

THE XVth CENTURY EAR DAGGER. ITS HISPANO-MOESQUE ORIGIN

by

J. J. Rodríguez Lorente

THE so-called ear dagger is one of the short European arms more sought after by collectors, due to the comparatively small number of specimens which are known to exist at the present time.

These daggers are usually described as those where the pommel is formed by a pair of discs bent outwards, sometimes covered on the outside with plaques of ivory or horn, and the grip of steel always forms part of the blade. Most of the authors of the last century, specially the French, have considered these arms as being made in Venice, as well as in some other parts of Europe.

The type has been described by Sir Guy Francis Laking in his classical book *European Armour and Arms* (G. Bell and Son Ltd. London, MCMXX, 5 vol.) where it is mentioned as the 4th type of European dagger of the XVth century. Sir Guy in his vol. III p. 48 ff describes 17 specimens, distributed amongst the different collections known to him, under numbers 823 to 835.

Number 823 with bronze hilt, which is kept at the British Museum, was found at Ardabil on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and attributed to the IV-VI century. From this type of Persian dagger which the author compares with the prehistoric swords discovered at Almedinilla (near Priego—Córdoba—Spain) Sir Guy believes the ear dagger originated.

Under number 824 Laking describes the dagger which he considers the oldest specimen known, attributed to 1480, with silvered bronze hilt, found in the Thames, near Westminster. Fifteen other daggers of varied artistry are also described by Laking, and attributed to the years 1490 to 1500 A. D., as existing in the following collections:

| <i>Collection</i> | <i>Place</i> | <i>No. of specimens</i> | <i>Laking's Number</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Baron Cosson | Paris | 1 | 825. |
| Wallace | London | 2 | 826-833. |
| Lord Astor (1) | Hever Castle ... | 1 | 827. |
| Bargello Museum | Florence | 4 | 828 (a-b-c-d). |

(1) We understand that this dagger was subsequently in the collection of the Countess Behague. Paris.

| <i>Collection</i> | <i>Place</i> | <i>No. of specimens</i> | <i>Laking's Number</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Metropolitan Museum ... | New York | 3 | 829-831-832. |
| Prince Odescalchi | Rome | 1 | 830. |
| Ambrosian Library (2). | Milan | 3 | 834 (a-b)-835. |

Sir Guy does not mention any dagger existing in Spanish collections, although the so-called «daga de Boabdil» had already been exhibited in Paris in 1900 (Fig. 1).

When reading the comments of Laking on the chronology of these arms the first thing which struck us was that all the daggers were supposed to have been made between 1480 and 1500, over a period of only 20 years, during which arms of so varied artistry were produced. Sir Guy indicates that he was unable to find evidence of European making of these daggers before the XVth century, although he recognized the existence of two different patterns of art, the Spanish Moresque to which four of the daggers are attributed, and the Venetian, responsible for the remaining ones.

After our interest in the ear daggers was aroused in the first place, we soon discovered that the information provided by Laking was by far the most comprehensive that could be obtained, in spite of the 40 years which had elapsed since the publication of his work, and covered indeed most of the specimens known in armouries abroad. We still had to investigate the existence of these pieces in Spanish armouries to complete the picture as far as possible, as the feasibility of extending our investigations to other centres of Islamic culture such as Istanbul or Cairo could only be contemplated for future work as a continuation of our investigations in Europe.

The largest collection of ear daggers in Spain is in the Lázaro Galdiano Museum in Madrid, where not less than ten pieces, of Spanish and Venetian art, attributed to the XV and XVI centuries, can be admired.

In the «Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan» (IVDJ) of Madrid, there is a Spanish Moresque ear dagger which under number 104 has been described in the *Catálogo de las Armas del Instituto* by Sres. Florit and Sánchez Cantón, and attributed to the XVth century (Fig. 2 a-b). In the IVDJ are also four other ear daggers of a more modern type, which were previously in the J. J. Reubell collection in Paris, and are not mentioned in the Institute's Catalogue (Figs. 7-8).

In the Royal Armoury of Madrid there is only one ear dagger, a very fine specimen of exquisite art, which has been attributed to the

(2) Were destroyed during the last world war.

