

**John Dee,
King Arthur,
And The
Conquest of
The Arctic**



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A **BSTRACT: A DETAILED STUDY OF JOHN DEE'S LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CLAIM THAT KING ARTHUR CONQUERED THE FAR NORTHERN WORLD AND NORTH AMERICA.** Although sometimes treated as Dee's own invention, the concept of Arthur as a conqueror of the Arctic and even parts of North America clearly antedates Dee. One witness to it is the *Gesta Arthuri*, which was seen and summarized by Jacob Cnoyen, who probably wrote in the fourteenth century.

This medieval document apparently described Arthur's attempts to conquer the far north, including an expedition launched against the North Pole itself. Another witness is the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae*, which dates from the start of the thirteenth century and provides a list of Arthur's northern conquests, including Greenland, Vinland and the North Pole. On the basis of these and other documents, it would appear that the concept of Arthur as an Arctic conqueror can be traced at least to the later twelfth century, if not before.

§1. From 1577 to 1580 the English polymath John Dee was engaged in manufacturing and disseminating some extraordinary claims on behalf of

the English monarchy and its imperial ambitions. Most intriguingly, Dee, generally seen as the originator of the phrase "the British Empire," argued that Queen Elizabeth could assert dominion over a vast tract of the northern globe and the New World, partially by dint of its having once been conquered and ruled by the Tudors' reputed early medieval ancestor, King Arthur. In his most important treatment of the issue, the *Brytanic Imperii Limites* ("Limits of the British Empire") of 1578, he wrote that

Elizabeth could claim title royal to all the coastes and ilandes begining at or about Terra Florida, and so alongst, or neere vnto Atlantis [i.e., America], goinge northerly, and then to all the most northern ilands great and small, and so compassinge about Groenland [i.e., Greenland], eastwards until the teritoris opposite vnto the farthest easterlie and northen boundes of the Duke of Moscovia his dominions (Dee Limits 43)[1].

§2. Dee's arguments, culminating in the *Limites*, do not rest exclusively upon Arthur's supposed conquest of the northern latitudes (an Oxford friar, the Welsh Prince Madoc (Williams 1987), and St Brendan the Navigator were all also cited as evidence for a historical dominion and thus current ownership) but Dee himself admitted that his case did "depende cheiflie vppon our Kinge Arthur" (Dee Limits 52).

As a result, Dee went to some pains to legitimize his Arthurian material, complaining that the profusion of "fables, glosinges, vntruthes, and impossibilities, incerted in the true historie of King Arthure" meant that the "truth yt selfe" of Arthur's historical acts, as Dee conceived it, was often disbelieved or ignored, and can only be retrieved through a purging of the parasitic legends that had gathered around it—a endeavour that Dee proceeded to undertake (Dee Limits 53; Sherman 1995, 188; Artese 2003, 129; MacMillan 2006, 65–66).

Having weeded out the "untruths" from the Arthurian narratives he had gathered, Dee could confidently proclaim that Arthur had conquered Gaul, Scandinavia, Iceland, Greenland, all the northern islands around Russia (i.e., the entire Arctic Ocean abutting northern Europe, Estoti-

land—which may be the Canadian Baffin Island, if it describes a real place), as well as the North Pole itself (Dee Limits 46–47, 55–57, 61–69, 82–85; French 1972, 195–197; Macmillan 2006, 54).

§3. The resulting legal case for Tudor ownership of much of the northern world was, naturally, of considerable interest to Elizabeth. Dee records in his diary a number of meetings with the Queen and leading members of the court, with Elizabeth actually visiting Dee for further discussions. Indeed, it appears that it was Elizabeth who commanded Dee to set out more fully his ideas of a northern Arthurian inheritance in the *Limites* (MacMillan 2001b, 196; French 1972, 196; Halliwell 1842, 4, 5, 8–9).² If Dee consequently had clear political motives for exaggerating the case he made, this does not mean that his case was purely invented, as researchers sometimes appear to assume (Artese 2003, 129–130).

After all, his aim was explicitly to provide documentary proof of the Tudor claims, separating out what he judged to be the genuinely historical data from the chaff of "fables" and "untruths." The remainder of this study stems from the question: what documentary "proofs" of Arthur's Arctic conquests prompted John Dee to make his astounding claims?

