

overb goes that for Quail oting, one needed a good ter and a cheap gun

Some sayings associate birds with changes in the countryside, like the proverb which goes: when the sea-squill blossoms, expect Turtle Doves. Others link bird behaviour with migration: *Meta I-Gamiem ibarqam ġos-siġar tkun waslet tmiem ilpassa*, (when Turtle Doves croon while resting in trees, the end of the migration season is near). The disappearance of Scops Owls in autumn heralded the arrival of Song Thrushes.

Pointers were highly esteemed for Quail shooting, so much so that a proverb goes that for shooting Quail one needs an expensive dog and a cheap gun (*Għas-Summien, kelb ta' mitt lira u senter ta' sold*). Another saying was that a hunter without a dog is like a crib figurine (*Kaċċatur bla kelb, kaċċatur pastur*).

Hunter's marksmanship is spoken about in proverbs: One who killed half of what he shot at, was considered to be a good shot. Another says that the good shooter went wrong once; the bad one gets it right once! Yet another saying goes that he who shoots plenty of shots will finally hit, but another advises hunters to shoot only when a bird is within range, even if one fails to kill. According to a saying, *Alwett fotti tiri*, Skylarks are difficult to shoot and makes one waste shots.

While a proverb states that a flying bird presents a target three times larger than a sitting one, another proverb cautioned that the sky is bigger than the fowl, meaning it is easier to miss than to hit.

While a proverb goes that hunters and trappers are liars, because they are always recounting tales about what they caught and the ones that got away, another saying went that a hunter is a gentleman all year round except in the hunting season, because at that time, hunting is the only thing on their mind.

A number of sayings are related to gun safety. One saying goes that it takes only one cartridge to burst the barrel of a gun. An even earlier saying goes that the hunter loads the muzzleloader but the devil fires it. Another saying said that an empty gun kills a man, and this saying was coined because accidents sometimes happen when someone thinks the gun is empty while in fact, it is loaded. Another proverb advises old hunters to stop hunting: When your eyesight dims and you become hard of hearing, put your gun away as you won't need it anymore. Though migrations were heavier, catches were not guaranteed and a proverb warns: Do not prepare your frying pan as it is not guaranteed you will catch anything. Christmas heralded the end of the hunting season, and a proverb advised hunters to leave their fowling piece at home during the months of January and February. A similar proverb existed for the month of August *f'Awwissu*, *is-senter m'hemmx ghalfejn tmissu*, there is no need to touch your shotgun in August, as there is no game.

These proverbs, and the others listed in Appendix 1, are a clear indication that birds played an important role in people's lives.

Falconry

Falconry was an important activity in Malta during the Middle Ages and continued to have a degree of importance until 1798, when the Knights were ousted by the French. The practice is likely to have died down at that time as the last reference to it was in official documents in 1800 and guns probably replaced the falcons for hunting purposes.

Although references are very scant, falconry must have been practised in the 13th century and it is evident that falcons that were trapped from Malta were held in high esteem as in 1239, Emperor Frederick II had sent a team of 18 falconers with horses and men under the leadership of Falconer Guiljermo Ruffino for a two-month tour to trap falcons for him. Documentary evidence shows that the falconers brought with them a team of 22 men and 39 horses. Each of these men were paid 13 gold grains a day, and when one considers that they had to feed their horses, they were still rather well paid at that time. They had to send the falcons to Messina on a special boat and had to inform the Emperor about the number of falcons that there were on the Islands, how they were kept and how many were caught from the wild that season (Huillard-Breholles 1963).

A medieval votive stone slab that once formed part of a church in the late Middle Ages in Rabat is perhaps one of the most tangible of the references from this period. It features a falconry scene with a falcon on a heron's back and a man following the two birds.

What appears to be a falconry scene also exists in the form of a doodle in a vignette in one of the *Libri Bullarum* manuscripts found at the National Library of Malta. These manuscripts contain the administrative orders issued at the time and it seems that the scribes who wrote the books took the liberty of drawing doodles, some of which bear associations with the surnames of people involved in the writings. The scene in question, showing a man with what looks like a falcon on his left hand and accompanied by a dog, is found in the manuscript which contains orders issued between 1564 and 1565 and was scribbled next to the name of Federico Cazza. Another doodle showing a hooded falcon is found alongside the name Filbert Faucon (Bonello 2008).

