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► **To cite this version:**

Thierry Buquet. Hunting with Cheetahs at European Courts, from the Origins to the End of a Fashion. Weber, Nadir; Hengerer, Mark. *Animals and courts: Europe, c. 1200-1800*, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, pp.17-42, 2020, 978-3-11-054479-4. 10.1515/9783110544794-002 . hal-02139428

HAL Id: hal-02139428

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02139428>

Submitted on 6 Jan 2020

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Hunting with Cheetahs at European Courts: From the Origins to the End of a Fashion

This document is the post-print version of the following article: Buquet, Thierry, "Hunting with Cheetahs at European Courts: From the Origins to the End of a Fashion", in *Animals and Courts*, ed. Mark Hengerer et Nadir Weber, 17-42. Berlin : De Gruyter, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110544794-002>.

The history of using the cheetah as a hunting auxiliary has been subject of various studies since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ Despite these studies, little has been said about the hunt itself and its evolution at European courts from the beginnings in the thirteenth century up to its decline in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The aim of this article is to provide a "state of the art" on a complex subject over a long period of time, studying the appearance of a hunting practice in the Orient, its use in Islamic culture, its arrival at European courts, its peak during the Renaissance and the end of the fashion. In conclusion, I will try to evaluate various hypotheses explaining the disappearance of hunting with cheetahs in western courts during the seventeenth century.

The article does not claim to be exhaustive on the subject. Some aspects of the topic such as cheetah handlers and their salaries, equipment for hunting, housing, logistics, capture, trading, and the roles of cheetah as pets or caged exhibits, will be only briefly described. I will mainly focus on direct evidence about cheetah hunting, which is much scarcer than other mentions of the exotic animal in menageries or as a diplomatic gift. To possess a cheetah is one thing, but to hunt with it is another thing altogether. This is especially apparent in European sources where there is, as will become apparent in the first section, much confusion regarding the naming of the cheetah in medieval and early modern texts.

I. Uncertainty about cheetah and panther in sources

The cheetah (*Acynonyx jubatus*) is a different animal from the leopard or panther (*Panthera pardus*), the last two being synonyms.² The cheetah has a greyhound-like body, a small head, and tiny round black spots on its fur. Leopards are bigger [p. 18], with more massive bodies, a larger head, and rosettes in their fur instead of spots. The cheetah is one of the fastest animals on earth, able to reach a speed of up to seventy miles per hour. In the Middle Ages and early modern times, however, the cheetah had no specific name in any European language: both cheetah and panther were named *leopardus*, *pardus* or *lonza* in textual sources. The names cheetah in English and *Guépard* in French or *Gepard* in German do not appear before the eighteenth century.³ In contrast, there are two different names in Arabic: *fahd* for cheetah, and *nimr* for leopard. It is clear that the two cats were never confused in medieval Arabic literature.⁴ Usāma ibn Munqidh, a Syrian emir from the twelfth century, relates that one day, in the city of Haifa, a Frank tried to sell him a young panther (*nimr*), claiming that it was a cheetah (*fahd*); Usāma is not fooled by the Christian and is very surprised that he was able to tame such a savage beast.⁵

In early modern European texts, one should rather speak of a "conundrum of cats".⁶ It is difficult to interpret sources and to identify the zoological reality behind the zoonym "leopardus". Last but not least, another difficulty studying the history of cheetah hunting is that direct testimonies

1 Camus (1909); Messedaglia (1941); Messedaglia (1945); Messedaglia (1954); Vincent (1994); Allsen (2006a); Masseti (2009).

2 The Black Panther is not a sub-species of the *Panthera* genus: its blackness is due to a melanistic color variant. Defining the Panther as "black" and the Leopard as "spotted" is a contemporary abuse of language, probably influenced by fiction, e.g. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894).

3 Buquet (2011).

4 Viré (1977).

5 Usāma ibn Munqid (1983), 251.

6 I borrow the expression from Nicholas (1999).

or detailed descriptions of hunts with cheetahs are quite rare. On the contrary, textual mentions of “leopardus” are more common in accounts describing princely menageries or animals presented as diplomatic gifts. In such cases, however, it remains unclear whether the animals were used for hunting or simply put in cages in the menagerie along with other beasts such as lions, bears, lynxes, or panthers. DNA analysis has shown that a partial skull found in the Tower of London, dating from the end of the Middle Ages or early modern times, was the skull of a panther.⁷

II. Cheetah hunting in the Orient

The story of hunting with cheetahs goes back in time long before its arrival in Medieval Europe. In Ancient Egypt, texts and iconography prove that tamed cheetahs were imported from the South, and may have been domesticated as pets. It has been conjectured that the cheetah was used for hunting, but there is no evidence to support this.⁸ In China, some pictures indicate that hunting [p. 19] with cheetahs was practised during the Tang dynasty (618-907): in the tomb of Prince Li Shu (d. 631), a painting shows a captive cheetah carried on horseback.⁹

