

Itinerant Smiths in the Iberian Iron Age ? (6th-2nd centuries BC)¹

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After years of research it seems now clear that the vast majority of iron weapons during the Iberian Iron Age were made in local workshops, in small quantities at a time, by local smiths of different experience and ability. These smithies also produced other objects for local use, such as agricultural implements. Let us examine the case of the *falcata*, the most popular Iberian sword. Local blacksmiths clearly had a "mental template" of what they intended to forge (Fig. 1); these mental templates originated in "models" seen by the artisan or described by others, but in the actual forging process some differences with the template, some subtle and some major, became evident. Among the relevant factors in the appearance of these differences, we should mention the artisanal character of the production, the ability of each smith, the natural desire to produce something "different" according to personal taste, sense of proportion and aesthetics, and the particular preferences of the customer. Be that as it may, the resulting objects produced by the same hand were never identical.

If we examine some contemporary pieces found on the same site, we find a wide variety of shapes and sizes within the same "mental template" (Fig. 2). If we compare *falcatas* produced in the same period but found on different sites, the variations in shape, proportions and size become even more pronounced. As it is to be expected, these differences are more marked as distances increase.

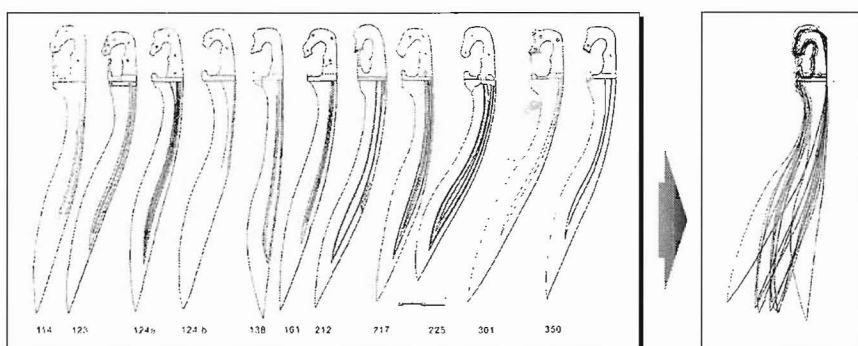


Fig. 1 — (Left) *Falcatas* from the cemetery at El Cigarralejo, Murcia, Southeastern Spain. This cemetery belongs to a medium-sized settlement. They are contemporary dated to c. 400-375 BC by association with Attic Black-glaze pottery. Some even belong to the same burial. Note however, different shapes, proportions, sizes and curvatures. (Right) Superimposed profiles of the *falcatas* on the left, showing different shapes, sizes and curvatures of the blade.

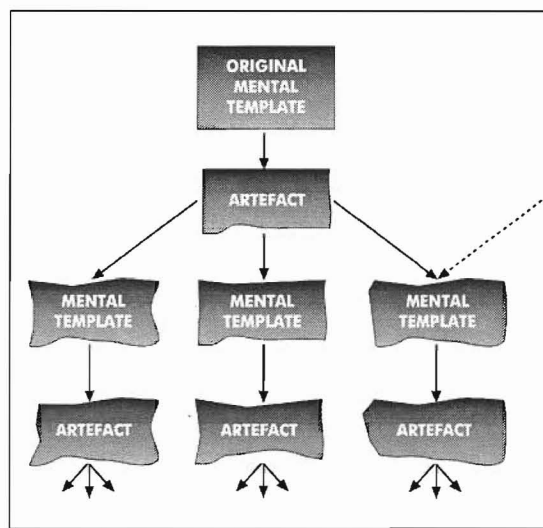


Fig. 2 — "Mental templates", prototypes and spread of ideas using these mental templates (after Bishop, 1987, modified).

