Introduction
Elizabethan colonization is often viewed as something outside of - separate from - the overall course of European expansion. On the other side of the Atlantic, it was once seen as an expression of the British Empire to come, implicitly a civilizing force bringing the benefits of English language, laws, and common decency. Looking at the domestic conflicts of the Stuart period, an alternate view held that Elizabeth’s overseas enterprises were spawned by a militant Protestantism defending England from a global Catholic conspiracy. On this side of the Atlantic, colonization was claimed to be the product of an ideological conflict between absolutism and democracy. Elizabethans were thus “yearning to breath free.”

An alternative viewpoint asserts that the motives and methods leading to early English colonies differed little from the forces behind French, Dutch, Spanish, or even Swedish colonization. European power was expanding, and at the same time its constituent parts, nation states and dynastic states, were in constant competition within Europe and overseas. Colonies, even more than commercial ventures, were strategic responses to perceived threats. They were part of the chess game of dynastic and proto-nationalistic competition. Like war to von Clausewitz, colonization was an extension of politics in a late Renaissance infused with Machiavellian ideas. Poorly developed economies, a rudimentary state apparatus, and the non-stop competition among nations, however, meant that colonization was haphazardly implemented, even when a firm policy was formulated. Limited resources led to a constant juggling of priorities.

For Tudor England, we can make three observations. First, colonization was pragmatic and was often proposed as an opportunistic response to new conditions. Second, all
colonial enterprises were related to some degree. There may have been differences in distances involved and the types of colonization, but not among decision-making and patronage groups. These comprised the Court, military adventurers, and the commercial investors of London and other major ports. Third, military considerations always played a role in colonization, if only for the defense of the settlers, but often at a strategic level. As such, colonizing voyages should be considered moves in an imperial strategy, and the colonies themselves as part of an Elizabethan Empire. This proto-colonial polity was of course a failure, existing in theory and on paper, while its colonies disappeared. Yet, the efforts to establish an English overseas empire were no less real than the successful first or second British Empires.

The great achievement of Elizabeth’s reign was in maintaining the status quo regarding England’s possessions and security; she was able to project English power only momentarily. Yet it could be argued that her failure to take back Calais under the terms of the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis was balanced by England’s control for twenty years of the three Dutch “cautionary towns” of Flushing, Brill, and Ramekins. Her expansion of the navy and its use by the Sea Hawks to attack Spanish shipping and seaports did force Philip to devote imperial resources to costly defensive measures. In this strategic competition, then, colonial efforts in the Arctic, Ireland, Virginia, and Guiana, were pieces in an essentially defensive game on the part of the Queen. Certainly, that is how James I acted when he permitted Raleigh to go to Guiana under such conditions that the king would succeed either by Raleigh’s acquiring for England a gold-rich territory, or by his failure, execution, and consequently improved relations with Spain. In the game of empire, a colony was as much a pawn as Raleigh.

We must recognize, then, that for the English Crown, transatlantic colonization was not the colonialism of later political philosophies, but one of many diplomatic, military and commercial tools. Cisatlantic colonization – in Ireland – was one option among other policies to protect England by controlling the archipelago.\footnote{D. B. Quinn “Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577) and the Beginning of English Colonial Theory,” \textit{Proc. American Philos. Soc.} 88 (1944), 543-60.} The collapse of the Munster
colony in 1598, and the ensuing years of hard conquest by Elizabeth’s generals, was due to the same errors of policy and perception that in the twentieth century would lead to a widespread rejection of English rule. Nevertheless, despite support from the Crown that was changeable at best and financial backing from commercial sources that demanded quick returns from investments, colonies in Munster and Carolina, Baffin Island and Trinidad did occur. They were physically attempted in some form, while places like Newfoundland and California were briefly visited and saw only the flourish of flag and drum. The universal failure or “loss” of Elizabethan colonies was largely due to grossly inadequate supplies. This in turn was caused by insufficient knowledge of the localities and their inhabitants. Perhaps even more importantly, English understanding of colonization itself was poor, based on Classical sources, Renaissance writings, and imitation of the Spanish Empire.