In 1271, during Angevin times, Charles of Anjou wrote to the Castellan of Malta and Gozo, Bertrando de Real, that falcons were to be trapped, cared for and sent to His Majesty by expert people. The Castellan was instructed to keep a note of the names and surnames of those who transported the falcons to the royal court from Malta (Laurenza 1934). Evidence of payment to Maltese falconers exists in 1374 (Fiorini 2001).

Trapped falcons were passed to the Royal Falconer in a very formal way, with notarial deeds registering the species, quantity and expenses involved. The falconer was responsible for ferrying the birds to Sicily and then to Catalunya. Hoods for falcons were made from lamb skin while jesses, that were tied to the birds' legs, were made out of dog skin.

In the early 1400s, falconers were considered to be important people and were exempted from carrying out night watch duties (Wettinger 1979). Falcon trappers enjoyed many exemptions due to the privileges and provisions laid in their favour by the overlords and their ministers, particularly the Viceroy of Sicily. In May 1470, the town council, which was the local government of the time, discussed whether the falconer had to pay taxes and while some council members insisted that he should pay, others said that ancient customs should be observed (Wettinger 1993). Privileges and exemptions to falcon trappers were also given in May 1492 and confirmed in 1493 (Abela 1647, Ciantar 1772). In 1563, there were not more than 20 falcon trappers in Malta and Gozo and they petitioned to be exempted from various taxes and watch duties (Fenech 1992).

In the 15th century falcons were being used for hunting in Malta too. Specific mention of the use of a falcon for hunting is found in a petition on behalf of people from the upper and middle class in 1494. The town council pleaded with the Kingdom of Sicily to allow them to at least have falcons such as the *villani*, since King Ferdinand's falconers had taken all the birds away (Abela 1647, Mifsud 1917, Dalli 1993). The petition states that there was nothing else for them to do except to go hawking



and falconry prevented them "from becoming idle". The *villani* were not the best kind of falcons to be used in falconry as they were adult birds that were difficult to tame and train and the petition shows that the people at the time were begging to be at least allowed to use such birds.

Between 1428 and 1458, the Falconer, one of the few officials of the medieval administration, was a Maltese called Baldo Zebi. The administration had very limited expenses and "the only significant expenditure was on the hunting, capture, feeding and shipment to Sicily of falcons for the king. Falcon hunting was a major royal prerogative on Malta, and partly explains the king's interest in the island" (Bresc 1975).

The birds themselves came to be possessions of the greatest value and were looked upon as symbols of power and influence. They even made their appearance on crests and on coats of arms. Writing about falconry in France during the reign of Louis XIII (1610–43), Charles D'Arcussia (1554– 1628) one of the most renowned falconers of his time, stated: "I can say that falconry has never

Portrait of Don Artal de Alagon holding a falcon found in a Maltese collection





Doodles from *Libri Bullarum* from the mid-1500s show a falconer with a dog and a hooded falcon

been practiced so well in France as it is today. Never has a King had so many nor such good birds as His Majesty has at present. People bring him birds from everywhere, because they know he loves them. The Greeks bring him Sakers and the Dutch, Gyrfalcons. From Malta there is an annual present from which His Majesty last month most graciously gave me a Sakeret (female Saker) which I hold as dear as my life. It is called Real because he gave it to me, His Majesty honoured it with that name and commanded me to call it so" (Schlegel and Wulverhorst 1844).

Falcons in Malta were trapped while on migration in autumn and the falcon trapping sites were called *paragni*. In 1563, the falcon trappers and owners of paragni numbered 20 at most (NLM AOM 429). Both Abela (1647) and Ciantar (1772) mention the use of *paragni*, a set-up of net and a domesticated falcon used as a lure, with which other falcons were caught. This they termed as "an ingenious invention". These were vertical nets. A graphic of them can be seen on a map made in late 1565 by the German engraver Mathias Zündt. The map shows various battles of the Great Siege of Malta, but a pair of standing nets can be seen on the cliffs on the south west coast of Malta (Ganado and Agius-Vadala 1994).

Paragni existed at Corradino and between Mellieħa and Marfa in Malta (Abela 1647) while in his description of Gozo, Agius (1746) gives a list of 13 places where 20 falcon traps were set and states that in some years, up to 50 falcons were trapped, adding that the pigeons or Turtle Doves were used as decoys. The trapping sites in Gozo were situated at Ta' Giarriska, tal-Maqjel, two at Qasam ta' San Pawl, four at Ta' Ċenċ, singles at Mġarr ix-Xini, il-Qortin tal-Imgarr, in-Nuffara, Ta' Brieken, Rdum il-Kbir, Rdum iż-Żgħir and il-Qortin overlooking Wied ir-Riħan and four at Wardija.

