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# Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages

Perspectives across disciplines

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*ANIMALIA EXTRANEA ET STUPENDA AD VIDENDUM.*  
**DESCRIBING AND NAMING EXOTIC BEASTS IN CAIRO  
SULTAN'S MENAGERIE**

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**Abstract**

The description of exotic animals (African or Asiatic beasts as seen in European medieval context) is an interesting paradigm of otherness, especially in the construction of the image of the oriental world. Zoological marvels coming from India or Ethiopia were not imaginary beasts, but real animals that could be observed in nature or in Egyptian menageries. The paper studies three aspects of the description of foreign animals (especially elephants, giraffes, and other big animals) by occidental pilgrims:

1. The difficulty of describing the unknown, whether in zoological terms (detailing the external features of the animals), or in more affective terms (surprise, marvel, emotion);
2. The problem of naming unknown animals, whence the adoption of Arabic zoonyms;
3. The choice of species in the menageries selected for description in the travel account.

**Keywords**

Pilgrimage; exotic animals; description; menageries; medieval travelogues

**Introduction: encounters with exotic animals in Egypt**

Research on exotic animals has often ignored an important source, the descriptions of voyages made by medieval travellers in the Late Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> These travelogues, which contain many notes on strange fauna, are not just collections of *mirabilia* meant to astonish the reader. They contain eyewitness accounts of animals seen in the wild or in cities of the Near East. This paper will mainly focus on Cairo, a city often described by travellers<sup>2</sup> headed for the Holy Land or those

visiting Egypt for commercial or diplomatic reasons.

Pilgrims had to pass through Egypt when new lines of navigation were established in the Mediterranean in the fourth century and after the fall of Acre in 1291. These constraints led to the creation of new travel routes in the Nile Valley and Sinai Desert, including visits to Alexandria and Cairo.<sup>3</sup> The passage through Egypt aroused a new curiosity about the country, for which there are three main reasons. Curiosity about Egypt was natural for it was little known before the thirteenth century, except through written sources. Secondly,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Richard, *Les récits de voyages et de pèlerinages*, vol. A-1.7, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental 38 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Herman Dopp, "Le Caire vu par les voyageurs occidentaux au Moyen Âge." *Bulletin de la Société Royale de*

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*géographie d'Égypte* 23 (1950): 117–149; 24 (1951): 115–162; 26 (1954): 87–118.

<sup>3</sup> Aryeh Graboïs, "La description de l'Égypte au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle par les pèlerins et les voyageurs occidentaux," *Le Moyen Âge* 109, n° 3–4 (2003): 529–543, see 530–531.

late medieval pilgrims added their personal observations to the description of the holy sites, describing things that had no relation to the religious motivations of their voyage.<sup>4</sup> And lastly, the profile of the pilgrim underwent a sociological change in the later Middle Ages. Mingling with the men of the Church, we now find ambassadors, merchants, men in search of adventure, and explorers.<sup>5</sup> There are even a few spies sent out on reconnaissance missions in preparation for possible crusades. Among these travellers, we find scholars versed in ancient texts and encyclopaedias.

During their Egyptian tour, the traveller might encounter exotic animals while crossing the Sinai Peninsula, the habitat of wild, sometimes menacing animals (lions, leopards, hyenas, jackals, etc.); or while descending the Nile either by boat or along the banks, where the real or imagined encounter with crocodiles became a commonplace of this type of travelogue.

In cities, travellers took note of all the animals sold at markets or led about on tethers or exhibited to the public: namely lions, panthers, cheetahs, elephants, giraffes, monkeys, ostriches, parrots, etc.

