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► **To cite this version:**

Thierry Buquet. The Gyrfalcon in the Middle Ages, an Exotic Bird of Prey (Western Europe and Near East). Burnett, Charles; Van Den Abeele, Baudouin. Falconry in the Mediterranean Context During the Pre-Modern Era, 9, Droz, pp.79-98, 2021, Bibliotheca Cynegetica, 978-2-600-06236-7. hal-02139381

HAL Id: hal-02139381

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02139381>

Submitted on 21 May 2021

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The Gyrfalcon in the Middle Ages, an Exotic Bird of Prey (Western Europe and Near East)

Thierry Buquet, CRAHAM – CNRS – Normandie Université (Caen)¹

Abstract. This paper will consider the medieval trade of the Gyrfalcon as an exotic animal. The exoticism the gyrfalcon is considered from two geographical points of view, Western Europe and Islamic lands. The bird was imported in Muslim countries from Northern Europe (through diplomatic gifts or from Italian and Spanish merchants) or from Russia through Central Asia; Gyrfalcons were also popular in Europe, praised as one of the noblest birds of prey. This study emphasizes three main topics. First, the naming of a foreign animal, as the name “Sunkur” was borrowed in Arabic from Turk languages of Central Asia. The medieval Latin *Gyrfalco* has a German and Old Norse etymology. Second, the paper investigates the geographic origin of this bird (Scandinavia and Russia) according to medieval Latin, Arabic and Persian historians and geographers. Third, the trade of this rare and expensive raptor is studied upon Latin and Arabic sources; during Mamluk dynasty, possessing gyrfalcons have been rather common in Egypt, an elite’s fashion.

The gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) has been a subject of historical studies for the last several decades². Being a specialist in the history of exotic animals and [80] menageries, I will consider the gyrfalcon as an exotic bird, in the general context of the transportation of foreign fauna, imported from far distant lands³. Thus, I will emphasize three main areas: the naming of a foreign animal; its geographic origin according to medieval authors; and the trade in this bird, its very high cost, and its use as a royal gift or tribute. I will consider this exoticism from two geographic points of view, Western Europe and Islamic lands, since the history of exotic northern fauna in these regions has not been studied in great detail⁴.

¹ I want to thank warmly Mike Carr and José Manuel Fradejas Rueda for bringing to my attention sources unknown to me, Ingrid De Smet for sending her forthcoming paper and Baudouin Van den Abeele for his comments and suggestions.

² I. DE SMET, ‘Princess of the North: Perceptions of the Gyrfalcon in Sixteenth-Century Western Europe’, in *Raptor and Human: Falconry and Bird Symbolism throughout the Millennia on a Global Scale*, ed. K.-H. GERSMANN and O. GRIMM, Kiel and Hamburg, 2018, vol. 4, p. 1543-1569; N. Mehler, ‘The export of gyrfalcons from Iceland during the 16th century: a boundless business in a proto-globalized world’, in *Raptor and Human: Falconry and Bird Symbolism throughout the Millennia on a Global Scale*, ed. K.-H. GERSMANN and O. GRIMM, Kiel and Hamburg, 2018, vol. 3, p. 995-1020; S. AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons, from Medieval Times to the Modern Era*, Siglufjörður, 2015; S. SBOLZANI, ‘Una star del XVI secolo. Un mirabile ritratto di girifalco forse dipinto per il duca di Mantova’, in *Civiltà Mantovana*, 50.140 (2015), p. 100-109; S. MELANI, ‘Alcune note sparse per servire a una storia medievale del girifalco’, in *Tabulae del Centro studi Federiciani*, 48 (2013), p. 89-122; R. VAUGHAN, *In Search of Arctic Birds*, London, 2010, p. 83-85; T. ALLSEN, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, Philadelphia, 2006, p. 244-252; S. FUKS and H. VAN DER WINDT, ‘De IJslandse giervalk, een koninklijke vogel’, in *Jaarboek Ecologische Geschiedenis* (2004), p. 137-152; S. JACQUESSON, ‘La chasse au vol en Asie centrale : savoirs et pratiques’, PhD thesis, Inalco-EHESS, 2000, p. 188-216; S. FUKS and C. PARPOIL, ‘Le gerfaut d’Islande, prérogative royale’, in *La chasse au vol au fil des temps, 5 Juin-23 Octobre 1994*, ed. C. PARPOIL and T. VINCENT, Gien, 1994, p. 109-113; G.P. DEMENTIEV, *Der Gerfalke (Falco rusticolus L.: Falco gyrfalco L.)*, Wittenberg Lutherstadt, 1960 (Neue Brehm-Bücherei, 264); S. BATTAGLIA, ‘De falconibus et girofalcis’, in *Filologia Romanza*, 5, fasc. 3-4, 19-20 (1958), p. 388-433.

³ T. BUQUET, ‘Aspects matériels du don d’animaux exotiques dans les échanges diplomatiques’, in *Culture matérielle et contacts diplomatiques entre l’Occident latin, Byzance et l’Orient islamique (XI^e-XVI^e s.)*, Actes du colloque de Liège, 27-28 avril 2015, ed. N. DROCOURT, F. BAUDEN and S. PÉQUIGNOT, Leiden (forthcoming).

⁴ O. VASSILIEVA-CODOGNET, ‘Plus blans que flours de lis: Blanchart l’ours blanc de *Renart le Nouvel*, les ménageries royales et les encyclopédies du XIII^e s.’, in *Reinardus*, 27 (2015), p. 220-248; W. PARAVICINI, ‘Tiere aus den Norden’, in *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 59.2 (2003), p. 549-591;

The gyrfalcon is not native to Western Europe, nor to Arabic or Persian regions⁵. It is exclusively an animal of the north, inhabiting an area from Greenland to Siberia (and even to northern Canada). The present wintering area of the bird extends moderately into more southern areas⁶. Some rare vagrant specimens have been [81] observed on the Atlantic coast near Portugal (1978) and the Azores⁷. Around 1380, Pero Lopez de Ayala relates in his treatise on falconry that a white gyrfalcon given to the king of France had been caught near La Rochelle, on the island of Oleron⁸. But these are exceptions for this Nordic raptor. Knowledge of these distant regions was very limited in Western Europe, the Mediterranean area and the Near East. Despite this, medieval falconers from both sides of the Mediterranean Sea were very curious about this bird, for they considered the gyrfalcon as one of the very best raptor species for falconry. In fact, the gyrfalcon is the largest of all European falcons, hence it could be trained to capture spectacular game, such as cranes.

For example, Albertus Magnus praised its qualities, power, fierceness and ability to fly and hunt. He ranked it in second place in the hierarchy of falcons, just behind the saker⁹. The Emperor Frederick II devotes an entire book to the training of gyrfalcons in his *De arte venandi cum avibus*, and states that ‘in genere falconum girofalcus nobilior est’ (the gyrfalcon is the nobler among the species of falcons)¹⁰. The Arabo-Latin treatise known as the *Liber Moamin* says that the gyrfalcon is the first kind of falcon, as it is the noblest¹¹. His judgement is paralleled in some of the earliest Western treatises (Guillelmus Falconarius and Daude de Pradas)¹². As a consequence of the ‘celebrity’ of this bird, and in spite of its exoticism, it appears quite often from the twelfth century onwards in medieval literature¹³. The bird was also very much praised by Arab authors. In the fourteenth century, al-Nuwayrī writes that the gyrfalcon is among the noblest of the birds of prey¹⁴. [82]

VAUGHAN, *In Search of Arctic Birds*; R. VAUGHAN, ‘The Arctic in the Middle Ages’, in *Journal of Medieval History*, 8.4 (1982), p. 313–342; W. PARAVICINI, ‘Animaux pour un roi mourant. Louis XI et les Hanséates entre 1479 et 1483’, in *Commerce, Finances et Société (XI^e–VI^e siècle). Recueil de travaux d’histoire médiévale offert à M. Le Professeur Henri Dubois*, ed. P. CONTAMINE, T. DUFOUR and B. SCHNERB, Paris, 1993 (Cultures et civilisations médiévales, 9), p. 101–121; H. EISENSTEIN, ‘Zu Drei Nordeuropäischen Tieren aus Ibn Sa’id’s Geographie’, in *Acta Orientalia*, 54 (1993), p. 53–61.

