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The Noblest of Sports: Falconry in the Middle Ages



The Noblest of Sports: Falconry in the Middle Ages

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A lady with a falcon. Flemish tapestry, school of Arras, 1420-1435.

Introduction: “Ah, what great pleasure God our Lord conferred on man when He gave him the sport of dogs and birds ... and when He willed that beasts and birds should be obedient to him!” In such words did good King Modus in the fourteenth century voice the spirit of his age in praise of falconry, “the noblest of sports.”

All the mediaeval world hunted. Like the art of warfare, hunting was part of the education of every knight, who took as much pride in the falcon on his fist as in the sword at his side. Knights took their favorite birds to war with them and entrusted them to their squires only at the moment of battle. Even bishops were known to carry their falcons to church and to relinquish them only when approaching the altar. A Bishop of Ely so valued his stolen falcon that he excommunicated the thief. In a famous fourteenth-century book, *Le Menagier de Paris* (*The Goodman of Paris*), the unknown author advised his young wife to carry her hawk with her wherever people gathered, “at church or in other assemblies.

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Falconry was ardently pursued with costly trains of dogs and horses by the upper classes, but it was by no means confined to them. *The Boke of Saint Albans*, printed in 1486, lists the kinds of falcons and hawks appropriate to each rank of mediaeval society, ranging all the way from the lordly eagle for the emperor to the lowly “muskyte” for a holy-water clerk. In this book the noble gerfalcon is assigned to a king. Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, ransomed his son, the Count of Nevers, by a gift to the Sultan Bayazid of twelve white falcons-probably the Greenland or Iceland gerfalcon, rare and most highly prized. This kingly ransom was well chosen, since the sultan’s passion for falconry was such that he kept no less than seven thousand hawks.

Although falconry, which has been called the oldest sport known to man, was practiced in western Europe before the Crusades, it received new impetus from knights returning from the Near East, where it had been known at least as early as the first millennium before Christ. The Emperor Frederick II, who employed Muhammadan trainers, was one of the greatest mediaeval falconers of Europe. Even while he was besieging Faenza in 1240 he found time to correct a translation of an Arabic work on hawking. His own book on hawking, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, was a principal source of many later books.



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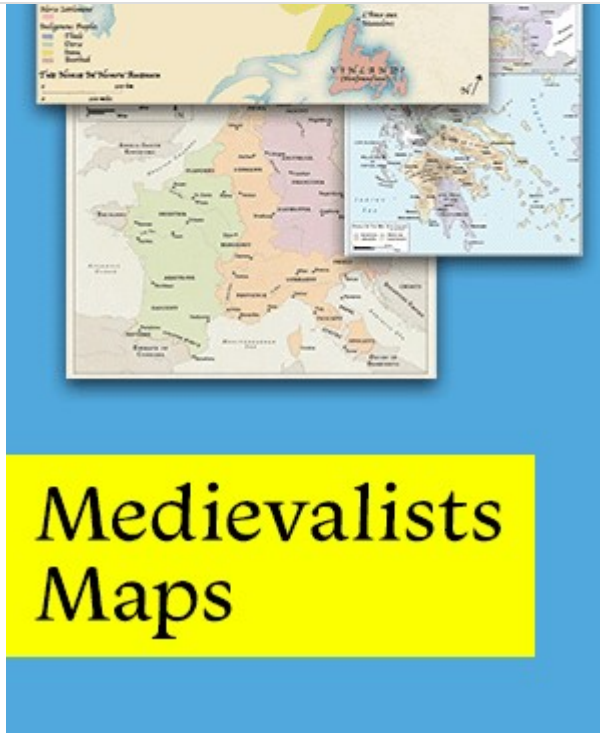
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