate necessitie and manifolde commodityes that are like to growe to this realme of Englande by the western discoverie lately attempted, written in the yere 1584 by Richarde Hackluyt of Oxford, known as Discourse of Western Planting*, ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn (London, 1993), xv.

place for being the earliest and most comprehensive justification for the expansion of the British Empire to be offered in Elizabethan England."²⁹ The compilation should be considered by scholars interested in claims to overseas territories during the early modern period, in early formulations of the British Empire, and in the contemporary use of evidence to serve a political and propagandist purpose. Readers will be impressed by Dee's command of ancient, medieval, and contemporary historical, geographical, and legal evidence to advance claims for Elizabeth's sovereign title and to challenge similar claims made by Spain and Portugal.³⁰

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29. Indeed, taking into account all of Dee's imperial writings, Sherman has termed Dee one of the British Empire's "earliest, boldest, and most ingenious advocates"; *John Dee*, 148–52 at 148.
30. See John Dee, *The Limits of the British Empire*, ed. Ken MacMillan and Jennifer Abeles, forthcoming from Greenwood Press. For an examination of Dee's arguments in "Limites" and an effort to determine his influence on the Crown, see Ken MacMillan, "Discourse on History, Geography, and Law: John Dee and the Limits of the British Empire, 1576–80," *Canadian Journal of History* 36 (2001): 1–25.