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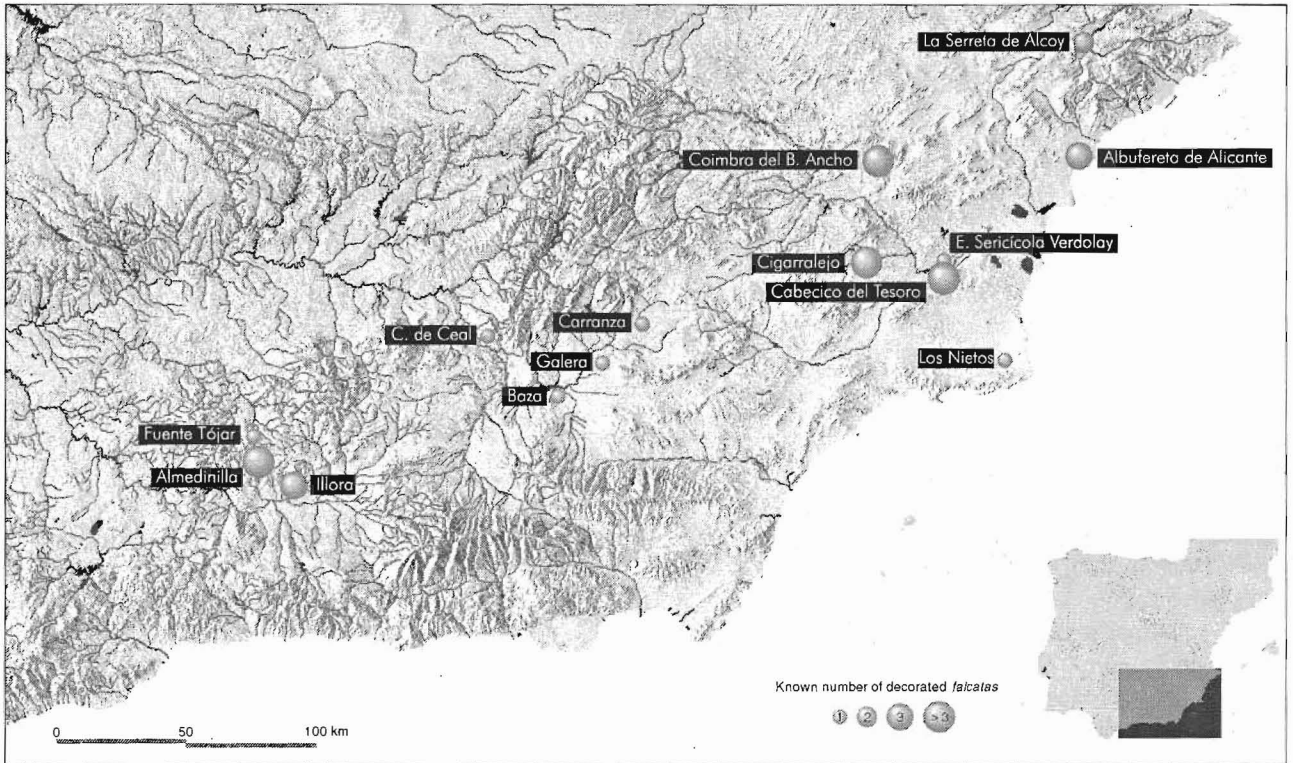


Fig. 3 — Dispersion of *falcatas* decorated with silver inlay in the Southeast of the Iberian Peninsula. Only three known decorated *falcata* sword come from outside this area, in Spanish Extremadura, Tarragona and Toledo.

There is, however, a special case: *falcatas* decorated with motifs in silver inlay. The majority of these weapons come from different sites in Southeastern Spain (Upper Andalusia, Murcia, Albacete and Alicante), although we know of some other isolated examples from other regions (Fig. 3). The surfaces covered with silver inlay decoration are quite “normative” (Fig. 4); all decorated *falcatas* contain decoration in areas “B” and “C”, most of them are also decorated along the grooves previously cut into the surface of the blade (area “E”). A few examples have also decorated motifs in areas “D”, “F” and “G”; finally, only a very few display decoration in area “A” (usually feline heads).