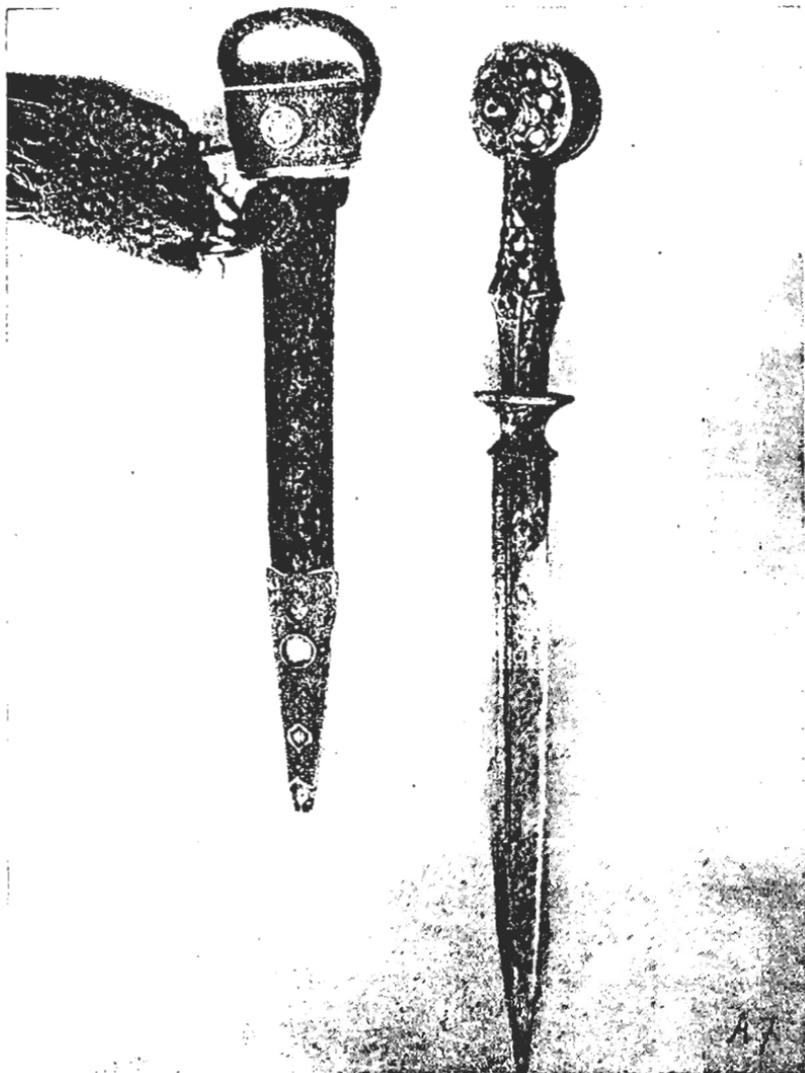


Fig. 1. Dagger of Boabdil, the last Nasrid king of Granada, defeated in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabel. Hispano-arab, type 1. (Armería Real, Madrid.)

last Islamic king of Granada, Boabdil, and on which articles have appeared in both Spanish and foreign publications (Fig. 1). This dagger belonged to the Marquis of Viana, and previously to the Marquis of Villaseca, and was in the Paris Exhibition of 1900 and also in the «Exposición de Orfebrería Civil Española» of 1925. It appears that this piece was presented to the late King of Spain Alfonso XIII by the Marquis of Viana, and subsequently went to the Royal Armoury, where it can now be seen.

