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History of falconry in Malta with a difference

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On Tuesday 21 February, I attended a very interesting evening at the Italian Cultural Institute in Valletta entitled Falco-on-Aria. The subject was photographs of men and falcons taken by Serena Galvani. Galvani is the official photographer of falcon activities in Italy. Her photographs are fantastic, extremely suggestive and carry an intrinsic spiritual value. Each image speaks for itself and expresses Galvani's passion for photography and the sea. She links falcon images with the sea, thus expressing her search for nature and transcendental values; hence the title Falco - on - Aria.

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Thus, I wish to share with the readers of my blog some important historical points that came out

of this interesting conference which are definitely of interest to any person in love with Maltese and Mediterranean history.

The conference was attended by a falconer from Italy, Gianluca Barone, and two falconers from Spain, Juan Jesus Bernabe and Don Luis Mozo Mena. The latter heads the King of Spain's falconers.

Rai Uno's sports journalist, Giulio Quizzini was one of the speakers. He started out by stating that Malta has a unique history. The value of Malta is in her history, in particular her maritime connections. He reminisced on the iconic Middle Sea Race, which he has covered for Rai. Quizzini made an important observation related to the sea and falconry; the concept of fair play. Falconry is about hunting but it is hunting with a difference. Quizzini qualifies falconry as a modern sport.

Historian Joan Abela and ornithologist Natalino Fenech discussed the historical link between Malta and hunting for falcons. Fenech rightly pointed out that Malta must have been important for Arab princes for her falcons during the period when Malta was known to have been under Muslim rule.

Both Abela and Fenech referred to Malta being a breeding ground for falcons in the High Middle Ages. It is recorded that Frederick II, 'stupor mundi', in 1239, sent 18 falconers to Malta to report and hunt for these raptors. These royal falconers came over with their horses. Records show that around 50 falcons were caught alive every year. Indeed, Frederick brought the sport to its epitome of respectability with his book "The Art of Falconry". It took him over 30 years to complete the work and it is considered as one of the first scientific works about birds, placing him as one of the founders of ornithology. It is he who introduced the Arab practice of hooding falcons to keep them tranquil during training. His book also contains several pages of instruction for dog trainers.

Falcons were so valuable that they were worth more than their weight in gold. During one of the bloody crusades in the late 14th century, the Ottoman Sultan Beyazid captured the son of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and turned down Philip's offer of 200,000 gold ducats for ransom. Instead Beyazid wanted, and was given, something even more precious, 12 white gyrfalcons!

Falconry's popularity became a status symbol in Medieval society but it was a rather expensive pleasure. To keep a falcon that was above one's station was a felony and the typical punishment in the Middle Ages was cutting off hands of people who committed that crime.

In the fifteenth century, the Cusmano family in Malta was famous for being a family of falconers. The importance of falcon breeding and hunting in Malta increased in 1530. That was the year that Charles V gave Malta to the Knights of St. John against the annual token payment of a falcon. The falcon was to be caught alive and given to the Viceroy of Sicily as homage to the King of Spain. Once a new kingdom was created, the falcon was presented to the King of the Two Sicilies. It was presented yearly on the 1st November. The Spanish falconer, Juan Bernabe reminded the audience that a few months before giving Malta to the Order, Charles V was crowned Emperor by Pope Clement VII at the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna on 22 February 1530.

In Malta, the Order of Saint John created the post of Falconiere Maggiore who had a number of hunters under his command. His office was so important that in the seventeenth century, the street where his house was situated, Melita Street in Valletta, had its original name changed from Strada Pia, in honour of Pius V, to Strada della Falconieria. Żurrieq was famous for falcon hunting, particularly the areas of Tal-Mansab and Tas-Soru. According to Fenech, Tas-Soru stands for the French word, 'sor', meaning a small falcon.

Falconry represents 5000 years of history entering the language of the Mediterranean people and becoming part of their tradition and culture. This is why, in 2010, UNESCO nominated falconry part of the human heritage of humanity. It should be pointed out that UNESCO has included Italian Falconry as part of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Such an appellation may appear oxymoron. But falconry represents the unity between hunting and the environment. None can deny that behind this form of hunting, there is also a strong tradition and art. This is why it should be preserved. In fact, the falconers present stressed that falconry represents the love for nature.

It is not known precisely where or when humans started using trained raptors to hunt for food, but tradition holds that it probably came into existence with the nomads on the Asian steppes from where it spread to China and west to Arabia, Persia and Europe.

Falcons have to be taught and this work requires great passion and patience. Moreover, falconry has a modern utility. Falconers are used in airports to avoid accidents. Falcons are used as a therapy for children.

Spain has preserved its historic falconry history. Its written history on this subject goes back as far as 1080, when King Alfonso de Leon created the Royal Falconers. Even today, Spain has thousands of falconers. Despite the fact that Malta was historically part of the Spanish and Aragonese Empire, the Golden Age of falconry ended with the arrival of the British in Malta. In fact, hunting with falcons, succeeded to survive the short but turbulent French period, but dwindled during British times. As a historian, I cannot but conclude that the British colonial period extenuated this long tradition. Hunting with guns and dogs started to gain importance over falconry in Britain around this period. The nineteenth-century popular lithographs of hunting scenes in the English countryside clearly demonstrate this. This had an inevitable influence on Malta, being part of the British Empire.

In many countries in the Middle East and parts of Asia, falconry remains a popular sport. Middle Eastern falconers, who can back their interest with virtually unlimited wealth from the oil industry, have been the primary supporters of the market. Nevertheless, over the last few decades, falconry is being revived around the continent and is now being assiduously practised by enthusiasts even here in Malta. We are returning to our roots and breeding falcons. This is a good move but as always, divergent groups emerge in Malta that tend to divide on political lines. This was not officially said at the opening ceremony but could be felt in the informal conversations that followed afterwards.

This opening was also accompanied by the presentation of Galvani's book featuring the photographic work of this artist about falcons, man, nature and the sea. The event was also

reported that same evening on Rai Radio.

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