

Imperial Spain: Castile and Aragon

The modern-day state of Spain originated as a series of separate and distinct kingdoms throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Imperial Spain emerged from the marriage of two members of two influential kingdoms: Castile and Aragon. In 1469, the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon successfully united these two kingdoms. After winning a civil war in the years following her coronation, by 1479 Queen Isabella was fully in control of her realm. In that same year, upon the death of his father, Ferdinand became the King of Aragon. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand became the joint rulers of Castile and Aragon, out of which would become the state of Spain. The reign of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand (who were collectively referred to as the Catholic Monarchs) would oversee the early development and growth of the Spanish empire. Castile and Aragon continued to retain separate social, political, and economic identities until the ascension of King Charles I in 1516. During his reign, the territories throughout the Iberian Peninsula (with the exception of Portugal) were officially unified. For the next couple of centuries, imperial Spain would continue to expand under a newly unified structure.

The Kingdom of Aragon

The kingdoms of Castile and Aragon had unique histories before their unification. Although the marital union between Isabella and Ferdinand was considered an equal arrangement, the kingdom of Aragon was already floundering by the time of its union with Castile. Aragon boasted many port cities, which provided the kingdom with a strong commercial empire. The kingdom (or Crown) of Aragon comprised a federation of distinctly separate provinces or regions. The strength of Aragon's nobility lay with its urban, commercial sectors, as opposed to the more traditional landed nobility. The kingdom started to crumble financially as the monarchy increasingly failed to match the commercial and shipping success of other European regions. Although the kingdom of Castile was in a more favorable position for a dynastic union, Aragon brought a long history of commercial and mercantile enterprise, diplomatic experience, and administrative and bureaucratic expertise. These features proved extremely beneficial for the budding phases of imperial Spain.

The Kingdom of Castile

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the kingdom of Castile was a thriving realm. Unlike the gentry in Aragon, the Castilian nobility enjoyed vast wealth in landholdings. Established in the ninth century, Castile was one of the most enclosed and isolated kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula throughout the medieval period. Due to its relative seclusion, the kingdom of Castile retained the cultural and social features and values of the medieval period much longer than its more worldly neighbors in Aragon. Castile's attempts to repel the Muslim Moors during the 700 years of Reconquista, and Castilians' identification with the medieval crusaders, fostered a martial behavior and mindset that equated expansion with conquest.

Over the course of the fourteenth century, the Castilian nobility gained an increasing amount of control and wielded enormous power. By the early fifteenth century, the Castilian monarchy had in many respects become a puppet of the nobility. During the first half of the fifteenth century the kingdom of Castile experienced internal strife, which eventually led to civil war. The War of Castilian Succession (1474–1479) broke out as a result of Isabella's claim to the crown in 1474. After five years of fighting, the episode eventually concluded with the triumph of Queen Isabella, who was able to take control as the monarch of Castile in 1479. As joint rulers under the newly unified kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, Isabella and Ferdinand reorganized the structure of the government and judiciary so as to remove power from the nobility and reallocate it to the Crown. This allowed the monarchy to access and control the kingdom's economic endeavors. A substantial portion of this growing financial success was designated to overseas exploration and imperial expansion.

The Marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand

The union between Isabella and Ferdinand benefited both Castile and Aragon. The partnership between the two kingdoms created a united front on foreign policy and European geopolitics. Even though Castile was the more powerful partner in the newly formed union and the leader in foreign policy, King Ferdinand still commanded a strong role in the decisions and outcome of the two kingdoms. Ferdinand was primarily concerned with the political balance on the European continent, particularly with the kingdom of Aragon's territories in Italy. He played an influential role in the formation of several significant royal betrothals with members of European royalty.

Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand's rule was considered a golden age for the development of Spain and its expanding empire. As a result of the reallocation of power and finance from the nobility to the Crown, Ferdinand was able to redirect his attention to winning the Reconquista. The attempt to permanently expel the Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula had been inactive for nearly 200 years prior to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand's reign. In 1492, under King Ferdinand, the joint military forces of Castile and Aragon defeated the Moors in Granada, in southern Spain. Their military victory successfully ended nearly 800 years of occupation and subjugation by the Muslim Moors on the Iberian Peninsula. The defeat of the Moors in 1492 carried substantial and long-lasting consequences for the Iberian Peninsula, along with the rest of the world.

Expulsion and Expansion Under Isabella and Ferdinand

Queen Isabella was an extremely devout and fervent Catholic who believed that Christianity needed to be protected where it already existed and spread to regions where it did not. This driving motivation contributed to two major developments in world history. The first was Queen Isabella's fervent implementation of the Spanish Inquisition, which had been established under the Catholic Monarchs in 1480, but was only superficially enforced until the defeat of the Moors in Granada in 1492. Queen Isabella perceived the Inquisition as an expression of her extreme devotion to

Catholicism. Under the Spanish Inquisition, all Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, and all Jews in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon were expected to convert or face expulsion as well. The other significant development that resulted from Queen Isabella's ardent observance of Catholicism—and the victory in Granada in 1492—was Christopher Columbus's expedition. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand interpreted their victory against the Moors as an opportunity to extend the reach of the Catholic Church to all corners of the earth. This voyage, supported by Isabella and Ferdinand, would lead to the discovery of the New World and usher in a golden age for Spain's imperial and colonial expansions.

Christopher Columbus's famous voyage to the Americas is considered the most successful expedition of overseas expansion that Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand supported. During his first expedition in 1492, Columbus landed in the present-day Bahamas, and continued on to present-day Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. In all, Christopher Columbus undertook four expeditions and was responsible for launching Spain into its golden age of imperialism and colonialism. The colonial territories founded by Columbus throughout the Americas yielded enormous wealth for the Spanish empire, which would enjoy European supremacy overseas until the late sixteenth century. Columbus's discoveries also introduced information about the New World to European society.

Summary:

- The marriage of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand created a dynastic union of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. The combination of these kingdoms' skills, knowledge, and wealth provided the necessary tools that gave rise to the first major period of imperial Spain.
- The unique characteristics of both Castile and Aragon helped to generate a strong administrative state that was primarily centralized through the power of the monarchy. This consolidation and streamlining allowed the Spanish Crown to withstand the trials of overseas exploration and colonization in the New World.
- The religious fervor of Queen Isabella triggered the Spanish Inquisition and provided a moral impetus and justification for Christopher Columbus' exploration and discovery of the New World in 1492.
- The mandatory conversion to Catholicism throughout Spain's territorial conquests throughout South America has shaped and influenced the religious and cultural development of that region to this day.