

Notes on the bow in al-Andalus and its ideological historical context

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From the pictorial and chronicled evidence relating to al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia) the bow used is clearly a horn-sinew composite bow¹. The limited graphic evidence for this last type is that of an archer holding one such short bow painted on a tenth century ceramic plate to be seen in the museum of Madinat al.Zahrā` (fig.1) near Cordoba. The archer on this ceramic may be using the thumb draw or the so-called “Mongolian draw”.



fig. 1

One other visual evidence of a horn-sinew-bow in al-Andalus can be seen on an ivory casket of the Caliphate

period (Xth Century) in the Museum of Burgos, previously held in the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (fig. 2). On this casket a kneeling soldiers, actually eight of them², four at the corners of each face, are using a larger horn-sinew bow than the above displaying very long siyahs (rigid ends of the bows), which are quite different from the ones pictured in the al-Zahrā` plate. The other pictorial evidence is a much latter one from the walls of the Alhambra of Granada (fig 5).

The draw here is quite evidently a finger draw or the so called “Mediterranean draw”³. There is furthermore historical testimony of the yearly collection of horn for the purpose making horn sinew bows in a tenth century agricultural calendar written in Cordoba (this last published in Arabic and Latin by Dozy)⁴.



fig. 2 detail

In contrast to the common use of the bow as a war instrument in al-Andalus, as documented in the

objects referred to above, the many arrow points found and its use being repeatedly cited throughout the various Arabic chronicles covering the eight centuries of the political existence of al-Andalus, but very surprisingly

1. The horn-sinew or “composite-bow”, as opposed to the all wooden “self-bow”, is constructed by a very laborious laminations of various materials; horn, sinew and wood, all held together with various natural glues. It is very time consuming to construct but results in a compact, lightweight, very elastic and powerful bow ideal for mounted archery and for that specific purpose it is a superior bow..

2. These archers seem to be fully clad in scale body armor or more likely chain mail. For the first material evidence of the early use in al-Andalus of chain mail see: <http://www.andalustonegawa.50g.com/SELLOS/S-daj.html>.

3. Both the expressions “Mongolian draw” and “Mediterranean draw” are misnames as they are both prehistoric, and historically as well as geographically intermingled over the continents. Both expressions, if not invented by him, were first popularized in 1885 by Edward Morse’s important article “Ancient and Modern Methods of Arrow Release”. The objectively descriptive, avoiding imagined ethnicities, is simply “thumb draw” and “finger draw”; in either case you can safely substitute “release” for “draw”.

4. Reinhart P. A. Dozy, *Le Calendrier De Cordoue De L’Anne 961*, E.J. Brill, Leyde, 1873.



fig. 2

there is little mention, if any, of its function or use as a weapon of war by the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula⁵. There seems to be no longbow tradition like there was at that same period in the various parts of northern Europe, this in spite of the area being reputed as one of the best sources of yew staves. On the contrary, the bow is very clearly considered from an ideological perspective as the weapon of the bedeviled Muslim enemy, invariably named in the Latin chronicles with choice epithets such as, Saracen, Moor or more revealing harking back to the biblical sons of Hagar, Hagarite, Ismaelite. Etc... (Medieval Europe does seem to have an atavistic and congenitally transmitted problem with the two descendants of Abraham, a factor that is masterly expressed on a XIth century panel (fig.4), it is a fixation that seems to be quite central, and perhaps even fundamental to the early formation of its

particular ethnicity- that is, its deeply primordial dual anti-Semitism! But that, though very interesting, is another vast subject...). The repeated iconographic representation of the bow in Iberian Romanesque Art many times shows the association of the bow with the perceived congenital, ideological, military enemy. It is clearly the weapon of the biblical outcast, Ismael, which as Genesis 21.20 singles out "...he became a skilfull archer". For example even when depicting a mythical being, the likes of a centaur tensing a bow, a turban is placed on the fabulous creature's head (Nuestra señora de la Vega, Requijade, Segovia). Another more revealing and artistic example would be an equestrian archer aiming backwards with his bow at the very "Lamb of God" and true to form he wears an elegant turban⁶ (Puerta del Cordero, San Isidoro de León. See below, fig. 4). Of note, aside from the use of stirrups, is the

5. The bow is nevertheless represented in some Christian religious manuscripts (fig 3), as in the 10th century "Beato de Gerona" (now deposited in the Catedral de Santa María de Gerona). Of special note in the image below is the fabulous and very imaginative, but obviously nonfunctional shape of the bow especially with the inward curving ends of its siyahs. It is quite evident that the talented miniaturist had probably never seen an actual horn and sinew war-bow.

But no need for him to represent an actual bow as his was a mystical bow shooting invisible arrows at a charging mounted archer with a very real and threatening lance or javalin. This was obviously not one of those mundane earthly duels!

Of note on this bow is the strange protruding object at the other side of the grip held by the fingers of the stretched right hand arm of the archer. Is this a small tubular arrow case for holding arrows in the bow hand for rapid shooting as is cited was done (but without arrow holder) in the XIIth century Mardi Al-Tarsusi's Arabic chronicle?

Also of interest is that the horse on right seemingly a stallion, has a smaller saddle, perhaps in Moorish style and has a differentiating knot on the horse's tail. .

6. It is said that the turban, a very tight one at that, did not start becoming popular in al-Andalus until the very end of the tenth century, in the time of 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Amir, just before the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate, and whose collapse would lead onto the period of the Taifa rulers which is chronologically concordant with the general period this panel is said to have sculptured.



fig. 3



fig. 4

depiction of a very short horn sinew bow quite similar in size and design to the one seen above on the glazed plate in the museum of Madinat al-Zahra`. Also very interesting is the fact that he is shooting backwards, in Parthian style, that is, treasonably as it would be seen in the "world view" of the panel's artist. Historically the rendering of this particular mounted archery position by the artist could be a possible indication that this essential tactic of "torna fuye" was in use in al-Andalus at that particular period.

