

Catherine of Aragon



Figure 1: Catherine of Aragon.

(1485–1536). The first wife of King Henry VIII of England (ruled 1509–47) was Catherine of Aragon. The refusal of Pope Clement VII to annul Henry's marriage to Catherine triggered the break between Henry and Rome and led to the English Reformation.

Catherine was born on December 16, 1485, in Alcalá de Henares, Spain. She was the youngest daughter of the Spanish rulers Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. In 1501 she married Prince Arthur, eldest son of King Henry VII of England. Arthur died the following year, and shortly afterward she was betrothed to Prince Henry, the second son of Henry VII.

Subsequent problems between England and Spain, as well as Ferdinand's refusal to pay the full dowry, prevented the marriage from taking place until Henry assumed the throne in 1509. For some years the couple lived happily. Catherine was intelligent and companionable, and she was a competent regent while Henry was campaigning against the French in 1512–14.

Between 1510 and 1518 Catherine gave birth to six children, including two sons. All of them, however, except for Mary—who would serve as queen of England from 1553 to 1558—were either stillborn or died in early infancy. Henry's desire for a legitimate male heir prompted him in 1527 to appeal to Rome for an annulment on the grounds that the marriage was not legal since Catherine had been married to Henry's brother. Catherine appealed to Pope Clement VII, contending that her marriage to Henry was valid because the previous marriage to Arthur had never been consummated.

For seven years the pope avoided issuing the annulment because he could not alienate Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman emperor Charles V. Finally, Henry separated from Catherine in July 1531. On May 23, 1533—five months after he married Anne Boleyn—he had his own archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, annul the marriage to Catherine. Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy rejecting all papal jurisdiction in England and making the king head of the English church. Although Catherine had always been loved by the English people, Henry forced her to spend her last years isolated from all public life. She died on January 7, 1536, in Kimbolton, Huntingdon, England.

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