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DEAR JOHN WATERER: (on leather art and history)

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In 1986, while teaching in a small village in one of the islands of Azores, I came across a shoemaker that tanned the hides needed for his work, including the use of whale oil. This meeting became a short article published in England, and it opened my interest beyond the leatherwork I was doing; around 1988 I came across several articles referring to your books published in England. A letter from the Museum of Leathercraft informed me that you no longer remained in the world of the living, and that your books were unavailable.

It took me several years to buy "Leather craftsmanship" (1968), "Leather and craftsmanship" (1950), "Leather in art, life and industry" (1946), "Leather and the warrior" (1981), "A short history of Saddles in Europe", "Leather", "Spanish Leather" (1971) thanks to specialized bookshops in the UK. They started a long series of articles, very much inspired by your research. Somehow I felt I could continue your work, making clear other faces of the almost forgotten leather trade. Over the years my interest kept on growing, and suddenly the beginner's writings turned complex and longed to become books.

The following paragraphs, and my comments, are centred on "Spanish Leather" (SL), as "Leather and craftsmanship" (L and C) has only a page devoted to the Iberian leather trade.

"The use of leather furnishings of various kinds, but particularly for mural hangings, provides a long and complicated story which originated, so far as Europe was concerned, in Spain after the Moorish conquest". Historically speaking, there was no Spain in early 8th century, when the Islamic armies -directed by the Damascus-based Ummayyad dynasty, with soldiers from Yemen and North Africa - came into the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, Hispania - all the Peninsula - was in a political turmoil, and a faction of the ruling Visigoth court called for the help of the Muslim armies. Most of Hispania came under Islamic rule, and the new country was al-Andalus, having as neighbours in the north small kingdoms of Christian refugees.

"Through a combination of incoming and indigenous skills a beautiful tawed leather was produced which was naturally white but was also dyed a wonderful red. Córdoba was the first and principal place of manufacture and the fame of the leather it produced was mentioned in a Latin poem as early as c 800. Córdoba provided the name of this leather for the outside world: in France it became cordouan, in England it was corrupted into 'cordwain' (but was sometimes called 'Cordoban' or 'Spanish' leather). But within Spain it was always called guadameci, a word derived from the name of a Libyan town - Ghadames - which was itself renowned for a particular kind of leather, probably tawed goatskin". The medieval supremacy of leather meant it was tanned and worked upon in many places; Córdoba, besides the political and cultural capital of the Emirate and Caliphate, provided good waters, and the plants needed for the tanning of sheep, goat and cattle. "Cordoban" was the label for the goat skins from Córdoba, as well as the similar ones tanned in other places. Up to now I haven't come across Islamic documents on cordoban or guadameci. Portugal and other Iberian Christian kingdoms produced (or imported, and that is still a strong hypothesis), as early as the

“guadameci” date from early 12th century, in Portugal and Castille-Léon - they refer to shoes and panels. But the term was not used for white or red skins - those skins are one of the products of the medieval tanners, taxed in the early kings' documents.

“But in Spain the term cordoban indicated vegetable-tanned goatskin (not necessarily made in Córdoba), quite different in character from the guadameci, and, in general, used for different purposes. The English expression ‘Cordovan’ is obviously derived from Córdoba but was loosely used; ‘cordwain’ was probably a corrupted form of the French cordouan – both had many variants.

The distinction between cordobanes and guadamecies was made quite clear as early as 1575 by the Spanish historian Ambrosio de Morales. The former (he said) was a widely-used leather made from goatskin, whereas the latter was made from sheepskin (badana), which would include the hair-sheep that was in fact used), which, in his day – gilded, worked (i.e. hand-stamped) and painted – gaily embellished the streets where it was made into panels of guadameci and stood in the sun to dry. The significance of this statement, with its clear-cut distinction between two different kinds of leather, has been overlooked by later writers, but this is understandable in view of the confusion caused by the indiscriminate use, outside Spain, of the term ‘Cordovan’ whereas within that country its equivalent (cordobane) signified a particular kind of leather – and not the one with which this treatise is concerned. Whatever name is used in connection with hangings in what follows, the leather indicated before the seventeenth century was hair-sheepskin, which was originally tawed and in later times was vegetable-tanned. In spite of all its technical changes of character, such leather continued to be known to the Spaniards as guadameci”.

The confusion and mistake is that, outside Iberia, museum curators and others, tended to label antique Spanish leatherwork as “cordoban”, “Spanish leather” or guadameci. Even here sometimes the confusion shows up in books published in this century. Ambrosio de Morales' words are very clear: there are the goatskins called cordoban; and there is the guadameci, a particular decoration technique used on sheepskins. But he doesn't state a distinction between two different kinds of leather! He states the distinction between a type of leather (goatskin) and a technique, done on sheepskins. Such leather was also used for saddlery and shoemaking, plain or dyed – but worked to become a guadameci is something else! And this technique/aspect gave the fame to Spain and, much less, to Portugal.

(This article was too long for a single Newsletter and will be continued in the next Ed.)