

“WAS HE NOT WITH YOU? WHAT ON EARTH DOES HE DO?”

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN JOHN DEE AND ANDREAS DUDITH

MARCELL SEBŐK

“John Dee was a notorious visitor of East-Central European courts with a strange, mystical-chiliastic message based on his conversations with angels.”¹ This is how György Endre Szőnyi [henceforth Gyuri] introduced John Dee’s visits to our region in his book, which became a solid reference point in the historiography of early modern cultural history and occultism. Later in this book, after a detailed reconstruction of Dee’s regional activities, he offered another assessment of him: “[...] Dee lived an almost schizophrenic double life in East-Central Europe. The psychotic and visionary loner on the one hand can be contrasted with the vivid and exuberant scholar-magus who maintained his contacts and sought new acquaintances.”²

This evaluation is accompanied by a thorough discussion of Dee’s attempts toward patronage and acknowledgment expected from the regional aristocracy, papal envoys, and the Habsburg royal house (Rudolph II himself), and Gyuri plausibly concludes that Dee did not entice enough attention and then support in these circles. There is only but one exception within the series of disappointing efforts when Dee received a more extensive treatment: this can be detected in the exchange of letters between Tadeus Hájek-Hagecius (a Prague-based imperial astronomer) in whose house Dee spent some days during his trip, and Andreas Dudith, a contemporary Hungarian-born politician and erudite humanist. Dudith had an extremely large network of contacts, based on his personal relationships and correspondence.³ Consequently, I was wondering whether John Dee might have ever met Dudith in his house in Breslau (present-day Wrocław), or contacted, as it was already open for such English visitors as Philip Sidney and Henry Savile. This article offers, therefore, a new discussion of the possibility of their encounter or contact

¹ György Endre Szőnyi, *John Dee’s Occultism: Magical Exaltation Through Powerful Signs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 161.

² *Ibid.*, 260.

³ For the most detailed recent discussion of Dudith’s life see Gábor Almási, *The Uses of Humanism: Johannes Sambucus (1531–1584), Andreas Dudith (1533–1589), and the Republic of Letters in East Central Europe*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2009, 306–7.

by looking at again two examples Gyuri used,⁴ and also deals with other, new references which were not available for analysis at the time of publishing his Dee book.

In the first reference, a letter to Tadeus Hájek-Hagecius, composed on December 20, 1585, Dudith mentions “dominus Dee, Anglus, mathematicus” with great admiration, and asked Hagecius to inquire John Dee whether he could recommend him a resident mathematician to whom he was willing to offer a respectable salary.⁵ Even more, he urged Hagecius – and in this way Dee – to find somebody with whom he would live together. “I would treat him [the imagined mathematician] kindly and will pay him an annual salary, and he will have lots of books of every kind and leisure (otium).” Dudith also wrote to Francesco Pucci, “nobilis et patricius Florentinus”, a Florentine patrician and convert, whom he seems to have also esteemed, and asked him the same, that is, to suggest a mathematician to satisfy his personal educational plans.

For many years then, Dudith had desperately tried to find a companion of well-prepared mathematicians and astronomers. He relied on his various English and other European contacts in his search because he decided to be a scholar of celestial spheres, to be a trained astronomer. It happened in a period of his life when he had already published an erudite and critical manifesto (*A Commentariolus – Short Commentary*) against the superstitious explanations of heavenly phenomena on the occasion of the famous comet of 1577.⁶ His efforts to become a member of the community of astronomers had failed, though he remained a respected member of the Republic of Letters whose Breslau-house and library were open for learned travelers like John Dee.

The second reference Gyuri used in his book describes a different assessment of Dee by Dudith, “whose esteem seems to have waned by 1587”, – who composed again an epistle to Hagecius on July 3, 1587.⁷ “De Anglis multa audivi” – I have heard a lot about the Englishman – says Dudith and continues as follows: “All of these seem puzzling and little credible to me. Since some people are determined that he speaks with the angels, I do not know whom to believe.” And Dudith goes on by discussing the alchemical term, *chrysopoeia* which refers to the artificial production of gold, most commonly by the alleged transmutation of base metals such as lead. Also, he refers to the *adamant*, a legendary mineral to which many properties were attributed. During the spiritual sessions organized by Dee and

⁴ Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 261–62.

⁵ Dudith, *Epistulae*, vol. 7, no. 1251., 533. <https://mek.oszk.hu/20300/20374/pdf/accesses> September 10, 2022.

⁶ My article on the commentary is forthcoming: Marcell Sebők, “Practicing and Patronizing Science in the Republic of Letters: Andreas Dudith’s Radiating Curiosity, Vanity, and Skepticism.”