Animal handlers, sometimes sent by the Sultan, led beasts directly to the pilgrims so that they could observe them at leisure and admire the quality of the training of bears, elephants, lions and monkeys. These animal trainers or guardians were paid for their visit. Felix Fabri, for example, notes in 1483 that he tipped the men who took him to see a giraffe, as they expected remuneration for their service.<sup>6</sup>

The best place to see exotic beasts was the Sultan's menagerie, and the Sultan's staff often arranged the visit. Westerners knew about European princely menageries,<sup>7</sup> where one could find lions, cheetahs, lynxes and falcons used for

hunting, monkeys and exotic birds, but where elephants and giraffes were quite rare, and indeed mainly absent before the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Arabian menageries were without equal in Europe.<sup>9</sup> The tradition is ancient and we have a ninth-century source that speaks of a menagerie in Cairo in a complex architectural compound, with spaces and cages devoted to each species: lions, cheetahs, panthers, giraffes, elephants and so on.<sup>10</sup> The richness of the Cairo menagerie is confirmed by travellers, who saw large groups of animals, between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example herds of several elephants or families of five or six giraffes, male, female and calves,<sup>11</sup> or a pride of eight lions, as Antonio Reboldi da Cremona mentioned in 1327.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Sultan's menagerie was the ideal place to encounter and observe in detail rare and spectacular exotic animals.

### Exotic animals and otherness

If animals inspire the symbolic imagination,<sup>13</sup> exotic species undoubtedly inspired medieval mentality reflections on the oriental world. In the

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<sup>8</sup> For the elephant, see Robert Delort, *Les éléphants piliers du monde*, Découvertes Gallimard. Histoires naturelles 93 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). For the giraffe, see Thierry Buquet, "La belle captive. La girafe dans les ménageries princières au Moyen Âge," in *La bête captive au Moyen Âge et à l'époque moderne*, eds. Corinne Beck and Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp (Amiens: Encreage, 2012), 65–90.

<sup>9</sup> The history of oriental menageries remains to be written. One exception is a paper by L. Keimer, which has to be emended and completed, especially for the medieval times: Louis Keimer, "Jardins zoologiques d'Égypte," *Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne* 6/2 (1954): 81–159.

<sup>10</sup> Maqrīzī, *Description historique et topographique de l'Égypte (Livre des admonitions et de l'observation pour l'histoire des quartiers et des monuments) 3<sup>e</sup>-4<sup>e</sup> parties*, ed. Paul Casanova, vol. 3, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire 3–4 (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1906), 219–221.

<sup>11</sup> Lionardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi, Georgio Gucci, and Simone Sigoli, *Viaggi in Terra Santa, di Lionardo Frescobaldi e d'altri del secolo XIV*, ed. Carlo Gargioli (Florence: G. Barbera, 1862), 125–126.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Reboldi da Cremona, "Antonius de Cremona. Itinerarium ad Sepulcrum Domini (1327–1330)," ed. Reinhold Röhrich, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 13 (1890): 163.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Sperber, "Pourquoi les animaux parfaits, les hybrides et les monstres sont-ils bons à penser symboliquement ?" *L'Homme* 15/2 (1975): 5–34.

<sup>4</sup> Aryeh Graboïs, *Le pèlerin occidental en Terre sainte au Moyen Âge* (Paris-Brussels: De Boeck et Larcier, 1998), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Felix Fabri, *Voyage en Égypte*, ed. J. Masson, Collection des voyageurs occidentaux en Égypte 14 (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1975), II, 422.

<sup>7</sup> Gustave Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, 3 vols. (Paris: O. Doin et fils, 1912).

Middle Ages, the perception of the Orient was built on more than religious oppositions and the Crusades. Discovery of new landscapes, new people, new habits and beliefs by pilgrims, travellers or crusaders, brought new information about countries previously known only through biblical or encyclopaedic texts. Descriptions of native or imported animals in Egypt, Holy Land, India or Persia, added to new zoological knowledge about exotics beasts. In accounts of their travels, pilgrims were as interested in depicting everyday life, cities and landscapes, as they were fascinated by such 'marvels' as crocodiles, elephants, giraffes and ostriches.<sup>14</sup>