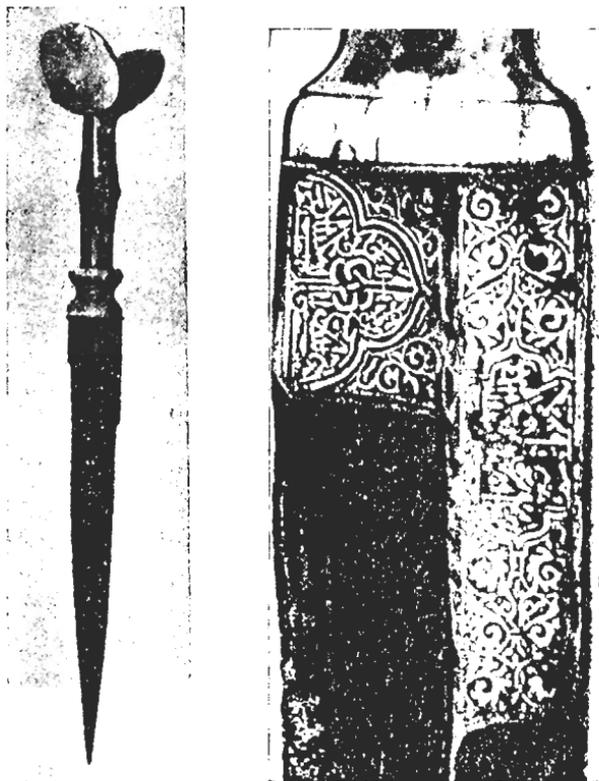


Fig. 2. Hispano-arab ear-dagger of type I. Pommel and cross of ivory. Gold damascening and maker's stamp in blade. Total length 37,5 cm. (Instituto Valencia de Don Juan. Madrid. Catálogo número 104.)

To the best of our knowledge the only specimen of ear dagger in Spanish private collections is the one owned by the author of this article, which makes the 17th specimen known, about the same number of daggers published by Laking as existing in foreign armouries (Fig. 3 a-b). High as it may appear, the number of ear daggers existing

in Spain is still very low, considering the fact that all the data so far collected tend to confirm our theory that these arms were introduced and developed in Europe through Spanish Moorsque culture of the Iberian Peninsula (3).

We have no reference to the existence of these daggers in Portugal other than the communication of the Coimbra Professor Dr. Virgilio Correia to Señor Gómez Moreno, regarding the specimen found in

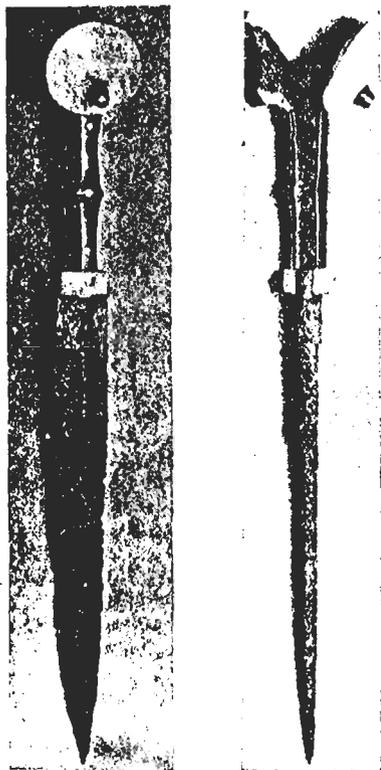


Fig. 3 a-b. Hispano-arab ear-dagger of type I. Pommel and cross of ivory. Gold damascening in blade almost disappeared. Stamp inlaid with gold in shape of Gothic A. Probably oldest known specimen of type I. Total length 37,5 cm. (Coll. Rodríguez Lorente. Madrid.)

Alcacer, which was mentioned by Florit in the Catalogue of the Arms of the IVDJ.

We have based this article on the foregoing, and have tried to obtain photographs of the specimens kept at the different armouries, in order

(3) Since writing this article two other specimens have been found.

to distinguish the types of decoration and marks on the blades, and our research, whilst in some cases resulted in discoveries which increased our previous information, produced in some others a reduction on the material available, as in the case of the three daggers kept before the last world war in the Ambrosian Library of Milan, which dissapeared as a result of bombardment in August 1943, according to information kindly supplied by Professor Carlo Castiglione.

The attribution of the ear daggers to the Spanish warriors of Islam has already been made in the past by authors of the greatest authority on arms and armoury such as Sánchez Cantón in the above mentioned Catalogue, and also by Don Enrique Leguina, Marquis de la Vega de Hoz, in his *Glosario de Voces de Armería* (page 732), so that the aim of this article can only be to add some data to those already supplied by the above authors, which together with the information obtained



Fig. 4. Ear-dagger. Veneziana. Type III. Gold ornaments in ricasso. (Museo Lázaro Galdiano. Madrid.)

