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Emblems and enigmas: Revisiting the ‘sword’ belt of Fernando de la Cerda

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A B S T R A C T

The belt of Fernando de la Cerda is on permanent display in the Museo de Telas Ricas, Burgos. Presently, scholars believe the belt dates from 1252–75, is of Hispano-Islamic work and was worn as a baldric. This article suggests that the belt is English, that it was commissioned by King Henry III and was worn around the waist. Henry gave the belt to the count of Champagne, Thibault II, during his first diplomatic visit to France. In turn, Thibault probably gave the belt to Fernando de la Cerda, the infante of Castile, in 1269, at Fernando's wedding. The belt's burial with the Castilian infante provides important evidence of the close familial and political relationships that linked the ruling dynasties of north-west Europe during the thirteenth century. Commissioned as a gift and richly decorated, the belt should be seen as an example of the aesthetic accomplishment of Henry III, his use of propaganda and political aspirations.

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In 1942 the tomb of Fernando de la Cerda, the eldest son of Alfonso X of Castile (1252–82), was discovered in the monastery of Santa María Regalis de Las Huelgas, Burgos. Within the tomb, the body of the 19 year-old infante was clothed in exquisite vestments of embroidered cloth and silk. A belt of comparable beauty and workmanship lay around Fernando's waist, but stood out, for unlike the rest of Fernando's garb, adorned with the arms of Castile and León, the belt displays the arms of the royal houses of England, France and Navarre. Another nine heraldic devices, unknown to Castile in the thirteenth century, are incorporated into the belt's design. The buckle lid features the arms of Champagne. For over 60 years the origin of the belt has puzzled historians. Different arguments have been put forward to claim the belt as Spanish, French and English. Among those scholars who favour an English origin, there is disagreement about whether the belt was commissioned by King Henry III

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(1216–72) or his second son, Edmund. Debate has tended to confound rather than clarify questions about the belt's origin, manufacture and meaning. Bringing together the published work on the belt and making use of sources that were unknown or unavailable to earlier writers, this essay provides a full account of the belt's journey through the kingdoms of north-west Europe. It describes the belt's appearance and manufacture, and considers the significance of its decoration and design.

The tomb of Fernando de la Cerdá is one of 25 royal, stone sarcophagi in the Cistercian monastery of Santa María de las Huelgas. Founded in 1187 by Alfonso VIII of Castile and his wife, Eleanor, daughter of Henry II of England, the palace-monastic complex served the Castilian monarchs as coronation church and mausoleum.¹ Situated within the Castilian capital of Burgos and endowed with extensive estates and privileges, the monastery played host to Europe's crowned princes. In November 1254, the heir of King Henry III of England, the Lord Edward, married Eleanor of Castile, the half sister of Alfonso X, at Burgos. In 1269, it was also the location for the marriage of the daughter of King Louis IX of France, Blanche, to Alfonso's heir, Fernando de la Cerdá. Ransacked during the Peninsular War (1808–14), the monastery and many of its tombs were desecrated. Inaccessible, and so ignored, the tomb of Fernando de la Cerdá remained intact until it was opened in the early 1940s. Almost immediately, Fernando's belt attracted comment.

The belt of Fernando de la Cerdá

The belt is made of a tablet-woven braid, decorated with minute blue and white glass beads. It measures 1920 mm × 42 mm (Plate 1). The belt strap is lined with light green silk, brocaded with gold.² Two silver-gilt plates, measuring approximately 150 mm, are attached to the ends of the strap. One of the plates, rectangular in shape, is hinged to a folding buckle. The other plate, trapezoid in shape, forms the tongue. Both plates are decorated with pearls and sapphires, and each contains four, three-sided shields painted with heraldic devices. The shields are covered with a thin layer of glass. The shields on the buckle plate are set at 90 degrees to the belt strap, indicating they were to be viewed horizontally. Those on the tongue are positioned at 180 degrees, suggesting they were to be viewed vertically. This arrangement would imply the belt was meant to be worn around the waist, with the tongue hanging between the wearer's legs. Fernando's belt is thus similar to that depicted on the effigy of King John of England (1199–1216) in Worcester Cathedral (Plates 2 and 3).³ The buckle, decorated with pearls, sapphires and a single carnelian, contains a three-sided shield. Set within a trapezoid frame, the buckle is covered by a hinged lid. A slot between the buckle and frame edge allows the strap to be threaded through. The belt is secured against the body by closing the buckle lid against the strap at the desired point.⁴

Nineteen silver-gilt bar mounts divide the strap into 20 equal sections of 75 mm. Providing reinforcement, the bars are fastened at either end by round-headed pins. A pearl is placed at the centre of each bar mount. An arched, pendant mount is suspended from the strap between the first and second bar mounts nearest the buckle. The pendant is silver-gilt and decorated with pearls and sapphires in an alternating design, matching the buckle and tongue.⁵ The pendant is decorative. It could not have supported Fernando's sword which weighed upwards of 2 kg when scabbarded (Plate 4).⁶ The 20 sections of the belt strap are decorated with alternating designs. Ten of the panels feature intricate geometric patterns set within a diamond-shaped frame. The corners of these panels are filled with swastikas and discs. No two panels are identical, but the colour scheme of each is blue and white. The 10 remaining panels are filled with three-sided, heraldic shields, some of which replicate those found on the buckle plate and tongue. The shields are depicted in blue and white. It is therefore unlikely that they

¹ A. Rodríguez López, *El real monasterio de Las Huelgas y el hospital del rey: apuntes para su historia y colección diplomática con ellos relacionada*, 2 vols (Burgos, 1907); R. Walker, 'Leonor of England, Plantagenet queen of King Alfonso VIII of Castile, and her foundation of the Cistercian abbey of Las Huelgas: in imitation of Fontevraud?', *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), 346–68.

² E. Crowfoot, F. Pritchard and K. Staniland, *Textiles and clothing c.1150–c.1450* (Woodbridge, 1992), 130–8; G.M. Crowfoot, 'The tablet-woven braids from the vestments of St Cuthbert at Durham,' *Antiquaries Journal*, 19 (1939), 57–80.

³ E. Oakeshott, *The archaeology of weapons: arms and armour from prehistory to the age of chivalry* (Woodbridge, 1994), 243–5.

⁴ For a different view, see R. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European jewellery with a catalogue of the collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1992), 321.

⁵ G. Egan and F. Pritchard, *Dress accessories c.1150–c.1450* (Woodbridge, 1991), 222–3.

⁶ Oakeshott, *Weapons*, 241–2.

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