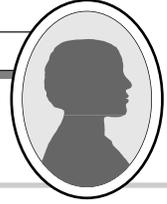


BIOGRAPHY



Isabella I, Queen of Castille

Christopher Columbus had a long, hard struggle to find backing for his “Enterprise of the Indies.” He first tried to convince King John of Portugal to sponsor his voyage west across the Atlantic. The king refused him, and the Portuguese backed Vasco da Gama instead. Columbus then turned his sights on Spain. He spent the next seven years desperately pleading his case at the court of Isabella I of Castille.

As you read the passage below, think about how Isabella changed Spain.

When Isabella was born in 1451, there was no unified Spain. Instead, there was the kingdom of Castille, ruled by her father, Juan II. To its east lay the smaller kingdom of Aragon, to which Isabella’s second cousin Ferdinand was heir to the throne. To the south lay the Muslim kingdom of Granada.

As a young girl, Isabella dreamed of a united and all-Christian Spain. In time, events and her own steely determination conspired to help make her dream come true. First, her half-brother succeeded her father as King Enrique IV of Castille. Because Isabella was successor to the crown, the king began making wedding plans for her, but she refused the marriage. “God will never permit it, and neither will I,” she vowed. Unknown to the king, Isabella had her own plan—to marry her cousin Ferdinand so that they could eventually unite their two kingdoms. In 1469 the two cousins slipped away to be secretly married.

UNITING TWO KINGDOMS

In 1474 King Enrique IV died, and Isabella was crowned Queen of Castille. Five years later, Ferdinand became King of Aragon. At last the two rulers could unite their two kingdoms

(though they administered them separately during their lifetimes). Now they turned their attention toward Granada and in 1482 began its conquest. Their aim was to drive the Muslims from Iberian soil. Ferdinand commanded the army and Isabella managed its financing. She was well along in her fourth pregnancy when she decided to join her husband on a campaign. Advised against it by her doctors, she replied, “Glory is not to be won without danger,” and off she went.

A decade later, the war was at last won, and Granada was united with Castille and Aragon. After the Muslims were expelled, Isabella ordered the expulsion of Spain’s other non-Christian minority—the Jews—and they were driven out in 1492.

With war no longer draining her purse, Isabella decided to back Columbus’s expedition to the Indies. Did she pawn her jewels to raise funds, as legend has it? Probably so. One reason that monarchs owned jewels was to use them as collateral for loans. Over the next decade, Isabella funded not one, but four voyages in her effort to establish Spain as a preeminent European power. She died in 1504, shortly before Columbus returned from his last voyage.

Questions to Think About

1. What was Isabella’s overriding ambition for her country?
2. What evidence can you find that Isabella was a strong, “hands-on” monarch?
3. **Recognizing Ideologies** How would you characterize Isabella’s religious beliefs?