

Saddles and leather shields in the battle field in Iberian Peninsula – Christian and Muslim riders, saddle makers and ways to ride and fight

I've just bought the book "In the saddle – an exploration of the saddle through History" (Archetype Publications, London, 2004) and, in spite of no longer being a rider (my British style saddle is kept aside), I keep appreciating horses and their gear. Few months ago I gave a speech at a 3-day seminar on medieval warfare in Iberia Peninsula (papers to be published soon), and also had an article published in an on-line magazine on medieval studies (the abstract in English can be read at: <http://www.revistamirabilia.com/Numeros/Num8/indiceartsa8.htm>). The subject was a chapter of my MA thesis "Leather and Islam in Iberia Peninsula" (2005); my book "Leather trades in medieval Lisbon" was published few weeks ago, and has a chapter dedicated to saddlery.

Most of the written documents date from the 16th century, and are oral rules and ways of doing that were passed from generation to generation, or from master craftsmen to young apprentices.

The riding way "a la gineta" – referred by Ann Hyland in the chapter "The medieval war saddle and its accessories", page 36, of the said book – was also kept in Portugal, as both Iberian countries received the Muslim legacy. Thus, in saddlery, the "gineta" type of saddle was built, as well as the "estradiota" one, a model to fit the European type of riding (high pommel and cantle, curved to fix the rider by the hips, straight leg position due to long straps holding the stirrups); there was also another model, called "bastarda", probably a type in between. Both saddles went along with their particular gear, which was made, according to guilds' documents, by another guild, called "correeiros"; these leather craftsmen had at hands not only the horse gear, but the making of bags, sheaths, bags for bows and arrows, coverings of wooden trunks and upholstery (in carved cowhide); the makers of leather shields – called "adargas" – were also included in this guild; such shield is another Muslim heritage, included in the "gineta" riding and fighting method. Fully in leather - cowhide, "anta" (another large size herbivore), and goatskin/cordovam -, this shield (in the shape of a rounded heart or two beans) had in the back two straps for the left hand; in the front, it usually had braids and two or more tassels. Two books on horsemanship, published in Portugal and Spain in the 17th century, are manuals of the "gineta" exercises; the Portuguese one refers plain leather shields for training, and decorated ones for parades and public shows.

These divisions between guilds – and no mixture between artefacts - lasted until late 18th century, at least (date of the last written documents of the guilds); probably, due to the increase of the demand for carved cowhide upholstery – which has been my main subject of study, from which several books and articles have been emerging -, other production of the “correeiros” became specific of the bag makers, for example, and carvings, asking for so much quality and art, became strict of the leather carvers; due to similarities (and having the same clients), all horse gear turned to the hands of the saddlers, which is, nowadays, the artisans of all this field, in Portugal; in fact, they are called “correeiros”, not saddlers.

Another interesting matter is that many names of horse gear do repeat what is found in 16th century documents of the guilds.

This riding and fighting “gineta” style – narrow curves, zig-zags, quick runaways, control of the horse with the legs and feet, arrow throwing while riding, even while twisting the upper body – was opposite to the European “a la brida” style: warrior with metal armour, fixed between raised pommel and cantle, heavy and long wooden shield, long spike, straight line attacks of the collective army. Both methods had good and bad points in the battlefield.

The incoming of gun power made drastic changes in war strategies and equipment. The leather shield makers got extinct, and the “gineta” riding way was only kept in the training and show of the Iberian horse breeds. It remained in bullfight as well: a statement from the pope Pio the 5th, dated from the 16th century, allowed bullfight amidst Christians, so that the “gineta” riding art style won’t get lost. It is in this field where one can see the “gineta” rider in action when facing a bull – and it also allows imagining how such riders did combat in battles.

