

What if María Pita had not existed?

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Abstract. If the Galician heroine María Pita had not taken up arms in 1589 and acted like a true heroine in A Coruña (Spain), would she have colonized England, Spain and Portugal? England could have taken the Azores and captured the Indies fleet, Spain could have become a Protestant country, and other alternative histories could have developed. This paper attempts to highlight a historical event and examine hypotheses about the role of women during that period and subsequently, through the perspective of contemporary figures such as Elizabeth I of England, through a brief documentary review.

Keywords: Anglo-Spanish War, María Pita, Alternative History, gender perspective, Elizabeth I of England.

1. Introduction

María Mayor Fernández de Cámara y Pita, born in the mid-sixteenth century (the exact date of her birth is unknown but not her death, which occurred in 1643), better known as "María Pita", she was a Spanish heroine with a prominent role in the defence of A Coruña (one of the four Galician provinces) in Spain. Philip II rewarded his courage, granting him various honours, and perpetuated this grace among the descendants of the illustrious Galician. Her leading role went down in the annals of history on May 4, 1589, in the fight against the English Invincible commanded by Francis Drake. Although the figures vary according to the authors, most of the data offered put the participation of England at around one hundred and fifty ships and twenty thousand men off the coast of A Coruña (Galicia) Spain.

The English defeat prevented the sacking of the city of A Coruña and frustrated numerous wishes of the English monarch, such as Spanish possessions and the imposition of Protestantism (we should remember, for example, the attacks by English corsairs such as Francis Drake on the Spanish colonies in America). In this way, too, the relationship between the two monarchs (Philip II in Spain and Elizabeth I of England) evolved from an initial alliance to a deep enmity that marked the balance of power in Europe at the end of the sixteenth century. For this reason, although María Pita was not recognized for many years (something very widespread in the invisibilization of women for centuries), more contemporaneously many have considered her heroism in the fact of personally killing the English ensign who led the attack (identified as Drake's brother), which caused panic and the subsequent withdrawal of the English fleet, and with it the English aspirations.

The question then that may arise is *What if Maria Pita had not existed?* And from this question, multiple other questions arise, such as: Has María Pita's role really been so relevant? What other realities could have occurred? Could it be the beginning of a total victory over Spain, which would have been invaded by the English? Would the Iberian Peninsula be the English peninsula and dominated by Protestantism? Would England dominate the Spanish possessions in America? The same hypotheses or possible outcomes could be common to both countries (Spain/Portugal)?

This work departs from real events and recreates the context in which this historical episode has occurred (sections 2 and 3) and explores what history would be like if something had changed (section 4) in the form of counterfactual history or alternative history. Some hypotheses are provided as to how certain historical events could have developed in a different way from the historical fact of María Pita's bravery. However, the main objective of this scientific-literary effort is to highlight a reality without the possibility of fiction that emerges from all the work: the important figure of many women who, like Maria Pita or Elizabeth I of England, were able to stand out in an absolutely masculine world, defying established social canons, laws, and even death.

2. María Pita and the historical, political and social context

There were numerous reasons why the English ventured into the Galician coasts: religious (English Protestantism versus Spanish Catholicism), national jealousy and personal resentments. The Queen of England, Elizabeth I, wanted to strip the throne of her brother-in-law and later rejected suitor, King Philip II (King of Spain since 1556 and of Portugal since 1580). Likewise, it was in England's interest to cancel Spanish trade in America, establishing its own. Why A Coruña? The war of 1585-1604 between the England of Isabella I and the Spanish Monarchy of Philip II placed the Kingdom of Galicia at the centre of the strategic military chessboard because the city of A Coruña was the seat of the Royal Audience and the Captain General, and in addition, the idea was to use the port of A Coruña as a stopover for voyages to the New World (America) [1].

In addition, Philip II's "Great and Happy Armada" had sunk off the English coast while trying to conquer England. Saavedra Vázquez [2] have highlighted that English foreign policy was becoming more and more aggressive, the increase in the activities of some of its privateers in island affairs, Elizabeth's support for the Dutch rebels, the conquest of Ireland and the execution of the Queen of Scots, Mary Stuart, were sufficient elements to provoke in Philip II something more than irritation.

