



## *The English Armada: The Greatest Naval Disaster in English History*

by Luis Gorrochategui Santos.

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The story of the English Armada of 1589 is generally seen as a footnote to that of the Spanish Armada of 1588. Philosophy professor Luis Gorrochategui Santos (IES Francisco Aguiar) finds this surprising, since the English force of over 200 ships and 27,667 men was larger than its Spanish predecessor with its 137 ships and 25,696 men (41). In *The English Armada*,<sup>1</sup> he argues that the discrepancy in the historical record is the result of English propagandists' exaggeration of the scale of England's victory in 1588 and concomitant minimizing of its own defeat the next year. In particular, Santos singles out Capt. Anthony Wingfield's *A True Discourse* (London 1589) as essentially an "exculpatory report ... notable for its length, prolixity, literary nature, and, above all, the remarkable inventiveness Wingfield employed to create a fictitious journal of military operations to replace what actually occurred" (183). Generations of Anglo-American historians have taken Wingfield's and similar English accounts at face value, ignoring "the contradictions and weaknesses of English sources, which are far less-numerous and structured than Spanish ones" (246). Santos is the first to use Spanish and Portuguese sources as well as English accounts to paint a more accurate picture of what really happened to the English Armada.

The author begins in Part I by refuting some longstanding myths about the Spanish Armada. He notes that cannon fire from Spanish warships inflicted serious damage on the English fleet and that the use of archaeological evidence of large quantities of unspent munitions to argue that the Spanish engaged in little artillery fire is wrong: most of the excavated wrecks were, in fact, not warships, but supply vessels (*urcas*) whose artillery and munitions were intended solely for land operations. In addition, small-arms fire from Spanish soldiers on deck inflicted significant casualties on the English, particularly in the close fighting between the two fleets off Gravelines. An intercepted English report indicates that

only twenty-eight very badly damaged [English] vessels' had reached London and thirty-two had arrived in Flushing, in an even worse state and with few survivors, with many others killed, in particular their chief pilot; and the Queen had published an edict that no one in the whole country should dare to say that the armada had been a success, or to allow ships to leave its ports. (26)

Hence, Santos maintains, the battle was less one-sided than historians have claimed. But the source for this is Alonso Vázquez,<sup>2</sup> a Spanish captain in the Netherlands. Although there is no reason to suspect that Vázquez deliberately fabricated a story involving intercepted documents, Santos offers no other evidence and cites no original documents. He is, however, on firmer

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1. Orig., *Contra Armada: La mayor catastrophe naval de la historia de Inglaterra* (Madrid: Min. de Def., 2011).

2. *Los Sucesos de Flandes y Francia del tiempo de Alejandro Farnese, Colección de Documentos Ineditos para la Historia de Espana*, v. 73 (Madrid 1879) 352.

ground when he writes that it is “no exaggeration ... that half the men who took part in the English interception fleet in 1588 did not survive to tell the tale” (33), since many English sources attest to the Crown’s callous treatment of demobilized troops. Santos concludes that the “Spanish armada was never defeated. It never shied away from fighting the English. It continued to rule the waves after each of the four battles that were fought in the channel. (27). This does not negate the fact that the Spanish Armada was a colossal failure. One only has to consider the reaction of Philip II, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, and Juan Martínez de Recalde, the vice admiral, to see this.

Santos’s account of the failed English Armada of 1589 in Part II, the longest of the book, holds that it was Queen Elizabeth’s intention to destroy the surviving ships of the Spanish Armada, but the plan became badly compromised by the attempt to place Dom António, Prior of Crato, on the Portuguese throne. The subsequent voyage to La Coruña was a way for Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Norreys, the leaders of the expedition, to dissemble their intention to invade Portugal. But most of the surviving Spanish warships were in Santander; the English delay at La Coruña gave the Spanish time to reinforce Lisbon. The English managed to capture the Pescadería (lower town) on 5 May but not the main part of the city. Their various efforts over the next two weeks were foiled by the city’s tenacious defenders. The defining moment of the siege came when María Pita, the wife of a Spanish army captain, led a group of women in repelling a major enemy attack. When the English finally gave up and set sail for Portugal on 18 May, they had suffered over fifteen hundred killed and even more wounded.

