

# Mercator's Letter to John Dee

*Written: 20 April 1577*

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Imago Mundi published an article by E G R Taylor, containing the text of a letter from Gerard Mercator to John Dee in 1577 (Imago Mundi, vol. XIII, 1956 pp. 55-68). The article is based on a manuscript by John Dee entitled "*Volume of Great and Rich Discoveries*", the final chapter of which is entitled:

*"That all these Northern Iles and Septentrional Parts are lawfully appropriated to the Crown of this Brytish Impire: and the terrible adventure and great loss of the Brytish people and other of King Arthur his subjects perishing about the first discovery thereof. And the placing of Colonies in the same Iles and Regions by the same King Arthur. And an entire and general Description of all the part of the world within 12 degrees of the North Pole and somewhat more."*

This chapter is, apparently, almost entirely given over to Mercator's letter to Dee dated 20 April 1577. The letter itself is quoted from Cnoyen:

*"The iedeas about the Northern Regeions which some time ago I extracted from him follow word for word save where for sake of brevity or speed I have translation into Latein when if not always his words I have retained his meaning"*

As to where Mercator got his information:

*"The historie of the voyage of Jacobus Cnoyen Buschoducensis, throughout all Asia, Africa, and the North, was lent me in time past by a friend of mine at Antwerp (probably Ortelius). After I had used it I restored it again: after many years I required it again of my friend (no doubt to answer Dee) but he had forgotten of whom he had borrowed it"*

- One assumes the parentheticals were but in by Taylor, the author of the article.

We don't know how much of Cnoyen's remarks on the North were quoted by Mercator, or how much he may have edited them. There might be considerably more that was not of interest to Mercator when he made his original copies. Or not. Unfortunately, much of the letter dealing with the "priest with the astrolabe" is in Latin, which is to say edited by Mercator.

King Arthur is mentioned some four times in the text of the letter (with an additional assumed mention in a missing line) regarding a presumed expedition of his in the year 530 AD, all of which is in the first half of the letter. The information about Arthur is from a lost manuscript called in the letter the *Gestae Arthur* (Dutch: Atrurus Gesten, Latin: *Pincipio Gestorum Arturi*). There is apparently no other mention of this manuscript other than in this letter.

One question that arises is whether the information from the *Gestae Arthur* comes from Cnoyen, or whether it was inserted later. And also "what was the version of the *Gestae Arhuri* which all parties refer to familiarly, and yet which contains such strange new detail of that King's enterprises?" (Taylor).

Certainly there were Legends of Arthur conquering islands to the North - Geoffrey of Monmouth, for instance, says "*After an entire conquest of Ireland, he made a voyage with his fleet to Iceland, which he also subdued.*" - this was just prior to Arthur's conquests of Gaul, Norway, etc. - no doubt others gave him credit with the subjugation of Iceland and more.

There is some doubt as to whether the *Inventio Fortunatae* was written by Nicholas of Lynne or by some other explorer. Nicholas was a Carmelite as opposed to a Minorite as Cnoyen has the explorer.

One possibility is Hugh of Ireland, of whom almost nothing is known - however we do have the following about him "*Hugh... of Ireland, a Minorite, wrote a certain journey in one volume... We read of no other work by this Hugh, but he is said to have flourished in 1360 AD, in the reign of King Edward III*". Thomas Kingsbury is also mentioned in Taylor's article as an alternative.

Nicholas of Lynne, however, is the name Hakluyt (in his 1589 Dictionary of National Biography) gives to the author of the *Inventio Fortunatae*, and simply for expedience I will use the name of Nicholas as well.

Taylor adds "*...but unless fresh evidence appears, the actual adventurer cannot be identified. Nevertheless that he existed, and that he wrote Inventio Fortunatae, purporting to describe the world from lat. 54 degrees northwards (ie what lay beyond the limits of the classical Seventh Climate) cannot be doubted. And the number of authentic touches to be found in the scanty notes we have of what he saw supports the suggestion that he visited Greenland and Markland.*"

As to the term 'magical Arte' Taylor has this to say in footnote 18: "*Mercator, like Dee, used the term 'magical art' in no perjorative sense. Natural Magic was based on the application of science and mathematics made by scholars*" The only magic that Nicholas may have used was his astrolabe.

A full reading of Mercator's letter does at least seem to confirm the idea of an expedition going beyond Greenland around the year 1360, though it difficult to determine exactly where it went (Taylor suggests the 'indrawing sea' of the letter as being the Davis Straight between Greenland and Baffin Is.). Some early maps, prior to the known investigations of the area, show a large bay on the north of Canada - we certainly cannot prove that these maps are based on Cnoyen or on the *Inventio Fortunatae*, but on the other hand we also know of no other expedition on which the maps might have been based.

ADDENDUM:

The following is a translation taken from Mercator's 1569 polar map:

*"we have taken [the Arctic geography] from the Itinerium of Jacobus Cnoyen of the Hague, who makes some citations from the Gesta of Arthur of Britain; however, the greater and most important part he learned from a certain priest at the court of the king of Norway in 1364. He was descended in the fifth generation from those whom Arthur had sent to inhabit these lands, and he related that in the year 1360 a certain Minorite, an Englishman from Oxford, a mathematician, went to those islands; and leaving them, advanced still farther by magic arts and mapped out all and measured them by an astrolabe in practically the subjoined figure, as we have learned from Jacobus. The four canals there pictured he said flow with such current to the inner whirlpool, that if vessels once enter they cannot be driven back by wind."*