Evidence for Elizabethan colonization exists: verbal, pictorial, and physical. The verbal survives in the written form of documents, charters, reports, and letters. Scholars such as Williamson, Quinn, and Canny have diligently sifted through this material, though occasionally new items come to light. Pictorial evidence survives as a handful of drawings of colonial activities and a larger number of maps and picture maps, often in the form of prints accompanying published accounts. Again, this material has been widely published, but some individual maps may still be unidentified or not well understood. It is the physical evidence, the standing, preserved, and buried structures and objects associated with the Elizabethan colonization, that has thus far been little touched upon and offers the most rewarding avenue for future research. The evidence falls into the two geographic areas of Elizabethan colonial imperialism: Ireland and the Americas.

_Ireland_

Let us first consider the case of Ireland.\(^2\) Although the successful Jacobean planting of the northern province of Ulster was and still is a most important element in the history of

the British Isles, there were several previous colonial attempts in Ireland, the greatest of which concerned Munster province in the southwest of the island, and which has been the subject of a ten-year archaeological study.\(^3\) Elizabeth, exasperated by yet another important Irish lord rebelling against her government in Dublin, but alarmed by the Papal expeditionary force that had tried to spark an anti-Protestant revolt, in 1582 confiscated all the lands of the earl of Desmond. Most of these scattered estates were held by his clients or vassals, but the Crown now claimed all under the law of treason, and they totaled about one fourth of the entire province. Beset by clamorous courtiers, Elizabeth took the momentous decision to regrant the land not to Irish claimants, but to Englishmen who would bring to the province thousands of settlers of unquestioned loyalty, a not insignificant point given international Catholic opposition to her rule.

Munster thus became a quasi-colony, described as a “plantation,” with one fourth of the province under new owners, but the remainder in local hands. The grantees of the 1200-acre “signory” estates were figures at Court or those connected to London merchant guilds, but several thousand English settlers found little welcome from the displaced Irish population. Success in Munster would have brought about an area secure for Elizabeth, from which her power could spread to encompass the island. But when the rebel Earl of Tyrone’s forces marched south from Ulster in October 1598, they met little effective resistance. The Munster colony collapsed. Refugees streamed into the walled cities, and within a few weeks the English held only four places outside those walls. Over the next five years, Elizabeth was forced to raise more than one new army and try out several commanders before Lord Mountjoy ended all resistance just as the Queen lay dying in 1603.

As part of the colonial program, London had sought to divide Munster into counties. The new regime also affected settlements: cities, towns, villages, and elite residences. Irish cities like Waterford, Cork and Limerick were self governed and were not owned by magnates like the Earl of Desmond. They were undoubtedly affected by the political and

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\(^3\) The project was undertaken by the writer and was funded by Mercer University, the Earthwatch Foundation, the Royal Irish Academy, and the Royal Archaeological Institute.
economic changes of the 1580s and 90s, but this is not yet visible in the archaeological record. The late Elizabethan warfare that first overthrew the Munster plantation, and then imposed English rule, has left traces because until then cities were protected only by medieval walls and gates. At Cork, a Renaissance citadel called Elizabeth Fort was built ca. 1600 to both dominate and defend the city. For Limerick, Sir Richard Grenville mapped a Renaissance defensive system that included star forts and advance earthwork ‘demilunes’ or half moons, but hostilities had ended before much of the work was carried out.

Smaller towns might show change in the Munster colony. Existing ones benefited from new settlement and trade, and may have outgrown their obsolete medieval walls. Youghal served as the port for Sir Walter Raleigh’s huge 42,000 acre estate along the Blackwater River in east Munster. The citizens obsequiously elected him mayor, and he took over the cloistered college of priests there, converting it into an urban mansion. Inland towns also prospered with little thought of defense, like Buttevant along the road between Limerick and Cork, a target to be plundered and burned in 1598. The Munster colony also saw new towns established. River traffic on the Bride tributary of the Blackwater reached Tallow, which had boasted 120 Englishmen and their families on the eve of its destruction by Tyrone’s army. Urban development returned in the early 1600s. Sir Richard Boyle bought Raleigh’s estates and others for pennies on the pound. Later becoming the Great Earl of Cork under James, Boyle founded Bandonbridge, which had walled defenses, two churches, a mill, and several hundred inhabitants. Contemporary maps suggest elements of regular planning at Bandon and other new towns, like Baltimore in West Cork.

