

A Brief History of Falconry

Written by Administrator

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At the Abu Dhabi Symposium on “**Falconry: a World Heritage**” in September '05 experts on many aspects



of falconry met and gave presentations on their various specialities. Falconry from all regions of the world was represented and many exiting facts came up that were previously unknown to those of us restricted to learning from our own compatriots and from books written in our own language. Here is a short summary from a layman's point of view. My apologies to those countries whose names and histories do not appear, the number of experts that were able to attend the symposium was sadly limited.

A significant problem with recorded history is that history can only be recorded where records exist. We are certain the origins of falconry go back much further than the origins of writing because the earliest written records found describe a highly organised and technical falconry that must have taken many hundreds, if not thousands of years to evolve to that level of sophistication. Many experts present at the Symposium are engaged in almost full-time research into this very elusive subject.

Falconry was practiced **Mongolia** at a very remote period and was already in very high favour some 1000 years BC, that's 3000 years ago. It achieved a very high level of refinement on the military campaigns of the Great Khans who practiced falconry for food and for sport between battles. One such military expedition reached almost to the gates of Vienna. By the time of Marco Polo there were over 60 officials managing over 5000 trappers and more than 10 000 falconers and falconry workers.

Falconry was combined with legal and military affairs, diplomacy and land colonisation and moved accordingly, reaching **Korea** in 220 BC and Japan much later. In **China** itself the culture of falconry once occupied a very significant role – there are many historic remains in literature,

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poems, painting and porcelain describing it in the culture of the imperial family, the nobility and the social life of the ordinary people. Chinese falconry had an inseparable relationship with politics and power and written records go back prior to 700BC. These depict a very mature and technical falconry, exactly parallel with techniques used today. The imperial family of the time (Chu Kingdom) were already using falcons, eagles and shortwings in exactly the same way we do. This would put the birth of falconry in the region (if indeed this was where falconry was born) at well over 3 000 years ago.

Falconry was strong in China right into the early 1900's. It enjoyed imperial patronage and was popular



among the aristocracy and even common people all through the centuries; largely due to the medieval society China endured all this time. With the decline and fall of the imperial family in 1912, falconry at a high level became feeble and died. At the same time the falconry of the common people declined through conflict between ethnic groups, invasion by eight different foreign countries and ultimately, World and Civil Wars. Now falconry survives in the ethnic minority groups – the Hui, Weir, Naxi etc. Hunting is not allowed under the Chinese Wildlife Conservation Act of 1989. This act was designed to protect rare species like tiger, bear, panda etc. from shooting and trapping, but at the time no one knew the importance of falconry in the culture of these small and often remote communities. There is now no proper way for young people to learn and pass on their falconry heritage with goshawks and sparrowhawks. How can the heritage and the rich and long cultural history of Chinese falconry be preserved when no one is coming into it? How can it be made legal and official, coordinating relations between falconers and conservation? How can we avoid Chinese falconry disappearing in 10-15 years? Perhaps these are some of the questions that can be addressed under the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003.

Japan's isolation by the sea meant that the natural advance of falconry did not come till quite late, the first written records are from 355 A.D. (Nihon Shoki) from Pekche, which documented hawks exported from Korea to Japan. There is considerable archaeological evidence then from

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the 6th century onwards. In ancient times Japanese Hawking was done by falconers on horseback and armed with bows on their back. This gave a deliberate martial effect to a hawking party, designed to intimidate and overawe lesser mortals. The scene of a hawking departure deeply impressed spectators, so hawking was used very effectively to symbolise and publicly demonstrate military power and dominance over the land. Because of this, the central rulers always tried to monopolize or even ban hawking through laws and Buddhist ideology, while the emerging local lords kept hawking in practice either through connections with those in influential positions or through finding religious excuses in Shintoism. This importance of public demonstration in Japanese falconry created a tradition of beautiful costumes and elaborate equipment the aesthetics of which have survived to the present day.