Today we speak of these animals as 'exotic,' but this adjective was very rare in medieval times, and was almost never applied to animals before the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The word and the idea are modern concepts, too readily projected back on the Middle Ages. In medieval Latin texts, foreign animals are sometimes qualified as *extranea* (foreign), *peregrinus* (alien, foreign, roving), *ultramarinae* (overseas), *mirabilia* (marvelling, wonderful), and *stupenda* (astonishing, amazing, surprising). Matthew Paris, describing presents brought by the Sultan of Egypt to Frederick II in 1228, speaks of marvellous animals, unseen and unknown to Europe (*'bestiis mirabilis, quas Occidens non vidit aut cognovit'*).<sup>16</sup> The most frequent adjective is *peregrinus*, thus explaining that the animal is coming from far away (the noun *peregrinatio* means a voyage to a foreign land). In a tenth-century gloss on the grammarian Nonius (fourth century AD), *peregrinus* is given as a synonym for *exoticus*,<sup>17</sup> from the Greek *exotikos* which refers to clothes, objects or products that are not Greek. The modern notion of 'exoticism' summons up ideas of otherness, unfamiliarity, strangeness, and marvels of the Orient. These ideas were not ignored in medieval times, but they were

quite different from the sensationalist attitude of nineteenth-century writers and artists.

Humbert de Dijon, visiting Egypt in 1329–1330, says of Cairo that

*In eadem etiam civitate sunt multa et diversa animilia stupenda et extranea ad videndum ut puta leopardi, elephantes, unicornia, crocodilli, girafili et similia, de quorum nominibus non valeo recordari.*<sup>18</sup>

(In this same city, there are many diverse foreign animals, astonishing to see, such as leopards, elephants, unicorns, crocodiles, giraffes and other of similar kinds<sup>19</sup> whose names I could not remember).

The medieval attitude toward exotic animals was thus centred on surprise and foreignness, and the difficulty of describing and naming. We can see here that the perception and the description of exotics beasts is an interesting paradigm of otherness, whereas alterity is something difficult to describe and record, especially with exotic animals.

### Naming the unknown: the otherness of foreign zoonyms

During the thirteenth century encyclopaedists had access to new zoological material through the *De animalibus* by Aristotle, translated from the Arabic into Latin by Michael Scot. They also gleaned zoological material from the writings of Avicenna and Averroes. But the Arabic names of the animals in these Latin translations caused problems. If the Latin translator was ignorant of Greek zoological knowledge, he had to make an approximate transliteration of the Arabic world. For example, we find in Thomas de Cantimpré's *Liber de natura rerum*, or in Albert the Great's *De animalibus* (which paraphrases Aristotle), several zoonyms, previously unknown in Latin or vernacular tradition: *agothilez*, *amraham*, *carchates*,

<sup>14</sup> Richard, *Récits de voyages et de pèlerinages*, 64–66.

<sup>15</sup> Liliane Bodson, ed., *Les animaux exotiques in les relations internationales : espèces, fonctions, significations. Journée d'étude, Université de Liège, 22 mars 1997, Colloques d'histoire des connaissances zoologiques 9* (Liège: Université de Liège, 1998), *Introduction*, v.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Paris, *Historia anglorum in Ex rerum Anglicarum scriptoribus saec. XIII*, ed. Felix Liebermann, *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptorum* 28 (Hanover, 1888), 402.

<sup>17</sup> John Henry Onions and Wallace Martin Lindsay, "The Nonius Glosses," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 9 (1898): 76.

<sup>18</sup> Humbert de Dijon, "Un pèlerinage dominicain inédit du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle : le *Liber de locis et condicionibus Terrae sanctae* d'Humbert de Dijon, O.P.," eds. Thomas Käppeli and Pierre Benoit, *Revue biblique* 62 (1955): 520.

<sup>19</sup> '*Similia*' should be a copyist error for '*simia*' (monkey), if we consider that, in the same sentence, '*stupenda*' is a correction of the editors on '*stupida*,' as it is written in the unique manuscript.

*dariata, fetix, komor, kyches, kym, linachus, magnales*, etc., which can be linked, sometimes with difficulty, to Arabic names. Albert the Great, for example, uses the zoonym 'alfech' (or derivatives like *alfeht, fehít*, etc.) several times to describe a kind of leopard or lynx.<sup>20</sup> The Arabic gives *al-fahd*, the cheetah, an animal without a specific name in European languages in Antiquity<sup>21</sup> and the Middle Ages.<sup>22</sup> Thomas de Cantimpré's *oraflus*,<sup>23</sup> on the other hand, which is derived from the Arabic *zarāfa* for giraffe, is not found in Latin translations of Aristotle, or in any other antique or medieval source. This could be a misunderstanding of an oral report by a witness unfamiliar with the Arabic language.

