

## THE GOLD OF THE *GIRONA*

### Background

In 1588, it seemed as if Spain controlled half the world. As well as her own conquests in the Americas, her conquest of Portugal and all its colonies in 1580 and control over large parts of Holland also gave her command over their trading stations.

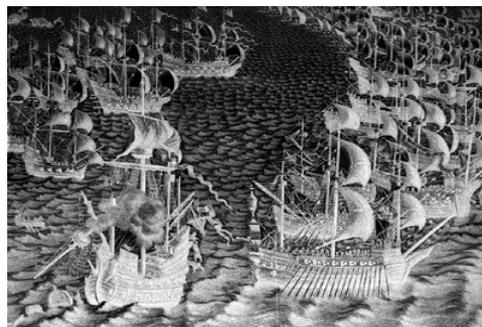
England, however, had long been an irritation to the Spanish by constantly attacking her treasure galleons as they made their way home from the South American colonies laden with gold and silver bullion and rich ornaments from the native goldsmiths. The Spanish king, Philip II, had tried to form an alliance with England by marrying the devout Catholic Queen Mary and, after her death, had even offered for the hand of the staunchly Protestant Elizabeth I. Her delaying tactics, coupled with the continued raids on the Spanish fleets and settlements by Sir Francis Drake and others, finally wore his patience down. The sober and devout Philip determined to invade England and to bring it under Spanish dominion.

When he embarked on the enterprise, he could not have foreseen the tragic outcome, with the noblest of his aristocracy being lost on the bleak rocks of a northern Irish shore. Philip unwittingly condemned the Armada to failure with his idealistic religious and political ambition, which showed little regard for military realism.

Even by modern military standards, the plan to crush England, not only with a large Armada, but also with a mighty army moving through Europe to rendezvous with the fleet in Flanders, would be extremely hazardous to execute. Inevitably, difficulties and delays between the naval and land commands were to seal the fate of the endeavour and present the advantage to the mobile defender.

### The Armada

One hundred and thirty ships set sail from Lisbon in 1588 under the command of Don Alonso Perez de Guzman, Duke of Medina Sidonia.



*The Spanish Armada of 1588, Pyne Engraving*

There were four enormous galleasses - ships intended to have the double advantage of craft powered by sail and oar, but which, in reality, were difficult to manoeuvre - and small fast sailing petaches, with a great variety of ship sizes in between.

The ships all carried cannon as well as the weaponry necessary for an invasion and all the foodstuffs needed to sustain them.



*Swivel gun, breech blocks and cannon balls from the Girona*

As well as sailors, soldiers and armaments, they carried clerics, because Philip viewed the Armada very much as a religious undertaking - before it set sail, La Felicissima Armada was blessed and all on board received religious medals.

After a first engagement in the English Channel on 31 July, followed by other attacks off Portland Bill on 2 August and the Isle of Wight on 3 August, the Armada's commander decided that the fleet should anchor at Calais and wait for news of the army under the command of the Duke of Parma. The English took their opportunity and sent in fire-ships, which forced the Armada ships to cut their cables and scatter, so losing their usual effective crescent-shaped fighting formation. Another very damaging attack was sustained off Gravelines on 8 August and Mdina Sidonia, realising that the fleet was in disarray and unable to beat back against the winds, immediately made plans to get the remaining ships home via the north of Scotland and along Ireland's Atlantic coast. He specifically exhorted his commanders "to take great care lest you fall upon the Island of Ireland, for fear of the harm that may befall you on that coast". However, the autumn weather of 1588 was one of the worst on record and the ships, already damaged in battle, were driven off course by the violence of the storms. Over twenty were wrecked along the north and west coasts of Ireland.

Four centuries later, the noted Belgian underwater archaeologist, Robert Stenuit, by a combination of academic research and sheer physical effort, was able to reveal the wreck site of the galleass *Girona*, which had not managed to survive the difficult journey home. The *Girona* collection was acquired by the Ulster Museum in 1972. For the first time, an entire assemblage from an underwater excavation was purchased by a single institution and preserved for the nation.

