

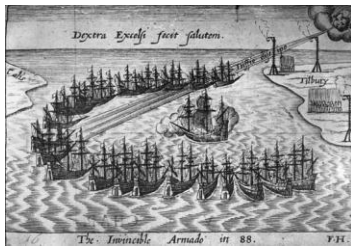
History's Turning Points: The Spanish Armada (1588)

In the late 1500s, Queen Elizabeth of England began to defy Philip II, King of Spain. She encouraged privateer raids on Spanish treasure ships and defended Protestantism by aiding the Protestant Netherlands in a revolt against Spain. After a claim to the English throne was made by the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth had her executed. Within a month after Mary's death, Philip ordered his naval fleet to invade England.

By the spring of 1588, Philip had carefully assembled the largest invasion force that Europe had ever seen. This force, known as the Invincible Armada, included 130 ships, 8,000 sailors, and 20,000 soldiers. The Armada had orders to meet up with more of the Spanish army who had been fighting in the Netherlands. The fleet would then carry the troops across the English Channel to invade England. Dutch ships, however, aided the English by preventing the rendezvous from taking place.

The Spanish Armada was sighted off the southwestern coast of England on July 29. Along England's coast beacons were lit to spread the news of the coming attack. An English fleet commanded by Lord Howard and Sir Francis Drake sailed to meet the Armada.

The first battle quickly showed that the two fleets had very different strategies. The Spaniards arranged their ships in a tight crescent-shaped formation. They hoped for a close-quarters battle so that their powerful cannons could disable the English ships while Spanish soldiers boarded and captured the English vessels. To combat the Spanish, the English had developed fast, maneuverable ships that allowed them to keep out of range of the Armada. They would then pound the Spanish with long-range cannons.



Worried English commanders realized that if the crescent could not be broken, the Spanish plan might succeed. The English then decided on a daring strategy; sending eight unmanned fire-ships into the Spanish fleet.

The English plan worked. Shortly after midnight, favorable winds blew the burning ships toward the unsuspecting Armada. Panic-stricken Spanish

captains cut their anchors and headed for open waters. The Spanish crescent formation had finally been broken.



The English swiftly close in on the disorganized and now vulnerable Armada. English gunners blasted holes in the giant Spanish Ships. Although the Spaniards fought bravely, several of their ships suffered severe damage and 15 were captured. Defeat seemed certain when a sudden storm scattered the two fleets.

With supplies and ammunition running low, the Spanish commander reluctantly ordered his battered fleet to return to Spain by crossing the North Sea and sailing around the British Isles. Fierce storms sank as many as 42 Spanish ships. Only 67 ships safely returned to Spain.

The failure of the Armada marked a decisive turning point in European history. The defeat signaled the decline of Spain's political power. The defeat also held religious importance. Since all of Europe had viewed the battle as a contest between Catholics and Protestants, the power of the Catholic Church suffered a serious setback. As Spain's influence declined, England's power increased. The English were now free to develop their overseas trade and colonize North America.

Recent Research

The defeat of the Armada may not have been due to the superiority of the English. Examination of cannon balls found on the bottom of the North Sea has shown that Spanish cannon balls were not all the same size. Different sizes of guns required different sizes of cannonballs. It has been suggested that the Spanish ships were not equipped with the right cannonballs for the guns on board their ships and were therefore unable to fire on the English ships that attacked them. They therefore chose to retreat.

