

QUEEN OF SPAIN Born 1451 Died 1504

# 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, 1492

According to a contemporary chronicler, Isabella I of Spain 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 mother shut herself away. Her young brother died of a plaguelike illness in 1468, and her older half-brother, the mentally unstable Henry IV, perceived her as a threat. However, Isabella emerged from this Cinderella-like childhood an extremely strong-willed and intelligent young woman.

As a leading contender for the throne of Castile, Isabella attracted many suitors—including the king of Portugal and brothers of the kings of England and France—but she herself decided to marry Ferdinand of Aragon: “It has to be he and absolutely no other.” In marrying the young prince of Aragon—whom she had yet to meet—17-year-old Isabella

risked the wrath of Henry, who had not given his 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

## Isabella the Catholic

Isabella’s strong will helped bring about fundamental changes in Spain. Her reign led to the permanent unification of Spain (which had previously been a collection of kingdoms) and her decision to sponsor Christopher Columbus’s journey to find a new route to Asia laid the groundwork for an era of global commerce and trade.

## Catholic New World

This 17th-century altarpiece from Guatemala reveals the impact of Spanish culture in the Americas. Isabella regarded it as her sacred duty to bring Christianity to her subjects in the New World.



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 Toledo in triumph—they were the unchallenged monarchs of Castile. Their partnership was carefully worked out. In keeping with their motto “*Tanto monta, monta tanto, Isabel como Fernando*” (“It’s the same thing, Isabella is the same as Ferdinand”), they issued joint decrees and approved coins and stamps. Although Ferdinand’s name preceded Isabella’s on state documents, her coat of arms came first. They were a 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 court run by the Catholic Church with the aim of ensuring royal subjects remained faithful Christians. Within Isabella’s own lifetime, this institution—whose first victims were Jews and conversos (Christians of Jewish ethnicity)—became a byword for cruelty and terror. By 1492, the year of the fall of Granada, those who died because of its denunciations may have exceeded ten thousand in number.

In 1480 Isabella and Ferdinand announced their intention to go to war against Granada, the last Moorish (Muslim) kingdom in Spain (see pp.174–75). In 1492, after being besieged for a year and a half, Granada surrendered. For this victory, Isabella and Ferdinand were congratulated by

## Family portrait

This painting in a Dominican monastery in Avila shows Isabella, Ferdinand, and their children John and Joanna at prayer before the image of the Madonna and Child.

the monarchs of Europe, and awarded the title of the “Catholic Monarchs” by the pope. In addition to forming the final episode in the centuries-long battle by the Christian church to reclaim the Iberian peninsula, Granada’s conquest was widely seen as compensation for the loss of Constantinople to Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453 (see pp.206–07).

## New-found wealth

This 15th-century gold coin was minted in Seville with the images of both monarchs. Spain had access to vast amounts of silver and gold in the Americas.



## KING OF SPAIN (1452–1516)

### FERDINAND OF ARAGON

Ferdinand’s political skill was matched by his flair as a military commander. Although not particularly handsome, he had great charm, and in his enthusiasm for hunting, jousting, gambling, and women, he was the epitome of the dashing Renaissance prince.

After Isabella’s death, he was in an awkward position as a former king, until 1506, when the death of his son-in-law Philip the Handsome allowed his return to Castile as Regent for his fragile daughter Joanna. Ambitious and flexible, Ferdinand gained much territory in Italy for Spain as a result of the Italian Wars of 1511–13.

## Fall of Granada

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

Having achieved so much for “God’s cause,” Isabella had time for other activities. She and Ferdinand agreed to sponsor the “enterprise of the Indies,” the first transatlantic voyage of Christopher Columbus (see pp.228–29), which led to the development of a global Spanish empire (see pp.234–35).

## 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 married into the Portuguese royal family, while John and Joanna married the daughter and son of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I. The first husband of Catherine was Arthur, Prince of Wales; the second, Henry VIII of England.

But Isabella’s son and heir, John, died soon after his wedding, and this loss was followed by the death in childbirth of Isabella’s eldest daughter, Isabella. Then, before he was two, her grandson Michael died in her arms. Since it was clear that the unhappy Joanna *la loca* (“the mad”) had lost her reason, all hope for the future of the dynasty rested with Isabella and Ferdinand’s Habsburg grandson, the future Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. It is thought that these events contributed to a decline in Isabella’s health, and her death in 1504.



## TIMELINE

- **1451** Birth of Isabella, daughter of John II of Castile and Isabella of Portugal.
- **1452** Birth of Ferdinand II of Aragon.
- **1454** John II of Castile dies; Isabella’s half-brother Henry IV accedes to the throne.
- **1468** Isabella’s younger brother Alfonso dies.
- **1469** Isabella of Castile marries Ferdinand of Aragon.
- **1470** Birth of Isabella’s eldest daughter, Isabella.
- **1474** Henry IV of Castile dies; Isabella and Ferdinand claim the throne.
- **1476** Isabella and Ferdinand set up the *hermandad*, a collection of local militias that act as a peacekeeping organization.
- **1478** Birth of Isabella and Ferdinand’s son and heir, John; the Spanish Inquisition is established.
- **1479** A treaty with Portugal brings order to Castile; birth of Isabella and Ferdinand’s daughter Joanna; Ferdinand inherits the throne of Aragon, thereby bringing two Spanish dynasties together under the same monarchs.
- **1480** Parliament confirms Isabella’s succession as Queen of Castile; the monarchs announce their intention to go to war against Granada.
- **1481** Dominican priest Tomas de Torquemada is appointed by Isabella as Grand Inquisitor. As a result, treachery and heresy become indistinguishable in Spain, and nonconformists, Jews, and dissidents are rigorously persecuted. Torquemada is likely to have been the author of the infamous decree of 1492, which expelled the Jews from Spain.
- **1482** Birth of Isabella and Ferdinand’s twin daughters, only one of whom (Maria) survives.
- **1485** Birth of Isabella and Ferdinand’s youngest daughter Catherine.
- **1492** Fall of Granada, last Moorish kingdom in Spain; Ferdinand and Isabella agree to support the expedition of Christopher Columbus. Isabella gives him numerous entitlements to the new lands he discovers, which he compiles in his *Book of Privileges*.
- **1493** In the Papal Bull (a decree) *Inter Caetera*, Pope Alexander VI refers to the couple as *Reyes Catolicos* (The Catholic Monarchs).
- **1497** John marries Margaret of Austria; Joanna marries Philip of Flanders.
- **1498** John dies suddenly; young Isabella, Queen of Portugal, dies in childbirth.
- **1499** Isabella and Ferdinand’s daughter Maria marries Manoel of Portugal.
- **1500** Death of Isabella and Ferdinand’s grandson Michael; their youngest daughter Catherine (Catherine of Aragon) marries Prince Arthur of England.
- **1504** Isabella dies.



THE BOOK OF PRIVILEGES