The typical English village, with cottages clustered around a manor and church, did not exist in pre-plantation Munster. The ubiquitous clachan settlements were small hamlets of fewer than a dozen dwelling. Some of the population was thought to lack permanent settlement. They engaged in transhumance, called here “boolying,” accompanying their

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herds in a seasonal movement among pasturelands. On Raleigh’s lands, English settlers established compact villages in various forms, with adjacent fields. These details were recorded on a uniquely-surviving estate map dated 1598, just before the colony’s destruction. Outside Mogeely Castle, they built English-style houses around a village green. Excavations in 1990-91 confirmed the map’s accuracy by located one of these houses, identified as a timber-frame construction upon a low foundation wall of mortared stone.⁶ Among the recovered finds were the earliest examples outside England of an earthenware pottery from Devonshire. At nearby Curraglass, house plots were set at regular intervals along the sides of a T-junction crossroads. Although the road system has survived, modern farming unfortunately removed all trace of the houses, leaving only the occasional Elizabethan potsherd. A hamlet of English houses appeared at a spot now called Carrageen; they replaced the most of the native houses of a clachan there. Excavations in 1992-93 confirmed the location of the hamlet dwellings, uncovering interior and exterior cobbled areas and shallow cuttings that had held sleeper beams for timber walling.⁷ The estate map does record one more settlement, a forest-edge clachan that had no fields associated with it, suggesting that the natives were left there to provide a work force for English settlers or landholders.

A fourth category of settlement was the residence of the colonial elite. Government officers and landholding heads of “signories” for the most part reoccupied the seats of Irish lordships, adapting or adding to the existing structures. Medieval Ireland had a number of true castles, multi-towered walled enclosures like Cahir, the object of a famous siege by Elizabeth’s later favororite, Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex and briefly Lord Deputy of Ireland. Most Irish structures termed “castles,” however, are much smaller, comprising a stone residential tower and a wooden or stone hall and service buildings in a walled enclosure called a “bawn.” Many of the Munster tower-houses would have been occupied by the English colonial elite. In some cases, the towers were retained, with new Tudor residences erected in the bawn, like the handsome Tudor

mansion at Carrig-on-Suir, the seat of the Earl of Ormond, Elizabeth’s cousin and part of the ruling establishment. At Edmund Spenser’s Kilcolman Castle, excavations in 1993-96 revealed that between the tower-house and hall he added a new structure, identified as an Elizabethan “parlour.” Among the artifacts recovered were the earliest examples outside England of another variety of Devonshire earthenware. Elsewhere, tower-houses were incorporated into a new residence, a fortified house, but usually this new building type stood alone in the bawn. Such castle-houses were defended by gun loops, rooftop crenellation and machicolation, and often corner turrets, as at Mallow Castle built by the Sir Thomas Norreys, President of Munster. Such structures gave sufficient protection against sudden raids, and given the unsettled nature of the Irish countryside, they continued to be built well into the next century. At the same time, expectations of effective control again led leaders to build undefended great houses, the most dramatic example of which is the massive ruin of the governor’s palace at Jigginstown, which the absolutist Thomas Wentworth, Lord Strafford, left unfinished for London and the scaffold in 1639.

Archaeological study of the twelve-year Elizabethan colonial settlement of Munster has barely begun, with only a handful of sites examined. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn. The villages, large and small, were replicas of what existed in England: individual house plots, probably with a small garden or orchard attached, ran off streets and greens at regular intervals. At Mogeely, it was estimated that a property was 45’- 50’ feet wide, the distance between property boundaries at the excavated remains of the 1619-22 Wolstenholme Town in Virginia. Families lived in half-timbered houses similar to those they had left in England, and attended services in refurbished medieval churches reserved for the Anglican Church of Ireland, Catholic public worship having been officially banned. They were attracted to Munster by the availability of land. The fields seem adequate to support the number of households in a mixed farming regime with dairy products, wool, and hides as exports. Some settlers would have been involved in the highly profitable lumber industry (which sold barrel staves to Spain) and attempts

