

Queen Isabella I

Isabella I was born on April 22, 1451 in the town of Madrigal de las Altas Torres. She died on November 26, 1504 in the castle of La Mota. She is often referred to as "La Católica" (the Catholic) a "title" given to her by the Spanish Pope, Alexander VI. This is a title that the Kings and Queens of Spain still retain. She was the daughter of John II, King of Castile and his second wife, Isabella of Portugal.

Her father died when she was three and her older brother became King Henry IV. The Spanish nobles had become very powerful during the reign of John II. They did not wish to have Henry as their king. They felt that he was not very smart and would not be a good leader. They hoped to make Isabella's other brother, Alfonso, their king, but he died on July 5, 1468. Some people thought that he might have been poisoned to prevent him from being made king. The nobles then approached Isabella who by now was 17. She refused the throne saying that she would never become queen while her brother was alive. Although he had a daughter, King Henry declared Isabella to be the heir to the throne when he died. It is thought that he did this to make peace with the nobles who had wanted Isabella to be made queen. They knew that she would be the next ruler of Spain and King Henry knew that he could continue to rule. But soon Isabella would be at odds with her brother over her impending arranged marriage.

King Henry had wished his sister to marry Don Carlos, the Prince of Viana, who was the eldest son of John II. He was also heir to the Kingdom of Navarre. The King of Aragon, wished to marry Isabella to his son, Ferdinand. Before the final arrangements could be made, Don Carlos died. Henry tried to arrange marriages with several other people including King Alfonso V of Portugal, but Isabella had already decided that she wished to marry Ferdinand.

Her brother was so mad that he threatened to throw her in the dungeon. But because of her powerful supporters he knew he could not do that. Instead he made her promise

that she would not make any plans to marry until he had returned from Andalusia. However almost as soon as he had left, Isabella made plans to marry Ferdinand. The only problem was that she had to find him. She sent out noblemen to search for him and he was finally found in Sicily (the island at the bottom of Italy) where he had become King. He has also now become heir to the throne of Aragon.

He braved a trip back to Spain and married Isabella in 1469 in the palace of Juan de Vivero. King Henry was mad at his sister, but his new brother-in-law was after all the future King of Aragon. Henry ruled for only 5 more years before he died in 1474 in Madrid. Isabella was then declared Queen of Castile. However, before he had died, Henry had arranged his daughter Joan to be married to King Alfonso V of Portugal. He also made his daughter the heir to the throne. Because there was now there was uncertainty of who was the rightful Queen, Castile and Aragon went to war with Portugal. The war last for five years and ending in peace in 1479 with an alliance between the Kingdoms. As part of the peace treaty, Joan abandoned her claim to the throne, making Isabella Queen of Spain. During this period, Ferdinand became King Ferdinand II of Aragon. Isabella once again showed her great abilities when she decided that Ferdinand and herself would equally rule the two Kingdoms. She created the motto "Tanto monta, monta tanto - Isabel como Fernando" (As much as the one is worth so much is the other - Isabella as Ferdinand).

Now that Isabella and Ferdinand were rulers they set out to achieve some goals. One was the lessening of the power of the nobles who Isabella had thought had become too powerful. They created an organization "Santa Hermandad" (Holy Brotherhood) which was a type of permanent military force. It

was paid for by the communities and was intended for the protection of persons and property against the violence of the nobles. They also re-organized the courts and the administration of justice. They removed the rights of certain people to make coins. This made it easier for business because only one type of coin would be used. They took away some of the lands previously given to the nobles and also destroyed some of their castles which they felt was a menace to public peace.

Because they were both devoutly Catholic, they felt that they had to rid Spain of anyone who was not Catholic. Or at least get them to convert. For such reason they got Pope Sixtus IV to establish the Spanish Inquisition in 1478.

The Spanish Inquisition, which officially lasted until 1808, was not a good period for Spain. It was particularly bad during the reign of Isabella and Ferdinand. Anyone who was not a Catholic was suspected of being against the church. They risked torture and death if they did not renounce their own religion and become a Catholic. Unfortunately even converting was not good enough for the Chief Inquisitor, Torquemada. He convinced, Isabella and Ferdinand that the Jewish people posed a threat to their Kingdoms, even those that had previously converted. As such on March 31, 1492 Isabella and Ferdinand ordered that by July 1st all people of the Jewish faith had to leave Spain or be put to death. Some of these people secretly remained in Spain, some settled in Portugal or went to North Africa. And some decided that they would leave Spain as far behind as possible. They decided to join with a sea captain who was looking for sailors to help him find a new western route to India. The name of the sea captain was Christopher Columbus.