Imperial Falconers existed under the Imperial Household Ministry until the Second World War after which falconry became open to distribution to the public by a system of apprenticeships to retired imperial falconers leading to the "Schools of Falconry", the Yedo school, the Yoshida School (Niwa Arie) etc. the ideals of which exist to the present day. There was also a folk tradition of subsistence hunting with Mountain Hawk eagles dating from the early 19th century. Unfortunately this bore the brunt of opposition by birdwatcher fanatics and it is believed that currently only one austringer remains in this tradition.

Despite a belief that falconry originated in the Mongolian steppes, Iran/Persia is sometimes also cited as the cradle of falconry. A theory put forward at the Symposium suggested a possible "parallel evolution" - with the first hunting birds of prey trained at around the same time in both the Mongolian steppes and in Iran. In documented Iranian history the one who used birds of prey for the first time was Tahmooreth, a king of the Pishdadid dynasty, 2000 years before Zoroaster who himself lived around 6000 BC. This could mean hunting with falcons has a background of 8 to 10 000 years. This was one of the most interesting hypotheses at the Symposium and was presented with several proofs (dates of dynasties, approximate lengths of generations and reigns etc.). The first complete book on falconry was the Baznameh-e-Naseri, in the 12th century commissioned by Naseraddin Shah, the Qajar king. This famous tome has been translated to English, French and German.

In modern times the story is repeated in Iran as elsewhere: falconry declined as guns developed and in political unrest resulting in the overthrow of the royal family and subsequent revolution. Since the revolution overthrowing the Shah, the Department of the Environment has forbidden breeding, buying and selling of any birds of prey as well as falconry. Several non-governmental organizations in Iran are witnessing a range of demands from young people asking about falconry and training of birds of prey. There is now a revival based on preserving and restructuring traditional methods, but heavy urbanization and the introduction of western elements make it difficult.

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In the **Indo-Pakistan** sub-continent, falconry appears to have been known from at least 600 years BC. Falconry became especially popular with the nobility and the Mughals were keen falconers. Surprisingly, the humble sparrowhawk was the favourite of the mighty Emperor Akbar. In the Indus Valley, falconry was considered a life-sustaining instrument for the desert dwellers, while those from the green belts considered it as a noble art and used the falcons as symbol of high birth and luxury. Organized hunting parties would go out for game. Richard Burton, the famous 19th Century historian and translator, wrote extensively about falconry in the Indus Valley, citing the interesting practices of its communities in his book "The Valley of the Indus."

In India, in the Rajput States - in Jaipur, Bhavnagar etc. the royal families continued to cherish the sport of hawking till the 1940s, but then partition and subsequent political problems did for falconry in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Nowadays, while there are many people who have paper knowledge of the birds, there are very few with practical knowledge left. In India there appear to be only three persons who possess the traditional skills. One of them is Col. Osman (Brother of King Zaeer Shah of Afghanistan); the others are Shantanu Kumar and Shahid Khan, both of Jaipur whose ancestors were professional falconers to Kumar Shree Dharmakumarsinghji, brother of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar.

Modern Pakistan, since partition from India and the loss of royal patronage, has had no falconry. The new state's modern laws of the 1950s banned falconry to Pakistanis. However, hunting tourism is permitted and since the 1960's wealthy foreigners have paid for the privilege of hawking there. This has led to problems— when commercialism enters common sense exits, but regulation has finally come and trappers must be licensed and are restricted to 15. Conservation groups like Falcons International (itself funded by Arab falconers) are now demanding a zero quota. The Environmental Agency of Abu Dhabi and Falcon Foundation International Pakistan have joined hands to work for the conservation of falcons, including the annual release of falcons into the wild under the Falcon Release Programme. These annual releases include falcons from several Gulf States that have spent a season hawking legally as well as illegal birds confiscated from smugglers. The confiscation of those illegal birds is part of the country's efforts to implement stricter wildlife trade regulations.

Because of connections with the Arab market, Pakistan is the foremost producer of falconry equipment in the world.

