

INTRODUCTION

After the conquest of Granada -the last Arab stronghold in the Iberian Peninsula- and the discovery of the American continent, Spain became a new and great nation with a decisive naval vocation.

The resulting geostrategic unity called for several political solutions to the challenges posed by the new situation: on the one hand, ignore the problems of Europe and start its expansion in Africa and, on the other, control the Strait of Gibraltar, project its power in America, and start a hegemony policy throughout Europe.

Not a single line of action was adopted but all strategies were contemplated and cared for, depending on the given moment of history. However, the imperial dream of our monarchs ended up by neglecting national policies for the sake of attaining a much larger empire, difficult to sustain.

CHAPTER I – THE NAVAL ENTERPRISES OF THE CATHOLIC SOVEREIGNS

The last days of the Castile Navy. The Granada Campaign and the Conquest of Malaga and Almeria.

It has been traditionally affirmed that the true national navy was established when Ferdinand and Isabella (The Catholic Sovereigns) reunited the whole of Spain after the conquest of Granada, the last stronghold of Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula. But the fact is that the navy was hardly present in any of the subsequent campaigns against French and Portuguese armies.

It was in 1481 when the Catholic Sovereigns ordered to '*facere la Armada*', (build and arm the Navy) to protect the easternmost kingdoms of the Crown of Aragon against Turkish attacks. Very soon, 50 large vessels were built in Laredo (N Spain) and placed under command of Francisco Enriquez.

Once adequately arranged, the fleet headed towards Italy to counter the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the central Mediterranean, but the sudden death of Mehmed II cooled things down and the naval force returned to Granada to help end the final conquest of that last Muslim territory in Spain, interrupting and controlling the traffic to and from the North of Africa.

Prior to the conquest of Granada in 1492 the cities of Velez Málaga and Málaga were blockaded, and they subsequently surrendered in May 1487 by ships under command of the Admiral of Castile, Alonso Enriquez.

The fall of Granada on January 2nd 1492 put an end to more than 8 centuries of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula. This feat was also the culmination of the much sought-after unity of the two main kingdoms in Spain: Ferdinand's Aragon and Isabella's Castile. From now on, the different disputes between rival navies in the Peninsula were solved by the new united nation.

Africa, a common ambition for Portugal and Spain.

If Christopher Columbus had not approached the Catholic Sovereigns offering his services to the Spanish Crown, today's map of the political world would probably have been very different. The '*Reconquista*' would have continued expanding southwards, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar and – possibly – reaching Mauritania. But Columbus' plan focused most on the attention with the recent discovery of a new continent and lands of plenty. The efforts regarding the conquest of new territories beyond the Atlantic Ocean were balanced by the desire of King Ferdinand, and supported by Cardinal Cisneros, to pay greater attention to the Mediterranean and the African continent, where Portugal was making steady progress expanding its colonies.

In short, Spain policies in Africa were threefold: consolidate the sea lines of communication in the Mediterranean; establish cities in the coast, and conduct missionary activities.

This political, economic and religious endeavors looked for a solid and convincing strategy intended to fight the ever-present Berber piracy in the western Mediterranean.

During the war to reconquer Granada, the governors of Rota and Gibraltar organized a series of naval actions resulting in the occupation of the North African cities of Azamar, Alhucemas and Fadala.

With the north of Africa essentially secured by Spanish contingents, the Portuguese continued the expansion of its territories through the western coast of the continent and adjacent archipelagoes like Madeira, Azores and Sao Tome. The territorial disputes between Spain and Portugal continued over the years until the Treaty of Tordesillas, an agreement which will be discussed later on.

Naval campaigns in Italy

The modern era in Europe started with an international conflict in the Italian peninsula with the five main states fighting among themselves to achieve supremacy: Naples, Genoa, Milan, Florence and the republic of Venice. Spain played an important role in those wars, mainly in Milan and Naples, since the kingdom of Aragon had significant strategic interests in the Mediterranean. With the islands of Sicily and Sardinia already under its rule, King Ferdinand could not accept the presence in Naples of troops of the French king Charles VIII, which had crossed the entire peninsula without hardly any opposition.

Soon the whole of Italy responded by joining forces to try and expel the French troops from its territories with the establishment of the 'League of Venice' (1495) made up by the Papal States, Venice, Genoa, Milan, Spain and troops sent by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire Maximilian I. Among the decisive factors were the threat of Spain and Emperor Maximilian to invade France, and the attack of the Neapolitan coast on the part of heavily armed Venetian galleys.

The sudden death of King Charles VIII marked a turning point and a peace treaty was signed with his successor King Louis XII. But yesterday's enemies soon became today's best friends and the French king, supported by the Pope, invaded Milan. Louis and Ferdinand tried to negotiate but the disputes over Naples prevented a peaceful solution.

After initial difficulties on the part of the Spanish troops, Gonzalo de Córdoba, also called '*El Gran Capitán*' (the Great Captain) led the Spanish forces to a great victory after a series of battles in south Italian territories. The Catholic Sovereigns benefited from the Italian campaigns strengthening their relations with Austria and Burgundy, thanks to a clever and skillful marriage policy.

It is evident that the Italian campaigns were, above all, land operations but the navy played a key role in the expansion of Aragonese territories. Without it, the conquest of Sicily, Sardinia, Naples and the North African cities would have been impossible.

In fact the navy, made up of 60 Castilian and 20 Aragonese ships, was in charge of transferring 6,000 soldiers from Spain to Sicily. During all that time, the Spanish warships battled against French units which tried to gain superiority in the western Mediterranean, but to no avail.

The art of sailing in the 15th century

Technical improvements, so evident in the second half of the 15th century, implied great developments in the maritime activity in general, along with other inventions. The printing machine contributed to the dissemination of documents like Ptolemy's Geography, translated into Latin and widely known by the end of the century. Theories began to spread about the possibility of reaching Asia sailing westwards and one of its enthusiast supporters was Christopher Columbus.

One of the leading scientists in the study of nautical astronomy was Abraham Zacuto, who in 1485 published the first printed astronomic almanac (ephemeris) and was a member of the Lisbon Mathematicians Board, who tried to draw simple and practical rules to solve the problems posed by the nautical astronomy.

In the 14th century the use of the compass was already widespread but the current denominations of N, NE, E, SE, etc. was not prevalent until well into the 16th century.

Port charts also began to be drafted in that century but with poor accuracy as regards longitude and latitude. They were profusely decorated with wind roses, coats of arms, flags, exotic animals and religious images.

Among the important instruments used for navigation in the 15th century was the astrolabe, a disc to measure the height of the sun. The first nautical treaties, written by Pedro García Fernández, were printed in 1485 and were translated into French on several editions.

Naval shipbuilding also expanded and made progress designing bigger ships with higher poop decks and with two or three masts. The most common types were the caravel and the carrack which were designed and built mainly in the Atlantic coast, above all in Portugal; they were robust, reliable, seafaring and easy to man.