§4. The concept of Arthur as a historical warrior of c. 500 AD first appears in the Welsh *Historia Brittonum* of 829/30, where he is described as the *dux bellorum*, "leader of battles" (*Historia Brittonum* 56).³ However, the Arthur of this text is certainly not an overseas conqueror: his victories are all insular, fought against the Germanic invaders of post-Roman Britain. Indeed, he was not even described as a king at this point.⁴ By and large, we have to wait until the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, published c. 1138, before we find the imperial, far-conquering Arthur of the medieval chronicle tradition:

That summer Arthur prepared his fleet to go to Ireland, which he desired to conquer . . . Having subdued the whole country, Arthur took his fleet to Iceland, where he defeated the natives and conquered their land. As the news spread through the islands that no one could stop Arthur, kings Doldaius of Gotland and Gunuasius of the Orkneys came unbidden to submit and promised to pay tribute . . . [Arthur] exulted at being univer-

sally feared and decided to conquer all Europe. He readied his fleets and headed first for Norway to make his brother-in-law Loth its king—[The Britons] assaulted the cities with fire at the ready, and scattered the country-dwellers with unabated fury until they had subjected the whole of Norway and Denmark to Arthur's control (Geoffrey of Monmouth History of the Kings of Britain 9.153–154).⁵

§5. Not satisfied with northern Europe, Arthur finally marches on Gaul and conquers it too. Certainly the rudiments of Dee's Arthurian empire are here, in a text that was considered by many English antiquaries of the period to represent the genuine history of Britain, despite the attacks on it by Polydore Vergil (French 1972, 194–195).^[6] Arthur is no longer an insular war leader but instead an emperor and the conqueror of Iceland and Scandinavia^[7]. However, this is still a long way short of Dee's claims: Arthur has conquered the then-known north, but his rule over the Arctic Ocean, Greenland, and parts of North America are most definitely absent.

§6. Since neither of the most significant early Arthurian pseudo-histories go so far as to place Arthur in Greenland, America, or the Arctic—although Geoffrey's account prefigures such claims by extending Arthur's conquests to the farthest known northern and western limits of European civilization—we must therefore turn to Dee's own manuscripts for some illumination as to where this idea came from and how it developed. Dee himself seems to have been acutely aware that many of Arthur's conquests—particularly the northern and Arctic conquests—were not attested in the primary sources for Arthur's supposed military career, and that the documentary evidence he relied on was not usually regarded as trustworthy.

He explains this issue partly by alleging the jealousy of Britain's rivals who ignore and criticize his sources, and partly by alleging the deliberate loss or destruction of evidence by Britain's enemies, in particular by the Arthur-questioning humanist Polydore Vergil. So in his *Brytanici Imperii Limites* he says that there once were many proofs of Arthur's conquests, but "wilfully and wickedlie (as by sondrie credible gentlemen I have heard it testefied), this Polijdor burnt [them], yea a whole carte load

almost" (Dee Limits 53, 62; Artese 2003, 130)[8]. Nonetheless, despite these alleged depredations, Dee did have some solid evidence of Arthur's North Atlantic and Arctic conquests that he could cite, as is made clear by a 1577 letter from the geographer Gerard Mercator to Dee, which Dee transcribed in his slightly fire-damaged manuscript "Of Famous and Rich Discoveries" (1577) and which Dee translated and summarized in his *Brytanici Imperii Limites* of 1578 (Taylor 1956; Dee Limits 83–85).

§7. Mercator included a legend to his great wall map of 1569 that referred to Arthur in the following way:

Touching the description of the North parts, I have taken the same out of the voyage of James Cnoyen of Hartzevan Buske, which allegeth certain conquests of Arthur king of Britaine, and the most part, and chiefest things among the rest he learned of a certain priest in the king of Norway's court, in the year 1364. This priest was descended (in the fifth generation) from them which King Arthur had sent to inhabit these Islands (Taylor 1956, 64).

§8. This legend naturally attracted Dee's interest, and the letter from Mercator is in answer to Dee's inquiries about the sources of his knowledge of Arthur's Arctic conquests. For the most part, Mercator copied out for Dee his own notes from a manuscript of Jacobus Cnoyen van Tser-toghenbosche, an apparently noted medieval traveller: "The ideas about the Northern Regions which some time ago I extracted from him [Cnoyen] follow word for word save where for the sake of brevity or speed I have translated into Latin when if not always his words I have retained his meaning" (Taylor 1956, 57).[9] To this letter, which includes both Mercator's transcription of Cnoyen's Dutch text and his Latin summations and comments, Dee added his own English marginal notations, which he made during his transcription of the letter, thus providing us with three different perspectives on the idea that Arthur had ruled in Greenland and the Arctic.

