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**MEDITERRANEAN FALCONRY
AS A CROSS-CULTURAL BRIDGE:
CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM HUNTING ENCOUNTERS**

IN THE CONTEXT of medieval mentalities, as we tend to imagine them, any kind of religious dissent seemed apt to create an unbridgeable chasm between people. This vision is nevertheless not entirely correct. The difference of credo never prevented medieval people from some sort of intercultural exchange. Especially the culture of chivalry, created by the knighthood as a class opposed to the clergy and to a certain degree less attentive to the subtleties of credos, was paradoxically open and receptive in its contacts with the Other, even if these contacts consisted essentially of military encounters. Nevertheless, in the context of this cultural formation, fighting was a primary form of recognition of the adversary. No wonder that, if we consider the Crusades and the Reconquista from the perspective of the knightly culture, particularly of its games and entertainments, we see a landscape which seems far enough from any idea of a “civilization clash.”¹

The wars between Christians and Muslims created opportunities for cross-cultural hunting encounters, exchange of knowledge and zoological species, such as mammals and birds trained to hunt. The animal on which the European devotees of hunting undoubtedly could cast covetous eyes was the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*). The tradition of taming and training it probably originated in India, but it was also largely practiced by the Arabs since the beginning of the Islamic era. This beautiful animal

¹ This notion, proposed by Samuel Huntington as a possible description of a contemporary phenomenon, would be a blatant anachronism if applied to the medieval context otherwise than as a metaphor.

was often used as a luxurious gift on the occasion of diplomatic missions. This is why a cheetah is believed to have been in the possession of Charlemagne. As the fastest animal on Earth (even if it can run at the maximal speed only over a distance of approximately 500 m), the cheetah is evidently a skilful hunter. But what makes it really useful for humans is the fact that this fast runner, but on the other hand slender and fragile animal, relies, as attack strategy, exclusively on the shock provoked in the victim's organism by a sudden, extreme muscular effort. In other words, the cheetah attacks only animals able to run away fast enough, which is evidently not the case of creature as slow as the human being. This is the reason why cheetah presents – relatively – no danger to people (it is still kept, even nowadays, as a pet and as a status symbol in certain Gulf countries, such as Qatar). Nevertheless, in spite of the great fascination with the cheetah, it was virtually unfeasible to keep such a fragile species as a pet in medieval Europe; breeding in captivity and use in real hunting expeditions was practically out of question. This is why the Europeans became interested in other felids living in historical times all over the Middle East, such as leopard (*Panthera pardus*), a much more aggressive, but stronger and more resistant species, rarely tamed by Arabs, because it always represented a considerable danger to humans.²

Among the spectacular Eastern hunting techniques which could become the object of interest and envy of the Europeans, one easily adapted to the natural conditions of Europe was undoubtedly the falconry. In fact, it became not only a great fancy of medieval and renaissance Europe, but also a kind of cross-cultural bridge across ideological gaps. It created common interests and occasions of getting together for the social and sometimes even intellectual elites of Muslim and Christian world. The exchanges occurred in many contact points all over the Mediterranean: in the Holy Land occupied by the crusaders, at the Sicilian court of Frederic II of Hohenstaufen, on the Iberian Peninsula, where the elites of Christian and Muslim states shared very similar interests for falconry and hunting.

The attractiveness of the cross-cultural exchange involving birds of prey was related to differences between the available species of birds and disparity of local falconry knowledge. The European tradition was probably related to a very ancient cultural heritage³ concerning mainly hawking, i.e. hunting with different species of birds be-

² The Arabs were occasionally greatly surprised by the success the Europeans sometimes had in coping with that animal, as we can read in Usāma ibn Munkid̄ memoires, *The Book of Learning by Example*, which we will comment below. The Muslim courtier was quite astonished to discover that the tamed felid which a “Frank” knight tried to sell him was in fact a leopard, not a cheetah.

longing to the genus *Accipiter*. The birds of prey, as a hunting technique, occupied an important place already in Roman times, but more distinctively in the context of imagination related to the symbols of status and power. A new hawking wave seems to have come to Europe with the Huns and the Alani.

