

Weapon and Armor Guide for 16th & 17th Century New Mexico

By Samuel Santiago Ulibarrí

One of the biggest misconceptions about 16th and 17th century New Mexico is in regards to the weapons and armor used by the Spanish settlers and soldiers who populated the Internal Province of Nuevo Mejico. Various persons would like to believe that there was a completely uniform Spanish army, meaning that the Spanish soldiers and settler-soldiers all dressed in uniform colors and bore the same swords and pikes, etc. The main reason for such misconceptions is due to the lack of substantial evidence. During this time period there was a standard uniform for the Spanish soldier but such standard depended on the province where one served. It was not until the Bourbon reforms that Spain would try and create a completely uniform Spanish military.

During the Medieval period in Europe, kings and lords would provide their soldiers with tunics and/or tabards that bore their personal heraldic arms, but with the dawn of the Renaissance period such practices were disappearing as the various European countries were trying to centralize themselves and the old system of private armies were giving way toward united provincial armies as a step towards completely unified national armies. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish military was comprised of provincial armies who bore the flags and uniform requirements of their individual provinces (i.e. soldiers from Aragón would dress in gold and red to mirror the heraldic arms of that province, while soldiers from Navarre would dress in gold and green).

In the New World the situation was much different. The Spanish military throughout the New World was comprised of Presidial soldados who were professional soldiers of the king, settler-soldiers or militia and finally Native American auxiliary warriors. Like their counterparts on the Iberian Peninsula, these New World soldiers were expected to provide as much of their own gear and clothing as possible, unlike Iberia however, there were no provincial colors in the New World provinces. Thus the problem of proving a standard Spanish uniform in provinces such as New Mexico.

Another factor in all of this was the nature of the various New World provinces. Both California and La Florida could be accessed by sea, thus they could easily receive shipments from the New World capitol at Mexico City. New Mexico was a landlocked province so it was much more efficient for a soldier to make his own clothing whose colors would be dependant on the natural resources used in making such clothing (i.e. leather could range from a bleached white to a more natural buff or buckskin color; cloth could range from its natural off-white to an indigo blue or a clayish red). Thus, for New Mexico it was very doubtful and highly illogical that the soldiers dressed in clothing of the same material and color.

Armor: When don Juan de Oñate was preparing for his expedition to New Mexico he spent much of his own money to buy equipment for men who could not afford their own. Rather than

buy arms and armor from Spain he purchased such things from whatever was available in Mexico. Similarly, the men who could afford their own gear or who possessed it already would have had to settle for what already existed. Realistically there would have been surplus arms and armor which dated back to at least the 1540's and the time of don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado as well as some newer stuffs from Spain. Such armor would have consisted of chain mail shirts and some coifs, German and Spanish plate armor, helmets of various styles and origins, leather doublets and tunics (the predecessors of the *cuera*), and more than likely there was some heavy cotton and wool armor whose origins were Aztec (it was recorded that in 1540 many of Coronado's men were using Aztec-style armor). It is important to keep in mind that by 1598 the New World Spaniards had been adapting to Native American warfare, thus their arms and armor would have reflected this.

Leather armor was rapidly replacing that of metal because it was lighter and much more comfortable and it was easier to manufacture due to the abundance of large game animals. Many historians label 1692-3 and the *reconquista* of New Mexico as the last major campaign in the New World where metal armor was still being employed. Helmets, on the other hand, took longer to lose their popularity because of the protection they offered to the most exposed of vital organs; the head and brain. The Spanish feared the Native Americans' accuracy with thrown rocks more than any of their other weapons.

As far as shields are concerned, the Spanish in New Mexico were primarily mounted, thus they favored light shields. It would not have been uncommon to find a metal buckler here or there, but the primary shield used by the Spaniards in New Mexico would have been the *adarga* which was a borrowed technology from the Moors of North Africa. In Spain these were made from bull-hide while in New Mexico they were made from the hides of elk, deer and buffalo.



Adarga from northern México.
Ca. 1700



Fig1: (From left to right) The first pikeman offers a good example of a light studded leather doublet and a high-top Italian mori3n helmet. The center figure is an example of a dismounted cavalryman; note the leather *botas* around his calves, these served as chaps for the Spanish cavalry units in the New World. He is also clad in chainmail armor covered by a long leather tunic bearing the cross of Burgundy and wears a wide-brimmed hat, demonstrating how many Spanish soldiers traded safety for comfort in the New World. The soldier at the right demonstrates the use of cotton armor via his cotton doublet. Once again this ensemble is completed with a variant of the mori3n helmet.

Fig2: (From left to right) The soldier at the left is dressed in the fashion of a Spanish *arquebusero*, or rifleman, but is an excellent example of home-spun cotton armor and clothing; note the leather sleeves that are attached to his cotton doublet. In the center we find the *sargento mayor* of the *tercio*. He is wearing a heavy padded leather doublet along with leather *calzones abombadas*, or knee breeches. Thus a fine example of the use of leather by Spanish soldiers in the Americas





Fig3: (From left to right) At the left we see a soldier wearing a heavy padded cotton doublet with a bib-like piece of plate armor around his neck called a *gorg6*, which adds protection to his chest and neck. In the center we find another soldier wearing a light studded leather doublet. The soldier at the right demonstrates a home-spun light leather doublet and is wearing a high-combed Italian mori6n helmet.

Fig4: This picture is an example of Spanish soldiers in 1588 aboard a ship bound for the New World.