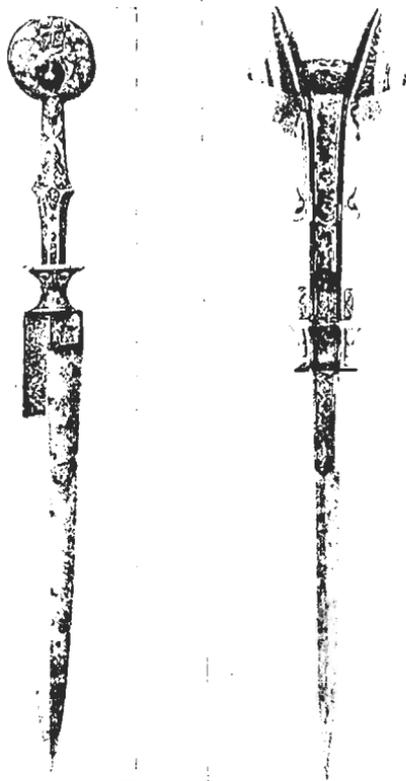


Fig. 5 a-b. Hispano-arab ear-dagger with coat-of-arms after the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada. In blade gold damascening and maker's stamp. (Nat. Mus. Bargello, Florence.)

through photographs and visual examination of the specimens available has enabled us to reach some conclusions. It is also worth mentioning here the interesting article published by Doña Pilar Fernández Vega in the *Anuario del Cuerpo de Archiveros y Bibliotecarios*, Madrid, 1935, where a great deal of information can be found on Italian and Spanish monuments and paintings, of the XVth and XVith centuries, depicting ear daggers.

Origin of the Type

The evidence so far gathered tends to confirm the Persian source in the IV-VIth centuries of what we could call the historical prototype of these weapons, not only through the similarity of pattern afforded by the specimen of the British Museum, but also because a very si-

milar type of pommel is quite common in swords and daggers of the Middle East up to very modern times. The relationship between the prototype and the Spanish prehistoric swords (*espadas de antenas*) is a matter beyond our scope, due to the lack of adequate archeological knowledge.

In 622 A. D., the first year of the Muhammadan era, the prophet Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina with a few followers. Only twenty years later, in 641 A. D. the Islamic armies invaded and conquered Persia, and it is only to be expected that the young Arab army, then in the cradle, had to adapt for their own use the more efficient weapons of the subjugated peoples of Persia. It may give us an idea of the possible efficacy of the ear dagger of the VIIth century, if we consider that these weapons were fashionable and adopted by the noblement and royalty of Christendom eight centuries later.

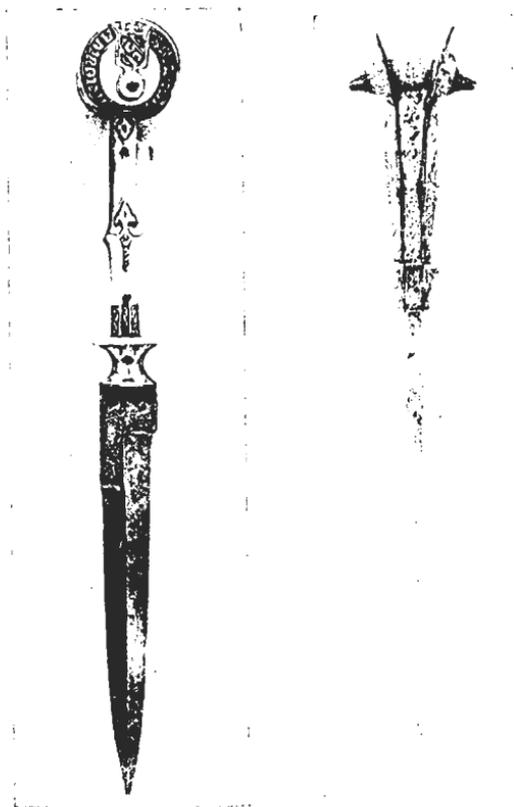


Fig. 6 a-b. Hispano-arab ear-dagger with coat-of-arms in pommel, Ivory. In blade gold damascening and maker's stamp as in fig. 5. (Nat. Mus. Bargello, Florence.)



