

Falconry

as Intangible Heritage:

A Universe of Values

The falconers' community should constantly develop and foster the reflection on spiritual and intellectual values associated with their practice. At the moment of the official recognition of falconry as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO the whole widespread community of falconers had good reason to celebrate.

Words and images by Prof Ewa Łukaszyk

But the justified joy and satisfaction shouldn't cover the fact, voiced by Patrick Morel in the previous issue of the International Journal of Falconry in Autumn 2011, that this cultural practice continues to be strongly contested, especially on the European ground, where the dominating tendency is to ban all traditional hunting techniques, as happened in the case of hunting with hounds. For many people alien to the falconry community, there is no difference: if hunting with dogs was banned, why should hunting with birds remain? In the widespread consciousness, falconry is in exactly the same category of practices. Thus, in spite of the UNESCO recognition, in many countries the pressure on hawking is likely to continue. The survival of falconry depends on how persuasively the falconry community will be able to express itself, inscribing its own cultural practice into a larger universe of values shared by members of the diverse societies to which falconers belong, arguing the necessity for preserving this particular tradition in the context of safeguarding the cultural diversity of Humanity and showing in what ways falconry has contributed to enrich the patrimony of particular societies and of human kind as a whole. Of course, the necessity for counter weighting the arguments

of opponents is not the only reason to reflect on the deep meaning of falconry as Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the aftermath of the official, international recognition, this is the moment of rethinking the true meaning of the falconer's tradition as a universe of values and to foster the proper understanding of how and in what sense falconry is in fact a positive and meaningful legacy, worthy of being transferred to future generations. The legacy of falconry, seen as a lesson of history reshaped by our present endeavours and worthy of transfer to the future, encompasses such heterogeneous, but somehow interrelating elements as universalism, diplomatic management of conflicts, cognitive posture of man facing the world and relationship with transcendence, being a model of perfect love and even giving some hints for a gender perspective. The initiative of UNESCO, leading to the protection of the immaterial aspect of human heritage and recognizing its value at the highest institutional level, is based on the growing consciousness that not only monuments or artefacts preserved over time shape the cultural landscape of Man. Culture, evidently, means more than just this. Any material object, monument or exhibit item remains meaningless



A detail from the original manuscript of *De arte venandi cum avibus*, the falconry book by Frederic II, illustrated by anonymous miniaturist, 1240s.

without a living tradition into which it can be inscribed. It makes sense in the context of a tradition and to the bearers of a tradition that those who have inherited it from their ancestors feel deeply interested and concerned in transmitting it to their descendants. Living tradition builds and shapes a community into which a human being can inscribe itself and from which he or she can draw a sense of his or her individual existence, identifying with a larger universe of values, spreading over space and time. Falconry establishes such a community, vehicular of values that can be named, enumerated and persuasively argued. It is not merely a set of techniques destined to tame a bird of prey in order to use it in a hunting expedition or an efficient way to acquire meat. It might have been this at a very distant moment in the past, but it has become much more ever since. Perhaps it is not exaggerated to say that falconry is a state of mind. And if the falconers want to pass this heritage to the future generations, it's not an archaic technique of acquiring meat that they want to transfer, but this special attitude that became a consistent legacy, transmitted over centuries till it came into our hands. It constitutes an important gift for the future. There is a paradox in falconry. It can be considered as a highly individualistic activity, and at the same time it is a vehicle of a subtle communitarian dimension. While falconry is no longer a mark of social distinction, it still remains an expression of the spirit of independence of those who set and demand the highest standards, both for themselves and for those to whom they bestow their friendship. On the other hand, falconry has a power of creating a community of its own kind. The links of closeness, relationship and friendship built over the falconer's



A French translation of the falconry book by Frederic II, elaborated in Flanders and illustrated by an anonymous master active in Bruges, 1482.



A miniature from the Codex Manesse, approx. 1330. A falconer portrait of another member of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, Conrad called the Boy (1252-1268), juvenile king of Sicily and Jerusalem.

passion often cross the frontiers and the habitual boundaries of social class, ethnicity, differences of credo or ideological persuasion. There is a surprising potential of universalism attached to this seemingly down-to-earth activity of training birds to hunt. It becomes obvious when we consider some historical examples.

As early as in 783, a manuscript of a work by Archigenes of Apamea on breeding and taming hawks was included as a part of the tribute offered by the Byzantine empress Irene to establish a truce with the Muslims. Already at this early stage of history, falconry seems to play an important role as a common point of interest, able to redirect the attention of both sides of the conflict towards a loftier sphere of human activity, bringing truce in war. Ever since, birds and all kind of falconry artefacts or literature have been widely used in the aftermath of conflicts as means of re-establishing, at least symbolically, the disturbed order. In different times and

places falcons, rather than gold or precious objects, have been offered and accepted as ransoms. Would it be an exaggeration to call them Birds of Peace?

