An Exploration of the Historical Background to the Prevalence of Piracy in England during the Elizabethan Era

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Abstract: In the 16th and 17th centuries, especially during the reign of Elizabeth I, the British pirate community grew to an unprecedented size, and their plundering was frequent. During this period, pirates were no longer the despised thieves but the heroes of the nation. Due to Britain's deteriorating financial situation, the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, and the intensification of the Anglo-Spanish conflict, it became clear to the British government that piracy was a powerful force to be reckoned with. The resultant large-scale piracy enabled Britain to accumulate huge wealth on the one hand, and weakened the power of Spain on the other, gradually replacing it as the dominant maritime power. This paper briefly analyses the historical reasons for the prevalence of piracy in this period from the perspective of economics, politics, geography, and historical tradition.

1. Introduction

Many scholars in China have conducted extensive and in-depth studies about the Elizabethan era in England, but there are few, if any, research results about pirate groups at this time, and to some extent, they are even in a blank. People have the impression that pirates were a socially unacceptable group who hid in the shadows and only killed people and did nothing but evil, such as Japanese pirates. However, under Elizabeth I, although they were still engaged in robbing cargo ships, extorting ransom, and attacking colonies, they were regarded as national heroes by the British public, and the pirate leader, Drake, was even knighted by the Queen, and the pirate community at this time developed and grew with the support of the British government. And why was this? With the above questions, the author from a historical-cultural perspective to explore the reasons associated with the prevalence of piracy in Britain during this period, aiming to help find the truth about piracy, so that more scholars to re-examine and explore the group, and thus deepen the interpretation of the unique British pirate culture.

2. The Historical Origins of Piracy in Britain

Piracy has a fairly long history in Europe, "Piracy has been around since the mid-2000s B.C. " [1]It can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman times. At that time, piracy was not considered shameful, rather it was considered an honorable means to be used to be able to defeat the enemy. But after the 5th century BC, "Pirates increasingly appeared in classical texts as evil and punishable

figures." [2] Pirate plundering also gradually became an unlawful means of gaining wealth for those with ulterior motives and became an object of scorn. Homer also portrayed the Cretans as notorious pirates in his book *The Odyssey*, and Herodotus gave a vivid account of pirate attacks and Athenian campaigns against them in his *Histories*. During the Roman era, pirates were numerous in the Mediterranean and posed a greater threat to Roman rule. In 67 BC, the Romans, under the leadership of Pompey, launched a counter-attack against the Silesian pirates and destroyed them in one blow. After this battle, piracy in the Mediterranean was almost completely eradicated. This was the largest campaign to eliminate pirates in ancient history and was the earliest recorded account of the fight against pirates in the history books.

The most representative pirates of the Middle Ages were the Vikings, who created a miracle in the history of piracy and even established states and taxed the local people. From the end of the eighth century to the eleventh century, they invaded England for more than three centuries, bringing havoc to the English people while also having a profound impact on the development of English society. Firstly, it led to the formation of a martial, adventurous, pioneering character and the ambition of the British to conquer the outside world. Secondly, "from the Nordic stone figures and archaeological evidence, it is clear that the Norse mastered superior shipbuilding techniques around the middle of the eighth century, and that their ships were stunningly shaped and perfectly constructed".[3]The techniques and nautical experience brought by the Vikings undoubtedly accelerated the development of the British maritime industry in later history. Thirdly, the Vikings were very good at trading activities, and many Norse had a dual identity as merchants and pirates, often selling looted goods in the marketplace. From the mid-9th century onwards, they also developed their commercial trade by migrating in large numbers to the Britannia region. The trade between Scandinavia and Ireland and England became extremely active as a result of piracy. The commercial nature of piracy itself was in tune with the mercantilism practiced by modern Western countries. Influenced by the Vikings, the British also carried out some maritime plundering. It can be said that the Vikings became the guiding force behind Britain's foreign expansion and played an extremely important role in the British colonial path, providing the colonists with much experience and leaving the seeds of piracy for England, forming the pirate gene in British civilization.

3. Historical and Cultural Factors in the Prevalence of Piracy in Britain

3.1 Economic Factors

"The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the most serious period of poverty in European history."[4] England during the Elizabethan era was certainly no exception, and it was even more difficult. At the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign, England was suffering from an empty treasury, a devalued currency, prevalent wandering, and famine. All of these aggravated the already struggling state treasury.

