

Jerzy AXER

University of Warsaw

THE HUMANISTIC IDEA OF AN IMAGINED MAP

THE CASE OF THE MEDICIS' GIRAFFE

In 1487, Lorenzo il Magnifico received a live giraffe from the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, Abu Al-Nasr Sayf ad-Din Al-Ashraf Qaitbay. It was the first giraffe seen in Europe since Roman times.¹ On 11 November of that year, an unusual caravan magnificently proceeded down the streets of Florence. It boasted a 5-meter tall giraffe that elicited the wild enthusiasm of everyone looking on. At once, it became the subject of painted portraits (Fig. 1). For the next century, the spectacle was part of the powerful family's symbolism (Fig. 2). This was, in fact, the famous "Medici giraffe" that has been researched by many scholars in various contexts over the past quarter century,² and which has also become an element of popular culture.

Seeking an explanation for this spectacle and trying to find connections between power and the world of symbols and art, Marina Belozerskaya continues the thinking of earlier scholars—art historians—who claimed this was an

¹ If we leave out those giraffes, which may have been received from the sultans of Egypt by Frederick II, King of Sicily and Holy Roman Emperor (in 1245), and his son Manfred (in 1261), cf. Berthold LAUFER, *The Giraffe in History and Art (Anthropology Leaflet 27)*, Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1928, pp. 70–72; Clive A. SPINAGE, *The Book of the Giraffe*, London: Collins, 1968, pp. 55 ff. Some information about giraffes sent to the courts of the rulers of Ferrara, Calabria and Naples in the fifteenth century does not seem to deserve trust, cf. Graham MITCHELL, *How Giraffes Work*, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 28–29.

² One major factor in this has been the book, reissued several times, by Marina BELOZERSKAYA, *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power*, New York–Boston–London: Little, Brown and Company, 2006. (Let us add that before then, there was also, e.g., the book by Joan BARCLAY LLOYD, *African Animals in Renaissance Literature and Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, and the paper by Christiane L. JOOST-GAUGIER, "Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Giraffe as a Symbol of Power", *Artibus et Historiae* 16 (1987), pp. 91–99.) See also Lorenzo MONTEMAGNO CISERI, "Camelopardalis. Storia naturale e straordinaria della giraffa di Lorenzo il Magnifico", *Interpres. Rivista di studi quattrocenteschi* 31 (2012), pp. 351–372. Angelica GROOM's *Exotic Animals in the Art and Culture of the Medici Court in Florence*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018, is another important step in this research, see *ibidem*, pp. 179–207.

example of using ancient associations to legitimize power.³ So she refers to ancient texts known to every humanist in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as ones by Pliny the Elder, Cassius Dio, Diodorus Siculus, and finally Horace, for these texts refer to the triumphal procession that Caesar held in Rome in 46 BC, probably with Cleopatra in attendance, after his Egyptian campaign. The highlight of this celebration was the presentation of a never-before-seen giraffe to the people of Rome.⁴

Belozerskaya considered the hypothesis that Lorenzo il Magnifico might have used the giraffe to cast himself as a new Caesar. This explanation is often offered in academic and popular literature, but the author herself spoke of it as doubtful.⁵ It would have been altogether dangerous to play Julius Caesar in republican Florence at this time when there was no shortage of potential Brutuses. Hence, such a propaganda move would have made no sense.

The matter was finally settled by Angelica Groom, who proved that the mission and the gifts bestowed were a tribute not to Lorenzo il Magnifico himself “but to the Florentine ‘nation’ as a diplomatic goodwill gesture to encourage mercantile relations”.⁶ Only artists working under the patronage of Lorenzo and his successors caused a version of events with possible Caesarian associations to take root. Ultimately, these efforts were rounded off three generations later by Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici when he commissioned Giorgio Vasari to paint the picture *Lorenzo il Magnifico Receives Tribute of the Ambassadors* (Fig. 2).