Instead of attacking Lisbon directly by sea, the English disembarked twelve thousand men at Peniche, seventy kilometers away. Santos states that Norreys, the land commander, was led to believe (by Dom António) that his presence on Portuguese soil would have the advantage of inciting a popular revolution. Drake, in command of the navy, disagreed: he favored a direct attack on Lisbon by sea, seizing merchant ships along the coast of Portugal rather than supporting operations against Lisbon. The tediously slow march from Peniche to Lisbon (28 May–2 June) provoked not a general rising but constant harassment by Spanish forces, all in brutally hot, arid weather. When they finally reached the outskirts of Lisbon, it was too late. On the eve of the planned English all-out assault on 3 June, the city’s defenders overran part of the English trenches, wiping out an entire regiment. The next day, Norreys retreated to Cascaes, nineteen miles away, where Drake’s fleet was anchored. In the ensuing withdrawal (4–5 June), they were attacked and lost over five hundred men—an episode omitted from Wingfield’s report.

The arrival in Lisbon of the Adelantado of Castille on 15 June with a fleet of fifteen galleys compelled the English to withdraw from Cascaes three days later in unfavorable weather, in a southwest direction. The Armada then split into two formations. The Dutch, accompanied by some Huguenot and English ships (sixty in all) departed first. One of the ships was carrying back to England the Earl of Essex, who had joined the expedition without the queen’s authorization. Meanwhile, Drake, with 160 vessels, pondered whether to return to England or sail to the Azores to intercept the Spanish treasure fleet. Santos believes he never had any intention of going to the Azores, but sought to return to England to protect the vast loot he had seized along the Portuguese coast. He was also obligated to pick up the English garrison at Peniche, to his north. The Adelantado’s galleys, however, overtook the rear elements of Drake’s Armada on 20 June and sank or captured nine English vessels, as well as a tender and a barge. “About seven hundred Englishmen were taken out of action, of whom one hundred and thirty survived the attacks and were taken prisoner” (219). Drake escaped by sailing further out to sea and beginning a long series of tacking maneuvers necessary to make slow progress up the Portuguese coast. He arrived too late

to save the English garrison at Peniche (23 June), which had surrendered to Spanish forces the day before.

Drake eventually reached Vigo in Galicia on 29 June, where he took on fresh supplies and looted the town. In one clash with local Spanish forces, however, the English lost three hundred men. Drake remained anchored off Vigo until 2 July; several weeks later, he reached England with thousands of soldiers and sailors dying of plague and hunger. At one point, over thirty English ships under Norreys lost contact with the main fleet and sought refuge off the Cies Islands in Galicia: “Marcos de Aramburu captured two of the vessels sailing with Drake [and] the English lost several other vessels” (235); at least two others ran aground. On 6 July, a WSW wind finally enabled the scattered ships to clear the Spanish coast and return to England. The scale of the disaster, however, far exceeded the losses sustained by the Spanish Armada in 1588: “a figure of seventy to eighty lost vessels does not seem exaggerated” (248), while English casualties were “probably over 20,000 men” (298). By comparison, the Spanish Armada lost “no more than thirty-five ships” (290) and took “some 11,000 casualties” (298).

The book’s third and final Part is a postscript on the last fourteen years of the war. Unfortunately, the terse review of its main events is rife with misconceptions and factual errors. For instance, Santos reduces the Spanish intervention in Brittany in the 1590s to a war fought strictly by Catholics and Protestants. The truth is more complicated. Although some English Protestants and French Huguenots fought for Henry IV in Brittany, the great majority of his troops were Catholics. In addition, the Royalist force that won the battle of Craon in 1592 was not “a Protestant army,” being led by two Catholic Bourbons, the Prince of Dombes and the Prince of Conti, cousins of Henry. Moreover, the town of Craon was never “under siege by Norreys” (256), nor was he even present at the battle, having left for England a few months earlier, not to return till 1594. The port of Brest was never “a Huguenot bastion.” Its Royalist governor, the Sieur de Sourdéac, was a Catholic, as was Marshall D’Aumont, the supreme commander of the Anglo-French army besieging the Spanish fort outside the harbor of Brest.

Such errors likely stem from Santos’s overreliance on an outdated source—Cesário Fernández-Duro’s *Armada Española*, published in the 1890s. More problematic, given his criticism of biased Anglo-American historians, are Santos’s own biases, apparent, for example, in his description of the supporters of Dom António in Portugal as “a tyranny of extremists” and “a crazed rabble” whose takeover was akin to “the rule of demagogues” (35). The author even claims “Philip II had no imperialist ambitions to conquer and annex England” (1), but fails to mention his involvement in the Ridolfi and Babington Plots against Queen Elizabeth, or his own dynastic claims to the English crown via his double descent from the House of Lancaster.

These minor irritants aside, Luis Gorrochategui Santos has produced the best available account of the disastrous English Armada of 1589, thanks to his (mostly) judicious use of sources in Spanish and Portuguese.