Queen Elizabeth of England did not hesitate to take advantage of the Spanish debacle as an unbeatable opportunity to take advantage in her confrontation with Spain, thus formalizing her most ambitious war navy, to overthrow the Spanish king by supporting the uprising from Lisbon. Philip II had organized a large fleet to attack the English, but inclement weather and the ineptitude of the Spanish commanders led to a major defeat. The English mockingly called that fleet "the invincible armada". For this reason, the Elizabethan fleet has also been called the "Counter Armada" or "English Invincible".

The English intended to attack and destroy what was left of the Spanish ships (which were being repaired in Santander), to later go to Lisbon, raise Portugal against Spain and crown the "prior de Crato" as king of Portugal, turning it into a "puppet government" from which to control, among others, the passage through the Azores, fundamental in the transoceanic routes to capture the Fleet of the Indies on its return from America. However, and despite their efforts, not only did they not succeed but the material and human losses turned out to be much greater than those of the Invincible Armada. As he has summarised Santos Fernández [3]:

The Counter-Armada chartered by England intended to avenge the ill-fated Spanish attack of the previous year led by the Great and Powerful Armada, sarcastically nicknamed Invincible. But he also sought to destroy the battered ships of that adventure that were repaired in the Cantabrian ports; and to recover the Portuguese crown for D. Antonio, the prior of Crato, a submissive ally of the Virgin Queen; and to occupy the Azores in order to disrupt the transit of the Fleet of the Indies and gain control of the Atlantic. Two weeks later, on May 19, the English infantry gave up their attempt to take La Coruña. Despite the manifest numerical disproportion between besiegers and besieged, the city had resisted the siege. The Counter-Armada marched towards Lisbon, leaving three thousand men in the Galician capital, some wounded, most dead. He would also fail in Lisbon.

3. María Pita and the Anglo-Spanish War of 1589 in A Coruña

María Pita had just been widowed by her second husband (the military man Gregorio Rocamundo), who fell in this confrontation, and who, taking the latter's sword, pounced and killed the second lieutenant who led the assault, the brother of Admiral Francis Drake [4]. This demoralized the English troops, made up of twelve thousand troops, and caused them to withdraw. Tradition says that this event was carried out by shouting in Galician of: "Quen teña honra, que me siga!" (Whoever has honor should follow me!). Padre Feijoo¹ [5] in his work entitled "Teatro Crítico" published in nine volumes from 1726 to 1740, express:

A María Pita, Galician heroine, who in the siege laid by the English to La Coruña in the year 1589, when the enemies were already lodged in the breach, and the Garrison ready to capitulate, after that with ardent, although vulgar facundia, criticized our cowardice, tearing sword and surround it from the hands of a Soldier, and crying out that whoever had honor should follow her; inflamed with courage she threw herself into the breach, from whose martial fire, sparks flying into the hearts of the soldiers, and neighbors, which they ignited in the gunpowder of honor, with such impetus they all closed on the enemies, that with the death of one thousand and five hundred (among them a brother of the General of the Land, Henri Noris) they forced them to lift the siege. Philip II rewarded the courage of the Pita, giving him for the days of his life the rank and salary of a living ensign; and Philip III perpetuated in his descendants the rank and salary of Reformed Ensign.

Although the literality of this phrase is denied by many authors, they have all recognized the impulse that his feat aroused and the spirits that he tried to awaken in those who were fighting against the English. Antonio de la Iglesia in 1860 [6], referring to what was described by Juan de Mariana in his "Historia general de España" (Libro IX, cap. VII), attributes this literal narration to him:

The heroic courage of a Galician woman named María Pita shone, for the convicts lost heart in the fight, oppressed by the multitude of the enemies. Seeing this, this valiant woman, having taken the sword, and surrounded it in her hand, "good cheer, my companions, says to them, follow me, and take an example from me, for here it is a question of the honor of the Spanish name." And having said this, he charged against the enemies with incredible daring, and the soldiers being incited with him, recovered all their strength, and after a bitter fight, repulsed the enemy from the breach of the wall with great havoc.

¹ The reference is made on speech six from the first volume, with the title "Defensa de la mujer".