The origin of hunting with cheetahs probably goes back to antique times in Persia, India, or possibly Afghanistan. Some Persian literary traditions say that the cheetah was tamed for hunting at the time of the Sāsānids. According to the *Shah-Nama* of Firdowsī (twelfth century), cheetahs were part of the hunting equipment of King Bharām Gūr (fifth century),¹⁰ and were tamed for the first time by the legendary King Tahmūrāt.¹¹ Some Arab traditions indicate that cheetahs were used for hunting before the Hegira, in the second half of the fifth century.¹² The first textual evidence of hunting with cheetahs in India appears in Muslim records of the thirteenth century, where the animal is named *yūz*, its Persian name.¹³ Concerning Central Asia, Marco Polo mentions briefly that Kublai Khan uses “*granz liepars pour chacier assez afaitiez*” (big “leopards” well trained for hunting) in the thirteenth century.¹⁴

In the Arabic tradition, we have more information about capture and hunting techniques.¹⁵ Kušāḡim (tenth century) describes the cheetah and its use in a long chapter of his hunting treatise *Kitāb al-maṣāyid wa'l-maṭārid*,¹⁶ and gives some information on hunting and on the animal's treatment, based on earlier treatises.¹⁷ Following Kušāḡim, other hunting treatises deal with cheetah hunting: the *Kitāb al-bayzara* of the great falconer of the caliph al-ʿAziz (tenth century),¹⁸ the hunting encyclopaedia of the Bagdadian al-Asadī (thirteenth century),¹⁹ the anonymous *al-Mansur's book on Hunting*, which cites Kušāḡim on cheetahs (thirteenth century),²⁰ and Ibn Manglī who re-wrote and abbreviated the version of al-Asadī in the fourteenth century. Ibn Manglī provides us with much information about cheetahs and their training which was similar to the training of falcons. Ibn Manglī names the different breeds used for hunting and their geographic origin, the best races coming from Western Euphrates (Samāwa), [p. 20] Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.²¹ In hunting parties, the cheetah's keepers were called *fahhādīyah* or *fahhādūn*, and they were under the authority of the *amīr šikār*, responsible for all hunting animals at the Mamluk sultan's court. The *fahhādīyah* are mentioned in

7 O'Regan (2006).

8 Vernus / Yoyotte (2005), 144–145; Allsen (2006a), 118; Osborn / Osbornová (1998), 122–123.

9 Mansard, (1993), fig. 6.

10 Firdowsī (1905), VII, 21, 26, 42, 49, 76, 100, 143.

11 Firdowsī (1905), I, 46; A'lam (1989).

12 Viré (1977), 738.

13 Divyabhanusinh (2006), 31.

14 Marco Polo (2009), 85 (chap. 90).

15 Mercier (1927), 70–76; Viré (1977).

16 Kušāḡim (1954), 183–195.

17 Viré (1974), 85; Viré (1977), 740.

18 Viré (1966). The chapter on cheetahs is not translated by Viré, who focused his translation on falconry.

19 Viré (1974), 85.

20 Clark / Derhalli (eds.) (2001), 49–52.

21 Ibn Manglī (1984), 92–108; Buquet (2012).

connection with falconers.²² Cheetah keepers had to tame the females for hunting.²³ All this hunting knowledge proves that cheetah hunting was well known in the Islamic world.²⁴

Indian Moghul images dating from the end of the sixteenth century represent hunts by the Moghul Emperor Akbar, who supposedly possessed one thousand cheetahs.²⁵ Cheetahs can be seen wearing hoods, similar to the bird's cap used in falconry. Cheetahs were driven to the hunting field – a park enclosed by movable fences – in cattle carts, in cages, or crouching on horses just behind the rider. Unmasked, the cheetahs were released to chase hares, roebuck or gazelles. Their very fast pace allows them to catch these swift animals, as they usually do in the wild. This kind of hunting is very spectacular and seems to have been delightful to witness. In the middle of the hunting field, a picture shows a huge and luxurious tent from where the royal court is able to watch the spectacle (**fig. 1-3**).

