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The Slow Recognition of the African Rhinoceros from Hondius to Camper

Kees Rookmaaker

Abstract

The presence of the rhinoceros was recorded from the southern part of Africa before Jan van Riebeeck settled at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. While the animal was often seen in the wild and a mounted skin was exhibited in the fort, publications of the seventeenth century are equivocal in their description or illustrations. Although in 1719 Peter Kolb mentioned that the rhinoceros had two horns, he illustrated his account with a copy of Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the Indian (single-horned) species. This was corrected by the engraver Jan Wandelaar in the Dutch edition of his work (1727). In his address to the Royal Society of London in 1743, James Parsons carefully stated that at least some of the rhinos in Africa had two horns. Linnaeus accurately described a skull of the two-horned rhinoceros that he examined: it came from India, had frontal teeth, and two horns, because a trader had added a second horn to a specimen of the Indian rhinoceros. Based on observations made in the field by Robert Jacob Gordon and Anders Sparrman, and a skull provided by Joachim van Plettenberg, the African rhinoceros was finally shown to differ from the species in India by Petrus Camper in 1782.

Introduction

The study of the rhinoceros in western scientific literature and iconography has centred around the five animals imported alive in Europe in 1515, 1579, 1684, 1739 and 1741 (Cole 1953, Rookmaaker 1973). The first rhinoceros was a gift of the Indian sultan Muzaffar II of Cambaia to King Manuel the Fortunate of Portugal and arrived in Lisbon on 20 May 1515. In need of favours from Pope Leo X, the King decided to send the curious animal to Rome, but it drowned in a shipwreck off the North Italian coast

in January 1516. Its likeness was immortalized in a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer of 1515 and his interpretation has remained the image of the rhinoceros most commonly reproduced throughout the next three centuries, easily identified by the spurious hornlet on its shoulder (fig. 1). The second rhinoceros lived at the Spanish court in Lisbon and Madrid from January 1579 to 1583 and was depicted on an engraving by Philippe Galle. The next two rhinoceroses were exhibited in London for short periods, a female from 23 August 1684 to 21 September 1686 and a male from 1 June 1739 to 1744. The fifth rhinoceros became well-known and famous in the course of her tour through most European countries between July 1741 and April 1758. She was called *Clara* or the Dutch Rhinoceros, because she was brought to Holland by Douwe Mout van der Meer, a captain of the VOC (Rookmaaker & Monson 2000, Verheij 1992). The history of these early rhinoceroses has been reported in considerable detail in the important and well-illustrated book by Tim Clarke (1986), while their itineraries can be found in Rookmaaker (1998a). These five earliest rhinoceroses, imported from the Indian subcontinent and with a single nasal horn, were referred to as 'the rhinoceros' or its equivalent in other languages or scientific terminology, until at least the middle of the eighteenth century.

Today we recognize three species of rhinoceros in Asia and two in Africa. The five specimens seen in Europe before 1760 belonged to the species now called the Indian rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis*. In Africa, we know the black, *Diceros bicornis*, and the white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum*. When we compare an Indian rhinoceros with any of the African species, it is impossible not to notice significant differences in their physical appearance. It is easily observed that the Indian animal has a single horn on the nose, while both African rhinoceroses have two, one behind the other. It is strange to realize that it would take until the last quarter of the eighteenth century before the African rhinoceros was officially recognized and accepted as different from the Indian one. In this paper, I will trace the history of the discovery and recognition of the rhinoceros in Africa in order to answer two questions. In the first place, was there a significant contribution to the study of the African fauna by those associated with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and secondly, why it needed to take such a long time to accept that there was more than one kind of rhinoceros. To develop the present argument, there is no need to distinguish between the black and white rhinoceroses, because it took until the early nineteenth century before people came into contact with the white rhinoceros, which was first found in the region north of Kuruman in 1812 by William John Burchell.

Early Evidence

In 1652, the year in which Jan van Riebeeck started the settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, Jodocus Hondius (b. 1622) published a small booklet in Amsterdam full of information about the southern part of Africa. He reported that there were rhinoceroses on Table Mountain and at Mossel Bay (Hondius 1652: 18, 21). There was no description and probably most of the VOC personnel expected to see the armour-plated monster with a single horn, which was commonly found in the animal books of the time. During the 1650s, rhinoceroses were often seen around Cape Town, and of course further inland, whenever somebody ventured away from the settlement (listed in Rookmaaker 1989: 285). François Valentijn (1666-1727) in his *Oud en Nieuw Oostindien* in 1726 popularized the story of the sudden attack of a *rhinocer* on commander Simon van der Stel (1639-1712) near Piketberg on Wednesday 5 September 1685. The animal came straight for the coach of the commander, who had barely enough time to leap out, aim his blunderbuss and fire. The gun misfired, but Van der Stel was lucky and the animal just brushed against his body (Valentijn 1971: 243). Although the rhinoceros soon disappeared from the immediate vicinity of the Cape, it was often mentioned by people who called at the settlement on their way to the East Indies. Some of those may have seen a mounted skin, which was exhibited in the small museum maintained in the Fort (Rudner 1982), mentioned in so many words by Wouter Schouten (1676: 185) on his visit in March 1665.