This mounted archer though in a pictorial scene of biblical representation on the marble panel below is in this context an elucidatory image of how the Christian kingdoms of the north saw their Muslim or Andalusí enemy of the south, not only as a temporal, circumstantial enemy but also as the descendants of a timeless ideological one at the very roots of their belief system. This is very cleverly achieved in the panel by harking back deep into the beginning of theological time through a biblical exegesis masterly expressed in the panel below. He is in this perspective the unchanging enemy rooted near the start of creational time and so therefore for all times to come!

The panel is divided visually into two triangular parts; the heavenly one on the top and the earthly one right under it. At the center of the upper triangle within a sanctified circle held by two winged angels is the "Lamb of God, ("Agnus Dei" as John 1.29), of particular note is its cocked foreleg balancing an elevated cross. While right behind on the sides of the respective angels, as if in support, are two holy persons with cross held in the right hand. While in contrast looking below within the earthly triangle in its center stands Abraham in the wilderness, symbolized by

the trees in the background, who is about to carry out God's mandate of executing his eldest son. Note the victim's head is held down by an unfurled turban⁷. Just behind Abraham appears the timely "hand of God" stopping the execution while a saintly figure offers the alternative sacrificial lamb. On the same plane at furthest left is our turbaned equestrian archer who is, as said, treacherously in a backward shot, aiming at the "Lamb of God". His identity in this biblical context is clearly none other than Ismail, the father of all the 'Arabum'.

Right next to him stands his mother Hagar who is depicted as pulling her dress off the right breast brazenly



fig. 4 detail

having lifted the clothing that was over her right leg right way up to her hips, an unrepentant seductress clearly indicating her sexual depravity and, by association, congenitally that of all her decent. In passing, it seems like a long distance ideologically and umbilically connected forerunner of European 18 & 19th century orientalist painters with their sometimes creative but completely unreal sensual paintings of their imaginary "East", though probably just mirror images of the sexual frustrations of their own societies at that particular period. In the depiction of this panel there is no possible salvation for this branch of the descendants of Abraham. It is clearly under world view of Genesis 16:12 "His hand

7. Could this be indicating the Jews of Sefarad would have worn one such head gear at that particular time?.

against everybody and everyone's hand against him "...and, metamorphosed, it so seems to presently be...."

On the other side we have the other part of Abraham's decent, with Sara at the right seated in dignified dress in front of her abode, the seated posture would be a reference to her advanced biblical age and her improbable miraculous birth giving. While to her right are two characters, one rides a mule or donkey and another in front is in the act of taking his shoes off, perhaps as if entering a sacred area, a sacrificial one in this case. They could be various representations of an obedient Isaac meekly going towards his accepted destiny or, more probably, they could be the two cited servants of Abraham helping their overlord with the preparations for the extreme demand, it is said, God had put on him. One can infer in this depiction that this branch of Abraham's decent in spite of being saved here at its very origin by the grace of the "Agnus Dei" above, has not been in its totality grateful by wholeheartedly putting itself when the due time came under that same redeeming lamb . But quite on the contrary were to stand damned collectively as the 'deicide nation' for the supposed execution by crucifixion of that same saving "Lamb of God" (Mathew 27:24-25). Nevertheless in this particular world view

they are not a total loss as conversion, coercive if need be, could still save them ... and so it was through time to be repeatedly attempted.

Undoubtedly, this panel, regardless of what we think of its ethical or religious content, is both a great masterpiece of theological propaganda and among the best of Romanesque art. It is a brilliant exposition of the dual anti-Semitism so central to the ethnicity of those times (no need to say, and long after). Without doubt, the mostly illiterate congregation of the moment that would necessarily have to pass under this central door-head would have easily recognized and understood its graphic dual message which would concord perfectly with their deep existential fears, imagined or not.

There are in the Iberian and Gallic Romanesque art other much less flattering renditions of the bow as truly the weapon of the forever evil and monstrous other⁸. This perception was probably also related to the bow's perceived efficiency on the battlefield, specially at the hands of the mounted archer.

As said before the Iberian Peninsula, especially the northern part was reputed to have been an important



fig. 5

⁸. Ines Monteiro Arias has a very interesting thesis dealing mainly on the subject of the representation of the Muslim other in the Romanesque art of the Iberian Peninsula and Southern France and now published as: *El ENEMIGO IMAGINADO. La escultura románica hispana y la lucha contra el Islam. (THE IMAGINED ENEMY. The Romanesque sculpture in Hispania and the fight against Islam.)* Toulouse, 2012. 864 p. and CD for images .



source and exporter of fine Yew staves used for the production of 'self bows', in particular the famed English longbow which makes the lack of any significant reference of its use as a war weapon by the northern peninsular states quite mysterious. All the more so as the bow appears as the decisive factor in two important battles that took place among the various Christian powers in the Iberian Peninsula and where very small contingents of English longbow archers play a decisive part in the defeat of opponents with much larger armies; Najera 1367, in the Castilian Civil War and the very important foundational battle of Aljubarrota 1385, where the improbable but resounding defeat of the Castilians

lead directly to the independence of the Portuguese crown and, by gratitude and self interest, to the consequent long lasting strategic alliance with the English crown.

Finally the last pictorial evidence of the use of the horn bow in al-Andalus can be seen in a stucco wall painting of mounted archers on the walls of the Alhambra of Granada. (fig.5)

Judging from shape these are undoubtedly horn-sinew bows and not very different from the Asiatic bows of the ancient past or the Ottoman bows of the period.

Bibliography

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