

# "Great Planets"

Astrological Imagery  
in an Elizabethan Portrait of  
Sir Christopher Hatton KG

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## Astrological Imagery in an Elizabethan Portrait of Sir Christopher Hatton

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**Plate 1.** Sir Christopher Hatton KG. Oil on panel, unknown English artist c.1580. NPG L256. (Image reproduced with the kind permission of Northampton Museums and Art Gallery)

The unusual portrait of Sir Christopher Hatton KG (1540-1591) currently in the National Portrait Gallery (ref:NPG L256) (**Plate 1**) shows his head and shoulders encircled by a schema of the tropical ecliptic<sup>1</sup>. The twelve zodiac signs are illustrated figuratively and the planets are portrayed as Classical Gods, accurately positioned in the signs<sup>2</sup>. This is a horoscope chart of a specific date and time that was apparently significant, auspicious or important to the sitter.

Elizabethans routinely sought astrological advice about potentially life-changing circumstances: births, deaths, marriages, illnesses, anxieties, celebrations, investments etc. Simon Forman, a noted astrologer/physician of 1590's London, compiled casebooks containing details of many thousands of consultees whom he diagnosed, prescribed medicines and otherwise advised using astrological tools<sup>3</sup>. Doctor John Dee of fame was an active practitioner of the astrological and alchemical sciences. He was an advisor to Elizabeth I and the wider nobility and was well known to Sir Christopher Hatton.

The portrait represents the zodiac signs in a lively, semi-realistic style as follows (reading anti-clockwise from the left):

- Aries: a recumbent ram
- Taurus: a recumbent bull
- Gemini: a pair of naked children seated on the ground facing each other
- Cancer: a scaly crayfish in flowing water
- Leo: a lion tripping amongst grass
- Virgo: a winged human figure clad in austere brown raiment
- Libra: a suspension lever-balance scale
- Scorpio: multi-legged scorpion creature (very similar to the crayfish shown in Cancer)
- Sagittarius: a centaur armed with bow and arrow
- Capricorn: a fish-goat hybrid
- Aquarius: a kneeling, bearded male figure holding a pot from which water flows copiously
- Pisces: a pair of silvery fishes arranged head to tail

(All the creatures, beasts and hybrids are facing the zero-degree point of their signs)

The known planets<sup>4</sup> are depicted as the Classical Gods<sup>5</sup> (**Plate 2.**) who embody the powers and attributes of their respective celestial orbs:

- Sun: a male figure of *Apollo* clad in golden raiment and bearing a golden standard with a radiant Sun motif
- Mercury: a male figure of *Hermes* with winged helmet and a winged *caduceus* staff
- Jupiter: a male figure of *Zeus*, dressed in green, carrying an eagle-topped(?) sceptre
- Venus: a winged female figure of *Venus/Aphrodite*, holding a flaming heart in her right hand and an arrow in her left.
- Saturn: a dark-robed, aged male figure of *Krónos*<sup>6</sup>, his footless left leg supported by a short crutch. He is holding and devouring his own child.
- Moon: a figure of *Artemis/Diana* the moon-goddess, dressed in silver and holding a staff or spear and a circular moon-shield.
- Mars: a male figure of *Mars/Ares* dressed in red and equipped for war with a large shield and long-sword (*spatha*).



**Plate 2.** Detail: the planets as Classical deities left to right: Saturn, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Sun, Mars, Moon (reproduced with the kind permission of Northampton Museums and Art Gallery)

The planetary gods progress anti-clockwise through the signs from zero to 30 degrees. Their longitude positions, written beneath their feet, are in the form **Gr•24•54•scr**<sup>7</sup> (e.g. for Jupiter) apparently using a geocentric coordinate system. The digits are degrees and minutes of arc separated by interpuncts, seconds are not given. The planetary positions were most likely derived from pre-calculated published ephemerides<sup>8</sup> and interpolated accordingly. Reviewing early ephemerides enables the exact time of the chart to be discovered<sup>9</sup>. Saturn is the slowest moving planet, circling the ecliptic every 30 years and the easiest planet to locate for any given year. Saturn, as noted in the portrait, appears at longitude 24 degrees of Aquarius in December 1581<sup>10</sup>. Positions are also given for Sun, Mars and Jupiter in the painting. Allowing for minor data inaccuracies and assuming a London location we can interpolate further to obtain a date and time of the chart as:

**Tuesday 12 December 1581, approximately 2.45 am GMT.**

Sunrise occurred at around 8.00 am, so the chart ascendant would be approximately 15 degrees of Libra. The chart employs the Julian calendar that was current in 1581. For Gregorian date, we add 10 whole days to get Tuesday, 22 December 1581 at 2.45 am GMT. The astrological data remains the same. This is not Hatton's natal chart. His exact birth date, thought to be in 1540, is not recorded. The chart must therefore represent another significant date.