⁵ The biological reference book is E. POTAPOV and R. SALE, *The Gyrfalcon*, London, 2005.

⁶ POTAPOV and SALE, *The Gyrfalcon*, p. 174–177.

⁷ AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons*, p. 28; POTAPOV and SALE, *The Gyrfalcon*, p. 182.

⁸ Pero López de Ayala, *Libro de la caza de las aves*, adaptation in modern Spanish by J. Manuel FRADEJAS RUEDA and J. FRADEJAS LEBRERO, Barcelona, 2016, p. 122. La Rochelle was taken from the English with the help of the Castilian fleet (note 194, same page).

⁹ Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus Libri XXVI*, ed. H. STADLER, Münster, 1916 (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, 15–16), p. 1458–1459 (chapter XXIII, 6).

¹⁰ Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *L’art de chasser avec les oiseaux: le traité de fauconnerie De arte venandi cum avibus*, French trans. A. PAULUS and B. VAN DEN ABEELE, Nogent-le-Roi, 2000 (Bibliotheca cynegetica, 1), chapter III.1.

¹¹ S. GEORGES, *Das zweite Falkenbuch Kaiser Friedrichs II: Quellen, Entstehung, Überlieferung und Rezeption des Moamin*, Berlin, 2008 (Wissenskultur und gesellschaftlicher Wandel, 27), p. 122; *Moamin et Ghatrif. Traités de fauconnerie et des chiens de chasse. Édition princeps de la version franco-italienne*, ed. H. TJERNELD, Stockholm and Paris, 1945 (Studia Romanica Holmiensia, 1), p. 99.

¹² R.S. OGGINS, *The Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England*, New Haven, CT, 2004, p. 12–13.

¹³ B. VAN DEN ABEELE, *La fauconnerie dans les lettres françaises du XI^e au XIV^e s.*, Leuven, 1990 (Mediaevalia Lovaniensia. Series 1, 18), *passim*.

¹⁴ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, al-Qāhira, 1929–1998, vol. X, p. 204.

Naming the gyrfalcon in Arabic

The name of the gyrfalcon in Arabic and Persian languages was borrowed from Central Asia (Mongol or Turkic): *sunkur*¹⁵, with some variations such as *sonkār*, *šunkār*, *sonkor*, etc., influenced by varying distributions of the long vowels *alif* or *waw*. The most usual form is *sunqur*, without *alif* or *waw*, plural *sanāqir*¹⁶. As a loanword, this name seems to emerge quite late in Persian and Arabic literature. For example, al-Ġitrīf (eighth century) does not mention the gyrfalcon in his hunting treatise¹⁷; nor is it recorded by al-Ġāḥiẓ (died AD 867) in his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*¹⁸. The *sunkur* is not cited in the ninth-century falconry book of the caliph al-Mutawakkil¹⁹, and the falconer of the caliph al-ʿAzīz, in his tenth-century falconry book, also ignores the gyrfalcon²⁰.

The earliest mention of this raptor can be found in the first Persian treatise on falconry, dating from the eleventh century, the *Bāz-Nāmā (History of Falcons)* by al-Nasavī. This author only knew the animal by name: 'it is not found in these regions; I have been told that it used to be taken from Turkestan to the courts of [the Ghaznavid]'²¹. The Ghaznavid kings ruled over Iran and Pakistan from the end of the tenth century onward. This testimony suggests that the gyrfalcon was known, but very rare, in Persia long before the Mongol invasions²². Starting from Central Asia, a passion for gyrfalcons seems to spread westwards thanks to the Mongol Conquest²³. If we except al-Nasavī, the first Arabic and Persian [83] sources mentioning the *sunqur* date from the Mamluk period in the thirteenth century²⁴.

We find the gyrfalcon in the *Marvels of the Creation* by Zakariyā b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī²⁵, and in his epigone Hamdullāh al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī, the latter mentioning that the *šunqar* is known by this name in the Turkic, Persian and Mongolian languages²⁶. The zoonym *sunqur* is also found in the encyclopedia of hunting by al-Asadī from thirteenth-century Baghdad, transmitted by Ibn Manglī in the fourteenth century²⁷. In

¹⁵ H. EISENSTEIN, *Einführung in die arabische Zoographie. Das tierkundliche Wissen in der arabisch-islamischen Literatur*, Berlin, 1992, p. 62, p. 180 note 88.

¹⁶ F. VIRÉ, 'Essai de détermination des oiseaux-de-vol mentionnés dans les principaux manuscrits arabes médiévaux sur la fauconnerie', in *Arabica*, 24.2 (1977), p. 138–149: 144.

¹⁷ Al-Ġitrīf ibn Qudama al-Ghassani, *Traité des oiseaux de vol*, Kitāb ḍawārī al-ṭayr: *le plus ancien traité de fauconnerie arabe*, French trans. F. VIRÉ and D. MÖLLER, Nogent-le-Roi, 2002 (Bibliotheca cynegetica, 3).

¹⁸ 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Kitāb Al-Ḥayawān*, ed. A.S.M. HĀRŪN, 7 vols, Le Caire, 1938.

¹⁹ *Das Falken- und Hundebuch des Kalifen al-Mutawakkil: ein arabischer Traktat aus dem 9. Jahrhundert*, ed. A. AKASOY and S. GEORGES, Berlin, 2005.

²⁰ F. VIRÉ, 'Le traité de l'art de volerie (*Kitāb al-bayzara*) rédigé vers 385/995 par le grand-fauconnier fu Calife fāṭimide al-ʿAzīz Bi-llāh, I–IV', in *Arabica*, 12.1 (1965), p. 1–26; 12.2 (1965), p. 13–139; 12.3 (1965), p. 262–296; 13.1 (1966), p. 39–76.

²¹ H. AʿLAM, 'Bāzdārī', in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 1989, IV, fasc. 1, p. 53–58, citing Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Aḥmad Nasavī, *Bāz-Nāmā*, ed. A. ĠARAWĪ, Teheran, 1975, p. 155–156.

²² Some authors consider that the gyrfalcon and its name were introduced in the Near East through the Mongol invasions: JACQUESSON, 'La chasse au vol en Asie centrale . . .', p. 203–204.

²³ ALLSEN, *The Royal Hunt . . .*, p. 246.

²⁴ See the long and erudite note on *sunqur* by Quatremère in his edition of Aḥmad ibn 'Alī Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks, de l'Égypte, écrite en arabe par Taki-Eddin-Ahmed-Makrizi*, ed. É. QUATREMÈRE, Paris, 1837 (Oriental Translation Fund, 47), p. 91–95.

²⁵ G. JACOB, *Welche Handelsartikel Bezogen die Araber des Mittelalters aus den nordisch-baltischen Ländern?*, Berlin, 1891, p. 54.

