



The caliph and the falcons: a ninth-century history from Iceland to Iraq

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In the late ninth and early tenth centuries, an extraordinary number of falcons were given to the 'Abbāsid caliphs in Baghdad, many of which were white. Gifts from competing dynasties in the northern provinces of the Caliphate, at least some of these birds were almost certainly gyrfalcons from near the Arctic Circle. This article argues that they came from Scandinavia and that their appearance in Baghdad can be linked to Norse settlement in Iceland. The journey of these gyrfalcons demonstrates the importance of access to northern goods for caliphal politics and the impact of scarce animal resources on early medieval trade.

In the year 893, Ismā'īl b. Aḥmad (r. 892–907), the Sāmānid ruler of Transoxiana, sent a large number of gifts to the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 892–902) in Baghdad.¹ Among the assorted camels, slaves, cheetahs and horses listed, were 'thirty-two falcons, eleven of which were white.' The Sāmānids were not the only people who had heard that the caliph liked falcons. The following year, the Saffārid ruler of Khurasan, 'Amr b. al-Layth (r. 879–900), dispatched to al-Mu'taḍid fifteen falcons.² Perhaps worried that this compared poorly with

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¹ *Book of Gifts and Rarities* (henceforth BGR), c. 54, trans. G. al Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmī (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 86–7.

² BGR, c. 55, p. 87.

Ismā'il's gift, 'Amr followed this in 895 with thirty more falcons.³ While we might imagine at this point that the caliph had enough falcons, 'Amr disagreed, producing a further twenty in 896.⁴ Nor was he alone in this avian generosity. The Saffārid emir was the most prolific giver of raptors, but in the years between 869 and 911, the caliphs were given at least 172 falcons by seven different donors. The majority of these gifts were made between 893 and 899, in which over a hundred falcons were given across six separate donations. (The full list of the falcon gifts can be consulted in the Appendix.)

Put simply, by the end of the ninth century, the skies of Baghdad were filled with falcons. These falcons were unusual not simply because of their sheer number or because they came from several donors on multiple occasions in a very short space of time. They were also striking birds. When we are given more detail on them, many are described as being white or piebald, as one account says, 'the like of which no one had ever seen before'.⁵ The horizons of the Islamic world were vast, but white or polychrome falcons were not common within them. The bird these descriptions most resemble is the gyrfalcon, the world's largest falcon, which resides close to arctic climates in the far north of Eurasia and North America.⁶

To the best of our knowledge, this extraordinary gathering of falcons, at least some of which came from very far away, has never been noticed before. This article discusses why and how Baghdad became the residence for so many falcons, and their implications for understanding ninth-century history. The contemporary politics of the Caliphate will be investigated in terms of why so many powerful rulers were prompted to send gifts to the caliph at this precise point, and the significance of falcons as gifts in 'Abbāsīd culture. We will then track the falcons' origins to Scandinavia, reflecting changes in both the exploitation of natural resources in the Atlantic and the links between the far north and the Islamic world via Rus' and Viking-Age trade networks.⁷ We begin, though, with the crucial source of evidence for these falcons.

The Book of Gifts and Rarities

Our information for the giving of the falcons comes from a work called the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*. At first glance this is not a particularly

³ BGR, c. 57, pp. 87–8.

⁴ BGR, c. 49, p. 85.

⁵ BGR, c. 47, p. 85; c. 54, p. 87.

⁶ E. Potapov and R. Sale, *The Gyrfalcon* (London, 2005), pp. 43, 66–78.

⁷ We use lower-case 'viking(s)' for people or the population group but retain upper-case usage for concepts, namely the Viking Age, the Viking world and the Viking East.

promising source for attempting to reconstruct ninth-century history. It is a catalogue of famous gifts and wonders assembled in Egypt by a Fāṭimid official in the second half of the eleventh century.⁸ Many of its entries are clearly fantastical, featuring magical items and peoples.⁹ There is, nonetheless, reason to take it seriously for our purposes. The anonymous compiler indicates that they were previously employed in the administration of the Būyids in Baghdad, where they would have had access to the 'Abbāsīd archive.¹⁰ This is borne out by the sober nature of the falcon entries which are lists of gifts made to the caliphs by powerful rulers.

Some of the gifts listed can be confirmed by other sources. The historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) notes that in 899 'Amr b. al-Layth sent al-Mu'taḍid 'twenty horses with ornamented saddles and bridles inlaid (with silver) one hundred and fifty horses with embroidered saddle cloths, garments, perfume, and falcons'.¹¹ Not only does this tally with one of the pertinent entries in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, but al-Ṭabarī even offers a more precise date for their arrival, 4 July. Elsewhere, the geographer al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956) makes reference to 'Amr's gift of 896, although he does not mention falcons.¹²

This suggests that we can use the relevant entries in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* as evidence for presents of falcons. There are, however, a few caveats. The account of the first gift of these birds says that Ya'qūb b. al-Layth al-Saffār (r. 861–79) gave al-Mu'tamid (r. 870–92) ten falcons, but without offering a date.¹³ This is certainly not impossible. While Ya'qūb spent most of the caliph's reign waging war on him, relations were good in 870–1 when diplomats were sent back and forth.¹⁴ However, al-Ṭabarī says that in 869 Ya'qūb gave al-Mu'tamid's

⁸ M. Hamidullah, 'Nouveaux documents sur les rapports de l'Europe avec l'Orient Musulman au Moyen Âge', *Arabica* 7 (1960), pp. 281–300.

⁹ O. Grabar, 'The Shared Culture of Objects', in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, DC, 1997), pp. 115–29, 128.

¹⁰ BGR, c. 87, 111. On the archive, see M. van Berkel, 'Reconstructing Archival Practices in Abbasid Baghdad', *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 1 (2014), pp. 7–22. H. Halm argued that the non-Fāṭimid material was added later: 'Das "Buch der Schätze und Raritäten": Zur Autorschaft und Überlieferung des *Kitāb ad-dahā'ir wa t-tuḥaf*', in U. Vermeulen and J. van Steenbergen (eds), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras, Vol. 4* (Louvain, 2005), pp. 79–84. This places too much weight on al-Maqrīzī, whose use of Fāṭimid evidence was probably determined by his Egyptian focus.

¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 38: The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad: The Caliphates of al-Mu'taḍid, al-Muktafi and al-Muqtadir A.D. 892–915/A.H. 279–302*, trans. F. Rosenthal (Albany, 1985), p. 77.

¹² Al-Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, trans. P. Lunde and C. Stone (London, 1989), p. 335.

¹³ BGR, c. 47, p. 85.

¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 36: The Revolt of the Zanj A.D. 869–879/A.H. 255–265*, trans. D. Waines (Albany, 1991), p. 119; D.G. Tor, *Violent Order: Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the 'Ayyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World* (Würzburg, 2007), pp. 159–73.

predecessor, al-Mu‘tazz (r. 866–9), ‘steeds, falcons, some musk and various garments as presents’.¹⁵ The entry in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* may be an erroneous record of this gift, rather than of another one shortly after.

Among the list is the famous account of the sending of gifts to Caliph al-Muktafi (r. 902–8) by Margravine Bertha of Tuscany in 906, which included fourteen raptors.¹⁶ This story’s veracity is fiercely debated and this is not the place for a full discussion.¹⁷ Stylistically it reads very differently from the other entries. While Bertha may well have sent an embassy with gifts, we view the surviving details as clearly the product of writers within the Caliphate. The letter purporting to be from Bertha begins with a classic Arabic *basmala* despite supposedly being originally in Latin, and contains a description of the Frankish world that bears no resemblance to anything found in western Europe. In the letter Bertha proposes marriage to Caliph al-Muktafi, which seems unlikely given that she was already married. In addition to falcons, among the gifts she allegedly sent were ‘three birds found in the land of the Franks’ that ‘utter detestable cries and flutter their wings’ to draw attention to poisoned food or drink, and ‘beads that painlessly extract arrowheads and spearheads’.¹⁸ This description’s fantastical nature makes it hard to discern whether Bertha did send falcons to Caliph al-Muktafi, so we put her embassy to one side.