Some of the decorations are quite complex, including zoomorphic, vegetal and geometric motifs. These include felines, boars, wolves, birds, even human heads, as well as bowl palmettes, evergreen friezes, etc. (Fig. 5 and 6). The most elaborate examples also have their pommels modeled into a combination of feline and human heads, also decorated with silver inlay (Fig. 4, area “A”). These weapons have been found in very important sites (such as Albufereta de Alicante, Fuente Tójar or Verdolay) and also in the cemeteries of medium-sized settlements in relatively marginal areas (such as Almedinilla, Illora or Carranza).

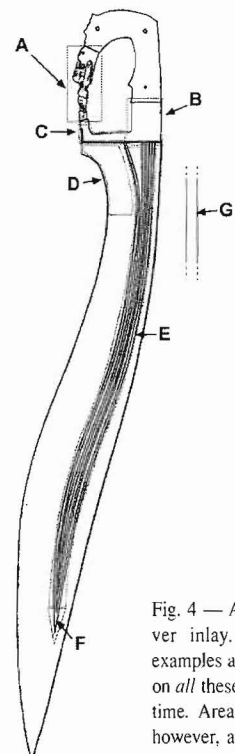


Fig. 4 — Areas that display silver inlay. Only a very few examples actually display motifs on *all* these surfaces at the same time. Areas “B” and “C”, however, are decorated in every documented case.