Cheetah hunting continued in the region, even if a long period of decline seems to have begun in the seventeenth century. While the crew of cheetah handlers was removed from the Ottoman court in 1686 to 1687,²⁶ several travellers (Tavernier, Bernier, Oelschalger and Chardin) witnessed cheetah hunting in Persia and Moghul India.²⁷ The last testimonies of royal cheetah hunts in India date from the twentieth century, between the 1920s and 1940s.²⁸ At the same period, a subspecies, the Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*), disappeared as native animal of India, as it also disappeared in the Near East, in Egypt, and in the Maghreb. Only very few critically endangered specimen are today living in Iran.²⁹ [p. 21-24]

III. Cheetah hunting in Classical and medieval sources

The ancient Greeks and Romans probably never practiced hunting with cheetahs. We can find much confusion about naming big cats in Greek and Latin texts – *leopardos*, *leontopardos*, *pardus*, *panthera* – and it is impossible to identify individual species behind these zoonyms.³⁰ That pet cheetahs were common in Classical Greece has been conjectured from ambiguous pictorial evidence on vases.³¹ In Imperial mosaics, images show many leopard-like felines (hunting scenes, *venationes* in circus games, Dionysus' triumph, etc.), but the animals look like panthers, not like cheetahs.

The first description of a hunting cheetah in Late Antiquity comes from the sixth century, at the court of the Vandal king Thrasamund in Carthage. The Latin poet Luxorius describes a hunt with tamed "*pardos*", animals that were probably cheetahs.³² Five centuries later, in the Byzantine Empire, a picture shows a cheetah being released by a hunter on a couple of fallow deer (**fig. 4**). The very naturalistic depiction of the cat allows us to identify it as a cheetah. The animal wears a collar and the hunter holds a leash in his hand. Medieval Byzantine iconography offers other pictures of such captive cheetahs.³³ In the middle of the twelfth century, Constantin Pantechnes, a Byzantine author, wrote a detailed description of cheetah hunting at the Imperial Court. The hunting techniques described by Pantechnes are very similar to those employed by the Arabs: the cheetah was released from a horse, and after it captured its prey, the hunter arrived quickly to free the hare from the mouth of the cheetah, giving it some of the blood of the dead animal.³⁴

The earliest mentions of cheetahs in Western Europe date from the turn of the twelfth century. Between 1096 and 1099, Raoul Tortaire, a monk from the abbey of Fleury, saw, among other exotic

22 Shehada (2013), 174, 177, 199–201.

23 Ibn Manglī (1984), 92–106.

24 Shehada (2013), *passim*. The author provides much information on veterinary medicine regarding the cheetah during Mamluk time.

25 Divyabhanusinh (2006), 48; Jahangir (1909), I, 240.

26 Faroqhi (2008), 95.

27 Messedaglia (1941), 49–51.

28 Divyabhanusinh (2006), 154–156.

29 Farhadinia et al. (2017), 1–20.

30 Jennison (1937), 183–187; Nicholas (1999), 253–259.

31 Ashmead (1978).

32 Luxorius (1961), 154–157.

33 Papagiannaki (2017), fig. 3-8, 232–237.

34 Translation in: Nicholas (1999), 290–298. See Papagiannaki (2017) for a general discussion on cheetahs in Byzantium (in menageries and for hunting), and for a study of Constantin Pantechnes' description, 238–241.

animals, a leopard attached to a chain, carried on horseback in a royal procession of the King of England in [p. 25] the city of Caen in Normandy.³⁵ Was it a cheetah trained for hunting? The fact that the cheetah was able to ride a horse suggests it was. But the information is too scant to allow any definite conclusions. An English source witnesses the presence of “leopards” at the Woodstock menagerie around 1125, among other exotic animals (lion, lynx, camel, porcupine).³⁶ Wace, in his *Roman de Brut* (1155), writes that “leopards” are given by King Arthur as luxury gifts during his coronation (“*dona lieparz e dona ors*”).³⁷ In another chapter which describes predators being afraid and fleeing from their prey, Wace mentions the opposition leopard/hare in analogy to that of lion and lamb, and wolf and goat.³⁸ This is totally absent in the Bible³⁹ or other possible sources such as medieval bestiaries or the writings of Plinius and Isidorus. Without any better evidence of such practice in England, Wace’s association between cheetah and hare may indicate some knowledge of cheetah hunting at his time.

In the late twelfth and especially in the thirteenth century, the cheetah appears more frequently in European sources. According to the chronicler Radulf of Diceto, in 1190 Saladin gave two *leopardos* with four birds of prey (*accipitres*) [p. 26] and four camels to Louis III, Landgrave of Thuringia. Emperor Frederick the Second, a great hunter, is known to have possessed many “leopards”, probably cheetahs trained for hunting. We know that Frederick imported cheetahs from Tunisia in 1239.⁴⁰ Scholars usually believe that Frederick is probably the first to have used cheetahs for hunting in Europe.⁴¹ The evidence comes from correspondence. In a letter to one of his officers, Frederick asks the addressee to send him trained leopards and others that are not perfectly trained but able to ride on a horse. Frederick uses the Latin word *affaytendum* for “trained”, the same term used in relation to the training of falcons.⁴² The *Registro della cancelleria* of the court of Frederick kept many records about the cheetah handlers (*leoparderii*) and their salaries.⁴³ Frederick seems to have owned a great number of cheetahs, as he ordered 60 carpets especially for his *leopardi* in 1260.⁴⁴

