

# Gilt leather/guadameci in Coimbra – comments on documents of the 12th and 16th centuries

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Artigo entregue em: 2 de fevereiro de 2012

Artigo aprovado em: 19 de abril de 2012

## RESUMO:

Entre vários tipos de calçado, as posturas municipais de Coimbra, de 1145, referem botas em couro dourado/"gudemiciz"; parece ser esta a primeira referência aos guadamecis no reino de Portugal, e em particular numa cidade recentemente reconquistada ao domínio muçulmano. Em finais do século XVI, vários documentos da Universidade de Coimbra referem cobertas de parede, coberta de mesa e guardaportas, tudo fabricado por um guadameceiro. Esta documentação leva-nos numa viagem às modas mudéjares e medievais onde o guadameci se encontrava.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Couros dourados/guadameci; Arte mudéjar; Panejamentos

## ABSTRACT:

Amidst different footwear, a document of Coimbra municipality, dated from 1145, refers boots made in gilt leather/"gudemiciz"; it seems this is the first reference to gilt leather in the kingdom of Portugal, and in particular in a city recently conquered from the Muslims. In late 16<sup>th</sup> century, several documents of Coimbra University refer wall hangings, a table cover and large door frames made by a maker of gilt leather. These historic data take us into a journey of mudejar and medieval fashions where gilt leather was a part.

**KEYWORDS:** Gilt leather/guadameci; Mudejar art; Wall hangings

## Introduction

Gilt leather is a rather unknown or hardly studied matter; production places, patterns, uses by the church and nobility, techniques, web of expansion and exports overland and overseas haven't yet received studies and publications. The historic references are scattered throughout the centuries; only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there is a handful of inventories of wealthy interiors, showing gilt leather as wall hangings and cushions to sit on, sometimes already stored in wooden boxes. The new Renaissance fashions were drastically changing former ways of comfort in interiors, rooted in the Islamic heritage. To understand gilt leather it is therefore needed to have a look at the context of Iberian medieval and late medieval times. In both countries born out of the Reconquest, there are no examples of gilt leather surely dating from before the 16<sup>th</sup> century; and very few of the earliest ones – wall hangings and altar fronts – do show the influences of mudejar art. Nevertheless, documents dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> until the 17<sup>th</sup> century show gilt leather used as wall hangings, cushions, table covers, floor covers, altar fronts, devotional paintings, saddle clothes, footwear, large door frames and altar protections (to avoid wax drops from the candles). Wall hangings were part of the mudejar fashions, as Christianity kept on former Muslim ways, like sitting on cushions on rugs, and having walls covered with tapestries or silks. In Portugal, these wall coverings were called “panos d’armar”, literally “cloths to hang”; this means they were mobile and foldable ornaments, put on the walls of palaces whenever needed to embellish and to add comfort; gilt leather was used in the warm season, while tapestries were put on during the cold months. Along with the ornamented walls were rugs on the floor, with cushions, both in textile and gilt leather; this way to sit was called “in the Moorish way”, and the label clearly shows the imprint of Islam and Mediterranean ways brought into al-Andalus.

## The roots of the word “guadameci”

In spite the lack of gilt leather pieces from Islamic times, the term of the technique – guadameci – shows its creation in al-Andalus; the term is rooted in the Arabic “wad al-másir”<sup>1</sup>, meaning the qualities of the foliage

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<sup>1</sup> PEZZI, 1980:136; 1991: 74.

and branches; other root is the Hispanic Arabic word for leather – “gueld” – that, together with “al-másir”, formed “gueld al-másir”<sup>2</sup>, that would later develop into guadameci. Those roots explain the Spanish medieval terms, like “guadalmeci” or “guadalmexir”; the Portuguese archaic words - gudomiçil, goadameci, guadamesym – don’t have the “l”; nevertheless, recently I was surprised to find in a dictionary the word “guadalmecim”: “(from the Arabic gadamesi) – a kind of tapestry in painted and golden leather”, and “guadalmecileiro”<sup>3</sup> for its maker. Anyway, I never came across “guadalmecim” in any Portuguese document.

Thus, guadameci has nothing to do with the oasis-city of Ghadamès (nowadays in Libya), where the important tanning industry exported leathers to other countries, including al-Andalus.

The two roots of the word are a clear proof of such technique created and used in al-Andalus; nevertheless, only in the Sultanate of Grenade are documents and pieces found.

