

The Spanish Empire,[b] sometimes referred to as the Hispanic Monarchy[c] or the Catholic Monarchy,[d][4][5][6] was a colonial empire governed by Spain between 1492 and 1976.[7][8] In conjunction with the Portuguese Empire, it was the first empire to usher the European Age of Discovery and achieve a global scale,[9] controlling vast portions of the Americas, Africa, various islands in Asia and Oceania, as well as territory in other parts of Europe.[10] It was one of the most powerful empires of the early modern period, becoming known as "the empire on which the sun never sets".[11] At its greatest extent in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Spanish Empire covered over 13 million square kilometres (5 million square miles), making it one of the largest empires in history.[3]

An important element in the formation of Spain's empire was the dynastic union between Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon in 1469, known as the Catholic Monarchs, which initiated political, religious and social cohesion but not political unification.[12] Castile (formed in 1230 from the Kingdoms of Leon and Asturias) became the dominant kingdom in Iberia because of its jurisdiction over the overseas empire in the Americas.[13] The structure of the empire was further defined under the Spanish Habsburgs (1516–1700), and under the Spanish Bourbon monarchs, the empire was brought under greater crown control and increased its revenues from the Indies.[14][15] The crown's authority in the Indies was enlarged by the papal grant of powers of patronage, giving it power in the religious sphere.[16][17]

In the beginning, Portugal was the only serious threat to Spanish hegemony in the New World. To end the threat of Portuguese expansion, Spain invaded its Iberian neighbour in 1580, defeating Portuguese, French, and English forces. After the Spanish victory in the War of the Portuguese Succession, Philip II of Spain obtained the Portuguese crown in 1581, and Portugal and its overseas territories came under his rule with the so-called Iberian Union, considered by some historians as a Spanish conquest.[18][19][20][21] Philip respected a certain degree of autonomy in its Iberian territories and, together with the other peninsular councils, established the Council of Portugal, which oversaw Portugal and its empire and "preserv[ed] its own laws, institutions, and monetary system, and united only in sharing a common sovereign." [22] In 1640, while Spain was fighting in Catalonia, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, Portugal revolted and re-established its independence under the House of Braganza.[23] Iberian kingdoms retained their political identities, with particular administration and juridical configurations. Although the power of the Spanish sovereign as monarch varied from one territory to another, the monarch acted as such in a unitary manner[24] over all the ruler's territories through a system of councils: the unity did not mean uniformity.[25]

Following the Italian Wars against France, which concluded in 1559, Spain emerged with control over half of Italy (Kingdom of Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, and the Duchy of Milan) with the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis. The Habsburg Netherlands came under Spanish rule following the abdication of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, in 1555. A war against Spanish rule erupted in the Netherlands, with the Spanish unable to pacify the northern provinces. However, under the leadership of Alessandro Farnese, the Spanish managed to subdue the southern provinces, which became the Spanish Netherlands (present-day Belgium and Luxembourg). These territories remained under Spanish rule until the War of the Spanish Succession.

Beginning with the 1492 arrival of Christopher Columbus and continuing for over three centuries, the Spanish Empire would expand across the Caribbean Islands, half of South America, most of Central America and much of North America. In the 16th century, the Spanish Empire conquered and incorporated the Aztec and Inca empires, retaining indigenous elites loyal to the Spanish crown and converts to Christianity as intermediaries between their communities and royal government.[26][27] After a short period of delegation of authority by the crown in the Americas, the crown asserted control over those territories and established the Council of the Indies to oversee rule there.[28] The crown then established viceroys in the two main areas of settlement, New Spain and Peru, both regions of dense indigenous populations and mineral wealth. The Maya were finally conquered in 1697. The Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation—the first circumnavigation of the Earth—laid the foundation for Spain's Pacific empire and for Spanish control over the East Indies. In the early 1500s, Spanish forces captured several Muslim cities in North Africa, forcing them to pay tribute to Spain.[29]

The structure of governance of its overseas empire was significantly reformed in the late 18th century by the Bourbon monarchs. Although the Crown of Castile attempted to keep its empire a closed economic sys

tem under Habsburg rule, Castile was unable to supply the Indies with sufficient consumer goods to meet demand. This allowed foreign merchants from Genoa, France, England, Germany, and the Netherlands to take advantage of the trade, with silver from the mines of Peru and New Spain flowing to other parts of Europe. The merchant guild of Seville (later Cádiz) served as middlemen in the trade. The crown's trade monopoly was broken early in the 17th century, with the crown colluding with the merchant guild for fiscal reasons in circumventing the supposedly closed system.[30] Spain was largely able to defend its territories in the Americas, with the Dutch, English, and French taking only small Caribbean islands and outposts, using them to engage in contraband trade with the Spanish populace in the Indies.

Spain experienced its greatest territorial losses during the early 19th century, when its colonies in the Americas began fighting their wars of independence.[31] By 1900, Spain had also lost its colonies in the Caribbean and Pacific, and it was left with only its African possessions. In Latin America, among the legacies of its relationship with Iberia, Spanish is the dominant language, Catholicism the main religion, and political traditions of representative government can be traced to the Spanish Constitution of 1812.