Meanwhile, the genuine Arabic tradition seems originally less diversified. The Arabs used exclusively the species of *Falco*, mainly the saker (*Falco cherrug*). As it seems, they discovered the possibility of taming birds of prey in late pre-Islamic period. At least they believed their own falconry tradition to be a local invention. Certainly, we don't have iconographic evidence, such as images of birds of prey in painting or sculptural decoration. Nevertheless there is sufficient written evidence to believe that the origin of Arabic falconry is as ancient as the kingdom of Kindah. The most famous, late pre-Islamic representative of this tribe, Imru'l-Qays, mentions falconry in some of his poetry gathered under the label *Ayyām aṣ-Ṣayd* (*Hunting days*), but overall what fascinates him most is not the falcon; it's the Arabian horse. Nevertheless, the famous 10th century historian, al-Mas'ūdī, in his monumental work *Murūğ ad-dahab* (*The Meadows of Gold*, I, 170-171) collects many reports concerning the origin of the falconry.⁴ Among other versions,⁵ he attributes the invention of falconry to an earlier Kindah king, Ḥārīt ibn Mu'āwīya ibn Tawr. Supposedly he had found an injured bird caught in a trap destined to seize other species, and he kept it in his tent. After some time he observed a change in the bird's behaviour – it learned to come to humans when called. This must have happened about the end of the 4th century, when the Kindah

³ Most probably, falconry became a widespread hunting technique all over the Eurasian region already at an early stage of history. Its earliest origins can be associated with Central Asia, from where the technique spread over vast steppe territories towards the West. A different branch of this stream reached Korea and Japan, where falconry is still practiced according to ancient rules of *takagari*. Also the Indian Subcontinent has a rich and original hawking tradition of its own, differing from the Middle Eastern, i.e. Persian and Arabic techniques. No wonder that, according to local natural conditions, there is a large variation in the details of taming and hunting techniques, species of birds used and types of prey. Nonetheless, many surprising similarities can be noted all over large territories of the Old World, which proves that hunting with birds of prey had been the object of many cross-cultural borrowings.

⁴ The falconry in al-Mas'ūdī was studied by Urszula Lewicka-Rajewska in an article published as an annex to a rather uninteresting book concerning the hunting traditions in the Muslim world; cf. U. Lewicka-Rajewska, *Sokolnictwo w krajach muzułmańskich w X wieku w świetle Murūğ ad-dahab Al-Mas'ūdīego*, in: S. Milczarek (ed.), *Kultura łowiecka w świecie islamu*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 194-204.

⁵ Another attribution of the invention of falconry related by al-Mas'ūdī refers to the emperor Constantine and remains connected to the legend about the foundation of Constantinople. This could indicate that the interest in birds of prey, dating back to the Antiquity, was keenly cultivated in the Byzantine context.

still lived in Ḥaḍramawt, participating in the Himyari confederation. Seemingly these circumstances don't confirm the hypothesis of a cultural borrowing.

Al-Mas'ūdī refers also to a reliable source for this piece of information, as he claims to have found it in the writings of the 8th century falconer, Adam ibn Muḥriz, who, being a descendant of the Lakhmids, had no obvious personal interest in attributing the origin of the prestigious falconry tradition to the Kindah. Whether his testimony is true or not, the Arabs quickly developed some practical techniques of taming birds, and they were keenly interested in accumulating a deeper ornithological knowledge as soon as they could find any sources of it.

The history of Arabic treatises on falconry starts with an author known in the medieval Europe under the name of Gatrif. This name refers to a personage related to the Damascene court, al-Ġiṭrīf ibn Qūdāma al-Ġassānī, who was the falconer of the Umayyad caliph, Hišām ibn al-Malik (724-743). After the death of this ruler, al-Ġiṭrīf remained in the employ of the new dynasty, the Abbasids. Collaborating with another falconer, Adam ibn Muḥriz al-Bāhilī (the one cited by al-Mas'ūdī), he elaborated, between 783 and 785, the first Arabic treatise concerning falconry. Both Arabs used as a starting point a Greek book about breeding and taming hawks, attributed to a Syrian author, Archigenes of Apamea. As a matter of fact, the Syrian was not a falconer, but a highly reputed physician who practiced at Rome in the time of Trajan. Supposedly, this Greek manuscript was handed down to the Muslims as part of the truce tribute offered by the Byzantine empress Irene in 783. The fact seems to corroborate the hypothesis of the special role played by the falconry as a “common point of interest” in situations of conflict. It seems that hunting and diplomacy went closely together already in Muslim-Byzantine relations as early as the first half of the 8th century. In any case, the manuscript of Archigenes was warmly welcomed and gave rise to such interest that the caliph immediately handed it over to the experts in order to be thoroughly studied.

Later on, the treatise of al-Ġiṭrīf was copied and adapted, compiled with the achievements of other, often anonymous falconers, who, during the 9th century, followed the tradition of elaborating falconry books dedicated to the successive rulers. It was also combined with texts by other authors, such as Ḥumārawayh, dating from the end of 9th and from the 10th century. The book of al-Ġiṭrīf in this reworked form, i.e. adapted and joined with other Arabic texts on similar subjects, was translated into Latin.

