

ESTRATTO

La Chasse au Moyen Age  
*Société, traités, symboles*

*Textes réunis par*  
*Agostino Paravicini Bagliani*  
*et*  
*Baudouin Van den Abeele*



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José Manuel Fradejas Rueda

## FALCONERS' ORNITHOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION IN MEDIEVAL SPAIN

It is not known when falconry was introduced to the Iberian Peninsula. What is certain is that it was contemporary with or slightly after the Gothic invasions of the fifth century. The oldest attestation is a rather confusing statement by Isidore of Seville in his *Etimologiae* when establishing a bird's classification. He speaks of «[...] aliae ad manum se subiiciunt, ut accipiter» (XII, 7), but some researchers think this is an interpolation<sup>1</sup>.

Although evidence for concerning the existence, practice and regulation of falconry in the Iberian Peninsula goes back to the ninth century, falconry texts were unknown until the second half of the thirteenth century. The history of Spanish falconry books begins with a set of translations into the language of Castile<sup>2</sup>. The texts translated into Old Spanish came down through two different routes: the Arabic, with the translation in 1252, apparently under the aegis of Alfonso the Wise, of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar

1. Some of the older references to falconry seem to be interpolations. That seems to be the case of the words of Julius Firmicus Maternus contained in his *Astronomicorum libri octo* (Venice 1499) when he says: «In Virgine Mercurius si fuerit inventus, quicumque sic eum habuerit, fortes erunt, industrii, sagaces, equorum nutritores, accipitrum, falconum, caeterarumque avium, quae ad aucupia pertinent, similiter et canum, molossorum, vertagorum, et qui sunt ad venationes accomodati». (V, VIII; sig. bb10<sup>o</sup>). Most scholars believe that this is an interpolation by Aldus Manutius. See Juan Vallés, *Libro de acetería y montería*, ed. J. M. Fradejas Rueda. Madrid 1994, 26 n. 6.

2. For a full discussion of the history of Spanish falconry books see J. M. Fradejas Rueda, *Literatura cetería de la Edad Media y el Renacimiento español*, London 1998. Likewise, a full bibliographic account can be found in J. M. Fradejas Rueda, *Bibliotheca cinegetica hispanica: bibliografía crítica de los libros de cetería y montería hispano-portugueses anteriores a 1799*, London 1991 and a forthcoming supplement.

al-Bayzār's *Kitāb al-ḡawarih*, known as *Libro de las animalias que caçan*<sup>1</sup>; and the Latin tradition of the 'traité du faucon malade', to use B. Van den Abeele's felicitous expression<sup>2</sup>. The texts being translated were *Dancus Rex*, *Guillelmus Falconarius*, *Gerardus Falconarius* – better known to Hispanists as *Tratado de las enfermedades de las aves de cazan* – and the *Medicaminum avium* – or *Libro de los azores*<sup>3</sup>.

It is with the literary heir of Alfonso the Wise, his nephew Juan Manuel, that a more lively vernacular production of falconry texts begins. In the first quarter of the fourteenth century, no later than 1325, Prince Juan Manuel finished his *Libro de la caza*<sup>4</sup>. That book is the very first original work on falconry produced in the Iberian Peninsula, and it must be clearly distinguished from a host of books that translate, copy, or summarize others. Juan Manuel does not copy any previous treatise. Juan Manuel contents himself with saying that the theoretical aspects of the art were better expounded by his uncle King Alfonso the Wise, so he makes no use of written sources<sup>5</sup>. Likewise he concentrates on the practical aspects of the hunt: the classification of birds and the choice of the right bird (chapters I-II), and the proper way of handling and training them (chapters III-X). But he speaks only about *falcones altaneros* or high-flying falcons<sup>6</sup>, and leaves aside low-flying birds like the *açor* (goshawk), as these birds were not appreciated by Castilians – they were highly appreciated by the Portuguese<sup>7</sup> –, and in the second chapter he expounds his reasons

1. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar al-Bayzār, *Libro de las animalias que caçan*, ed. J. M. Fradejas Rueda, Madrid 1987.

2. B. Van den Abeele, *La Fauconnerie au Moyen Âge: connaissance, affaitage et médecine des oiseaux de chasse d'après les traités latins*, Paris 1994, 263.

3. J. M. Fradejas Rueda, *Antiguos tratados de cetrería castellanos*, Madrid 1985.

4. Juan Manuel, *Libro de la caza*, ed. J. M. Fradejas Rueda and F. Calero. Madrid, 1998.

5. J. M. Fradejas Rueda, «Las fuentes del *Libro de la caza* de don Juan Manuel», *Boletín de la Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua*, 14/2 (1986), 35–42.

