Alfonso García de Santa María (Alphonsus Burgensis, 1385/6–1456) was the second son of Shlomo ha-Levi, rab de la corte of the Jewish aljama of Burgos, who on 21 July 1390, before Alfonso had been taught Hebrew, converted to Christianity under the name Pablo de Santa María and was subsequently elected bishop of Cartagena (1402) and Burgos (1415). The Santa María became leading members of the Burgos patriciate, intermarrying with the noble houses of Manrique, Mendoza, Rojas, and others; on being granted a royal patent of nobility in 1440, the family changed its surname to Cartagena. Alfonso García read canon law at Salamanca (ca. 1400–1406) before entering the church and court bureaucracy. By 1415 he was dean of Santiago de Compostela (dean of Segovia and canon of Burgos, 1420) and judge in the royal audiencia of Castile; in 1419, on the majority of Juan II of Castile (1406–1454), he was appointed to the king’s council. In 1421–1423 he was sent on the first of several diplomatic missions to the Portuguese court of João I, where in the summer of 1422, at the behest of Prince Duarte, he wrote the “first-born of all my writings,” Memoriale uirtutum, a scholastic compilatio of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics with glosses from Aquinas written in rhythmical Latin prose; the prologue to Book II extols the delights of studious solitude, adding the parallels of Scipio Africanus (Cicero, De officiis, III, 1) and Count Fernán González in Pelayo’s cave on the banks of the Arlanza, while the ultilogus illustrates the effects of vice in public life with Tarquin’s rape of Lucretia and King Roderick’s of La Cava, while virtue is represented by the heroes of the Reconquest.

These exempla foreshadow a civic humanist ideal, based on the model of classical Roman culture and virtue but with a significant admixture of native elements, which it became Cartagena’s life-long project to preach to the aristocracy. Within months he penned his first Castilian work, a completion of Pero López de Ayala’s unfinished translation of Boccaccio, Decasibus illustrium uirorum (Caida de príncipes de Juan Bocacio, 30 September 1422); this was followed by versions of Cicero’s De senectute and De officiis (Quatro libros de Tulio, Montemór o Novo, 10 January 1422 o.s./1423 n.s.), Pro Marcello (Oración de Tulio a Julio César), and De inuentione, I (Retórica de Marco Tulio Cicerón, 1425–27), whose prologues make explicit the program for educating knights in “lengua clara vulgar e maternal,” steering a via media between the competing claims of classical rhetoric and scholastic philosophy.

Cartagena’s next project was a cycle of vernacular translations from the Córdoban Stoic Seneca the Younger which, under the patronage of Juan II, was designed to show the antiquity and worth of Hispanic classical culture in defiance of the Italians (Gran copilación del alphabeto de algunos dichos de Séneca, from Fra Luca Manelli’s fourteenth-century Tabulatio et expositio Senecae, 1428/9–30; Cinco libros de Séneca, from De uita beata, Ep. ad Lucilium 88, De providentia, the apocryphal De institutis legalibus, and Seneca the Elder’s Controversiae, 1431; De constantia; De elementa).

It was on a third Portuguese legation in 1427 that Cartagena experienced a first direct contact with Italian humanism, through a pair of Leonardo Bruni’s Latin translations from the Greek brought back from Bologna by some Portuguese jurists. The result was his
Declinationes super nova quadam Ethicorum Aristotelis translatione, dedicated to Fernán Díaz de Toledo in 1431, a pamphlet criticizing Bruni’s humanist version of Aristotle’s Ethics as too rhetorical and unphilosophical. The Declinationes aroused European controversy when, in 1434, Cartagena took a copy to the General Council of Basel as a member of the Castilian delegation. There he also pronounced a number of public speeches, notably a disputation on Lex Gallus de postumis instituendis uel exheredandis (Avignon, 18 July 1434), sermons on the feasts of St. Thomas Aquinas (Juan II’s birthday) and All Saints, and political briefs on the powers of the Council and the papal plenitudo postestatis, on the preeminence of the crown of Castile over that of England (Propositio super altercatione preeminentiae sium inter reges Castelle et Anglie, 14 September 1434), and on the Castilian right to the conquest of the Canaries (Allegationes super conquesta insularum Canarie contra Portugalenses, 27 August 1437). The latter are no less interesting for their Ciceronian rhetorical schemes than for their political ideology.

Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini informs us that Cartagena’s oratory so deeply impressed everyone that, when Pablo de Santa María died in 1435, Pope Eugenius IV immediately provided him to the vacant see; his election as bishop of Burgos was confirmed by Juan II’s nomination. A further outcome of his stay in Basel was his Latin correspondence with Leonardo Bruni and Pier Candido Decembrio, in which he successfully requested translations from Greek (Porphyry, Homer, and Plato’s Republic). In March 1438 Cartagena attended the imperial coronation of Albrecht III of Austria in Breslau, where he met Diego de Valero and Pero Tafur. He returned via Prague, Nuremburg, and Mainz, reaching Spain in December 1439, where his first act was to grant a canonry in Burgos to his protégé Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo; at the same time the young Alfonso de Palencia entered his retinue. In 1440 he was the chief negotiator in the marriage of Juan II’s son Prince Enrique to Blanca of Navarre; it was during the princess’s stay in his brother Pedro’s palace in Burgos that the Bohemian traveler Rozmítal met Cartagena, and it was probably also at this time that the latter formed his close friendships with Pedro Fernández de Velasco (Epistola ad comitem de Haro, ca. 1441, a Latin treatise on noble education which again propounds Cartagena’s ideal of educated chivalry), with Ifígo López de Mendoza (Respuesta a la pregunta fecha por el marqués de Santillana, 1444, on Leonardo Bruni’s De militia, a discussion of the classical origins of chivalry), and with Diego Gómez de Sandoval, Count of Castrojeriz (Doctrinal de cavalleros, ca. 1445, a compendium of laws and commentaries on chivalry). Cartagena formed a deeper friendship with Fernán Pérez de Guzmán, to whom he dedicated his Duodenarium, a set of Latin essays on political, moral, and linguistic questions sent to its addressee (unfinished) soon after 1442.

In the 1440s Cartagena wrote a number of juridical briefs on the rights and constitutions of his bishopric against the pretensions of Alfonso Carrillo, archbishop of Toledo (Liber Mauricianus, Conflatorium), and reorganized the cathedral archive; he was also responsible for major building works, including the cathedral’s two famous openwork stone spires, designed by Johann von Köln, and the Chapel of the Visitacion, which houses his own tomb, and the plaza and episcopal palace of El Sarmental. To these years belong his gloss on a devotional sermon of St. John Chrysostom and Apología super psalmum Judica me Deus, a “contemplación mezclada con oración” on the Penitential Psalm 26, both written in Latin and subsequently translated by the author into Castilian; and the massive Defensorium unitatis Christianae, a reasoned impugnation of the anti-converso libels of Pero Sarmiento in the Rebellion of Toledo, addressed to Juan II in 1449, in which, once again, Cartagena brought his vast knowledge of history, theology, and oratory to bear on a subject which other writers had treated only in legal terms. The political situation in the wake of Sarmiento’s rebellion was volatile, however, and, after Álvaro de Luna’s arrest and imprisonment in his brother Pedro’s Burgos palace in March 1453, Cartagena found himself in the invidious position of having to draw up the charges for the execution of the privado whose policy he had so loyally supported for twenty years.

Cartagena’s last works were the Oracional (ca. 1455), a layman’s treatise on prayer written in Castilian for Fernán Pérez de Guzmán, which lays stress on the inwardness of spiritual life in ways which point to the Devotio moderna and Illuminism rather than Italian humanism, while the Latin Anacephaleosis regum Hispanie, on which he was working in the months before his death and which he dedicated to Burgos cathedral chapter, develops the Neo-Gothic myth expounded in his father’s Coplas de las siete edades del mundo on the Messianic imperial and crusading destiny of Hispania. In the summer 1456 Cartagena undertook a pilgrimage to Santiago for the jubilee, but he was already ill, and had to return before the feast of St. James, dying at Villasandino on 22 July. His decease is recounted in touching terms, with the obligatory deathbed miracle, in the contemporary De actibus domini Alfonsi de Cartagena (BNM 7432, fol. 89–92v, attributed to his amanuensis Juan Sánchez de Nebreda). Other tributes were penned by Fernando de la Torre in a letter to Pedro de Cartagena; by Fernán Pérez de Guzmán in his Coplas sobre el transito del reverendo padre don
Alfonso de Cartajena ("Aquel Séneca espiró a quien yo era Lucilo"); and by his pupil and camarero Diego Rodríguez de Almela in a semblanza included in a work undertaken at Cartagena’s behest, Valerio de las estoriías escolásticas e de España, VIII, 6, 9 (completed March 1462, printed Murcia 1487). The most vivid portraits, however, are those by his fellow conversos (Catholic converts) Juan de Lucena (Diálogo moral de vita felici, 1463) and Fernando del Pulgar, whose semblanza shows Cartagena as a man of deep intelligence, pious modesty, and complete integrity (Claro varones de Castilla, ca. 1483–1486, published 1486).

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Bibliography