The last of the avian gifts came in 911, when the Sāmānid Ismā‘il b. Aḥmad sent fifty falcons to Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32).¹⁹ This was an impressive trick given that Ismā‘il died in 907.²⁰ This must be a mistake for Ismā‘il’s son and successor, Aḥmad II b. Ismā‘il (r. 907–14). Helpfully, al-Ṭabarī mentions that Aḥmad sent a message to Baghdad in October of precisely this year, although he does not mention any gifts.²¹ According to the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, ‘Amr b. al-Layth apparently sent falcons to al-Mu‘taḍid twice in 894.²² These were probably separate occasions but it is conceivable that the same gift was accidentally recorded in two different ways.

¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 35: The Crisis of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate: The Caliphates of al-Musta‘in and al-Mu‘tazz A.D. 862–869/A.H. 248–255*, trans. G. Saliba (Albany, 1985), p. 161.

¹⁶ BGR, c. 69, pp. 91–7.

¹⁷ A. Christys, ‘The Queen of the Franks Offers Gifts to the Caliph al-Muktafi’, in W. Davies (ed.), *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 149–70; D.G. König, ‘906: Bertha of Tuscany’s Correspondence with al-Muktafi bi-lāh in the Version of Ibn al-Zubayr’, *Transmediterranean History* 5 (2023).

¹⁸ BGR, c. 69, p. 91.

¹⁹ BGR, c. 70, p. 98.

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 38*, p. 183.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 38*, p. 196.

²² BGR c. 48, p. 85; c. 55, p. 87.

That said, what remains is a solid corpus of accounts that indicate that an awful lot of falcons were being sent to the caliphs, particularly in the 890s. Of the nine separate donations, six (that is, two-thirds) came from the Saffārids, with five of these six being from 'Amr b. al-Layth. Of the rest, two came from the Sāmānids, with the final one being sent by Muḥammad b. Abī al-Saj (r. 889–902) of Armenia.²³ The falcons were never the centre of attention, but rather part of a wider platter of offerings. The gifts that comprise these packages were not just extravagant, they were also exotic, with goods from the east, such as musk and aloeswood, and from the west, such as Byzantine cloth. Emphasis was placed on the wide geographical origins of the gifts.

The politics of the late ninth-century Caliphate

Understanding all these gifts requires some context.²⁴ On 11 December 861, while enjoying dinner in his capital of Sāmarrā', Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) was murdered by his own Turkish slave soldiers. The decade that followed is known as 'the Anarchy at Sāmarrā'', in which a sequence of short-lived 'Abbāsīd caliphs were effectively held prisoner in their own capital by a series of Turkish generals.²⁵ In the meantime, as the central administration collapsed, the provinces were taken over by a shifting set of strongmen. Some of these were the official governors, such as the Ṭūlūnids; others were local figures who seized power, like the Saffārids.²⁶ The anarchy came to an end in 870 and over the next few decades the 'Abbāsīds staged a comeback. By 890 at the latest the caliphs effectively controlled Iraq, providing a wealthy powerbase. It was in this context of reviving caliphal authority amidst competing military dynasties that the falcon gifts took place.

The provincial dynasties faced a number of dangers. Most had challengers within the territory they claimed to rule. They also

²² BGR c. 48, p. 85; c. 55, p. 87.

²³ On the Sāmānids, see L. Treadwell, 'The Samanids: The First Islamic Dynasty of Central Asia', in E. Herzog and S. Stewart (eds), *Early Islamic Iran: The Idea of Iran 5* (London, 2011), pp. 3–15.

²⁴ For a recent overview, M. Bonner, 'The Waning of Empire, 861–945', in C.F. Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 305–59.

²⁵ H. Kennedy, 'The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire', *Der Islam* 81 (2004), pp. 3–30; M.S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200–275/815–889 C.E.)* (Albany, 2001), pp. 90–104.

²⁶ M. Brett, 'Egypt', in Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1*, pp. 541–80; C.E. Bosworth, *The History of the Saffārids of Sistan and the Maliks of Nimruz: (247/861 to 949/1542–3)* (Costa Mesa, 1994), pp. 9–16.

competed with each other for power. The Saffārids and Sāmānids were frequently in conflict.²⁷ Many of their difficulties were linked to a legitimacy deficit: Ya'qūb b. al-Layth was the son of a coppersmith and started his career as a bandit or a holy warrior, depending on who you talked to in ninth-century Khurasan.²⁸ These dynasties sought to solidify their positions in several ways. The Saffārids patronized a revival in Persian culture.²⁹ They also waged holy war to the east and west and competed with the Tūlūnids to lead the *hajj* to Mecca.³⁰

The caliphs of Baghdad offered another potential source of legitimacy. They could provide official recognition by making the dynast the governor of the region they ruled. 'Abbāsīd marks of favour, such as the robes of honour they bestowed, could be redistributed.³¹ Other signs of distinction, such as having one's name read out at Friday Mosque or being granted a ceremonial court office, could bolster one's position.³² Further, a friendly caliph could undermine one's rivals by declaring them rebels and encouraging their supporters to depose them.

From their Iraqi base, the 'Abbāsīds increasingly had the resources to be a bad enemy. That said, the dynasts had the power to challenge the caliphs in a fight. Baghdad was also distracted by the revolution of the Zanj in lower Mesopotamia.³³ In these circumstances, the caliphs reached agreements with the leading dynasts, although they were not above playing rivals off against each other. Indeed, the 'Abbāsīds benefited greatly from these interactions. In addition to the monetary value of gifts, the sending of presents that could be publicly displayed in Baghdad helped maintain the fiction that they continued to rule the entire Islamic world.³⁴

²⁷ D.G. Tor, 'Historical Representations of Ya'qūb b. al-Layth: A Reappraisal', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12 (2002), pp. 247–75, 250.

²⁸ Tor, 'Historical Representations', pp. 247–75.

²⁹ M. Rahmati, 'The Saffarid Ya'qub b. Layth and the Revival of Persian Kingship', *Journal of Persianate Studies* 13 (2020), pp. 36–58.

³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 37: *The 'Abbāsīd Recovery: The War Against the Zanj Ends A.D. 879–893/A.H. 266–279* (Albany, 1987), p. 63.

³¹ D. Sourdel, 'Robes of Honor in 'Abbāsīd Baghdad During the Eighth to Eleventh Centuries', trans. D.M. Sadah, and G.R.G. Hambly, 'From Baghdad to Bukhara, from Ghazna to Delhi: The *khila'* Ceremony in the Transmission of Kingly Pomp and Circumstance', both in S. Gordon (ed.), *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York, 2001), pp. 137–45 and pp. 193–224 respectively.

³² For example, 'Amr b. al-Layth being appointed Head of Security in Baghdad in 889, al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 37, p. 159; Ismā'il b. Aḥmad having his letters read at Friday Mosque in 904, al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 146.

³³ K. Franz, *Kompilation in arabischen Chroniken: Die Überlieferung vom Aufstand der Zang zwischen Geschichtlichkeit und Intertextualität vom 9. bis ins 15. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2004).

³⁴ On diplomacy as a source of legitimacy for the 'Abbāsīds, S. Ottewill-Soulsby, *The Emperor and the Elephant: Christians and Muslims in the Age of Charlemagne* (Princeton, 2023), pp. 12–13.

This was not always an easy process. The case of Muḥammad b. Abī al-Saj, who gave al-Muʿtaḍid falcons in an unspecified year, is an apt example. Ibn Abī al-Saj had seized control of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 889 or 890 and then defied the central authorities before the caliph eventually accepted the fait accompli, appointing him officially in 898.³⁵ In exchange, the following year Ibn Abī al-Saj sent his son as a hostage, together with gifts.³⁶ It may have been on this occasion that he dispatched falcons, as well as numerous presents from Byzantium.³⁷ Baghdad was a potential source of generosity in return. In 895 al-Muʿtaḍid gave ʿAmr b. al-Layth a waistcoat and a crown. The value of both amounted to 13,000 dinars.³⁸ Ibn Abī al-Saj received ‘robes of honour and gift horses’ from the caliph in 898.³⁹ In 901, the caliph sent Ismāʿil b. Aḥmad ‘a corselet, a crown, and a sword of gold, completely encrusted with jewels’.⁴⁰

As discussed, ʿAmr b. al-Layth had a particularly intense diplomatic relationship with Caliph al-Muʿtaḍid.⁴¹ After a tumultuous couple of decades, ʿAbbāsīd–Saffārid relations settled down. In 892 the caliph officially recognized ʿAmr as governor of Khurasan, sending him ‘robes of honour and a standard’. ʿAmr had the latter ‘exhibited in the courtyard of his house for three days’.⁴² In 896 al-Muʿtaḍid had news of Saffārid victories read aloud at Friday Mosque; the following year he displayed the head of an enemy of ʿAmr next to the Police Station in Baghdad as a criminal.⁴³

As this suggests, the Saffārid emir had numerous opponents within Khurasan against whom ʿAbbāsīd legitimacy could be mobilized.⁴⁴ ʿAmr also sought al-Muʿtaḍid’s backing against his Sāmānid rival to the north. Traditionally Transoxiana had been a dependency of Khurasan, but Ismāʿil b. Aḥmad ruled the region autonomously, sending falcons of his own to Baghdad. In February 898 the caliph appointed ʿAmr governor of Transoxiana, offering his blessing to a campaign against Ismāʿil.⁴⁵ This backfired badly when the Sāmānid defeated ʿAmr in

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, pp. 72–3.