Falconry in **Russia** has an ancient history, its roots found probably in the 8th and 9th centuries. It came to the Eastern Slavic tribes from their southern neighbours and from the Huns and Khazars, the Turkic speaking nomadic nation who created in the fifth century a country whose

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boundaries stretched over the modern Dagestan, Cis-Azov Sea area, the Crimea, the Don River region and the Lower Volga River area. At the end of the ninth century, the ancient-Russian knight Oleg built the falcon yard in Kiev. Vladimir, son of Yaroslav Mudryi who ruled between 1019-1054 issued the first legislative acts regulating falconry. Historical chronicle returns many times to the mention of falconry as an important feature of the everyday life of Russian princes. Falconry was loved by Prince Igor, famous for his unsuccessful military trip to Polovets in 1185. Even when in captivity this prince did not change his habits and continued to fly hawks.

An interesting legend exists about Saint Trifon, whose day is celebrated by orthodox Christians on 14th February: the boyar (nobleman) Patrikiev had the bad luck to lose a falcon belonging to Tsar Ivan the Terrible. Fearing the worst, he prayed to a local saint, Trifon (or Triphon), to show him where it was. Sure enough the saint appeared in a dream and showed him where to look. In return the boyar built and dedicated a church. Religious icons of St. Trifon show him in a falconer's pose with a falcon on his fist.

During the middle ages falconry flourished in Russia, especially in the Moscow Principality. One of the Moscow districts is even now known as "Sokolniki", which translates "Falconers" or "Site of Falconers". Falconry had its heyday during the reign of Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov (1626-1676), father of Peter the Great, but, as elsewhere, it had practically died out among the elite of Russian society by the end of 19th – beginning of 20th century. After October 1917 falconry was not officially prohibited but was not supported by government and that in reality meant one and the same thing. However, in two regions where falconers were simple common people it continued to exist: in Transcaucasia (Georgia) and in the republics of the Middle Asia, where falconry was one of several hunting methods for acquiring food or furs.

In Russia, even during Soviet times falcons and hawks were used to scare hooded crows from the cupolas in the Moscow Kremlin. Besides the constant noise, the crows' feet were wearing off the thin layer of gold that covered the cupolas. Corvids, especially Hooded Crows, were especially numerous in Moscow centre. There were three falconers that did this work and they had to be employed by the Kremlin's security service (the former KGB). Since 2003 Russian falconers have been holding fieldmeets and Russia has applied for IAF Membership. In the **Ukraine**

there is now a club, established five years ago, which has also applied for IAF Membership. At the moment there is a restoration of falconry in the ex-USSR. In Lithuania there are about six falconers hunting goshawks. Medieval falconry was developed in

Lithuania

as a part of Joint Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom with much bigger territory than now. In

Estonia

there are only three falconers and a recent ban has been forced on them.

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Falconry is known in **Georgia** since the 5th century and is most remarkable for its tradition of flying passage sparrowhawks at quail. This was clearly described in literature of the early 19th century and similar living traditions exist today in Tunisia and Turkey. For many centuries ordinary people in Western Georgia have hunted with sparrowhawks while the more elite of society of Eastern Georgia flew goshawks and falcons. Georgia was the first of the former Soviet states to formally legalize falconry in 1967. In the town of Poti there is monument devoted to bazieri (sparrowhawkers). For many decades the Chairman of Falconry section and the Head of all the Georgian bazieri was the medical Doctor Givi Chogovadze who died last year. There are over 500 registered bazieri at the present time.