The imported animal names bring a strange feeling of alterity in the Latin texts of the encyclopaedists. This otherness stems from the novelty of the new animals such as the giraffe, and the 'barbarism' of the approximate Latinization of Arabic names. New zoonyms also appear in the literature of the Crusades in the twelfth century. The word *gazela*, for example, appears in Latin around 1110 (Albert of Aix – or Aachen)<sup>24</sup> and the Old French 'gacele' appears around 1195 (Ambroise);<sup>25</sup> both are built on the Arabic *ghazāl*.

Travellers are confronted with new zoological realities that amaze and confound them, and

encounter problems of naming an unknown animal in their diaries. Fra Niccola da Poggibonsi tells us in 1350 that 'I've seen many things, countless animals for which I had no name because there was as yet no translation.'<sup>26</sup> In 1387, Giorgio Gucci says of the giraffe 'as its name is new, it is something even more novel to see.'<sup>27</sup> Three different situations arise with regard to exotic species. In the first the animal is recognized and named by its Latin or vernacular name. This is the case of the elephant and the crocodile, which are recognized by everyone, and known locally by their Arabic name, *fil* (elephant) and *timsāh* (crocodile). In his Latin travelogue, Adorno uses the vernacular form *coquatrices*, explaining that Arabs called them *themasa*.<sup>28</sup> He had thus recognized the beast on the Nile and was able to equate the Arabic word with a well-known vernacular zoonym. In the second situation an unfamiliar animal is given its Arabic name. This is the case of the giraffe, often called *zarāfa* or *seraffe*, as in Arabic. A few Italian pilgrims give the name *giraffa*, apparently using directly the previously known Italian word.<sup>29</sup> In the third situation an unknown animal is described but is not named, especially when, as Poggibonsi notes, there is no interpretation or translation available. Lacking knowledge of Arabic, pilgrims, like Humbert de Dijon, could not record foreign names. Similarly, Foucher de Chartres, a historian of the first Crusade, described a wild goat, for which nobody knew or had never heard of its name.<sup>30</sup>

## Exotics, Otherness and Scholarship

Many pilgrims had already read widely about Egypt and the animals of Africa, and when faced with elephants or crocodiles, they show their learning not only by recognizing and naming non-

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<sup>20</sup> Albert the Great, *De animalibus libri XXVI: nach der Cölner Urschrift*, ed. Hermann Stadler, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters 15–16 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1916), 2, 2.25, p. 297; 2, 3.37, p. 303; 2, 4.56, p. 311; 8, 3.28, p. 678; 19, 8.39, p. 1352; 2, lib. 22, 15.3, p. 1449.

<sup>21</sup> Liliane Bodson, "Contribution à l'étude des critères d'appréciation de l'animal exotique dans la tradition grecque ancienne," in *Les animaux exotiques in les relations internationales : espèces fonctions, significations. Journée d'étude, Université de Liège, 22 mars 1997*, ed. Liliane Bodson, Colloques d'histoire des connaissances zoologiques 9 (Liège: Université de Liège, 1998), 143, n25.

<sup>22</sup> Thierry Buquet, "Le guépard médiéval, ou comment reconnaître un animal sans nom," *Reinardus. Yearbook of the International Reynard Society* 23 (2011): 12–47.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas de Cantimpré, *Liber de natura rerum*, ed. Helmut Boese (Berlin – New York: W. de Gruyter, 1973), lib. IV, cap. 83, p. 156.

<sup>24</sup> '...qui lingua Sarracenicā gazela appellatur...': Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, ed. Susan B. Edgington, Oxford medieval texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 578–579.

<sup>25</sup> Ambroise, *The History of the Holy War: Ambroise's Estoire de la Guerre Sainte*, eds. Marianne Ailes and Malcolm Barber (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), v. 10548.

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<sup>26</sup> Fra Niccola da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare*, ed. B. Bagati, Pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 2 (Jerusalem, 1945), 108.