³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 75.

³⁷ BGR, c. 63, p. 89.

³⁸ BGR, c. 61, p. 88.

³⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 73.

⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, pp. 95–6.

⁴¹ R. Glagow, *Das Kalifat des al-Muʿtaḍid Billāh (892–902)* (Bonn, 1967), pp. 83–9.

⁴² Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 2.

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, pp. 40, 41.

⁴⁴ D.G. Tor, ‘A Numismatic History of the First Saffarid Dynasty’, *The Numismatic Chronicle* 162 (2002), pp. 293–314, at pp. 301–8.

⁴⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 70.

900, sending the Saffārid in chains to Baghdad, where al-Mu‘taḍid – seeing which way the wind was blowing – imprisoned ‘Amr.⁴⁶

Bird brain: falconry in the early Caliphate

While falconry had been practised in the Arabian Peninsula long before Islam, its significance as an elite activity seems to have increased dramatically in the eighth century.⁴⁷ Knowledge of falconry was associated with Byzantium and Persia, and Arabic manuals on the subject claimed with varying levels of plausibility to be imparting the ancient wisdom of their courts.⁴⁸ As many of these manuals were commissioned by caliphs and emirs, they were effectively the heirs to these imperial dynasties. Hunting was a keen pastime of many caliphs, and falcons feature heavily in the hunting poetry (*ṭardiyyah*) of the time, becoming an increasingly dominant theme in the early ‘Abbāsīd period. An enthusiastic hunter, Caliph al-Mu‘tazz referred to his falcons in his poetry, with lines such as ‘the falcons like lords of war, with the rust of iron on their shoulders’.⁴⁹

The best falcons could command high prices. Al-Jāhīz (d. 868) discussed the market for birds of prey in ninth-century Baghdad, where wealthy buyers spent large sums.⁵⁰ A comic story of the time told of a foolish man who bought a dead falcon for two dirhams because he could not afford a living one for a hundred.⁵¹ What truly distinguished elites were the number and variety of birds of prey they could maintain.⁵² While we rarely have precise counts, we do occasionally have access to caliphal expenditure on hunting.⁵³ Caliph al-Mutawakkil spent 500,000 dirhams a year on his hunting staff, including falconers. Al-Ṣābī’ (d. 1056) records that al-Mu‘taḍid paid 2,500 dinars a month

⁴⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 84.

⁴⁷ A. Akasoy, ‘Falconry in Arabic Literature: From its Beginnings to the Mid-9th Century’, in K.-H. Gersmann and O. Grimm (eds), *Raptor and Human: Falconry and Bird Symbolism Throughout the Millennia on Global Scale* (Kiel, 2018), pp. 243–65; D. Genequand, ‘Les décors en stuc du bâtiment e à Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Sharqī’, *Syria* 88 (2011), pp. 351–78, 363.

⁴⁸ A. Akasoy, ‘The “Founding Fathers” of Falconry according to Medieval Arabic Literature’, in C. Burnett and B. Van Den Abele (eds), *Falconry in the Mediterranean Context During the Pre-Modern Era 9* (Droz, 2021), pp. 9–37 and A. Akasoy, ‘Falconry at Medieval Islamicate Courts: Open-Air Practice and Backstage Knowledge’, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 11 (2023), pp. 174–99.

⁴⁹ J. Stetkevych, *The Hunt in Arabic Poetry: From Heroic to Lyric to Metapoetic* (Notre Dame, 2016), p. 149.

⁵⁰ Al-Jāhīz, *The Book of Insight into Commerce*, trans. A. Setia (Kuala Lumpur, 2012).

⁵¹ M. Manazir Ahsan, ‘A Note on Hunting in the Early ‘Abbasid Period: Some Evidence on Expenditure and Prices’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 19 (1976), pp. 101–5, at p. 105.

⁵² T.T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia, 2006), p. 69.

⁵³ The numbers that follow come from Manazir Ahsan, ‘A Note on Hunting’, pp. 101–5.

to animal-keepers for their salaries and expenses, with an extra 50 dinars for equipment. Al-Muqtadir reportedly spent 44,070 dinars a year on his animal collection. These different kinds of expenditure are all enormous sums. The falcons given to the 'Abbāsids in the late ninth century thus accord with several existing ideas. Possession of falcons placed elites in an ancient tradition associated with power, and ownership in large numbers emphasized the caliph's status while also speaking to the donor's wealth and generosity.

Identifying the falcons

Apart from the falcons' size, it was their white and piebald colouring that received particular attention in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*. Based on this description, at least some of the birds exchanged were probably gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*). Today, four distinct colour morphs of gyrfalcons are recognized: white (white feathers with no or only faint markings); silver (white feathers with some darker barring on the wings and breast; grey (tan feathers with some barring on the breast and dark barring on the wings); black (tan feathers with heavy dark barring on the wings and back).

The gyrfalcon's status as the world's largest imbues it not only with an impressive size worthy of a high-status gift, but means that it can catch and carry heavier prey than other falcons can, thereby making it particularly desirable for hunting. This is reflected in the literal meaning of its name in modern Scandinavian languages ('hunting falcon': Norwegian/Swedish *jaktfalk*, Danish *jagtfalk*). Further, its colour range made it distinctive. There seems to have been an aesthetic preference for white animals in general during the Middle Ages, due to their rarity in the natural world and to the connotations of the colour.⁵⁴ Medieval lists of royal gifts that include grey and white gyrfalcons consistently place the white ones first, though they are generally in smaller numbers than their grey counterparts.⁵⁵ This emphasizes their interlinked scarcity and worth.

One problem with this identification is that the gyrfalcon is generally believed to have started appearing in the Middle East in the eleventh century but only in major numbers in the thirteenth, following the

⁵⁴ M. Giese, 'Kostbarer als Gold', in I. Bennewitz and A. Schindler (eds), *Farbe im Mittelalter. Materialität — Medialität — Semantik. Akten des 13. Symposiums des Mediävistenverbandes vom 1. bis 5. März 2009 in Bamberg* (Berlin, 2011), pp. 665–78, at pp. 666–7, 671–2.

⁵⁵ R.S. Oggins, *The Kings and their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* (New Haven, 2004), p. 13.

Mongol conquests.⁵⁶ Reason to question this assessment is provided by al-Mas'ūdī's tenth-century description:

the falcon whose colour is close to white is the swiftest, most beautiful, with the most magnificent build, most enterprising and physically the most resilient. It is also the strongest of all falcons at high altitudes.⁵⁷

The presence of similar sounding birds in passages from the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* casts further doubt on the idea that gyrfalcons only arrived later.

In describing the gifted birds, however, the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* does not use the standard Arabic terminology for gyrfalcon, *ṣunqūr* *shunqūr*.⁵⁸ This should not surprise us. Derived from Turkic languages, *ṣunqūr* and related terms started appearing in Arabic treatises in the eleventh century, becoming more popular after the Mongol conquests made the culture of falconry from Central Asia more accessible to Middle Eastern writers.⁵⁹ Written before these changes, the word employed by the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, *buzah*, strictly refers to goshawks or hawks more generally, deriving from Persian usage, but in practice was a generic term for birds used for hunting.⁶⁰ It therefore makes sense that an unfamiliar raptor would be named in this way.