⁷ Dudith, *Epistulae*, no. 1265., 555.

Edward Kelley, they made use of this holy stone – adamant – through which they could see angels and communicate with them. But the spirits in fact returned mere coal (*carbon*), and even this coal burned into ashes. This proves for Dudith, without hiding his displeasure, that both Dee and Kelley practiced black magic and not science.

For the sake of offering a glimpse of Dudith's well-informed composition of letters, it should be mentioned that within this same letter he describes, for example, the case of Francesco Pucci, who, under the effects of a spiritual séance carried out in Prague on August 6, 1586 – during which angel Uriel spoke to him through the mouth of Edward Kelly – converted to Catholicism and officially abjured on March 6, 1587. Pucci's religious stance and his relation with heretical circles arouse suspicion though, and later in 1593 he was arrested in Salzburg, and then transferred to Rome after a long procedure of a trial. Finally, Pucci was sentenced to death by the tribunal of the Inquisition and beheaded on July 5, 1597. Dudith also mentions the death of Paul Wittich, a talented astronomer of the day, "whose library was torn apart by his sister – as I heard – and no other memories remained." Wittich died on January 9, 1586, and his mentor, Tycho Brahe intended to buy his library but failed.

Dudith's shift of perception and opinion about Dee seems understandable since at the beginning of the 1580s Dudith sought knowledgeable experts for improving his mathematical and astronomical capacities, and that is why John Dee was amongst the "wanted" scholars. Dudith also asked for this favor or recommendation from a number of his correspondents whom he expected to offer an appropriate person. But some years later he became skeptical and sarcastic about those practitioners in science who had not met the high standards required for a cutting-edge scholarship of the day, the one Dudith never pursued. There could be another reason that fed Dudith's irritation towards John Dee, and I quote again from the book: "While at home Dee collected books, organized a private academy, managed geographical expeditions, and suggested a reform of the calendar, he did little of this sort in Eastern Europe. He did not even practice the occult art in that complex, esoteric-humanist form as he had previously at home. His message for Eastern Europe was a mystical, religious lesson, but without the innovative dogmatics of the radical reformers who temporarily camped in Poland or Hungary (the Sozzinis, Palaeologus, or Francken). In fact, Dee was abhorred by the vistas of skeptical anti-Trinitarianism."⁸ At that time Andreas Dudith, who left the Catholic Church for the sake of his liberty and a marriage with a Polish noblewoman, was rather sympathetic to the teachings of anti-Trinitarianism, though he never converted to any of the denominations of the Protestant Church.

⁸ Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 260.

Besides these two mentions in Gyuri's book, however, there are some more reflections from Dudith on John Dee. Thanks to the finally published critical edition of the full correspondence of Dudith (the last Volume, number VII, was published in 2019), one can explore more references than two on John Dee, therefore, a more exhaustive mapping becomes possible of his thoughts and relationships.

In the letter to Johannes Praetorius (the first professor of mathematics at the University of Altdorf) on October 9, 1584,⁹ Dudith informs his friend that "he heard about Dee, the mathematician of London", who was in Kraków from March 1584. He also refers here to Olbracht Laski who sponsored Dee's performance there, though he had financial difficulties afterward. In this composition, Dudith used a nonjudgmental description of Dee, and mentioned numerous common acquaintances too, such as Hagecius' illness, or Tycho, whose letter he sent to Praetorius "which I do not understand, being ignorant of his observations."

On November 20 of the same year, he mentions again the "celebrated English mathematician, John Dee" in a letter to Guillaume Ancel, the resident envoy on behalf of the French king to the court of Rudolph II in Prague.¹⁰ Dudith was eager to learn more about Dee and his family's move to Prague "regarding which I beg you to inform me fully" – he wrote. On the same day, Dudith composed another letter to Peter Monau of Breslau (an imperial physician at that time in the court of Rudolph II), in which he complained about not having any news of Dee's period in Kraków.¹¹ Earlier Dudith asked Monau – among others – to find a well-prepared mathematician for himself, and here, he urged him again: "Please, remember my request, and let me know of a mathematician who wants to live with me." And went on more desperately: "Dee might be able to persuade a family member or a student of him (in case of not being himself the tutor). The English are generally talented, diligent, and well-educated in philosophy and other arts." Dudith was looking for the company of intellectual partners in order to transfer his "solitude and otium" into an enjoyable place, because without them "we will die in stupor and cowardice."

On December 12, in another letter to Praetorius, Dudith first mentioned Henry Savile, another English scholar visiting Central Europe, and asked Praetorius to inform him about Savile's whereabouts.¹² Then he requested information about the mathematician Dee, "who was either in Prague or Kraków. Was he not with you? What on earth does he do?"

