



Fig. 1. António Santos making a pair of large bull collars.

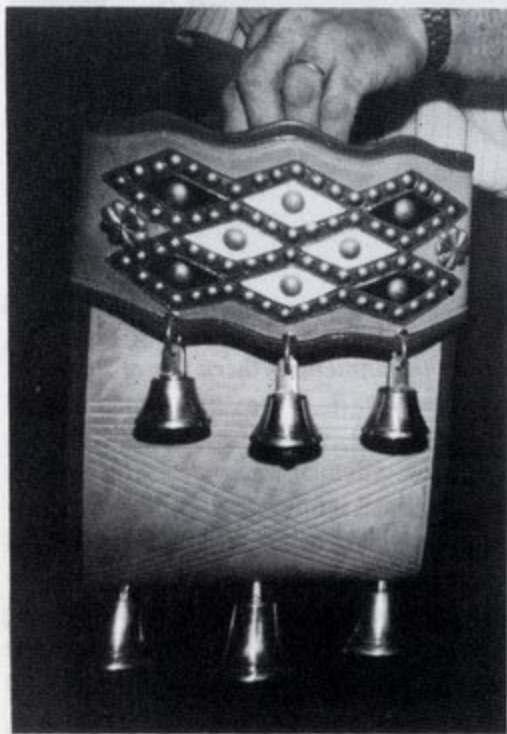
DECORATED BULL COLLARS AT NORTHERN PORTUGAL  
COUNTRY FAIRS.

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*Dedicated to the saddler António Santos, who passed away in October 1990.*

**Introduction**

About three years ago I started visiting some of the main cattle and horse fairs in Portugal; at the same time, reading the pages of history books shed some light on the medieval origins of some markets and fairs, encouraging one to imagine how the trades and businesses operated and how one travelled in the old days. Several trade workshops - fur collectors, saddlers, bootmakers, legging-makers and parchment painters - existing survivors of the past crafts - helped with painting the overall picture.



*Fig. 2. Part of a collar. This works as a belt keeper, with brass bells. The lines were made with a wooden creaser.*

At two annual northern fairs I saw some quite unusual, heavily decorated bull collars; it was at the "beauty contests" for the strong powerful bulls, with their brushed and combed coats, that these huge collars could be seen. It all gave me a feeling of something very old, maybe coming from the feasts of the Celtic tribes of pre-Roman times: a hard-working, rural society with rituals and feasts for the earth, seasons, animals and harvests. This "cult of the bull" was a way to show appreciation of the animal as a working force, for its reproductive capacities, as a giver of milk, meat, hides and leather, bones, horns and dung, ... the bull as origin of many trades and crafts was the highlight of the feast, venerated over a huge geographical region from India ("the sacred cow") through Greece (the Minotaur) to Iberia (the bullfights).





*Fig. 3. Strong bulls at the "beauty contest" at the annual northern fair at Povoia do Lanhoso. This fair was established in the 13th century.*

All these hilly places between the northern cities of Braga and Guimarães were ancient lands and villages of early settlers, and many ruins still exist today. Guimarães was the cradle of the small Portuguese Kingdom in the early 12th century.

#### **At the workshop of the bull collar maker**

A couple of years ago I found the workshop of António Santos, in Braga: a high-ceilinged place by the side of a small square; wooden saddle-vessels hanging amidst dust and cobwebs, shelves with rolls of leathers and tools, a long wooden table for working bench; in a corner, a pretty saddle of Portuguese style waiting for the owner - saddles were his main work.



*Fig. 4. A Portuguese style saddle made by Antonio Santos.*

helped a lot in my own leathercraft; at last I could see the use and possibilities of the edger, bordering creaser, half-moon knife, bees-waxed thread, stitching-pony, and decorative stamps. A freshly cut glass borderer was used to sandpaper belt borders, before applying a coating of "glue out of leather" (that inspired a visit to the last maker of "hide glue" at a nearby village - the subject of a future article); finally a rubbing with a flannel cloth gave a compact shiny appearance to the borders. Some of his tools - the stitching-wheels, awls, metal strap-cutter - were old ones that had come from the "Blanchard" factory in France.

He was the only craftsman making the big bull collars - used not only at the annual "beauty contests" but also for decoration; such a pair cost about £400 (in Portugal that is three times the minimum monthly salary, and a bit more than the usual salary). The illustrations show how such a collar is made.

António Santos started working as a boy at his uncle's saddlers shop. Beside saddles, he had been making many types of harnesses for horses and chariots, and leather bags; after a period of crisis due to social changes in Portugal in the late 1970s, the saddlery business was strong again, and he always had plenty to do. His friendliness, pride in his products, and readiness to explain to me how to make the various products, made his workshop a regular visiting place for me; those perfect finishing touches, the moulded leather parts and the nice looking hand-stitching were the main attraction. The tips he was ready to give me

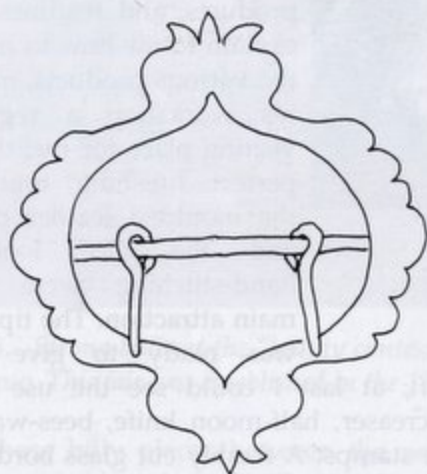
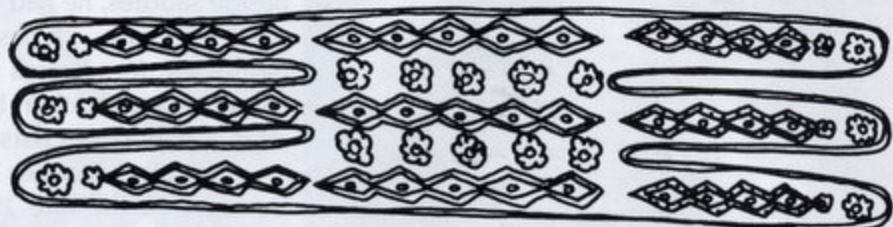


Fig. 5. A bull collar, showing the decorated strips (usually white, blue, red and black but made of plastic not leather!) and the flower-like tacks. Fig. 6. The brass buckle. Fig. 7. António Santos' half-moon knife, used for cutting and skinning.

António Santos often talked about having someone to carry on his trade; but he said that saddle-making takes time, patience and a good deal of enjoyment in the work and, in spite of the demands, and a centuries-old tradition of saddles and horse-riding, the survivors of the craft find it difficult to get anyone to follow in their footsteps.





Fig. 8. A fully decorated harness and saddle on a horse from North Portugal at the same fair; this is a typical style of the region. Note the fox tails hanging from the side of the harness.