Another clue to the identity of these birds comes from their donors. Only the Saffārids, Sāmānids and Sajids sent falcons. These northern dynasties were far from the only people despatching gifts to Baghdad in this period, with the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* listing numerous others. Among the most generous was Khumārawayh b. Aḥmad (r. 884–96), the Ṭulūnid emir of Egypt and Syria, who gave presents on four occasions between 892 and 900, including a giraffe; gifts were also sent by the Aghlabid rulers of North Africa and the governor of Sind.⁶¹ That

⁵⁶ Allsen, *The Royal Hunt*, p. 244; T. Buquet, 'The Gyrfalcon in the Middle Ages, an Exotic Bird of Prey (Western Europe and Near East)', in Burnett and Van Den Abeele (eds), *Falconry in the Mediterranean Context*, pp. 79–98, at pp. 82–3.

⁵⁷ U. Lewicka-Rajewska, 'Falconry in Muslim Countries during the Tenth Century in the Light of *Murūḡ ad-dabab* by Al-Mas'ūdī', *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 50 (1995), pp. 133–43, 138–9.

⁵⁸ F. Viré, 'Essai de détermination des oiseaux-de-vol mentionnés dans les principaux manuscrits arabes médiévaux sur la fauconnerie', *Arabica* 24 (1977), pp. 138–149, at p. 144.

⁵⁹ T. Buquet, 'The Gyrfalcon in the Middle Ages, an Exotic of Prey (Western Europe and Near East)', in Burnett and Van Den Abeele (eds), *Falconry in the Mediterranean Context*, pp. 79–98, at p. 81.

⁶⁰ F. Viré, 'Hawking', in D. Waines (ed.), *Food Culture and Health in Pre-Modern Islamic Societies* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 94–7, at p. 96.

⁶¹ Gifts from Khumārawayh, BGR, c. 46, p. 84; c. 52, p. 86; c. 56, p. 87; c. 59, p. 88; Aghlabid gifts, BGR, c. 58, p. 88; c. 68, p. 90; gifts from Sind, BGR, c. 44, pp. 83–4. For Khumārawayh's giraffe, al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 2. On the Ṭulūnids, T. Bianquis, 'Autonomous Egypt from Ibn Ṭulūn to Kāfūr, 868–969', in C.F. Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt 1: Islamic Egypt, 640–1517* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 105–6; M. Bonner, 'Ibn Ṭulūn's Jihad: The Damascus Assembly of 269/883', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130 (2010), pp. 573–605. On the Aghlabids, G.D. Anderson, C. Fenwick and M. Rosser-Owen (eds), *The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors: Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa* (Leiden, 2018).

the givers of falcons were the three most northern dynasties of the Islamic world, based in Khurasan, Transoxiana and Armenia respectively, also supports the birds being gyrfalcons. A 'fur route' has previously been identified whereby northern commodities were exchanged for Sāmānid silver.⁶²

The falcons presented to the caliphs in the late ninth century were a novelty. Despite reference to many more in catalogues and other sources, only two Arabic falconry manuals survive from the eighth and ninth centuries.⁶³ Both were written by falconers to 'Abbāsīd caliphs: al-Ghiṭrīf b. Qudāma, who served al-Mahdī (r. 775–85), and Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Bāzyār at the court of al-Mutawakkil. Despite describing a large number of raptors, neither manual refers to gyrfalcons or to any white falcons at all.⁶⁴ This is particularly telling in the case of the handbook for al-Mutawakkil, which cannot post-date the caliph's assassination in 861.⁶⁵ This suggests that they were unfamiliar at court in the middle of the ninth century, so the birds arriving from 869/70 were therefore something new. Some confirmation for this comes from the note in the earliest entry in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, which describes falcons sent by Ya'qūb b. al-Layth in 869/70 as 'the like of which no one had ever seen'.⁶⁶ Those falcons were the first but, as indicated, far from the last. In the space of little more than a generation, the central Caliphate apparently went from having no gyrfalcons to owning over a hundred from diplomatic gifts alone.

Scandinavian sources

The modern distribution of gyrfalcons is close to the Arctic at high altitude and somewhat coastal. Given this, these gyrfalcons must have travelled a long distance to Baghdad. We contend that they went via the expansive trade routes of the Viking world, linking Scandinavia and the Baltic to Rus', and thereby the Persian and Arabic worlds.

Scandinavia was not the only potential source of gyrfalcons. From the thirteenth century at the latest, the rulers of Muscovy were acquiring these birds from Permia.⁶⁷ Long before these written records, artefacts

⁶² M. Michailidis, 'Samanid Silver and Trade along the Fur Route', *Medieval Encounters* 18 (2012), pp. 315–38.

⁶³ Ibn an-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, ed. B. Dodge (New York, 1970), p. 739.

⁶⁴ F. Viré, 'Essai de détermination des oiseaux-de-vol mentionnés dans les principaux manuscrits arabes médiévaux sur la fauconnerie', *Arabica* 24 (1977), pp. 138–49, at p. 144.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Bāzyār, *Das Falken- und Hundebuch des Kalifen al-Mutawakkil: ein arabischer Traktat aus dem 9. Jahrhundert*, ed. A. Akasoy and S. Georges (Berlin, 2005).

⁶⁶ BGR, c. 47, p. 85.

⁶⁷ A.V. Zinoviev, 'Early Falconry in Russia', in Gersmann and Grimm (eds), *Raptor and Human*, pp. 1251–70.

from Byzantium and Sasanian Persia have been found in Permian sites, while beads, belts and other items from Perm Finn cultures travelled long distances, indicating an earlier history of contact.⁶⁸ Sámi and Perm Finns are known to have acted as intermediaries in the fur trade between northern Europe and the Caliphate.⁶⁹ Recently Johan Callmer has argued for an intensification of Perm Finn commerce with the Middle East from about 860, as the consolidation of Rus' power shifted trade routes south.⁷⁰ That said, there is little direct evidence for falconry in Permian before the thirteenth century. No physical falcon remains have been found in any archaeological sites. Art from Permian cultures features many human-bird hybrids, but the closest parallels to depictions of falcons date to over a millennium before the ninth century.⁷¹ Nor are white or piebald falcons common to Permian, so Scandinavia seems the more likely origin.

A comparison can be made here with new research on the trade in walrus ivory. It was assumed that this commodity that appeared in eastern Europe and was exported onward to Asia in the twelfth century originated in Arctic Russia, given the walrus population from the Barents Sea region, but recent ancient DNA work on specimens from Kyiv along the Dnieper River demonstrates a Greenlandic origin instead.⁷²

Turning elsewhere, the Scandinavian context for falconry presents different scholarly issues to that of the Caliphate. In the case of the latter, the majority of the available evidence is textual. Indeed, we are more dependent generally on written sources for the medieval Islamic world, where archaeology has been challenging for a range of historical and political reasons.⁷³ However for Scandinavia in this period there is greater reliance on archaeological evidence. There are not many written traces of falconry in Viking-Age and medieval Norway and even less evidence for the keeping of raptors in Iceland and Greenland.

⁶⁸ E. Goldina and R. Goldina, 'On North-Western Contacts of Perm Finns in VII–VIII Centuries', *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 22 (2018), pp. 163–80.

⁶⁹ C. Damm, 'Honey, Bones, and Furs: The Saami and the Bjarmians as Brokers in the Early Medieval Trade between Scandinavia and the Islamic World', in C. Heß, S.M. Wang and E. Wolf (eds), *Colonial Entanglements and the Medieval Nordic World: Norse Colonies and Indigenous Peoples* (Berlin, 2024), pp. 181–200.

⁷⁰ J. Callmer, 'Eastern Middle Sweden, Finland and Beyond in the Late Vendel and Early Viking Periods', *Fornvännen* 119 (2024), pp. 1–24, at pp. 19–21.

⁷¹ E. Autio, 'The Permian Animal Style', *Folklore* 18 (2001), pp. 162–86, at p. 166.

⁷² J.H. Barrett *et al.*, 'Walrus on the Dnieper: New Evidence for the Intercontinental Trade of Greenlandic Ivory in the Middle Ages', *Proceedings of the Royal Historical Society B: Biological Sciences* 289 (2022).