Frederick does not treat the hunt with cheetahs in his falconry book, *De arte venandi cum avibus*. He only cites some animals that may be trained for hunting, among them the *leopardus*.⁴⁵ In the falconry book entitled *Moamin*, translated from the Arabic at the court of Frederick around 1241 (and later into Old French and Spanish), we can find a few mentions of the cheetah, its use for hunting and its feeding, but these translations do not contain a word of its use at Frederick’s court.⁴⁶ Yet we know that Frederick loved his cheetahs very much and greatly enjoyed hunting with them. A troubadour, Guilhem Figueira, criticizes him because he wasted so much time running and hunting through bushes and woods with his cheetahs (*Pero qar vai chazan / per bosc et per eissartz / ab cas et ab leopartz?*).⁴⁷

35 Bouet (2017), vv. 171–174. The author proposes a new date for the procession, which was formerly dated during the reign of the English King Henry the First “Beauclerc”, after 1105.

36 Giese (2008), 152 (n. 133); Hauck (1963), 67. Source: William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum anglorum* IV, § 409.

37 Camus (1909), 31–32; Wace (1836), 115.

38 Wace (1836), 117 (v. 10950).

39 In Isaiah 11:6, after the coming of the Messiah, the leopard (*namir* in Hebrew, translated as *pardalis* in the Septuagint and as *pardus* in the Vulgate) will live peacefully with the goat, the wolf with the lamb and the lion with the calf. There is an evident parallel with Wace’s text. One can find seven other verses mentioning the leopard, where the feline is not interacting with any of its prey.

40 Huillard-Bréholles (1852), V, 1, 125.

41 Giese (2008), 134–135. But Giese doesn’t mention the passage in *Roman de Brut* speaking about cheetahs and hares. She considers Frederick as the first using cheetahs for hunting, because he is the first about whom we have various pieces of evidence.

42 At the end of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo uses the same word (*afaitiez*) to describe the tamed cheetahs of Kublai Khan. See Marco Polo (2009), 85 (chap. 90).

43 Giese (2008), 134 (notes 56 and 58).

44 Giese (2008), 128 (note 30).

45 Frédéric II Hohenstaufen (2000), P.I.12, P.I.14.

46 Latin text: Georges (2008), 259–260, 266–267. French medieval translation: Moamin and Ghatriif (1945), 228–229, 237–238.

47 Camus (1909), 34.

Frederick also sent cheetahs to other rulers, for example in 1235 to the English King Henry III. The chronicle by Roger of Wendover, also transmitted by Matthew Paris, explains that these “leopards” had bodies similar to greyhounds, which seems a good comparison for the slender body of the cheetah. Later, these felines were kept at the king’s court, and accounts of Henry III mention salaries [p. 27] for their keepers.⁴⁸ After Frederick II, Charles I of Anjou, ruling over Sicily between 1266 and 1285, seems to have maintained cheetah hunting, as he paid fees to feed cheetahs and lions, and salaries for five *leopardieri*, “cheetah-handlers”, in 1269. They were named Domenico, Pasquale, Isa, Elia and Bulfetto, and were under the authority of the Saracen Salem, “master of the cheetah-handlers of the king” (*Salem saraceno Maestro de leopardieri regi*).⁴⁹ In 1273, Charles issued an order to capture eight cheetahs and to have them transported to him, accompanied by faithful and trusted experts in order to avoid accidents.⁵⁰

There are also a few mentions of the use of cheetahs in thirteenth-century encyclopaedias. Thomas of Cantimpre, author of the *Liber de natura rerum* from around 1240, explains that the *leopardus*, despite its cruelty, can be tamed for hunting. According to the author, the *leopardus* is set on its prey (*relanxantur ad predam*) but if it does not catch its prey after three or four leaps, it gets angry and may attack its handler and his dogs.⁵¹ Thomas gives no citation of a previous author for this passage: perhaps he was informed by courtly hunters. Similar information about tamed cheetah is to be found in the works of other natural historians of the thirteenth century, such as Albertus Magnus.⁵² Bartholomeus Anglicus talks about the vexation after the three or four missed leaps, but does not mention that the animal is tamed for hunting.⁵³