§9. In Mercator's transcription, the first mention we get of Arthur comes in Cnoyen's Dutch, when he refers to a document known as *Arturus Gesten*, or *Gestae Arthuri*[10], while discussing the lands immediately

around the mountains that are supposed to surround the North Pole: "And near here, towards the north, those Little People live of whom there is also mention in the *Gestae Arthuri*." Cnoyen's reference is, of itself, intriguing: since Mercator is one of Dee's sources for Arthur's Arctic activities, and Cnoyen is Mercator's, so it seems that Cnoyen himself derived his information from an earlier text known as the *Gestae Arthuri* (Taylor 1956, 57).

This text has since vanished, but based on their comments, it seems likely that it was also known to both Mercator and perhaps also Dee. Thus, when Mercator breaks off from his transcription of Cnoyen's Dutch to remark in Latin that "these facts and more about the geography of the North are to be found in the beginning of the *Gestae Arthuri* etc (in *Principio Gestorum Arturi*. etc.)," which would appear to indicate his familiarity with this text (Taylor 1956, 57, 61; Muir 1968, 258).

Less clear-cut, but also potentially suggestive of his own familiarity with the *Gestae Arthuri*, is Dee's marginal note that reads "*Gestae Arthuri*. A rare testimony of great importance to the Brytish title to the Septentrional Regions, Atlantis [i.e., America] in particular" (Taylor 1956, 57, 61; Muir 1968, 258)[11]. Nevertheless, even if the above is true, we are now reliant only on the evidence of Mercator's transcription of Cnoyen's summary for the contents of this *Gestae Arthuri*. As such, whatever else this text had to say about the Arctic "Little People" (*dat Clein Volck*) and their encounters with Arthur is lost to us[12]. We do, however, find an additional brief reference to some sort of Arthurian activity in the Arctic mountains in Dee's translation and summary of Mercator's letter in his *Brytanici Imperii Limites*. Referring to a line, since lost to fire damage, that occurs just before the mention of "Little People" in his transcription of Mercator's letter in "Of Famous and Rich Discoveries," Dee writes:

These are the mountains [around the North Pole] of which it is written that there were among them certain cities, as you can find mention in the *Arthuri Gestis* above, &caet (Dee *Limits* 84)[13].

§10. Dee comments on this in the margin of *Brytanici Imperii Limites*: "Great Mountains surrounded the North pole in which there were cities

in King Arthur's time." As with the previous quote, the import is unclear, but it may well be that Arthur was said to have either conquered or founded the mountain cities around the North Pole in the *Gestae Arthuri*, in order to account for their appearance there.

§11. Obviously such a text as the *Gestae Arthuri* is of the utmost importance in the present context, and, fortunately, Cnoyen appears to return to it (Muir 1968, 258, 261)[14]. Another brief lacuna in the manuscript robs us of some of the detail, but this can again be retrieved from Dee's translation in *Limites*. After referring us once more to the mountains around the North Pole, which lie "in the 78th degree of latitude," we are told that they do not form a continuous ring. Rather they are broken at various points by channels known as the "Indrawing Seas," due to their irresistible northward current drawing water into a central sea around the Pole itself:

One group of Arthur's knights sailed thus far when he was conquering the northern isles and making them all subject to him. And we read that nearly 4000 persons entered the indrawing seas who never returned. But in A.D. 1364 eight of these people [i.e. descendants of Arthur's invading force] came to the King's Court in Norway. Among them were two priests, one of whom had an astrolabe, who was descended in the 5th[15] generation from a Bruxellensis: one, I say: The eight (were sprung from?) those who had penetrated the Northern regions in the first ships[16].

§12. Again, we have a frustratingly brief summation of Arthur's deeds in the far north. From what we have, it would seem that, according to the *Gestae Arthuri*, Arthur sent part of his army of at least 4000 people into the "Indrawing Seas," since they were the only way to pass beyond the Arctic mountains that he seems already to have run up against, presumably with the intent to conquer and colonize whatever islands lay within the central sea surrounding the North Pole.

After alluding to this expedition, Cnoyen then breaks off from the Arthurian narrative to discuss more recent, but by his account related, events. Muir (following Taylor) has plausibly argued that the details of the eight visitors to the Norwegian court in 1364 probably do, in fact, derive from

Cnoyen's own experience and that "he himself met the priest with the astrolabe in Bergen in 1364," which carries with it the necessary implication that Cnoyen was alive in the mid-fourteenth century and thus that the *Gestae Arthuri* that Cnoyen quotes from was already in existence by this point, as Muir indeed notes (1968, 259; Taylor 1956, 61–63; van Rooij 2000, 22; MacMillan 2001b, 21–22; Enterline 2002, 51). Who exactly the eight visitors were whom Cnoyen believed to be the descendants of Arthur's men is unclear, though Taylor is of the opinion that Cnoyen is here mistakenly assigning Arthurian origins to a "band of the Norse settlers in Greenland, or even . . . a group from Markland (Labrador)" (Taylor 1956, 66). Whatever the case may be, Cnoyen then appears to return to his summary of the the narrative of the *Gestae Arthuri*:

That great army of Arthur's had lain all the winter ["of AD 530" is inserted in a blank space in the text] in the northern islands of Scotland. And on May 3 a part of it crossed over into Iceland. At that time there returned from the north four of the twelve ships whose captains warned Arthur of the indrawing seas. So that Arthur did not proceed further, but peopled all the islands between Scotland and Iceland, and also peopled Grocland. [Mercator adds here: "So it seems the Indrawing Sea only begins beyond Grocland."] In this Grocland he found people 23 feet tall, that is to say of the feet with which land is measured (Taylor 1956, 58)[17].

§13. Where this Grocland that Arthur settled is supposed to be is not entirely clear: Dee believed it to be Greenland, though his belief seems to have been based mainly on the shared Gr-; on Mercator's globe it lies west of Greenland and may be a representation of the Arctic Baffin Island (Enterline 2002, 65–66).

Whatever the case may be, the above clearly constitutes a claim by the *Gestae Arthuri* that Arthur both subjugated and populated at least parts of the far north in the sixth century. The context of this colonization appears to be a brief enforced lull in the expansion of his empire due to concerns over the treacherous nature of the Indrawing Seas, with Arthur using this time to settle those lands he has thus-far conquered. Dee's translation of the above section, which is slightly damaged in the transcription, indicates that the four ships which warned Arthur were the remainder of an

original group of twelve, while the next section of Cnoyen's precis of the *Gestae Arthuri* confirms that these twelve were in fact an expedition sent out by Arthur. In this context, it would seem natural to conclude that the four ships were the remnants of Arthur's already-referenced first attempt to send part of his army through the Indrawing Seas to whatever lands lay around the North Pole beyond them, hence the ships' warning to Arthur about these seas. Arthur, however, seems not to have been willing to give up on the idea of passing beyond the Arctic mountains via these channels:

When those four ships had come back, there were sailors who asserted that they knew there were magnetic rocks under the water, and that eight ships had foundered because of their iron nails. So Arthur again fitted out a fleet of twelve ships, containing no iron, and embarked 1800 men and about 400 women. They sailed northwards on May 3 in the year following that in which the former ships had departed. And of these 12 ships, five were driven on the rocks in the storm, but the rest of them made their way between the high rocks on June 18, which was 44 days after they had set out (Taylor 1956, 58).¹⁸

§14. Where exactly this new northern expedition of Arthur's ended up is unclear. They presumably passed through one of the channels of the Indrawing Seas, given that this seems to have been Arthur's goal and the preceding expedition had been turned back by their treacherous nature. This scenario cannot be confirmed, however, as the above is all that we have by way of Cnoyen's paraphrase of the *Gestae Arthuri*. Nonetheless, what we do have is most instructive in explaining the origins of Dee's claims for an Arthurian empire that included the Arctic and the north.

It would seem that Dee, Mercator, and Cnoyen were all familiar with (either directly, indirectly, or both) a medieval Arthurian text that was written in or before the mid-fourteenth century, and that claimed that Arthur did not simply end his conquests at Iceland, as Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* implies. Rather it told of Arthur subjugating and settling the 'Northern Isles' of the North Atlantic, including the giant-infested Grocland (i.e., Greenland or an Arctic island to the west of Greenland) and, presumably, a land of "Little People," which was either intended to reflect the north-eastern tip of Norway or possibly the Arctic

Ellesmere Island to the northwest of Greenland (Taylor 1956, 57; Muir 1968, 258; Enterline 2002, 54).¹⁹ The Arthur of the *Gestae* would also seem to have had some involvement with legendary cities located in the Arctic mountains that supposedly ringed the North Pole at "the 78th degree of latitude"—perhaps in the role of either a founder or a conqueror—and was thought to have sent two expeditions into the Indrawing Seas that reportedly cut through these mountain ranges, allowing access to the North Pole itself.

§15. Of this *Gestae Arthuri* we have no further evidence, and the same is true of Cnoyen's text. Whatever else it said of Arthur's activities in the Arctic we cannot know. Richard Hakluyt, having read Dee's manuscript, asked Mercator in 1580 for further details but met with a disappointing response:

The historie of the voyage of Iacobus Cnoyen Buschoducensis throughout al Asia, Affrica, and the North, was lent me in time past by a friend of mine at Antwerpe. After I had vsed it, I restored it againe: after many yeeres I required it againe of my friend, but hee had forgotten of whom hee had borrowed it (Hakluyt 1599 1.445).