There was a lively trade in all kinds of natural products to supply the demand for curiosities in the European cabinets. It was natural to VOC officers and personnel to buy all kinds of animals and plants, dead or alive, and transport them back home on board the ships. The decks with their array of cages and boxes must have resembled a small menagerie or museum. Traders and cabinet owners would wait for the arrival of the ships in the harbour to buy the most precious items for their collections. It is recorded, for instance, that the apothecary Albertus Seba (1665-1736) visited incoming ships on the IJ, just a few steps away from his home and shop on the Haarlemmerstraat (Pieters 2002). Among the treasures brought to Europe, there were several double rhinoceros horns, although it is unlikely that we can still ascertain even a percentage of the actual number (Rookmaaker 1999). The most important examples were illustrated in books of the period, including horns in the collections of King Christian V in Copenhagen (Jacobaeus 1696, pl. 3 fig. 4) and the Grand Duke in Florence (Bartholinus 1678: 163).

Although several authors of travel accounts described the appearance of the rhinoceros and even specified the presence of two horns on the animal's nose, the majority of these books were sparsely illustrated. The few available representations hardly showed the actual characteristics of the animal. Among the watercolours made by Hendrik Claudius (b. 1655) during the expedition by Simon van der Stel in 1685-1686, there is one of a rhinoceros-like creature, with a strange growth on its nose supposedly meant to show the horns (Rookmaaker 1989: 22, IPA 418). In the book of Albrecht Herport (1641-1730) published in 1669, there is a beautiful plate of Table Mountain, with some people, an ostrich and a rhinoceros (fig. 2). It is a pity that the artist copied the rhinoceros of Dürer - Asian and single-horned - to represent the genus in this evocative African landscape. It is truly amazing that nobody wrote about the differences between the African and Asian rhinoceroses, because they are so obvious to our modern eyes. When we read the accounts of travellers and eye-witnesses and look at the pictures in their books, there is nothing which would lead people in Europe to suspect that the rhinoceros in Africa was in any way different from the rhinoceros described and depicted in the textbooks.

Plates in the Works by Peter Kolb

Peter Kolb (1675-1726) collected information about the geography, astronomy, ethnology and natural history of the southern part of Africa during his stay from 1705 to 1713. After his return to Germany, he published his observations about this wide variety of subjects. He was the first to attempt a comprehensive description of all the animals found at the Cape, which he did in an alphabetical order, resulting in long lists of names of mammals and birds. He felt the need to apologize for imperfections, because he had lost some of his notes on birds and he was not trained as a zoologist. His work has often been criticized in the course of the eighteenth century, often severely, and not always without reason. He described the rhinoceros and clearly stated that these animals in Africa have two horns. In the original German edition of 1719, he (or his publisher) added a plate of an elephant fighting with a rhinoceros, which was nothing but another copy of the single-horned animal depicted by Dürer two centuries earlier (Kolb 1719, pl. IV fig. 2; see fig. 3).

There were many valuable parts in Kolb's book that deserved a wider audience. It was translated into Dutch in 1727 and French in 1741. The publisher in Holland engaged Jan Wandelaar to update or retouch the

engraved plates for the Dutch edition. Wandelaar recognized that the illustration of the rhinoceros did not match the description and found that there was a mounted skin of a double-horned African rhinoceros in the collection of the University of Leiden. This skin probably belonged to an animal, which had been shipped alive from Cape Town in 1677, had died during the voyage and had been donated to the university (Anonymous 1733). It has been ascertained that there still was a mounted skin in the collection in the 1720s, because the English physician James Douglas (1675-1742) made drawings of it during a visit to Leiden around this time (Rookmaaker 1976, 1978: 34). Wandelaar decided that there should be two plates of the rhinoceros in the Dutch translation of Kolb's book, one depicting the species as it is usually shown, with the Dürer-hornlet on the shoulders, and a second one "according to this description" (Kolb 1727: 189, 190). The second plate was the first naturalistic representation of the African rhinoceros, which remains easily recognizable today (fig. 4).