Between 1297 and 1305, we have some information about cheetah handlers at the French court of Philip IV the Fair. The keepers of the lions, leopards and white bears were named “leonarius” (lion keeper); the *Rôle de la taille* and the royal accounts indicate their names (Gilbert, Berge and David), their salaries and expenses for the animals. Accounts show that lions and leopards were fed with sheep, two and a half carcasses a day (we may thus assume that the menagerie contained four lions and two leopards, as lions were fed with half a carcass, and leopards with a quarter).⁵⁴ In the Moamin hunting treatise, cheetahs are said to be fed with haunches of sheep.⁵⁵ The accounts of the city of Florence registered several payments for the year 1291 for building small houses [p. 28] (*domuncula*) for the “leopards” and to feed them.⁵⁶ Other expenses arose for transporting cheetahs from the Orient. In 1291, an embassy by Geoffrey of Langley brings back to Burgundy a cheetah from Tabriz in Persia, given as a diplomatic gift. A wooden cage had to be built for the animal and later repaired at Constantinople. During this stop-off, the animal keeper had to buy three chickens and three and a half living sheep to feed the feline.⁵⁷

Cheetah hunting was practised in Spain, possibly following a Muslim custom; in the fourteenth century, cheetahs kept in royal menageries (Aragon and Navarre) were trained.⁵⁸ Ferdinand I, King of Aragon, mentions cheetah hunting in a letter dating from 1412. Earlier, at the end of the fourteenth century, a cheetah was brought from Cyprus to the court with its trainer.⁵⁹ Cyprus seems to have been a great place to hunt with cheetahs at the time of the Lusignan rule.⁶⁰ Two pilgrims, William of

48 Giese (2008), 141 (note 85).

49 Camus (1909), 12–13; Riccio (1874), 72.

50 Masseti (2009), 39.

51 Thomas Cantimpratensis (1973), 142 (IV, 55).

52 *De animalibus*, XXII, cap. 2 and 59; Albertus Magnus (1916-1921), 1356, 1467; Albertus Magnus (1999), 1449, 1514.

53 Bartholomeus Anglicus (1483), bk. XVIII, cap. 65.

54 Maillard / Fawtier (eds.) (1953), 176 (3760), 217 (4457–58); ‘Rôle de La Taille’ n.d., fols 88, 121, 142, 209, 284, Paris Archives nationales KK 283. I warmly thank Caroline Bourlet (IRHT) for sending me the data from the *Rôle de la Taille*.

55 Georges (2008), 264; Moamin and Ghatrif (1945), 237.

56 König-Lein (1997), 86–87. Source: *Le consulte della republiana Fiorentina*, 1280-1298.

57 Paviot (1987): 47–54 (sp. p. 51).

58 Morales Muñoz (2000), 253-254.

59 Ferragud (2011), 50–51.

60 Coureas (2016), 33–50.

Boldensel and Ludolf of Sudheim, visiting Cyprus separately around 1335, describe royal hunts with falcons, dogs, and “*domestici leopardi*”.⁶¹ Sixty years later, the pilgrim Nicholas Martoni explains that James I of Cyprus possessed twenty-four hunting cheetahs in Famagusta.⁶² Cheetah hunting seems to have continued during the Lusignan period, and comes to an end in the sixteenth century.⁶³

IV. Cheetahs in Italy and France (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries)

The first substantiated mentions of cheetah hunting in Italy date from the last quarter of the fourteenth century. In his *Trionfi*, Petrarch describes the swiftness of the cheetah, running freely in the forest after a deer: *Non corse mai sì lievemente al varco / Di fuggitiva cerva un leopardo / Libero in selva o di catene scarco* (“Never a cheetah, free in the forest, or released from his chain, ran so quickly to the passage of the fugitive doe”).⁶⁴ In praising the cheetah hunt, Petrarch was followed by several Renaissance poets like Boiardo, Ariosto and others.⁶⁵ [p. 29]

In 1391, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, organized a cheetah hunt in Pavia in honour of the ambassadors of the Duke of Burgundy.⁶⁶ In 1394, Gian Galeazzo received cheetahs from the Mamluk Sultan Barquq, who reciprocated a gift consisting of horses and dogs from the Duke of Milan.⁶⁷ Gian Galeazzo was a famous hunter at his time, as mentioned by the anonymous chronicler of the French King Charles VI, especially because he was not only hunting with dogs but with “leopards” and other domesticated beasts.⁶⁸

At the turn of the fifteenth century, a new and abundant iconography of the cheetah appears in Lombardia, representing the animal in a realistic and naturalistic way, in manuscripts, drawings and frescoes. A model sketch book by Giovannino de’ Grassi (fig. 5) and other drawings by his followers show fine depictions of “true” cheetahs, clearly distinct from realistic representations of panthers.⁶⁹ This new iconography influenced the Italian emblems, where heraldic leopards were presented in a more naturalistic form, with spotted fur, a collar and a leash.⁷⁰ But very few pictures depict the cheetah in action while hunting. A page with drawings from the second quarter of the fifteenth century, formerly attributed to Paolo Uccello, shows a “lonza” (short tailed lynx with long ears) catching a hare and a “leopardo” with rounded ears and long tail grabbing a deer by its throat.⁷¹ (fig. 6) The famous *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano (1423) shows a deer hunt with a cheetah and a leopard mounted on a horse (fig. 7). The presence of the panther hunting draws many questions about its use for hunting in Europe, since the oriental tradition forbids this animal for hunting.⁷²

