

ARTICLES

LEATHER BOTTLES IN PORTUGAL AND A VISIT TO A MAKER IN SPAIN FRANKLIN PEREIRA

Introduction

During a "leather" tour in 1989, I visited what will become the Museum of Leather in Vich, which is situated about 1 1/2 hours by train from Barcelona, Spain. There I saw, for the first time, a wineskin. I also found a leather bottle maker still working there. At the time, I was researching into the old documents of the Leather Bottle Maker's Guild in Portugal. This article is based on these travels and a few books that I have found in various libraries.

The word, in both Portuguese and Spanish, used for this type of container is "odre" which means neither made of leather, nor a wine container! So the translation into "wine skin" or "leather bottle" is more explicit than the word actually implies.

I have not yet found either drawings or actual leather containers in Portugal, although there was a short programme on television last year about the islands of Madeira which showed a man carrying a wine skin. I have tried to investigate this further through a Cultural Institute in Madeira but have not as yet had any response.

Wineskins in Portugal

Leather was possibly man's first "manufactured" product, and animal skins would have been tanned and then stitched to form bags, the fore-runner of later containers made of clay, metal and wood. It is a pity that, at least in Portugal, leather artefacts are so neglected as sources of information about the history of such events as migrations, invasions, cultural links, etc.

However, the documents of the Leather Bottle Maker's Guild have given some clues. Artisans and their Guilds started their rise to importance in the late 14th century. In Lisbon, the Guild Rules of 1539 and 1771 puts the wine skin makers, together with the shoemakers and tanners under the banner of St. Crispin as their patron saint. (Several different Guilds often came under the protection of the same Saint). The Guild protected their rights, fixed the obligations of the workers and provided them with a banner, "with castle and inventions", to carry during religious ceremonies.

Although the documents are written in old Portuguese, which is less than clear to the modern reader, it is possible to discover from these documents how the trade was carried on. In 1551 the wine skin makers asked if it was possible for them to purchase skins from the tanners and shoemakers, between July and September, for keeping the new wine. The City Council answered that the skins should be given to them "being needed for the service of the republic" and ordered the Skinner's Guild to remove the skins from the goats without cutting them along the belly. If the Skinners did not follow this order, they would be fined or even arrested.

From another book, dated 1572, from Lisbon, which lists all the Guilds working at that time, it is possible to discover the Rules of the Wine Skin Maker's Guild. A worker who wished to become a Master had to "prepare a boiler of pitch and three new skins with their hair on, without any snip of scissors (....) and the skins will be of smoke or of bark, as the worker wants". This shows that the skins were tanned, either with smoke or bark before being worked without the hair being cut.

The rules stated that only a Master Craftsman could open a workshop and have workers and apprentices; where materials may be bought, their prices, the judges of the craft and the fines for bad or fake work and so on. Above all, it set out their contribution to the City Council. By the late 14th or early 15th century, every corporation, or

banner, of the guilds, had to provide two members for the City Council to sit with the rich and the royalty. There were twelve corporations at that time in Lisbon. This did not mean that there were only twelve Guilds. As previously explained, there were often several Guilds under the same banner or corporation. As each of the twelve corporations had to provide two members, the council was known as the "House of Twenty Four"; The same arrangement existed in other cities as well as Lisbon and has played an important part in the history of Portugal.

Back to the wine skins. In an appendix to the Guild Rules of 1771, it was stated that the Wine Skin Makers rented wine skins by the day for keeping wine, olive oil and must. The appendix was to raise the rents, as the prices were then out of date. This implies therefore that wine skins must have been on hire before 1771.

