Isabella of Castile

“I... am ready to pawn my jewels to defray the expenses of it.”

ISABELLA TO COLUMBUS, SPEAKING ABOUT HIS PROPOSED VOYAGE TO ASIA, 1450

According to a contemporary chronicle, Isabella of Castile was a neglected child. “The Queen, Our Lady, from childhood was without a father and we can even say a mother... She had work and cares, and an extreme lack of necessary things...” Isabella’s father, John II of Castile (a Spanish kingdom), died when she was three, at which point her depressed (a Spanish kingdom), died when she was three, at which point her depressed

Lasked the wrath of Henry, who had not given her consent. But Isabella knew that this was the marriage most likely to bring her power. In 1469 they were married in the Spanish city of Valladolid, and for much of the next 10 years they fought for recognition of their right to become joint rulers of the unruly kingdom of Castile.

Love and war

In 1474 Henry died and civil war broke out. However, within a few years it was clear that Isabella and Ferdinand were winning on every front. By 1476 they had set up the hermandad (“Brotherhood”), a network of local militias that formed a basic police force, and eventually became the basis of a national Spanish army.

In 1477 Isabella and Ferdinand entered the city of Seville in triumph—they were the unchallenged monarchs of Castile. Their partnership was carefully worked out. In keeping with their motto “tanto monta, monta tanto,” Isabella found love in the “same” thing as Ferdinand. They joined joint decrees and approved coins and stamps. Although Ferdinand’s name preceeded Isabella’s on state documents, her cost of arms came first. They were united front, fully supporting each other’s decisions.

The Catholic Monarchs

Isabella may have viewed the turmoil of her childhood as a sign of God’s displeasure with the weak rule of her half-brother Henry. Her sense of duty and passion for order and unity led to the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. This was a cost too high for the Catholic Church. 

Isabella’s health, and her death in 1504.

Having achieved so much for “God’s cause,” Isabella had little time for other activities. She and Ferdinand agreed to sponsor the “enterprise of the Indies,” the first transatlantic voyage of Christopher Columbus (see pp.228-229), which led to the development of a global Spanish empire (see pp.234-235).

Isabella’s final years

In her final years, Isabella was distressed by a succession of family tragedies. She had five children: Isabella, John, Joanna, Maria, and Catherine. Both Isabella and Maria were winning on every front. By 1474 they had set up the hermandad (“Brotherhood”), a network of local

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Isabella’s greatest achievement was the conquest of Granada, the last Moorish kingdom in Spain. She and her husband were pictures (left) accepting the submission of their new Muslim subjects, but in practice, promises of religious tolerance were not kept.

Family portrait

This painting in a Dominican monastery in Avila shows Isabella and Ferdinand’s eldest daughter, Joanna. Ambitious and flexible, Ferdinand was an extreme lack of necessary things...” Isabella’s father, John II of Castile (a Spanish kingdom), died when she was three, at which point her depressed (a Spanish kingdom), died when she was three, at which point her depressed

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This painting in a Dominican monastery in Avila shows Isabella and Ferdinand’s eldest daughter, Joanna. Ambitious and flexible, Ferdinand was a handsome, dashing Renaissance prince. After Isabella’s death, he was in an unhappy Joanna. Isabella and Ferdinand’s daughter Maria marries Manoel of Portugal. 

Fall of Granada

In 1492, the year of the death of their son-in-law, Philip the Handsome, Ferdinand and Isabella announce their intention to go to war against Granada. This 15th-century gold coin was minted in Seville with the images of Columbus and Ferdinand. 

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