Figs. 7-8. «Españolas». Ear-daggers of pure Spanish origin. Iron. Grip, cars and blade made in one piece. In ricasso Latin inscriptions: «O Mater Dei | Memento Mei» and maker's stamps with copper. (Instituto Valencia de Don Juan. Madrid.)

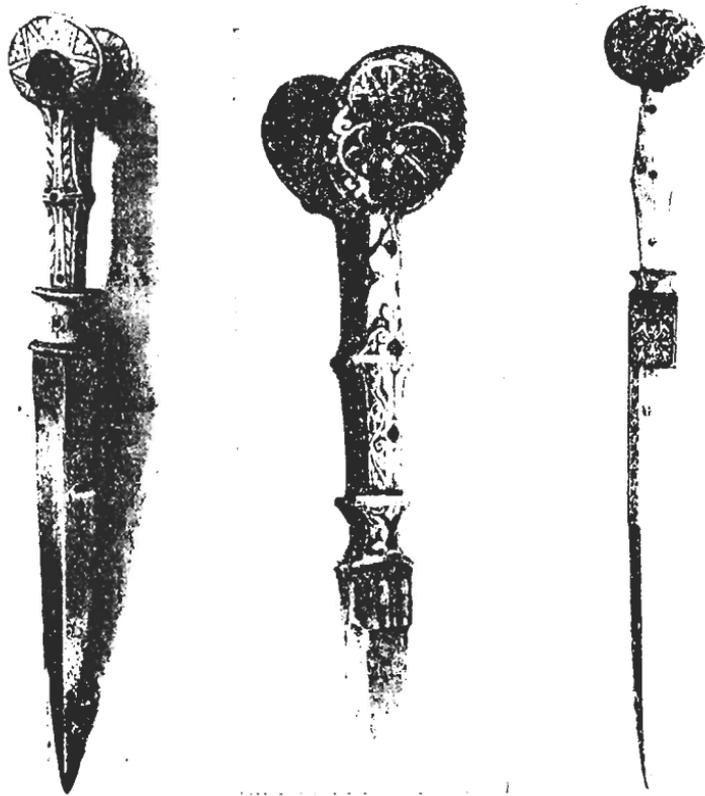
Development of the Type in Europe

In 711 A. D. the Islamic armies of the Caliph of Damascus crossed the Straits of Gibraltar (Gebel Tarik—after the name of the leader of the Islamic forces) and invaded the Iberian Peninsula, which thereafter became a flourishing centre of medieval Islamic civilization. But in the northern part of the country Christian resistance expanded into a number of warlike kingdoms whose reconquest of the territory did not end till the defeat of the last *Nasrid* king of Granada by Ferdinand and Isabel in 1492.

Spain was thus the meeting-ground of two civilizations, oriental and European, and the European door for the penetration of Islamic culture and craftsmanship, the most advanced of that time. During this long period of 781 years the development of Spanish Moresque

arts obtained such splendour that their influence can still be detected in some of the popular arts of present day Spain. Even in reconquered territory Moorish craftsmen continued to work in Eastern style, and many of the medieval kings of the Christian States of the Peninsula used their products.

Most unfortunately only very few samples of the Hispano Moresque metal work have reached us, and no substantial discoveries of arms of the period have so far been made to enable us to ascertain whether



Figs. 9-11. 9: Veneziana of type III. Ivory grip. Renaissance ornaments in ricasso. 10: Morisca of type III. Grip of carved bone. 11: Veneziana of type III, so-called «La de los Mendozas». In pommel head of Medusa, in blade gold damascening and maker's stamp. (All of them in Museo Lázaro Galdiano. Madrid.)



Fig. 12. «Estampa del Rosario». Wood cut. Fray Fco. Domenech, 1455, Original in Brussels. (Biblioteca Nacional. Sección Bellas Artes. Madrid.)

the ear dagger was commonly used before the advent of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada (1231 A. D.). The difficulties in this respect are further aggravated by the fact that the Islamic artists, due to the restrictions imposed by their religion, did not usually depict human beings in their works, and as a result it becomes extremely difficult, even in a country like Spain so rich in medieval art, to trace documentary evidence of the arms in use during the VIIIth to the XIIIth centuries.

