

The legend and procession of the Moss Men from Béjar (Salamanca, Spain)

The study of the past and present uses of bryophytes by man has received considerable attention. Bryophytes, especially mosses, have been used in medicine, hygiene, horticulture, gardening, pollution bioindication, decoration, construction, whisky making, as fuel material, etc. (see reviews in Richardson, 1981; Ando & Matsuo, 1984; Glime & Saxena, 1991). We report here a legendary and, apparently, unique use of mosses for man camouflage, something previously seen in some insect larvae and weevils (Richardson, 1981).

In 711 the Arabs, coming from Africa, invaded the Iberian Peninsula. They dominated most of it towards 714, except for some scattered Christian redoubts, mainly located in a strip formed by the Cantabrian Range, the Cantabrian coast and the Pyrenees. In 718 the Christian kings began the reconquest of the lost territories, departing from the still independent northern zones, especially from Covadonga (in the present province of Asturias, in the Cantabrian range). The reconquest finished seven centuries later, in 1492, with the storming of Granada by the Catholic monarchs (Arié, 1981).

The region of Béjar, situated in the centre-west part of the Iberian Peninsula, in the present province of Salamanca, occupied a strategic place near the fluctuating border between the Moslem and the Christian kingdoms for over 300 years. It suffered from successive attacks by both sides, and was definitively taken by the Christians in the 12th century. The region was repopulated towards 1180 by King Alfonso VIII of Castilla, who also clearly fixed the boundaries of the council of Béjar in 1209 (Aguilar Gómez & Martín Martín, 1989). The legend of the Moss Men probably originated at this time. The legend tells that the Christians were hidden in the mountains at a place called El Castañar ("chestnut grove"), located 3 km from the present town of Béjar. On 18 June, the feast day of Saint Marina of Bitinia (a virgin who lived disguised as a male monk in a monastery during the 8th century), the Christians got together to celebrate mass at a site called La Centena. After that, the Christians covered their clothes and weapons with the moss growing on the nearby stones and, before dawn, went to the Moslem fortress and lay camouflaged on the walls and neighbouring rocks. When the sentinels opened the fortress gate (called since then "Gate of the Treason" or "Gate of the Bears", but now disappeared), the disguised Christians entered the place and surprised the watchtowers, knocking them down. Starting from there, the Christians took the streets one-by-one in a hard, day-long struggle and, finally, conquered the town.

The tradition of the Moss Men has survived until the present day and is commemorated every year in the procession of the Corpus Christi festivity, which is celebrated nowadays on the ninth Sunday after Easter. An additional tradition involved the pilgrimage of the people from Béjar to the hermitage dedicated to Saint Marina, which was built in the 12th century at the site where the Mass was said before the battle. This pilgrimage, which used to take place every "Monday of Albillo" (8 days after Corpus Christi), is not celebrated nowadays, and the hermitage has disappeared.

The Corpus Christi procession was established by Pope Urban IV in 1264 and, according to documentary evidence, it has been celebrated in Béjar at least since 1397 (López Álvarez, 1996). Originally, the procession in Béjar combined the celebration of the proper religious feast with that of the town conquest, due to the close proximity of the dates and the religious implications of the Christian victory. The procession involved the top ecclesiastic, governing and military authorities (the abbots, the chapter, the town council, the chief magistrate, etc.), together with the nobility, members of the guilds, soldiers, the Moss Men, and mayors, priests, vergers and citizens of the region of Béjar. Twenty triumphal arches and eight altars, where the monstrance (a sacred vessel in which the consecrated host is displayed) stopped, were erected along the route. On arriving at the main square, the alderman ("regidor") with the banner, accompanied by two Moss Men, paid homage at the monstrance. A military authority ("alférez mayor") also lowered his baton, in the company of two other Moss Men. Finally, a Mass was celebrated in the church of El Salvador, where the monstrance remained exposed and guarded by members of a brotherhood for 8 days.

In addition to their specific role in the procession, an hour before the beginning of the ceremony the Moss Men enacted the town conquest in the walls, defeating the Moslems again and leading the prisoners along the procession. Historical documents show that 30 Moss Men were needed for the enactment, and these were all prominent knights of the town (López Álvarez, 1996). The Moss Men also dressed up on certain other days of the year for popular entertainment. All these traditions continued until the 17th century, when some neighbouring villagers, attending the Corpus Christi procession with wax torches (used for lighting images), set light to the Moss Men. After this altercation, for which someone was sent to prison, the performance was abolished and only two Moss Men have

attended the procession since then. Furthermore, the knights of Béjar were prevented from dressing in moss and thus 'plain men' replaced them. These changes were probably promoted by the Duke of Béjar, in order to appropriate the political and social symbolism of both the Corpus Christi procession and the mythical conquest of the city by the Christians. The iron control imposed by the house of the Duke on the traditional celebrations of the town became more acute in the 18th century (López Álvarez, 1996).

It is curious to see that, in historical documents, the Moss Men were named indistinctly "monsters", "savages", "bears" and "men of *Mó*" (Aguilar Gómez & Martín Martín, 1989; López Álvarez, 1996). The term "*Mó*" might be an ancient (and, in certain zones of Spain, still used) denomination of moss, derived from the contraction of the Spanish term for mould ("moho"). For example, Antonio of Nebrija (1444–1522), the author of the first Spanish grammar, says that "moss" is synonymous with "tree mould" or "fountain mould" (Corominas & Pascual, 1987).

Nowadays, Béjar is an important centre of 17,000 inhabitants, situated at 959 m altitude. It is surrounded by mountains up to 2,400 m altitude (Sierra de Béjar and Sierra de Candelario), and extensive woodlands of chestnuts and oaks cover the slopes. The main economic activities are textiles, cattle raising, agriculture and tourism. The original and colourful procession of Corpus Christi

(Fig. 1) continues, with an itinerary similar to the original one, involving the attendance of high-ranking authorities and many citizens. The Moss Men still play a privileged role in the event; they accompany the Spanish flag and pay homage to the monstrance, together with the town councillors. The moss plates used to dress the Moss Men are kept in the Convent of San Francisco, and only small quantities of moss that have been shed have to be replaced from year to year. Six volunteers (Fig. 2) are usually dressed with more than 200 m² of moss plates. They use an overall as their base clothing, to which small hooks are fastened. Moss plates are tied with twine all over their heads, trunks and extremities, so that only their faces remain visible (Fig. 3). Each Moss Man carries a club, also completely covered with moss, on his shoulder. Pictures of Moss Men and tourist information can be found on the following websites: <http://www.readyssoft.es/home/cisalamanca/pablo/bejar/infobejar.html>, <http://www.guiarte.com/bejar>

The moss species employed for the plates depend on local availability, but some common and abundant species such as *Antitrichia californica* Sull., *A. curtispindula* (Hedw.) Brid., *Homalothecium sericeum* (Hedw.) Bruch, Schimp. & W.Gümbel and *Hypnum cupressiforme* Hedw. are usually used.

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Figure 1. The procession of Corpus Christi of Béjar (Salamanca, Spain). The Moss Men, authorities and people accompany the monstrance at the Plaza Mayor.



Figure 2. Six Moss Men standing at the Plaza Mayor of Béjar after the end of the procession, with the church of El Salvador at the back.



Figure 3. A detail of a Moss Man with his moss-covered club.

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