⁷³ A. Northedge, 'Iraq', in B.J. Walker, T. Insoll and C. Fenwick (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Archaeology* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 81–100, at pp. 81–2. On the specific challenges of the archaeology of hunting, see C. Capel, 'La question des parcs de chasse à l'époque abbasside: le cas emblématique de Sâmarrâ', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 130 (2012), pp. 153–80.

Most archaeological traces of falconry in early medieval Scandinavia come from Sweden.⁷⁴ Graves containing raptors are found in the east central region from the Vendel Period. These include the gyrfalcon found in the eighth-century inhumation at Vendel III and the two more in Söderby in two ninth-/tenth-century cremations (A7 and A10) in Uppland.⁷⁵ There is, though, one tantalizing piece of evidence from Viking-Age Norway. The famous Gokstad ship burial mound (Vestfold, south-eastern Norway), which dates to around 900, contained a quantity of animal bones, including twelve horses and seven dogs (of various sizes, some of which were for hunting). In 2009 Anne Karin Hufthammer examined this material again and identified bones from two sub-adult female northern goshawks, which are 'the first ascertained birds of prey in a Norwegian burial context'.⁷⁶ It is not known if the high-status buried man utilized these birds during his life, but because female raptors are much larger than their male counterparts, they are most used for falconry. In terms of other material evidence, small bells have been discovered, but it cannot be said conclusively whether these were used for falconry or for other purposes, such as decoration on clothing or horse harnesses.⁷⁷

Before trading or gifting a falcon, it was necessary to catch one, something particularly challenging for gyrfalcons, which nest in inaccessible locations on high cliffs and mountains. Archaeological evidence for medieval falcon-catching is lacking, but more is available from the early modern period. There is, though, one eleventh-century Norwegian example from the island of Orta in Sandøy municipality, Møre og Romsdal – a small construction with peat walls, resembling a modern-day bird-watching hide.⁷⁸ Its marshland location was well suited to catching raptors, including gyrfalcons, which often prey on waders. Another method of falcon-catching used nets baited with birds. The stone footings securing these nets would be the only part that might feasibly remain in the archaeological record.

⁷⁴ G. Åkerström-Hougen, 'Falconry as a Motif in Early Swedish Art: Its Historical and Art Historical Significance', in R. Zeidler (ed.), *Les pays du Nord et Byzance (Scandinavie et Byzance)* (Uppsala, 1981), pp. 263–94, at p. 271; P.G.P. Ericson and T. Tyrberg, *The Early History of the Swedish Avifauna: A Review of the Subfossil Record and Early Written Sources* (Stockholm, 2004), p. 113; R.J. Wallis, 'As the Falcon Her Bells' at Sutton Hoo? Falconry in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Archaeological Journal* 174 (2017), pp. 409–36, at pp. 410–13.

⁷⁵ H. Stolpe and T.J. Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel* (Stockholm, 1912); M. Vretemark, 'Birds of Prey as Evidence for Falconry in Swedish Burials and Settlements (550–1500)', in Gersmann and Grimm (eds), *Raptor and Human*, pp. 243–55, at pp. 247–8.

⁷⁶ R. Orten Lie, 'Falconry, Falcon-Catching and the Role of Birds of Prey in Trade and as Alliance Gifts in Norway (800–1800 AD) with an Emphasis on Norwegian and Later Foreign Participants in Falcon-Catching', in Gersmann and Grimm (eds), *Raptor and Human*, pp. 727–86, at p. 731.

⁷⁷ Orten Lie, 'Falconry, Falcon-Catching', p. 732.

⁷⁸ Orten Lie, 'Falconry, Falcon-Catching', p. 732.

These traces demonstrate the existence of a culture of falconry in Scandinavia in the early medieval period. But we can perhaps go further in locating the origin of the gyrfalcons. There are traceable patterns in the geographic distribution of the colour morphs of gyrfalcons, with some variants primarily associated with specific regions, both in modern and medieval times. White gyrfalcons are not entirely unknown in mainland Scandinavia, but are much rarer there than in Iceland and Greenland.⁷⁹ Focusing on medieval documents from England, Robin S. Oggins found that when 'gyrfalcon' alone is used it likely denotes the more common darker morphs (previously known as the 'Norway' gyrfalcon), whereas grey birds were dubbed the 'Iceland' gyrfalcon, and white ones the 'Greenland' gyrfalcon.⁸⁰ These two latter terms are still used for those colours.⁸¹ This distribution is borne out by genetic analysis, with the distinct Greenlandic and Icelandic populations being much more likely to be white than those in mainland Eurasia and North America.⁸² The *Book of Gifts and Rarities*' description of the birds thus fits that of gyrfalcons from Iceland and Greenland in particular.

A thirteenth-century Norse text, *Konungs skuggsjá* ('The King's Mirror'), associates white morphs specifically with Greenland. Intended to educate the son of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (d. 1263), the work has encyclopaedic sections. The description of Greenland (in the orbit of the Norwegian kings) includes the most detailed account of gyrfalcons in Old Norse: 'There is a falcon that is larger and greater in number in that land than in any other so it is thought to be a great treasure. White falcons, and they are more numerous there than in any other land.'⁸³

Greenland was not settled from Iceland until c.986, far too late to be the source of the birds which ended up in Baghdad. Even in the thirteenth century there is no written evidence for falcons being caught in Greenland and exported from there.⁸⁴ White gyrfalcons are known in Iceland, with some possibly arriving as stragglers from Greenland given

⁷⁹ Grey and white gyrfalcons were caught at several sites in Norway in the mid-eighteenth century (E. Pontoppidan, *Norges naturlige historie* (1753; repr. Copenhagen, 1977), vol. 2, p. 118). The Danish geographer Clavus Swart reported that white falcons were caught at Lista (southern Norway) around 1400: O. Bø, 'Falkfangst i Norge i nyare tid', *Norsk skogbruksmuseum Årbok* 3 (1961–2), pp. 68–122, at p. 96.

⁸⁰ Oggins, *The Kings*, p. 12.

⁸¹ J. Ferguson-Lees and D.A. Christie, *Raptors of the World* (New York, 2001), p. 908.

⁸² J.A. Johnson *et al.*, 'Genetic Structure Among Continental and Island Populations of Gyrfalcons', *Molecular Ecology* 16 (2007), pp. 3145–60, at p. 3156.

⁸³ *Konungs skuggsjá*, c. 17 (*Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. L. Holm-Olsen, Gammelnorske Texter 1 (Oslo, 1945), p. 30); trans. by authors).

⁸⁴ S. Ægisson, *Icelandic Trade with Gyrfalcons: From Medieval Times to the Modern Era* (Siglufjörður, 2015), p. 42.

the presence of drift ice and that gyrfalcons can travel considerable distances. The same Hákon of Norway sent ‘Thirteen gyrfalcons, three white and ten grey’ to Henry III of England in 1225; he specifically mentions his fowlers obtaining them in Iceland, further remarking that ‘Icelandic birds are said to be held at a greater worth than gold or silver.’⁸⁵

The Norse settlement of Iceland took place from around 870, contemporary with the arrival of the first falcons in Baghdad and just before the largest wave. Recent work has pointed to the importance of the walrus ivory trade in motivating and funding the early settlement of Iceland.⁸⁶ Gyrfalcons would have provided another profitable resource that could be exploited quickly.⁸⁷ Iceland’s settlement may have been too late for the first falcons that arrived in Baghdad from c.870, which likely came from mainland Scandinavia. But the opening of Iceland would explain why by the 890s there was an unprecedented number of gyrfalcons available on the market. It therefore seems likely that although some of the falcons came from mainland Scandinavia, many of the other birds were originally from Iceland, indicated by the steady flow.

The aforementioned *Konungs skuggsjá* description of the abundance of white falcons in Greenland noted that its inhabitants lacked the knowledge to use the birds themselves.⁸⁸ There is indeed little evidence for falconry being practised in Greenland and Iceland, which seems likely to have been the result of the birds’ value for international trade, as well as the dearth of game, particularly mammals, available for hunting compared to continental Europe, the British-Irish Isles, and even Scandinavia itself.⁸⁹ But it also speaks to the importance of the existence of a culture of falconry and falcon-catching. But ninth-century Scandinavia proper did have a culture of falconry and falcon-catching, providing them with precisely the expertise to acquire, use and sell them.

Routes and intermediaries

Trading links between the Caliphate and Scandinavia went back at least as far as the eighth century, as attested by the astonishing number of

⁸⁵ *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* 19, §167 (ed. A. Bugge (Oslo, 1910–14), p. 125).