²⁶ Hamdullāh al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī, *The Zoological Section of the Nuzhatu-l-Qulūb of Hamdullāh al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī*, ed. J. STEPHENSON, London, 2007 [facsimile edn] (The Muslim World, 1100–1700, 7; Royal Asiatic Society Classics of Islam, 2), p. 76.

²⁷ Ibn Manglī, *De la chasse : commerce des grands de ce monde avec les bêtes sauvages des déserts sans onde*, French trans. F. VIRÉ, Paris, 1984 (La Bibliothèque Arabe. Les Classiques), p. 133–134.

the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some Mamluk authors mentioned this bird, always under the name of *sunqur* or its derivatives²⁸.

One famous anecdote is often cited about the gyrfalcon. According to an Arabic source, Philippe II Auguste, king of France, lost his white falcon near the city of Acre, in April 1191²⁹. The author Abū Šāma (d. 1268) says that this falcon was a rare species and of great size. The sultan did not want to return the bird, not even for the 1,000 dinars promised by the king³⁰. The source does not use the word *sunqur* but talks about a white falcon: *bāz abyāḍ* (white falcon) or *ašhab* (pale or greyish)³¹. *Bāz* means hawk or goshawk, but is used as a generic term for all birds of prey, especially falcons. It seems that this zoonym gave rise to the word *bayzara*, 'falconry'³². There is little doubt about the identification of the bird: the description (great size, rare species) strongly suggests that it was a gyrfalcon, a bird still relatively unknown at that time in the Near East. It is striking that the Arab author cannot actually name this falcon precisely, probably because of the unfamiliarity of the Arab falconers with the gyrfalcon at the end of the twelfth century. [84]

Later on, several authors remarked that the gyrfalcon was still not well known in their time: for example, al-Nuwayrī remarks at the beginning of the fourteenth century that he needs to talk about the gyrfalcon (*sunqur*), because authors and experts have failed to study this bird³³. To illustrate this lack of information, one may notice that Ibn Munqid̄ does not mention gyrfalcons in his memoirs (second half of the twelfth century) when he talks about different birds of prey used in falconry: his father hunted with the hawk (*bāz*), the saker (*saqr*) and the peregrine falcon (*šāhīn*) – but not with the *sunqur*³⁴.

Origin according to Arab authors

1. The eastern origin

Arab and Persian authors locate the provenance of gyrfalcons in two distinct areas. First, the gyrfalcon is said to come from Central Asia, namely Turkestan, as recorded by al-Nasavī³⁵ and Zakariyā b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī³⁶. On the other hand, Ibn Manglī, quoting al-Asadī, says that it comes from Georgia³⁷. The gyrfalcon does not live permanently in these areas, but François Viré wrote that the Caucasus is the southernmost region where it comes for wintering³⁸, a piece of information not confirmed by Potapov and Sale³⁹.

²⁸ See Quatremère's note: al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks*, I, p. 90–95.

²⁹ AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons*, p. 34.

³⁰ Abū Šāma, *Le Livre des deux jardins. Histoire des deux règnes, celui de Nour ed-Dīn et celui de Salah ed-Dīn*, ed. C. BARBIER DE MEYNARD, Paris, 1872 (Recueil des historiens des croisades, Historiens orientaux, 4–5), II, p. 6–7.

³¹ Abū Šāma cites several sources that use different adjectives, *abyāḍ* or *ašhab*.

³² F. VIRÉ, 'Bayzara', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, Leiden, 1986, vol. 1 (A–B), p. 1152–1155.

³³ Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat . . .*, vol. X, p. 204.

³⁴ Usāma ibn Munqid̄, *Des enseignements de la vie: souvenirs d'un gentilhomme syrien du temps des Croisades*, French trans. A. MIQUEL, Paris, 1983 (Collection orientale), p. 384–409. In the nineteenth-century edition, Derenbourg falsely translated *šāhīn* (peregrine falcon) as gyrfalcon: Usāma ibn Munqid̄, *Souvenirs historiques et récits de chasse par un émir syrien du XIII^e siècle: Autobiographie d'Ousāma Ibn Mounkidh intitulée l'Instruction par les exemples (Kitāb Al-ī'tibār)*, trans. H. DERENBOURG, Paris, 1895, II, p. 122, 184, 186.

³⁵ H. A'LAM, 'Bāzdārī'.

³⁶ See Quatremère's note: al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks . . .*, p. 91.

³⁷ Ibn Manglī, *De la chasse . . .*, p. 133.

³⁸ Ibn Manglī, *De la chasse . . .*, p. 272 note 231.

³⁹ POTAPOV and SALE, *The Gyrfalcon*, p. 9 (distribution map), 175–177.

These ‘errors’ in the writings of Arabic and Persian authors could be explained in three ways. First, geographic locations can be quite approximate in the Middle Ages; Russia, for instance, was little known by Arab geographers. Regions of southern wintering for gyrfalcons may have been more extended in past times than at present. Finally, Georgia and Turkestan may have been the lands where [85] the birds were purchased and imported from northern Russia, especially the Altai region where gyrfalcons have been seen wintering⁴⁰.

Earlier mentions of white falcons (*al-bazāt al-bayād*) living in the islands near Georgia, such as by al-Mas‘ūdī in the tenth century, are uncertain. As previously mentioned, *bāz* is a generic term for falcon. But it is not impossible that the bird in question is the gyrfalcon, for Mas‘ūdī says that this white bird is fearless, that it is the strongest and fastest falcon, and that it flies from high above⁴¹. Ibn Quštimur, author of a book on falconry, tells that in 1260/1261 he saw gyrfalcons coming from the east, from Mongolia⁴². Gyrfalcons had been used for hunting in Eastern Han China (AD 25–220), according to pictorial evidence⁴³, and later in China and Mongolia from the Tang dynasty (seventh–tenth century)⁴⁴. Several testimonies indicate that gyrfalcons were sent as diplomatic gifts from Eastern kingdoms to the Near East (for example, from the rulers of Kipšaq)⁴⁵, in a well-established tradition of using gyrfalcons as tributes in China and Mongolia⁴⁶.

2. The northern origin

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Arab authors described *sanāqir* as coming from Northern Europe⁴⁷. Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī says these birds are plentiful in Europe and live in cold countries⁴⁸. The geographer Ibn Sa‘īd says that you can find white gyrfalcons on northern islands, one called *ḥarmusa*⁴⁹ or *Ĝ-r-m-w-n-y-a*⁵⁰, [86] which is twelve days long by four days wide in the middle; other western islands are called the isles of white gyrfalcons (*ġaziratu al-sanāqiri al-bīḍi*). One of these isles probably is Iceland⁵¹.

Al-Širazi (fourteenth century) says that gyrfalcons come from Ireland, which could be a misunderstanding of Iceland⁵². Knowledge of Northern Europe was rather poor and imprecise in Arabic texts, even in al-Idrīsī’s remarkable geographic treatise written at

⁴⁰ POTAPOV and SALE, *The Gyrfalcon*, p. 176.

⁴¹ Abu al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Les Prairies d’or* (Murūġ al-ḍahab wa ma‘ādin al-ġawhar), ed. and trans. C. BARBIER DE MEYNARD and A. PAVET DE COURTEILLE, Paris, 1861 (Collection d’ouvrages orientaux), II, p. 27–28.

⁴² EISENSTEIN, ‘Zu drei nordeuropäischen Tieren . . .’, p. 59–60.

⁴³ L.V. WALLACE, ‘Representations of Falconry in Eastern Han China (A.D. 25–220)’, in *Journal of Sport History*, 39.1 (2012), p. 99–109.

⁴⁴ JACQUESSON, ‘La chasse au vol en Asie centrale . . .’, p. 189–195.