#### The Galleass *Girona*

The *Girona* was captained by Fabricio Spinola of Genoa and she was one of four galleasses of the Naples squadron. However, at the time of her sinking off Lacada Point, near the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim, on the morning of 26 October 1588, she was actually commanded by Don Alonso Martinez de Leiva. He was a member of one of Spain's noblest families and one of the youngest and most admired of the military leaders. A favourite of Philip II, he was Commander Designate of the Armada in the event of the death of Medina Sidonia. Having survived the wreck of two other ships, the *Sancta Maria Encoronada* and the *Duquesa Santa Ana*, he heard that the *Girona* was sheltering in Killybegs harbour, Donegal, attempting to make some repairs. He struggled north with the remnants of the crews and infantry of the two ships. Jettisoning most of the heavy cannon on board the *Girona*, a ship

designed to hold 550 men became crowded with 1,300. When the *Girona* was dashed to pieces at Lacada Point, only five men survived and the brave de Leiva was not among them.

The first object which Robert Stenuit and his team found was a heavy boat-shaped lead ingot carried by Armada ships to make shot for muskets and arquebuses. Gradually, objects of a much more opulent and glamorous nature began to be recovered.

### **Renaissance Gold**

The sumptuous gold jewellery comprised orders of chivalry, religious orders and purely ornamental personal decoration, such as gold chains and gold buttons.

Hundreds of gold and silver coins were recovered, as well as silver candlesticks and the remnants of silver-gilt tableware designed to grace the table of the aristocratic ship's officers.



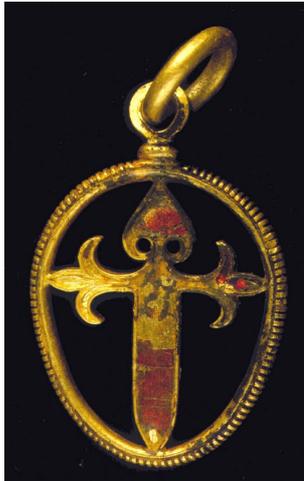
*Forks and spoons*

Philip II was an austere and devout man, plain in his dress and ornament, but this was not reflected by the members of his court in either garments or jewellery.

The Spanish officers on board dressed in the same luxurious splendour as they did when attending Court, complete with gold buttons, gold chains, gold rings, orders of chivalry and glittering diamond rings. The reason there was such wealth on board the *Girona* was because she was carrying the crews, and officers, of two other ships and the leaders of the Armada, who had been chosen from the noblest and wealthiest houses in Spain.

### **Knights**

Many of the jewels reveal facets of 16th century Spanish history. The Orders of Chivalry of Compostela and Alcantara were originally founded in the 12th and 13th centuries as religious military orders, with the purpose of protecting pilgrims to the Holy Lands and recapturing Christian shrines from the Muslims, or Moors as they were called at that time. Each knight wore a cross of the saint connected with his Order and pledged to drive the Moors out of Spanish territory. In succeeding centuries, Orders were awarded to the nobility more as badges of office and to underline their importance in society, rather than for courage and military honour. A gold cross of the Order of a Knight of St John of Jerusalem may have belonged to the captain of the *Girona*. We do not know the owner of the oval doubled-sided Cross of a Knight of Alcantara, which had St Julian of the pear tree on one face and an openwork gold cross on the other.



*Cross of a Knight of Santiago*

This exquisitely simple gold cross, inlaid with red enamel, of a Knight of the Order of Santiago de Compostela belonged to de Leiva.

In the Middle Ages, the shrine of St James of Compostela was an important place of pilgrimage for Irish pilgrims and others.

## Religion

Philip II considered the Armada as a religious crusade and forty clerics travelled on board ship. All the crews were issued with a religious medal in copper or pewter.

A gold ring with the initials 'IHS' on the bezel was found. The initials are an abbreviation of the Greek for 'Jesus' and are the sacred monogram of the Jesuit Order.



An even more splendid religious jewel is an Agnus Dei reliquary in the form of a small golden book with St John the Baptist depicted on the front cover. It contained little wax pellets made from Paschal candles mixed with consecrated oil. These had been blessed by the Pope at the start of the grand enterprise and were believed to have miraculous powers of protection.

