

# Falconry in central Europe in the Middle Ages

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente les sources archéologiques, iconographiques et écrites qui permettent de documenter l'histoire de la fauconnerie au Moyen Âge dans les régions germanique et slave. On y considère l'apport des analyses archéozoologiques fondées sur le matériel osseux issu de sites slaves.

## ABSTRACT

Archaeological, iconographical and written sources for falconry in the Middle Ages from the Germanic as well as from the Slavic area are described. The possibility to use archaeozoological analyses of bone material from Slavic sites for this topic is discussed.

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Falconry is a special interaction between humans and wild animals. A bird of prey, which has been tamed and trained, is used like a hunting weapon. This hunting method was widespread in medieval Europe and was practised especially by the nobility, not, however, as an economic necessity in order to gain meat for nourishment, but as a sport and amusement. It is a highly developed hunting technique, where the bird captures the wild animal, and the hunter takes away the prey by giving the bird some food. In most cases a dog is involved in this hunting technique, and very often the hunter is mounted. For falconry one needs normally a vast area of open land, especially when true falcons are used. However, other birds of prey were also used for this hunting method, although falcons were the noblest ones, particularly the gyr falcon – *Falco rusticolus* –, which was brought mainly from northern countries to central Europe. The white gyr falcons from Iceland were most famous. The falcons gave the name to this hunting technique.

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Depending on the geographical region, goshawks or sparrow hawks, different species of falcons or even eagles, were used. In central Europe the most commonly used bird of prey was the goshawk – *Accipiter gentilis* –, and sometimes also the sparrow hawk – *Accipiter nisus* –, because normally these birds chase their prey on slightly wooded and broken ground (C.R. Hennicke, without year), and therefore they were particularly fitted for falconry in this geographical area.

Falconry is commonly assumed to have developed in nomadic herder-societies in the steppe area of Inner Asia (Vögele, 1931), although we do not have unambiguous evidence for this. It would have made its way via the Sarmatians to the Goths, who brought it to Europe during the Migration Period (Birkhahn, 1972). The oldest representation of a scene of falconry is known from Argos in the Peloponnesus. In a late Roman villa, there were found some floor mosaics dated to about 500 AD. Among them are two which depict scenes of falconry (Akerström-Hougen, 1981). Because the Visigoths raided the Peloponnesus around 400 AD, these representations can be traced back to the influences they entailed. In central Europe falconry was soon accepted by the Germanic tribes as is evidenced by different bodies of laws from that time. In the *Lex Baiuvariorum* (ed. von Schwind, Hannover, 1926, MGH Leg. nat. Germ. 5, 2, Index), there are mentioned the *cranohari*, that is the peregrine – *Falco peregrinus* –, used for hunting cranes, the *canshapuh*, that is the female goshawk, used mainly for hunting wild geese, the *anothapuh*, that is the male goshawk, used for hunting wild ducks, and the *sparuarius*, the sparrow hawk, used in the same way as the male goshawk. In the *Lex Salica* (ed. Eckhardt, Hannover, 1969, MGH Leg. nat. Germ ; 4,2) we find regulations which indicate the practise of falconry. For instance everybody who had stolen a goshawk or a falcon from the nest in a tree had to pay a penalty of three shillings. By signing the tree on which the nest was situated or by binding the bird to the nest one could become the owner of a young bird of prey. For the theft of a trained bird of prey from the bar the thief had to pay 15 shillings, and for the theft out of a closed room 45 shillings. Similar regulations are also known from other Germanic laws. They show us that falconry was well established by the Germanic tribes about 500 AD and that its introduction must have been somewhat earlier.

The archaeological evidence for falconry in central Europe is of great interest to us. The earliest example in this connection is grave nr. 41 from the cemetery of Quedlinburg-Bockshornschanze (Schmidt, 1976, Müller, 1980). The skeleton of a female goshawk<sup>(1)</sup> was found there, together with the skeletons of two dogs. They were part of the rich grave goods, which are dated to the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this grave was buried a woman, who obviously belonged to the nobility. In the cemetery from Eschwege-Niederhone, Werra-Meißner-Kreis, Hessen, (Sippel, 1986), the skeleton of a female goshawk together with the skeleton of a dog was also excavated in a large chamber grave of the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. The sex of the human buried in this grave is not yet determined, although the different weapons indicate a man. The skeleton of a sparrow hawk was found in a woman's grave from the cemetery of Selzen, Rheinhessen, dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> or

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(1) By comparing the measurements of the bones of goshawks from Quedlinburg (Müller, 1981) as well as from Alach (pers. communication by H.-J. Barthel, Weimar) with recent material (Otto 1981, Schmidt-Burger, 1982), it could be stated that these goshawks were female.