Kazakhstan is a country the size of Europe –mountain and steppe, barely touched by modern civilization and whose inhabitants are mostly farmers and part-time farmers. Its falconers continue the Central Asian tradition of flying golden eagles at hare for food and at fox and wolf for furs and flock. Until modern times this was a subsistence necessity for the peoples of Kazakhstan as well as in **Kirghizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** and Mongolia and the ethnic minorities in Western China. Falconry tradition in Turkmenistan differs greatly from the neighbouring traditions of eagles in Kazakhstan and the other central Asian republics to the north and east. It is much more like the traditional falconry of Iran and Afghanistan using sakers and tazy (the Turkmen version of the saluki) at the desert hare. Falconers traditionally spend five months of the year in the desert staying with their hawks, their tazy and their falconry mentors. The Oguz Khan tribes, forefathers of the Turkmen people who lived 5 000 years ago, had falconry symbols on their ancestral emblems, carpets, pottery and other archaeological finds.

In literature falconry appears in many Turkmen classics of the 15th –17th centuries, authors such as Sayilly, Makhtumkuli, Seyidi, Mollanepes who were also falconers. There are more than 60 proverbs and sayings in Turkmen folklore that cite falcons and falconry. Falconry is seen as a sign of equality. You find the falcon carried by the countryman as well as the city-dweller, by worker as well as academic or cultural workers; it is seen as instilling ideals of nature protection.

Arab Falconry: falconry appeared with the emergence of civilizations and was already popular in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf region several millennia BC.

In the Al Rafidein region (Iraq) it was widely practiced 3500 years BC; in 2000 BC the Gilgamesh Epic clearly referred to hunting by birds of prey in Iraq.

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The Babylonians created a Divan for falcons and made game reserves for quarry species. Al Harith bin Mu'awiya, an early King of the present region that includes Saudi Arabia, was one of the first who trained and hunted falcons.

The Omayyad caliphs and princes, Mu'awiya bin Abi Sufyan and Hisham bin Abdul Malek, practiced falconry and falconry had a good position in the Abbasid period.

The caliph Haroun Al Rasheed was fond of the sport and exchanged falcon-gifts with the other kings.

The Arab poets composed a lot of poems lauding the falcon and all Arab classes – Kings, Sheikhs and cavalry – practiced falconry and bequeathed it to the next generations.

The Arabian Gulf region became famous for its falconers and falconry traditions. Through Arab influence it spread out through the Islamic World, eastwards into the great Islamic Empires of Central Asia and westwards across North Africa to the Magreb, giving us the distinctive styles of falconry of the Bedouin, of the Kingdom of Moroccao and the Magreb and of Tunisia (passage sparrowhawks at quail – note similarities with the falconry of eastern Turkey and Transcausasia).

The Holy Koran itself includes a falconry-related verse that permits falconry as a hunting method.

Falconry is considered a symbol of this region's civilization more than any other region in the world;

50% of the world's falconers exist in the Middle East, which includes the Arab region. In the philosophy of the region hunting trips teach patience, endurance and self-reliance and bravery can be learned from falcons.

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The earliest evidence of falconry in Europe is usually considered to be from the 5th century AD, written quotations from Paulinus of Pella and Sidonius Apollinaris in France and the famous mosaics in the Falconer's Villa in Argos (Greece). For over a thousand years, falconry was extremely popular in Europe and carried enormous cultural and social capital. A marker of high social status, falconry was considered an essential part of a gentleman's education, for it was thought to prevent sickness and damnation and demanded the cultivation of personal qualities such as patience, endurance and skill.

Using the term 'European' falconry is in one sense misleading, because falconry techniques and technologies have been traded across European and other countries for centuries. For example, in the thirteenth century, Arab falconry techniques were imported into Europe through Spain and through the court of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, in Sicily. He employed Arab, English, Spanish, German and Italian falconers, and translated important Arab falconry works. His masterwork *de arte venandi cum avibus* distils the falconry knowledge of many cultures.

