

Falconry at the Aragonese Court of Naples (15th century)

*Baudouin Van den Abeele
(FNRS, University of Louvain)*

Since the time of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, whose kingdom of Sicily also included a large part of the southern Italian peninsula, Naples has known several changes of dynasties, beginning with the Angevin kingdom founded by Charles I of Anjou (1266-1285), which lasted until the first decennia of 15th century. In 1442, Alphonso V of Aragon (fig.1) conquered the city and became King of Naples, known as Alfonso il Magnanimo. His son, Ferdinand I of Aragon (fig.2), succeeded in 1458 as Ferrante I, ruling until his death in 1494. These two rulers were famous for their magnificent lifestyle, as patrons of artists and as collectors of works of art, and their court (fig.3) was one of the most brilliant of early Renaissance Italy. It

Fig. 1.
Alphonso V
of Aragon
by Pisanello,
1440 (Paris,
Louvre, Codex
Vallardi).



is less widely known that they were also fervent hunters and falconers. Thanks to the late Professor Antonio Lupis, we have some information about their passion for hunting and their library (Lupis 1975). Lupis did not hesitate to state that in the second half of the 15th century,

Naples was undoubtedly the most important European centre for the art of falconry. However, at the time he wrote these lines, research about the hunting activity of other 15th century princely courts had not yet developed, and nowadays one would be somewhat more prudent about a “ranking” of courts. Investigations into hunting under Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy’s rule in the Low Countries (Niedermann 1994) and at the Gonzaga court of Mantova (Malacarne 1998 and 2003) have shown the very developed organisation of hunting activity at these courts, and the same could be said about the Sforza court of Milan, or the French royal environment. It is, however, true that there are impressive figures about falconry at the Aragonese court of Naples.



Fig. 2. Ferdinand I of Aragon
(Paris, Louvre).



Fig. 3. Naples, Castel Nuovo, 15th c.

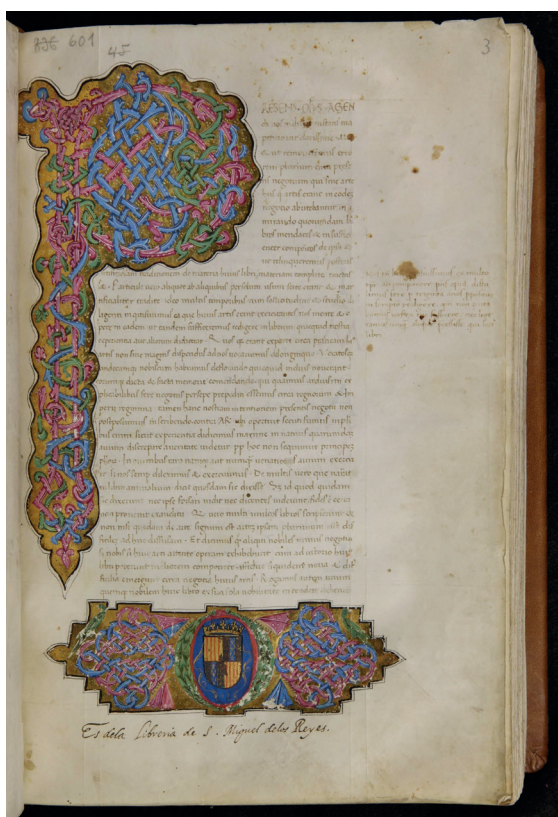


Fig 4. *De arte venandi* of Frederik II of Hohenstaufen copied for Ferrante I (ms. Valencia, Biblioteca universitaria, 601, ca 1470, fol.1).

Archival documents show the vast provision of hawks from various origins (Germany, Candia and Spain) and of associated furniture: Lupis relates the order of 354 pairs of varvels with the arms of both Aragon and Naples on behalf of King Alfonso in 1455, and of 180 bells for sparrowhawks in 1473: astounding numbers. The large hawking parties organised during the realm of the two kings could involve several hundred participants, in a dazzling demonstration of power and magnificence. Hawks were sent as diplomatic gifts to other courts in Italy, France and Spain, which was in fact a common practice at the major European courts.