7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lindenschmit, 1880-1889, 1. Theil, p. 132). In Alach, Kr. Erfurt, again a man was buried, together with a female goshawk. Here also the grave goods are rich, indicating the man's nobility (Timpel, 1990). A bird of prey of yet unknown species was found in a grave from the cemetery of the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries in Nieder-Erlenbach, near Frankfurt/Main, and also one in a grave of the early 8<sup>th</sup> century in Staufeu, Landkreis Dillingen, Bavaria (Stein, 1967). All these skeletons come from uncremated material. But a bird of prey had obviously also been laid together with a dead man on a pyre. In a funeral urn from Hedehusum/Süderende, on the Isle of Föhr, among the cremated bones of a man there were found the burnt remains of a bird of prey and of a dog. This grave is dated to the late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup> century (Jankuhn, 1960)<sup>(2)</sup>. This find can be seen as a link between central Europe and northern Europe, where graves of the huge barrows, in several cases, contained burnt remains of birds of prey among the cremated bones. S. Sten and M. Vretemark (1988), who analysed the bone material from these burials, could identify the peregrine falcon in three of these graves, the goshawk in twelve graves, and the sparrow hawk in one grave. These graves are dated from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the large ship-graves from Vendel (Stolpe, Arne, 1927) and Valsgårde (Arwidson, 1942) remains of falcons could also be identified.

While the archaeological evidence for falconry is mainly known from the second part of the first millennium AD, the iconographic evidence essentially derives from the first centuries of the second millennium AD. The representation on the famous tapestry of Bayeux, dated to the 11th century, shows the mounted king Harald with a falcon on his left wrist. In the pictorial manuscript from Manesse, dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD several representations of falconry are to be found. They provide evidence that both men and women of the nobility were involved in hunting with a falcon or a hawk, as we have also seen from the graves. Here the falcons' prey is also shown. Especially the heron – *Ardea cinerea* – was a preferred quarry in falconry. The most famous source for medieval falconry is undoubtedly the book written by the emperor Friedrich II from Hohenstaufen : *De arte venandi cum avibus*. In this book all the regulations, the equipment and the techniques in connection with falconry are compiled and described. It is well illustrated by several pictures. From all these sources we can conclude that falconry is well documented for the Germanic area in the Middle Ages.

But what is known from the Slavic area ? First two pieces of iconographic evidence have to be mentioned. In Moravsky Jan, in the northern part of Slovakia, a belt-end made of bronze was found showing a man who had just thrown his falcon with his left hand (Klanica, 1970). This specimen is dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. The other is a silver plaquette decorated by a mounted falconer with his bird on his left wrist. It was found in Staré Mesto, in Moravia, at the site of « Spitalky », where in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD a church and nearby a cemetery existed (Poulik, 1963). The plaquette itself

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(2) H. Jankuhn (1960) mentions « bones of a falcon » from this site. However, in a letter of Prof. W. Flemming from about 1890 it is written : « Die kleineren Knochen sind Extremitätenknochen vom Vogel, und können sehr wohl einem Falken angehören. » From this we can conclude that Prof. Flemming could not precisely identify the bird bones ; he only thought that they belonged to a falcon. Yet, they could also belong to a goshawk. (I thank Mrs. I. Kühl, Schleswig, for elucidating the situation of this find and for sending me a copy of the letter from Prof. Flemming. Unfortunately, the bone remains of this find were lost some time in the last 100 years).

is also dated to the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. It has a diameter of 4.3 cm. These specimens obviously were not items of daily use for everybody. They were parts of the horse gear of a socially prominent group : the nobility is suggested. Therefore one can conclude that in the Slavic area falconry was also restricted to the nobility. Written historic sources for falconry are also known from the Slavic area, although not from as early a time as in the Germanic area. In the poem about the Russian hero Igor from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it is mentioned that « 10 falcons were thrown onto a group of swans » (Graßhoff *et al.*, 1965). In this connection falcons and swans are symbols, as one can see from the sequel. It is not a real hunt that is reported by this poem. However, the use of falconry as a symbol could only occur when falconry itself was known to the people in this region and at that time. Therefore this source is also an evidence for knowledge of falconry by the Slavs. A special form of written sources is the toponym, as for instance « Sokolnici », which can be derived from the phrase « sokolnik », that means « hunter with falcons ». They are found especially in the area of the Great Moravian Empire (Eichler, Walther, 1969). Settlements with those names were obviously the official habitations of a prince's falconers. They show us that falconry in this area was well established and was a privileged sport or amusement for the nobility. However, in the region of the northwest Slavic tribes such toponyms are not to be found.