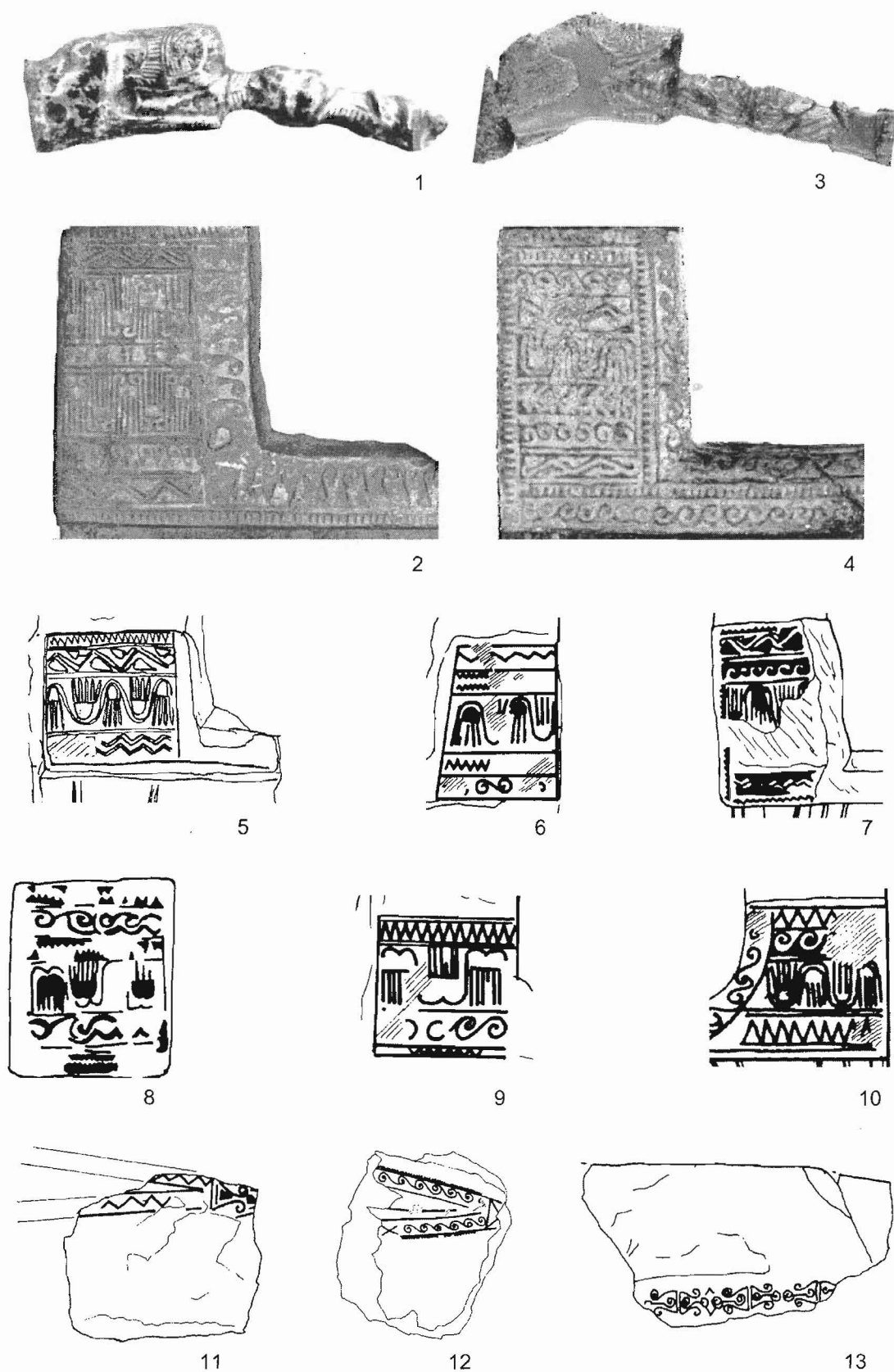


Fig. 5 — "Precise" style. 1 and 2 : Illora (Granada). 3 and 4 : La Serreta de Alcoy (Alicante). 5 : Estación sericícola de Verdolay (Murcia). 6 and 12 : Albufereta de Alicante, grave 101. 7 : Carranza (Huéscar, Granada). 8 : Coimbra del Barranco Ancho (Murcia), grave 47. 9 : La Albufereta de Alicante, grave 99. 10 : Almedinilla (Córdoba). 11 : La Albufereta de Alicante, grave 132. 13 : Coimbra del Barranco Ancho (Murcia), grave 14.