Agius De Soldanis (1750), who wrote the first Maltese dictionary, mentions the mansab tal-bies, a trapping site for falcons. This continues to confirm the existence of these sites. It is worth noting that edicts permitting people to trap "birds and Turtle Doves" specifically forbade them from moving their decoy birds when a falcon was seen, so as not to interrupt the falcon trappers, obviously by attracting the bird to their nets. In his dictionary of 1796, Vassalli lists the long defunct word *Bejjys*, saying this meant *cacciatore di falconi*, falcon trapper.

The Knights of St John, who were granted the Maltese Islands in fief, were obliged to pay the

yearly nominal rent of a falcon or a hawk on All Saints Day (1st November). However it later became customary to send a number of falcons to the kings of France, Spain, Portugal and Naples. The custom of sending falcons to kings existed before the Knights of St John were given Malta as documents dated 1446 indicate that falcons were already being sent to the King of France. However, falcon trapping goes back to even earlier times.

Records of the number and types of falcons that were trapped exist and date back to 1431, when 14 falcons had been caught, of which 11 were Peregrine Falcons and one was a Saker. The number of falcons trapped varied and up to 50 were trapped annually, but there were years when fewer were caught, as had happened in 1771, when only 5 falcons were sent to the King of Naples, and the accompanying protocol letter said that the usual number of 6 could not be sent because falcons had been scarce. The King of France was usually sent 12 birds each year. Twelve falcons were sent to the King of France in 1727 and 11 in the following year and there were several years when 10 or 8 birds were sent. Records held in the archives of the National Library show that between 1646 and 1789, between 4 and 21 falcons were sent annually to the Kings of France, Naples and the King of the two Sicilies (Table 4). In some years, entries in the annals simply record the despatch of "some falcons" and list neither the quantity nor the type that were sent. When a number of falcons were sent, these were usually mixed and one finds names such as Laniers de Russie and Laniers de Sicile, showing that the Knights made distinctions between plumages or races of Lanners, calling them Lanners of Russia and Lanners of Sicily. Most The location of falcon trapping sites on Gozo in 1746

- 1. Tal-Magjel, Għarb
- 2. Ta' Ġarriska, near San Dimitri Chapel, Għarb
- II-Qasam ta' San Pawl, between Santa Luċija and Ras il-Wardija
- 4. II-Wardija
- 5. Ta' Ċenċ
- 6. Mġarr ix-Xini
- 7. Ta' Brieghen, between Xewkija and Ghajnsielem
- 8. II-Qortin tal-Imġarr, overlooking Mġarr Harbour
- 9. II-Qortin overlooking Wied ir-Riħan, between Wied ir-Riħan and Daħlet Qorrot
- 10. Rdum iż-Żgħir, limits of Nadur
- 11. Rdum il-Kbir, limits of Nadur
- 12. In-Nuffara



Detail from a 1565 map of Malta showing the nets used for trapping falcons

Table 4: Number of falcons sent from Malta						
Year	Peregrines	Saker	Lanner	Lanier de Russie Saker	Lanier de Sicile Lanner	Total
1646	4					4
1676	7	4		2		13
1683	9	2				11
1684	11	1		1		13
1685	11	1				12
1705	8			2		10
1706	6	1		2	2	11
1707	9		1			10
1708	7	1	2			10
1709	8	1		1		10
1710	8	7	1	and the second	1	11
1711	6			4		10
1713	6		2			8
1715	6					6
1721	17	1	3			21
1727	9		3			12
1728	7		4			11
1732	7					7
1741	10					10
1742	8					8
1744	6		2			8
1745	4		2			6
1747	4		4			8
1752	8					8
1753	10					10
1762	10					10
1764	15					15
1765	16					16
1766	6					6
1767	6					6
1768	6					6
1771	5					5
1772	6					6
1778	10					10
1783	10					10
1784	12					12
1785	6		,			6
1786	8					8
1787	10					10
1788	6					6
1789	6					6

of the falcons sent were Peregrines of different sexes and ages, but up to 1747, several Lanner and Saker Falcons were also sent. There was a whole protocol that had to be observed on how the Knight sent by the Grand Master had to present the falcon to the respective King.