3.2 Financial Crisis

In the 16th and 17th centuries, as the Crown and central administration expanded, the cost of living at court, of administration, of the military, and salaries, annuities, and other allowances for a growing number of nobles and officials rose in tandem with soaring prices. From Elizabeth I onwards, the royal treasury ran in debt. "In 1555 the external debts of England (mainly to Netherland) amounted to £148, 526 and 5 shillings and 8 pence. These external debts were also subject to an interest rate of 14% per annum", [5] putting England's finances in a tense situation. The last years of Mary Tudor's reign were years of starvation and pestilence for England, the treasury was empty, the munitions were depleted and in 1559 the external debt had reached £226, 910,

leaving with a total of £200, 000 in huge debts when she died".[6] This huge debt became a legacy that Queen Elizabeth had to settle. In addition, the cost of suppressing the Scottish revolt of 1559 and the expedition to France in 1562, totaling some £650, 000, depraved the financial situation of England. In the Elizabethan era, in 1600, the total revenue was £374, 000, while the expenditure was £459, 840, leaving a deficit of £85, 940.[7] Thereafter, the suppression of the northern rebellions, support for the two Irish rebellions of 1573 and 1579, support for the Netherlanders' resistance, the war with Spain, etc., all became important expenses of England. At home, there was also an illustrious "beggar's gallery" of court and nobility to be dealt with by the Queen, who had to support many of them with gifts and loans, as she could not afford to bankrupt them.[8]

In addition, the population of England fell sharply as early as the mid-14th century as a result of the Black Death epidemic (1348-1351) and continued to decline over the following period, with the country's population standing at only around 2.1 million in 1480, before gradually rising again. By the 16th and early 17th centuries, the English population was experiencing a period of historical explosion. As a result of this huge increase in urban population, the total demand of English society continued to outstrip the aggregate supply, and the plundering of the American colonies by Western European countries such as Spain, which resulted in an influx of gold and silver into Europe, caused prices—especially food prices to rise, which had remained unchanged for around 150 years before the establishment of the Tudor dynasty. This sharp rise in prices led to social unrest, deepened class divisions, and seriously undermined the foundations of the feudal economy.

Financial difficulties, therefore, made it necessary for Queen Elizabeth to maintain England through various irregular means, one of which was the support of pirates, a very effective means. The idea of obtaining wealth from abroad (whether legally or illegally) to bring it back to England was not pioneered by Elizabeth's subjects. From Henry VIII onwards, the Tudor kings were addicted to luxury. Various luxuries, such as magnificent clothing, jewelry, food, or entertainment were part of Henry's power. In Elizabeth's time, they again became the main symbol of her rule. The queen was most complimentary of the treasures that paid her bills, which could be turned into her wealth and used to consolidate her power and to keep her favorites, in addition to defending her country.[9]It is thus clear that Elizabeth could have resorted to any means to solve her financial crisis. Looting and plundering were important ways in which she achieved this goal, so much so that she later successfully applied them to state policy.

3.3 Impact of the Enclosure Movement

The Enclosure Movement in British history was a process by which large land occupiers violently dispossessed farmers of their land and appropriated the commons. The enclosure movement resulted in the displacement of large numbers of peasants, who were forced into piracy. Most of the sailors on board pirate ships came from the bankrupt peasantry that followed the enclosure movement. Enclosures in England emerged as early as the 13th century, but at that time they were an isolated phenomenon in the counties, on a modest scale, and did not have a profound social impact. By the 15th and 16th centuries, woolen textiles were in short supply in various European countries and sheep ranching was a dramatic development that characterized the English economy at the time. Many landowners were keen to keep sheep in enclaves and used their privileges to force peasants off their land, forcing many to flee their land, the famous "Sheep Devour Man " movement. Marx pointed out in Capital that the process of primitive accumulation in 16th century England was typical, with the means of production and land were in the hands of the lords, which meant dispossessing the peasants and driving them off the land. The peasants who were forced off the land "were transformed into whole groups into beggars, thieves, and vagabonds.......[10] Thomas More also describes the exiles of the time in his Utopia: "Men, women,

husbands, wives, orphans, widows, and even poor mothers with suckling children were forced to leave their homes without pardon. orphans, widows, and even poor mothers with suckling children were all forced without pardon to leave their homes, they lacked the means of subsistence ...... How could they not go to desperate lengths when they were penniless and at a loss for what to do."[11] Vagrancy caused by the enclosure movement was quite common in England at the time, and in London alone there were usually more than 50, 000 vagrants (London had about 200, 000 inhabitants at the time).[12]These vagrants wandered around and eventually died at sea, becoming a sailor as a means of subsistence. They were the main source of piracy.