## Gilt leather making techniques

Gilt leather/guadameci is a leather working technique of high complexity and luxury. The sheep skin (from a male animal) comes from the tanning factory and needs to be washed to remove ingredients; dry, it is cut to a rectangle shape (near about 50x70 cm), thus leaving aside the parts with more wrinkles like belly, feet and neck; the rectangle is covered by a liquid (like shellac or rabbit skin glue) that closes the pores; a special glue or varnish – like rabbit skin glue – covers all the rectangle, and small rectangles of silver foil are thus stuck to it. A metallic kind of pencil traces the patterns on the skin, previously drawn in hard paper or parchment, we may suppose; other patterns existed in wooden stamps, to be marked with ink in the silvered surface. Oil colours (transparent and home-made from minerals) were used for painting parts of the patterns. Some other parts were figures, and may demand painters of religious art, which also painted on wood. A strange – and even secret - varnish gave to the silver covered surface the shades of gold; this varnish – “douradura” - results from the boiling of vegetable ingredients, like aloes vera cactus powder, pine tree resin and linseed oil (one of the medieval recipes); the golden tonality is the reason why sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> SOLER, 1992: 146.

<sup>3</sup> GRANDE DICIONÁRIO, 1997, III: 269.

gilt leather is called golden leather in Latin languages, but gold foil was rarely used. Even the sheepskin was a cheap material, useless for most artifacts, and mainly used for the inside covering of bags, belts or shoes. Finally, tooling with metal stamps - dots, dot with rays, concentric circles, triangle with lines or dots - gave different textures and glows to each rectangle. For wall hangings, the rectangles were stitched side by side, with borders, to cover a large surface.

Gilt leather makers were called “guadamecileiros”, with their ordinances written in the “Livro dos Regimentos dos officiais mecanicos da mui nobre e sempre leal cidade de Lisboa” (“Book of the Ordinances of the trades of the very noble and always lawful city of Lisbon”, from then on referred as the “Book of the Trades”), dated from 1572; it seems it’s the only ordinances of the guild. Former organization of the trades, given by king D. João III, dated from 1539, kept this guild under the Banner of Saint George, with many other guilds, sometimes with no direct connection between each other<sup>4</sup>. This fact shows the weak importance of the guild in Lisbon. Nevertheless, the ordinances are very clear about the technique<sup>5</sup>, when compared to the Spanish ordinances of the same century, written in Seville (1502), Valencia (1513), Cordoba (1529), Barcelona (1539) and Madrid (1587).

## Use and ornament of gilt leather since the Middle Ages

The technique of covering leather with gold or silver foil is an ancient one, already used in the Egypt of the pharaohs; but adding paintings, a golden varnish and textures seems to have developed in al-Andalus. The growth and final domain of Christianity in Iberian Peninsula had increased the use of gilt leather, mainly during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, being Cordoba the main production place. Nobility demanded wall hangings, including paintings of History-based tales, Christian figures and coat-of-arms; the church asked for altar fronts, sometimes with devotional paintings, being this use a way of the workshops to keep on, where Muslim artisans remained, in spite of the change of the political-religious power – this is, tough, only a (strong) hypothesis that explains the production of gilt leather during medieval times. Renaissance didn’t erase the patterns from Muslim art, like the star-shaped polygons, braids and laces, the four petalled flower on a

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<sup>4</sup> LANGHANS, 1948: 89.

<sup>5</sup> PEREIRA, 2009: 95-100; 2012: 61-64.

square, and others - flowers with petals in counter curved arches, artichokes and pine cones, frames with floral motives - shared with textiles.

Mudejar fashions were mainly in use in the lands from Coimbra until the Algarve, due to the direct Islamic legacy; that's the reason to find several interiors' inventories, dated between 1500's and 1600's, geographically situated in Coimbra, Arraiolos, Montemor-o-Novo, Elvas, Borba, Vila Viçosa, Lisboa, Évora and Faro<sup>6</sup>. The descriptions are, tough, too general; we may come to know the number of rectangles that formed the final wall hanging, its dominant colour, where it was hung or where was the deposit; other earlier inventories state the number of high-sole golden shoes (called chopines) a princess may had.

