

## Travelling in the Southern Plains

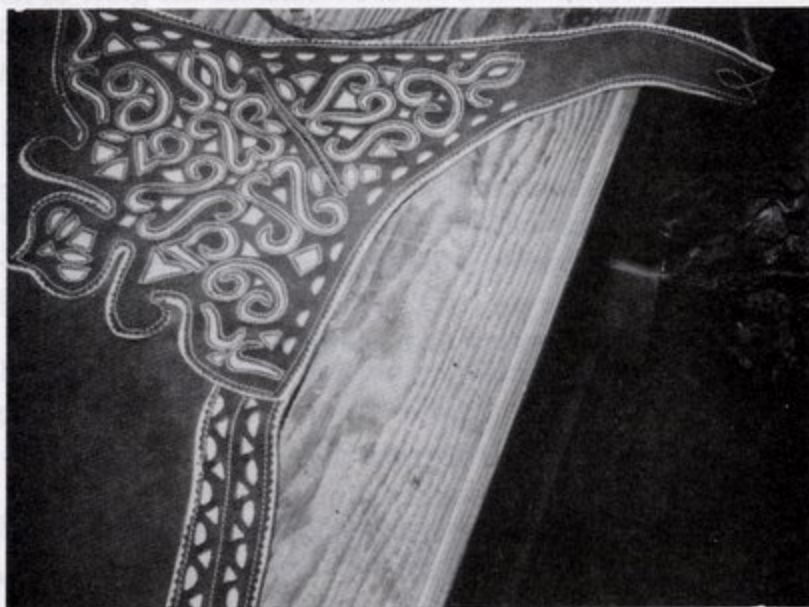
Alentejo, in the southern plain of Portugal is related culturally and historically to the neighbouring Spanish province of Andalucia, where Córdoba is situated. It is the most important city from the point of view of artistic leatherwork, the home of the famous gold embossed "guadamecim". Alentejo and Andalucia were both part of the Moorish Empire of Al-Andaluz. The Moorish rule in Portugal ended in the 13th century, although in Spain it remained until the 15th century. Together with music, architecture, food (and, I am told, human genetics) leatherwork still shows the moorish influence, although so many centuries have gone by.

Yerbura, now Évora, was a flourishing city in the early kingdom of Portugal. From archives, dated in the 18th century, it is apparent that the gilded leatherwork "guadamecim" was also produced in this city and that there were tanners, wineskin makers, saddlers and "correeiros" working there. However "Guidamecileiros" Guild had come to an end in Portugal by the late 18th century.

On the outskirts of Évora, designated a World Heritage city by UNESCO, there is still a small tanning factory, using the old hand methods together with a workshop of traditional leatherwork; leggings, bags and two-pouch bags in the old mudèjar style, although not so richly decorated as the leatherwork of neighbouring Spain. I saw some very attractive leggings and, at another craft workshop in the city, a pair of richly decorated leather trousers. (Fig. 8 & 9.) There is an old shoemaker who makes beautiful boots in different styles, made-to-measure for the customer, out of cowhide. The ancient Saddlery Street amidst the narrow street of small white houses and stone monuments helps retain the relaxed moorish atmosphere.

The village of Nossa Senhora de Machede is 17km away. In the "street of the tanning factory" there is a tannery and leather workshop which makes leather and fur garments and bags, mostly worn by the shepherds of the Southern Plains. I usually visit the main annual craft fairs

Fig. 9. Evora: Leather leggings showing different mudèjar decoration.



in Portugal and in only one did I see this mudèjar style of decoration and then only for show not for sale. This style of leatherwork is quite localised and used only for the country workers and shepherds. Sadly, mechanisation in agriculture is causing the disappearance of this traditional style and its makers.

Beja is another town in the Southern Plains. Its coat-of-arms, shown in Fig. 10. carved in stone, shows a cow's head - which referred not only to the cattle business of the plains but also to the leather trade. Although now I could only find one old saddlemaker in the city, there are a few moorish documents in which is written:

"Beja has very good land for sowing and raising cattle. And is very good for honey bees ..... its water is good for the tanning of leather."  
(Ahmede Arrazi, writing in the 10th century.)

Beja is the capital of a huge state... it is famous for its leathers and cotton materials.



Al-Andaluz has been called by many writers "earth's paradise" ....its belt-work is famous all over the world for the glow of its colours and its delicacy....saddles, harnesses and all kinds of horse trappings, the Andalus products surpass any other country." (Almacari, writing in the 13th century).

Finally...I would like to thank once again, the leather craftsmen and others for their assistance and understanding that made my "Leather Tour" and this article possible. Besides finding information, I wanted to learn about some of the practical aspects, the "how to's" and tips, and something about styles for my own leatherwork

### **Bibliography**

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Fig. 10. Beja: The heraldic coat-of-arms, depicting a cow's head which is also a symbol of the leather trade.