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the fashion of cheetah hunting spread to many of the princely Italian courts including Este, Sforza, Visconti, and [p. 30] Medici.⁷³ Italian courts employed specialized cheetah handlers, the *pardieri*. For example, in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, at Ercole d’Este’s Ferrara court, the cheetah master, Battista da Battaino, had two assistants. He had to take care of the animal and its equipment, and sometimes had to travel far to convey cheetahs with their horse carpets to other courts. The expertise of the cheetah handler was an esteemed part of the

61 Guillaume de Boldensele (1997), 1005; Ludolphus de Sudheim (1884), 336.

62 Nicolas de Martoni (1895), 634–635.

63 Coureas (2016), 39.

64 Francesco Petrarch (1984) *Trionfo della pudicizia*, vv. 37–39; Camus (1909), 36.

65 Messedaglia (1941), 31–34.

66 Messedaglia (1941), 60–61.

67 According to Beltramo de Mignanelli, an Italian merchant who lived in Damascus and served as an intermediary and translator for an embassy sent to Barquq by Gian Galeazzo Visconti. In 1416, after his return to Europe, Bertrando wrote a biography of Barquq entitled *Ascensus Barcoch*. See Fischel (1959), 169. Original manuscript in Latin: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 557, f. 63-63v.

68 “Tunc et si venacioni insistebat, ut hanc magnificencius ceteris dominis exerceret, non cum canum agminibus [...] sed cum leopardis vel domesticis feras venabatur.” Anonymus of Saint-Denis (1839), 132–134 (XXIV, 18).

69 Chapman / Faietti, (2010), 90–91; Buquet (2011), 29–32; Tresidder (1981), 481–85.

70 Rocculi (2010), 207–30.

71 Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Inv. 27, V 13. Ink on paper, 23.6 × 17.8 cm.

72 Buquet (2011) 39–43.

73 Camus (1909); Messedaglia (1941); Messedaglia (1945).

diplomatic gift.⁷⁴ The Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, was always in quest for cheetahs, asking Muslim rulers to send them to him, according to his biographers, Piero Candido Decembrio and Giovanni Montano.⁷⁵ Several hunts are attested at the court of the Gonzaga in Mantua in 1459 and 1462.⁷⁶ In the chronicle of the reign of the French King Charles VIII for the year 1459, Mathieu de Coucy relates that a French embassy to Francesco Sforza witnessed cheetahs hunting hares from horseback in Milan.⁷⁷

At the end of the fifteenth century, the cheetah fashion spread to France through exchanges with Italy. Even by around 1375, archival accounts attest payments for cheetah handlers and for other expenses for the felines (carpets, game bags, food) [p. 31] in the kingdom of France and in Burgundy,⁷⁸ but nothing is said about its use for hunting. Now, in 1476, Louis XI, King of France, wrote several [p. 32] letters to his cousin Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, asking him for cheetahs "that hunt hares well".⁷⁹ In another letter, he thanks him for the only one cheetah he received and writes that it was the most beautiful and best hunter he has ever [p. 33] seen.⁸⁰ At the turn of the century, Charles VIII hunted with cheetahs in Amboise.⁸¹ Louis XII organized hunts with cheetahs at his royal residence near Tours. In 1499, a cheetah attacked a falcon and wounded the falconer who wanted to protect his bird. According to the chroniclers, this event shocked the court and the queen wanted to stop this kind of hunt permanently.⁸² Yet in 1510, Louis XII was still organizing cheetah hunts. A cheetah given by the Cardinal Hippolito d'Este caught a hare but continued to chase a roebuck with its first prey still in its mouth! Aldobrandino Turchi ends this story by stating that the French King was so pleased that he could not find the words to describe it.⁸³

Cheetah hunting was still practised in the middle of the sixteenth century, perhaps under Italian influence. In 1548, Corneille Dipard, the king's cheetah handler, was paid for buying a horse that would carry the cheetah on its back, to follow the king.⁸⁴ Conrad Gesner, in his *Historia animalium* (1551), said that some princes and kings hunted with "leopards" on horseback. The most famous representation of this hunt in the sixteenth century is an engraving by Stradanus (**fig. 8**): the cheetah sits on the rear of the horse upon a case, ready to hunt hares. Gesner adds that one can find two species of leopards at the French court: one bigger with short legs, the other of the size of a dog. The last is carried on horseback, sat on a carpet or chest, attached to a chain, and released to hunt hares, in order to provide a show for the French king.⁸⁵ Francis and his son Henri II seem to be the last French kings to have been hunting with cheetahs. At the end of the sixteenth century, King Henri III killed all savage beasts at court, an event that caused a decline of French royal menageries that lasted until the reign of Henri IV.⁸⁶