Falconry and diplomacy went closely together all over the medieval history of Christian-Muslim conflicts and relationships. Independently of the military confrontations, the time of truce was filled both with hunting encounters and exchange of knowledge, artefacts and zoological species used in falconry. An interesting evidence of these close contacts, practised in the Holy Land dominated by the crusaders, is given by Usamah ibn Munqidh in his autobiography, *Kitab al-I'tibar (Book of learning by example)* studied and translated by Philip K. Hitti. This Muslim warrior and courtier living in the times of the Crusades (1095-1188) was the son of the educated emir of Shaizar, 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 Salah ad-Din and of the king of Jerusalem, Fulk. If we believe Usamah's own words, he was bound by mutual ties of amity with numerous European knights. In his autobiographical book, falconry furnishes a constant background for those social relationships, crossing over an ideological gap that could seem impossible to traverse.

This is also how the most famous falconer figure of the Middle Ages, the Emperor Frederic II of Hohenstaufen, first discovered his life-long passion. The crucial moment in the history of European falconry was the 6th crusade (1228-29). This is when Frederic II, the Holy Roman Emperor, but also a ruler closely related to the Eastern Mediterranean as the king of Sicily and of Jerusalem, and in private a great enthusiast for Arab culture, became fascinated with the falconry he learned through personal contacts with representatives of the Islamic world. His teacher in this aspect was, among others, Fakhr ad-Din al-Farisi, a Persian sufi (mystic) and advisor to the sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, who stayed at the Sicilian court as a diplomat. Frederic was interested not only in practical skills, but also in falconry literature which was already an established tradition in the East; successive caliphs not only maintained falconers at their courts, but expected from them a deepened reflection on their art, taking the shape of manuscripts. Frederic came

across at least one and presumably even more of those falconry treatises. Most probably he received the *Kitab al-mutanakkili* (a book dedicated to the caliph al-Mutawakkil, ruling in the 9th century), which he handed over to Master Theodore of Antioch, called the Philosopher, a naturalist and interpreter belonging to his court. In 1241 the emperor made by his own hand some addenda and corrections in the adaptation elaborated by Theodore. This text, *Scientia venandi per aves*, became one of the earliest Latin manuals of falconry circulating in medieval Europe; it has survived in numerous handwritten copies.

The falconry passion of Frederic II was part of his much larger research project concerning birds in general. 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 the experiments he liked to conduct. Being interested in answering numerous ornithological questions Frederic II implemented a well-planned, systematic research program, which should be cited among the earliest projects of this kind in the history of science. He intended to check, for example, if birds have a sense of smell or if chicks can hatch from eggs incubated by the heat of the sun. *De Arte venandi cum avibus* gathers knowledge not only about falconry and hawking, but also more general ornithological observations. No wonder that this work exercised a lasting influence, circulating in Europe. The sound knowledge it gathered didn't become obsolete quickly; on the contrary, the falconry book of Frederic II was a "long-seller" of its time, copied and distributed not only during the Middle Ages, but also during the Renaissance.

But, contrary to the widespread belief, Frederic II was not the originator of this intellectual and cognitive endeavour, closely related to falconry. The adventure started a century earlier. In fact, falconry, a domain which might seem superfluous to our contemporary eyes, was one of the crucial elements of a new, empirical science that had already started to brave its path in the 12th c. It is not an accident that Adelard of Bath, a northern scholar travelling all over the Mediterranean



A touching love scene from the Codex Manesse, approx. 1330. Conrad von Altstetten, poet and knight (end of the 13th – beginning of the 14th c.), enjoying a moment of romance, still with the falcon on his wrist.

in search of knowledge, was also, among 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*. 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 c. by the *Arabica studia*, an empirical domain seen nearly as the opposite in relation to the old type of knowledge, based not on the observation, but mostly on the authority of earlier authors. Novelties, such as those that Adelard could find



Love and falconry mixed together. A portrait of the poet Werner von Teufen (1225-1240) in the Codex Manesse, approx. 1330.

during his seven years long trip around the Mediterranean, became an impulse for a deep change in the attitude of Medieval Man towards nature and a seed for the new *scientia naturalis* flourishing in the 12th c, for during 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.

