



Elizabeth I, by George Gower, c. 1588

Swine Before Pearls

What a valiant woman ... If she were not a heretic, she would be worth a whole world!
Pope Sixtus V, on Queen Elizabeth I, 1585

† THE CHURCH TREASURY WAS empty when Gregory VIII died in 1585, having once again been squandered by a pope's extravagant spending. Largely as a result, the Papal States had devolved into anarchy, as formerly loyal barons abandoned their support of Rome in pursuit of more lucrative careers as solo extortionists.

Despite his common origins from a family of immigrant pig farmers, the Franciscan monk Felice Peretti was unexpectedly elected pope two weeks later, his narrow margin of victory engendered by the support of the wealthy Cardinal de' Medici, who had little difficulty twisting the arms—or satisfying the carnal proclivities—of the requisite number of cardinals.

As Sixtus V, the former swineherd would follow the example of so many of his papal predecessors, using his pontificate to make himself one of the wealthiest men in Europe (and, not incidentally, his peasant sister the most lavishly-bejeweled woman in Rome).

While still a monk, Sixtus had done a brief stint as Inquisitor General for Venice, until his severity and high-handedness led to his recall, and as pope he had zero tolerance for criminals and heretics of any stripe.

In an attempt to confront the rampant lawlessness bedeviling the Eternal City, Sixtus executed four criminals on his very first day in office, staged frequent public executions, and—having a particular fondness for beheading—initiated the quaint tradition of displaying the impaled heads of bandits on the Ponte Sant'Angelo. (The Romans joked that there were more heads impaled on spikes along the bridge's span than melons for sale in the marketplace.)

Sixtus immediately set about rectifying the Church's dismal financial situation by reviving the liberal sale of Church offices. The effort was so successful that even after embarking on an extravagant construction campaign, he had enough surplus funds to cajole King Philip II of Spain into launching an invasion against Protestant England, promising him an enormous sum in support.

Philip regarded Queen Elizabeth as a usurper after the death of his wife and co-regent, Mary I, and was eager to retaliate against England for its support of Dutch rebels in the Spanish Netherlands. For his part, Sixtus hoped the invasion would lead to the overthrow of Elizabeth and bring the renegade isle back into the control of Rome.

In May of 1588, the 'invincible' Spanish Armada set sail from Lisbon, consisting of 130 ships carrying 2500 guns and about 30,000 men. But storms delayed the Armada's arrival in England until fully two months later, and by then—aided by a vast network of spies—the English were ready.

While the Armada was anchored off Calais, France, the English fleet, under the able command of Sir Francis Drake, sent eight burning ships into the harbor. Fearing their ships anchored downwind would also catch fire, the panicked Spanish were forced to hastily cut anchor and flee back out to sea.

In the following furious week-long battle, the English continually provoked Spanish fire while staying comfortably out of range, and then moved in for repeated broadsides at close quarters. Unable to get close enough to practice their familiar 'ram and board' tactics, the disorganized Armada was decimated by the newly-developed long-range guns of the well-organized English.

A sudden change in wind direction finally forced the devastated Spanish fleet to abandon the battle and retreat northward around Ireland and Scotland to regroup.

To make matters worse, severe storms in the North Atlantic battered the anchorless Armada even further, and by the time it limped back to Spain in October in full retreat, half of its ships and only a third of its men remained, more of them lost to the weather than to combat. An enraged Philip II lamented, "I sent the Armada against men, not against God's wind and waves!"

To add insult to injury, the Armada had never actually set foot in England (having your ships dashed to splinters against coastal rocks apparently didn't count as landfall), invalidating Sixtus's agreement with Philip and allowing him to refuse to pay his promised million crown subsidy.

After one of the most famous naval victories in European history, England had not only secured its independence but was well on its way to becoming a world power.

Believing that Providence had secured its victory over the Spanish, England would increasingly view it as its destiny to expand its global territory and influence. Although England's navy was defeated the following year in an ill-fated retaliatory attack on Spain, it would recover and over time lay the foundation for the British Empire.

Although Elizabeth had many lovers and entertained marriage proposals from everyone and (literally) their uncles, the legendary 'Virgin Queen' was cautious about matrimony, having witnessed the beheading of both her mother and her stepmother as a child. She once remarked, "I know of but one man who is worthy of my hand, and that man is Sixtus V."

Although he had supported the Spanish invasion against England, authorized Elizabeth's excommunication, and even actively supported plots to murder her, Sixtus also expressed great regret that they could not marry, lamenting, "A pity ... our children would have ruled the world!"