The falconer heritage was slowly accumulating and migrating in both directions between the Christian and the Muslim world. The treaties often contained also remarks

concerning hounds, specially the famous saluki collaborating with the falcon hunting the gazelle, and cheetahs, tamed and used by the Arabs both as a status symbol and for the spectacular gazelle hunting. The most important work of this kind is *Kitāb al-mutawakkilī* (dedicated to the caliph al-Mutawakkil), circulating in the Christian Europe under the name of the book of Moamyn.⁶ The authorship was for a long time a mystery, till the name was identified by François Viré⁷ with the well-known figure of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq al-'Ibādī,⁸ Christian scholar, physician and translator living between 809 and 873 at the court of al-Mutawakkil.

If true, this identification shows that knowledge of falconry was seen as an important and attractive subject both by the courtiers and by the intellectual elite. In fact, the falconry, a domain which might seem superfluous to our contemporary eyes, was an important element of a new, empirical science which started to brave its path in the 12th century. It is not an accident that Adelard of Bath, a northern scholar travelling all over the Mediterranean in search of knowledge, was also, additionally to his other works, the author of a small treatise on falconry. Adelard lived approximately between 1080 and 1152. Before settling down, in 1122, in the English town of Bath, he crossed all Europe and the Mediterranean in search of new ideas. He reached Sicily and Antioch. His figure is well known in the history of European science mainly for his Latin translation of the Euclidean *Elements*, based upon an Arabic version. Nevertheless, Adelard was also a naturalist and the author of a book on hawking, *De cura accipitrum*.⁹ Even if this dialogue, rather small in size, occupies a marginal position in the work of the medieval scholar, it reflects the influence exerted in the 12th century by the *Arabica studia*, seen nearly as the opposite of *Gallicae sententiae*. Novelties, such as those that Adelard could find during his seven years long trip around the Mediterranean, became an impulse for a deep change in the attitude of the medieval man towards nature and a seed for the new *scientia naturalis* flourishing in the 12th century. For the late Middle Ages falconry became a sign of the harmonious domain of reason over nature. The human skills in controlling the bird became a powerful symbol of triumphant rationality.

⁶ The name of the author of this treatise was written in many different ways. In 14th century we have a notice about a *Liber falconarie magistri Oxamini arabici* which could be again the same book of Moamyn.

⁷ F. Viré, *Sur l'identité de Moamyn le fauconnier*, "Comptes-rendus des séances de l'année – Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres" 111, 2 (1967), pp. 172-176.

⁸ Known in Latin as Johannitius.

⁹ The manuscript from the National Library in Vienna (Codex Vindobonensis Palatinus 2504) was edited in 1937 by A. E. H. Swaen.

Nevertheless hunting remained associated first of all with the warrior and courtly elites, both on the Muslim and on the Christian side. Independently of their military confrontations, the time of truce was filled both with hunting encounters and the exchange of knowledge, artefacts and zoological species used for hunting. An interesting evidence of these close contacts, practiced in the Holy Land dominated by the crusaders, is given by Usāma ibn Munqid̄ in his autobiography, *Kitāb al-I'tibār* (*The Book of Learning by Example*) studied and translated by Philip K. Hitti.¹⁰ This Muslim warrior and courtier living in the times of the Crusades (1095-1188) was the son of the educated emir of Shayzar, a miniature state in the vicinity of Aleppo. His life was filled by wars, travels and hunting. As a member of the social elite of that time, he used to maintain close relationships with important figures among both, Muslims and Christians. He was a friend of the great Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn (Saladin) and of the king of Jerusalem, Fulk, who, if we believe Usāma's own words, used to call him "his brother." In his autobiographical book, falconry and hunting furnish a constant background for those prominent social relationships.

The crucial moment in the history of European falconry is the 6th crusade (1228-1229), when Frederic II of Hohenstaufen, the Holy Roman Emperor, a ruler closely related to the Eastern Mediterranean as the king of Sicily and of Jerusalem, in private a great enthusiast of the Arabic culture, became fascinated with falconry he learned through personal contacts with representatives of the Islamic world. His teacher in this aspect was, among others, Fakhr ad-Dīn al-Fārsī, a Persian sufi and advisor of the sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil, who stayed at the Sicilian court as a diplomat. Frederic came across a falconry treatise, probably the *Kitāb al-mutawakkilī*, which he handed over to Master Theodore of Antioch,¹¹ a naturalist and interpreter belonging to his court. In 1241, he made corrections in the translation. The text, *Scientia venandi per aves*, attributed, as we already mentioned, to a certain Moamyn, became one of the earliest Latin manuals of falconry circulating in medieval Europe; it survived in numerous manuscripts. The Latin version by Theodore of Antioch was reputed for its exceptional fidelity, not always rivalled by the vernacular versions which started to appear almost immediately after. In 1249, Daniel Deloc of Cremona produced a French translation, not so faithful and containing many mistakes; it was clearly difficult to equal the level

¹⁰ *Usamah ibn-Munqidh, an Arab-Syrian gentleman and warrior in the period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usamah ibn-Munqidh (Kitab al-I'tibar)*, transl. P. K. Hitti, New York 2000.