De Boisgelin noted that the expense of sending and presenting falcons to the Kings of France, Spain and Portugal and the Viceroy of Sicily in the 10-year period between 1779 and 1788 amounted to 10,393 scudi, 3 tari and 8 grani, equivalent to £103, 18 shillings and 7 pence. The average annual expense 1,039 crowns a year represented four per cent of the whole budget. The most that was paid was 1,272 crowns in 1779 while the least

was 766 crowns in 1781. It seems that the expense was not directly proportional to the number of falcons sent as while 1,184 Crowns were spent in 1783, when 10 falcons were sent, 989 Crowns were spent in the following year, when 12 falcons were sent and 842 Crowns were spent in 1785, when only six falcons were sent. In 1788, 1,172 Crowns were spent on the dispatch of another six falcons. In 1787, ten falcons were sent at an expense of 1,213 Crowns while 945 Crowns were spent in 1786 when 8 falcons were sent.

References show that from the mid-1500s, the Grandmaster used to send falcon trappers to Lampedusa during the migration period in order to trap falcons from there too (Bosio 1683). In 1545, the Grand Master sent the Knight Fra Diego Lopez de Aiala to Spain to give greetings to King Philip and to deliver a quantity of falcons *Pellegrini e sagri*, part trapped in Malta and another part trapped in Lampedusa.

Once caught, falcons used to be marked and a female falcon belonging to Henry II (1547-59), which escaped while he was hunting with it at Fontainebleau, was caught in Malta on the following day and recognised from the ring it was wearing (Bachman 1833).

The obligation to send falcons compelled the Order to create the post of the Grand Falconer. The Grand Falconer was appointed by the Grand Master but had no rank, thus other senior officers entered the Grand Masters' room before him. Apart from taking care of the Grand Master's reserves, he had to look after, and prepare, the falcons to be sent to the Kings abroad, for which he had an allowance of 3 carlini per falcon per day until they were delivered. He paid for the powder and shot used by himself and his hunters, he was responsible for issuing hunting licences and to determine the dates when the hunting season was to open and close. At the beginning of the hunting season he had to send game to all the Council members of the Order as well as to the Inquisitor. He also had to provide game for the Grandmaster's table. The Grand Falconer also accompanied the Grandmaster on his hunting excursions and presented him the gun, which was loaded by the chief hunter and carried by the pages. He had an allowance of two cartouches of wine per day, 3 candles a week and had free lodging, had a house in town and another one in the country (Fenech 1992).

Under Grandmaster Lascaris, one of the buildings in Valletta housed the falconry of the Order and was the Grand Falconer's official residence. The street where it was located was then called *Strada della Falconeria* and is now called Melita Street, but the original building no longer exists. The Grand Falconer had some support staff which included the posts of *cacciatore* (hunter), *Guardiano della caccia* (game warden) and a supervisory rank *Capo caccia* (chief hunter) also existed.

Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette, who was the Grand Master during the Great Siege of 1565, liked to hunt partridges with falcons close to St Paul's Bay and had a Gyrfalcon which was sent to him by the King of France. A hooded Gyrfalcon can be seen on his shield-of-arms. De Valette died of sunstroke he got while hunting with falcons. Three days before he died, his lioness died. The following day his parrot died and then his Gyrfalcon died. These were seen as premonitions that his death was close, and he did indeed die after his falcon (Bosio 1683). During his reign, De Valette had confirmed the exemption from nightwatch duties and taxes to those who manned the falcon-trapping stations. There were 20 falcon trappers at the time. When the falconers' regiment was formed in 1751, its soldiers, who numbered 20, were exempted from paying taxes.

Sending falcons to dignitaries abroad was not always without hitches. Documents dating back to 1551-53 show that on one occasion, falcons meant for the King of France were held up in Trapani. On 4th April 1609 Fra Geronimo de Britto was sent by the Grand Master to take falcons to the King at Saragoza in the Kingdom of Aragon, but the guards of the kingdom forbade him entry and demanded payment of 200 Reals (20 Scudi, approximately €8.50). This was later halved and being "such an extraordinary expense", the Knight had asked to be reimbursed.