Interpretation of osteological finds is difficult in this region. Skeletons of birds of prey among the grave goods similar to those of the Germanic area are absent in Slavic people's graves. Within the bone material analysed from medieval sites in the Slavic area west of the Oder river, however, bones from birds of prey were found in several cases. In this region bones from wild birds could be identified from 32 medieval sites. The goshawk – *Accipiter gentilis* – was found at 12 sites, the sparrow hawk – *Accipiter nisus* – at 6, and the peregrine – *Falco peregrinus* –, the hobby – *Falco subbuteo* – and the golden eagle – *Aquila chrysaetos* – at 1 site each, to name first those birds of prey which could be used in falconry. The kestrel – *Falco tinnunculus* –, which sometimes could also be used in falconry, is known from two sites. However, other birds of prey, not normally used in falconry, occurred in similar quantity. The white-tailed eagle – *Haliaeetus albicilla* – is known from 11 sites, the buzzard – *Buteo buteo* – and the kite – *Milvus milvus* – from 6 each, the hen harrier – *Circus cyaneus* – from 3, and the short-toed eagle – *Circus gallicus* –, the lesser spotted eagle – *Aquila pomarina* –, the black kite – *Milvus migrans* – and the marsh harrier – *Circus aeruginosus* – from 1 site each. Birds of prey, which could be used in falconry, are therefore not represented at more sites than other birds of prey. Whether the bones of birds of prey used in falconry were more numerous at these sites than the bones of other birds of prey could not be established because of the small number of bird bones at most of these sites. Thus, we can not use this as evidence for falconry. It might be that birds of prey were hunted because their feathers were needed for fletching arrows.

Some other observations, however, are of interest in this connection. First we have to look at the sex ratio. The determination of sex from the bones of the goshawk is relatively easy, because in most cases there is a gap between the ranges of variation in the measurements of male and female bones. Female goshawks, as most other female birds of prey, are larger and stronger than males, and they were therefore preferred for falconry. Consequently, their bones are also larger and stronger. If one can note a preponderance of the larger, female, bones in a material, then the conclusion that

goshawks were used there in falconry is justified. In fact, in the bone material from the sites mentioned above, the remains of female goshawks were twice as common as those of males. Similar observations were made by H. Reichstein and H. Pieper (1986) on the material from Haithabu, and by J. Boessneck and A.v.d. Driesch (1979) on the material from Eketorp.

The next interesting observation is the dating of goshawk remains. Most of these bones were excavated from the younger levels of the sites, belonging to the early centuries of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD. This is the time when in the Germanic region of central Europe falconry was flourishing as a sport and an amusement for the nobility. Taking also into consideration the fact that most of the goshawk bones derive from castles of political and/or economic significance, one can conclude that the same may have applied for the Slavic area. Of course, there could be the objection that goshawks were hunted with a view to protection of the domestic poultry. If this were true, then we should find bones of goshawks or of other birds of prey that were normally used in falconry also in rural settlements or in castles of minor importance. At such sites, however, we have not yet found any.

To sum up, we come to the conclusion that falconry in the Middle Ages in central Europe was known by Germanic tribes as well as by Slavic tribes. It was a sport and an amusement, particularly for the nobility, practised by both men and women. It is possible that falconry in the Slavic area flourished a little later than in the Germanic area.

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## Discussions

*B. Hell* : Dans les dépôts funéraires d'Europe centrale, les oiseaux de proie sont-ils toujours de sexe femelle ?

*H.-H. Müller* : We only know that the sex of the goshawks found in the graves of Quedlinburg, Eschwege and Alach was female. The sex of the sparrow hawk of Selzen is not known, and from the birds of prey found in the graves of Niedererlenbach, Staufen and Hedehusum neither the species nor the sex are known. At least, according to the three first mentioned cases, it seems that females were preferred for falconry.

*S. Bökönyi* : I would like to make four remarks :

1) The Asiatic steppes and the southern ones of the East Europe did not seemingly play a role in the early development of falconry evidenced by 100 000 Avar and thousands of early Hungarian graves that contained no falcon bones. It was invented by Germanic times and taken over from them by the Arabs.

2) The fact that the Europeans carried the falcons on their left hand and the Arabs on the right one can be the result of different riding styles.

3) The fact that Arab women did not practise falconry is in connection with the different roles of women in a Moslem society and in a Christian society.

4) Female falcons were used not only because of their larger size but also because they were more docile (at least according to the treatise written by Frederic II).

*H.-H. Müller* : Thank you for this comment, but I do not think that falconry was invented by Germanic tribes, because, according to Antje Gerdessen (1956), it was practised by the Chinese already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Also Japanese notices about hunting with falcons from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC exist. The Germanic tribes in Central Europe practised falconry in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD at the earliest. The problem of whether the falcon was carried on the right or the left hand is discussed in detail by H.-H. Vögele (1931). He thinks that there is no connection with a difference in the riding style.

*N. Benecke* : What is known about the sex ratio of birds of prey in graves from Scandinavia ?

*H.-H. Müller* : In the publication by S. Sten and M. Vretemark (1988) about the graves in the huge barrows, 4 species of birds of prey are mentioned, the goshawk, the sparrow hawk, the peregrine falcon, and, possibly used as a decoy bird, the eagle owl. But nothing is dealt with about the sex ratio of these birds. It might be that it is difficult to determine, because the bones were cremated.