§16. However, while significant, the *Gestae Arthuri* and Cnoyen's text (via Mercator) were not Dee's only sources for his North Atlantic and Arctic Arthur. Dee, in his marginal notes on Mercator's letter, comments on Cnoyen's paraphrase of the *Gestae Arthuri*'s account of Arthurian colonies in Grocland as follows:

Note the Colonies sent by King Arthur into all the north Islands and by name into Grocland, which I yet suppose to be the same which is otherwise anciently known as Groenland [i.e., Greenland] and of that you had the word before owt of the boke De Priscus Anglorum Legibus (Taylor 1956, 58).

§17. Clearly Dee had already read of Arthur's supposed northern conquests, particularly of Greenland, when he became acquainted with Cnoyen, (just as he may himself have read the *Gestae Arthuri*). The source he refers to was William Lambarde's *Archaionomia sive de Pris-*

cus Anglorum Legibus libri (London: Roger Daniel, 1568), which Dee had a copy of in his library and used in his *Brytanici Imperii Limites* (Macmillan 2006, 58; Dee *Limits* 57–58). The relevant portion of Lambarde's *Archaionomia* was also known to Hakluyt, that other proponent of an Arthurian Atlantic and Arctic empire, who translated it in his *Principal Nauigations*:

Arthur which was sometimes the most renowned king of the Britains, was a mightie, and valiant man, and a famous warriour. This kingdome was too litle for him, & his minde was not contented with it. He therefore valiantly subdued all Scantia, which is now called Norway, and all the Islands beyond Norway, to wit, Island [i.e., Iceland] and Greenland, which are appertaining vnto Norway, Sweueland, Ireland, Gotland, Denmarke, Semeland, Windland [Latin text, Winlandiam], Curland, Roe, Femeland [i.e., Finland], Wireland, Flanders, Cherilland, Lapland, and all the other lands & Islands of the East sea, euen vnto Russia (in which Lapland he placed the Easterly bounds of his British Empire) and many other Islands beyond Norway, euen vnder the North pole, which are appendances of Scantia, now called Norway.

These people were wild and sauage, and had not in them the loue of God nor of their neighbors, because all euill commeth from the North, yet there were among them certeine Christians liuing in secret. But king Arthur was an exceeding good Christian, and caused them to be baptized, and thorowout all Norway to worship one God, and to receiue and keepe inuiolably for euer, faith in Christ onely.

At that time all the noble men of Norway tooke wiues of the noble nation of the Britaines, whereupon the Norses say, that they are descended of the race and blood of this kingdome.

The aforesayd king Arthur obtained also in those dayes of the Pope & court of Rome, that Norway should be for euer annexed to the crowne of Britaine for the inlargement of this kingdome, and he called it the chamber of Britaine. For this cause the Norses say, that they ought to dwell with vs in this kingdome, to wit, that they belong to the crowne of Britaine . . . (Hakluyt 1599, 1.2–3).²⁰

§18. This text tells much the same tale as the *Gestae Arthuri* seems to of an imperial Arthur who establishes dominion over the whole of the northern latitudes, though here we get some additional details that do not appear in Cnoyen's fragmentary paraphrase of the latter. As such it backs up the conclusion reached previously that Dee was not the first to connect Arthur with the far north and Arctic regions—or, indeed, the North Pole itself—and, contrary to the frequent assumption, this connection cannot simply be dismissed as Elizabethan propaganda. Indeed, not only does the *Gestae Arthuri* appear to date from the mid-fourteenth century or before, but Lambarde himself had a very clear source for the text he gave: a manuscript of the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* into which, it has been demonstrated, there was inserted an Arthurian section taken from the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae*, which now survives through such interpolations, aside from a single complete manuscript (Muir 1968, 253–254; Liebermann 1896; Liebermann 1913).²¹

This source is most significant, not least because the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae*, with its claims of Arthur's northern conquests and conversions, has been shown to have been composed c. 1210 (Muir 1968, 260; Liebermann 1896, 91–100; Liebermann 1913, 734). As such, the tradition of Arthur as a North Atlantic and Arctic conqueror must certainly go back to at least the very early thirteenth century.

§19. It has to be asked what exactly the relationship between the *Leges Anglorum* and the *Gestae Arthuri* was. It seems unlikely that both represent independent elaborations of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, given their shared but very rare concept of Arthur. Similarly, Muir is probably right that there is no good reason to come down in favor of the view that the *Gestae Arthuri* is an elaboration of the *Leges Anglorum*, based on the content and nature of both the sources, although such a situation is not impossible (Muir 1968, 260). Muir considers that we are left with two possibilities.

