John Dee: Scholar, Astrologer, and Occult Practitioner that Captivated the Royal Court of 16th Century England

Born into the era of intellectual and artistic reawakening, John Dee quickly rose through Elizabethan society as a scholar, philosopher, navigator, doctor, and astrologer of the Queen of England. Intrigued with so many fields, including a deep fascination with the occult, John Dee’s vast interests resulted in his unintentional creation of the largest personal library in Elizabethan England at the time, visited by renowned scholars from all over the world. Luckily for modern historians, Dee was a prolific enough writer that his life is well documented, however, the question why he was tasked with so many important roles in the British court is still an incredible dilemma.

John Dee Sets His Sights on the Royal Court

Though Dee wore many hats during his lifetime, he made astounding waves in each field. He was a skilled student at St. John’s College, so much so that after obtaining both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s from the university, Dee set his sights on working directly in the Royal Court under Queen Mary I.
His relationship with the royal court, however, turned tumultuous as he became more interested in mathematics and astrology. Queen Mary I had him arrested in 1555 for "calculating", as mathematics and magic were considered close cousins in this time. The charges were of treason and he was imprisoned for a period, until finally exonerated by Bishop Edmund Bonner.

- The Book of Abramelin the Mage, Esoteric Grimoire of Kabbalistic Knowledge
- The Ars Notoria - An Ancient Magical Book to Perfect Memory and Master Academia
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**Astrological Advisor of Queen Elizabeth I**

Dee rose once again in the favor of the court when Elizabeth I became queen in 1558—three years after Dee’s arrest. She took him on as her astrological advisor, allowing him the prestigious task of choosing the exact date of her coronation. After, he was given numerous important court duties, such as aiding in Elizabeth's exploration ambitions.
Rarely discussed in references of the New World, Dee actually helped pioneer the Voyages of Exploration England took on in the sixteenth century, aiding the various ship captains in their mathematical techniques of navigation. It was he who provided the instruments used to navigate the waters, himself being somewhat of a professional in the art of navigation. Driven by a mutual desire to reestablish the great British Empire, Dee and Queen Elizabeth I worked tirelessly in the exploration of North America. By 1583, however, he had given up his work as a navigation specialist, and chose instead to focus on his research into the forces of nature and the supernatural forces of the universe.

John Dee and the Language of Angels
What John Dee was most known for was his work in attempting to commune with the spiritual world, particularly heavenly angels. This work was preceded by endeavors at understanding the unifying factor of nature, which he believed could be discovered through a combination of magical and mathematical means.

Dee wrote his first astrological book called *Monas Hieroglyphica* in which he discusses the various facets of the symbol he created to represent the cosmos.

Dee's glyph, whose meaning he explained in *Monas Hieroglyphica* as representing (from top to bottom): the moon; the sun; the elements; and fire. Public Domain

Collaboration with a Psychic Medium
This text drew heavily on Christian Cabballism, and was greatly coveted during his lifetime. However, Dee's struggle to find a prestigious patron was an uphill battle, and eventually he tired of this work on the cosmos. It is then that Dee began to focus his efforts more seriously on his angelic search, eventually joining forces with a medium called Edward Kelley, a man twenty-eight years younger than him, to conduct séances to interact with the angels. Through their continued meetings, Dee and Kelley claimed to have been given the gift of a new alphabet, said to have been revealed to them by angels. They called the language 'Angelico' and later it became known as 'Enochian'.
John Dee Claims to Have the Gift of Alchemy
Less than a decade after meeting, however, Kelley and Dee's interests began to drift once more. Kelley himself claimed that he was also gifted in alchemy and could turn ordinary metals into gold. As such, Kelley continued to work with Dee as his soryer, but focused much more of his time on an attempt to transform substances and find the legendary Philosopher's Stone.

The magical locla of John Dee: golden and wax discs, a quartz sphere, and a polished mirror. Wikimedia Commons

John Dee: The Final Years
The seven years they spent together, leading nomadic lives and working endlessly on their newfound alphabet, came to an abrupt end in 1589, when Kelley returned to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II and Dee went home to England. Dee outlived his former friend by many years, and continued their work, immortalizing them both with his Angelical/Enochian literature.

“The Enochian alphabet with letter forms, letter names, English equivalents, and pronunciation of the letter names (pronunciation in quotes if different than English). The Enochian letters in this chart are read from right to left, as written in John Dee’s diary.” Wikimedia Commons

Over time, Dee's work in the occult became more heavily criticized and, after parting ways with Kelley in 1589, he became Warden of Christ's College in Manchester, England. He died a poor man's death in 1608, having fallen out of favor with Elizabeth I's successor James VI/I.

Despite the way his life ended, John Dee was considered somewhat of a wizard in Elizabethan circles. Even with so few followers of his angelic endeavors, his work evolved into a modern magical and religious practice that continues to be utilized by occult organizations around the world.
Still Creating a Dramatic Scene
In 2016, researchers got another reminder of John Dee’s mysterious ways. They were shocked when they discovered a hidden element through x-ray analysis of the famous painting depicting ‘John Dee performing an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I’ (the top image in this article). It’s been revealed that Dee was originally painted standing before the queen in a circle of skulls.

It is not certain why the artist Henry Gillard Glindoni initially painted the skulls, however, it is possible that “After Elizabeth died, scholars would paint Dee as a deluded fool. It’s that legacy that may have inspired Glindoni to add the skulls to his painting, perhaps along with the Victorian-era obsession with death. But why did he then paint over them?”

Curator Katie Birkwood provided a reason. “Glindoni had to make it look like what we now see, which is august and serious, from what it was, which was occult and spooky. That epitomizes the two different impressions of Dee which people have and the fight between them.”

Featured image: John Dee performing an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I. [Wellcome images, a website operated by Wellcome Trust, a global charitable foundation based in the UK.]

By Ryan Stone

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ANCIENT IMAGE GALLERIES
John Dee was a British scholar and mathematician who became court astrologer to Elizabeth I. After studying mathematics, astronomy and map-making on the Continent, Dee returned to England in 1551. He established himself in Mortlake with his vast collection of books, manuscripts, maps and scientific instruments – one of the largest private libraries in England at the time. Dee calculated the most favourable date for Elizabeth’s coronation and advised her on British expansion. He became a leading expert on navigation, receiving regular visits from many key Elizabethan explorers - Humphrey Gilbert, Martin Frobisher and Walter Ralegh. Carole Levin looks at witchcraft trials in the 16th century and considers their relation to the ‘weird sisters’ of Macbeth.