The phrase "woman of arms to take" takes on all its meaning. As have described Benito Vicetto, with the characteristic post-romantic prose of his cited «Historia de Galicia» in 1871 [7] that María Pita was endowed with a lively and strong genius; she had a very marked action in the big game, and was so skillful in the handling of the arquebus, that her fine dexterity gave occasion for the natives of the country to transmit to posterity when they see a good shot, the saying of "Apostaas a María Pita!" There is no doubt that this woman managed to awaken the spirits of the people of A Coruña to raise their weapons against the English, who ended up fleeing from Galicia. Her heroism has been taken to comics [8] and to television in the series "El Ministerio del tiempo" on Radio Televisión Española [9], in a Comedy attributed to Antonio Valladares de Sotomayor [10], in the work of Francisco Robello y Vasconi, a nineteenth-century actor picked up by Benítez [11], or in the "Drama en tres actos y en verso" of Antonio Mallí de Brignole [12], with some verses like this:

I come to accompany you...With the pleasure of admiring you, my penalty vanishes All to the temple let's march; and because our city is protected by its goodness, thanks be to God, let us elevate. To you Maria Mayor, Fernandez, Cámara and Pita, La Coruña needs to give a high prize of honor; and in eternal bronze be written the courage of the woman who helped us to win: Long live Maria Pita! Hurrah! Let the deep mourning be given a truce, and let the world know with amazement that, fortunate and fruitful, our soil gives heroines!

In the context of the sixteenth century, it is necessary to highlight this woman, María Pita, who not only helped to free her city and her country from the English siege, but also to relate to the Court, moving from A Coruña to Madrid and residing, in the capital, for several periods, to request justice and, thanks to His Majesty, defying all the bureaucratic, orographic and inclemency difficulties of a long and tortuous experiential journey, not without difficulties, between A Coruña and Madrid, for the defense of the rights of their children and women, as he pointed out López Rodríguez [13]. García Oro [14] have even published an appendix to some of his writings in which Maria Pita presents her merits and asks for reward and help according to them.

Likewise, part of the biography of María Pita is known through documents preserved in the General Archive of Simancas (AGS), the Notarial Archive of A Coruña and the Archive of the Kingdom of Galicia, in particular the memorials that María Pita raised to the Council of War in request of a reward for her services, some notarial deeds. We are also aware of various judicial processes [15]. The example presented here is a document containing a consultation of the Council of War, dated 1606 and which is part of the collection of the Council of War (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries) preserved in the General Archive of Simancas (AGS), and its transcript was published by Martínez Salazar (vide Figure 1). In this document, the Council of War explained to King Philip III that it had seen a memorial from Mayor Fernández de la Cámara y Pita (María Pita) in which he requested (due to the services rendered in the English siege of A Coruña) that her monthly salary be increased by five escudos (granted in the times of Philip II, charged to the Infantry of the city of A Coruña), that after his death one of his two daughters could receive this pay and that some position was given to his two sons. In this consultation, the Council of War proposed to the king to increase María Pita's monthly salary by three more escudos.