Iberian Muslim documents shed more light into saddles. Dated from late 10th century, from the court of the second caliph of al-Andalus (most of Iberia under Muslim rule), there are references to saddles and harnesses “of the Caliphate”, or “ornamented with silver”, which would distinguish the government stables’ horses from the civilian ones. And where would those signs of distinction/marks be put? The outer faces of the cantle and pommel could be easily seen when the rider mounts the horse. These marks had to have a clear design, easily seen. Taking a look on Portuguese and Spanish traditional saddles, there’s, in the outer faces of the pommel and cantle, a row of cone-shaped metallic rivets forming triangles (in the Portuguese model), and filigree arabesques (in the Spanish model). Considering that both countries inherited Muslim

traditions, and that the “gineta” way is still practised in bullfight, then both saddles’ ornaments do have links with their past examples. In particular the Portuguese use of stepped triangles has plenty of similarities to such past decorations, found in ancient architecture and different artefacts. According to archaeological findings, stepped triangles were in use in the Middle East: Khorsabad at 8th century b. C., Persepolis and Susa at the 6th century b. C., and also by the Sassanian Empire (before the Islamic take-over in the 7th century). Islam absorbed this entire heritage, and re-used its arts in early aesthetics stages of the new religion. As artefacts were mostly utilitarian and very few did survive use and neglect, we must turn ourselves to architecture: stepped triangles are found as castellations of palaces and mosques in Muslim Iberia and, later on, in 16th century churches, owing to a heritage that turned tradition. In leather, the earliest examples of Portuguese carved cowhide upholstery, dated late 16th/early 17th century, do show, in the left and right side of the frames, stepped triangles, made by curves done with a non-sharp chisel; the inner stylized floral motives – owing to a rich Islamic past – were carved with a V-sharp gauge (that removes a tiny strip from the epidermis). Renaissance quickly erased such patterns, and the frames became rows of stylized acanthus leaves, and the carving tools became a growing collection of non-sharp chisels.

Another document of the second caliph of al-Andalus, dated from the late 10th century, talks about the caliph watching a riders’ parade; he totally disliked one of the riders, that was using a low type of saddle “made in the other shore” (that is, in the North of Africa), and ordered its burning at the Army headquarters; other riders did appreciate that type of saddle, and had tried it once. Later on, in another situation, the caliph appreciated Berber riders (incorporated in the Iberian armies) mounting with such low saddles, remembering a line of a poem, which refers whether horses were born under the riders, or riders were born on horses. One can consider that was by this date that the “gineta” riding way was introduced in Muslim Iberian chivalry.

Amidst several illustrations of the “brida” and “gineta” riders, dating from the 12th up to the 16th century – in illuminations, engravings, carved stone capitals, carved wood -, I’ve chosen two from the famous Spanish book “Songs of Saint Mary”, of Alphonso the 10th.

Photo no. 1 shows both armies in battle: armoured Christian warriors, on raised saddles, holding long shields; on the other hand, the Islamic army uses low type of saddles, raised stirrups, and leather shields. In photo no. 2, a Christian warrior (on the left) greets a Muslim one. The Christian uses a high type of saddle and, as the stirrups

are low in the straps, his legs are almost straight. The Muslim rider mounts in a low type of saddle, and bends the legs by the knees, as the stirrups are raised in the straps; the saddle is quite close to the typical Portuguese model, which is no wonder, as it inherited the Muslim “gineta” way of riding. Both the examples show the two schools’ riding styles – and of war strategies – in medieval Iberia Peninsula.

Back to Ann Hyland chapter, just a short remark about the Moors. At the earliest stage of the Muslim arrival to Iberia Peninsula in 711, the rulers were dependent from the Damascus’ centred Umayyad dynasty; al-Andalus was a far-away colony. By 750, the new Abbasid dynasty – owing its name to a lineage from Mohammad’s uncle, Abbas – overthrow the Umayyad, and shifted the capital from Damascus to Baghdad; only a prince escaped, and arrived in al-Andalus in 756, starting an independent emirate. Only later on did Muslim Iberia receive riders from the North of Africa, amidst them the Berber Zanata tribe; it’s from them that a new way of riding and fighting – using a low saddle – was introduced in al-Andalus armies, later on used by Christians and civilians as well; language changed Zanata to gineta, and in both Iberian countries such word still nowadays means rider.

Franklin Pereira – Portugal

frankleather@yahoo.com



Photo no 1; from the book El cuero en el atavio árabe medieval. Su huella en la España cristiana, by Elena Pezzi (Vic: Colomer Munmany, 1990), page 155



Photo no. 2; from the book Objetos y imagenes de al-Andalus, by Teresa Pérez Higuera (Madrid: Editorial Lundberg, 1994), page 101.