<sup>27</sup> Frescobaldi, Gucci, and Sigoli, *Viaggi in Terra Santa*, 297–299.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno en Terre Sainte (1470–1471)*, eds. Jacques Heers and Georgette de Groer, Sources d'histoire médiévale 11 (Paris: CNRS éditions, 1978), 180–181.

<sup>29</sup> Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> Foucher de Chartres, *Fulcheri Carnotensis. Historia Hierosolymitana, 1095–1127*, ed. Heinrich Hagenmeyer (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1913), 778.

European animals known in literature and in encyclopaedias (for example, elephant and crocodile), but also by inserting into their accounts passages borrowed from authorities or travel books. In this case, the traveller might do extensive research and compilation when he returned home. Furthermore, he might note details of anatomy or behaviour that ancient authorities missed out or misconstrued.

One spectacular case of scholarly compilation is that of Jacques de Vitry. He gives a list of African animals, which he borrowed mostly from bestiaries, ranging from Isidore of Seville to Pliny. The passage describing a giraffe whose name was 'chimera'<sup>31</sup> and which was exhibited in public in Egypt, appears to be based on direct observation, but the text was in fact borrowed from Foucher de Chartres, who wrote a century earlier.<sup>32</sup> Foucher himself compiled from several authorities, and at the end of his description of the fauna of the Holy Land, Foucher admits that in order to complete his own descriptions, he personally selected extracts from the wise and expert Solinus (*'hoc autem, quod dixi tantillum, a Solino exquisitore sagacissimo et dictatore expertissimo, prout valui, excerpsi'*).<sup>33</sup>

Felix Fabri described finding a strange animal in the desert on September 20, 1483. It may have been an oryx or an antelope, but Fabri thought it was a unicorn. His long description of the animal is a complex amalgam of things seen and literary references related to the legends surrounding the unicorn, the *monoceros* and the rhinoceros. His text flits back and forth between first person narrative and extracts from his sources.<sup>34</sup> Here, the meeting with an unknown exotic beast transforms the witness into a mixture of legend, marvel and scholar knowledge. Facing the unknown and the otherness, the erudite pilgrim has to certify his account with several sources chosen from the best authors, as if it were too incredible without solid reference. The apparition of the unicorn in the

travelogue tries to transmit the emotion and admiration felt by pilgrims in the desert, who are sure that they have seen a fabulous beast.<sup>35</sup>

Religious pilgrims also recognized animals they had read about in the Bible. For example, the fifteenth-century Franciscan monk Symon Simeonis shows his amazement in front of the elephants, saying, 'because of their stature and excessive size, they seem to possess all the strength referred to in Holy Scripture.'<sup>36</sup>

When faced with animals well known in bestiaries, pilgrims sometimes try to verify the legends about their fabled attributes. All classical and medieval texts say that the ostrich can digest metal, even if Albert the Great had already cast doubt on the assertion.<sup>37</sup> At the end of the fifteenth century, a German traveller, Paul Walther von Guglingen, wanted to prove by personal experience the veracity of the legend. He notes:

I have proven that the ostrich eats iron. In the presence of my companions, I gave it a rather large nail, about the size of a finger, and the bird swallowed it as soon as she had received it from my hand.<sup>38</sup>

Another legend seems to haunt pilgrims who carefully examine the elephant: does it have knees? Can it bend its legs and thus lie down and stand up without help? In 1384, Frescobaldi seems intent on confirming ancient legends that claim that because the elephant was unable to lie down, thus had to lean against a wall in order to rest. He reports that 'it stood leaning on its flank, having moved to the side, because without joints in its knees, it could not raise itself to a standing position.'<sup>39</sup> But Wilhelm von Boldensele, in 1336, had already contradicted this assertion:

<sup>31</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *Histoire orientale*, ed. Marie-Geneviève Grossel, Traductions des classiques du Moyen Âge 72 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), 263.

<sup>32</sup> Foucher de Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, 778.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 784.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Meyers, "Le 'rhinocéros' de Frère Félix Fabri. Autopsie d'un passage de l'*Evagatorium* (II, 7, fol. 39 B-40 A)," *Rursus* 3 (2008), <http://rursus.revues.org/221>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, §25.