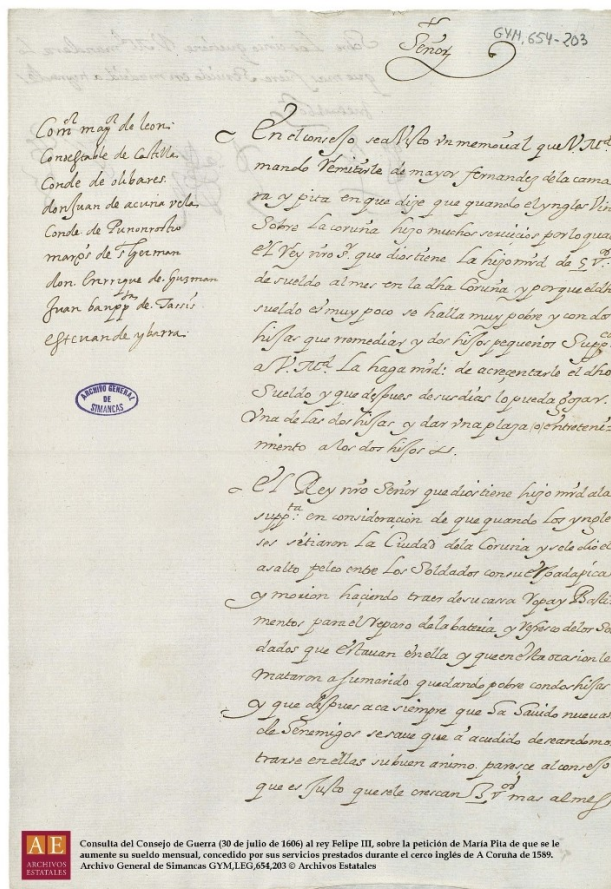


Figure 1. Consultation of the Council of War, dated in Madrid on July 30, 1606. Simancas Archive (AGS GYM,LEG,654,203)²[16].

By the impetus of María Pita, Philip II rewarded her courage, giving her the rank and salary of ensign and also an export license with Portugal, and perpetuated this grace among the descendants of the illustrious Galician. Likewise, the ship that carried out the Royal Philanthropic Expedition of the Vaccine for the vaccination of the overseas territories in 1803 was named after her. The corvette María Pita transported the Balmis expedition that distributed the smallpox vaccine around the world, in one of the most important humanitarian and scientific feats as described Veiga y Martín [17].

² Transcription of the document:

«[...] Sir: In the Council [of War] there has been seen a memorial, which your Majesty ordered to be sent to you, from Mayor Fernández de la Cámara y Pita [María Pita], in which he says that when the Englishman came to La Coruña he did many services, for which the king our lord (God has) [Felipe II] made her the mercy of 5 escudos of salary per month in the said Coruña; and because the said salary is very little, he is very poor and with two daughters to remedy and two small sons, he begs your Majesty to do you the favor of increasing the said salary and that after his days one of the two daughters may enjoy it, and give a place or entertainment to the two sons. The king our lord (God has) [Philip II] made a favor of the supplication in consideration that, when the English besieged the city of La Coruña and the assault was given, he fought among the soldiers with his sword, pike and morion [helmet], having clothes and provisions brought from his house for the repair of the battery and refreshment of the soldiers who were in it; and that on this occasion her husband was killed, leaving her poor with two daughters; and that hereafter, whenever there has been news of enemies, it is known that [he] has come wishing to show his good cheer in them. It seems to the Council [of War] that it is fair to increase three more escudos a month over the five he has. Your Majesty will command what is most useful. In Madrid on the thirtieth day of July 1606".

The María Pita festivities in A Coruña are the best documented of those held in the city. They began in the sixteenth century to commemorate the resistance of A Coruña against the English attack of 1589 and have been maintained since then associating religious acts (Function of the Vow to the Virgin of the Rosary), to profane ones (theatrical performances, Floral Games, popular festivals) that vary reflecting the tastes of the time as described Mercedes López Picher [18]. In the Plaza de María Pita, in the city of A Coruña and where the City Council of the city is located, a monument was erected in honor of María Pita. The work, finished in bronze, was conceived by Xosé Castiñeiras, and it depicts the heroine with the spear with which she killed the English ensign while holding her husband's lifeless body with her other hand, Gregorio de Racamonde. The María Pita House Museum in A Coruña remembers the life of this heroine. On the site it occupies, a house owned by María Pita's first husband was built in the sixteenth century, Juan Alonso de Rois.

4. What if María Pita had not existed? Alternate History: The Queen of England defeats and colonizes from Galicia, Spain and Portugal. It becomes the Empire of England

The Anglo-Spanish War has generally been dated between 1585 and 1604. After the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, her successor James I of England (who sought a less bellicose policy than his predecessor) signed the Treaty of London in 1604. With Philip III of Spain, both countries agreed to end the war, two decades of conflict that had caused enormous losses to both countries. England promised to stop supporting the Dutch rebels and to stop privateer attacks on Spanish ships. In return, Spain recognized the English Protestant government and hostilities were suspended.