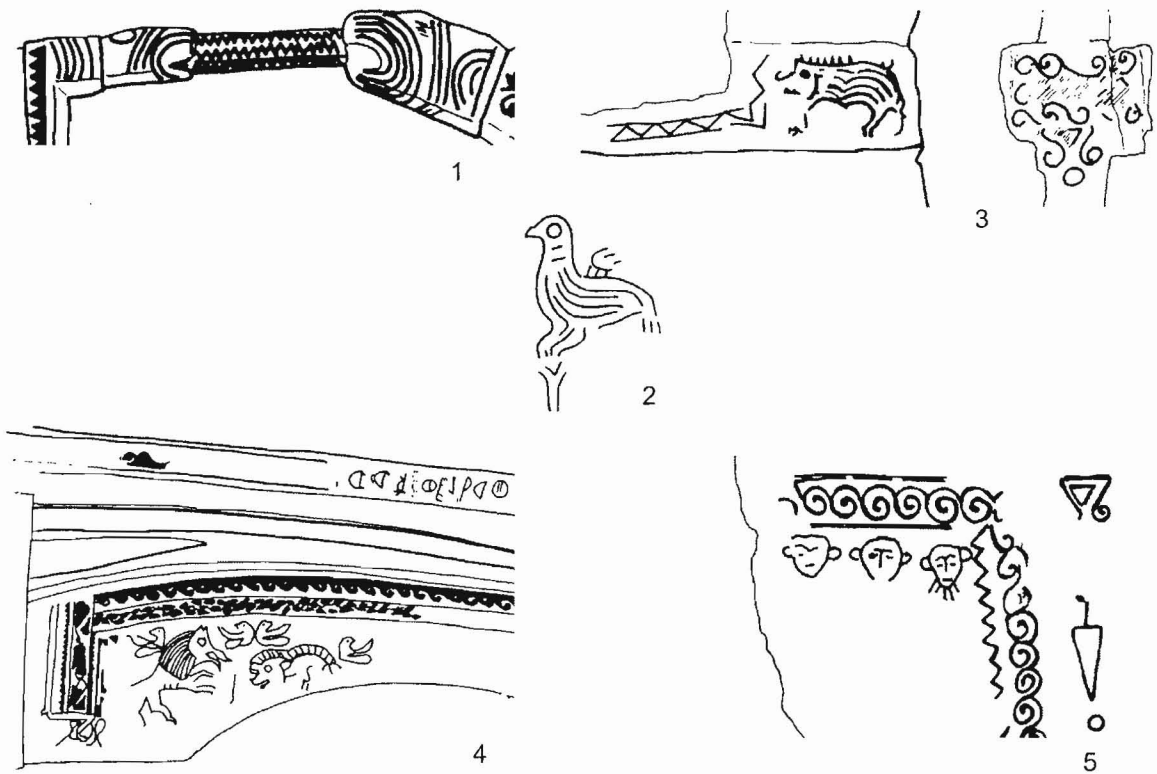


Fig. 6 — “Free” style. 1 and 2 : Almedinilla (Córdoba). 3 : Cabecico del Tesoro (Murcia), grave 260. 4 : Unknown provenance. Note short text in Iberian script on the dorsal part of the blade. 5. Coimbra del Barranco Ancho (Murcia), grave 48.

Two decorative “styles” can be tentatively identified. One is somewhat rigid, quite detailed, and very precise in the design and execution of the inlay. Most *falcatas* with elaborate pommels belong to this group. Let us call it “precise” style (Fig. 5). The other “style” is less minute, sometimes even coarse; it is used mainly for animal figures, but in these examples also the geometric motifs are roughly traced. Let us call it “free” style (Fig. 6).

We do not know what percentage of *falcatas* could have displayed silver decoration, since most have not yet been cleaned or restored. On sites that yield a reasonable quantity, the proportion of decorated to undecorated examples is never higher than 15% (Almedinilla, 7 out of 48 pieces, all cleaned), and often much lower. In all, we know of 638 *falcatas* in the Spanish Iron Age, but only 43 of them (6.7%) show traces of silver decoration. If we allow for corrosion, lack of restoration, etc., we could perhaps double this figure.

It is striking that not only the choice of motifs, but also the inner “syntax” of the decoration (the arrangement and positioning of simple elements into more complex patterns) is very similar sometimes nearly identical in different contemporary examples corresponding roughly the first quarter of the fourth century BC from sites that are

separated by up to 400 kilometers (e.g. Fig. 5, n°1-2 and 3-4 ; Fig. 5, n°5-10). The similarities in the “precise” style are more pronounced, while the “free” style shows more variety (compare Fig. 5 and 6).

It is clear that the best examples of decorated *falcatas* were made by quite skilled and specialized artisans, since the precision and quality of the inlay is well above the ability of the average local smith.

There are two possible models to explain the pattern of dispersion of decorated *falcatas*, and also why very similar decorations, probably even drawn by the same hand (Fig. 5, 1-3, 2-4), have been found in sites quite far apart. One is that some important *oppida* had specialized workshops of some size, under the direction of skilled craftsmen. These smithies would “export” their production to other sites, mainly to the local rulers and their chief retainers. This does not mean only “selling” swords, but also perhaps includes “presents” from big chiefs to smaller aristocrats. In the present state of our knowledge, the most likely sites could be Castulo in the Guadalquivir Valley and Ilici on the Mediterranean coast. Nevertheless, other production centres are possible (Fig. 7a). However, no swords of this type have so far been found in these sites or the immediate vicinity, although this is not proof in itself.