8 E. Klingelhofer, “The Castle of the Faerie Queen,” Archaeology (March/April, 1999), 48-52.
at iron working. Their trade with the West Country ports brought them English goods, like the serviceable Devonshire pottery, as well as items from the Continent, like Spanish oil jars, or German beer jugs, also demonstrated by archaeology. Outside the villages, in the shadow of the great woods, native Irish still lived in their traditional hamlets, from which they would serve as a reluctant workforce in farm and forest.

In Munster, there could well have been as strong a division between the classes as there was in Tudor England. Insufficient data now exist about living conditions, but the Kilcolman evidence does suggest that the colonial elite had a far richer, varied diet than the typical native household, but in some ways not dissimilar to that of townsfolk in Limerick or Cork. Colonial settlers remain enigmatic, but the architectural record reveals the scale of difference between castle and cottage. The granting of land in 1200 acre signories was in fact a feudal arrangement, and these grantees were lords in law and in fact, living in castles and fortified houses that had been suppressed in England. The leading men and their families may have been estranged nearly as much from their English dependents as they were from the expropriated Irish, and this no doubt contributed to the colony’s rapid demise.

**America**

Outside Europe, Englishmen sought and sometimes received Elizabeth’s backing in planting colonies from the Arctic to the Equator. If successful, they would have presaged by more than a century the British Empire’s domination of North America and effective presence in the Caribbean. It would have been a powerful counter-balance to Philip’s Latin America colossus. But her overseas empire failed to materialize; not one of her colonies succeeded. One cannot claim that Elizabeth created them as mere pawns in her great Hapsburg war, to be sacrificed for the greater security of England. Nor should one claim some overarching plan of westward colonization; all evidence indicates that each effort was opportunistic, and grew out of earlier discoveries.

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In 1578, Martin Frobisher returned to the edge of the Arctic, to Baffin Island, which he believed was at the entrance to a North-West Passage from the Atlantic to Asia. Contemporary voyages eastward into the Russian Arctic had found a tenuous trade route south to Moscow, but little opportunity to advance further into Siberia. Members of the Muscovy Company backed Frobisher’s expeditions and were pleased to hear of the likely passage to the Orient, but were overwhelmed by the reported discovery of untouched gold deposits. The third expedition, well funded by the public, planned to exploit this ore and set up a permanent colony at the site, a frigid rock named Countess of Warwick Island, now known by its Inuit name, Kodlunarn. Despite careful planning, the expedition faced the real problems of survival in the far north. Terrifying storms scattered the fleet, sending supplies and pre-fabricated housing to the bottom. The sparse native population proved hostile, and the island’s only fortification comprised a trench and bank across the neck of a small, cliff-faced promontory. Unsurprisingly, many questioned the plan to stay over the winter. Though some of the hundred soldiers and miners did volunteer, thinking of the riches they would be sitting on, it is to the credit of the otherwise rash commander that he refused to leave these the men to an obvious doom. One building was constructed, out of local stone and mortar, as an experiment to see how it would survive a winter. But the English never returned to find out. The tons of rocks they mined under such hardships proved to be iron pyrites, fool’s gold. The project yielded no return at all the investment, and Elizabeth jailed the leaders for what the public assumed was a vast swindle.

In the mid-nineteenth century the American explorer Hall found Frobisher’s site, and in the 1990s fieldwork by St Johns University of Newfoundland and by the Smithsonian Institution have corroborated his findings. The foundations of the colonists’ house remained, the Inuits having removed the items left within and others presumably buried outside. Some pieces of sea-coal and a few fragments of Renaissance stove tile indicated how it had been heated in a land without wood. One area was identified as a forge,

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another as a cutting or slip for boat repair. Swept by arctic winds, Frobisher’s site remains a testament to the Elizabethans’ exploits and their folly.