## The Jewellery

Twelve gold rings were recovered from Girona and, although most had lost their jewelled settings, one still retained two cut diamonds. The personal and sentimental nature of the gold rings is emphasised by two in particular, the 'Madame de Champagne' ring and the 'no tengo' ring. Madame de Champagne's ring was being worn as a family heirloom by her grandson, Don Tomas Perrenoto, who was aged just twenty-one years when he perished with the Girona.



*'No Tengo' ring*

No one knows who was the owner of the little gold ring of a hand holding a heart, with the legend "No tengo mas que dar te" - I have nothing more to give you.

In a much more ornate style were the two surviving segments of a composite gold chain with a central ruby setting, flanked on either side by a pearl. Such grand jewelled chains are often depicted in contemporary portraits of Spanish grandees.

Twelve portrait cameos of Byzantine Caesars, in lapis lazuli, gold, enamel and pearls, would have formed a spectacularly ornate chain for one of the Girona's officers. Two of the most complete cameos still retain some of their green enamel and four pearls on each side. The pearls came from the oyster beds of Venezuela, traded by Indian pearl divers with the Spanish conquerors. Only eleven of the cameos were found during the original excavations and Robert Stenuit maintained that there should have been a twelfth to complete the set. In 1997, almost thirty years later, a diver made the remarkable discovery of the twelfth!



Two other jewels - a gold salamander set with rubies and a gold ring with a salamander on the bezel - reflect the grandeur of the Spanish empire.



*Gold and ruby salamander*

Gold and silver from the Spanish conquests in the Americas were a primary source of income for the empire. While large numbers of splendid native gold ornaments were melted down for bullion, the ideas of South American craftsmen were often retained. This may explain the fondness for jewels in the form of animals, which appeared during the 16th century. Hernan Cortes, the conqueror of the Aztec Empire of Mexico, recorded in 1526 that among the gold ornaments sent to Spain was a "winged lizard" or salamander. In legend, the salamander was believed to have the magical properties of being able to extinguish and to survive fire - this made it a potent good luck charm on board a wooden fighting ship, where fire was one of the greatest hazards.

The salamander appears again on the bezel of a fine gold ring, where it is flanked on either side by a human head. The head was frequently depicted by pre-Hispanic Indian goldsmiths on breast, nose and ear ornaments.

Six gold chains were recovered from the galleass, two of which were of large and heavy plain links. It is recorded that each Armada captain wore a heavy gold chain over this undershirt and under his doublet. The four other gold chains were fragmentary, much finer and more intricately made, but all reflected the wealth and grandeur of their owners.

### **The Coins**

The hundreds of gold and silver coins represent the personal wealth of those on board, but they also emphasise the close connections between medieval Spanish wealth, Spain's conquests in the New World and the extent of her empire in the 16th century.



The gold, silver and copper coins had been minted in six different countries: Spain, Portugal, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Republic of Genoa, Mexico and Peru. Although by 1588 the Spanish had established mints in Mexico, at Lima in Peru and at Potosi in Bolivia, almost 85% of the gold coins found had been minted in Seville. This important and wealthy city of southern Spain was the centre for gold coming from the New World.

A single Portuguese gold coin, a Sao Vicente from the Lisbon mint of the Portuguese king, John III (1521-1557), is a further reminder of the power of Spain's empire in the 16th century. Her conquest of the Portuguese empire gave her access to the wealth of the Portuguese colonies and the very profitable trade routes.



In more recent years, the Ulster Museum acquired a pendant jewel which provides an epitaph for the thousands of Spanish soldiers and sailors who perished on the shores of Ireland in the aftermath of the Armada. The centre of the pendant is a gold and blue enamel ear-ring of the Virgin and Child. It has been customised later with the addition of a gold border set with an octagonal amethyst and four emeralds and hung with a pendant pearl.

The verse round the border, in Medieval English, reads:

When Spanneshe fleet fled home for feare  
This golden picktur then was found  
Fast fexed unto Spanniards eare  
Whoo drowned lay on Irish ground Anno 1588.

*Winifred Glover*  
*Curator of Ethnography and non-Irish Antiquities*