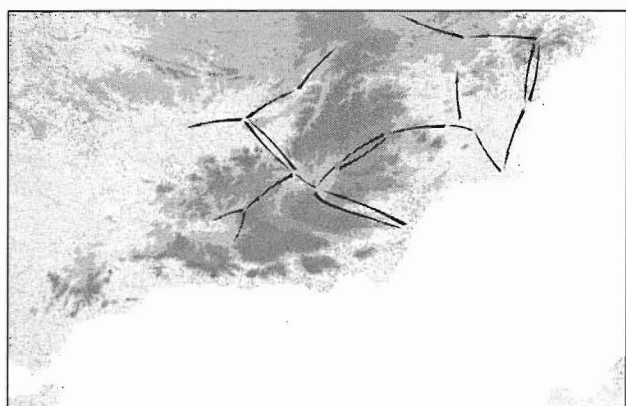
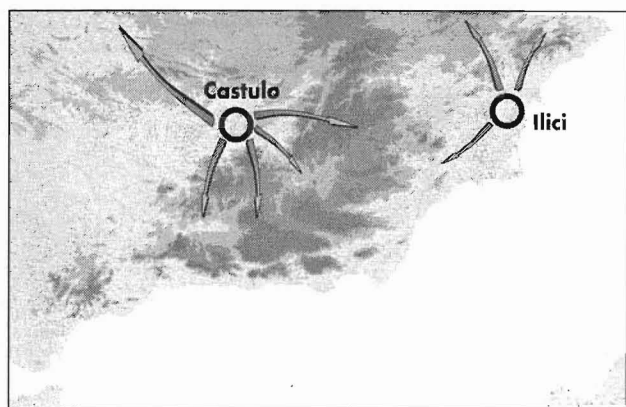


Fig. 7 — Two alternative theoretical models built to explain strikingly similar patterns of decoration in pieces from different areas. a : Castulo and Ilici are known to have been very important centres in the Iberian Iron Age, but a few other sites could also be candidates to have possessed important specialised workshops. b : A more probable model based in the work of itinerant artisans.

The other possible model is that of itinerant artisans travelling from place to place offering their services to local rulers who would be interested in just one or a very few decorated swords for the sake of status symbol. They would then move elsewhere in an apparently haphazard pattern (Fig. 7b). This system is well documented in Archaic Greece and other areas in the Mediterranean with similar social systems that include ruling warrior aristocratic elites living in *oppida* or other types of central places. It could also explain the appearance of the “free style”. Perhaps some local less gifted smiths subsequently tried to produce imitations of the original model, with less than perfect technical results but with a wider range of motifs and themes.

The main difficulty in trying to prove the feasibility of any of these two models lies in the fact that many of the most important decorated *falcatas* were found during the later decades of the nineteenth century or the early years of the twentieth on uncontrolled digs. As they lack proper archaeological context, it is often very difficult to date them independently (*i.e.*, not taking into account typology or parallels with other well-dated *falcatas*), and to compare them with contemporary examples.

To sum up, we believe that the model of itinerant specialized craftsmen is, in the present state of our knowledge, the best choice to explain the existence of two different decorative “styles” and the appearance of swords decorated with strikingly similar patterns in sites that are quite far apart. It fits known social patterns, it has parallels elsewhere, and can also be applied to some other luxury products, such as silver fibulae of the Late Iberian Iron Age (3rd to 2nd centuries BC), and other jewellery products.

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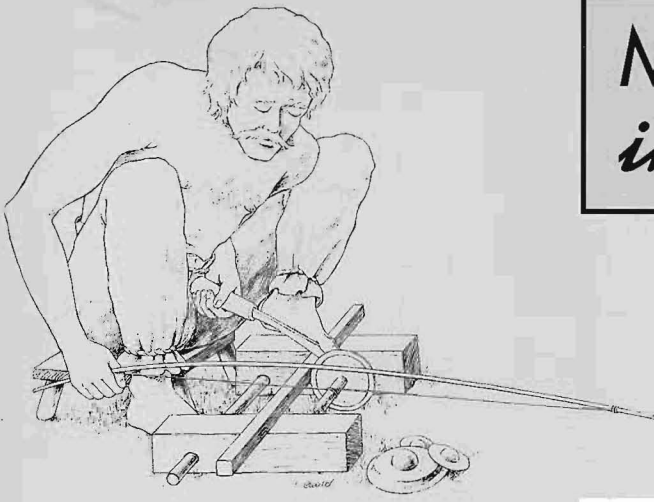
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