Yarrell (1843) stated that Louis XVI, the King of France, had Lanners sent annually from Malta, "but they were brought from eastern countries". Yarrell gives no supporting evidence to his statement that these were imported into Malta. Furthermore, records held in Malta show that Lanners were sent on several occasions. Schlegel and Wulverhorst (1844) stated that every year, the Grand Master of Malta sent a French knight with 12 birds for the King. The King of France made a gift of a thousand ecus to this Knight and the Grand Master of Malta paid for his journey to the court of France. This habit of sending falcons to the King of France was also followed by the King of Denmark and the Prince of Kurlandia, who sent Gyrfalcons and other birds of





In Medieval times, hoods for falcons were made from lamb skin. Today some are still highly decorated

prey to the King of France. Kurlandia, or Courland, formed part of Poland and now forms part of Latvia.

The Knight presenting the falcons was given a letter by the Grand Master to be presented to the respective King and another to the Ambassador. The letter contained a list of the falcons that were being sent as well as named the person who was helping the Knight with the falcons. In one such letter dated 13th October 1764, the Grand Master told the King of France that he was sending him "Three Peregrines, two females and four tiercels", adding that he was "full of joy in sending these birds of *haute volerie*," a term used to describe the hunting of herons, kites and hares by the falcons. *Basse volerie* included flights at Partridge, crow and Magpie.

Falcons were sent to the King of Sicily even during the uprising against the French in 1798 as the expenses for sending these birds are listed in official accounts of the time. The last time the falcons appear to have been sent is by the first British Governor, Alexander Ball, in 1800.

Trapping and bird keeping

One cannot state with certainty who introduced bird trapping to the Maltese Islands. It is probable that the early settlers had some catching methods as bird bones have been found from several archaeological sites. It is unfortunate that these have not yet been analysed to try and identify what species they represent.

The words *xibka* (net), *mansab* (trapping site) and *insib* (trapping) have been derived from Arabic, and as the Arabs ruled Malta from 870 to 1090 AD, one can assume that some forms of bird catching may have been taking place at that time. An expression in old Maltese that has fallen into disuse speaks of *sajjied l-għasafar*, which literally translated means one who fishes for birds, but which actually means a bird snarer. Agius De Soldanis (1750) defines *mansab* (trapping site) as a place where "one fishes for birds".

In the mid 1500s, people caught Quail by cast nets, locally called *terrieħa*. The *terrieħa* is sometimes used by fishermen from the shore, but this fishing method is almost obsolete. One cast the round, bell-shaped net with weights on its sides over fish in shallow waters or birds such as Quail or Partridge, that were seen crouching. The nets had to be thrown from very close range and both partridges as well as Quail were caught with it. Criminal records show evidence of the use of such nets for catching Quail in 1551, as a man was found using such a net without a licence from the Grand Falconer (Wettinger 2006). A regulation published in the *Malta Government Gazette* on 2nd October, 1883 stipulated that the *terrieha* and another kind of net called *xibka*, which referred to the nets traditionally used for catching Quail, were the only nets that were allowed for the taking of Quail. The use of vertical nets had already been banned by the Police Laws published on 1st March 1854 and a subsequent Government Notice published on 22nd May 1872. The use of the *terrieħa* was finally made illegal by a Government Notice published on 24th January 1911.

Quails were trapped with nets set on standing corn in spring and from special trapping sites in autumn. Farmers often complained about the damage done to their crops because of such practices and on 19th April 1879, Notary Carmelo Gauci wrote on behalf of 109 Gozitans petitioning the Governor to ban the use of the *regna* for Quail trapping (LGO 1131/1879). The signatories included several parish priests and other clergy as well as a number of farmers.

In the late 1800s, Quails were also trapped with vertical nets, which were fixed along the shore. Some people applied for permission to fix stakes on which nets standing some 12 feet high would be hung for the purpose of catching Quail in September and October, but such permission was refused because this meant an encroachment on public land (LGO Petition 4033A/1881).

This practice however seemed to have gained in popularity and in 1883, the Police Superintendent aired a grievance on behalf of hunters (LGO 15741 Police). Hunters were complaining that nets 8 to 10 feet high and spanning up to 3,500 yards were being set up in different places in April, May and September. Shortly after, a total of 210 hunters sent a petition asking "that the custom lately introduced of laying Quail nets on the sea shores may be prohibited (LGO 6909S). According to this petition, nets spanning 800 yards were fixed and hunters were unable to find any Quail to shoot as a result. Hunters were threatening that they would no longer pay the hunting licence, arguing this would mean a loss of revenue to government. The law was subsequently changed and only small nets could be used to catch Quail (Malta Government Gazette 1883).

During the time of the Order of St John, vertical and other nets were used. Edicts regulating