To understand Lorenzo il Magnifico’s intention in giving so much publicity to the giraffe’s arrival, it is worth realising that this concept had emerged much earlier. Lorenzo’s grandfather Cosimo de’ Medici, who built the family’s power, used the “giraffe effect” in the context of relations between his native city and the Mamluk sultans of Egypt. More precisely, he used it in the spring of 1459 for the reception in Florence of the newly elected Pope Pius II and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, son of his closest ally, Duke of Milan Francesco I. On 1 May 1459, the illustrious guests sat in makeshift grandstands to watch, along with thousands of Florentines, the spectacle sponsored by the future Father of the Fatherland. A “herd” of domestic animals (mainly horses, goats, dogs, and pigs) was driven into the Mercato Nuovo square, transformed into a huge arena. Then twenty-six lions

³ See JOOST-GAUGIER, “Lorenzo the Magnificent ...”, op. cit.

⁴ See Horace, *Epistulae* 2.1, 192–196: “Si foret in terris, rideret Democritus, seu / diversum confusa genus panthera camelo / sive elephans albus volgi converteret ora”. In this poetic letter to Augustus, the giraffe refers to Caesar’s triumph. At the same time, the white elephant is most likely a reference to the ceremony that Octavian Augustus organized a quarter century later.

⁵ BELOZERSKAYA, *The Medici Giraffe ...*, op. cit., pp. 106–109.

⁶ GROOM, *Exotic Animals ...*, op. cit., pp. 190.

were unleashed upon them. The lions, however, showed no interest in their potential prey and lay down for a collective nap after a while. Then a huge mockup of a giraffe entered the arena on wheels and scattered the herd. After a moment, the inside of the construction opened, and a bunch of armed youths emerged. However, the lions remained unruffled; no fight ensued, and not a single drop of blood was shed.

Previous interpreters of the spectacle have concluded that in a show imitating the Roman *venationes*, no bloody slaughter in the arena is evidence of the spectacle's failure. They follow this up by assuming that the predators were ill-prepared for the performance and that a giraffe dummy was introduced *ad hoc* by the desperate "director" of the show to force the big cats to be aggressive.⁷

This explanation is very unconvincing. It is hard to believe that after a few centuries of experience with breeding lions—animals that were venerated and symbolized the Republic—the Florentines were unaware of their temperament and did not know how to keep a proper feeding schedule. It is also hard to imagine that the appearance of an enormous mechanical giraffe—a unique effect whose attractiveness equaled that of the famous mechanical elephant that Leonardo da Vinci had produced a few years before for Duke of Burgundy Philip the Good—was not the highlight of the spectacle but an off-the-cuff idea aimed at preventing the unexpected failure of the whole project.⁸

Thus, I view Cosimo de' Medici's intention differently. I assume that the "director" prepared and faultlessly executed a plan to show his honorable guests a very original spectacle but also very meaningful as a political declaration.

Pius II visited Florence on his way to a council he had called in Mantua to announce the start of a new, all-European crusade against the Ottoman Empire. Cosimo de' Medici did not intend to support this initiative but could not officially dissociate himself from the crusade idea. Planning the visit as an opportunity to show the Republic's power, he thus built the ceremony's program to include a special message for the new pope, who, before his election, was already famous as one of the greatest humanists of his era under the name Enea Silvio Piccolomini.

The spectacle in the Mercato Nuovo began as an imitation of the Roman *venationes*—a reenactment of hunting and animal fighting in an arena. However, to my mind, from the very beginning, the lions were "programmed" to behave

⁷ See BARCLAY LLOYD, *African Animals ...*, op. cit., p. 39; BELOZERSKAYA, *The Medici Giraffe ...*, op. cit., pp. 90–94.