Lisbon documents of the 16<sup>th</sup> century refer the making of wall hangings and cushions; only sheep skins with silver foil or covered with the golden varnish were sold to shoemakers; these artisans also used gold foil covered goat skin (also thin, but much more resistant and expensive); a rare inventory on the wealth of Lisbon, dated from 1552, mentions that the city received 48.000 golden goat skins<sup>7</sup>.

There are documents of the 1500's stating imports from Cordoba, directly to the king, or to other nobles<sup>8</sup>, which also stress the small capability of the trade; at the same time, such imports emphasize the high quality of Cordoba workshops.

The new Renaissance fashions decreased the production of former mudejar artifacts; slowly, paintings, shelves, chairs and other furniture lead to the removing of gilt leather, whether for wall hangings or cushions. In Lisbon's "Book of the Trades", dated from 1572, one finds the decrease of the old mudejar style (called Moorish style, "ao mourisco"), and the income of the Renaissance - called Roman style, "ao Romano" -, in particular in religious sculpture and interiors' architecture.

Sitting in the Moorish way means cushions and rugs, being the chairs a rare piece of furniture until the 16th century. The end of national gilt leather production meant an increase of cowhide upholstery for straight back chairs, with patterns rooted in archaic Muslim motives - probably coming from the ones formerly used in gilt leather and shared with other crafts (silks, ivory, pottery, stucco, bookbinding); such old models kept on being used in

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<sup>6</sup> PEREIRA, 1998; 2002; LOUREIRO, 1984: 114; FERRÃO, 1990, IV: 91, 130, 131, 136, 138, 141, 164.

<sup>7</sup> BRANDÃO, 1990: 51.

<sup>8</sup> PEREIRA, 2009: 101-103; 2012: 64-65.

the western lands of al-Andalus, that Portugal inherited, until being erased by the Renaissance, in early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, in early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese gilt leather workshops ended, and the technique, name and uses turned into forgetfulness.

The lack of documents doesn't help in the study of national gilt leather. The classical pieces are truly very few: an altar front at the Museum of Bragança (dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century); a small wall hanging and a cushion at the Palace of Ajuda (dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century); an altar front at a private collection (dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century); and two upholstered chairs in a private collection near Guimarães (gilt leather dating from the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century).

Portuguese gilt leather artisans started workshops in the Low Countries in early 17<sup>th</sup> century; years later, local masters developed wooden moulds and press for quick embossing rectangle shaped skins (no more sheep skins, but calf, which held better the new Baroque and Rococo motives); such industry expanded and exported to Iberia, thus helping the extinction of the last workshops. These Low Countries gilt leather pieces were used for altar fronts - like the one at Coimbra museum -, screens and upholstery; these new motives of a repetitive industry seemed to be well accepted, as references and pieces are found from the northern village of Moledo until Beja, in the southern plains. Other late imports were coming from France, in particular from Paris: there's a group of chairs, at the Palace of Ajuda (Lisbon), machine-embossed with the Portuguese coat-of-arms and the letters "L. I°"; only the crowned coat-of-arms is painted and gold foil covered. One chair keeps a printed paper stuck in the back side; this rare leaflet refers the name of the workshop and its address: J. Tixier, 9, 11 and 12, Rue Moreau, XII<sup>ième</sup> Arrondissement, Paris. The title of the leaflet is "Cuirs de Cordoue"/leathers from Cordoba - in spite of being machine-embossed, the work of J. Tixier factory lived out of the history and fame of former Iberian gilt leather, namely the one from Cordoba. It's said to be a "usine à repousser les cuirs"/workshop of leather embossing, and making "meubles, tentures, sieges d'art de tous styles"/furnitures, tapestries, chairs of all styles, and also "paravents, coffres en bois"/screens, trunks in wood. It seems it accepted custom-made orders, like this one for the Portuguese king Luis, as the workshop states the "spécialité de plaques à repousser les cuirs"/specialty for moulds for leather embossing. Those chairs in the Palace of Ajuda date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A similar leaflet is stuck in a huge black embossed screen at the Museu dos Patudos (Alpiarça); a similar screen exists in the National Palace of Sintra, which I admit to be a Paris import as well.

The Leather Room at a Lisbon's library (Hemeroteca Municipal) still keeps the walls covered with machine-embossed gilt leather; the coat-of-arms is from the Costa Cabral family. The gilt leather – probably also a French import - was custom-made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It seems to be the last gilt leather wall-covered room in Portugal, from a rich and luxury tradition that left very few pieces and documents.