<sup>36</sup> Symon Simeonis, *Itinerarium Symonis Simeonis ab Hybernia ad Terram Sanctam*, ed. Mario Esposito, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 4 (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for advanced Studies, 1960), 82-83.

<sup>37</sup> Albert the Great, *De animalibus libri XXVI*, lib. 23, tract. 1, cap. 24, §102, p. 1510.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Walther von Guglingen, *Itinerarium in Terram sanctam et ad sanctam Catharinam*, ed. Matthias Sollweck, *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart* 192 (Tübingen: Gedruckt für den Litterarischen Verein in Stuttgart, 1892), 241.

<sup>39</sup> Frescobaldi, Gucci, and Sigoli, *Viaggi in Terra Santa*, §84.



Certain people say that the elephant cannot stand up again once he has fallen to the earth. This is not true. The elephant frolics, lies down and stands up like other beasts. At the command of his master, he welcomes visitors, lowers his head, kneels, and kisses the earth, because in this country lords are honoured in this way.<sup>40</sup>

And indeed, most observers like Brancacci, in the fifteenth century, insist on the ability of the pachyderm to lie down, rise alone, and bend his knees.<sup>41</sup>

For the medieval traveller, the novelty of animals stands at the intersection between what he did see (the otherness) and what he wanted to find or verify (legends and knowledge from ancient authorities). In medieval travelogues, the novelty of Oriental realities is often structured upon the basis of pre-existent elements given by encyclopaedias, thus preparing the reception of novelty by the pilgrim.<sup>42</sup>

### Emotion in front of the otherness

The traveller wants to share with the reader his emotions and reactions, both to heighten the narrative and to give it a personal tone. In the testimony of Humbert de Dijon who wrote '*animalia stupenda et extranea ad videndum*,' the diversity and strangeness of animals leaves the traveller stupefied. Giorgio Gucci explains that elephants, giraffes and other such animals are 'marvellous for which is not used to see such beasts' ('*mirabili bestie a chi uso non è di tali bestie vedere*').<sup>43</sup> In 1394 in Cairo Nicola de Martoni speaks of *jaraffe* (giraffes) that are marvellous to see (*mirabilia ad videndum*).<sup>44</sup> The 'feminine' beauty

of giraffes fascinates most pilgrims. In 1485, The Franciscan Francesco Suriano finds the animal '*bello a vedere*' and '*piacevole*' (agreeable), but thinks that, despite all, the animal is proud and vain. He admits, however, to finding a great pleasure looking at this incredible thing ('*e tanto allegra la natura humana guardandolo, che è cossa incredibile*').<sup>45</sup> The most loving among the admirers of giraffes is Martin Baumgarten who, when visiting Cairo in 1507, described the giraffe as 'the most beautiful animal we can ever see... which has eyes of a charming aspect, like those of a young girl' ('*oculos visu gratissimos et quasi virgineos*').<sup>46</sup>

One of the most surprising aspects of the descriptions of the menagerie is that none of the pilgrims seems to be frightened by the animals, even lions or panthers. There is one exception, Paul Walther von Guglingen, who was afraid of a lion, brought in the courtyard of the pilgrims' hotel, playing and roaring horribly ('*adductus est leo magnus, qui ludebat in curia coram dominis peregrinis, et emisit horribiles rugitus*').<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, travellers seem to be afraid of savage beasts while crossing mountains and deserts, where lions, jackals, wolves and panthers could attack them.<sup>48</sup> They describe the ugliness and the dangerous nature of the crocodile along the Nile River, comparing this animal to the dragon.<sup>49</sup> But in the Sultan's menagerie, pilgrims show no sign of fear in front of tamed animals, which are surrounded by fences, cages or barriers and often hold with chains or strong leashes. For the most part, pilgrims only describe elephants and giraffes, the rarest and more spectacular specimen of this medieval zoo. They rarely say a word about dangerous animals like large felines. They were probably used to see such animals in European courts and menageries, and were not frightened at all by them in this context.