⁴⁵ Quatremère’s note in al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks . . .*, p. 93–95.

⁴⁶ ALLSEN, *The Royal Hunt . . .*, p. 246–247.

⁴⁷ EISENSTEIN, ‘Zu drei nordeuropäischen Tieren . . .’, p. 77–79; A.I. SAMARRA’I, ‘Arabic Sources on the Norse: English Translation and Notes Based on the Texts Edited by Alexander Seippel in *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici*’, PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1959, *passim*; A. SEIPPEL, *Rerum Normannicarum fontes arabici*, Oslo, 1896, *passim*; JACOB, *Welche handelsartikel . . .*, p. 54–55.

⁴⁸ Hamdullāh al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī, *The Zoological Section of the Nuzhatu-L-Qulūb . . .*, p. 76.

⁴⁹ SAMARRA’I, ‘Arabic Sources on the Norse . . .’, p. 188; SEIPPEL, *Rerum Normannicarum . . .*, p. 138.

⁵⁰ Another reading of this word (according to the Beirut 1970 Arabic edition): EISENSTEIN, ‘Zu drei nordeuropäischen Tieren . . .’, p. 59.

⁵¹ EISENSTEIN, ‘Zu drei nordeuropäischen Tieren . . .’, p. 58–59.

⁵² SEIPPEL, *Rerum Normannicarum . . .*, p. 142 (Arabic pagination).

the court of King Roger II of Sicily; in fact he makes no mention at all of the Scandinavian fauna⁵³.

In both cases (northern or eastern origin), the gyrfalcons are always called *sunqur* in Arabic texts, suggesting that Arabs and Persians learned about this bird from Caucasian people before getting to know the gyrfalcons from the Arctic.

I was not able to find any Arabic or Persian source prior to the thirteenth century mentioning gyrfalcons from Northern Europe: their Nordic origin seems to be unknown to Arab authors before 1200. The Latin *Moamin*, translated from an earlier Arabic treatise, describes gyrfalcons as coming from Denmark and Norway⁵⁴; but this might be an addition of the translator at the court of his patron Frederick II (who was well informed about the bird's northern origins, as we will see).

Naming the gyrfalcon in Latin

The origin of the name 'gyrfalcon' in Latin and Western languages has been debated since the nineteenth century. Scholars agree on a German etymology: *gīr*, meaning 'vulture' (German *geier*), for the first part of the word, and 'falcon' (or *fau* in Old French, derived from *falc*) for the second part. The German word *gerfalch* may derive from the Old Norse word *geirfalki*, which gives the etymon *gerfalco* in Western languages⁵⁵. [87]

The earliest written mentions of the gyrfalcon can be found in archival documents, the English pipe rolls. The first mention dates from 1130, during the reign of Henry I⁵⁶; a few other mentions also go back to this century⁵⁷.

In French literature, the first occurrences of *girfaus* or *gerfaus* date from the fourth quarter of the twelfth century, the oldest being from Guillaume de Berneville's *Vie de Saint Gilles* (1170). Other epics and romances include *Anseis de Metz*, *Roman d'Alexandre* (decasyllabic version), *Les Narbonnais*, *Conquête de Jérusalem*, *Chanson d'Antioche*, *Yon* (or *Vengeance Fromondin*), Renaud de Beaujeu's *Bel inconnu*, and *Gui de Warewick*⁵⁸.

In the same period, the Sicilian author of a treatise on falconry, Guillelmus Falconarius, calls the birds *girifalchi* (but this word may be a later addition in later manuscripts)⁵⁹. Giraldus Cambrensis, in his *Topographia Hibernica* (1188), calls the bird *gyrofalco*, and explains the etymology of this zoonym as *gyro faciendo*, that is to say, 'doing circles'⁶⁰. This explanation was also retained by Alexander Neckam at the beginning of the thirteenth century: 'Girofalcones a giro dicti sunt, eo quod in girum et circuitus multos tempus expendunt' ('Gyrfalcons are named after the word *giro*, as they spend their time in circles and frequent circuits')⁶¹. Albertus Magnus provides the same

⁵³ Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Šarīf Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Idrīsī, *La première géographie de l'Occident*, trans. H. BRESCH and A. NEF, Paris, 1999 (GF Flammarion, 1069), p. 458–464.

⁵⁴ GEORGES, *Das zweite Falkenbuch Kaiser Friedrichs II. . .*, p. 122; *Moamin et Ghatrif. . .*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons*, p. 16–17; W. VON WARTBURG and O. BLOCH, 'Gīr', in *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 16 (Germanismes G–R), Basel, 1966, p. 43; G. BAIST, 'Falco', in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 27 (1883), p. 57–60.

⁵⁶ OGGINS, *The Kings and Their Hawks . . .*, p. 53.

⁵⁷ 'Girfalco', *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, fasc. IV F-G-H, ed. D.R. HOWLETT, Oxford, 1989, p. 1077.

⁵⁸ VAN DEN ABEELE, *La fauconnerie dans les lettres françaises . . .*, *passim*, and *Corpus*, p. 266–316: *Corpus* I. 28, 32, 94, 139, 236, 265, 297, 392, 423 and *Corpus* II. 23, 134, 360.

⁵⁹ MELANI, 'Alcune note sparse . . .', p. 97 note 15.

⁶⁰ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Giraldi Cambrensis opera. V. Topographia Hibernica et Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. J.F. DIMOCK, London, 1861 (Rerum britannicarum Medii aevi scriptores), p. 38 (I, 12).

⁶¹ Alexander Neckam, *Alexandri Neckam De Naturis rerum libri duo with the poem of the same author De Laudibus Divinae Sapientiae*, ed. T. WRIGHT, London, 1863 (Rerum britannicarum Medii aevi scriptores, 34), p. 77 (I, 26).

explanation: the bird is named because of the way it spirals (*gyrando*)⁶². The French medieval translations of Albertus's *De falconibus*⁶³ have *tournoiant, girant*⁶⁴.

In contrast, Frederick, in his *De arte venandi cum avibus*, has recourse to a Greek etymology: *gyro* comes from the Greek *hieros* (*sacer*: sacred, holy) or from *kyrios* (master, *dominus*)⁶⁵. Thus the gyrfalcon is said to be the *dominus falco*, the **[88]** lord of falcons – which is not surprising according to Frederick's mind, for he considers that the gyrfalcon is the noblest among the species of falcons⁶⁶.

All these medieval etymologies have been abandoned today⁶⁷.

Herodius

One can find another zoonym for gyrfalcon in medieval Latin encyclopedias: *herodius*, which is the name of a bird in the Latin bible. Medieval glosses interpret this animal first as a bird of prey, and later as a falcon⁶⁸. Two encyclopedists identify the *herodius* with the gyrfalcon, Bartholomaeus Anglicus (*De proprietatibus rerum* 12.21, *erodius*)⁶⁹ and Thomas Cantimpratensis (*Liber de natura rerum* 5.4, *herodius*)⁷⁰. Thomas quotes the *Glossa ordinaria* for this bird: *herodius* (as a bird) is present in four verses of the bible (Lev. 11.19, Deut. 14.16, Job 39.13 and Ps. 103.17). The identification perhaps arises from the fact that *accipiter* follows *herodius* in the same verse of the book of Job⁷¹. *Herodius* is not explained in the main commentary of the *Glossa ordinaria* but in the interlinear gloss, in Deut. 14.16: 'gryfalco (*sic*) vulgo rapit aquilam' ('gyrfalcon, in vernacular, which captures the eagle')⁷². We find the same idea in Thomas's chapter on the eagle: 'De solo girfalco Glosa dicit, quod capit aquilam' (5.4)⁷³. Thomas suggests a synonymy between *herodius* and 'gyrfalcon' in two other chapters: 'Herodius qui est girfale . . . vel girfalus dicitur' (5.44) and 'Octavum genus est illud, quod herodius **[89]** vel vulgariter gyrfalcus dicitur' (5.50)⁷⁴. Other biblical glossators mentioned that the *herodius* was a falcon: Hugues de Saint-Cher, in Lev. 11.19: 'qui vulgo falco dicitur avis velox & rapida in praeda'⁷⁵; in Deut. 14.16, where he only cites the *Glossa ordinaria* ('Gl. grifalco vulgo')⁷⁶. We find a literal explanation (*glossa literalis*) in Nicolas of Lyra on Lev.

