

Survey to Medieval Aviculture Handout



By Biya Fujin, mka Laurel A Rockefeller

www.biyasama.com

timelessjourneycounseling@gmail.com

718-312-8633

Welcome to Survey to Medieval Aviculture! In this handout you will find some material contained in the presentation and some we will not be able to cover in detail in class. If you arrive before class starts, feel free to look at this handout early. If you are taking other aviculture classes from Lady Biya, this handout will serve as good review and refresh material.

Some material in this handout has been taken directly from Biya's paper, "Aviculture in the Middle Ages and Current Middle Ages"

Part One—Introduction

What is Medieval Aviculture?

- The study of companion birds in the middle ages. For SCA purposes, this is the period from 600-1600 or Tang through Ming dynasties.
- Practical aviculture involves the study and practice of bird psychology, nutrition, medicine/first aid, genetics (breeding), herbalism, cooking, woodworking (perches), metalworking (cages), handcrafts (toys) and many more.
- Medieval aviculture involves paleo-climatology, archeology, falconry studies, biology, religious studies, birds in culture studies, warfare, ecology, comparative species studies, evolution, and many many more!

In other words...MEDIEVAL AVICULTURE IS: a broad collection of sciences ultimately focused on studying a wide range of subjects relating to three orders of birds:

- PASSERIFORMES: songbirds, including but not limited to finches, canaries, and sparrows. Also includes crows and ravens.
- COLUMBIFORMES: pigeons and doves.
- PSITTACIFORMES: parrots.

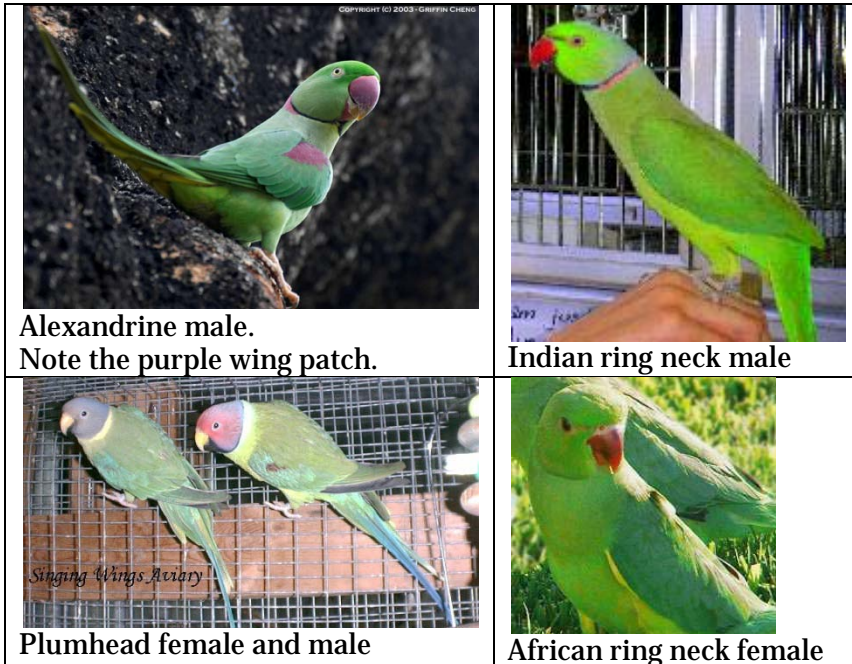
Where did parrots evolve?

- Passeriformes and Columiformes evolved on all six habitable continents (both of the 2 super continents after the split), but Psittacines only formed on the southern Gondwana supercontinent.
 - Gondwana is!:

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gondwana>

- parts of Africa
 - South America
 - Australia and islands between Australia and Asia
 - Antarctica and islands between Australia and Antarctica
 - India, Arabia
- In other words...EUROPE HAS NO NATIVE PARROTS² LIKE AFRICA (including Egypt), INDIA, CHINA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, the Americas, and the SOUTH PACIFIC.

What species of parrots were kept in the Medieval Europe?