6. For the correct spelling of *altaneros* and its real meaning in Juan Manuel's *Libro de la caza* see J. M. Fradejas Rueda «El *Libro de la caza*: ¿halcones abaneros o halcones altaneros?», *La Corónica*, 18:2 (Spring 1992), 77–82.

7. «ponerse á en este libro lo de la caça de los açores que don Johan sabe, et lo que oyó dezir et usar [...] a otros cavalleros de Portugal que saben mucho de caça de açores» (Juan Manuel, *Libro de la caza*, ch. II, XL). Two hundred years later, Fadrique de Zúñiga y Sotomayor's *Libro de cetrería de caça de açor* (Salamanca 1565) put forward an explanation for the flourishing trade in of hawks in Burguillos, a Spanish town close to the Portuguese border, by saying «pienso que deve ser causa d'estar Burguillos cerca de Portugal y ser los portugueses muy caçadores d'estas aves» (bk. I. ch. 18).

for preferring falcons to hawks, because «falcons of the tower» are more noble than low-flying birds.

Although, or perhaps precisely because, the *Libro de la caza* is a practical handbook<sup>1</sup>, Juan Manuel was obliged to include a chapter on veterinary issues. This section represents only seventeen per cent of the total. The last chapter deals with a totally new aspect, that of the geography of the chase, but unfortunately only the sections dealing with three of the fifteen promised bishoprics have been preserved. This section may be regarded as a field guide to the best hunting locations and the kind of quarry most likely to be found in those territories<sup>2</sup>.

As we have already seen, Juan Manuel is the very first falconer in medieval Spain to establish an ornithological classification, but in his *Libro de la caza* he only speaks of hunting birds, and the only distinction he makes is between *nobles* and *ignobles*, with nobility being a reference to the way the bird hunts: high flying falcons are the noblest because they «matan la garça después que los açores la dexan, et por esto es más noble». Nevertheless, in another work, his *Libro del cavallero et del escudero*<sup>3</sup> he establishes his whole ornithological theory. According to Juan Manuel there are five basic groups. Firstly, birds that hunt, those that are both hunted and hunting themselves, and those that are hunted. Secondly, he makes a distinction between migrant and non-migrant birds. Thirdly, between wild and tame birds. Fourthly, between waterfowl and non-waterfowl. Fifth and last are those birds that are more monster-like, and within these are the *estrucios* and the *murciegos*, that is ostriches and bats<sup>4</sup>.

1. That Juan Manuel's manual is a practical handbook is made clear by Juan Manuel himself when he says: «ca si quier quando lloviessse o quando se aguasse la garça en el río, si entonce oviesse de abrir el libro para leerle, mojarse ia et sería perdido el libro, et dende adelante non sabr[í]a cómo caçar» (Juan Manuel, *Libro de la caza*, ch. VI, LV).

2. Another hunting book connected with Alfonso the Wise that contains a field guide to the best hunting locations, the kind of quarry to be found, and how to set up the chase is the *Libro de la montería*, whose third book covers most of the Castilian territory in the 1300s. Some attempts have been made to identify the place names with actual locations (see G. de Andrés, «Las cacerías en la provincia de Madrid en el siglo XIV según el *Libro de la montería* de Alfonso XI», *Anales del Instituto de Estudios Madrileños*, 15 (1978), 27–57; 16 (1979), 17–43; 17 (1980), 25–40; 18 (1981), 9–22; 19 (1982), 269–82; y 25 (1988), 457–76, and A. López Ontiveros, B. Valle Buenestado & F. R. García Verdugo, «Caza y paisaje geográfico en las tierras béticas según el *Libro de la montería*», in *Andalucía entre Oriente y Occidente (1236-1492): Actas del V Coloquio Internacional de Historia Medieval de Andalucía*, Córdoba 1988, 281–307).

3. Juan Manuel, *Libro del cavallero et del escudero*, in his *Obras completas*, ed. J. M. Bleuca, Madrid 1982, ch. XII, 90–96.

4. No attempt will be made here to identify the birds quoted in the texts being analysed. One might attempt this with the aid of the works by F. Bernis, *Diccionario de*

Within each of these five main groups some subgroups can be established. Thus, among the birds that are hunted, some of them are waterfowl (any bird whose habitat is totally or mostly aquatic), others are terrestrial (great and little bustards, stone curlews, blackbirds, partridges, sandgrouses, quails, and so on), and others are half and half. He refers to waders, because part of their time is spent in the water and part outside it. The waterfowl group is, consequently, divided into two subgroups: swimming birds (any member of the *anatinae* family, whether they are divers or surface-feeders), and waders, those that only wet their feet (herons, spoonbills, bitterns, storks, avocets, stilts, and the flamingo). Among migrant birds he makes a sub-grouping according to the direction of their migration. There is a group of birds that migrates from north to south (geese, cranes and herons), and another that migrate from south to north (storks, doves, swallows, or quails). As is to be expected, these migrant birds can be classified into two main subgroups, those that hunt (sakers, peregrines, kestrels and hobbies) and those that do not hunt.