Original poetic text on the reverse of the painting, according to NPG gallery notes, suggests that it was displayed in one of Hatton's residences<sup>11</sup>. Hatton owned and managed many properties, from townhouses to castles, some gifted by Queen Elizabeth I and others acquired by purchase and investment. He visited one of his larger acquisitions, namely Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire, for the first time around 1580<sup>12</sup>. It was a magnificent prodigy house<sup>13</sup> he refurbished for an anticipated progress<sup>14</sup> visit by Elizabeth I, although she never actually visited there. Hatton's own visit may be a useful time reference for hanging the portrait and astrological chart at Kirby in anticipation and hope of Her Majesty's progress in the following summer, but there is another possibility.

Wealthy courtiers competed as to who could build or appoint the most opulent and fashionable prodigy house for Her Majesty's pleasure, including devising lavish entertainments and diversions. No expense was spared, no matter how financially ruinous. Royal progress visits presented opportunities for gaining status and making favour with the Queen, extending political ideas and influence with the court and parliamentarians, enjoying dance, drama and feasting and in Robert Dudley's case, a rather unsubtle and desperate pressing of his marriage suit to Her Majesty<sup>15</sup>.

Hatton had his own ambitious prodigy house project at his birthplace, Holdenby in Northamptonshire. It was a huge undertaking, designed and built with the most fashionable architecture, extensive facilities, courtyards, gardens, deer park and even its own church. It was a palatial estate along the lines of Lord Burghley's<sup>16</sup>, but bigger and probably the largest of such houses ever built. The project commenced in 1571<sup>17</sup> and relocated an entire village community to provide the space and aspect required. Hatton apparently only visited twice during construction, but presumably approved the design, décor and furnishing of the palace, delegating works and oversight to trusted friends<sup>18</sup>, managers and employees. Lord Burghley visited in 1579 to view and report on the project. It was completed in 1581 at huge expense, although further developments and additions continued for some years.

Hatton actually dedicated the house as a 'shrine' to Her Majesty and was very confident inviting her progress. Holdenby was fully staffed and equipped, enabling hospitality for friends and itinerant nobles. However, Hatton felt unable to stay there himself until the Queen had first graced it with her saintly presence<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Completion of the Holdenby House project and progress preparations seems a more likely reference date for the chart and perhaps cause for commissioning this portrait<sup>20</sup> to display there. In effect it would have been the 'birth' chart or nativity chart of the completed building, as well as an astrological and pictorial snapshot of the proprietor himself; an example of multi-electional astrology. Astute readers may also notice that the astrological date of the chart coincides with the winter solstice of 1581 (22 December 1581 Gregorian date). That day is the shortest day of the year and represents the point of gradual emergence from the cold and darkness of winter. The days grow longer and brighter and herald progress towards a new year, new hope and the much awaited spring season ahead.

The 'planetary gods' imagery recalls some of the great personalities in Hatton's circle who were actually compared to '*...great plannets*'<sup>21</sup>, such was their power and influence: creative and positive when in favourable aspect, or devastating and destructive in opposition. Queen Elizabeth I herself was portrayed as the Moon-Goddess in contemporary literature, radiating her influence over human affairs<sup>22</sup>. The planetary gods certainly manifested their energy through those few earthly individuals who vied, held and wielded power in the Elizabethan Age, as our history attests.

Sir Christopher Hatton died in London on 20 November 1591, almost ten years after the chart's date. He achieved fame, reputation and enormous wealth as a courtier, statesman and trusted favourite of the Queen, but he died with debts of £40,000, equivalent to roughly £7 million today. His Holdenby project, Kirby Hall and other expenditures had proved financially ruinous.

Readers may venture their own analysis of the chart, the possibilities and potential of future events, but a brief glance at one section with Venus and Saturn in Aquarius, suggests that although the subject may be bestowed with worldly wealth, property and facility, everything material is temporary, is ultimately lost and flows away like water in the river of time, as *Krónos* looks on.

Chris Egerton

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the geocentric zodiac ecliptic. The Sun moves about 1 degree per day, completing a circuit of all the signs in one year. Mars traverses all the signs in about 7 years. Saturn takes 30 years to complete a circuit.

<sup>2</sup> The planetary positions shown in the painting :

Sun 0°16' Cap.(NB the Sun has just entered this sign)

Jupiter 24°54' Capricorn.