Europeans kept four species from the genus *Psittacula*³ (aka “Asian parakeets”) prior to Renaissance explorations across the Atlantic expanded the families and genera of parrots available to them. Prior to 1400 these three species were collectively known as “popinjays”: Alexandrine parakeet, Indian ring neck parakeet, African ring neck (aka rose ringed) parakeet, and plum head parakeet. In addition, African grey parrots (Congo and/or Timnehs) were available, though to much fewer individuals than the popinjays. Henry VIII of England famously kept an African grey.

² Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

³ Ibid.

What species were kept in Medieval Asia?



Male Indian Ring neck parakeet



Alexandrine male close up



Male (left with red beak) and female Derbyan parakeets

“As the term “Asian parakeet” suggests for the genus *Psittacula*, the parakeets loved and adored by Europeans, with one exception, were natives to India and Southeast Asia⁴ and therefore became natural parts of aviculture throughout the continent. In China, the native parakeet was the Derbyan, a violet breasted bird of great beauty not kept in European aviculture. “

...

A great resource on all *Psittacula* genus parakeets is at <http://home.wanadoo.nl/psittaculaworld/> and it was from that website that this aviculturist discovered information regarding these two species....

...“But the Chinese did not stop with just Asian parakeets [in Asia]. The Chinese were great sailors and explorers who went out into great ships to explore the south pacific and beyond. By the Tang dynasty (618-960), Chinese sailors had reached Indonesia which would become known as the “Spice Islands” by European traders. ⁵

Several species of Indonesian parrot are named for their particular native Indonesian island(s). The sailors brought back great treasures in plants, animals, and other valuables—including the magnificent parrots of Indonesia—including “white parrots”—that is, COCKATOOS. In Indonesia there are umbrella cockatoos, Moluccans (named for the Moluccan aka Seram islands), and several kinds of sulfur crested

⁴ Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. See also <http://home.wanadoo.nl/psittaculaworld/> for species specific information, including specific native ranges for each *Psittacula* species, living and extinct.

⁵ Known World Aviculturists Guild demo info book, page 5.



Umbrella cockatoo from Indonesia⁶



Abbott's cockatoo⁷, now only found on Masakambing Island in Indonesia, but abundant during the middle ages.

cockatoos, including the newly rediscovered and highly endangered Abbott's Lesser Sulfur Crested cockatoo.”

Part Two: Companion Birds in Medieval Life

Who kept these birds?⁸

- Women—birds kept women company while spinning, weaving, washing, and handling the other household tasks.
- Crafts people—middle class traders and skilled workers enjoyed popinjays as both a symbol of improved prosperity and for their great companionship virtues.
- Nobility—kept both prestige species to display wealth and favorite companions to keep family members happy. No queen or noble lady would be without her favorite bird to pet and spoil. The intelligence of these birds made them attractive to noble ladies.

⁶ “Cuddles” the umbrella cockatoo, photo courtesy of Lady Beatrice Fayreweather, Barony of Atenveldt, Kingdom of Atenveldt.

⁷ “Rare Abbotts Cockatoo Seen in Indonesian Jungles and Jakarta Bird Market

“http://www.xomba.com/rare_abbotts_cockatoo_seen_indonesian_jungles_and_jakarta_bird_market

⁸ Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World's Most Talkative Bird*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

What role did companion birds play in medieval life?



Left: A peregrine falcon with her falconer in the middle ages on a block perch. Right: A peregrine falcon from a 1236 manuscript.⁹



Ox from 1236 manuscript¹⁰

In medieval societies, there were no such things as “pets” in the modern sense of the word—all animals had a function. Dogs were kept for hunting, vermin control, herding, even assistance in mountain and arctic survival tasks. Cats, which were barely tolerated and far less favored, when they were valued at all, were recognized for their vermin control abilities. Farm animals provided transportation, labor, fiber for clothing, and their bodies for consumption. Raptors were kept as hunting animals. These were not social animals. Even if some sort of attachment was formed, it was understood in all these cases that the primary purpose of these animals was to do a job. Our modern norm of the pampered pooch that relaxes and lives a life of leisure and comfort indoors with nothing to do except receive human attention was the exception to the norm in period.