⁶² Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, p. 1458 (XXIII, cap. 6).

⁶³ Albertus inserted this treatise in his *De animalibus*.

⁶⁴ A. SMETS, 'À la recherche du traducteur français le plus fidèle du *De falconibus*', in *Pratiques de traduction au Moyen Âge – Medieval Translation Practices*, ed. P. ANDERSEN, Copenhagen, 2004, p. 198.

⁶⁵ Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *L'art de chasser avec les oiseaux . . .*, p. 182 (II.R.5).

⁶⁶ See note 10.

⁶⁷ For the most recent study on gyrfalcon etymology in humanist treatises, see DE SMET, 'Princess of the North . . .', vol. 4, p. 1545–1546.

⁶⁸ *Herodius* is a Latin form of the Greek ἐρωδιός (*herodios*), the heron, which was also called *ardea* in Latin. For a complete study of the evolution of the zoonym *herodius*, referring first to the heron, then to the falcon, and finally to the gyrfalcon, see C. WILLE, 'Der Reiher, das Neunauge und der Igel. Tiernamen im romanischen Mittelalter', in *Tiere und Fabelwesen im Mittelalter. Zu ihrer Bedeutung in Wissenschaft, Religion, Geschichte, bildender Kunst und Literatur*, ed. S. OBERMAIER, Berlin and New York, 2009, p. 79–101 (see p. 83–85 on the medieval identification of the *herodius* as a falcon or a gyrfalcon). This section of my paper focuses on the thirteenth century and gives complementary information to Wille's paper.

⁶⁹ Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Bartholomaei Anglici de genuinis rerum caelestium, terrestrium et inferarum proprietatibus libri XVIII*, Frankfurt, 1601, p. 538.

⁷⁰ Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, ed. H. BOESE, Berlin and New York, 1973, p. 196.

⁷¹ P.A. SHAW, 'Telling a Hawk from an *Herodio*: On the Origins and Development of the Old English Word *Wealhhafoec* and Its Relatives', in *Medium Ævum*, 82.1 (2013), p. 1–22: 2, 8.

⁷² *Bibliorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, I, Venice, 1603, col. 1541.

⁷³ Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, p. 179.

⁷⁴ Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, p. 196, 199.

⁷⁵ Hugues de Saint-Cher, *Postilla Hugonis de Sancto Charo*, Venice, 1703, I, f. 111v.

⁷⁶ Hugues de Saint-Cher, *Postilla . . .*, I, f. 160.

11.13: 'Herodionem: falconem, quia est avis rapax' ('a falcon, because it is a bird of prey')⁷⁷.

The medieval *glossae* seem to be built upon some vernacular identification between *herodius* and 'gyrfalcon'. For example, *herodius* is translated in French in the fourteenth century into *gerfaut* by Jean Corbechon in his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus⁷⁸, although Bartholomaeus did not write that the *herodius* was directly synonymous with the gyrfalcon. Thomas of Cantimpré, in contrast, identifies *herodius* with the gyrfalcon ('herodius vel vulgariter gyrfalco dicitur'), and the illuminator of Valenciennes MS 320 had no problem with depicting this bird to illustrate the text. In the margin of folio 94, there is an instruction for the illuminator (the note has been partly cut away when the volume was rebound): '1. Gyrfal...'⁷⁹ The *herodius* is mentioned by James of Vitry in his *Historia orientalis* as a Greek name for the bird called *diomedia*⁸⁰. This bird is clearly not a falcon in the text. But an anonymous Old French version of the *Historia orientalis*, dating from the thirteenth century, chose to translate *herodius* as *girfaut*⁸¹. In some manuscripts of the travels of William of Rubrouk, the word *girfalcons* is surrounded by two points that seem to isolate the word from its context ('Habent falcones girfalcons et herodios . . .') between two Latin words and thus may confirm its status as commentary⁸². These translations seem to show that [90] in the thirteenth century, as Thomas of Cantimpré said, *gerfaut* and *herodius* were considered to be synonyms in French⁸³.

In contrast, Albertus Magnus identifies the *herodius* with an eagle. He gives an etymology for *herodius*: 'nobilis aquila vocatur et haec herodius Latine, quasi heros avium vocatur' ('is called the "noble eagle" as well as *herodius* in Latin, named, as it were, the hero of the birds')⁸⁴. As Albertus disagreed with the identification of *herodius* with the gyrfalcon, he chose to omit Thomas's entry on the *herodius*. Thus he devotes an entire, very detailed chapter to the gyrfalcon (under the name *gyrofalco*) in his *De falconibus*, whereas Thomas has no direct entry under 'gyrfalcon'⁸⁵.

Geographic origin according to Latin authors

Latin medieval authors mainly ignore the eastern origin of the gyrfalcon, with the notable exception of Marco Polo, who cites gyrfalcons at the court of Kublai Khan. When he describes the land of Bargu⁸⁶ in the northern regions of Russia, he says that these

⁷⁷ *Biblorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria*, I, col. 1005.

⁷⁸ Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Le Livre des propriétés des choses*, trans. Jean CORBECHON, Lyon, 1485, XII, cap. 21.

⁷⁹ Ms. Valenciennes, BM, 320, f. 94 (circa 1280).

⁸⁰ Jacques de Vitry, *Histoire orientale = Historia orientalis*, ed. and trans. J. DONNADIEU, Turnhout, 2008 (Sous la règle de saint Augustin, 12), p. 372–373; Jacques de Vitry, *Histoire Orientale*, ed. M.-G. GROSSEL, Paris, 2005 (Traductions des classiques du Moyen Âge, 72), p. 273.

⁸¹ Jacques de Vitry, *La traduction de l'Historia orientalis de Jacques de Vitry, Manuscrit français 17203, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*, ed. C. BURIDANT, Paris, 1986 (Bibliothèque française et romane, Série B : Édition critique de textes, 19), p. 147.

⁸² William of Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l'empire Mongol, 1253–1255*, French trans. C. KAPPLER, R. KAPPLER, R. MICHAUD, Paris, 2007 [3rd edn] (Voyages et découvertes), p. 233 note 4.

⁸³ It seems not to be the case in Spanish. Vincente de Burgos, in his translation of Bartholomaeus, gives *açor* (goshawk) for *erodius*. *El libro de las propiedades de las cosas*, trans. Vincente de Burgos, Toulouse, 1494, sign. f IIIIV.

⁸⁴ Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, p. 1433 (XXIII, tract. 1.1). The English translation is taken from Albertus Magnus, *On Animals: A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, trans. K.F. KITCHELL and I.M. RESNICK, Baltimore, 1999 (Foundations of natural history), p. 1547.

⁸⁵ Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, p. 1458–1459.