We find no reason however to discard our idea that the ear dagger, introduced into the Peninsula from Persia by the Islamic armies, was further developed in Spain during the centuries of Peninsular war, reaching its climax before the decline of the Nasrid dynasty of Granada, i. e. before the XVth century.

The following comments may help to bear out this theory.

Spanish and Venetian Arts

Among the 33 specimens of ear daggers that we have considered, excluding the prototype in the British Museum, it is easy to recognize three different styles of art.

The first seven daggers can be considered in our opinion as *Hispano Moresque* specimens, of different periods as will be discussed later (Type I, Figs. 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6).

The following six specimens with iron hilt, some of which are pierced, are pieces of *Spanish art* of later periods, from the XVth century (Type II, Figs. 7-8).

Three daggers of the Lázaro Museum, of *Moresque art*, may have been made in *Spain* or in *Venetia*, during the XVth century or the beginning of the XVIth (Type III, Fig. 10).

The remaining daggers can be attributed with reasonable confidence to Venetian artists of the XVth and XVIth centuries (Type III, Figs. 4, 9, and 11).

In order to establish this classification we consider of utmost importance the comparative study of the Boabdil dagger (Type I) with all the others (Fig. 1). This piece which can be considered as dated, and representative of the last manifestations of the Nasrid art (end of the XVth century), has some general features that in our opinion clearly indicate the degeneration of the original weapon through the centuries of Hispano Moresque art, as compared with the remaining specimens of type I.

The outstanding details which we noticed are as follows:

a) *Length of the ricasso*.—The difference in length between both sides of the ricasso is much greater than in the other specimens of the type, and this feature is also very noticeable in the dagger «de los Mendoza», and other Venetian pieces in the Lázaro Museum (Figs. 4 and 11).

b) *Pommel Pin*.—Is almost straight instead of curved, and of brass instead of steel. The forging of the hole on the blade to take the pin is prismatic instead of near cylindrical.



Fig. 13. «Ecce Homo». Painting by A. de Sedano, 1510. (Claustro. Museo Diocesano. Cathedral of Burgos.)

We cannot overlook the fact that these daggers were originally fighting weapons, whose strength was a primary consideration, and this is very much reduced in the Boabdil dagger. We consider essential the role of the riveted pommel pin in this connection, which we can see disappearing in the more modern types II and III, leaving only the tips as a decoration of the ears in degeneration of previous models.

c) *Ears and hilt back-plate*.—Is made of brass instead of iron.

d) *External profile of the ears*.—This is one of the most outstanding features. The beauty of the curved surface of the earlier pieces disappears in this dagger, which presents a profile of straight conical shape. It is to be noted that the Venetian specimens have the ears also with straight profile, and even in some cases clearly convex.

e) *Separation of the ears*.—It is smaller than in the earlier models, and does not easily permit the introduction of the thumb, with the object of obtaining a firmer grip on the weapon. This feature has led to error when considering this dagger as the typical Hispano Moresque specimen.

The above remarks have contributed to our belief that the Boabdil dagger, in accordance with its period, is not to be considered as a typical Hispano Moresque specimen, but only type of transition to the later Christian daggers of the XVth century. The artistic significance and merit of this dagger is however enormous, not only on account of the extraordinary richness of its decoration, but also because its condition is superb, including the leather sheath with decorations tooled in relief and colour painted, having in addition an outstanding historical significance as one of the last manifestations of the Hispano Moresque arts in the Iberian Peninsula.

The end of the XVth century saw the end of the art of the Islamic armourers in Spain, but ear daggers of Moresque type were still made in Italy, where specimens of great beauty were produced, which later on included renaissance decoration, lacking however the severe elegance of the true Hispano Moresque types. The Venetian production was apparently prompted by the great demand for these weapons which became fashionable among the European noblement of the time. The type was probably also produced by Moorish craftsmen in Spain, and later on degenerated into the Spanish daggers of type II, bearing inscriptions in modern lettering, and art of inferior quality to the Venetian specimens of the period.