⁹ Theological Miscellany, (1236), The British Library.

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8798&CollID=8&NStart=3244>

¹⁰ Ibid.



mouse¹¹

Cat, rat, and



1236 manuscript rendering of a popinjay—a
Psittacula parakeet. ¹²



Tang dynasty pot with (Derbyan) parakeet
design¹³

Instead, the animals that humans turned to for companionship in period were their companion birds. ¹⁴ These parrots, finches, canaries, pigeons, doves, and other members of the three aforementioned orders of birds kept members of the household company while engaging in the often repetitious day to day work of the household or keep like spinning, weaving, sewing, or washing. Pigeons, doves, and some parrots love to be held and cuddled while it was the color and song of the finches, canaries, and parrots that brought value to their companionship. Parrots of all sizes enjoy interactive games with their human flock members. And of course, many species of all these became prestige animals with the rarer and harder to obtain birds becoming the quests of the upper classes as methods of attaining social stature among each other. This was part of the point behind the royal menageries kept by many kings and emperors—the precursors to the modern zoos.

¹¹ Theological Miscellany, (1236), The British Library.

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8798&CollID=8&NStart=3244>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tang dynasty pot with parrot design (618-960 CE). Shaanxi history museum.

¹⁴ Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World's Most Talkative Bird. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

What Kind of Housing Did Birds Live In?



Qianlong era birdcage,
1735-1795¹⁵



Manchu bannerman, 18th
century with finches¹⁶



1349 "A young woman watches
a parrot in cage"¹⁷

Contrary to perhaps popular perception, keeping a bird in period was not difficult. All that was required was reliable shelter from the elements and extremes of temperature, a steady supply of food and water, and healthy clean air. Caging requirements depended on the species with the cage often being the most lethal component of a parrot's living environment due to metal toxicity and the strength of their beaks making an escape proof wood cage nearly impossible to construct. Oftentimes no cage at all was provided to parrots by those who wished to provide the longest life for their birds—the family bird lived as part of the family. Whereas for finches and other songbirds, wood or bamboo cages usually either in a

¹⁵ Bird Keeping Through the Ages—Cages

http://www.birdinfo.co.uk/sites/cages%20through%20the%20ages/cages_through_the_ages.htm

¹⁶ Manchu Bannerman "Liu" with gouldian finches. From 12/20/2005 post at <http://www.chinahistoryforum.com/index.php?topic/8785-pigtail-and-shaved-forehead/>

¹⁷ Concordantiae caritatis A woman watches a parrot in a cage (1349-1351) <http://tarvos.imareal.oeaw.ac.at/server/images/7004927.jpg>



Left: Chinese carved finch cage¹⁸ Right: 1470 European hexagon cage with popinjays¹⁹

square or dome style were more than

sufficient and ranged from small, portable cages such as those still popular as travel cages in China today, to large floor aviaries capable of holding dozens of birds. Pigeons and doves were kept in large finch cages and sometimes coops similar to chicken coops.

What are some of the things parrots ate in period?

Birds in Europe and Asia ate many of the same things, but also different things. For example, strawberries were better known in medieval Europe than the Far East.²⁰ Likewise, citrus fruits come from Southeast Asia and the south pacific and were in hybridization by the Chinese long before Europeans noticed the Chinese eating them. The orange we take for granted today is a human created species, the product of Chinese and later European experiments with cross breeding different citrus species.²¹

¹⁸ Bird Keeping Through the Ages—Cages

http://www.birdinfo.co.uk/sites/cages%20through%20the%20ages/cages_through_the_ages.htm

¹⁹ A birdcage from the studiolo panels for the ducal palace of Federico da Montefeltro (1470-1480), <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/LowRes2/TR1/YBHBJO/06-528740.jpg>

²⁰ A good source on fruits in medieval Europe is at <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/middle-ages-food-fruit.htm>

²¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_\(fruit\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_(fruit))



Largely, the fruits and vegetables available in Europe and Asia were the same by the middle ages. That is, the flow of goods, including foods, had spread both directions so that foods that started out in only Asia or only Europe were now being cultivated in both places by the year 1200 or even 1400 in some cases. Some fruits like the strawberry took time to spread from their small localized areas to the rest of Europe, but foods had a way of spreading.