⁸⁶ P. PELLIOT, *Notes on Marco Polo. I. Abacan–Çulficar*, ed. L. HAMBIS, Paris, 1959, p. 76–79.

lands produce gyrfalcons and peregrine falcons, and that they are exported from there⁸⁷. In another chapter, Marco Polo describes Kublai Khan's hunting with gyrfalcons (he may have possessed 500 of them). Kublai imported these birds from the north in Russia⁸⁸. Another great traveller in Central Asia, William of Rubrouck, describes captive gyrfalcons used for hawking by Mongol hunters⁸⁹. Except in this kind of travelogue, Latin authors ignore this part of the world and only talk about Scandinavia and Iceland being the place of origin of gyrfalcons. Importations of gyrfalcons from Russia do not occur in Europe until the sixteenth century⁹⁰. This origin will be reported by humanist [91] authors⁹¹ such as Conrad Gessner⁹², Pierre Belon⁹³ and Charles d'Arcussia, who mentions the gyrfalcon as coming from Armenia⁹⁴. Guillaume Tardif, in the second half of the fifteenth century, is the first to mention Prussia (near Russia according to him) as a geographical origin of the gyrfalcon, of the same importance as Scandinavia ('Gerfaut naist es partie froides et en Dacie, Novergie et Pruce vers la Roucie')⁹⁵. Tardif provides complementary information on his source, the medieval hunting treatise entitled *Moamin*, in which it was written that gyrfalcons 'neist es parties froides, ensi com est en Dacie et en Norvege' (original Latin: 'nascitur in partibus frigidis, ut in Dacia et Noruegia')⁹⁶. Jacques-Auguste de Thou says that its habitat is the arctic and sub-arctic regions⁹⁷.

This brings us back to the twelfth century with the first mentions of gyrfalcons. Giraldus Cambrensis says that 'the Northern and Arctic regions produce and send out' ('borealis arctoaque regio gignit et mittit') gyrfalcons; he adds in another passage that these birds come from Iceland, which is the first mention of this provenance⁹⁸. Giraldus was a member of the court of Henry II. He probably heard of or saw birds imported from Iceland or Norway, since they are mentioned in the pipe rolls, as we have seen⁹⁹.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, gyrfalcons are mainly said to come from Norway. For example, Guillelmus falconarius wrote: 'Sunt falcones qui vocantur girifalchi, qui conversantur in Noverch, id est in Norgia' ('There are falcons that are called gyrfalcons, which are common in Norway')¹⁰⁰. Albertus Magnus identifies two species: the gyrfalcon (with no origin), and the white falcon (*falco albus*), coming from the North and the Atlantic (*mare oceanum*), from the lands of Norway, Sweden and Estonia¹⁰¹. In 1215, Gervase of Tilbury mentions captures of gyrfalcons by lure (*eliciuntur artificiose*); these birds live on high cliffs [91] overhanging the sea, in

⁸⁷ Marco Polo, *Le deviseement du monde. Tome II: Traversée de l'Afghanistan et entrée en Chine*, dir. P. MÉNARD, Genève, 2003, p. 37; Marco Polo, *Le deviseement du monde*, trans. R. KAPPLER, Paris, 2004 (Voyages et découvertes), p. 223.

⁸⁸ Polo, *Le deviseement du monde*, p. 83, 85, 105.

⁸⁹ William of Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l'empire Mongol . . .*, p. 86, 233 note 4.

⁹⁰ VAUGHAN, 'The Arctic . . .', p. 332.

⁹¹ For a general study on the gyrfalcon in Renaissance zoology and hunting treatises, and especially its geographic origin, see DE SMET, 'Princess of the North . . .', § 2: 'The Homeland of the Gyrfalcon', p. 1548–1552.

⁹² Conrad Gessner, *Historiae animalium liber III qui est de avium natura*, Zürich, 1555, p. 66–68.

⁹³ Pierre Belon, *L'histoire de la nature des oyseaux*, Paris, 1555, p. 94 (II, 6).

⁹⁴ Charles d'Arcussia, *La fauconnerie de Charles d'Arcussia . . .*, Paris, 1615, p. 51.

⁹⁵ Guillaume Tardif, *Le Livre de l'art de faulconnerie et des chiens de chasse*, ed. E. JULLIEN, Paris, 1882 (Cabinet de vénerie, 4), p. 23.

⁹⁶ *Moamin et Ghatrif . . .*, p. 99; GEORGES, *Das zweite Falkenbuch Kaiser Friedrichs II . . .*, p. 122.

⁹⁷ DE SMET, 'Princess of the North . . .', p. 1548.

⁹⁸ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica*, p. 56 (I, 28), 96 (II, 13).

⁹⁹ OGGINS, *The Kings and Their Hawks . . .*, p. 55–56.

¹⁰⁰ *Dancus Rex, Guillelmus Falconarius*, ed. G. TILANDER, Karlshamn, 1965 (Cynegetica, 12), p. 172.

¹⁰¹ Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus . . .*, p. 1465 (XXIII, tract. 1, cap. 11).

unnamed northern oceanic islands¹⁰². Frederick II, in his *De arte venandi cum avibus*, explains that the gyrfalcon lives to the north of the seventh climate, that is to say, the arctic regions. He also says that this bird lives and nests in Iceland, an island lying between Norway and 'Galandia' (Greenland), near the North Pole ('versus polum arcticum nidificant et morantur': 'towards the North Pole they make their nests and spend their time')¹⁰³.

In French literature, there are examples where authors mention the bird's northern origin. The most interesting is found in *Sone de Nansay* (written circa 1270–80), where the eponymous hero travels to Norway where he observes the eyrie of a gyrfalcon on a high mountain; in this romance the Norwegian gyrfalcons are cited frequently, playing an important role in the plot¹⁰⁴.

Trade and gift from the North

Diplomatic or tribute gifts of gyrfalcons began quite early in the Scandinavian area¹⁰⁵: the oldest mention probably dates from 1024, and deals with a friendship gift sent by the people of Iceland to the king of Norway, Olaf II. The bird is named *haukar*, which is a generic term for hawk¹⁰⁶. It is difficult to prove that this *haukar* was a gyrfalcon, but its Icelandic origin (where the gyrfalcon is the only native noble falcon) strengthens the hypothesis.

One can find many examples of gifts or tributes in the pipe rolls of the kings of England during the twelfth century: in the first record from 1129–30, Outi of [93] Lincoln had to provide King Henry I with 100 gyrfalcons (six to be white) – but he could only hand over twenty-five grey gyrfalcons¹⁰⁷. They are seventeen mentions of exports of gyrfalcons from Iceland to England in the thirteenth century¹⁰⁸.

There are also many mentions of such gifts in archival documents from Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The king of Norway, Haakon IV, sent hunters to Iceland in order to catch gyrfalcons for the king of England, Henry III, about the year 1225. The expedition took two years and brought back three white and ten grey gyrfalcons, which were sent to England¹⁰⁹. In a letter to the English king, Haakon explains that this expedition was very tough, that the sailors had to struggle against extreme climatic conditions in the Northern Ocean, which was incredibly cold. Thus, Henry had to

¹⁰² 'In istis oceani insulis girfalci ex altissimis rupibus in mare dependentibus eliciuntur artificiose.' Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. S.E. BANKS and J.W. BINNS, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002 (Oxford Medieval Texts), p. 242–243.

¹⁰³ Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, ed. and Italian trans. A.L. TROMBETTI BUDRIESI, Roma, 2000 (Collana di fonti e studi, 10), p. 1008–1111. French translation: Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *L'art de chasser avec les oiseaux . . .*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁴ *Sone de Nansay*, ed. C. LACHET, Paris, 2012 (Traductions des classiques du Moyen Âge, 93), p. 174; VAN DEN ABBEELE, *La fauconnerie dans les lettres françaises . . .*, p. 2–3.

