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Follow The Aquila: 'The Eagle Huntress' And The Ancient History Of Falconry



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Science

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In the new documentary film *The Eagle Huntress*, the audience is introduced to the indomitable Aisholpan Nurgaiv. Although a young girl of just 13, Aisholpan trained to become an eagle falconer like her father and grandfather. Set in Mongolia, the documentary is well worth seeing for its moving story of a skilled Kazakh girl competing in a man's sport. It is also a pivotal reminder of humankind's long connection with the eagle.



(L) Aisholpan Nurgaiv attends the 'Eagle Huntress' Premiere during the 2016 Sundance Film Festival... [+]

In Greek, an eagle was generally referred to as an **ἀετός**, and was seen as a

bird that brought omens. The bird was a messenger of the Gods that mediated between the divine and man. In [Book 8](#) of Homer's *Iliad*, Zeus sends an eagle as a sign to the Achaeans: "Forthwith he sent an eagle, surest of omens among winged birds, holding in his talons a fawn, the young of a swift hind." Zeus also sent eagles as signs to the Trojans, sometimes with a snake in its talons. The King of the Gods could even take the shape of an eagle himself. Greek myth held that Zeus became an eagle in order to abduct Ganymede, the beautiful shepherd and son of [King Tros](#) (who would give his name to the city of Troy), from Mount Ida and take him off to be cupbearer to the Gods.

Romans also viewed the eagle, known in Latin as the *aquila*, with reverence. As I have [written about](#) before, it was vultures that activated Rome's *auspicia publica* (the taking of auspices) in the time of Romulus and Remus in the 8th century BCE. The *auspicium* was the power of priests to interpret bird sightings as a way to read the will of the Gods. Romans were particularly interested in vultures, crows, ravens, owls and eagles. Cicero would later argue that the priestly college of augurs (of which he was notable member) assigned to bird watch and then interpret the appearances of these birds, was of utmost importance to Rome.

The eagle was the zoomorphic embodiment of Jupiter and thus was placed on the Roman military standard which led troops. Although there had previously been a number of other animals used on the top of military standards (e.g., a minotaur, wolf and a boar), it was the general Marius who, at the end of the 2nd c. BCE in his war with the Cimbri, put the eagle above all others ([Plin. NH. 10.5](#)). No other animal standards could compete.

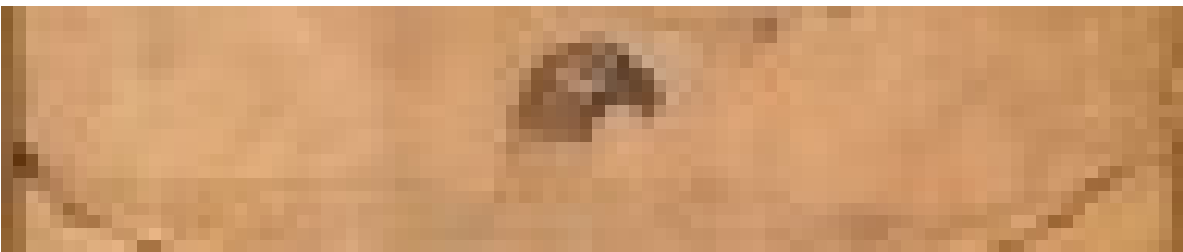




Ganymede, the Trojan prince, is abducted by Zeus, disguised as an eagle (Mosaic from the Sousse...
[+]

A pivotal question is then when man began to train birds to aid in the hunt, rather than simply observing them as a sign of divine will. First, we should recognize that there is a big difference between hunting with a falcon and hunting with an eagle. Falcons kill their prey with their beak, while eagles, part of the separate *accipitridae* family, kill with their talons. Smaller falcons were favored in the ancient and medieval Mediterranean, rather than the much larger golden eagle.

Although the sport may have first developed in Asia or Persia over a millennium prior, it is not until the later Roman empire that we have a surviving artistic depiction of the art of falconry. A mosaic from Argos in Greece dated to around 500 CE has a falconer and his bird practicing. Many have alleged that the art of falconry was introduced to the Roman Mediterranean by the Vandals or perhaps the Visigoths during the period of Late Antiquity.





A 9th century Carolingian minuscule illustration of the constellation Aquila (the eagle), with text...
[+]

The sport became popular among peoples from the steppe regions along the Silk Road. [Chinese tombs](#) dating to the Tang period (618-907) even have painted depictions of falconry. Romans in the late empire tended to use falcons or hawks in combination with their prized hunting dogs, as suggested by a mention in the early Christian poet Paulinus of Pella. In his autobiographical poem *Eucharisticos* ("Thanksgiving"), Paulinus notes that elite males desired nice clothing, a good horse, a swift hound and a "shapely hawk" as prestige symbols. As art historian [Ann Carrington has pointed to](#), the motif of the mounted falconer began to proliferate within Pictish Sculpture into the early middle ages and citations of falconry also occur in early Frankish law.





A 4th c. CE Roman mosaic showing a falcon swooping in to get a hare. Image courtesy of the Bardo... [+]

Falconry in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was often cited as an elite sport where the possession of a bird of prey could indicate one's social status. Into the medieval era, falconry continued to be a popular pastime for young men. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II is one of the best known western falconers of the Middle Ages. He wrote *De arte venandi cum avibus* ("The Art of Hunting with Birds"), a Latin ornithological treatise written in the 1240s that discussed falconry.



Image of falconers and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II from "The Art of Hunting with Birds (Vatican,... [+]

Although Aisholpan was the first female eagle huntress to compete in Mongolia, it is notable that medieval women are quite frequently depicted as falconers. Medieval historian Robin S. Oggins has a splendid book called *The Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* which notes that a number of royal women cared for these birds. Oggins points out that falconry was a way for women to participate in medieval "courtly sport." Henry II's mother Matilda knew about falconry and Eleanor of Aquitaine depicted herself with falcons on her official seals.

The [British Library](#) holds a number of manuscripts with depictions of medieval women and their pet hawks, particularly the [Taymouth Hours](#) and the [Smithfield Decretals](#). The famed 15th century [Book of Saint Albans](#) discussed hawking, heraldry and hunting extensively, and was in fact written by a prioress named Juliana Berners. It is a good reminder that elite medieval women also engaged in falconry and took an active part in writing about their sport.



"Detail of a bas-de-page scene of a lady observing her hawk bringing down a duck, Yates Thompson MS... [+]

The *Eagle Huntress* underscores the majesty of the eagle and our age-old connection to birds of prey; however, a substantive way to make a difference this holiday season is not only to see the film, but also to support the protection of eagles and other raptors through donations to non-profits. Consider the [American Eagle Foundation](#) or perhaps go visit a local raptor center. Here in Iowa, for instance, we have the [Iowa Raptor Project](#). That way we can all appreciate the good auspices brought about by spotting an *aquila* flying high in the sky, even if we don't have the courage to be an eagle hunter like Aisholpan.





ROME: Eagle Olimpia before the Serie A match between SS Lazio and AS Roma at Stadio Olimpico on... [+]

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