(1) Political and Religious Factors

Politics and religion have always influenced each other in England, and the Pope even had the power to decide on the successor to the throne of the secular state. Henry VIII, who could not bear the oppression of the Pope, initiated the Reformation, providing for the conversion of the population to Protestantism, and he became head of the Protestant Church in England. During the reign of Mary Tudor (July 1553-November 1558), however, she pursued an extreme religious policy. Mary, a devout Catholic and married to King Philip II of Spain, the most powerful Catholic country in Western Europe at the time, completely abolished during her reign the series of religious reform movements introduced by her father Henry VIII and further developed by her brother Edward VI, and restored Catholic rule and feverishly persecuted Protestants. Her husband at the time, King Philip II of Spain, also sought to control England by restoring Catholicism to the country. In terms of foreign policy, she followed Spain to the letter and became involved in a war against France, causing England to suffer great losses and losing Calais, her last stronghold on the European continent. By the time of Elizabeth's reign, Britain was still too weak to take on Spain openly. Spain at first tried to deal with Elizabeth as she had with Mary. Philip II asked Elizabeth to marry him and tried to control England through marriage but was refused. Spain was also not ready militarily at this time, so it too had to resort to covert fighting. They assisted the conservative forces within England and the Catholics to oppose Elizabeth's accession to the throne, intending to install Mary of Scotland as Queen of England instead. Mary was Henry VII's great-granddaughter (her grandmother Margaret, Henry VII's eldest daughter, was older than Henry VIII and had priority over Elizabeth in the line of succession to the throne). This, coupled with the fact that Mary had been brought up in France and was a devout Catholic, would surely have brought England into the Catholic fold again. England, in turn, supported the Protestants in France against Spain, supported Netherland in its struggle against Spain, supported Portugal in its revolt against Spanish rule, etc., as a means of fighting Spain. In addition, as many Protestants went away as pirates to avoid persecution during the reign of Queen Mary, they saw the plundering of Catholic ships at sea, especially those of Spain, as a patriotic act against Catholicism and in defense of England, and the outstanding pirate captains were more likely to become national heroes. The English pirates plundered Spanish and Portuguese ships, which gradually became a habit; furthermore, as pirates were numerous and difficult to contain, and the Queen was aware of the availability of piracy, she suppressed it while condoning and exploiting it. In 1564, for example, when Elizabeth ordered the pursuit of pirates off the coast of Déon and Cornwall, she said that 'pirates should be recruited to serve the king and allowed to forgive their crimes'.[13]The Queen's flexible use of both policies served the purpose of preserving her rule and fighting Spain without pushing England and Spain into war. In addition, Elizabeth gradually began to support English pirates and to participate in and organize their activities. In addition, the Queen issued "privateering licenses" to encourage British pirates to plunder overseas. "A 'privateer's license' was a symbol of the power granted by a government to its privateers to attack and plunder enemy merchant ships in time of war, and it

meant that the government took a cut of the pirates' profits.

After Elizabeth acceded to the throne in 1558, Anglo-Spanish relations deteriorated, and Elizabeth saw Spain as a triple religious, political, and economic enemy and therefore issued many licenses for privateering. In the ten months between June 1585 and March 1586 alone, Elizabeth granted licenses to 88 pirates, [14] and at this time licenses could also be obtained and used through inheritance, forgery, and sub-letting, [15]so there would have been many more pirates actually in possession of privateering licenses by the end of the 17th century, and English piracy and plundering would have been widespread.