¹⁰⁵ For a general perspective, see R. LIE, 'Falconry, Falcon-Catching and the Role of Birds of Prey in Trade and as Alliance Gifts in Norway (800–1800 AD) with an Emphasis on Norwegian and Later Foreign Participants in Falcon-Catching', in *Raptor and Human . . .*, ed. ed. K.-H. GERSMANN and O. GRIMM, Kiel and Hamburg, 2018, vol. 2, p. 727–786, esp. 738–743. The paper gives many examples of gyrfalcons gifts, trade and transport in the Middle Ages (complementary to those cited in the present article), with a list of textual sources from *The Regesta Norvegica* about gyrfalcons and other birds of prey used for payment (Appendix II, p. 761–766).

¹⁰⁶ G. HOFMANN, 'Falkenjagd und Falkenhandel in den nordischen Ländern während des Mittelalters', in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 88.2 (1957), p. 139.

¹⁰⁷ OGGINS, *The Kings and Their Hawks . . .*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁸ AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons . . .*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁹ PARAVICINI, 'Tiere aus den Norden . . .', p. 565; OGGINS, *The Kings and Their Hawks . . .*, p. 13.

consider these birds more precious than gold or silver¹¹⁰. In 1289, the French king Philip IV the Fair paid 60 £ to a Norwegian canon of Bergen, Magister Arnaldus, for he presented him with a gyrfalcon¹¹¹.

The king of England sent gyrfalcons as gifts to the Ilkhan of Persia, in a diplomatic mission that left England in 1291, led by Geoffrey of Langley. The archival documents provide information on the cost of such an expedition for these birds: three falconers took part in the embassy entrusted with the care of the precious gyrfalcons. The documents recorded expenses for their food (chicken meat)¹¹². In his *De arte venandi cum avibus*, Frederick II is aware of the difficulties of such transport and care. He complains about the bad condition of the birds on their arrival and he recommends letting the gyrfalcons rest for a complete season before flying for the hunt¹¹³.

Merchants from different places were involved in the gyrfalcon trade: one Venetian merchant sold more than a hundred gyrfalcons to the sultan of Egypt in 1317, for the huge sum of 300,000 dirhams¹¹⁴. In 1351, Stephen Roserius of Montpellier requests from the Pope the right to sell birds of prey to the sultan of [94] Cairo, and is granted a licence to sell twenty-five gyrfalcons or falcons¹¹⁵. Ramon Llull reports that a man saw in a noble town many men with gyrfalcons, which they had brought from one end of the world and were now taking to the Tatars to make money¹¹⁶. The Persian Ilkhan, Abaqa (identified as Tatar in the source), grandson of Genghis Khan, was in diplomatic relation with Edward I of England. In 1276, Catalan merchants bought gyrfalcons for the Ilkhan prince in Norway, with money provided by Abaqa¹¹⁷. Venetian merchants were deeply involved in the gyrfalcon trade¹¹⁸. In 1366 they sent gyrfalcons to the emir Yalbugā¹¹⁹ as ‘consolation’, probably to facilitate other trading¹²⁰. In 1378 Venetian merchants served as intermediaries between Lubeck and Alexandria to send ten gyrfalcons to Egypt¹²¹. In the previous century, Lubeck had to send twelve gyrfalcons a year to Frederick II¹²².

¹¹⁰ AEGISSON, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons . . .*, p. 36; *Diplomatic Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office. Vol. 1, 1101–1272*, ed. P. CHAPLAIS, London, 1964, p. 125–126.

¹¹¹ PARAVICINI, ‘Tiere aus den Norden . . .’, p. 565, 566 note 24.

¹¹² J. PAVIOT, ‘Le séjour de l’ambassade de Geoffroy de Langley à Trébizonde et à Constantinople en 1292’, in *Médiévales*, 12 (1987), p. 47–54: 48–51.

¹¹³ Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *L’art de chasser avec les oiseaux . . .*, p. 333.

¹¹⁴ H.A. SHEHADA, *Mamluks and Animals: Veterinary Medicine in Medieval Islam*, Leiden, 2013 (Sir Henry Wellcome Asian Series, 11), p. 68–69.

¹¹⁵ M. CARR, ‘Crossing Boundaries in the Mediterranean: Papal Trade Licences from the *Registra Supplicationum* of Pope Clement VI (1342–52)’, in *Journal of Medieval History*, 41.1 (2015), p. 107–129: 112, 128 no. 63.

¹¹⁶ Ramon Llull, *Selected Works of Ramon Llull (1232–1316)*, ed. A. BONNER, Princeton, 1985, II, p. 893.

¹¹⁷ PELLIOU, *Notes on Marco Polo . . .*, p. 79; C. KOHLER and C.V. LANGLOIS, ‘Lettres inédites concernant les Croisades’, in *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes*, 52 (1891), p. 46–63: 56–57.

¹¹⁸ For further reading on this topic: H. Shehada, ‘From the Far North to the Near East: Venice as an Intermediary in the Supply of Gyrfalcons to the Mamluks’, in *Cultures of Empire: Rethinking Venetian Rule, 1400–1700: Essays in Honour of Benjamin Arbel*, ed. G. Christ and F.-J. Morche, Leiden, 2020. (The Medieval Mediterranean 122), p. 369–382. Unfortunately, this paper was published after the final redaction of the present article.

¹¹⁹ Possibly Yalbugā al-‘Umarī al-Ḥāṣṣakī, mamluk emir (d. 1366), and important member of the Qalāwūnid Sultanate in Egypt. On this emir: J. VAN STEENBERGEN, ‘The Amir Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī, the Qalāwūnid Sultanate, and the Cultural Matrix of Mamlūk Society: A Reassessment of Mamlūk Politics in the 1360s’, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 131.3 (2011), p. 423–443. The Latin source on gyrfalcons (see next note) lacks precision about the identity of this emir.

¹²⁰ SHEHADA, *Mamluks and Animals . . .*, p. 69; M.-L. DE MAS-LATRIE, *Histoire de l’île de Chypre sous le règne des princes de la maison de Lusignan*, Paris, 1852, II, p. 285.

¹²¹ K. FRIEDLAND, ‘The Hanseatic League and Hanse Towns in the Early Penetration of the North’, in *Arctic*, 37.4 (1984), p. 539–543 (see 538–539); *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Lübeck*, Lübeck, 1873, IV, p. 307.

¹²² FRIEDLAND, ‘The Hanseatic League . . .’, p. 539–540.

Such a trade (dangerous and rather long, but which could be very profitable) was possible because of the curiosity and the important demand for gyrfalcons, a bird that was so highly praised by Arabic and Persian falconers. As in Western regions, owning gyrfalcons was reserved to the highest ranks of society and sometimes even a royal prerogative. Sultans would pay very high prices to buy European gyrfalcons, especially the white ones that came from the end of the world, as described by Ramon Llull. [95]

As in Islamic kingdoms, gyrfalcons were used as diplomatic gifts between regional rulers in England, France, Germany, Spain and Italy. As soon as they arrived from the North, the gyrfalcons were given or exchanged as diplomatic gifts. At the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was still great enthusiasm about the gyrfalcon in many Italian courts¹²³. In 1497 Francesco Gonzaga sent twenty-three gyrfalcons as tributary gifts to the king of Naples, Ferrante¹²⁴. In 1498 the marquis of Gonzaga asked Ercole d'Este, duke of Ferrara, for a peregrine falcon, promising to send him back the gyrfalcons he was waiting for as soon as they arrived¹²⁵. Marquis Federico requested gyrfalcons from the French king in 1499, as the Mantua court probably lacked these rare birds¹²⁶.