Type I. Hispano Moresque Daggers.—Out of the eight specimens of the type studied, there are four with a common prominent feature. This is the cross-bar shield (*escudo de la banda*), as a decorative ornament of the ears of the pieces in Coll. Condesa de Behague, Paris,



*Fig. 14. Retable by F. Gallego. Execution of Santa Catalina, 1510.
(Old Cathedral of Salamanca.)*

National Mus. Bargello, Florence, the now disappeared specimen from Ambrosian library, Milan, and in the sheath of the Boabdil dagger, which can be seen in the photographs (Figs. 1 and 5 a).

Although there was a Christian coat of arms of identical design during medieval times, that of the Knights of the «Banda», founded by Alphonse XI of Castille around 1330, which was used by that king and his successors, and is even nowadays used by the Chief of the Spanish State General Franco, our daggers are basically Islamic weapons and it will be necessary to relate that coat of arms to Muhammadan heraldry.

In 1231 A. D. Mohamed Ben Alahmar founded the Nasrid dynasty of Granada and his successors continued ruling the Spanish Islam until 1492. The shield of the «banda», with the arabic inscription «There is no winner but Allah», was precisely the coat of arms of the Nasrid kingdom as can be seen in many vestiges of their period, among which the following are worth mentioning:

Giant *Tile* called «azulejo de Fortuny», in the IVDJ. Dated 1408-1417.

Vall Tile from the Alhambra Palace at Granada, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. London. Late XIVth century.

Vall Tiles of the same type in the IVDJ and National Archeological Museum. Madrid.

Ceiling Decoration of the so-called «Sala del Tribunal» in the Alhambra Palace, made of leather tooled in relief, and colour painted.

Decoration motifs in the walls of the rooms of the Alhambra, etc.

The daggers having this coat of arms can therefore be considered as made, mainly in Granada, in the period 1231 to 1492 A. D., under the rule of the Nasrid kings, and this implies their attribution to earlier times than has hitherto been accepted.

The pieces of Condesa de Behague in Paris and Bargello, Florence (Fig. 5), have on the blade the mark , which can be taken as the swordsmith or shop mark, and is almost identical in both specimens. Unfortunately it has not been possible for the author to verify whether the other two daggers, in Bargello, Florence (Fig. 6a), and the lost specimen from Ambrosiana, in Milan, have also the same mark on the blade. As to the dagger from Bargello (Fig. 6 a) it seems to be the same. The Boabdil dagger has no mark as such, although the inscriptions on the blade seem to prove that it has been made in Granada. It may be of great interest to ascertain whether any Spanish Moresque



Fig. 15. Retable by F. Gallego. Martyrdom of Santa Catalina, 1510. (Old Cathedral of Salamanca.)

swords of the type called *espadas jinetas* have the same swordsmith mark δ on the blade (Fig. 16).

It appears to us rather peculiar that the dagger fig. 2 in the IVDJ, which in our opinion is a specimen of the purest Hispano Moresque art, seems to have been given less merit than the Boabdil dagger, perhaps as a result of considering the latter the classical Hispano Moresque type.

The dagger of the IVDJ is of the greatest beauty of lines, with very delicate and well preserved damascening in gold on the exposed part of steel of the grip and on the ricasso. The Moresque ornamental motifs are similar to those of the specimen belonging to the Countess of Behague, including the simplified arabic inscription, but the dagger of the IVDJ seems to be of an earlier type, and has no damascening on the ears back-plate.

The mark on the blade, which unfortunately is not well preserved, could serve to identify the maker among the scores of Islamic swordsmiths who undoubtedly must have been making weapons in Toledo, Córdoba and many other centres of medieval Spanish civilization.

Very similar to the dagger of the IVDJ is the piece fig. 3 a-b, in the author's collection. Both have the same overall length (37.5 cms.) and length of hilt (7.8 cms.) but our dagger is slender (2.7 cms. blade width instead of 3.1 cms.) and with longer ricasso. The base of the hilt is less elaborated, and we believe this dagger to be of an earlier model closer to the Ardabil prototype. The forging of the hole on the blade to take the pommel pin is identical to the dagger of the IVDJ, but all traces of possible damascening have disappeared as a result of heavy corrosion.

The outstanding feature of this dagger is the deeply inlaid mark on the blade, gold plated, in the shape of a perfect gothic «A», which may retard its attribution to the first centuries of the Islamic invasion (Fig. 16).