The possession and acquisition of hawking treatises also attests to their passion: Naples' royal library included a series of books on the subject. Lupis describes 11 still extant Italian manuscripts on falconry which belonged to Alfonso and/or Ferrante I, and he recounts a few others that are mentioned in old inventories but do not seem to have survived.

There were also Latin treatises on falconry in their library, which I have had the opportunity to examine at first hand. Let us start with the renowned *De arte venandi cum avibus* of Emperor Frederick II. A huge

manuscript (33 x 21cm, 304 f.), now in the University Library of Valencia, includes the full text of *De arte venandi's* six books, plus copies of two small 12th century treatises (*Gerardus falconarius* and *Grisofus medicus*) and of the *Ghatrif* and the *Moamin*, the two Latin translations of Arabic treatises made for Frederick II. The latter text, in a manuscript kept in Vienna, was the subject of an article in a previous *International Journal of Falconry* (Van den Abeele 2018). The Valencia codex is a refined book of excellent parchment, opening with a page adorned with a monumental capital P in gold and colours, measuring c. 20cm in height (fig. 4). In the lower margin, the page shows the Aragonese arms of Naples in a decorative medallion, revealing that it was commissioned by order of Ferrante I. Unfortunately, this manuscript of *De arte venandi* does not include any proper illustrations of the Emperor's treatise, unlike the famous Vatican manuscript of Books I and II. However, this volume shows that *De arte venandi* was still considered an important text in Naples two centuries after its redaction. As to the Latin *Moamin*, it also enjoyed lasting success at the Italian courts, especially that of Naples. Alfonso and Ferrante I had



Fig 5. *Moamin falconarius* copied for Alphonso I (New Haven, Yale University Library, Beinecke 446, ca 1450, fol. 1).

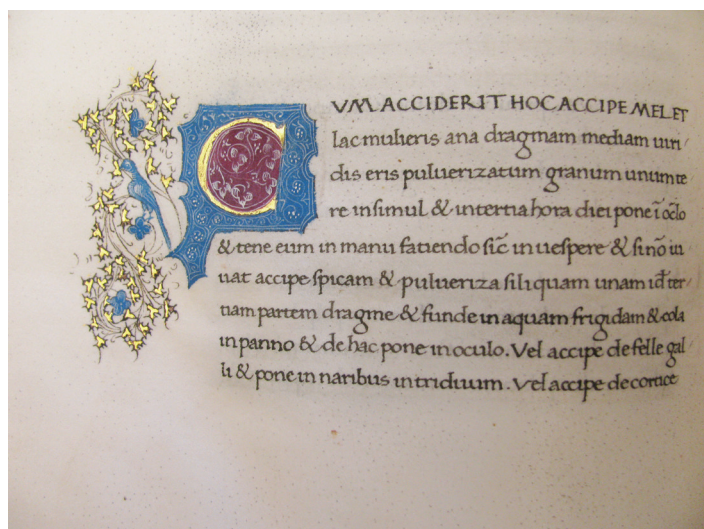


Fig. 6.
Beginning of
book III of
the *Moamin*
(same ms.,
fol. 43v).

no less than four copies of it in their library. Beside the Valencia codex, two other copies are unadorned, but the fourth one (now in the Beinecke Library at New Haven, Connecticut) opens on a splendid page with a double golden frame filled by flowers and a few birds, as well as *putti* bearing the Aragonese arms (fig. 5).