The first is that it may be better to think of the *Leges* and the *Gestae* as dual elaborations of a lost original, which would presumably date from the mid to late twelfth century, given that the *Leges* has its origins c. 1210 and both it and the *Gestae Arthuri* are clearly influenced by Geoffrey of

Monmouth's *Historia* of c. 1138.²² With regard to this possibility, the evidence of the fragmentary *Insule Britannie*, a text that appears to pre-date the *Leges Anglorum* (the earliest surviving manuscript dates from the end of the twelfth century or the very beginning of the thirteenth), may well be crucial^[23].

Although the *Insule Britannie* makes no mention of Arthur, it does list a number of northern islands as "British" possessions, all but one of which are also named (in similar spellings) as constituent parts of Arthur's British Empire in the *Leges Anglorum*. This text must surely derive its notion of these islands as "British" possessions from an acquaintance with the adventures of Arthur in the northern latitudes, and its existence and contents and especially its date strongly support the contention that there was indeed an earlier source from which at least the *Leges* and the *Insule Britannie* derive (Muir 1968, 257, 259).

The second possibility accepts that there must have been such a lost twelfth-century source, but rather than having the *Gestae Arthuri* as an independent elaboration of this, it instead considers the *Gestae Arthuri* to be this source, with the *Leges Anglorum* and the *Insule Britannie* being summaries of the conquests presumably narrated in it (Muir 1968, 259).²⁴

§20. Deciding between these two possibilities is difficult. One potential route is to look again at our most detailed source, the *Gestae Arthuri*, to establish whether or not its contents are consistent with an origin in the twelfth century. Taylor was of the opinion that the *Gestae Arthuri* must post-date Marco Polo and be of an early to mid fourteenth-century date, due to the fact that Cnoyen mentions the Polo-derived "province of Bergi" near a reference to the *Gestae Arthuri*. However, it is not entirely clear from the text that this name actually occurred in the *Gestae Arthuri* or that it was not Cnoyen's own addition to the account of the far-north, so the question of date cannot be fully concluded on this basis alone (Taylor 1956, 65; van Rooij 2000^[22], 22; Enterline 2002, 56).

Perhaps more telling are the various proposals of a relationship between Norse tales of the far north and the *Gestae's* account of Arthur's activities. Muir, for example, has followed Skelton in proposing that Arthur's

attempts to move into the very far north in the *Gestae Arthuri* are related to or modelled upon Eirik the Red's late tenth-century North Atlantic exploits in the sagas and histories (Muir 1968, 258–259; Jones 1984, 290–311; Jones 1964). According to Skelton, Arthur's first apparent scouting expedition to the far north was followed by a second successful attempt at colonization, which saw around forty percent of the ships involved being lost, is "strikingly reminiscent of the story of Eirik the Red" and "presumably fabricated therefrom" (Skelton 1965, 244). Thus it is said in the sagas that Eirik undertook an initial reconnaissance of Greenland but only settled it on his second voyage, when he led "twenty five ships . . . but only fourteen of them arrived there. Some were forced back and some perished" (Jones 1961, 129; Jones 1964, 144). Such an influence of Eirik's deeds on those of Arthur in the *Gestae Arthuri* would obviously be of considerable interest here, if it could be sustained. Whether the extant fragments of the *Gestae Arthuri* offer further supporting evidence for its use of Norse accounts for its tale of Arthur, or for its being derivative of them, is an important question. One might point to the *Gestae's* reference to the "Little People" whom Arthur presumably encountered in the far north (compare the *Skrælings* that the Norse encounter, who are described in "Eirik the Red's Saga" as "small, ill-favoured men" (Jones 1964, 182; Seaver 2008)) and to the "Indrawing Seas" that Arthur's ships have difficulties with, which Enterline considers to potentially derive from Norse experiences in northern Canadian channels (2002, 56–59). Of particular interest may be the claim that Arthur encountered "people 23 feet tall" in the Arctic Groeland (i.e., Greenland), as early Greenland sources apparently tell tales of natives from there who were 23 feet tall (Taylor 1956, 58. Jones 1982, 222)[25].