We intend to investigate the Christian lettering which appears in some of the Spanish Moresque swords, with a view to establish some chronological relationship.

Type II. Spanish ear daggers derived from the Hispano Moresque. These pieces have some unmistakable features of their own, easy to recognize. The ricasso is symmetric, and the whole of the hilt is forged in a single piece with the blade. Moreover the pommel pin has disappeared and the ears are simple ornamental discs of small size with a light tip in the center, simulating the end of the riveted pommel pin of earlier models. The damascening in gold has been replaced by

engravings and inscriptions of Christian artistry and modern lettering, private of the XVIth century (Figs. 7-8).

Type III. Venetian and Spanish Christian daggers of Moresque type. The greatest diffusion of ear daggers in Europe took place during the end of the XVth century and the first half of the XVIth, when these weapons became fashionable among the royalty of the Christian States of Europe. Such widespread diffusion may have been due not only to the exquisite beauty of these arms, but also to the great efficacy of the



Fig. 16. Maker's stamps from the car-daggers figs. 2, 5, 6, 8, 7 and 3.

weapon for self-defence on account of the strength and toughness of the blade, which could penetrate the plates of the armour then in use.

In this respect, as in many others, the industrial arts of the Hispano Moresque culture were advanced several centuries over the remaining peoples of Europe.

It appears that the Venetian craftsmen and merchants supplied the markets at the time with specimens reproducing the pure Hispano Moresque type, which later on included renaissance decoration. Such evolution of the Venetian craftsmanship can be followed in detail in the collection of the Lázaro Museum, where practically all stages of development are represented (Figs. 9-11). None of the daggers in this Museum have bladesmith mark clearly shown. The oldest specimens catalogued as «granadine» and «Spanish» respectively, might have been made in Spain by Moresque artists.

Some of these Venetian and Spanish daggers have very fine damascening work in gold and silver of great beauty, and chiselled ivory ears and grips (Fig. 11).

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Graphic document</i> | <i>Location</i> |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1380 | Oil Painting. | St. George Chapel. Padua. |
| 1400 | ditto | Catalonian school. Dean Coll. |
| 1431 | Bible of the House of Alba. | Duchess of Alba. Madrid. |
| 1440 | Oil Painting. | Catalonian school. Dean Coll. |
| 1450 | ditto | ditto |
| 1455 | Engraving. | Fray Fco. Domenech. National Library. Madrid (here fig. 12). |
| 1475 | Oil Painting. | Catalonian school. Dean Coll. |
| 1486 | Sculpture. | Sigüenza Cathedral. |
| 1494-96 | Oil Painting. | Berruguete. Prado Museum. |
| 1498 | ditto | Berruguete. Avila Cathedral. |
| 1510 | ditto | Sedano. Burgos Cathedral (Fig. 13). |
| — | ditto | Sedano. Salamanca Cathedral (Figs. 14 and 15). |
| XV century | ditto | Catalonian Art Museum. Barcelona. |
| ditto | ditto | Berruguete. Avila Cathedral. |
| ditto | ditto | Berruguete. Salamanca Cathedral. |
| ditto | ditto | F. Gallego. Salamanca Cathedral. |
| 1552 | ditto | Moro. Lázaro Museum. Madrid. |
| 1550 (circa) | ditto | Moro. Windsor Castle. |
| — | ditto | Copy of Tiziano. Royal Armoury. Madrid. |
| 1538 | Drawing. | Barcelona goldsmith. |

Documentary Chronology

It is not in the least surprising that Sir Guy Francis Laking and other authors attributed these daggers to the XVth and XVIth centuries exclusively, if we consider the large number of paintings and monuments of the period where these arms are depicted, and the enormous difficulty of finding them in earlier documents.

We give on p. 86 a partial list of those paintings and documents, some of which are reproduced on the plates.

Acknowledgement

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The late Sir James G. Mann, Wallace Collection. London.

W. Reid, Esq., Armoury of the Tower of London.

H. M. The Lord Chamberlain. London.

Monsignore Carlo Castiglione, Director of the Ambrosian Library. Milan.

The Director. Bargello Museum. Florence.

Lord Astor of Hever. Hever Castle.