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<sup>40</sup> Danielle Régnier-Bohler, ed., *Croisades et pèlerinages : récits, chroniques et voyages en Terre sainte, XII<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997), 1009.

<sup>41</sup> Felice Brancacci, "Diario di Felice Brancacci, ambasciatore con Carlo Federighi al Cairo per il commune di Firenze (1422)," ed. Dante Catellacci, *Archivio Storico Italiano* 4<sup>th</sup> series VIII (1881): 178.

<sup>42</sup> We use here remarks by Bernard Ribémont on geography and unknown countries and islands. Bernard Ribémont, "L'inconnu géographique des encyclopédies médiévales. Fermeture et étrangeté," *Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 3 (1997): §4, <http://crm.revues.org/index2465.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Frescobaldi, Gucci and Sigoli, *Viaggi in Terra Santa*, 297.

<sup>44</sup> Nicola de Martoni, "Relation de pèlerinage de Nicolas de Martoni (1394-1395)," ed. Léon Le Grand, *Revue de l'Orient Latin* 3 (1895): 602.

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<sup>45</sup> Fra Francesco Suriano, *Il trattato di Terra Santa e dell'oriente di Frate Francesco Suriano*, ed. Girolamo Golubovitch (Milan, 1900), 234.

<sup>46</sup> Martin von Baumgarten, *Peregrinatio in Ægyptum, Arabiam, Palaestinam et Syriam*, ed. C. Donauer (Nuremberg: ex officina Gerlachiana, 1594), lib. I, cap. 28, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> Walther von Guglingen, *Itinerarium*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> John Wilkinson, ed., *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2002), 36.

<sup>49</sup> Simeonis, *Itinerarium*, 66-67.

## Description

In both text and image, the medieval description of the exotic animal relies on analogy and fitting together of parts. The most common technique is to describe the different anatomical parts of the animal, comparing each with a better-known animal. This semantic and zoological puzzle leaves the reader with the impression of a marvel, if not a monster, that measures up to the image the West had made of the East in the Middle Ages.<sup>50</sup> The traveller used the jigsaw method in order to describe disconcerting animals. The wild goat described by Foucher de Chartres was a mix of goat, donkey, horse and ram.<sup>51</sup> The elephant is sometimes compared to the pig for its skin, and according to Frescobaldi<sup>52</sup> and Brancacci,<sup>53</sup> it has ears like bat wings, or even like a dragon, in the words of Fra Niccolo di Poggibonsi.<sup>54</sup> The giraffe can have the neck of a camel or even may resemble an ostrich, according to Simone Sigoli.<sup>55</sup> Its horns are linked to those of goats or the antlers of deer. It has the hooves of a bull and the tail of a gazelle. Adorno describes the giraffe using comparisons with camel, stag, and ox.<sup>56</sup> Evoking this kind of zoological puzzle, Sigoli writes that the giraffe is a counterfeit thing to see (*'cosa molto contrafatta'*), that is to say a weird imitation, a forgery made by different pieces.<sup>57</sup>

Although this kind of jigsaw puzzle descriptions might fill the readers with a sense of marvel and strangeness, it was not necessarily the original purpose of the writers. Their descriptions are factual, quite precise and objective, and sometimes interspersed with legends, critically dismissed in the face of observation, as was noted earlier with the elephant and the ostrich.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert Lascaut, *Les monstres dans l'art occidental* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), 220.

<sup>51</sup> Foucher de Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, 778.

<sup>52</sup> Frescobaldi, Gucci, and Sigoli, *Viaggi in Terra Santa*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Brancacci, "Diario," 178.

<sup>54</sup> Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Simone Sigoli, *Viaggio ai Monte Sinai (1384)*, ed. Luigi Fiacchi, Biblioteca scelta di opere italiane antiche et moderne 427 (Milan, 1841), 102–103.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno, *Itinéraire*, 192.

<sup>57</sup> Sigoli, *Viaggio ai Monte Sinai (1384)*, 103.