At the top of the page is a most original painting of a falcon chamber or mews with six hooded falcons on a perch – most likely peregrines: two adult males and four immature females. It is a rare view of the kind of rooms that were reserved for hawks, a topic on which we have little information for the medieval period. The codex is written on especially thin and smooth parchment, and each chapter begins with a golden letter in a red or blue frame. For the main divisions of the *Moamin* and the beginning of other texts (the volume continues with copies of the small treatises of *Dancus rex* and *Guillelmus falconarius*), the initials have a delicate marginal vegetation with gilt leaves, and on one occasion a bird (fig. 6). This certainly was one of the most refined of Alfonso's manuscripts.

The Aragonese kings not only possessed copies of older texts on falconry, but also promoted the translation of some of them. One of their most talented and prolific scribes, Iammarco Cinico, translated the Latin treatises of *Moamin*, *Dancus* and *Guillelmus* for Ferrante I. The autograph copy of Cinico's work is still

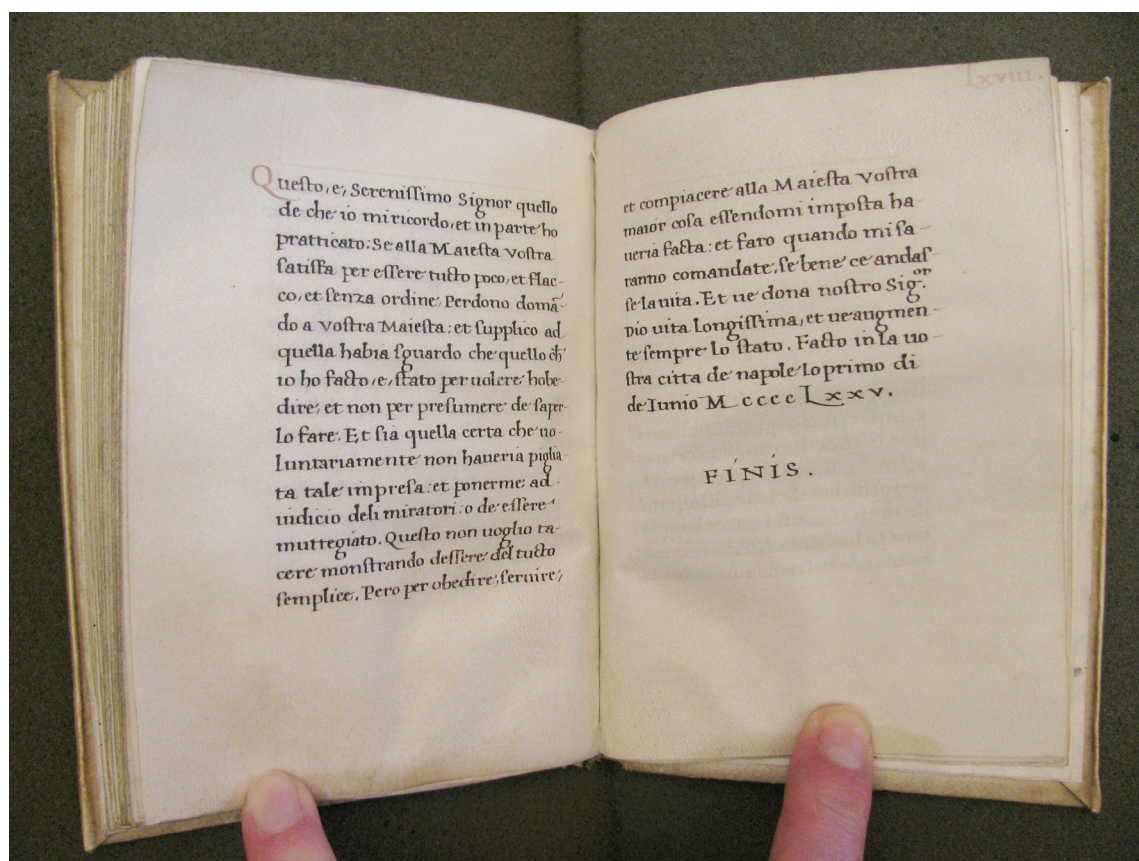


Fig. 7. Epilogue of the *Practica de citraria* by Mathias Mercader (New Haven, Yale University Library, Beinecke 124, 2nd half of 15th c., fol. LXVIIv-LXVIII).