Keith Roberts in his work *Pavana* (1968) [20], whose point of divergence is found in the fiction that the Spanish Invincible Armada defeats England in 1588, had already presented a world where the domination of the Catholic Church and the Inquisition slows down technological development, keeping Europe in a semi-medieval state. The novel *Ruled Britannia* (2002) [21] of Harry Turtledove, imagine a Catholic England occupied by Spain after a victory of the Armada in 1588. The story follows William Shakespeare, who becomes embroiled in underground resistance against the occupiers. The novel *Times Without Number* (1962) [22] written by John Brunner explores the invasion of the Armada, in which he successfully presents it, leading to a future where a dominant Spanish Empire has imposed Catholicism on much of the world and history has progressed very differently, with stagnant or divergent technology. Likewise, the novel *The Invincible Armada and Elizabethan England de Mattingly* [23], appeared in its English version in 1959 and had a first Spanish edition in 1961. Franco's censorship prohibited the distribution of the work. Carlos Gómez-Centurión he tells us in the prologue that some fool went so far as to include in the text a warning that read as follows: "The Spanish reader must not forget that the author of this book is of the Protestant religion and as such, a born adversary of the imperial and Catholic policy of our great monarchs of the house of Austria".

Other novels have focused less on the Spanish invasion and more on the queen's decision not to marry or have children, exploring what would have happened if she had chosen a different path, such as: the trilogy *Tudor Legacy* of Laura Andersen (The Virgin's Daughter; The Virgin's Spy; y The Virgin's War) [24]. They are historical fiction novels with uchronic elements that explore a world where Elizabeth I marries and has a daughter, which completely changes the line of succession and the destiny of England. The plot focuses on the struggles of his daughter, Princess Anabel, to keep the throne.

In this type of divergent lines, what would have happened if María Pita had not existed? One of the imaginaries of alternative history could have been that the Queen of England would have defeated and colonized from Galicia to Spain and Portugal. Elizabeth I of England (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603), nicknamed the Virgin Queen, Gloriana, was the Queen of England and Ireland from her

accession to the throne on 17 November 1558 until her death in 1603. Her reign, of more than four decades, was known as the Elizabethan era. She was also the fifth and last monarch of the Tudor dynasty. Elizabeth was the daughter of King Henry VIII of England and Anne Boleyn, his second wife, who was executed two and a half years after Elizabeth's birth (she did not have an easy start or reign). One of the most outstanding events of his reign was the transformation of England, a predominantly Catholic country, into a Protestant country.

One of her first actions as queen had been the establishment of a Protestant Church independent of the Holy See, of which she became supreme governor. This decision would end up causing the definitive birth of the Church of England. Elizabeth was expected to marry and have an heir; however, despite numerous courtships, she never did. Pope Pius V declared it illegitimate in 1570 and freed her subjects from obedience to it. Spain and Portugal were part of England, and so were all the possessions in America, whose revenues covered the costs of conquering other territories. Thus, attempts to establish permanent English settlements in America did not fail during his reign.

His reign was so prosperous that the phrase by which Philip II's reign had been known for decades that it was an "empire where the sun never set" was soon erased, given that he had possessions on each of the five continents. The man who had also been king of Naples, Sicily, Portugal and the Algarves, also obtained power in England and Ireland due to his marriage to Mary Tudor, whom he married after the death of his first wife, Maria Manuela of Portugal. All of these territories came to be dominated by Elizabeth I of England, whose rule became known as the "Elizabethan Empire".

Elizabeth was recognized as a charismatic ruler and a stubborn survivor whose 44 years on the throne provided remarkable stability to the kingdom and helped forge a sense of national identity with all the feats she achieved during her monarchy. Elizabeth was determined not to marry despite the pleas of the House of Commons, which asked its queen to ensure the survival of the dynasty. With her characteristic eloquence, she convinced the House that her commitment was total to England and that all Englishmen were her children. Sometime later, the House insisted again, but Isabel resolved the affront with a "don't talk anymore". She dissolved the Chamber for four years. It was the beginning of an absolute monarchy without control by any other power, which was followed by parliamentarism without parliamentarism triumphing in England.

Its enormous worldwide recognition meant that this period has also been famous for the flourishing of the so-called "Elizabethan theatre" directed by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Obsessed with theatricality and recognition, and with the intention of maintaining a young appearance, Isabella exaggerated her pallor of virginal face, dressed in flamboyant and sumptuous dresses that she had accompanied with all the paraphernalia of a true queen (gloves as a symbol of elegance, the ermine as a symbol of purity, the crown and sceptre as monarchical icons...) and thus fed her own myth by making poets and painters extol her as an immortal goddess who would precisely lead her to death. The white makeup, made from Venetian cerusa (a mixture of lead and vinegar) that made it highly poisonous, caused the slow poisoning of his blood, which fuelled the myth.

