

Hernando del Pulgar

Los Claros Varones
de España (ca. 1483)

A Semi-Paleographic Edition

Joseph Abraham Levi, editor



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Introduction

1. Fernando del Pulgar

Hernando del Pulgar, (ca. 1436 – ca. 1493), was a Spanish historian and chronicler. He was also the author of letters, some of which later became full-fledged independent treatises.¹

Hernando del Pulgar was probably born at Pulgar, a small town in the province of Toledo.² As he himself relates, Hernando del Pulgar was educated at the court of John II, (1405–1454), king of Castile.³ During the reign of Henry IV, (1425–1474), he held a few but notable political positions. This is a sure indication of his status: i.e., he was a highly respected person among the aristocracy and the court in particular. Based upon the content of some of his letters, *Letras*, it appears that Hernando del Pulgar was also part of a few political expeditions to France, at the court of king Louis XI, (1397–1479).⁴

In 1463 Hernando del Pulgar, together with the *Comendador* Diego de Ayala and Juan de Villanueva, translated from French into Castilian the treaty and the final verdict from king Louis XI of France, (1423–1483), settling the disputes among John II of Navarra and Aragón, (1397–1479), and Henry IV, (1425–1474).⁵

In 1473 Hernando del Pulgar is in Rome, on a diplomatic mission to Pope Sixtus IV,⁶ together with Don Rodrigo de Borja, the future Pope Alexander VI.⁷

In 1475 Hernando del Pulgar is again in Paris, at the court of king Louis XI. Also this time, he is sent to the French capital on official political affairs.⁸

During the reign of the Catholic kings,⁹ king Ferdinand II of Aragón, (1452–1516), and Isabel I, (1451–1504), queen of Castile, (1474–1504), Hernando del Pulgar was, among other things, one of their many secretaries, historians/chroniclers and, of course, counselors of state. It was during his position as a historian, while conducting chronological research for the Catholic kings¹⁰ that Hernando del Pulgar acquired an ever increasing interest in and fascination for history but, most of all, for people: granted, only

the famous men, the true and “clear” noblemen, whose names and deeds had been somehow forgotten or, even worse, never fully recounted and, therefore, recorded down for posterity, for the greatness of the country, Spain.¹¹ Hence, his patriotism, combined with the literary/historical tradition of the time, and the ancient tradition of the biography as a literary genre,¹² led him to the production of his own *semblanzas*, i.e., short sketches of the lives of famous and notable persons. He started with Henry IV, (1425–1474), and continued with the great figures of that kingdom. Hernando del Pulgar called this account: *Los Claros Varones de España* or, as it is further on stated in the text, *Los Claros Varones de Castilla*.

2. Los Claros Varones de España

Los Claros Varones de España is a selected biographical collection of the major accomplishments performed by 25 noblemen, all dignitaries and members of the high aristocracy, prelates and laymen alike, who during their life time, in some capacity or another, have played a salient and decisive role in the reigns immediately preceding that of the famous Catholic kings: Ferdinand II of Aragón, (1452–1516), and Isabel I of Castile, (1451–1504). In fact, the treatise starts with a short dedication addressed to Isabel I, the Catholic Queen of Castile and Aragón. The last two chapters are also dedicated to her; they are an appeal to her magnanimity, a pure display of loyalty and commitment, emanating devotion and admiration for her greatness, as a queen as well as a woman. Each tiny chapter, or subdivision introducing the 25 noblemen, is almost always introduced by the caption: *Titulo*, i.e., title. This title is there, of course, as a dedication to the most prominent figures of nobility and the clergy alike. However,

it also serves as a portrait, a true representation of images, physical traits, personal characteristics: in a word, those images which emphasize their innermost personal attributes. The biographical elements are therefore deduced from these external introductions, these short outlines or sketches, i.e., the *semblanzas* described above. This gradually leads us to discover, or rather, to unveil deeper and more subtle characteristics of the noblemen. We are now able to look at the spiritual side, the passions, the virtues, the faults and, finally, the vices of our heroes.

Hernando del Pulgar's model for the *Claros Varones de España* was Fernán Pérez de Guzmán's¹³ *Generaciones y semblanzas*.¹⁴ However, Hernando del Pulgar's version is more literary, both in style and for the underlying and recurring theme: the tact and diplomacy with which each of the main characters are presented. Though still an example of national heroism, most of the times these descriptions are intended hyperboles depicting, always in disguise, the lack of sincerity of the characters, thus stimulating humor and hilarity. Hernando del Pulgar's psychological insight is at its best here, surpassing that of his predecessors, including Fernán Pérez Guzmán.