Undeterred, other Englishmen dreamed of settling new territories in the west.\textsuperscript{14} The explorer John Cabot had named Newfoundland, and claimed it for England, under Elizabeth’s grandfather, Henry VII. Promising to take up this claim and advance it with mainland colonies, one of the early adventurers to Ireland, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, convinced Elizabeth in 1578 of the value of fishing and furs, and the possibility of a temperate passage through North America. Gilbert planted the flag of St George on Newfoundland in 1583 and was acknowledged as the legitimate authority by astonished fishermen of assorted nationalities who used the coves there to dry their catch each summer. Unimpressed by what he had seen there, Gilbert sailed off to plant his colony, probably in the region of New England. His ship disappeared in a storm, and he became a national hero.

Gilbert never colonized, but he did leave behind his plans and his royal charter, which his brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, by now the Queen’s favorite, quickly took up. Raleigh, forbidden to go himself, sent several expeditions to the mid-Atlantic coast to establish a colony that could maintain itself through local resources and serve as a base for privateers against Spain.\textsuperscript{15} The first group of colonists was brought to Roanoke Island, North Carolina, by Sir Richard Grenville in 1585. On the way there, he stopped in Puerto Rico to refit and gather supplies, erecting a fortified camp that he used to taunt the Spanish government. Despite the possibility that he might want to make the English foothold permanent and enlarge it by conquest, much of his fleet had already gone to the North Carolina rendezvous, so he moved on from this first English site in the Caribbean. John White, Raleigh’s artist, drew a picture map of the fort, which topographical study has used to identify the site’s location. Remote sensing techniques and limited archaeological testing have yielded tantalizing data, but for Grenville’s fortification, there is as yet no definitive evidence.

\textsuperscript{14} These efforts are reviewed in D.B. Quinn, \textit{North America from the Earliest Discovery to the First Settlements: The Norse Voyages to 1612} (New York, 1977).
This is not the case on Roanoke Island. There, early eighteenth-century maps actually mark a spot as Raleigh’s Fort. This survived as low earthworks, visited by many, including Presidents Monroe and Roosevelt, until excavated and restored by the National Park Service in the 1950s. Barely sixty feet across, the small fort comprised a rough square, with large projecting bastions on the three sides, the fourth containing an opening. The fieldwork was identified as a “sconce,” much used in the contemporary Dutch wars, and it would have mounted cannon that the Roanoke colonists were known to have brought with them. The records also refer to a town nearby, with a number of wooden houses. No evidence has yet been found for this first English settlement in the New World. The colony was essentially a military one; its governor was Captain Ralph Lane, whose leadership kept the English busy and reasonably effective, it seems, but whose demands upon local Indian food supplies soon grew intolerable and were resisted. An important member of the expedition was Thomas Harriot, a scientist in the employ of Raleigh, whose observations on the geography, natural resources, and native inhabitants became the foundation for studying the continent. In the early 1990s archaeologists were able to identify, close to the fort, the location of Harriot’s workshop. In this wooden structure, a metallurgist from Prague tested ore for precious metals using a brick furnace and crucibles. Other samples were collected and studied in European ceramic and glass vessels. Not far was a pit for making charcoal for the furnace, and some evidence for brick production. The next summer Lane’s colony was withdrawn, and a small occupying party of English soldiers was soon driven off the island to an unknown fate.

Raleigh meanwhile changed the structure of the colony, replacing seigneurial authority with a corporate and commercial organization. The new colonists, with John White as governor, were led by men who had a stake in the enterprise, and together planned to found the City of Raleigh in the newly-named Virginia. This was the famous Lost Colony of 1587, which was unable to establish a new settlement, and reoccupied the town and

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fort on Roanoke. White soon left for England to resupply the colony, but his return was
delayed for two years by the Spanish Armada. When he finally reached Roanoke, the
only sign he found of his family and friends was the name “Croatoan” carved on the
fort’s gatepost, indicating that the group had moved to the safety of a friendly tribe by
that name, further out on the barrier islands. No one knows if they ever reached Croatoan
safely, though theories abound.  