⁸⁶ C. Keller, ‘Furs, Fish, and Ivory: Medieval Norsemen at the Arctic Fringe’, *Journal of the North Atlantic* 3 (2010), pp. 1–23; K.M. Frei *et al.*, ‘Was it for Walrus? Viking Age Settlement and Medieval Walrus Ivory Trade in Iceland and Greenland’, *World Archaeology* 47 (2015), pp. 439–66.

⁸⁷ It has previously been assumed that a trade in Icelandic falcons began in the late tenth century and there is a well-known reference to them as gifts for an eleventh-century Norwegian ruler: Ægisson, *Icelandic Trade*, p. 33.

⁸⁸ *Konungs skuggsjá*, c. 17 (ed. Holm-Olsen, p. 30).

⁸⁹ E.A. (*K.A.) Haley-Halinski, ‘Birds and Humans in the Old Norse World, c. 600–1500 AD’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge (2021), p. 130.

‘Abbāsid silver dirhams that reached the latter.⁹⁰ Dubbed ‘silver fever’, it has even spawned theories about the start of the ‘Viking Age’.⁹¹ Drawing on material from before 850, Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. 913) records the coming of Rus’ merchants to the Caspian, bearing beaver and fox furs as well as swords, with some going all the way to Baghdad.⁹² Unlike a greater volume of lower-level trade, it is difficult to trace connections at a high diplomatic level via archaeological evidence.

Given the falcon boom, one might have expected a corresponding spike in finds of Arabic coinage in Scandinavia – however it appears to be the opposite. Indeed, the late ninth century has traditionally been understood as a low point in Scandinavian connections with the Islamic world, with fewer Arabic coins minted in this period appearing in archaeological contexts than in the earlier part of the century, or from the early tenth century.⁹³ This drought may have been overstated and appears to be somewhat uneven, with finds in sites including Kaupang, Norway containing more coins from the late ninth century.⁹⁴

Furthermore, the late ninth-century political climate disrupted regular minting practices in large parts of the Caliphate. The Saffārids in particular made new coins erratically, taking advantage of brief windows of calm and sudden windfalls of silver.⁹⁵ The great surge of Sāmānid minting in the tenth century came after their victories had established stability and afforded them access to new sources of silver from al-Shash and Ilaq in modern Uzbekistan, and Panjshir in present-day Afghanistan.⁹⁶ The chronological distribution of eastern

⁹⁰ See the essays in T.S. Noonan, *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750–900: The Numismatic Evidence* (London, 1998). On dating, see J.E. Montgomery, ‘Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources’, in Y. Suleiman (ed.), *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand* (Edinburgh, 2010), pp. 151–65, at pp. 154–5.

⁹¹ W. Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden, 2004), p. 62; J.H. Barrett, ‘What Caused the Viking Age?’, *Antiquity* 82 (2008), pp. 671–85, at p. 677.

⁹² *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, ed. and trans. P. Lunde and C. Stone (London, 2011), pp. 120, 126.

⁹³ T.S. Noonan, ‘The First Major Silver Crisis in Russia and the Baltic c. 875–c.900’, *Hikuin* 11 (1985), pp. 41–50. For a recent overview, S. Kalmring, *Towns and Commerce in Viking-Age Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 2024), pp. 150–1.

⁹⁴ C. Kilger, ‘Kaupang from Afar: Aspects of the Interpretation of Dirham Finds in Northern and Eastern Europe between the Late 8th and Early 10th Centuries’, in D. Skre (ed.), *Means of Exchange: Dealing with Silver in the Viking Age* (Aarhus, 2008), pp. 199–252.

⁹⁵ Tor, ‘A Numismatic History of the First Saffarid Dynasty’.

⁹⁶ R.K. Kovalev, ‘Dirham Mint Output of Samanid Samargand and its Connection to the Beginnings of Trade with Northern Europe (10th century)’, *Histoire et Mesure* 17 (2002), pp. 197–216. On the silver sources, S. Merkel, *Silver and the Silver Economy at Hedeby* (Rahden, 2016), p. 76. On Sāmānid expansion, D.G. Tor, ‘The Islamization of Central Asia in the Sāmānid Era and the Reshaping of the Muslim World’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009), pp. 279–99.

coins in Scandinavia may therefore say more about vagaries in minting practices than volume of trade.

That something changed in the supply and distribution of falcons in the late ninth century is supported by the sudden appearance of sword chapes in the shape of falcons at precisely this period.⁹⁷ These falcon chapes are primarily found in Scandinavia and eastern Europe, with only seven in England.⁹⁸ Another was discovered in the celebrated ship burial at Île de Groix in Brittany, tentatively dated to the tenth century, which also contains unidentified bird remains.⁹⁹ The vast majority have been found in Birka and the east, suggesting a connection to the Baltic and the Rus' world. The chapes have 'been found in virtually every 9th- and 10th century fortified settlement or early town in the Rus' area', including Staraja Ladoga in the north, Gnëzdovo and Chernihiv near the Dnieper, and Sarskoye Gorodishche and Timerëvo in the vicinity of the Volga.¹⁰⁰ The earliest dateable finds of the falcon chapes are from Birka and can be placed in the late ninth century.¹⁰¹ They have been explained as warrior emblems, possibly as the marks of princely families and their retinues.¹⁰² Sviatoslav I of Kyiv (r. 945–72) had a diving falcon on his seal.¹⁰³ The late ninth-century appearance of falcon-chapes may therefore reflect a process of political consolidation.¹⁰⁴ Sword chapes are rare in Norway, but a falcon chape was found in a presumed boat burial, thought to date to around 900, from Tønsberg, a Viking-Age seasonal market site (around seventeen kilometres north-east of Gokstad).¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ B. Ambrosiani, 'The Birka Falcon', in B. Ambrosiani (ed.), *Eastern Connections Part One: The Falcon Motif*, Birka Studies 5 (Stockholm, 2001), pp. 11–27; C. Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'Rus', Varangians and Birka Warriors', in L. Holmquist Olausson and M. Olausson (eds), *The Martial Society: Aspects of Warriors, Fortifications and Social Change* (Stockholm, 2010), pp. 159–78.

⁹⁸ N. Price, "'Now I am a Bird, and Now I am a Man": Posthumanism, Raptors and the Rus', in R.J. Wallis (ed.), *The Art and Archaeology of Human Engagements with Birds of Prey: From Prehistory to the Present* (London, 2023), pp. 166–82, at p. 171.

⁹⁹ N. Price, 'The Vikings in Brittany', *Saga-Book* 22 (1989), pp. 319–440, at pp. 383–8; N. Price, 'Viking Brittany: Revisiting the Colony that Failed', in A. Reynolds and L.E. Webster (eds), *Early Medieval Art and Archaeology in the Northern World* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 731–42, at p. 737.

¹⁰⁰ Quote from Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'Rus', Varangians and Birka Warriors', p. 172. Distribution from N.V. Yenisova, 'Ажурные наконечники ножен мечей X–XI вв. на территории Восточной Европы', *История и эволюция древних вещей* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 100–21.

¹⁰¹ H. Arbmán, *Birka I. Die Gräber. Text* (Stockholm, 1943), pp. 221, 271.

¹⁰² W. Kulakow, 'Kultsymbole und Kriegeremblem aus dem Baltikum, aus Skandinavien und Osteuropa im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 13 (1985), pp. 53–64; Ambrosiani, 'The Birka Falcon', p. 21.

¹⁰³ R. Edberg, 'Rurik, Jaroslav den vise och Djingis khan', *Meta: Medeltidsarkeologisk tidskrift* 3 (2001), pp. 3–18, at p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Price, "'Now I am a Bird'", p. 169.

¹⁰⁵ R. Orten Lie, 'Birkakrigere i Norge?', *Spor: Fortidsnytt fra Midt-Norge* 2 (2016), pp. 32–7.