§21. What do such potential Norse connections mean for the date of the *Gestae Arthuri* and its relationship with the *Leges Anglorum*? On the whole, they tend to support a late date for the *Gestae Arthuri* and undermine the case for the *Leges Anglorum* being a summary of the *Gestae Arthuri*. The two earliest sagas relating these events—the "Greenlanders' Saga" and "Eirik the Red's Saga"—are thought to date from the late twelfth or thirteenth century (Jones 1964, 225–227), and are thus exceedingly unlikely to have been transmitted to Britain or mainland Europe at an early enough date to have influenced a pre-1200 *Gestae Arthuri*. As

such, the most credible conclusion would appear to be that the *Gestae Arthuri* was a product of the fourteenth century, and that it represents an elaboration—influenced by the Norse sagas—of the lost twelfth-century text concerned with the Arthurian conquest of the Arctic, which underlies both the *Leges Anglorum* and the *Insule Britannie*.²⁶

§22. Granting all this, it is perhaps finally worth asking how this lost text might have developed its concept of an Arctic-conquering Arthur from the deeds ascribed to him in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. On the one hand, it is possible that the concept was wholly its author's own innovation (Muir 1968, 257, 259). On the other, there are hints that a tale of an Arthurian attack upon a frozen, possibly far-northern, Otherworld fortress existed in pre-Galfridian Welsh tradition, which could well be relevant here (Sims-Williams 1982, 244; Green 2007, 59; Green 2009). Whatever the case may be, we can say with a reasonable degree of certainty that the author of the text that underlies the *Leges Anglorum* and the *Insule Britannie* crafted his concept of a far-northern Arthur with the help of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesia Pontificum* of c. 1075. Not only has Muir shown that Adam of Bremen was likely this author's chief source for the names of northern countries and islands that Arthur could be said to have established his imperium over (including *Grenelandiam*, Greenland, and *Wynelandiam*[²⁷], the Norse *Vinland* in North America), but the *Leges Anglorum* account of Arthur's conversion of the Norse looks to have been lifted from Adam's account of the conversion of Norway (begun by John, an English bishop, and spread by Olaf, king of Norway), with these events now being credited instead to Arthur (Muir 1968, 255–257)[²⁸].

§23. We can go no farther at present. The evidence is scarce and fragmentary, and it appears that not only has the *Gestae Arthuri* been lost but so too has the text that it was an elaboration of. In conclusion, three points ought to be made. First, it is clear that Dee's concept of Arthur as a historical North Atlantic and Arctic conqueror cannot be considered to have been his own invention: we have definite witnesses to it going back to the very early thirteenth century, and good reason to believe that a common source for this concept was created in the mid to late twelfth century as an elaboration of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Sec-

ond, it is worth noting that this concept provides us with yet another instance of the deeds of historical and legendary figures being attracted to Arthur's name and claimed as his own (Green 2007, 203–217, 223–225).

The most obvious example is the reattribution of the tenth- and eleventh-century conversion of Norway to Arthur, but Arthur's conquest of the far north can be seen in the same light: the discovery and subjugation of Greenland and Vinland, here ascribed to Arthur, were the real achievements of Eirik the Red and his sons in the tenth century, and the *Gestae Arthuri*'s account of Arthur's deeds certainly appears to be in some way derivative of Norse tales of Eirik's feats in the North Atlantic. Finally, it appears that John Dee was not the first English author to try to use this concept of Arthur for political purposes, as the author of the *Insule Britannie* also seems to have considered that the idea of an northern Arthurian empire enabled places such as Norway, Iceland and Greenland to be claimed as British possessions, hence the title of his work.

Notes

1. For Dee's *Limites*, see *Dee Limits* and MacMillan 2001a. On Dee's construction of a case for a Tudor northern maritime empire, see Sherman 1995. See also French 1972 and MacMillan 2001. [Back]

2. While it may have suited Elizabeth to believe Dee's claims, others found them dubious. Artese (2003) argues that Spenser's *Faerie Queene* mocks the Arthurian claims of Dee. The legal case for a Tudor claim to much of the northern world was, of course, also of interest from the perspective of the then-ongoing search for a "northwest passage" that would allow the English to trade directly with China and the East Indies. [Back]

3. See Dumville 1986, Higham 2002, and Green 2007 on the nature and reliability of this reference. [Back]

4. While the text does not name him as a king, and most commentators have read it as implying that he was not, such a position is not explicitly excluded (Snyder 2005, 1–12). [Back]

5. Whether these conquests were entirely Geoffrey's own addition to the Arthurian legend is open to debate. In the *Vita Sancti Wohednouii* (Coe and Young 1995, 36–37) we find a claim that Arthur fought battles in "parts of Gaul," which does at least take him outside of Britain, though the notion that the *Vita* pre-dates Geoffrey's *Historia* is open to serious doubt. Similarly, in the Welsh folkloric tale *Culhwch ac Olwen* (ll. 118–120), usually dated to c. 1100, it is said that Arthur took twelve hostages from Norway, a claim that just might prefigure Geoffrey's claims if it is not itself a post-Galfridian addition to this tale. [Back]

6. Welsh histories continued to be based on Geoffrey into the eighteenth century, as witnessed by Theophilus Evan's *Drych y Prif Oesoedd* of 1716. [Back]

7. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that, contrary to Geoffrey's claims, Iceland actually appears to have been uninhabited during the period in which Arthur supposedly undertook its conquest. See, for example, Karlsson 2000, 9. [Back]

8. On Polydore Vergil and King Arthur, see Carley 1984. [Back]

9. Nothing more is known of Cnoyen beyond those references made to him by Mercator; on Cnoyen and the contents of the letter, see also van Rooij 2000, 19–24. [Back]

10. Cnoyen uses the former Dutch name and Dee the latter Latin one as the title for this text. Although it is possible that it was written in Middle Dutch, most commentators have preferred the name *Gestae Arthuri*; for convenience, I have adopted this usage here. [Back]

11. See also Dee's "&caet" after his first mention of the *Gestae Arthuri* in his translation of Mercator's letter (Limits 84, quoted below), where there looks to be no room in the transcription for further missing information beyond that which Dee already translates—this usage might possibly be interpreted in this way too. [Back]

12. "Little People," or pygmies, are frequently portrayed as living in the far north; Mercator considers, probably rightly, that these reflect the Norse 'Scraelings' i.e. 'eskimos' (Taylor 1956, 65; Seaver 2008). [Back]

13. This passage was presumably originally part of Cnoyen's Dutch summary of the *Gestae Arthuri*. [Back]

14. Note, for example, that Cnoyen uses the phrase "we read" when talking of Arthur (see below). [Back]

15. In a marginal note, Dee suggests that this is a mistake for twenty-five generations (Dee Limits 84; Taylor 1956, 58). [Back]

16. The initial section marked by italics is taken from Dee's translation rather than the transcription, which is damaged at this point: Dee's "group of Arthur's knights" reflects "part of the army of King Arthur" of Cnoyen's original Dutch (Limits 84; Taylor 1956, 58). [Back]

17. Once again, the section marked by italics is taken from Dee's translation (Limits 84) rather than the transcription, which is damaged at this point. [Back]

18. As previously, the initial section marked by italics is taken from Dee's translation (Limits 84–85) rather than the transcription, which is damaged at this point. [Back]

19. It is not entirely clear from Cnoyen's paraphrase that the Arctic land of "Little People" was conquered by Arthur, but it is a reasonable inference. [Back]

20. Hakluyt's *Principal Nauigations* includes both Lambarde's Latin text and Hakluyt's own English translation. Dee included the Latin text in his *Brytanici Imperii Limites*. See Dee Limits 57–58 for a modern translation that differs little from Hakluyt's. [Back]

21. Lambarde's text, translated by Hakluyt, largely resembles the best manuscripts of the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae*, except that *Estlandrium* is replaced by *Flandrium* in his version and *Wynelandium* becomes "Windland." [Back]

22. The most obvious evidence for this possibility comes from the names of the non-Arctic countries conquered by Arthur in both texts, many of

which are the same as those that Arthur conquers in the passage of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* cited previously (Ireland, Iceland, Gotland, Denmark, Norway). It is certainly clear that the London author who compiled the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae* had read Geoffrey's *Historia*, using it elsewhere in his text (Muir 1968, 260). [Back]

23. The *Insule Britannie* is translated in Tschan 2002, 228–29 [Back]

24. Given that we know that Cnoyen only quoted brief extracts from the *Gestae Arthuri*, the existence of deeds ascribed to Arthur in the *Leges Anglorum* that are not mentioned by Cnoyen need not concern us overmuch. [Back]

25. Unfortunately, I have been unable to ascertain which text Gwyn Jones refers to when he states that "early Greenland sources tell of natives . . . 23 feet tall," and his paper lacks detailed notes. [Back]

26. Note, however, that this rejection of a twelfth-century date for the *Gestae Arthuri* is not completely secure: it is not impossible that the Norse tales of the far north that ultimately inform the sagas could have made their way to Britain or mainland Europe in the course of the twelfth century and so have influenced a pre-1200 *Gestae Arthuri*, although we can never hope to prove such a proposition. In this context it should be noted that there is some evidence to indicate that Norse tales of Arctic Skrlings may have reached even Sicily by the mid-twelfth century, on the basis of the information contained in the *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq* of the geographer al-Idrisi, written c. 1150 (McGhee 1984, 11–12). [Back]

27. It is *Winlandiam* in Lambarde's Latin text and rendered as "Windland" by Hakluyt in his translation (1599, 1.2). [Back]

28. While a number of names appear to have been borrowed from Adam of Bremen, it is worth noting that some were clearly taken from other sources such as Finland and Lapland, as they are not present in Adam's *Gesta*. [Back]



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