23.1 The Living Animal

23.1.1 Zoology

The giraffe and its close relative the okapi are purely African mammals, and do not thrive elsewhere in the wild. However, because of their amazing exterior, they were captured early in history and given away as presents to rulers in other parts of the world, including India. Far away from their natural habitat, they never survived long. Both the giraffe and its name are imported.1

Giraffes, and okapis to a lesser extent, are extremely long-necked, even-toed herbivores with a sloping back and a characteristic coat pattern, consisting of stripes in okapis and of blotches of varying shape in giraffes (fig. 349). The giraffe has an impressive size with a shoulder height of 2.5–3.7 m, whereas the okapi is more moderate sized with a shoulder height of 1.5–1.8 m. The neck of the giraffe bears a mane. The tail ends in a bushy tip. The eyes and ears are large and the tongue is extensible: they can even clean their eyes with their tongue. The back inclines downwards from the withers to the loins. The feet are large and heavy; false hooves are lacking. The horns, born by both sexes, are no real horns but skin-and-hair covered ossicones. In the giraffe they grow behind the eyes but in the okapi above the eyes; in both species a fifth, median horn occurs on the nose in males.

23.1.2 Role of Giraffes in Non-African Societies

Several ancient Roman and Greek authors mention and describe the giraffe, for example Horace,2 Pliny the Elder, Pausanius, Solinus, the

1 Hindi: jirava/jarava from Arabic zurafa; Sanskrit: citroshtra, meaning ‘spotted dromedary’.
2 Horatius Flaccus Quintus, 65 B.C.E.–8 C.E.
poet Oppian and Heliodorus from Emesa. After that period, however, almost all accounts of giraffes come from the Arabs. The later Greeks and the Romans were not very acquainted with this animal, considering for example a Roman mosaic from northern Syria or Lebanon (fifth century; fig. 350). The coat is nicely spotted as in the leopard, false hooves are present as in the deer, the hooves are splayed as in the camel, the tail seems to have been forgotten, and the neck is moderately long as in the okapi. It has a cord around its muzzle, held by a negroid person who might be considered a tribute bringer.

One of the most popular Persian bestiaries is that of the Arab cosmographer Zakariya al-Qazwini (1203–1283) who described and depicted an Ethiopian specimen in his book about the marvels of creation. In the early versions the animal is still rather giraffe-like, but after 1545 it became more goat-like with cow’s horns. The common element in all descriptions and depictions of the giraffe is its spotted leopard-like skin; only al-Qazwini himself considered the coat pattern hyena-like, which is closer to the truth. From the gradual degeneration in depiction, it can be deducted that al-Qazwini indeed had seen a giraffe, while later artists simply copied him. Because of the popularity of his bestiary, it is not unlikely that depictions of giraffes in South Asia (see below) were based on one of its versions.

Giraffes were given as present by the sultans of Cairo to the other parts of the then known world. It seems that the first giraffe was sent to the imperial court of Timur Lenk in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, at the onset of the fifteenth century, according to the accounts of a Spanish ambassador of that time.

A second giraffe is mentioned in the Zafar-nameh of Sharaf al-Din (c. 1414) as well as by the German traveller Johann Schiltberger.

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6 At least the spotted African hyena, not the striped Indian hyena.
7 Also known as Tamerlane.
9 Spinage, op. cit. (1968).