If large numbers of Icelandic falcons were suddenly being transported by Rus' merchants across the Baltic and down the Volga to the Caspian in the late ninth century, it might explain the simultaneous appearance of falcon chapes in these places. In his study of the chapes, Björn Ambrosiani placed those at Timerëvo as contemporary with those at Birka, among the earliest.¹⁰⁶ He believed that all were from the mid-tenth century, but given that the Birka examples have since been re-dated to the late ninth, their counterparts further east may also be earlier. It would not be surprising if the falcon iconography reflected the high-status valuable goods upon which Rus' elites built their wealth and power. Interestingly, falcon images started to be inscribed on dirhams minted in the 880s, just before the largest wave of gyrfalcons appeared in Baghdad.¹⁰⁷ This might hint at a link between wealth acquired from the Islamic world and falcons.

The late ninth century was a complicated geopolitical period for the lands between the Baltic and the Caspian. These decades saw the arrival of the Pechenegs onto the steppes of south-eastern Europe.¹⁰⁸ The rise of Bulgar on the Volga challenged the power of the Khazar khaganate, although the latter remained a formidable force into the tenth century.¹⁰⁹ The implications of this disruption for the trade in falcons are unclear. Tensions between the Khazars and Rus' merchants may help explain the reorientation of Scandinavian trade away from the Caspian and ultimately Baghdad, towards Bulgar.¹¹⁰ If so, this would account for falcons being more accessible to the Saffārids and Sāmānids than for the 'Abbāsids.

While the precise route the falcons took cannot be reconstructed with any certainty, the fact that goods could travel such long distances in this period is difficult to dispute. At the same time as Baghdad's falcon boom, peacocks found their way to south-eastern Norway, where their bones feature in the aforementioned Gokstad burial. It may be significant that the Gokstad burial was fifteen kilometres from the major emporium of Kaupang and only five hundred metres from a market site.¹¹¹ Eastern

¹⁰⁶ Ambrosiani, 'The Birka Falcon', p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ E.A. Melnikova, 'Graffiti on Islamic Coins', *The Eastern World of the Vikings* (Gothenburg, 1996), pp. 73–89, at pp. 87–8.

¹⁰⁸ A. Parón, *The Pechenegs: Nomads in the Political and Cultural Landscape of Medieval Europe* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 104–10.

¹⁰⁹ N. Evans, 'Ibn Fadlan and the Khazars: The Hidden Centre', in J. Shepard and L. Treadwell (eds), *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan* (London, 2023), pp. 133–48.

¹¹⁰ J. Howard-Johnston, 'Rus and Khazars', *Studia Ceranea* 13 (2023), pp. 381–418, at pp. 399–404.

¹¹¹ See J. Bill and C.L. Rødsrud, 'Heimdalsjorder – Trade, Production and Communication', in Z. T. Glørstad and K. Loftsgarden (eds), *Viking-Age Transformations: Trade, Craft and Resources in Western Scandinavia* (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 212–31, at p. 212.

connections at the latter are indicated by weights, carnelian beads and a large number of dirham fragments, including from present-day Afghanistan, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Uzbekistan and possibly Syria.¹¹² A specialized craft production site, it was connected to an international trade network, one that notably faced east to the Baltic and further afield.¹¹³ Silk found in both Oseberg and Gokstad also points to eastern trade routes.¹¹⁴ As Ragnar Orten Lie comments, 'Perhaps Norwegian birds of prey went back along the trade routes on which the peacocks came to Gokstad?'.¹¹⁵

Why did the falcons stop coming to Baghdad? Political and ecological considerations

Writing in the 980s, the geographer al-Muqaddasī (d. 991) referred to falcons among the numerous products that arrived in Khwarazm from Bulgar.¹¹⁶ Assuming that his work was up-to-date, this suggests that a trade in the birds in the wider region continued long after the last of them arrived in Baghdad in 911. Ibn Faḍlān could attest to the presence of Rus' in Bulgar in 922 from personal experience.¹¹⁷ The large number of tenth-century Sāmānid coins in Scandinavia, as well as other influences, also point to continuing contact.¹¹⁸ It is therefore conceivable that the white falcons were still appearing elsewhere in the Arabic and Persian worlds, just not in Baghdad, but that no record of them survives. Thus, the end of the supply to Baghdad requires explanation.

The first consideration relates to the politics of the Caliphate. The last gift, from the Sāmānid Aḥmad II to Caliph al-Muqtadir, followed the former's defeat of the Saffārids in Sistan, effectively marking his control over the eastern Caliphate.¹¹⁹ The 'Abbāsids remained important in times of crisis after this point. When Aḥmad was assassinated in 914, the two rival candidates to succeed him both sent embassies to

¹¹² U. Pedersen and C.L. Rødstrud, 'Nye vektlodd fra Vestfold', *Nicolay* 119 (2013), pp. 53–59; Bill and Rødstrud, 'Heimdalsjordet', p. 225.

¹¹³ J. Bill and C.L. Rødstrud, 'En ny markeds- og produksjonsplass ved Gokstad i Vestfold', *Nicolay* 120 (2013), pp. 5–12, at p. 9; Bill and Rødstrud, 'Heimdalsjordet', p. 225.

¹¹⁴ See M. Vedeler, *Silk for the Vikings* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 73–7; p. 80 for trade; pp. 23–6 for a summary of silk finds in Scandinavia; pp. 112–15 for silk signalling power.

¹¹⁵ R. Orten Lie, *Gokstad- og Osebergshaugen i fugleperspektiv* (Sandefjord, 2016), p. 4 (trans. by authors).

¹¹⁶ Al-Muqaddasī, in *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness*, ed. and trans. Lunde and Stone, pp. 169–70, at p. 170.

¹¹⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, in *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness*, ed. and trans. Lunde and Stone, pp. 45–55. See recently Shepard and Treadwell (eds), *Muslims on the Volga*.

¹¹⁸ Michailidis, 'Samanid Silver'.

¹¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 196.

Baghdad to request caliphal recognition.¹²⁰ We are not told what gifts, if any, they sent. The resulting civil war ran until 920.¹²¹ The previous year, al-Muqtadir acknowledged a rebel in Nishapur as governor of Khurasan, while taking advantage of the disturbance to seize the city of Rayy. This opportunism probably won him few friends in Bukhara.¹²² When Ahmad's son Naṣr eventually won, taking back Nishapur in the process, his court showed relatively little interest in the 'Abbāsids. The emir also seems to have been seriously interested in Ismā'īlī Shi'ism.¹²³ This led to a smaller incentive to curry 'Abbāsid favour through gifts.

From 912, al-Muqtadir was in severe financial straits, making it unlikely that any generous gifts would travel to Transoxiana from Baghdad.¹²⁴ Things went from bad to worse from 923.¹²⁵ Baghdad was nearly sacked by the Ismā'īlī Qarāmiṭa in 927, and then actually sacked by angry unpaid 'Abbāsid troops in 929. Mecca and Medina were sacked by the Qarāmiṭa in 930, and al-Muqtadir was killed in battle outside Baghdad in 932. These were not circumstances likely to encourage outlying dynasties to invest much in the caliphate: the last record of money coming from Egypt or Syria dates to 927, around about the time the dynasty began its final decline into relative irrelevance.¹²⁶ Overall, the political context in which multiple northern strongmen competed for the caliphs' favour by giving them exotic gifts was probably over by the 920s, going part of the way to explaining why the falcons stopped arriving in Baghdad.

Another explanation may lie in the population of gyrfalcons. Recent attempts to ascertain the number of breeding pairs estimate between three and four hundred currently in Iceland.¹²⁷ Each pair requires a large territory. Gyrfalcons were presumably more numerous in the ninth century, and some of those that arrived in Baghdad may have instead come from mainland Scandinavia. It seems likely, though, that Baghdad was

¹²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 38, p. 201.

¹²¹ Gardīzī, *The Ornament of Histories: A History of the Eastern Islamic Lands AD 650–1041: The Persian Text of Abu Sa'id 'Abd Al-Hayy Gardizi*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (London, 2011), p. 59.

¹²² L. Treadwell, 'The Political History of the Sāmānid State', Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford (1991), pp. 150, 160.

¹²³ P. Crone and L. Treadwell, 'A New Text on Ismailism at the Samanid Court', in C.F. Robinson (ed.), *Texts, Documents and Artefacts* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 37–67.

¹²⁴ See H. Kennedy, 'The Reign of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32): A History', in M. van Berkel, N. Maria El Cheikh, H. Kennedy and L. Osti (eds), *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 13–47.

¹²⁵ N. Hurvitz, 'The Qarāmiṭa Scare: Public Sentiment and Political Reactions', *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 9 (2022), pp. 161–82.