⁹ Dudith, *Epistulae*, no. 1208., 427.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1212, 435.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1213, 438.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 1219, 454.

How I desire to speak to him!" For this purpose, Dudith intended to find out something certain about Savile, but for this reason, he needed some specifics about Savile. Another anxious attempt by him without a result we can trace.

On December 20, Dudith wrote again to Peter Monau, saying that "I eagerly await to learn everything about Dominus Dee: where he is going to stay, or whether he shall run away."¹³ Within some days, on December 24, 1584, Dudith composed another letter to Monau, and acknowledged with some sadness that "Dee is perhaps absent, as I understand from your silence and that of Tadeus Hagecius. But please, do not forget what I wrote about him recently."¹⁴

On January 14, 1585, Dudith wrote to Jacques Bongars (a French humanist diplomat) and referred to John Dee again, after a mention of Henry Savile, "a very dear friend of England, whom I eagerly wait for his letters and some books for two years now." Dudith was wondering about the silence of Savile, and the reasons for it, too. "He lived with me for six months and was intimately connected that I could not remember if I had ever spent so many more pleasant months before." Then, he mentioned John Dee, "mathematicus celebris" who is also not unfamiliar to Guillaume Ancel, whom "I beg you, you might bring anything about him [Dee]." While Dee was in Kraków, "he did not even respond to any of the greetings through friends." This caused a certain degree of disappointment and even more anxiety in Dudith.

Out of these seven new references on John Dee by Andreas Dudith – all of them dated between 1584 and early 1585, therefore all of them before the first letter mentioned in Gyuri's book – it looks obvious that Dudith closely followed John Dee's activities and places where he stayed, and he wanted to meet him in person, not just through intermediaries and common acquaintances. However, he skillfully relied on his network to have the possession of more information than simple hearsay, but as these letters reveal, he never accomplished this effort. As his correspondence also exposes, he became a frantic seeker of a mathematician, in lack of Savile, who would educate him on the basic theories and methods of astronomy. It is also detectable from his communication that the lack of possible experts in situ was often compensated by the rising intensity of recurrently composed letters to Praetorius or Hagecius, whose responses nevertheless were rather disproportionate. It should also be mentioned that there is no record of a possible approach on Dee's behalf towards Dudith. Even if he led a most active social life in the 1580s, according to his personal diary, by regularly meeting with numerous local and

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 1220, 457.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no 1223, 464.

international intellectuals, Dudith and his house never seemed as attractive as others'. More sarcastically one might say that Dee was keen to communicate his concerns about the natural world rather with the angels than Dudith.

All in all, it seems quite apparent that John Dee and Andreas Dudith had never met in person, though they could have come across many times. It is a story of a failed attempt from Dudith's perspective, whose pursuit of happiness via the possession of knowledge of natural philosophy, astronomy, or geography remained within the walls of his private library, and within the learned scholarly correspondence, he passionately fostered.

POST SCRIPTUM

It seems that there is only one exceptional example that proves a particular coming together of Dee and Dudith: the *Album Amicorum* of Abraham Ortelius, preserved intact at the Cambridge University's Pembroke Library.¹⁵ This album comprises contributions (signatures, inscriptions, poems, drawings, engravings, coats of arms) to the renowned Flemish cartographer, geographer, and antiquarian Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) from a distinguished group of his international friends. The contributions were gathered over several years and more than 130 of his contemporaries are represented. The list of friends includes, among others, Gerhard Mercator, Christopher Plantin, Justus Lipsius, Andreas Dudith, and John Dee, too.

John Dee's contribution was prepared in 1577 on Sunday before Lent, and he offered his shield of arms within an ornamental cartouche, containing his inscription: "Abrahamum Ortelium Antwerpianum, Joannes Dee Londoniensis, Geographum, Mathematicum Philosophico complectitur Amore."¹⁶ Dee was granted this shield of arms on July 3, 1576, which took the form of a gold lion rampant on a red ground, with the motto *Hic Labor*. A coat of arms of the Dee family is displayed in the Chancel of St Mary the Virgin Church, Mortlake. The two genealogical rolls he compiled of his ancestry survive among the Cotton manuscripts in the British Library, xiii 38 and xiv 1.

The inscription by Andreas Dudith was prepared on October 29, 1584 in Breslau. He penned his words with his famous red ink, as usual.¹⁷

¹⁵ This is MS LC.2.113, and fortunately, it has been digitized: accessed August 25, 2022, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-LC-00002-00113/1>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90r, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-LC-00002-00113/185>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51v, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-LC-00002-00113/108>.