Columbus had actually been asking for money to support his trip for several years. He was Italian so he first asked for money from the rulers of the cities of Genoa and Venice in Italy. He then asked the King of Portugal. He tried Isabella and Ferdinand but they had been turning his request down because they still had one more problem they needed to handle.

A portion of Spain was still under control of the Arabs (Moors). This was the area of Granada. By January 1, 1492, Granada was under their control. In contrast to the way that they had treated their Jewish citizens, they treated the Moors quite well. In the Treaty of Granada they allowed them to freely practice their religion and even be exempt from taxation for a number of years.

Now that the problem of Granada was solved they began to listen to Columbus and his plans to find a new route to India. A route not by sailing east around Africa, but rather west across unknown waters. They also decided that it would not cost too much money to pay for the trip and the rewards might be quite grand. The person who was in charge of the Royal Treasury said the cost of the trip (3 ships and crew) would be about what it cost them to entertain a visiting noble for one week.

On August 3, 1492 Columbus set sail with three ships the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria and 87 men. (The flag of the main ship, the Santa Maria is shown on the left.)

Columbus reached America on October 12, 1492. Actually he had not been sailing for all that time. He had first arrived in the Canary Islands and left them on September 6th. He did not find a new route to India, but found for Spain a land rich with gold, silver and spices. He was convinced that he had found a new route to Asia and the East Indies. He thought that Cuba was actually somewhere in Asia and that the island of Hispanola (where the Dominican Republic and Haiti are now located) was just off the coast of China. He also found the native people. He supposedly called them Indians because he thought they were from the Indies.

Columbus returned to Spain in 1493 bringing with him not only treasures, but also some of these natives. (The picture on the left is a panel from the main door of the US Capital. It is called the Columbus Door and has 8 panels showing scenes from Columbus' life. Just in front of Columbus you can see two of the Native American people.) Queen Isabella became the protector of the Native Americans. Queen Isabella established laws against the abuse of the Native American people by colonists and adventurers.

During this time Spain began its rise into greatness. This was the beginning of the "Golden Age" of Spain. Discoverers such as Columbus were bringing them riches, their agriculture prospered, they became great manufactures of cloths, glass, steel weapons and leather goods. This could not have been achieved without Queen Isabella. She was able to see the potential of Columbus. Her laws and the fair way she treated her citizens (with the exception of her horrible treatment of the Jewish citizens) enabled Spain to be at peace internally. Her strong army and navy made Spain a world power and a great trading power. The Spanish she spoke is still used by the Spanish Royal Academy as the standard for the language.

Isabella and Ferdinand had 5 children, four girls and 1 boy. They were Isabella, John, Joan, Maria and Catherine. Isabella not only made sure that the girls were well educated (which was unusual for that time), but also that they knew how to do such things as sewing. The children actually made most of their father's clothing. She herself would often mend her husband's and children's clothing.

Unfortunately she was not able to enjoy much happiness with her children. Her son died in 1497. Her daughter, Isabella became Queen of Portugal, but she died in 1498 while giving birth. Her son (Isabella's grandson), Miguel died when he was three. Catherine married King Henry VIII of England, but he divorced her when she was unable to produce a male heir. Joan, who was to inherit the throne became crazy.

Although she co-ruled with her husband, it was actually her that was the better ruler. Her husband did bring to their marriage the Kingdom of Aragon which enabled them to unite Spain. If the two Kingdoms remained separate it would have been doubtful that Spain could have achieved its greatness. But just uniting Spain did not enable it to become this great power. It needed a ruler such as Isabella who had the skill to guide and to make Spain a great country.

Isabella died on November 26, 1504 in Medina del Campo. In her will she asked that her successors protect and treat the people of the Americas the same as they would the Spanish people. Her husband continued to rule for 12 more years until he died in Madrigalejo on January 23, 1516. He was succeeded to the throne by his grandson, who was the son of his daughter Joan. This person was to become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.