Left: red millet Right: white millet

The seeds that most companion birds find in their food dishes today were available in most dishes in both places—with a few exceptions.²² The foxtail and/or finger millet that is sold today as spray millet (American birds are getting a hybrid of the two now—this is done less in Old World countries) is largely the same food as period birds were getting in aviculture. White millet which comprises so much of the bulk of seed mixes today would be available in Europe. In Asia, the only millet would be the foxtail

or finger millet. European birds also had red millet, which is the least nutritious of the types discussed. Canary grass seed was available for aviculture (hence its name), but my analysis²³ shows it has some of the worst nutrition of all the foods available—no real calories, protein, or any value to eating it. It takes more effort to eat and digest that seed than the bird receives from it. In other words, **DON'T FEED CANARY GRASS SEED** to your bird! This aviculturist makes her own food mix specifically so she can avoid that junk in favor of a more healthy period diet—heavy on nutritious pellets.

²² Detailed information on many of the common seeds and grains found in today's bird foods is found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finger_millet, <http://innvista.com/health/foods/seeds/oats.htm>, and at http://www.naturalhub.com/natural_food_guide_nuts_common.htm

²³ Analysis based on a detailed study of gourmet parrot food labels itemizing seeds/grains nutritional value individually.

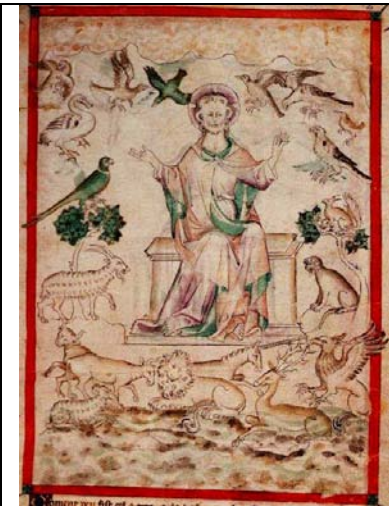
In Asia, safflower seeds would be saved after using the flowers for their brilliant dyes and given to the birds where parakeets of the genus *Psittacula* live and are wild. Safflower is high in both protein and fat—just like an almond!

In Scotland, they had oats, which most southern Europeans would rarely touch. But oats are a favorite food of small parrots—as anyone with a budgerigar has observed!

Going larger, almonds and walnuts were and are worldwide favorites for parrots. Big birds crack the shells easily. But for even smaller parrots, a shelled and chopped almond is a healthy (very high protein) and tasty addition to the diet. In Asia, access to Indonesian nuts meant feeding their cockatoos part of their native staple diet—a hard shelled almond called KENARI that is butter soft on the inside and an important part of the native Indonesian diet. This aviculturist once briefly found some for her cockatoos and they were by far the favorite food!

Parrots in Medieval Culture

In addition to pure companionship, parrots influenced Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism as feathered messengers of the Virgin Mary and Guanyin respectively. Mary is frequently depicted, as she is in a 1310s psaltery, with a popinjay in a place of honor.



Queen Mary Psaltery, 1310s.²⁴ The popinjay is sitting at her right hand while the falcon is at her left.



17th century Guanyin with cockatoo on her left shoulder²⁵

Placement this close to Mary was a sign of reverence and respect. With Mary came a close association between the popinjay and women. Since women's work involved being indoors with the family bird

²⁴ Queen Mary Psalter (1310s), The British Library. <http://bestiary.ca/manuscripts/manugallery973.htm#>

²⁵ "White-robed Guanyin: The Sinicization of Buddhism in China Seen in the Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara in Gender, Iconography, and Role" at http://www.fsu.edu/~arh/images/athanor/athxix/AthanorXIX_kim.pdf

and men's work more often took them away from home and to war, this initially religious association strengthened to a general association with women so that the qualities associated with human women were simply applied to parrots themselves.