¹¹ This Theodore of Antioch, also called the Philosopher, shouldn't be confused with another figure with the same name, and also an interpreter, Theodore of Antioch, bishop of Mopsuestia.

of excellence represented by the *scientia naturalis* cultivated at the court of Frederic II. The list of reworked copies and adaptations of this treatise is very long, as the Sicilian source can be still found in the book printed in Poitiers in 1567, *La Fauconnerie de messire Arthelouche de Alagona, seigneur de Maraveques, conseiller et chambellan du Roy de Secille*.

Nevertheless, this translation was by no means the greatest achievement of Frederic II and his collaborators. The monarch was keenly interested in ornithology and gave an original contribution to it. First of all, he created his own falconry book, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, where he coupled some ideas borrowed from Aristotle's Latin version, *Liber animalium*, with a large practical knowledge, of which he was very proud. He maintained at his court a large number of falconers and fowlers that not only took care of the various birds he had in his possession, but also assisted the emperor in experiments he liked to conduct. Being interested in answering numerous ornithological questions, Frederic II implemented a well-planned research program. He intended to check, e.g. whether birds have the sense of smell or whether chicks can hatch from eggs incubated by the heat of the sun. *De arte venandi cum avibus* gathers the knowledge not only about falconry and hawking, but also more general ornithological observations.

Frederic II was also the first to bring into the Mediterranean region the large species of birds from the north. He requested the capture of gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) in the region of Lübeck and even in Greenland, and introduced them to the Mediterranean falconry, where they became in fact highly appreciated. In this way he commenced the long-distance exchange of birds of prey, which evolved into a large scale, highly lucrative trade later on.

As the result of all this complex network of relationships and cross-cultural borrowings, a common set of techniques emerged; it was used, in spite of all differences in environmental conditions, over large territories of Western Europe and the Middle East. Even nowadays, striking similarities can be observed, if we compare the falconry practiced in such distant places as Great Britain and the states of the Gulf, such as Qatar or United Arab Emirates. In fact it's a common heritage shaped during the course of the medieval contacts and mutual borrowings. Let's try to characterize briefly this set of techniques and procedures creating such a fascinating relationship between man and bird.

Young falcons can be bred in captivity, but the wild ones were always considered as more skilful hunters, apt to be used in falconry. It is nevertheless important to catch

the bird in its first year of life, as it is more difficult to tame and train older specimens. There exist a complex terminology, of Romance origin, designating different ages at which the young birds are captured: *pelerin* is the bird captured between September and December, *antenaire* – between January and March, *genti* – between March and May. The term designating the bird which was captured as a nestling is *eyas* (from the medieval French *niais*). All the birds captured during the first year of life are designated as *passagers*, and the antonym is the term *haggard*, designating the bird in adult plumage, i.e. older than one year, much less appropriate for training. In order to catch the birds, medieval falconers devised an ingenious system of nets and traps, such as we can see e.g. in *Les Livres du Roy Modus et de la Royne Ratio*, created, most probably, by Henri de Ferrières between 1354 and 1376, extant in several illuminated manuscripts and early printed versions.

The young bird should be progressively accustomed to the human presence. The training is divided into several stages: initially, the bird should sit on the gloved hand; as the next step, the falconer should stroke his chest without provoking aggressive reaction of the bird. The bird at this stage is called *maige*, apt for starting the proper training. First of all, it should be taught to return to the hunter, at the signal given by a special kind of whistle, after being released for hunting. During this part of the training, the bird is released only for a short flight between two falconers, using a kind of long leash, called *creance*. Another stage of training consists in luring the falcon with a prey, usually a live pigeon, tied up to a cord whirled by the falconer.

The hawking accessories in the East and the West have not only similar function but also a surprisingly similar form. The basic equipment consists of a leather glove and a whistle. The falcon returns to the hunter after an unsuccessful hunt; but in case of catching any prey, the bird remains with it and should be found by the man; not always an easy task. This is why the bird carries special bells, often made with precious materials such as silver, whose sound can be heard at a large distance due to a special, spherical shape with a narrow, crosswise slit. To the basic equipment belongs also a leather hood covering the bird's head and eyes which should be put on when the falcon is not hunting and removed at the sight of a suitable prey.