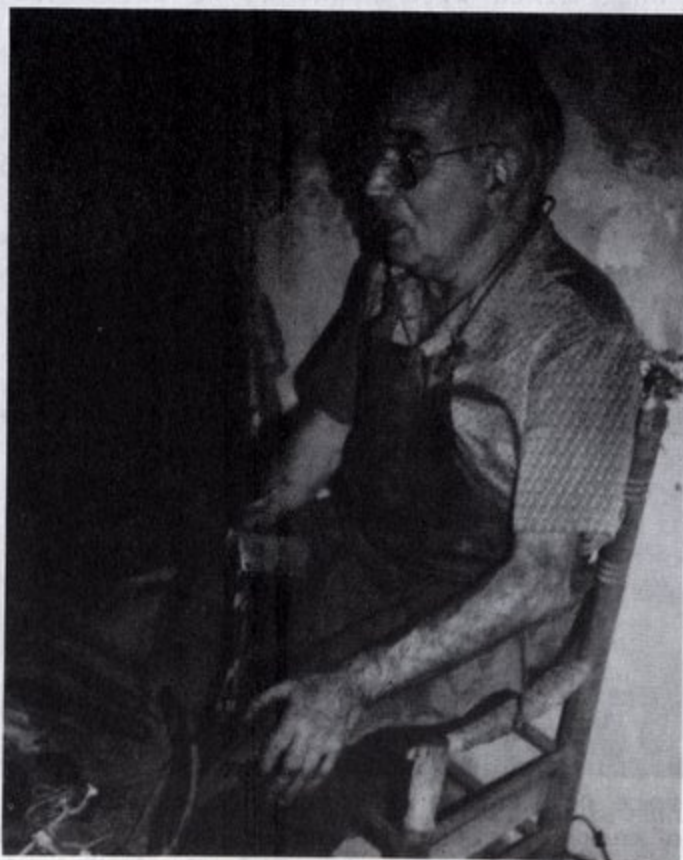
In another appendix, this time dated 1814, there is a complaint about some Measurers who were buying wineskins from Spain. This appendix forbids the sale or rent of Spanish-made containers. It appears from this that the containers were also used to measure liquids (wine and olive oil).

There is another document that lists all the Guilds with the number of master craftsmen through the years. In the Wine Skip Maker's Guild in Lisbon, there were nine masters in 1620, six in 1803 and only four in 1824 and 1834.

In a King's Ordinance of 1487, which concerns the working-out of the annual taxes for materials, artefacts and guilds, in the city of Porto in Northern Portugal, the wine skin makers are amongst fifty different professions listed.

In a document of rules for the religious procession of "Corpus Christi" dated 1517 in the city of Coimbra, the Guilds are organised into twelve associations, the wine skin makers being within the same association as the dyers, rope-makers and donkey-saddle makers. Their banner is the third in the procession of twelve.

In the first volume of seven on the Guilds in the city of Guimaraes, by A.L. Carvalho, dated 1929, the author lists most of the uses of leather in Portugal through the ages. He refers to "borrachas para vinho e odres para azeite" using therefore different words for containers for wine and containers for olive oil, although they were produced by the same Guild. There are two translations in the dictionary of the word "borracha", one is "rubber", the other "a leather container, in a round shape, with a narrow mouth made of wood" - a wineskin! The word for "drunkard" is a "borrachao" that is, a fellow that over uses the wine kept in a skin bag. An 18th century document uses the same word for the wineskin makers in the southern city of Evora; they were called "borrhacheiros e



Mariano Marti at his work table.

odreiros" their profession was to "rent and sell and work upon their leathers". There is also a list of their containers; for wine, oil and "leathers of grape picking" all of several sizes, with different prices, both for renting or sale. Between 1777 and 1810 there were eight wine skin makers in Evora.

A Wineskin Maker's Workshop in Vich

Being in Vich in the summer of 1989, I visited the workshop of Mr Mariano Marti, the last wine skin maker in Vich, a city famous for its tanning tradition. His shop and atelier are located at No. 11, Rambla del Carme. On the same day as my first visit the local daily newspaper published an interview with him written in the Catalan language. and, mixed with Spanish, he explained his craft to me.

He makes small wine skins, to hold 1, 1 1/2 and 2 litres of wine. Some are made for the tourist trade which have goat or cow hair on the outside, but have a plastic sheet inside but the traditional ones have the hair, which is waterproofed with pitch, on the inside. However, these need to be filled with wine very soon after being made or the summer temperature will cause the pitch to melt. Hence the plastic bags for the tourist!

Hanging from the walls and ceiling are the most amazing collection of wine skins, probably similar to the ones used over the centuries in Portugal, Spain and other countries. The wineskins are in the shape of a pear. The large size containers are made from a complete goat skin (if from a male goat, it has to have been castrated or the smell is too powerful) and briefly, the process is as follows. The skin is removed from the animal without being cut along the belly, only at the top of the legs and the neck. The leg openings are then stitched shut with the hair on the inside. The tanning process can be undertaken either before or after stitching. The neck is closed with a rope. To keep wine the inside of the skin must be lined with pitch on top of the hair. The pitch is made of resin



Filling a wine skin with air, using an old bellows. Note Mariano Marti's apron made from as goat skin.