

Assess the Successes of the Catholic Monarchs

The state of the Hispanic kingdoms in 1469 was such that Isabella and Ferdinand would inevitably have a sizeable legacy to contend with. Consequently a number of short-term measures were necessary yet provided problems to the monarchs in the future years of their reigns. In assessing their successes we must therefore consider these and the effect they were to have on their policies. To a certain extent however it suited Isabella to exaggerate the problems she faced in that contemporaries would hold a more favourable opinion of her.

The most significant legacy of Henry IV was the issue of succession and his ambivalent statements over who was heir to the Castilian throne. In 1468 Henry acknowledged his half-sister Isabella as heir and accepted her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon. However only months later Henry swapped allegiance to his daughter Joanna. The issue divided the nobility in its support and civil unrest plagued the country for the next ten years. That in December 1474 Isabella was crowned Queen of Castile and by February had the support of most Castilian cities is testament to her political ability and Ferdinand's military leadership. Ferdinand's military importance was seen most clearly in the battle of Toro in March 1476 when he effectively quashed Alfonso's invasion.

To a large degree however it was the marriage itself, which drew significant support from the nobility who recognised the benefits of peaceful and compliant relations with Aragon. Furthermore Isabella made a number of attractive promises, such as assuring never to alienate Crown land and widespread dispensation of royal patronage. These two measures in particular proved a hindrance in future years of her reign as the nobility-exploited privileges and endangered the independence of a number of cities. For example Valladolid, which became the centre of administration, was under the control of the Count of Benavente. Also in Extremadura and Andalucia violence was suppressed with the promise not to request more special taxation, a measure which potentially handicapped Isabella financially in the future. Woodward summarises the situation by suggesting that "Isabella and Ferdinand were compromised from the beginning of their reign by incompatible promises."

Isabella successfully held a tight line between not alienating the nobility and yet affirming their support, which remained critical throughout her rule. In 1480 the Toledo Cortes agreed she should seize back all the land, gifts and pensions issued by Henry between 1464 and 1474. In return however she confirmed rights to land issued before this date and moreover she exempted nobles from direct taxation and allowed them to collect the alcabala tax, a sales tax of 10%. Essentially she therefore seized a lump sum of nearly 30m Maravedis in sacrifice of considerable steady income. To dismiss this as short-sighted would be wrong however given the deficiencies of agriculture and industry at the time.

The state of agriculture during the reign of the Isabella improved little. The dominance of sheep industry over arable farming, and the privileges it enjoyed, led to severe food shortages after 1504. In an attempt to exploit the thriving mesta, common land used for arable farming was returned to pasture. Consequently in a time of inefficient farming techniques and a rising population grain prices inflated. When price controls were imposed farmers were therefore discouraged from selling. In Aragon, Ferdinand's reluctance to favour the sheep industry and offer privileges like Isabella had done in Castile, maintained a solid agricultural system.

The foreign policy of the Catholic Monarchs was largely successful in achieving its aims. Certain foreign acquisitions however brought with them a number of problems. The conquest of Granada can be regarded as one of the greatest successes of both leaders. The War was largely funded as a crusade by the papacy so put little more stress on the struggling economy. The rest was funded through a combination of taxation on towns, Jews and the Hermandad and loans taken from Castilian nobles. There also appear numerous other successes of the conquest. Ferdinand showed impressive military leadership and Isabella's thorough organisation of supplies for the army was a critical factor. Furthermore, the advent of artillery helped siege towns faster and more effectively. Rightfully both Monarchs received considerable prestige from the campaign and so a sense of unity between Castile and Aragon was created.

Suppression of the Muslim threat in North Africa was less successful though. The area was one of important economic and commercial advantage to Aragon and so seizure of large areas would have been of significance. Perhaps the key reason behind the policy though was the increasing Turkish influence in Naples and Sicily. Ferdinand's failure came in an expensive garrisoning project, which held little authority and merely contained the problem. Perhaps the reason behind the lacklustre campaign was his preoccupation with Italy. In 1485 he successfully defended Naples from France and then the Holy Roman Empire. Despite careless disengaging of troops during the illness of Louis XII the policy in Italy was on the whole regarded as a success. Taking advantage of French involvement in the North, Ferdinand reclaimed Roussillon and Cerdagne. Then in 1512 following the death of Germaine de Foix's father, Ferdinand annexed Navarre.

Isabella's fortuitous support of Christopher Columbus and hence the involvement in the New World had an increasingly significant impact on the economies of Castile and Aragon. Columbus's discovery opened new trade links and resources. In particular the trade of gold and slavery were of great economic benefit in future years. Furthermore Pope Alexander VI settled the rivalry with Portugal without conflict and expense with the division of the Americas.

Isabella's piety determined that the extensive period of convivencia, which existed prior to her reign, would end. Since the pogrom of 1391 there had been sporadic anti-Semitic outbreaks largely born out of a resentment of rich Jewish families. For Isabella however the growing trend of conversos practising Judaism in private was of the greatest concern. Therefore in 1478 an Inquisition into conversos was established in Castile and then one in Aragon in 1481. As a result Jews became confined to ghettos and forced to wear yellow badges. Those suspected of heresy were put on trial and punished. In 1492 conversion was then made compulsory with emigration the only other alternative. Whilst only around 3% of the total population actually emigrated a significant social and economic impact was felt. The commercial welfare of the two Kingdoms was severely damaged and perhaps more crucially the policy disillusioned much of the wider population.

The assessment of Isabella and Ferdinand's social, economic, religious and foreign success reveals that the period in Spanish history is not as clear cut as contemporary chroniclers have suggested. They failed to curtail the nobility, failed in implementing economic growth and embarked on unwise foreign conquests. In saying this however they also achieved numerous successes such as securing the throne, conquering Granada and increasing the overseas empire.