## **Gilt leather in Coimbra: a reference to footwear**

In the earliest list of artifacts – metalsmith, shoe making and pottery - and their prices by the municipality, dated from 1145, there are the ones for footwear<sup>9</sup>; amidst several shoes made in cowhide, zebro (a wild equine, with grey stripes), ram, calf and cordovam (goat skin, named after the one produced in Cordoba, following the same tanning methods), there's the reference to "osas bonas gudemiciz"; that means good boots made in gilt leather. All other shoes were cheaper than the "osas" model; thus we may consider that the "osas" were a luxury item. It seems this is the first reference to gilt leather in the kingdom of Portugal –geographically adding land from Muslim domain -, and in particular in a city recently conquered from the Muslims.

As Coimbra was conquered definitely for Christianity, which got an abundant booty - in goods, and in persons that remained after the fall of the Muslim domain -, one may admit that the making of gilt leather shoes inherits the manufactures from former times; also, one may consider that gilt leather was also used in other artifacts, mainly wall hangings.

## **Other references to gilt leather in footwear**

Dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there are two pairs of gilt leather shoes; one is for a cleric, and is at a Belgium museum<sup>10</sup>; it shows a painting of an animal. The other is in Madrid (National Archaeological Museum, Inv. No. 51884) and is covered with gold foil, with marked parallel lines; it is for a woman. In Germany there's a pair of open cleric shoes, dating from 1183<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> PMH, 1868, I: 743.

<sup>10</sup> Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Inv. No. 1825; WATERER, 1971: 30, and photo 75 b.

<sup>11</sup> DREYSPRING & GOPFRICH, 2000.

Along the scarce medieval documents, one finds references to the use of golden chopines, which means these high-soled women's shoes were covered with gilt leather. The documents don't specify any decoration, therefore we don't know if the gilt leather was plain (that would be strange) or if it had some kind of ornament (tooled or/and painted), like the ones shown in Spanish sculpture and paintings of late medieval times. The only chopine (not a pair, only one shoe) from the Sultanate of Grenade (or of mudejar production), dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, shows a feline looking over its shoulder, between two stylized leaves; over the feline there's a bird; at a corner there's a motif of leaves growing, similar to a motif found in an Iberian Islamic silk of the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. The silver foil is covered with a golden varnish. The tooling uses two stamps: a dot and a triangle with dots; these and other tooling stamps are found in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Iberian mudejar gilt leather. The chopine thus shares motives with other Muslim artifacts of the epoch. Would the same happen in the "osas" of early Christian Coimbra? Nevertheless, 16<sup>th</sup> century Iberian works in gilt leather - wall hangings, altar fronts and cushions - show an aesthetical and technical continuity with the Grenade chopine.

## 16th century gilt leather making in Coimbra

It is quite possible that Coimbra gilt leather workshops always produced between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century; it would be strange to image a master and employees to move to Coimbra, establishing themselves and trying to find costumers.

Seven Coimbra's university documents dated from late 1500 refer one gilt leather maker/"guadamecileiro", named João Fernandes; he might be a master of an artistic tradition that left neither ordinances nor other documents, from a time where writing was limited to very few persons of the elite. We may consider that the guild was small, as no reference was considered in the Coimbra trades' ordinances, written in 1573.

The documents start in 28<sup>th</sup> May 1596; that day, João Fernandes received 3.000 "réis" to pay the large door frame ("guardaporta") he had made for the chapel (of the local university?). In September, he received 14.100 "réis" in advance, for the skins and shape of the pieces he would have to make for the houses of the university administration ("q hade dar conta pera as

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<sup>12</sup> MATILDA ANDERSON, 1969: X-B and C, XIII-A; PEREIRA, 2000 a: 20, 22; 2008: 199, 209.



pelles e feitio dos guadamecis q hade fazer pera as casas do despacho"). Later on – 28<sup>th</sup> January 1597 -, he received 2.000 "réis" to partially pay the gilt leather pieces ("panos de guodomeçis") – seems to be wall hangings – he had made for the houses of the church and university administration ("casas do cabido e da fazenda"). The next document dates from May and suggests the "guadamecileiro" had been receiving money for the making of four gilt leather pieces. A month later, another document suggests that new gilt leather pieces (wall hangings?) were made, to fit in the two houses of both the church and university administrations ("duas casas do cabido e mesa da fazenda"); João Fernandes received 4.000 silver foils to finish the gilt leather pieces ("panos de guodomecis"); the document is not clear: were such works wall hangings? Had each house only one wall or several walls covered? On August the 12<sup>th</sup>, the gilt leather maker received 1.000 "réis" for buying silver foil, to be used for the making of gilt leather pieces ("pera os guadamecijs de q o ditto guadamecileiro hade dar conta"). And the last document dates from December 1597; by then, he received 1.100 "réis" to pay the table cover he had made ("sobrepano q fez pera a mesa")<sup>13</sup>; gilt leather might be used to cover tables as well.