Falconry was a means of cultural communication, because its symbolic system was shared between most cultures of the known world and falcons made ideal diplomatic gifts. Its geographical reach was extraordinary. Seventeenth century falcon-traders brought falcons to the French Court from Flanders, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Norway, Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, the Balearic Islands, Spain, Turkey, Alexandria, the Barbary States, and India. Falconry wasn't merely an amusement; it was a fierce articulation of social and political power; a deadly serious pastime, considered among the finest of all earthly pursuits - and big business.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the use of falcons as diplomatic gifts gradually faded, and falconry's connection with nobility won it no favours after the French Revolution. It faded away in favour of the new sport of shooting. By the nineteenth century, only a very few individuals still practised the sport in Europe. Now falconry clubs became necessary not simply to maintain both the social traditions of falconry, but the knowledge of falconry itself.

Somehow, falconry's living tradition survived with just sufficient falconers to pass on their treasured knowledge. Falconry had a renaissance in most European countries in the 1920s and 1930s and its popularity increased further in the 1950s and 1960s.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of falconry's intangible heritage was safeguarded by what UNESCO calls living treasures - proficient falconers who could teach apprentices not only the practical methods of falconry, but also its intangible dimensions. They

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communicated the ethical codes of falconry sportsmanship and could instil in their pupils an awareness of the emotional bonds falconers have with their falcons, quarry and hawking land.

Spain and Portugal. Recent exciting discoveries of images from the 3rd century BC in Eastern Spain, that show falconry scenes are currently under scrutiny by academics. Until these were found scholars believed falconry entered Spain in the 5th century AD, coming from North Africa with the Moorish Kings and along the northern Mediterranean coast from Eastern Europe with the Goths at approximately the same time. Much of the history of pre-16th century Iberian Falconry is intertwined with Arab falconry of the time and written references abound in the Arabic language, for example in the 10th century

Calendar of Cordoba and from Abd al-Yalil ibn Wahbaun in the 11th century. There are Islamic falconry images like the Leyre Chest. (1004-05 A.D.) now in Pamplona Museum, and the Al-Mugira jar. (968 A.D.) now in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Whereas in other parts of Western Europe many falconry terms have their origins in medieval French, in Spain and Portugal there are many terms derived from Arabic.

Old Spanish and Portuguese books on falconry are numerous and stretch from the very early "Libro de las animalias que cazan" in Spanish, 1250, through Viscount Rocaberti's "Llibre de cetreria" in Catalan c.1390 to Diogo Fernandes Ferreira's "Arte de caça de altanería" 1616 in Portuguese and now in an English translation.

The Archivo Iberoamericano de Cetrería, the Ibero-American Falconry Archive, has been formed with government assistance to the University of Valladolid to make a census of manuscripts, to collect and catalogue all modern publications, to track down and photograph artwork, miniatures, paintings, sculptures, etc., to digitalize this material, to promote historical research and to make it all available to the public.

After a gap of two centuries, Falconry in Spain was recovered from scratch by Dr. Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente in the 1950's. Not having any practicing falconer around in Spain his sources were Spanish medieval falconry literature and foreign falconers like the late Abel Boyer of France. In 1964 de la Fuente wrote his outstanding "El Arte de Cetrería" a masterpiece and a book of great influence not only in the Spanish, but for serious falconers everywhere. Félix, known as "the friend of animals", was one of the most popular celebrities in Spain thanks to his TV series on wildlife. In the '80's falconry started to flourish in Spain and Portugal and currently Spain is numbered in the top five falconry nations.

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For centuries the **Netherlands** was the centre of European falconry. Currently it has some very draconian laws regulating falconers; nevertheless falconry survives and thrives at a high level. The number of falconers allowed is 200 over the whole of the Netherlands and they are permitted to fly only goshawks and peregrines at quarry. Five clubs exist, the largest two being the Nederlands Valkeniersverbond, Adriaan Mollen and the Valkerij Equipage Jacoba van Beieran . The hey-day of falconry in the Netherlands came in the first half of the 19th century when it was a hub for falcon trading and trapping and the homeland of Europe's finest professional falconers. Nearly all of the well-spoken, multilingual, and cultured falconers who worked for Europe's seventeenth-century ruling families were Dutch. With royal patronage from the House of Orange and participation by gentlemen falconers from Holland, England, France and elsewhere in Europe the Loo Club was founded in 1839 and enjoyed a standard of "high flight" falconry at passage herons not seen since the 1600's.