⁸ "Mechanical" wooden animals with wheels will also appear later in spectacles (animal combats) organized in Florence, e.g., a porcupine and a tortoise in 1514, see BARCLAY LLOYD, *African Animals ...*, op. cit., p. 40.

non-aggressively. This unexpected situation, likely to disorientate the ordinary spectator, came in preparation for the main effect: the appearance of the “Trojan giraffe”! The allusion to the Trojan horse is the key to understanding the show producer’s intention, and it is a key selected especially with the chief guest in mind.

The message was framed in the language of the propaganda of the time brilliantly taking advantage of its being rooted in signs of ancient culture. The host’s intent must have been obvious to a great humanist and expert on ancient sources who knew how to conduct political negotiations in the convention of reflections on the Trojan War.

This was essentially the same language that Enea Silvio Piccolomini had used when he had outlined his vision of Europe not many years before. Promoting the necessity for the entire Christian world to unite against the power of the Ottomans, the future pope had declared a relentless battle against calling the Turks by the Latin term *Teucrici* instead of *Turci*. He took the humanistic custom of using a classical word instead of a medieval neologism as a declaration of readiness to accept the Ottoman state into the family of European nations. After all, *Teucrici* is the Virgilian word for Trojans, and the Turks called by that name might be acknowledged as the co-heirs to the noble Trojan tradition equally with the descendants of Aeneas—the Romans. At the same time, the Turks’ capture of Constantinople in 1453 might be interpreted as the Trojans’ descendants’ justified revenge on the descendants of the Greeks.

Devising his “Trojan giraffe”, Cosimo de’ Medici polemicized with the pope’s stand. The spectacle carried the following message: An army of courageous Florentine youths is ready for an expedition against the Ottomans to destroy them like the Greeks once destroyed Troy. In the meantime, however, the lions of Florence advocate peace (some reports from the event clearly suggest that the lions’ behavior should be interpreted as a manifestation of the Florentine Republic’s peaceful intentions).⁹ This is because they are waiting for the “countries of the giraffe”, i.e., Egypt under the Mamluks and the “Kingdom of Prester John”, to side with the crusaders. Without the participation of the “Trojan giraffe” it will

⁹ See *Ricordi di Firenze dell’ Anno 1459 di autore anonimo*, a cura di Guglielmo VOLPI, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, vol. 27, Citta di Castello: Scipione Lapi, 1907, pp. 25–26, ll. 1061–1127. Groom, describing this spectacle, does not note the wooden giraffe but puts forward the hypothesis that “the lions’ uncharacteristic pacifism and humility were interpreted as a divine sign of the peace and goodwill that existed between the Florentine republic and other states represented by the assembled dignitaries” (*Exotic Animals ...*, op. cit., pp. 135–136), without noting the connection to the crusade planned by Pius II.



Fig. 3. Genoese map, 1457, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.

be impossible to beat the Turks, just like it only became possible to conquer Troy after the Trojan horse was used.

Cosimo de' Medici thus ostentatiously rejected Piccolomini's recommendation not to call the Turks *Teuceri*, which had been meant to signify their political and cultural exclusion from Europe. Meanwhile, using the term *Teuceri* enabled negotiations and treaties with the Ottoman Empire and—under the mask of peace—the use of deceit and the striking of a deadly blow.

And this exactly would be Florence's policy. The idea of the necessity to wait for the decisive attack until the Turks were conquered by their rivals in Africa was presented by the Florentine envoy in Mantua when the crusade was announced.

Receiving the mission from the sultan of Egypt, it aimed to negotiate new trade agreements between the Florentine Republic and the Mamluk state; Cosimo de' Medici introduced the sign of the giraffe into his show of welcome as a traditional symbol of peace in the diplomatic language of the rulers of Egypt.

By this point, the sign of the giraffe was a familiar and correctly understood sign on the geopolitical map of the world of that time. It is enough to look at the images of animals on the Genoese map from 1457 (Fig. 3). We can recognize a pair: a giraffe and an elephant—as in Horace's famous text¹⁰—marking the area

¹⁰ See p. 14, n. 4.