Meanwhile, in China, starting around the 12th century CE²⁶, cockatoos could be found at the shoulder of Guanyin in Chinese temples. Though the cockatoo becomes part of Guanyin's story long before iconic depictions, the approximate 500 year gap between widespread importation of cockatoos and presence in Temple iconography and statuary most likely reflects the assimilation period required to enter Chinese aviculture.

In Buddhist stories, parrots, both parakeets and cockatoos, represent intelligence and virtue. They often carry prayer beads in their beaks. In the Tang "Precious Scroll of the Parrot,"²⁷ the parrot flies out on an errand for her mother's favorite food only to be poached into captivity along the way and forced to become a pet for humans. After a long struggle, she eventually breaks free and completes her quest, but by the time she returns, her mother is already dead. She grieves greatly, and then gives her mother a properly funeral. When her mourning is complete, she dedicates herself to the service of Guanyin. The sutra makes the parrot a role model for filial piety and Confucian virtue. The parrot is a bird to aspire to. In Pure Land Buddhism, parrots live in the Pure Land with Guan Yin. White parrots (cockatoos) are said to be sacred.

Did we say TOYS?

- Manet's 1867 "Woman with Parrot"²⁸ shows a simple toy: a wood block with a knotted rope through it next to an African grey parrot.
- The extreme intelligence of parrots points to the need to develop toys to cope with their inquisitive and highly destructive nature.
- We can infer the general features of some toys available in period based on the materials available to them: leather, braided grass, wood, grapevine, paper/parchment, falconry bells, etc.
- It is important to recognize that during the SCA period, parrots were almost exclusively drawn alone. Very few examples exist of even bird cages or perch stands (play gyms) prior to 1700 portraits.
- Photography changed everything!

²⁶ "White-robed Guanyin: The Sinicization of Buddhism in China Seen in the Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara in Gender, Iconography, and Role" at http://www.fsu.edu/~arh/images/athanor/athxix/AthanorXIX_kim.pdf

²⁷ We Love Kwan She Im Phosa (facebook id). "Guanyin and the Filial Parrot."
http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=145811025434126

²⁸ Manet, "Woman with Parrot" at http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/manet/woman_with_parrot.jpg.html

A Guild to Play With...

- This hour was just a sampling of the science...a tiny taste. To learn more and enjoy more of this science, <http://www.facebook.com/groups/kwagsca/> or go to facebook.com and search for "Known World Aviculturists Guild" to find our page!

The Known World Aviculturists Guild is in several Kingdoms including: East, Midrealms, West, An Tir, Atenveldt, Calontir, Anestorra, Trimaris, Aethelmearc, Atlantia, and Caid.

...Get out of your cage and join us!

Bibliography and helpful research resources:

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Concordantiae caritatis A woman watches a parrot in a cage (1349-1351)
<http://tarvos.imareal.oew.ac.at/server/images/7004927.jpg>

A birdcage from the studiolo panels for the ducal palace of Federico da Montefeltro (1470-1480)
<http://www.larsdatter.com/birdcages.htm>

Bird Keeping Through the Ages—Cages
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Manchu Bannerman "Liu" with Gouldian finches. From 12/20/2005 post at
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Tang dynasty pot with parrot design (618-960 CE). Shaanxi history museum.

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Wikipedia listing on finger millet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finger_millet

Oat History at: <http://innvista.com/health/foods/seeds/oats.htm>

Nut history, origin, and nutritional content information at

http://www.naturalhub.com/natural_food_guide_nuts_common.htm

A good source on fruits in medieval Europe is at <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/middle-ages-food-fruit.htm>

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_\(fruit\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_(fruit)) for detailed information on oranges and medieval China.

Enhanced information on Psittacula parakeets at Psittacula World,

<http://home.wanadoo.nl/psittaculaworld/>