In addition to the mystery of the colonists’ fate, the actual site of the colony is in doubt. White described the fort that Lane had built as having palisade walls and being large
enough to contain at least one dwelling. Thus, it has been argued, the small artillery
earthwork is unlikely to have been the main defense or even located near the settlement.
Clearly, archaeology can solve these problems, but it must be remembered that the most
successful fieldwork is also the most destructive of a site. Roanoke is unique, and the
Park Service intends to be a good steward of this part of world heritage. Although some
shoreline erosion is likely, many features of the Roanoke colony should still be
identifiable by the various techniques available to modern archaeology. The largest
imprint upon the sixteenth-century landscape would have been the palisaded fort and the
town, which may have resembled the Wolstenholme Town and fort built a generation
later at Martin’s Hundred in Virginia. Clues should survive for a wharf or landing site,
even if now underwater. Later plowing would not have removed all the holes that settlers
dug: the graves for colonists known to have died and for unrecorded deaths; the wells,
privies, root cellars, and trash pits of the town; the clay pits for brick making, infilling
cottage walls, and lining chimneys; and finally the trenches to bury cannon and other
heavy items when the English abandoned Roanoke.

Raleigh clung to the hope that his colony survived, if only to retain the charter that gave
him sole access to North America. Nevertheless, it was South America that drew him
next. Following up the Spanish stories of El Dorado that his employees had heard,

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18 These are summarized in D. B. Quinn, Set Fair for Roanoke: Voyages and Colonies, 1584-1606 (Chapel Hill, NC and London, 1985).
19 Ibid., and I Noel Hume, The Virginia Adventure. Roanoke to Jamestown: An archaeological and Historical Odyssey (New York, 1994).
20 I. Noel Hume and A. Noel Hume, The Archaeology of Martin’s Hundred (Williamsburg, VA, 2001)
Raleigh finally got Elizabeth’s permission to sail to America, and in 1595 he set off in search of the City of Gold, the expected third New World civilization of great wealth. He believed he was arriving just in time to prevent the Spanish governor of the just-settled Trinidad from mounting an expedition up the Orinoco to claim the prize. Raleigh initiated his conquests for Elizabeth with a swift assault on Trinidad, driving out the Spanish and liberating local Indians who had been treated cruelly. He was eager to explore Guiana and locate El Dorado, but first fortified a position on Trinidad that would protect his fleet from any Spanish counterattack. Mounting several cannon, this fort was well constructed of earthworks and timber. It was never attacked, but instead of being the key defense of a tropical Elizabethan empire, it and Trinidad were soon abandoned by Raleigh, whose discoveries had produced only fever, hunger, and valueless ore samples. For years, the natives of the region believed that Raleigh would return and deliver them from the Spanish. Yet the account he published fails to mention the abandoned fort, and it is from Spanish documents that one learns of this short-term threat to the Spanish Caribbean.\footnote{Both sources are reproduced in V.T. Harlow, ed., The Discoverie of Guiana, by Sir Walter Ralegh (London, 1928).}

The descriptions permit the fort site to be identified at Los Gallos Point, and like Grenville’s fort on Puerto Rico, it has recently been the object of archaeological search. And like the 1585 fort site from the voyage to Roanoke, this 1595 fort site from the expedition to El Dorado has not yet produced definitive results. Raleigh did return to the area, twenty years later, but it was a tragic attempt to elude the traitor’s fate that King James had ordered for him. By that time, English expansion had really begun. Ulster was planted with Protestants, Jamestown and scores of other Virginia settlements had taken root, and Bermuda was already counted as the second transatlantic colony of a post-Elizabethan empire.

**Commentary**

Proto-colonial archaeology, studying the first generations of European expansion, is a restricted field, focusing on a few places over a few centuries. Yet it concerns a topic of unimagined importance: the physical origins of the world culture that now surrounds us, derived from the descendents of Europeans and those they ruled. These sites show how
English and others first responded to the challenges of new environments and new peoples, and how their choices led to conquest, adaption, or failure. Archaeologists seek to discover, understand, and preserve if possible, before they are lost forever, the rare traces of these earliest European outposts, both firstborn and stillborn. The empire of Elizabeth belongs to the latter.