The other great falconry handbook from medieval Castile is that of Pero López de Ayala. This work is the keystone of the Hispanic falconry tradition as it is the basic source for all later works up to the seventeenth century. It is the first Hispanic text to blend in a balanced way the theoretical, i. e. the veterinary and pharmacological chapters, with chapters devoted to the practical aspects of the chase – classification, description and selection of the birds, management, training, and actual hunting<sup>1</sup>.

López de Ayala's ornithological classification is more simple. To begin with, he establishes that there is a group of birds known as *aves de rapiña* (birds of prey) because they «toman a las otras, e sse çevan e gobiernan dellas»<sup>2</sup>. Immediately afterwards he establishes another classification, a more detailed one in this instance, based on the birds' diet. So, among birds of prey, some of them feed themselves from what they actually hunt, but the eagle, when she cannot «tomar o caçar algun ave de las que acostumbra toma o caçar, torna a tomar la llebre o conejo e cordero pequenio, e aun vien al perro

muerto»<sup>1</sup>. Other birds of prey are scavengers (ravens and crows), as they feed themselves from carrion. Another group feeds itself from insects and small mammals, mostly rodents, and among these are to be found *atahormas*, *tartalanes*, *budalones*, and *aguiluchos*. The last group of birds of prey, whose members feed themselves from carcasses and dead bodies, is the group constituted by vultures (*buitres*, *avantos*, and *quebrantahuesos*). Leaving aside birds of prey, López de Ayala establishes three main dietary groups: omnivores, those that eat «carniças, gusanos de la tierra e frutas»<sup>2</sup>; seed-eaters, because their «mantenimiento es de simientes»<sup>3</sup>, and, finally, fish-eaters, because their «mantenimiento es de pescados»<sup>4</sup>. According to López de Ayala, there is a final subgroup that is made up by mixing the two features; nesting and diet, and, accordingly there are «aves que andan ribera de las aguas, e su mantenimiento es peçes menudos e gusanos de los que se crian en el agua, e paçen fuera en las yervas»<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, López de Ayala does not give an exhaustive classification; he concludes by saying that «asy ha aves de muchas maneras e diversas, e de diversos governamientos»<sup>6</sup>.

López de Ayala's treatise goes a little further ahead in treating the ornithological information since it includes a chapter on the migration of birds under the heading «Del passo de las aves»<sup>7</sup>. López de Ayala includes this chapter because throughout his book he has mentioned «el passo de las aves», and he wants to show what is meant by that: «e agora queremos dezir que passo es este de las aves que fazemos mençion»<sup>8</sup>. From López de Ayala up to the seventeenth century, with Ferreira's *Arte de caça da altanería* (Lisbon 1616), most falconry handbooks will include a chapter dealing with birds' migrations. So, some falconry texts are closer to an ornithological treatise than to a practical handbook on the chase. But it is precisely this feature that makes the Spanish and Portuguese falconry books slightly different from those of the rest of Europe, where such information is very limited or does not appear.

nombres vernáculos de aves, Madrid 1996 and K. Whinnom, *A Glossary of Spanish Bird-names*, London 1966, and some other papers like that by C. Almaça, «Falconers: the first Portuguese naturalists», *Archives of Natural History*, 24 (1997), 175-87.

1. J. M. Fradejas Rueda, *Literatura cetrera*, 29-32.

2. P. López de Ayala, «Libro de la caça de las aves»: el MS 16.392 (British Library, London), ed. Iohn G. Cummins, London 1986, ch. 1, 57.

1. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 57.

2. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

3. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

4. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

5. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

6. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

7. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. XLV, 192-5.

8. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. XLV, 192.



Having briefly reviewed the ways of classifying birds used by Juan Manuel and Pero López de Ayala, the two main authors of falconry books, I will now turn to the birds of prey that according to these two authors were used in falconry.

Among hunting birds (those that hunt and are not hunted), Juan Manuel establishes three groups quite close to today's classification: eagles, falcons and hawks. Nowadays, eagles and hawks belong to the same family, that of the accipiters, while falcons constitute another family, the falconidae, and are distinguished by falconers by their different ways of hunting. Accipiters are low-flying birds, while falcons, or true falcons as some English-speakers might say, are high-flying birds, or to use the Spanish term, they are *altaneros*.