¹²⁶ D. Waines, 'The Pre-Būyid Amirate: Two Views from the Past', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8 (1977), pp. 339–48; J.L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age*, 2nd edn (Leiden, 1992), pp. 31–7.

¹²⁷ Potapov and Sale, *The Gyrfalcon*, p. 82.

not the only destination for gyrfalcons, so the ones that appear in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* represent only a fraction of the birds being traded. The falcon-catching, which perhaps targeted white or piebald gyrfalcons particularly, could have been too intense over a fairly short period, resulting in the Icelandic gyrfalcon population being over-exploited in the decades immediately after initial settlement. As above, recent studies of the trade in walrus ivory offer an interesting parallel, with the Icelandic walrus population being driven close to extinction by the end of the ninth century.¹²⁸ The island was also deforested in the centuries after the Norse settlement.¹²⁹

There is reason to believe that many of the gyrfalcons did not survive their journey. In his 1240s treatise on falconry, Emperor Frederick II noted that gyrfalcons were likely to arrive the worse for wear after a long journey and needed a season of rest to recover.¹³⁰ It has been suggested that the birds, being adapted to a cold climate, can become ill when kept in conditions that are too warm for them.¹³¹ If this occurred, it may be that the effort expended on what proved to become sickly or short-lived birds had diminishing returns and might have contributed to the decline in the trade. However, in other instances the trade continued despite these challenges. In Mamluk Egypt it seems to have been common to pay for dead gyrfalcons to encourage merchants to continue this otherwise financially risky business.¹³²

This suggests a possible interpretation where the supply of gyrfalcons shrank rapidly due to over-exploitation by the early tenth century. The caliphs' declining prestige made it less likely that any of the smaller number of falcons available would end up being directed towards Baghdad, explaining the end of their appearances in the *Book of Gifts and Rarities*.

¹²⁸ X. Keighley *et al.* 'Disappearance of Icelandic Walruses Coincided with Norse Settlement', *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 36 (2019), pp. 2656–67; J.H. Barrett *et al.* 'Ecological Globalisation, Serial Depletion and the Medieval Trade of Walrus Rostra', *Quaternary Science Reviews* 229 (2020), pp. 1–15.

¹²⁹ T.H. McGovern, O. Vésteinsson, A. Fridriksson, M. Church, I. Lawson, I. A. Simpson, A. Einarsson, A. Dugmore, G. Cook, S. Perdikaris, K.J. Edwards *et al.*, 'Landscapes of Settlement in Northern Iceland: Historical Ecology of Human Impact and Climate Fluctuation on the Millennial Scale', *American Anthropologist* 109.1 (2007), pp. 27–51.

¹³⁰ Frederick II, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, c. 3.19, trans. C.A. Wood, *The Art of Falconry* (Stanford, 1943), p. 251.

¹³¹ Orten Lie, 'Falconry, Falcon-Catching', p. 742. This climatic unsuitability would have been starker for falcons arriving in Baghdad than for the thirteenth-century English examples. Nevertheless, a nineteenth-century report from England includes an instance when seven out of ten Norwegian gyrfalcons died within six months of arrival: G. Lacelles, 'Falconry', in His Grace the Duke of Bedford, K.G (ed.), *The Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes. Coursing and Falconry* (London, 1892), pp. 215–413, at p. 296.

¹³² Buquet, 'The Gyrfalcon', p. 96.

Conclusions

The gyrfalcons that arrived in Baghdad were an ultimately ephemeral phenomenon, leaving only a minimal trace in the sources, yet they offer a number of important points for modern scholars. The first is the significance for the Caliphate of links with the Scandinavian world. At a moment of deep political stress, the leading dynasties of the Islamic world competed through exotic gifts. Connections with the far north and its products in that context were a vital asset rather than a simple sideshow, and need to be taken seriously to understand caliphal politics. Something of that lingering importance may be reflected in the mission of Ibn Faḍlān to Bulgar on behalf of Caliph al-Muqtadir. The embassy chiefly related to the caliph's support of the Muslim ruler Almış b. Şilki against the Khazars.¹³³ But al-Muqtadir's regime is particularly known for its use of exotic diplomacy and goods to manage its domestic reputation.¹³⁴ Dispatched a decade after the last falcons arrived in Baghdad, Ibn Faḍlān offered the caliph a means of connecting to the supply of products available from the lands to the north.¹³⁵ Access to goods from the Scandinavian world was not just of significance to Baghdad. The story of the falcons demonstrates how other Muslim powers, including the Saffārids and Sāmānids, employed their contacts with the far north to build status and compete for power. This commerce mattered in the Islamic world to an extent that has gone underappreciated.

Our use of the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* acts as an invitation to consider a wider range of Arabic sources than the standard canon generally employed to examine connections between vikings and the Caliphate. While some writers in the Islamic world were certainly intrigued by the Rus' on ethnographic grounds, their impact can be felt even in works by those with no particular interest in them. This is most easily traced via distinctive objects such as arctic falcons, but the relatively copious source base from the Islamic world compared to that of Scandinavia may offer further opportunities to expand our understanding. It seems unlikely that many inhabitants in ninth-century Baghdad had ever heard of Iceland, yet its settlement would lead to an exotic bird species arriving in their midst. The falcons were hardly a routine gift and their significance as such came from the

¹³³ K. Rezakhani, 'Competition and Diplomacy in the Tenth Century: The Caliphate and the Sāmānids as Reflected in Ibn Fadlān's Travelogue', in K. Abdi and M.T. Atayi (eds), *For Shapur, Whose Lineage was from the Gods* (2024), pp. 209–20, at p. 215.

¹³⁴ Kennedy, 'The Reign of al-Muqtadir', p. 32.

¹³⁵ H. Kennedy, 'The Abbasid Background', in Shepard and Treadwell (eds), *Muslims on the Volga*, pp. 121–31, at p. 124.

fact that few people in Iraq had access to them. Nonetheless, they speak to the impact of viking networks, where an expansion on the farthest north-west had implications for places well to the south-east of their world.

Gyrfalcons were apparently prioritized for export rather than being used for falconry in Iceland and Norway. They were prestigious not just because of their size, colour and abilities, but also, in the context of the Caliphate, due to the very fact that they were so hard to obtain, so expensive to transport long distances, and so costly to maintain (given the previously mentioned expense of animal-keeping). That the timing of the falcon boom in Baghdad coincided with the first evidence of falconry in Norway (in the Gokstad burial) is intriguing. It is also tempting to connect it to the settlement of Iceland, which would make the western end of this exchange network about as far west as was possible in this period. Beyond the exchange itself, the falcon trade suggests communication, in that people in Scandinavia learned, perhaps via Rus', of a market for these birds in Baghdad itself or in the lands of the gift-givers, the Sāmānids and Saffarids. This case study underlines that global connections could be the highest levels of politics and diplomatic exchange.

The coming of the falcons was the product of a specific event, the Norse discovery of Iceland, encouraged by a particular political context in the Caliphate, perhaps linked to a moment of reorganization among the Rus' that would see the rise of the Rurikid dynasty. The 'Viking East' was not monolithic, but contingent, and the manner in which it changed can be tracked in ways beyond the tallying of dirhams in Baltic archaeological sites. There is a potential ecological dimension to this, in which demand stretching across Eurasia for a rare animal product that depends upon specific environmental conditions to flourish, leads to rapid over-exploitation.

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Appendix A.
Table of falcons given as gifts to the caliphs, 869–911

Year	Donor	Recipient	Number of Falcons	Chapter in <i>BGR</i>
869x871	Ya qūb b. al-Layth	al-Mu tamid	10	47
893	Ismā īl b. A mad	al-Mu ta id	32	54
894	Amr b. al-Layth	al-Mu ta id	many (minimum 3)	48
894	Amr b. al-Layth	al-Mu ta id	15	55
895	Amr b. al-Layth	al-Mu ta id	30	57
896	Amr b. al-Layth	al-Mu ta id	plural (minimum 2)	49
898x902	Ibn Abī al-Saj	al-Mu ta id	20	63
899	Amr b. al-Layth	al-Mu ta id	many (minimum 3)	50
906	Bertha	al-Muktafi	7	69
911	Ismā īl b. A mad	al-Muqtadir	50	70
Minimum Total			172	