(2) Diplomatic Factors

Traditional English foreign trade was strangled and new capital markets were forced to open up. Under the arbitration of Pope Alexander VI in 1493 and the Treaty of Thorsilas in 1494, Spain and Portugal divided the whole world. The Pope's awarding of the New World to Spain and Portugal and allowing them to monopolize trade with gunboats was one of the reasons for the rampant piracy. As the enclosure movement greatly facilitated Britain's wool export trade, which was mainly exported to Netherland, it made Britain extremely dependent on the Netherlandish market. In November 1563, the harassment of English pirates and religious differences prompted Spain to retaliate and Philip II banned the importation of any wool from London, reducing England's foreign trade, and the outbreak of the Netherlandish Revolution in 1566 greatly affected English trade in the Netherland. At this time, the giant pirate Hawkins was making a name for himself, robbing Spanish treasure ships and privateers in South America, making a fortune, and fighting Spanish colonial activity. Elizabeth saw the power of the pirates and began to think of a policy of appeasement, which would, in turn, be used by the Crown. The Queen herself made several investments, both directly and indirectly, to support Hawkins' expedition. In the beginning, this support was only private, the Queen and her ministers aiming only to share the spoils to cover the financial shortfall.

And by 1568, the Anglo-Spanish conflict was once again intensified. On Hawkins' third voyage, the Queen also invested in two ships, yet this time they were raided by Spain. The English fleet was badly defeated, with only two of the seven ships left under the command of Drake and Hawkins, and hundreds of men killed and wounded. This stirred up Hawkins and Drake's hatred for Spain, and Drake thus firmly advocated war against Spain and vowed revenge. Elizabeth, however, was reluctant to engage in open military conflict with Spain because Spain was too strong, but relations between Britain and Spain entered a period of "cold", and after this incident, Queen Elizabeth issued Hawkins with a "privateer's license" and became more After the incident, Queen Elizabeth also issued Hawkins with a 'privateer's license', giving her firm support for pirates to plunder Spanish ships to compensate for Britain's losses.

(3) Geographical Factors

The geographical location of a country has a profound impact on its development. Britain's geographical location created favorable conditions for seafaring, foreign colonial expansion, and the shaping of a powerful empire. Situated to the northwest of the European continent, Britain consists of the island of Great Britain, the northeastern part of the island of Ireland, and a series of smaller islands. Its only land border with another country is in Northern Ireland, bordering the Republic of Ireland. The UK is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, with the North Sea to the east, the English Channel to the south, and the Celtic Sea to the southwest, and is separated from Ireland by the Irish Sea. The British coastline is 17, 820 kilometers (11, 073 miles) long.

In the Middle Ages, when the economic and cultural center of Europe was on the

Mediterranean coast, Britain was considered to be on the edge of the world and the Great Ocean, while limiting Britain's interaction with the continent and hindering its progress at the time, also allowed Britain to have a large number of private ships to trade with the continent. After the geographical discoveries, the center of international trade gradually shifted from the Mediterranean region to the Atlantic coast, and the superiority of Britain's geographical position finally became apparent. At this time, Britain was able to seize the opportunity to use the sea for its development. In addition, Britain's geographical position, surrounded by sea, was not only a favorable geographical condition for its rise to power but also provided the preconditions for pirates to plunder.

4. Conclusion

The prevalence of piracy in England during the Elizabethan era was integral to Britain's national interests, the intensification of the Anglo-Spanish conflict, and the policies adopted by Queen Elizabeth. The massive loss of rural population caused by the Enclosure Movement provided the real possibility of a growing pirate community, and successive years of huge fiscal deficits and the collapse of foreign trade forced the Queen's government to resort to several means, both normal and illegal, to increase the revenue of the treasury. Among these, support for piracy was seen as an effective measure to generate considerable revenue and to combat Spain; in addition, the long-standing Catholic-Protestant conflict, the pirate culture left behind by the Vikings, and England's unique geographical position, surrounded by the sea, were also important reasons for the prevalence of piracy. The pirates of the second half of the 16th century had a profound impact on the development of England, rescued the country from a certain amount of hardship, and made it the dominant maritime power after Spain. If such a group of people was ignored, much truth would be lost. It is based on the relevant historical facts that I have tried to unravel the reasons for the prevalence of piracy in this period, and I am convinced that this group deserves further study. From them, we will find a glimpse of the strength of England and will help the reader to have a better understanding of the Elizabethan era.

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