According to Juan Manuel, there are four different species of eagles: *cuello albas*, *rubias*, *blancas* (known in time as *atahormas*) and fishing-eagles (quite probably the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)). Amongst falcons, according to the *Libro del cavallero e del escudero*, there are seven species, although it names five<sup>1</sup>: *gerifaltes* (gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)), *neblies* (peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)), *sacres* (saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*)), *esmerejones* (merlin (*Falco columbarius*)), and *alcotanes* (hobby (*Falco subbuteo*)). On the other hand, there are only two low-flying birds: the *azor* (goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)) and the *gavilán* (sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*)). In his *Libro de la caza* there are only five species of falcons too, but he takes into account neither the tiny merlin nor the hobby, and he incorporates two subspecies of the peregrine falcon: *baharíes* and *borníes*. Therefore, according to Juan Manuel, hunting birds that hunt and are not hunted, i.e., those birds of prey that might be employed in falconry are:

Águilas	{	cuello albas	{	Halcones	{	gerifaltes
		rubias				neblies
Azores	{	blancas	{	Halcones	{	sacres
		pescadoras				baharíes
Azores	{	azores	{	Halcones	{	borníes
		gavilanes				esmerejones
						alcotanes

1. Juan Manuel, *Libro del cavallero*, ch. XLI, 93.

However, of these three groups, Juan Manuel discusses only of the last two, falcons and hawks, and his preference, as already seen, is for falcons, because they are the noblest of the hunting birds because of the way they catch their quarry, while hawks are ignoble.

According to López de Ayala, however, there is no such grouping. For him the main feature distinguishing the birds of prey is that of the cleanliness of the provenance of their food. For him the cleanest birds are those that «se mantienen de aves bivas, e cada vez que se quieren cevar toman ave biva, e desque son çevados non curan de lo que finqua»<sup>1</sup>. The only birds of prey that share this feature are goshawks, falcons, sparrowhawks, merlins and hobbies. All these are to be found in his *Libro de la caça de las aves*, although his main interest lies in falcons, and among them he establishes six different species: *neblíes*, *baharíes*, *gerifaltes*, *sacres*, *borníes*, and *alfaneques*. In the last chapters of his book he speaks of sparrowhawks, birds that «en todas sus costumbres e façiones paresçen ser açores pequeños»<sup>2</sup>, and merlins, which are birds that «paresçen en todas sus façiones falcones»<sup>3</sup>. López de Ayala devotes one chapter to the hobby<sup>4</sup>, but the text for this chapter is that of the 1869 edition based on an unknown manuscript missing from Spain, and supposedly sold to a Frenchman in the XIXth century, but none of the manuscripts located in France has such a chapter. At any rate, according to the 1869 edition, hobbies are bigger than merlins and look quite like falcons («los alcotanes son mayores que los esmerejones; parescen algo falcones»)<sup>5</sup>, so the hobby is a member of the falconidae family<sup>6</sup>.

Falconry with eagles was not practised among the Spaniards during the Middle Ages. However, the oldest extant book on falconry, the *Libro de los animales que cazan*, mentions eagles as birds of prey used in falconry, but in as much as this book is the translation of an

1. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. 1, 58.

2. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. XLII, 187.

3. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. XLIII, 190.

4. López de Ayala, *Libro de la caça*, ch. XLIV, 191.

5. P. López de Ayala, *El «Libro de las aves de caça» del canciller – con las glosas del Duque de Alburquerque*, ed. Emilio Lafuente y Alcántara & Pascual de Gayangos, Madrid 1869; quotation from pg. 151.

6. M. Delgado Mototo in his doctoral dissertation (*Edición crítica del «Libro de la caza de las aves» de Pero López de Ayala*, Madrid 1998) has located the only extant manuscript with this chapter. It is manuscript 1464 of the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, a copy dated 1562! The author states that «el estilo es distinto del empleado por el Canciller», 495 n. 1.

Arabic text, of the *Kitāb al-ğawarih*, we should not take any notice of it as an account of actual practice, at least in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages.

As a final note for this paper I would like to stress that Juan Manuel alludes, as already seen, to the nobility of the bird. But he makes a different use of such nobility than the Arabic falconers. For Juan Manuel the nobility of the bird depends on the way it catches its prey, while for the Arabic falconer it depends on the bird's diet. So for an Arabic falconer a noble bird, *hurr*, is the one that feeds itself from what it actually hunts, while the ignoble bird, *bugat*, is the one that feeds itself from dead animals<sup>1</sup>. In that aspect López de Ayala follows an Arab way of classifying birds of prey, and Juan Manuel, a supposed follower of the Arabic falconry tradition, does not. However, Juan Manuel speaks of *biles caças*, fowl hunts. Such foulness is based on the ignobility of the quarry, so any bird that feeds itself, not only from carrion, the ignoble quarry for the Arabs and for López de Ayala, but from fish, worms, rodents, insects, seeds or grass, that is, any bird that does not hunt large birds such as cranes, herons, bustards or smaller ones such as ducks, geese or partidges, is an ignoble bird.

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1. F. Viré, «Falcoaria arabica: glanures philologiques», *Arabica*, 8 (1961), 273-93; 9 (1961), 37-60, 152-92.