Along with her, many women such as Elizabeth of Castile, Anne Boleyn, Margaret Tudor, Catherine de Medici, Anne of France, Margaret of Austria marked the modern world and sixteenth-century Europe saw an explosion of female power. Women had unprecedented power. Isabella of Castile, in armor costume, followed her soldiers to the battlefield. Margaret of Austria and Louise of Savoy, two queen regents, ended years of war with their "Peace of the Ladies." Anne Boleyn was raised at the court of Margaret of Austria, surrounded by powerful women; her daughter, Elizabeth Tudor, grew up to be one of the most famous queens in history. For the first time, Europe saw a sisterhood of women who exercised their authority in an exclusively feminine way and that has been the reason why it

reached modern times without fissures, hence today no alternative is contemplated other than the power of women.

5. Conclusions

Martínez Salazar has described how few contemporaries made María Pita's feat visible, and even many years later [19], so this publication aims to be a contribution to the many that have been made to María Pita in recent decades. The book *María Pita. Una aproximación a su vida y a su tiempo* written by María del Carmen Saavedra Vázquez [25] offer a documented historical study to reconstruct her biography, including her marriages and later life, while addressing her figure from a gender perspective to make visible the role of women in history. It addresses little-known aspects such as her four marriages (something common for female survival at the time) and her subsequent life, including the efforts to receive royal favors as a reward for her bravery, a long process that demonstrates her persistence and social status, and how the figure of María Pita has evolved from a real person to a symbol and iconic image of the city of La Coruña. Likewise, the book *María Pita, símbolo de libertad de A Coruña: siglo XVI* written by Miguel González Garcés [26] offer a detailed and documented account of the life of María Pita and the siege providing social and economic context of La Coruña in that period, using primary sources to reconstruct the events as a window into sixteenth-century Galicia, describing daily life, political tensions, and naval conflicts between Spain and England.

In all cases we can conclude that María Pita was more than the heroine of the siege of La Coruña. She represented an example of rebellion at a time when women were subordinated to the domination of men. But María Pita was not the only woman who defended La Coruña. Some historical documents portray this scenario in which women took on a radical importance. In a letter dated September 25, 1589, the seafarers from A Coruña of the “Cofradía de San Andrés”, allude to the participation of women in defense³. In other documents preserved in the National Library of Spain, the participation of the women of A Coruña in the day of May 14 has been recounted, but the role of María Pita is highlighted, who by killing an English standard-bearer (ensign), increased the fighting spirit of the defenders who thus managed to repel the English assault [27]⁴:

In all the time that this stubborn assault lasted, the women did not cease to provide stones to the soldiers and to shoot themselves from the same battery, and some loaded the arquebuses and muskets behind the soldiers, and gave them and took them so that they would not cease firing. The Ensign of the enemies who went up to the gap encouraged and shouted to his people, until a woman named María Fernández de la Cámara y Pita [María Pita] had the wisdom to kill him, and with this he caused some suspension to those who climbed and were fighting with the defenders who were already tired, and with this they were encouraged and recovered to repel the enemy.

However, despite these feats and numerous women such as those mentioned, the situation of women during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain (and well into the twentieth century), was directly determined by their subordination with respect to men, a subordination justified by religious and moral theories, and even scientific and legal theories relegated from the social space and totally dependent on the men to whom they were linked (fathers or husbands) [28 - 30]. In spite of this, we made visible the value of many of them, and the feats of many others who did not want to remain anonymous as the 'virtuous' woman who had to meet the requirements of chastity, purity, temperance, beauty, submission, modesty and obedience, in her main function of being a wife and mother. Their participation in public activities was not only considered inconvenient, but also immoral, hence their

³ General Archive of Galicia. (P. sig. 16-n.I)

⁴ It is a 19th-century copy of an old anonymous diary relating to the event in question.

presence is even more honorific and prominent. They excel in a world that silences them, remembering them is doing justice, and they allow us to represent what could have been and was not, nor has yet been achieved in the twenty-first century. Not even mere equality in all areas has been achieved today.

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