The Netherlands has two falconry-related collections: the world famous falconry museum in Valkenswaard, the 18th and 19th century centre for hawk trapping which supplied hawks and professional falconers to the whole of Europe. There is also a globally important collection of over two hundred falconry-related books and other items in the National Library of the Netherlands, centred on a bequest in the late 1940s by Professor A. E. H. Swaen. There is also a Falconry Historical Foundation concerned with the history of the sport.

Belgium, so near to Valkenswaard and the main passage routes for migrating birds of prey also became renowned for commerce in hawks and its falconers in the early-modern period. Arendonk's falconers were renowned from the 12th century and the region of the Kempen was the homeland of Europe's finest professional falconers. Some families provided falconers for about 5 centuries. Nearly all of the well-spoken, multilingual, and cultured falconers who worked for Europe's fifteen to eighteenth-century ruling families were Flemish or Dutch.

The city of Turnhout even had a special court for falconers. The last falconmaster of the King of France in the 1880's was a falconer from Arendonk. By the 1900s falconry had almost died out in Belgium but found a new start in 1912 with Viscount Le Hardy de Beaulieu who entertained an "Equipage" for crows and magpies led by a professional falconer till 1927. The true revival came with Charles Kruyfhooft in the late thirties. Charles was probably the last European falconer to trap passage peregrine falcons following the famous method used in Valkenswaard with a very sophisticated trapping hut. He flew crows and rooks each winter for about sixty years till his death in 1995.

By the end of the second World War there remained only three active falconers in Belgium, but by 1966 Belgian falconry had grown sufficiently for its falconers to form their own national

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organisation, the Club Marie de Bourgogne, named for the queen who died while hawking in 1482. Its first president was Charles Kruyfhoof followed by Christian de Coune and Patrick Morel. In the sixties, political lobbying by falconers persuaded the government to grant a limited number of licenses to keep peregrines, goshawks or sparrowhawks in order to keep the cultural heritage of falconry alive.

Christian de Coune and Patrick Morel succeeded in legalising falconry in 1985 and obtained a law which could be considered as one of the best regulation for falconry in the world. Throughout the 1990s, a total ban on falconry in Flanders was threatened but tireless efforts of falconers saved falconry and in 1993 it was finally given legal recognition as a method of hunting and pest control. Today about 200 falconers are active; there are several falconry clubs in Dutch speaking Flanders, but still only one national organisation, the Belgian Falconers Association Club Marie de Bourgogne. Belgian falconers face different legislative and political pressures in each region. Goshawks, redtails, Harris hawks and sparrowhawks are the most commonly used hawks (as in most of the rest of Europe) in Flanders and there are some superlative longwingers too, flying peregrines and hybrid falcons mostly in the French speaking Wallonia.

There are many private collections of falconry art, tapestries, books and literature in Belgium, and two small falconry collections at the chateau of Lavaux Sainte Anne and at Taxandria Museum in Turnhout. The holy falconer's patron, Saint Bavo, was born and lived in Belgium, he is buried in Gent.

In **Ireland** falconry was already familiar by late Celtic times (7th century on), but written references are more to the monetary value of hawks than to descriptions of the sport, pointing at an export trade rather than a native use. Falconry was responsible for the earliest legislation protecting raptors, there are references in the Brehon Laws Ireland supplied the nobility of Western Europe with peregrines and goshawks until the end of the 19th century and the aristocracy of several nations brought their hawks there to hunt. An Irish Hawking Club was formed in 1870 at a meeting chaired by Lord Talbot de Malahide. Maharajah Prince Duleep Singh, a familiar figure in falconry circles across two continents, pledged £50 to its founding. There has been a strong tradition of flying the sparrowhawk in Ireland and Irish falconers have enjoyed international renown.

In **France**, falconry reached its heights of complexity, scale and magnificence in the seventeenth century

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