

OSINT Report: The Doctrine of Discovery

The Papacy and the English Crown

Marie-Soleil Seshat Landry - Gemini Assistant

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1 Executive Summary

An investigation into the historical arrangement between the Papacy and the English monarchy reveals not a formal “deal,” but a unilateral adoption of papal-sanctioned principles by England to justify its colonial ambitions. While Popes in the 15th century granted specific rights to Portugal and Spain to claim non-Christian lands, England, under its own royal authority, mirrored this “Doctrine of Discovery” to legitimize its own explorations and conquests in the New World. This was not a bilateral agreement but a strategic appropriation of a legal and religious concept.

2 The Papal Precedent: A Grant of Power

The foundation of the Doctrine of Discovery lies in a series of 15th-century papal bulls. These decrees granted Portugal and Spain the right to conquer and claim lands inhabited by non-Christians, framed as a divine mandate to spread Christianity. Key documents include:

- **Dum Diversas (1452):** Issued by Pope Nicholas V, it authorized the Portuguese to conquer Saracens and pagans and consign them to perpetual servitude [2].
- **Romanus Pontifex (1455):** Also from Pope Nicholas V, this bull affirmed Portugal’s exclusive rights to lands and trade routes in Africa and beyond [2, 1].
- **Inter Caetera (1493):** Issued by Pope Alexander VI after Columbus’s voyage, it drew a line of demarcation, granting Spain the rights to “discover” and claim lands to the west of the line [3, 1].

These bulls established a framework where European monarchs could claim sovereignty over newly “discovered” territories based on papal authority.

3 England’s Entry: A Royal Proclamation, Not a Papal Pact

Historical records indicate no formal agreement was struck between a Pope and a King of England concerning the Doctrine of Discovery. England’s formal entry into colonization was driven by its own royal authority, which mirrored the principles of the papal bulls.

The pivotal moment was in 1496, when **King Henry VII** issued **Letters Patent** to the explorer John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) [4, 5]. This royal decree authorized Cabot and his sons to:

“...sail to all parts, countries, and seas of the east, of the west, and of the north, under our banners and ensigns, with five ships of what burthen or quantity soever they be, and as many mariners or men as they will have with them in the said ships, upon their own proper costs and charges, to seek out, discover, and find whatsoever isles, countries, regions or provinces of the heathen and infidels whatsoever they be, and in what part of the world soever they be, which before this time have been unknown to all Christians...” [4]

The authority to “subdue, occupy and possess” these lands was granted by the King, not the Pope. This unilateral move demonstrates that England adopted the prevailing European legal and religious justifications for colonization that had been pioneered by the Papacy for Spain and Portugal [5, 6].

4 Conclusion

The “deal” between the Pope and the King of England regarding the Doctrine of Discovery was not a formal, negotiated agreement. It was England’s strategic adoption and application of a papal-originated legal and religious framework to authorize and legitimize its own colonial expansion. England saw the precedent set for its rivals and, through royal authority like the Letters Patent for Cabot, asserted the same rights for itself.

References

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