A Mamluk fashion?

The Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī (in his *Kitāb al-Sulūk*) says that during the reign of Sultan Qalā'ūn (ruling between 1279 and 1290), gyrfalcons became so common in Egypt that every emir had at least ten *sanāqīr*. At his death, Qalā'ūn had 120 of these birds¹²⁷. Al-Nuwayrī, in his encyclopedia from the beginning of the fourteenth century, confirmed that kings went to great expense to acquire gyrfalcons from European merchants. They could give 1,000 dirhams for each living bird, but even 500 dinars for a dead bird, if the merchants showed the feathers of the gyrfalcons that had died during the journey¹²⁸. Al-Nuwayrī is repeating here the same information found in Ibn Saīd's geographical treatise from the thirteenth century¹²⁹. An Irish pilgrim, Simon Simeonis, who travelled in Egypt around 1323 confirms the same prices, and provides the same information about the price paid for dead birds¹³⁰. Paying for dead birds is also mentioned by Pero Lopez de Ayala. He writes that the sultan paid for dead gyrfalcons to encourage merchants to continue bringing them from far distant lands to Damascus, by land and by sea¹³¹, which is confirmed by al-Nuwayrī, who says that the sultan wanted to encourage [96] merchants to transport *sanāqīr* in Egypt¹³². In the fourteenth century, some merchants from Lubeck seem to have been unaware of this refund: in a document dating from 1378, a merchant charged to convoy the falcons to Venice and Alexandria is forced to vouch for the life of the birds and refund the complete price of each dead gyrfalcon¹³³.

¹²³ For example, white gyrfalcons of the Mantua court had been portrayed by painters in 1521 and between 1540 and 1560. SBOLZANI, 'Una star del XVI secolo . . .', p. 101, 107 note 7.

¹²⁴ G. MALACARNE, *Lords of the Sky: Falconry in Mantua at the Time of the Gonzagas*, trans. V. TAYLOR, Alessandria, 2011, p. 153–155.

¹²⁵ MALACARNE, *Lords of the Sky* . . . , p. 158.

¹²⁶ MALACARNE, *Lords of the Sky* . . . , p. 160.

¹²⁷ Quatremère's note on gyrfalcons: al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks* . . . , p. 95.

¹²⁸ Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat* . . . , p. 204–205.

¹²⁹ EISENSTEIN, 'Zu drei Nordeuropäischen Tieren . . .', p. 57–60.

¹³⁰ *Croisades et pèlerinages: récits, chroniques et voyages en Terre sainte, XII^e–XVI^e siècle*, ed. D. RÉGNIER-BOHLER, Paris, 1997 (Bouquins), p. 982–983; *Symon Simeonis, Itinerarium Symonis Simeonis ab Hybernia ad Terram Sanctam*, ed. M. ESPOSITO, Dublin, 1960 (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, 4), p. 71.

¹³¹ López de Ayala, *Libro de la caza de las aves* . . . , p. 249.

¹³² Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat* . . . , p. 205.

¹³³ *Urkundenbuch* . . . , IV, p. 307.

As al-Maqrīzī notes, a ‘gyrfalcon fashion’ seems to have been established among the Mamluk elite since they began their rule over the Near East and Egypt from 1250¹³⁴. In her recent book on gifts and material culture in the Mamluk period, Doris Behrens explains that the Mamluks, originally slaves imported from the Caucasus, established a fashion in Egypt for fur, not a normal tradition in such a warm country as Egypt. Fur was introduced in Mamluk costume and as an obligatory adornment of robes of honour, and hence became associated with Circassian Mamluk identity¹³⁵. Just as they imported the fashion for wearing fur into Egypt, Mamluks may have imported hunting with gyrfalcons, originally coming from Central Asia through the Caucasus.

As previously mentioned, there are very few mentions of gyrfalcons before the thirteenth century and this falcon seems to be hardly known before this time, even as a name. The gyrfalcon is still imported from Central Asia in the thirteenth century: for example, Ibn Quštimur saw gyrfalcons brought from the East by Mongols in 1260/1261. As possession of this hunting bird became more fashionable, it probably increased the demand for more expensive gyrfalcons, possibly white in colour, coming from the edges of the world. This fashion may have been stimulated by greater commercial and diplomatic contacts with Europe from the twelfth century onward and by European merchants attracted by the huge profits to be made by the sale of this bird. Sometimes diplomatic reasons and trading could go together in embassies. For example, in 1327 the king of France sent a merchant from Montpellier, Guillaume Bonnesmains, to the sultan of Egypt. The merchant brought more than a hundred gyrfalcons to the sultan, which pleased the [97] Mamluk emirs very much. We do not know if the emirs paid for the birds, but it was undoubtedly a significant diplomatic present¹³⁶.

Conclusion

An animal could be defined as exotic for specific qualities: foreign origin, rarity, subject to trade and princely gifting, striking zoological features (colour, ferocity, swiftness, size, etc.), and subject of curiosity or fashion. These characteristics belong not only to southern or eastern animals but also to some northern species¹³⁷.

The gyrfalcon is the sole falcon that is not native to either Western Europe or the Near East, so it had a particularly high value because of this exoticism. This bird was imported from the lands of darkness, living in extreme conditions: its unique properties of strength, courage, speed and audaciousness were connected to the harshness of the northern climate. Among the gyrfalcons coming from the North, the white ones were very much in demand. Because of its rarity, it was a very expensive bird and one that only nobles and kings could afford. The price is explained by the long distance of their importation to the south and by the complex logistics it implied. This expensive exoticism of gyrfalcons became a fashion among the Mamluk elite. This may also have suggested to European merchants that huge profits were to be made from the fashion for gyrfalcons in Ottoman Egypt, and the frequent diplomatic contacts between Christian rulers and the sultanate. Of course, the gyrfalcon was praised for its value in hunting,

¹³⁴ SHEHADA, *Mamluks and Animals . . .*, p. 66–69.

¹³⁵ D. BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World*, New York, 2014 (Library of Middle East History, 44), ch. 8, note 121.

¹³⁶ J. RICHARD, ‘Le royaume de Chypre et l’embargo sur le commerce avec l’Égypte (fin XIII^e–début XIV^e siècle)’, in *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 128.1 (1984), p. 120–134: 131–132.

¹³⁷ A. PLUSKOWSKI, ‘What Is Exotic? Sources of Animals and Animal Products from the Edges of the Medieval World’, in *The Edges of the Medieval World*, ed. G. JARITZ and J. KREEM, Budapest, 2009 (CEU Medievalia, 11), p. 113–129; T. BUQUET, ‘Les animaux exotiques dans les ménageries médiévales’, in *Fabuleuses histoires des bêtes et des hommes*, ed. J. TOUSSAINT, Namur, 2013, p. 97–121.

and Arab falconers liked it for its strength and majesty. Owning gyrfalcons in numbers was a sign of wealth and power, a prerogative of rulers. As with other exotic animals, possessing such foreign animals from almost unknown lands was a blatant sign of power for the sultan, whose influence extended to frozen islands over the seas.

The exoticism of the gyrfalcon is embedded in its very name: both in Arabic and Persian and in most European languages its name was foreign. In the Near East the zoonym *sunqur* was borrowed from the Eastern Türkish-Mongol languages of [98] Central Asia, while in Europe the name of the gyrfalcon was inspired by the German-Norse *geirfalki/gerfalch*.

All these characteristics show that the gyrfalcon is to be considered without any doubt a fascinating exotic animal, both in Western Europe and the Near East.