

Aztec origin of Elizabethan spirit mirror confirmed

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Credit: *Antiquity* (2021). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2021.132

New research has confirmed that an obsidian mirror used by John Dee, confidante to Queen Elizabeth I, to contact otherworldly spirits in his occult practices has Aztec origins.

"John Dee is a remarkable historical figure, a Renaissance polymath—interested in astronomy, alchemy, and mathematics—and confidante of Elizabeth I," said Professor Stuart Campbell, from the University of Manchester, "Later, he became involved in divination and the occult, seeking to talk to angels through the use of scryers, who used artifacts—like mirrors and crystals."

It had long been suspected that one of John Dee's scryers, an [obsidian](#) mirror now in the British Museum, had Aztec origins. However, with no records on how he obtained it, this was impossible to prove.

Now, an international team of scientists, including Professor Stuart Campbell, have solved this mystery with geochemical analysis. Their research, published in the journal *Antiquity*, confirmed the Aztec origins of John Dee's mirror.

Their analysis involved bombarding the mirrors with X-rays, resulting in the objects also emitting X-rays, which allow scientists to measure the composition of the artifact. These are unique 'fingerprints' that can be compared to obsidian samples to trace the origins of the material. The team studied four objects in the British Museum—John Dee's mirror, two other Aztec mirrors, and a polished rectangular obsidian slab.

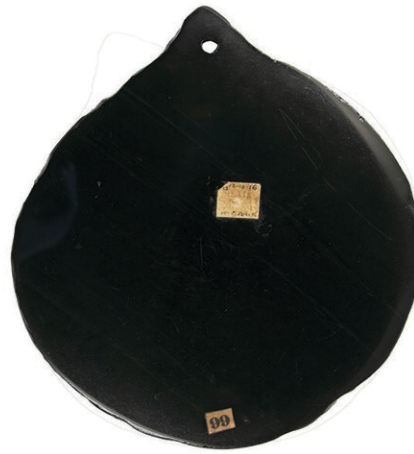


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This method revealed that all four of the obsidian artifacts studied were made from Mexican obsidian exploited by the Aztecs. John Dee's mirror, along with another with a similar design, originated from near Pachuca. This obsidian source was heavily exploited by the Aztecs.

To the Aztecs, obsidian also had spiritual significance. It could be used as part of medicinal practices, could act as a shield against bad spirits, and capture souls on its reflective surface.

One deity, Tezcatlipoca, is even named "smoking mirror" and often depicted wearing circular obsidian mirrors, as symbols of premonition and power.



1. Artefact 2; Am1825,1210.16



2. Artefact 3; Am1907,0608.2



3. Artefact 19; Am1926,-214

100mm

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Such symbolic value may have made them appealing items for Europeans to collect and bring home as they conquered the Aztecs. The fact that mirrors were also often viewed as magical artifacts in Europe may have served as additional motivation.



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"The 16th century was a period in which new exotic objects were being

brought to Europe from the New World, and opening up exciting new possibilities in the intellectual world of the period," said Professor Campbell.

These Aztec mirrors were novel and exotic items that found a place in many early collections.

Stories about the meaning of the mirrors may have traveled with them, and may have been what motivated John Dee to acquire his [mirror](#) when he encountered it in Europe.



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More information: Stuart Campbell et al, The mirror, the magus and more: reflections on John Dee's obsidian mirror, *Antiquity* (2021). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2021.132](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.132)

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