Nevertheless, the achievements of Frederic II were great and his activity exercised a lasting influence on the falconry tradition. He was the first to bring into the Mediterranean region 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 Mediterranean falconry, where they became 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 practised in such distant places as Great Britain and the Gulf States, such as Qatar or United Arab Emirates. In fact it is a common heritage shaped during the course of medieval contacts and mutual borrowings.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, the tradition spread both westwards and eastwards, becoming not only an entertainment, but also a source of poetic inspiration. It is not by chance that in Germany a magnificently illuminated manuscript, one of the greatest documents of the so called *Minnesang* poetry, is at the same time one of the most interesting sources of falconry iconography. The *Manessische Liederhandschrift* treasured at Heidelberg (also known under its Latin name of *Codex Manesse*) is a collection of courtly love poetry, illustrated with miniatures commemorating the individual figures of kings and great knights, many of them shown together with their birds, accompanying them not only during the hunting expeditions, but also in romantic moments of encounters with beloved ladies.

and intimacy, showing how closely falconry is related to the spiritual and emotional dimensions of human life.

No wonder that falconry can be associated with both the warrior and the courtly elites of the Christian and Muslim world. It was also a passion of intellectuals and men deeply interested in spiritual matters. A cultural tradition that joins the East and the West of the Mediterranean treats the relationship between the falconer and the falcon as a multivalent metaphor expressing the most lofty aspects of human experience. In the East, Sufi poets, such as Rumi (a 13th -century Persian mystic, popularly known and beloved in Turkey under the name of Mevlana), used this metaphor to speak about the mystical relationship between man and God. In a mysterious, but charming poem "The Seed Market", the "perfect falcon" appears at the end, as the most sophisticated and worthy of desire of all the earthly and heavenly treasures:

*Can you find another market like this?
Where,
with your one rose
you can buy hundreds of rose gardens?
Where,
for one seed
get a whole wilderness?
For one weak breath,
a divine wind?
You've been fearful
of being absorbed in the ground,
or drawn up by the air.
Now, your water-bead lets go
and drops into the ocean,
where it came from.
It no longer has the form it had,
but it's still water
The essence is the same.
This giving up is not a repenting.
It's a deep honouring of yourself.
When the ocean comes to you as a lover,
marry at once, quickly,
for God's sake!
Don't postpone it!
Existence has no better gift.
No amount of searching will find this.
A perfect falcon, for no reason
has landed on your shoulder,
and become yours.
(trans. Coleman Barks)*

Compared to this example, Shakespeare might seem terribly down-to-earth using falconry as a parabola of a "perfect" (or in fact not so perfect) marriage in his play *Taming of the Shrew*, where Petruchio, the astute fortune-seeker who courted and finally betrothed Katharina, explains by a falconry metaphor how to reduce a young, rebellious girl into a wifely submission:

*My falcon now is sharp and passing empty;
And till she stoop she must not be full-gorged,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come and know her keeper's call,
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites
That bate and beat and will not be obedient.*

But falconry can be considered as a means of smoothing the disposition of both sexes. The gender aspects are a delicate matter, not easy to speak about. Nevertheless, I must admit that many times the idea crossed my mind that the rejection of the Hunting Tradition is somehow part of a more general

cultural landscape in which the space reserved for traditional male values, virtues, passions and activities has tended to shrink.

The dominant cultural discourse, condemning violence and rejecting "bloodthirsty" hunting practices, brings hidden collateral damage, it destroys the activities that help to positively shape the masculine identity and foster male friendships. Falconry as Intangible Heritage is a legacy of a "wild masculinity" that shapes itself and finds its own vital space of rituals and communitarian identification through the codified cultural practices of falconry and hawking. But, what is to be stressed here, falconry, in its gender aspect, is not based on nor does it foster exclusion. Contrary to many other forms of typically male behaviours or activities, it has never been closed to women. It can be argued that at many a moment in history, falconry was a door permitting women to penetrate into the male world that was closed to them in so many other aspects. Late Medieval and Renaissance falconry (in Europe especially) tended to become a sophisticated, courtly entertainment, accessible also to ladies, as observed around 1410 by the Limbourg brothers on one of the well-known 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. Rather than just another typically male cultural practice, falconry is, once again, a point of contact, a bridge over a gap, this time between masculinity and femininity understood as culturally shaped and codified domains.

In conclusion: many reasons can be pointed out as to why falconry should be maintained as a cultural and spiritual heritage. The preservation of this practice is crucial not just to the benefit of a handful of hobbyists, but to the benefit of whole societies in different parts of the world. For sure, falconry is lived by many of its practitioners as a local activity, building friendships on a small scale. But at the same time, it is a form of culture that opens a door towards a direct, personal experience of universalism, offering an opportunity for cross-cultural contacts. The flight of a falcon opens horizons. It was used as a key, facilitating international and inter-cultural interactions in the past and it still can be used in this function today. Indeed, there is no ideological gap, no difference of credo so great as to divide people, that a common passion for birds of prey cannot put back together again. The decline of the tradition of falconry would indeed belittle the human identity in many aspects. It concerns the relationship both with other men and with the transcendence. It fosters identification, both as a member of a universal community and of a local one. It opens unexplored paths. In all these domains, falcons can offer a great and surprising lesson of being truly human. 🦅