So we see that João Fernandes had the elite of the church and university as costumers. Reading the ordinances of the leather makers' guilds of several Iberian cities (dating from 1500's) and interiors' inventories, one comes to understand that the reference to "panos" means rectangle-shaped pieces, mainly used for wall hangings; thus, we admit that João Fernandes used rectangles of sheep skin, individually worked according to the techniques of gilt leather; finally, all the rectangles were stitched to form wall hangings; according to the fashion of the epoch, he also made large door frames and table covers.

## The ornament of gilt leather

Nothing is said about the aesthetics of Coimbra's late 16<sup>th</sup> century gilt leather pieces. Such exercise can be done taking into account other works from the same century, remembering that we are in a transition period: Muslim patterns are giving place to Renaissance ones, which soon will be dominant.

In the northeast city of Bragança, the museum keeps a gilt leather altar

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<sup>13</sup> ALMEIDA, 1971, I: 37, 40; II: 28, 29, 31, 48, 50.

front; the central rectangle shows Christ receiving the white dove of the Holy Spirit; in the rectangles, side by side of this painting, there are two large circles with a flower pot in the centre; this pattern can be understood as another version of the Tree of Life, a centuries-old drawing, full of symbolism. In the circles' large frame there are Islamic braided patterns, which are two different versions of the endless variation of the ancient drawing of four-petalled flower on a square<sup>14</sup>; this pattern is shown in many Middle East (Coptic, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid), Iberian Muslim (Umayyad, Almoravid, Almohad, Nazarid), and Christian (Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque) manufactures, and still in metal and tile of our time. This altar front is too dry to understand its rich History and high quality; only a close look and study allow us to see these patterns of belonging to a faith, even if their symbology got lost in the centuries. The same four-petalled flower on a square – each corner of the square comes between two petals – was used to fill, in large size, two Spanish wall hangings, dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Portugal, the same pattern was carved in cowhide upholstery of late 16<sup>th</sup> century, amidst other patterns of mudejar art.

Another altar front shows Christian iconography in the central rectangle, having in each side rectangles with Muslim patterns. This altar front is in Gerona (Spain), and also dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The central rectangle shows the Virgin of the Rosary with the Baby Jesus; by the side, the two rectangles have star-shaped polygons of a clear Islamic heritage<sup>15</sup>.

Both altar fronts show that Christianity allowed the use of the patterns of the “infidel”, even at the church and in altar fronts where the believers pray.

In a private collection in the city of Guimarães, I came across two chairs, upholstered with classical Iberian gilt leather, formerly wall hangings. Their patterns, dating from the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century, are stylized floral ones (artichokes or thistles), and large floral-looking medallions with a pot inside; these aesthetics were called brocade style (“ao brocado”), shared with textile wall hangings, and are sometimes mentioned in inventories.

A close look at the Iberian paintings of circa 1500 can help us in this matter as well; sometimes the painters show gilt leather wall hangings behind the figures; these wall hangings are identified due to the division in rectangles, something that would not happen if such coverings were tapestries<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> PEREIRA, 2000: 22-24; 2008: 199, 209; 2008 a: 470.

<sup>15</sup> CATÁLOGO, 1924: 57; EXPOSICIÓN, 1953: fig. 57; GUADAMASSILS, 2001: 41.

<sup>16</sup> PEREIRA, 2011: 281.

Some paintings depict cushions, whether as seats or as stands for the saints to lay their feet. Flowers with petals in counter curved arches, artichokes, pine cones and curved frames with floral motives were the usual patterns for both cushions and wall hangings. In the paintings, one may consider that the visual texture – points, irregular lines, dots – is due to the tooled texture of the original gilt leather work.

All this data and images can help us to vision the patterns in Coimbra's gilt leather used in the houses of the church and university administrations.

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