

Elizabeth I and the Imperial Theme

Background Notes

Dr Gill White - 16 March 2016



The Drake Locket Jewel, 1591 (V&A)



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In the 1570s the Queen's mathematician, Dr John Dee, put forward a vision that would see the small island of England transformed into the hub of an empire and Elizabeth herself changed into an empress. The proposal was based not only on the recent activities of seafarers such as Drake and Gilbert but also on ancient precedents such as the exploits of King Arthur. The might of imperial Spain should be challenged and who better to lead the way than Gloriana? Elizabethan ideas of empire, discovery, trade and international power were reflected in the visual arts.

The Imperial Theme

In sixteenth-century England, the understanding of 'imperial' and 'empire' underwent a change. In the early part of the century, the words implied independence rather than territorial expansion. To be an emperor was to stand outside the authority of other powers. For Henry VIII, removing the pope from power over England and its church was to make the kingdom an empire and so, in the *Act in Restraint of Appeals* (1532), it was written, 'this realm of England is an empire'. By the end of the century, however, the idea that England should colonise new lands, especially in America, was gaining strength, and so the more outward-looking, expansionist notion of empire began to take hold.

Politics and Religion

It could be argued that one man stood behind the notion of an English empire: Philip II of Spain. English imperial ambitions were strongly driven by antagonism to the wealth and power of the Spanish monarch. As early as the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, Pope Alexander VI had divided up the new-found lands of the American continent between the two great European powers of Spain and Portugal. Spain now held much of Central and South America, and Portugal claimed Brazil, Newfoundland, Labrador and Greenland, to add to its territories in the East Indies. When, in 1580, Philip annexed Portugal to his rule, the two great overseas empires coalesced and the unimaginable wealth of gold, silver, precious jewels and other commodities flowed directly to England's greatest enemy, the Spanish king. Increased maritime activity, in trade, in piracy and in war, became a patriotic cause. To issues of national pride and security may be added religion. What greater duty for the Protestant powers than to spread the 'true' religion and to limit the influence of Catholic Spain and the pope? The call to action was led by John Dee, who is credited, probably wrongly, with having coined the phrase 'British Empire'. The title page of his *General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (1577) shows Elizabeth steering a ship across the oceans. The ship is Europe and the royal arms on the ship's rudder indicate that England is its natural commander. The Queen reaches out to Lady Fortune and the light of God beats down upon her endeavours.



Unknown artist, *Elizabeth I: the Armada Portrait*,
c. 1588 (Woburn Abbey)

Seafarers and Investors

In September 1580 Francis Drake sailed into Plymouth on his return from an epic circumnavigation of the world that had taken nearly three years to complete. A great achievement in seamanship, the voyage had cemented England's position as a maritime power and Drake's attacks on Spanish shipping had also brought pleasing amounts of plunder and a satisfying sense of having dented the King of Spain's imperial ego. In his portrait by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (1591), Drake is shown with the globe of the world at his side and wearing the jewel given to him by the Queen on his return. This jewel, the Drake Locket Jewel, has survived and is an exquisite masterpiece of the goldsmith's art, set with pearls, diamonds and rubies, embellished with enamel, with a sardonyx cameo depicting the heads of a white queen and a black king in profile. Drake's successes encouraged other seafarers. The anonymous portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh (1588) shows him in the Queen's colours of black and white, almost encrusted with pearls, Elizabeth's emblem, whilst a small moon refers to the identification of Elizabeth as Cynthia, the moon goddess, who controls the tides and waters – Elizabeth's punning nickname for Sir Walter. Voyages of discovery and piracy thrilled Elizabethan investors, notable amongst whom was Sir Christopher Hatton, another one of the Queen's favourites. Several portraits of Hatton survive, including the enigmatic double-sided painting of c.1581, and in many of these his heraldic badge, a golden hind, is displayed. Hatton was a significant investor in Drake's circumnavigation of the globe and Sir Francis re-named his ship in honour of the voyage's major sponsor. Hatton's strong engagement with the imperial theme is revealed in *The Sieve Portrait* of Elizabeth.

Empire and the Royal Image

The imagery of Elizabeth as an empress, a ruler too great for a mere kingdom, the vanquisher of Spain, appears in several of her portraits. Perhaps the most obvious is *The Armada Portrait* (after 1588), formerly attributed to George Gower, where the Queen sits, commandingly, at the centre of a composition celebrating victory over the forces of Philip of Spain. Behind her are images of naval might and cunning, and of the storm that God sent to buffet the Spanish fleet and aid the English cause. The Queen's throne is supported by sea creatures, an imperial crown is behind her and her hand rests possessively on a map of the Americas. The propaganda of English superiority and expansion is obvious. But the theme also creeps into *The Ditchley Portrait*, where Elizabeth wears a jewel in the form of an armillary sphere, a device to aid navigation, and rises out of the tiny island of England like a giant in search of greater realms. In *The Sieve Portrait* (c.1580-83) by Quentin Metsys the Younger, commissioned by Sir Christopher Hatton, argument over the Queen's possible marriage to François, Duc d'Alençon, is resolved by reference to the promise of an imperial destiny. Stay single and an empire will be yours.

New Lands

The plantation of colonies in Ireland could be seen as imperial expansion but the Elizabethan period also saw the first English colonies established in America. Many of those actively encouraging the settling of colonies in America, such as Philip Sidney, Walter Raleigh and Humphrey Gilbert, were also involved in the planting of Ireland. Ireland, however, was already nominally English territory but the Americas offered new opportunities for dominion and financial gain. During his circumnavigation, in 1579, Drake had landed on the western shore of America and claimed an area perhaps approximating to modern California as New Albion in the Queen's name. In 1585, the first English trial colony was started at Roanoke in modern North Carolina, although within a year the experiment had failed and most of the colonists had returned to England. In 1587 new colonists were despatched but by 1590 they had disappeared into legend and Roanoke became the lost colony. It would not be until 1607 that a permanent English colony was settled, at Jamestown in Virginia, established by the Virginia Company of London. The area had been named in honour of Queen Elizabeth. The colonisation of new lands brought contacts with older, established inhabitants and the drawings of John White, the first governor of Roanoke, who left the colony before its mysterious conclusion, show the excitement and curiosity that the local people aroused in the newly-arrived settlers. Unlike the artificial symbolism of so much Elizabethan art, White's sketches of local people, settlements and animals show a desire to depict reality with freshness, simplicity and an almost documentary regard for accuracy.



John White, *Drawing of a Male Indian of Virginia Carrying a Bow*, 1585 (British Museum)

‘this realm of England is an empire’

John Dee envisaged imperial greatness for England, led by the majestic Elizabeth, founded on ancient right, and maintained by naval superiority. He declared of England:

No King, nor Kingdome, hath, by Nature and Humayn Industry ... any, more lawfull, and more Peaceable Means ... wherby, to become in wealth, far passing all other: in Strength, and Force, invincible: and in Honorable estimation, Triumphantly Famous, over all, and above all other.

Spain, beware.

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