Swords: Since the Medieval Period it was commonplace throughout all of Spanish Iberia for its inhabitants, regardless of caste, to bear or at least own a sword. Consequently, swords were carried by all military personnel and ranged in their individual styles. Little had changed since then for the Spaniards in both Iberia and the New World. Due to their campaigns in Italy, the Spanish were constantly adapting their swordsmanship to that of their Italian enemies. By 1580 the Spanish swordsman was referred to as a *diestro* and the Spanish style of swordsmanship called *La Destreza*. The Spanish *maestros* had refined sword fighting to an intricate science and art to the point that a Spaniard, armed only with a dagger, could disarm and subdue an opponent armed with virtually any type of non-firearm weapon.

Because of their familiarity with swords and swordsmanship, the average Spanish soldier was not picky about what type of sword he bore. In fact, contrary to the norm of the day, most Spanish soldiers preferred shorter-than-average swords such as the *falchion* and *cinquedeas*. This was mostly due to the hardiness of their blades in combat and versatility as tools. Most of the Spanish *conquistadores* in the New World arrived with what are called *espadas de dos conchas*, or “clamshell-hilt swords.” These swords were a cavalry design and were quite long for the average infantryman, yet they worked well for the Spaniards with Cortez and Pizarro who fought Native American tribes that favored pitched battles, thus the *espadas de dos conchas* gave the Spaniards a reach advantage against such foes.

By the late 1500’s the Spaniards in the Americas were fighting more guerilla-style adversaries and the long cavalry-style swords were viewed as cumbersome and not particularly useful to the average Spanish soldier, not to mention they were much harder to replace if broken. Another factor that influenced their choice of shorter swords was the terrain and ecology of the New World. South America was primarily rainforest, so the Spanish soldiers needed a blade that could consistently handle being used as a modern-day machete. Northern México and New México were much drier climates, yet they possessed timber and such shrubbery as the *chámiso*, sagebrush, oak-brush, mesquite-brush, etc. Once again the Spanish soldiers favored swords that could be used to hack through such brush and still be fit for battle. By 1540 it was recorded that many Spanish soldiers were carrying *espadas anchas* (“short swords”) which varied in their style and design.

Around the 1480’s a new type of swordsman was adapted by the Spanish tacticians. Such soldiers were armed with a backsword and a round steel buckler for which they received their name of *rodeleros*. These soldiers were designed primarily to rush through and break apart an enemy’s line using berserker-style charges. While very successful in European warfare, the *rodeleros* were all but obsolete in the Americas by about 1540 due to the nature of the Native American warfare. However, we cannot rule out the probability that such soldiers did exist throughout New Spain.



At left is an artist's rendering of a *rodelero* from the province of Navarre, ca. 1480.

The soldier at the right is a portrayal of what a New World *rodelero* would have looked like, ca. 1590.

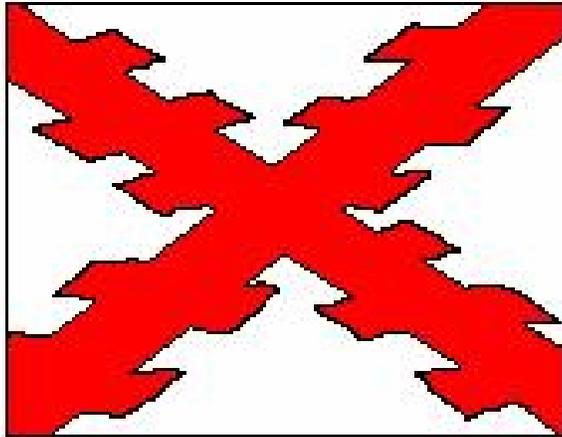


The Spanish style of swordsmanship came to be known as *La Destreza*. Above is an example of the *estocada*, or lunge. Note the lengths of the swords being used.

Ca. 1590



¡Diestros! - ¡Afirmar!



La Bandera del Tercio Nuevo México



Soldados de Cuera, ca. 1710

In the year 1610 the epic poem of Captain Gaspar Pérez de Villagr a was published in the Spanish town of Alcal a de Henares. It was his romanticized first-hand account of the colonization of New Mexico by Governor don Juan de O ate in 1598. Inside *Historia de la Nueva M xico* we find an abundance of references to the armament of the Spaniards who accompanied the expedition. This is probably the best source for knowing exactly what kind of equipment was being used by the Spaniards in New Mexico.

[[Historia de la Nueva M xico, 1610](#), Villagr a, (University of New Mexico Press, 1992) p 352]

Arquebus and balls (shot); Body armor, both leather and breastplate(s); Casque(s); Coats of mail; Corselets; Crown pieces; Cuirass(es); Cuisses; Dagger; Fieldpieces; Flank pieces; Flask [for powder]; Gunpowder; Hackbusses; Helmet; Horse armor, breastpiece, bridle and crownpiece; Iron-bound club; Javelin; Lance(s); Moorish spurs; Musket; Priming flask; Sallets; Shield; and Swords.

Once again, it is not a very detailed list but it does provide us with a general idea of what sorts of equipment they brought with them to this internal province of New Spain.



Spanish field musicians, ca. 1590



The Spanish had riflemen called *harquebuseros*, named after their firearm; the harquebus.

Ca. 1540



Re-creation of a Spanish pike unit in New Mexico, ca. 1590

Sources for Replica Gear

Museum Replicas Limited: www.museumreplicas.com

C.A.S. Iberia (Spain)