Saturn 24°??' Aquarius.

Mars 17°35' Sagittarius.

Mercury, Venus and Moon's details are erased, but they can be interpolated from the 1581 ephemeris.

<sup>3</sup> Kassel, L. '*How to Read Simon Forman's Casebooks; Medicine, Astrology and Gender in Elizabethan London*' Social History of Medicine, Vol 12 issue 1, pages 3-18. Oxford Academic April 1999. Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> Until telescopes were developed, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were not identifiable as planets. So in all there were seven planets including the Sun and Moon (the luminaries)

<sup>5</sup>For detailed and vivid depictions of Classical planetary gods see the British Museum 16<sup>th</sup> century examples of a series of seven prints after artist Henrik Goltzius. References: 1854,0513.164 to 170. Available to view online. Other examples by his contemporaries are also available to view. Accessed August 2019. British Museum online facilities are under rapid development and constant improvement.

<sup>6</sup> The glyph for Saturn is a stylised letter K for *Krónos* in the Greek spelling. *Krónos* devoured his own children at their birth for fear of being supplanted by them, as was foretold by his own parents. This Greek myth has been a subject of artists for centuries. Perhaps the most well-known portrayal is by Francisco Goya who painted the horrible, gruesome tableaux of 'Saturn devouring his son' on his house wall (!) in c.1819. The modern street artist 'Banksy' seems tame by comparison.

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<sup>7</sup> Although not fully researched by this author the abbreviation 'Gr' probably signifies '*geocentricus relatio*' i.e with reference to the earth as a centre for planet and zodiac positional determination. 'scr' likely means '*sequens relicus/reference/relatio*' or something similar, wherein the planetary positions are interpolated more precisely to minute and second of arc using meta data from published ephemerides. In this case, seconds of arc were omitted as they are generally not useful for subsequent interpretation of a chart.

<sup>8</sup> Published ephemerides and almanacs were available and popular in the Elizabethan era. For example: '*Ephemerides Novae*' by Ioannes Stadius, copies of which appear in Dr John Dee's diary collection. Planetary positions were generally calculated using Ptolemy's equations of c.100 AD and refined by later mathematicians and astronomers. Such ephemerides were very similar to today and are still very accessible. They often give planetary aspect information as well as options for Gregorian or Julian calendar and sundry data on eclipses and other important celestial events as well as instructions for mathematically interpolating data for specific times and places.

<sup>9</sup> Historical ephemerides obtained from [https://www.astro.com/swissex/ae/1500/ae\\_1581d.pdf](https://www.astro.com/swissex/ae/1500/ae_1581d.pdf) accessed 4 June 2019

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>11</sup> National Portrait Gallery. NPG L256 gallery notes at June 2019

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.parksandgardens.org/places/holdenby-house> accessed 25 August 2019

<sup>13</sup> The term 'prodigy house' ('prodigious' house) refers to ostentatious country houses built by courtiers or the extremely wealthy. The grandest were intended to accommodate the Queen with her court and retinue on her annual summer progresses.

<sup>14</sup> 'Progresses' were annual summer tours of the Kingdom by the monarch and court. Suitable accommodations were provided by wealthy courtiers or other wealthy nobles who owned sufficiently large properties on route.

<sup>15</sup> Queen Elizabeth's progress visit to Kenilworth Castle in July 1575, hosted by Sir Robert Dudley.

<sup>16</sup> William Cecil, Lord Burghley (Lord High Treasurer in office 1572-98) was a good friend of Hatton and built his own prodigy house at Theobalds.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 12

<sup>18</sup> Hatton asked Lord Burghley to confer with the surveyor/builder about improvements and further developments of the project. Letter from Hatton to Burghley, 9 August 1579 in '*Memoirs of the Life and Times of Sir Christopher Hatton KG...*' by Sir Harris Nicolas GCMG. Richard Bentley, London 1847. p 125

<sup>19</sup> Hatton's letter to Sir Thomas Heneage 11 September 1580 in '*Memoirs...*' pp 155-156.

<sup>20</sup> Paintings were routinely acquired and commissioned for stately mansions and progress visits. Cornelius Ketel for example was an artist who had depicted Hatton and other courtiers of the time, although artists of varying skill were employed in this sphere. Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester left a large collection of paintings upon his death in 1588.

<sup>21</sup> Lord Burghley's letter to Hatton 13 July 1581 referring to Earls Leicester and Sussex as '*... great planets*' in '*Memoirs...*' p 177

<sup>22</sup> e.g. Ben Jonson's '*Cynthia's Revels*' 1601, and his song '*Queen and Huntress*' in that drama.

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