



Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris

Michael Allin

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In October 1826, a ship arrived at Marseille carrying the first giraffe ever seen in France. A royal offering from Muhammad Ali, Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, to King Charles X, she had already traveled 2,000 miles down the Nile to Alexandria, from where she had sailed across the Mediterranean standing in the hold, her long neck and head protruding through a hole cut in the deck. In the spring of 1827, after wintering in Marseille, she was carefully walked 550 miles to Paris to the delight of thousands of onlookers.

The viceroy's tribute was politically motivated: He commanded the Turkish forces then fighting the Greeks in their war of independence, and hoped his gift would persuade the French not to intervene against him. But the viceroy and his intentions were quickly forgotten as France fell in love with its "beautiful stranger." *Zarafa* chronicles the full story of this remarkable animal, revealing a kaleidoscope of history, science, and culture that opens an exotic window on the early nineteenth century. From the Enlightenment's blossoming fascination with science to Napoleon's ill-fated invasion of Egypt in 1798—from the eminent French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire to Bernardino Drovetti, French consul general in Egypt and tomb robber extraordinaire—the era was full of memorable events and characters. Michael Allin deftly weaves them into the story with an appreciation for detail and an uncommon affection.

The giraffe's strange and wonderful journey linked Africa and Europe in mutual discovery. Although her arrival did not keep the French out of Ali's war, she became an instant celebrity in Paris and over the next eighteen years she fascinated all of Europe. Through Michael Allin's narrative skill, *Zarafa* stirs the imagination as it provides a new context for the history of a distant age.

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