V. The end of a fashion

In the seventeenth century, the practice of cheetah hunting gradually disappeared from European court life, even if cheetahs are still mentioned in sources occasionally. In 1591, the English traveller Fynes Moryson described cheetahs in Prague in the menagerie of Emperor Rudolf II. He provides interesting information [p. 34] about the use of the cheetahs for hunting, but does not say if he ever saw the king hunting with cheetahs in Bohemia.⁸⁷ Moryson wrote that the menagerie of Duke

⁷⁴ Cockram, (2017), 289–291.

⁷⁵ Azzi Visentini (2007), 207–208 (note 18).

⁷⁶ Malacarne (1998), 174–175.

⁷⁷ Godefroy (ed.) (1661), 718; Messedaglia (1941), 61. Messedaglia gives a wrong date for this event.

⁷⁸ Prost / Prost (eds.) (1902), vol. 1, § 2436, 2445, 2730, 2753, 3213, 3236, and vol. 2, § 173, 192, 248, 333, 2751.

⁷⁹ Camus (1909), 37.

⁸⁰ Messedaglia (1941), 70–71.

⁸¹ Camus (1888), 129–31.

⁸² Messedaglia (1941), 73.

⁸³ Messedaglia (1941), 74.

⁸⁴ *Catalogue analytique des archives de M. le baron de Joursanvault*, vol. 1 (1838), 137 (810).

⁸⁵ Gesner (1551), 938, 943.

⁸⁶ Mercier (2012), 111–29, sp. 128–129.

⁸⁷ Moryson (1907), I, 30.

Ferdinand in Florence contained many animals, among them leopards “used sometimes for hunting”, an information given by the animal keeper of the menagerie.⁸⁸ While cheetah hunting seems still to have been common in Florence, Henry IV, King of France, sent back to Italy a cheetah-handler (*léopardier*) who came from Florence with his new wife, Maria de’ Medici, in April 1601.⁸⁹ Obviously, the king had no use for such a specialized employee as there is no evidence that he hunted with cheetahs.⁹⁰ The same is true for King [p. 35] Louis XIII who had no cheetahs in his menagerie.⁹¹ The custom of keeping felines and savage animals in the palace of the king now seems old-fashioned, a sign of medieval feudalism. At this time of new modern courtly culture, large felines are relegated to the new menageries where they became objects of study and curiosity.⁹² In 1660, cheetah hunting is mocked and parodied in Parma during the marriage ceremony of Duke Farnese and Marguerite of Savoy.⁹³ At the very end of the century, Emperor Leopold I is described as having a couple of cheetahs that he used for hunting and which sat on the back of his horse. The animals had been presented to him by the Ottoman Sultan, and were wearing embroidered Persian coats; possibly, these cheetahs had been imported from the Safavid court.⁹⁴ This is probably the last attested mention of cheetah hunting in Europe during early modern times. Early modern zoologists, such as Samuel Bochart (d. 1667) and Buffon (d. 1788) apparently never saw a living cheetah, even in a menagerie.⁹⁵

Some authors have wondered why the fashion of cheetah hunting ended, and several hypotheses have been proposed. One brings the disappearance of the cheetah in line with the revival of falconry during the Renaissance. It has been conjectured that it was during the reign of King Louis XIII, who was a great fan of falconry, that cheetah hunting ended in the kingdom of France.⁹⁶ However, falconry and cheetah hunting were complementary and associated with each other both in Muslim regions and in Europe. Another view states that hunters may have come to prefer larger prey such as deer or wild boar to hare. Not being strong enough to bring down these powerful animals, cheetahs could only be used for hunting hares or smaller fallow deer, roebuck or gazelles. Following the same hypothesis, the development of the great hunt with dogs called *vénerie*, *chasse à courre*, or *Parforcejagd*⁹⁷ may have reduced the use of cheetahs. This kind of hunting was not suitable for such lightweight felines, which are better suited for sprinting than for long marathons in the woods. Another possible explanation is the decline of cheetah hunting at the Ottoman court. On the other hand, this form of hunting was still used in Persia as travellers mentioned it at that time. Finally, the end of the fashion could also be related [p. 36] to a progressive reduction of the cheetah population in Northern Africa and the Near East that was due partly to extensive captures for hunting equipages (Persian courts possessed hundreds to thousands specimens at one time). Also, cheetahs breed very badly in captivity. So, hunters and merchants must have captured too many animals in their natural habitat, and they may have accelerated their extinction,⁹⁸ a long time before European colonization which involved massive killings of wild animals.⁹⁹ Yet we can oppose to these arguments that the extinction of great predators is mainly due to the decrease of their hunting areas, a consequence of their prey living in a limited space.¹⁰⁰

As indicated, none of these hypotheses seems totally convincing to me. Overall, they tend to overestimate the relative importance of this type of hunt, as cheetah hunting seems always to have been a rather occasional phenomenon in Europe. There is no evidence of large numbers of imported

88 Moryson (1907), I, 325–326. Moryson did not describe a hunt, but he repeated information given by the animal keeper of the menagerie.