extant, in the famous Laurenziana Library of Florence (ms. Ashburnham 1249); it has a front page with a frame in “bianchi girari”, a kind of marginal decoration formed of white twigs contrasting with a dark background, which is typical for Italian manuscripts of the 15th century. The margins include the arms of Aragon on the lower side and four green parakeets on the right side. Cinico’s translation of *Moamin* has been edited and studied for its very rich vocabulary, which preserves traces of the Arabic terms borrowed by the Latin translator (Glessgen 1996). Translations from other languages were also patronised by the kings of Naples. Lupis recalls the mention of an Italian version of the famous hunting manual of Gaston Febus, the *Livre de chasse*, but it has not been preserved.

Finally, Alfonso and Ferrante I also encouraged the writing of new texts in Italian. In 1475 an archdeacon of Valencia, Mathias Mercader, wrote a treatise entitled *Practica de citraria breve* (“Short practice of hawking”) on behalf of Ferrante I: this has been preserved in a few 15th century manuscripts (Madrid, Palermo and New Haven). The text occupies some 40 folios (80 pages) in the two first manuscripts, but 68 folios (136 pages) in the New Haven manuscript, which is a tiny pocket-book of 10 to 14cm (fig. 7). This *Practica* has only been edited most recently (Fenollosa 2017). The *camerlengo* (chamberlain) Count Innico d’Avalos, a most loyal officer of Alfonso il Magnanimo, dedicated to Ferrante I

two short treatises on special subjects related to falconry: the first about the treatment of avian cancer and the second about hawks’ moults. These two texts were edited by Lupis in his article quoted above (Lupis 1975). The first of them includes a most original list of hawks’ names, which deserves special attention: this is the subject of the following article, by Michela Del Savio.

References

- FENOLLOSA, Roser Melchior, *Practica de citraria. Un tractat de falconeria de Maties Mercader (1475)*. Edición crítica, introducción y notas, Valencia: Diputacio de Valencia, 2017.
- GLESSGEN, Martin-Dietrich, *Die Falkenheilkunde des «Moamin» im Spiegel ihrer volgarizzamenti. Studien zur Romania Arabica*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1996.
- LUPIS, Antonio, “La sezione venatoria della biblioteca aragonese di Napoli e due sconosciuti trattati di Ynico d’Avalos conte camerlengo”, in *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e di Letterature Straniere di Bari*, 6 (1975), p. 225-313.
- MALACARNE, Giancarlo, *Le cacce del principe. L’ars venandi nella terra dei Gonzaga*, Modena: Il Bullino, 1998.
- MALACARNE, Giancarlo. *I signori del cielo. La falconeria a Mantova al tempo dei Gonzaga*. Mantova: Artiglio, 2003; English translation: *Lords of the Sky. Falconry in Mantua at the time of the Gonzagas*, Mantova: Artiglio, 2011.
- NIEDERMANN, Christoph, *Das Jagdwesen am Hofe Herzog Philipps des Guten von Burgund*, Bruxelles, 1995 (Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique, N° sp. 48).
- VAN DEN ABEELE, Baudouin, “The *Moamin*, an Arabic treatise on falconry translated for the Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in 1240”, in *The International Journal of Falconry*, 10 (2018), p. 64-69.



BAUDOUIN
VAN DEN ABEELE

Baudouin Van den Abeele is Professor of Medieval History at the Belgian Université Catholique de Louvain and Senior Researcher of the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique. For more than 30 years, he has devoted most of his research to the history and culture of medieval falconry. Besides numerous articles, he has published books on medieval Latin, French and Italian treatises on falconry (1994, 1998) and their manuscripts and illustrations (2013), as well as a French translation of Emperor Frederick II's monumental *De arte venandi cum avibus* (2000). He is currently developing a database on the medieval iconography of falconry.