According to the environmental conditions, there exist basically two types of hunt, which can be associated with two groups of predatory species, falcons (*Falconinae*) and hawks (*Accipitrinae*). A typical hunt with a falcon is best suited to large, open terrains, such as steppes or deserts. The bird which is set free hovers high in the air and flies over considerable distances, which makes a good horse an indispensable element of the

hunting expedition. The prey, such as a Middle Eastern houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) or its European relative, great bustard (*Otis tarda*), is most often attacked in flight. On the other hand, a typical hunt with a hawk can be practiced by a hunter on foot. The hawk hunts from an “observation point,” e.g. a high tree, catching, after a short, high-speed attack, a prey remaining mostly on the ground, such as a rabbit or a pheasant.

The Eastern and the Western falconry differ in species of birds which are used and in the favourite prey, but not everything is due to natural conditions. As I mentioned, one of the most beloved and appreciated birds in the Eastern falconry, the gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*), breeds on the Arctic coasts. As it is the largest falcon, this precious bird was used in the Middle East to hunt the gazelle. On the other hand, the birds imported to Europe from the East also belonged to the most costly and sought after species.

Late medieval and Renaissance falconry in Europe tended to become a sophisticated, courtly entertainment, accessible also to ladies, as observed around 1410 by the Limbourg brothers on one of the miniatures from *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry* (*The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry*). This explain the predilection for small species of falcons, such as different species of hobbies and kestrels, or merlin (*Falco columbarius*), often used by female hunters. Nevertheless among the most appreciated species remained the large lanner falcon (*Falco biarmicus*), used for hunting herons and egrets. The objective of this kind of hunting, considered as a particularly noble entertainment, had nothing to do with acquiring meat. In fact, the heron, successfully caught by the falcon, was often released unharmed. The coveted trophies were the characteristic feathers from its head, used as decoration of the headgears (so called *aigrette*). The thrill of this kind of hunt consisted in the unpredictability of the outcome of such contest: a large falcon and a heron are well matched adversaries. Only an experienced and well trained falcon is able to cope with the heron, avoiding its strong beak by skilfully “diving” in the air under the chest of its pray. This explains why hunting herons was often considered a royal privilege and why the bird itself inspired respect. The heron brought down alive and uninjured was often ringed with a commemorative band decorated with the coat of arms of the hunter, and set free.

The hunt can be dangerous for the hunting bird itself, and the falcon represented a very high financial value. No wonder that falconry was closely related with the beginnings of veterinary medicine. The Castilian hawking manual, *Libro de la caza de*

las aves (*Book of Hunting with Birds*),¹² is a very interesting document in this context. Its author, Pero (or Pedro) López de Ayala (1332-1407) was a Castilian statesman, poet, historiographer, and a member of the highest aristocracy; it is most probable that he, like many other members of this social class, was a competent practitioner of falconry and a direct heir of the Peninsular hawking tradition which emerged from an intensive exchange of know-how between Christian and Muslim worlds. He decided to gather this practical knowledge during his imprisonment: he had been made captive by the Portuguese after the battle of Aljubarrota (1385).

López de Ayala wrote his treatise more than a century after Frederic II of Hohenstaufen, when the hunting with birds of prey not only became an activity defining the highest social groups all over Europe, but also attracted a considerable amount of superstitions and misleading beliefs. This is why the Castilian hidalgo volunteered to rectify those misconceptions and to gather the tried-and-tested, trustworthy methods and techniques of breeding and training falcons. He paid a special attention to everyday veterinary care, cures for different diseases, as well as for injuries to which the bird could be exposed while hunting. As the result, *Libro de la caza de las aves* consists of 47 short chapters, describing specific species of birds and the appropriate care of them, full of concrete pieces of information about such problems as the cure of fractured wings, the basic medicines and even cosmetics the falconer should take with him for the hunting expedition in order to maintain the bird in the best physical form.

The treatise of López de Ayala lets us imagine how sophisticated a discipline the medieval falconry became after several generations of practitioners. No wonder that falconer and austringer (the care-taker of hawks) were considered as highly qualified and highly appreciated professions till the end of the Middle Ages and later on, as the falconry remained an important part of European culture during the entire period of the Renaissance. Finally it became obsolete as a hunting technique after the invention of fire arms. Nevertheless this set of cultural meanings remains untouched and the falconry is still largely practiced as a sport both in the East and in the West.

¹² Cf. Pedro López de Ayala, *Libro de la caza de las aves*, ed. J. Fradejas Lebrero, Madrid 1969.