

How far did Ferdinand
and Isabella create a
new monarchy in
Spain



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In 1540 Spain was nothing more than a geographical impression such as 'Germany' or 'Italy'.

It was divided into a number of states the largest being Castile. Each state was ruled differently, the kingdom of Aragon for instance was subdivided into three kingdoms each with its own Cortes (parliament) and laws: the kingdom of Aragon, the kingdom of Catalonia and the kingdom of Valencia. The emirate of Granada, another Spanish state was unlike the others, Islamic. The reigns of Ferdinand and Isabella marked an important stage in the development of Spain into a new unified state.

On 14th October 1469 Isabella of Castile married Ferdinand of Aragon for short term political gain in a period of great political instability. In the 15th century Castile and Aragon had weak monarchies; in Castile the monarch was faced by a powerful aristocracy. By 1481 both Ferdinand and Isabella had been given co-equal powers in both states, with this they were able to re-establish law and order and to prepare the conditions which enabled Spain to become a major western European power in the 16th century.

Ferdinand and Isabella immediately began by attempting to restore law and order. In 1476 the Cortes of Madrigal in Castile set up the league of brotherhoods, this involved every village or town with over 50 inhabitants. With the authority to act as judge and jury, the Hermandades had the task of bringing peace to Castile.

They could deal with many crimes and to aid them in their task the brotherhoods had armed men to punish the guilty. Although it has been viewed by many as too severe it was undoubtedly an important element in

the restoration of law and order. Not only did they extend Royal control but they also helped bring towns together. However in 1495 the Cortes suppressed it.

Isabella also revived the use of the corregidore or royal governor to extend the control. These governors were sent to all towns in which they did not already exist and gave the monarchy a voice in local affairs. However towns such as Segovia and Burgos refused to accept them and they were also a target for the Comuneros. Debatably the main achievement by Ferdinand and Isabella was to bring peace and order to Spain. This was done by using direct personal authority. As there was no fixed capital city Isabella particularly made a point of visiting the cities of Castile, during these visits she would dispense justice at the law courts.

As Ferdinand spent most of his reign travelling in Castile with Isabella, he appointed several Viceroys to whom he delegated his powers. This set the foundations for a more unified state. Another political change made by Ferdinand and Isabella was the re-organisation of the national government. The royal council consisted of many separate units who met with Ferdinand or Isabella daily.

The most important change in the council was the introduction of many lawyers (letrados) rather than clergy and aristocracy, although it did contain both of these. After 1493, all councillors with voting rights had to be letrados. However at a local level the administration still remained in the hands of the aristocracy. The financial administration of the states was not new. The main sources of revenue remained traditional.

The most important being sales tax (alcabala). According to J. N. Hillgarth the major innovation of the monarchs was their ability to acquire extraordinary revenue, such as the cruzada and loans for the wars in Granada. The monarchs also received revenue from the Holy Brotherhood and the military orders.

In all the monarchs had increased their extraordinary revenue by two thirds compared to their predecessors. There seems little evidence to suggest that Ferdinand and Isabella created a new monarchy in Spain rather than just improvements of the old ideas. Fernandez Navarrete said 'they founded the greatness of this immense monarchy' however Ferdinand and Isabella had no intention of a united Spain. It is also clear that the monarchs stuck to traditional methods of government to achieve their aspirations. It seems they achieved very little in limiting the nobles power or the power of the cortes and any financial advancements they did make, they squandered on the wars.

The monarchs through the javelin well however it was unfortunate that it did not stick in the ground.