89 Berger de Xivrey / Guadet (eds.) (1850), V, 403.

90 Pieragnoli (2016), 120-121.

91 Mercier (2012), 128-129; Pieragnoli (2016), 160-161.

92 Pieragnoli (2016), 26, 161; Mercier (2012), 128-129.

93 Camus (1909), 29.

94 Reindl-Kiel (2010), 273.

95 Buquet (2011), 45.

96 Vincent (1994), 161.

97 On the development of this type of hunt, see the contribution by Maike Schmidt in this volume.

98 Allsen (2006b), 112.

99 Planhol (2004), 80–81, 563, 683, 687.

100 This is typically the case of the African Cheetah: Planhol (2004), 748.

cheetahs, as we see in the cases of Persia or India, and no hunting treaty, medieval or early modern, has described cheetah hunting, seemingly because it was not something usually encountered in hunting. Cheetah hunting probably remained under the control of very few cheetah handlers who imported their technique from the Orient.¹⁰¹ Cheetah hunting seems to have remained an exotic practice even when it was a fashion at European courts. With the evolution of menageries from the seventeenth century onwards, rulers preferred larger animals such as tigers and panthers to be displayed in cages, giving an image of tamed ferocity. The fast, but relatively small cats did not fit into this scheme. In the end, the decline of cheetah hunting is probably due to a combination of various factors, such as the evolution of sensibility about savage animals in Renaissance courts, the development of princely menageries, the evolution of hunting, and less contacts with Oriental courts.

In any case, when in 1764 a cheetah hunt was organized at Windsor castle, this was a singular event for the contemporary spectators, and no one associated it with practices that had once been common in Western Europe. The tamed cheetah that was used for the hunt had been brought back from the British colony of India. English gazettes reported the event organized by the Duke of Cumberland. The cheetah attacked a stag in an area enclosed by nets. However, the powerful stag defended itself with its antlers, and the cheetah had to run off. Afterwards, the cheetah went into the woods where he was able to bring down a [p. 37] smaller fallow deer. This event seems to be the source of a famous painting by George Stubbs, dated 1765, in which the cheetah is perfectly depicted, drawn from nature (fig. 9).¹⁰² But this very late event seems to tell a new story, born in the modern era, a story of colonization and exoticism in a growing global empire.

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¹⁰¹ *Pardieri* or cheetah-handlers in Italy have Italian names.

¹⁰² Clutton (1970), 536–39.

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Image references (weblinks when images are available online)

- Fig. 1:** Miskina and Sarwan, *Akbar*, while holding a hunting circle, punishes Hamid and Bakkar, c. 1590-1595, London, © Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2:55 – 1896.
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9646/akbar-and-hamid-bakari-painting-miskina/>
- Fig. 2:** Mansur and Miskina, *Akbar hunting with cheetahs*, c. 1590-1595, London, © Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2:56 – 1896.
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9644/akbar-painting-miskina/>
- Fig. 3:** Basawan and Dharmdas, *Akbar hunts in the neighbourhood of Agra*, c. 1590-1595, London, © Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2.24 – 1896.
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9412/akbar-painting-basawan/>
- Fig. 4:** Constantinople, *Gospels*, early 9th century, Paris, BnF, Grec 64, f. 6.
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105157462/f21.image>
- Fig. 5:** Giovaninno de' Grassi, *Taccuino di disegni*, 14th century, Bergamo, Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, Cassaf. 1.21, ms, 16r.
- Fig. 6:** *Study of a cheetah*, second or third quarter of the 15th century, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Inv 27, V 13.
- Fig. 7:** Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi* (detail), early 15th century, Florence, Uffizi, Inv. 1890 n. 8364. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/adoration-of-the-magi/DQFJCeCtmALPyg?hl=fr>
- Fig. 8:** Jan Collaert, carton of Jan van der Straet (Stradanus), cheetah hunting, 1594–1598, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-BI-6111.
https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1620297&partId=1
- Fig. 9:** George Stubbs, *Cheetah with two Indian servants and a deer*, 1765, Courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery. <https://manchesterartgallery.org/collections/title/?mag-object-7398>