## Selecting elephants and giraffes

Western travellers were very selective about the animals they discussed, despite the wide variety present in Cairo menageries. They were struck first by the two most spectacular animals, the elephant and the giraffe. The lions, panthers, and cheetahs, on the other hand, are almost never described. These species were well known and too common to merit any mention in the texts. In 1470, Adorno even says that the elephants are 'kept at the court of the sultan, just like the lions at our courts,' emphasizing the banality of the lion in order to underscore the rarity of the elephant. One of the very rare travellers to mention the sultan's 'eight lions' is Antonio Reboldi of Cremona in 1327.<sup>58</sup> He also mentions six elephants, which he both saw and touched, but the only animal he describes is the giraffe, which was unknown to him, and he names it *zarāfa*, from its Arabic zoonym. He refers to it because he knows nothing like it in the world: *'In mondo non est ita similis bestia.'*<sup>59</sup>

In the brief passages about Cairo's menagerie, pilgrims limited themselves to the most spectacular animals as a matter of verbal economy. One of the most famous travellers at the end of the Middle Ages, Bernhard von Breydenbach, chose not to talk about the animals at all. He said that Arabs from the Sultan's court showed to the Pilgrims diverse strange animals, but he refrained from talking about this for the sake of brevity:

*Porro cum die illo in hospitio prefato essemus varie ad nos bestie monstruose adducebantur per mauros de castro domini Soldani pro spectaculo de quibus brevitatis gratia supersedeo.*<sup>60</sup>

The Dominican Friar Martin Roth, who wrote the itinerary for Breydenbach, may have shortened Breydenbach's account. In either case, the fact remains that these zoological observations seem less important than descriptions of the voyage and the holy sites. When travellers decided to write a few sentences describing the Sultan's menagerie, they focussed on the two biggest, most spectacular and rarest species: the elephant and the giraffe.

<sup>58</sup> Reboldi da Cremona, *Itinerarium*, 163.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>60</sup> Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Les saintes pérégrinations de Bernard de Breydenbach (1483). Extraits relatifs à l'Égypte suivant l'édition de 1490*, ed. F. Larrivaz (Cairo, 1904), 14.

The two beasts thus emerge as paragons of exoticism and zoological otherness, living symbols of the Orient fauna. The Elephant was already familiar from ancient history, encyclopaedic and biblical knowledge; the giraffe, on the other hand, was a true novelty, a wonder in the Lord's Creation, without equal for its aspect and beauty.

## Conclusion

Describing exotic beasts in medieval travelogues was part of the construction of the medieval image of the Orient. The otherness of true zoological marvels such as elephants and giraffes brought to the reader, through astonishing descriptions, sensations of strangeness and marvel. These literary effects were not only created from legendary monsters or exaggeration, but often from a scholarly approach. Pilgrims wanted to exhibit their knowledge and to support their accounts by quoting the Ancients. Thus, travelogues sometimes balance between scholarship and personal feelings, at the intersection between what pilgrims actually saw and what they wanted to verify. The novelty of Oriental realities is structured upon pre-existing knowledge; pilgrims were thus prepared to structure their reception of strange beasts. The otherness of such exotics animals like elephants, giraffes, ostriches is the result of a mixture of pre-existent ideas and a sensitive approach. The animal is even too novel to observe objectively; the description relies upon details borrowed for other animals, giving the reader the image of a jigsaw puzzle. The otherness is both attenuated (various parts of foreign animals find resemblance in more common beasts) and exaggerated (the construction of the 'puzzling creature' brings the image of a monster). Naming new animals like the giraffe forced the pilgrims to use Arabic names, bringing otherness to the language and reinforcing the strangeness of the travelogue.

On the most interesting facets of medieval accounts on Egyptian menageries is the importance given to the description of elephants and giraffes. Pilgrims shortened their description of the other beasts in the menageries in order to give more space to these large varieties to the point of ignoring the more familiar exotic beasts known from European menageries. Encounters with the two true marvels of Creation, the elephant and the

giraffe, elicited not only fascination, but also great emotion, as Francesco Suriano admitted.<sup>61</sup>

This attraction may have been the first step in the construction of a symbol, which would grow at the Renaissance, and then reappear after the eighteenth century: the couple elephant-giraffe as a living emblem of Africa and its marvels.

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<sup>61</sup> Suriano, *Il trattato di Terra Santa*, 234.

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