The Conclusions by James Parsons

The first opportunity to review the information about the rhinoceros in Africa and other parts of the world presented itself in 1739, when an example of the single-horned type was shown in London. The physician James Parsons (1705-1770) went to see it, made sketches and paintings, collected older material, and was allowed to address the gathering of the Royal Society of London on 9 June 1743 (Rookmaaker 1978). He talked about the rhinoceros in London in minute detail, and decided to compare this animal to those found in Africa at the end of his presentation. His conclusion was very carefully worded, recognizing first that "all those from Asia have really but one horn upon the nose" and secondly that "there is sufficient proof to show that there is a species of those animals in Africa with *two* horns on the nose" (Parsons 1743: 538). In other words, there were rhinoceroses with one horn in Asia, similar ones could exist in Africa, while others on the African continent had two horns. If, therefore, there were double horns in collections in Europe, those must have originated in Africa. Parsons not only had to cope with the scanty evidence, he also had to take tradition and history into account. If he would have stated categorically that there was no single-horned rhinoceros in Africa, somebody would have shown him the plate in Herport (1669) or in Kolb (1719). Besides, linguists and classical scholars were still fighting over references to rhinoceroses with two horns, found for instance in two

epigrams by Martial, and through the use of a daunting array of the most elusive of sources either tried to show that this animal was depicted on Dürer's woodcut (with a second horn on the shoulder), or argued exactly the opposite (Rookmaaker 1981). With his medical training, Parsons wisely avoided this subject full of potential pitfalls.

The Classification by Linnaeus

Just a few years later, the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) started to devise a system in which all plants and animals were not just listed in an alphabetical order, but classified in a hierarchical set of groups. The first edition of the *Systema Naturae* of 1735 dealing with the fauna was a modest publication of just a few pages. It is generally accepted that his method of classification and nomenclature had matured sufficiently in the tenth edition of 1758 to be the basis of our present system of naming animals by providing each type with a name indicating the species preceded by one for the genus. Linnaeus had chosen to characterize the orders, families, genera and species of the animal kingdom by the number of their frontal teeth. In the tenth edition of the *Systema Naturae*, he classed all animals with two frontal teeth and a nasal horn in the genus *Rhinoceros* (Linnaeus 1758: 56). There were two species, one called *Rhinoceros unicornis* with a single horn, from Africa and India, and another called *Rhinoceros bicornis* with two horns from India. There is something very peculiar about this classification, which later authors (like Thomas 1911) have tried to gloss over by alluding to the insufficient information available at the time. Linnaeus, however, was a trained scientist and a careful observer, who could not have failed to note the absence of frontal teeth in a skull of the African rhinoceros, if he actually saw one. Although there are always exceptions to a rule, the Indian rhinoceros always has large incisors in the front part of the jaw, while the black rhinoceros never has such frontal teeth. When you consult the *Systema Naturae* by Linnaeus, you find a list of species, each with a list of sources and a short description of appearance and habitat. *Rhinoceros bicornis* is one of a very small number of species, where Linnaeus stated in so many words that he examined a specimen, which could well have meant a skin, skull or set of horns. If he actually saw a skull, how could he have failed to notice the absence of frontal teeth? When I tried to come to grips with this disturbing question, the first step was to discover where Linnaeus could have seen a specimen of a double-horned rhinoceros. I have

suggested that he saw a skull in an unknown collection in London, of which there is a drawing made by Parsons in the 1730s. The depiction shows a skull of an Indian rhinoceros, which should have had one horn, but a dealer had added a second horn, possibly to add to its value (Rookmaaker 1998b). Linnaeus therefore described exactly what he had seen: a skull of a rhinoceros, from India, with two horns, and of course frontal teeth. Unfortunately, no such animal actually exists in nature.

The most important contemporary opposition to the system proposed by Linnaeus was contained in the books by the Count of Buffon (1707-1788), director of the King's Cabinet in Paris. He not only disagreed in a general sense with the methodology proposed by Linnaeus, he also could not accept his classification of the rhinoceros. When Buffon came to discuss the rhinoceros in the tenth volume of his monumental *Histoire Naturelle* (1764), he copied the description of the Indian rhinoceros from Parsons, while adding other information from a variety of sources. He unequivocally accepted the existence of rhinoceroses with one horn, and knew that there were some specimens with two horns, available in the collection in Paris. However, he supposed that the number of horns in each individual was determined by the climatic conditions in Africa or Asia. Therefore, this was not a constant factor, and the two varieties were mere expressions of the same species (Buffon 1764).

New Reports from Africa

Although the system of Linnaeus had shortcomings in the eyes of some of his contemporaries, it provided an easy way to compare animals and to establish if anything new had been discovered. In the second half of the eighteenth century the system was put to the test in many corners of the globe by his disciples and other converts. In South Africa, Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) looked for plants, Anders Sparrman (1748-1820) examined the larger animals, and François Levaillant (1753-1828) went in search of birds (Rookmaaker 1989). The notes by Thunberg on the rhinoceros had little detail, the drawing by Levaillant remained unpublished, but the descriptions by Sparrman were exhaustive and had a wide circulation in a number of languages (Sparrman 1779, 1783). The rhinoceros had disappeared from the immediate vicinity of the Cape, but it was still common to encounter them further into the interior. When Robert Jacob Gordon (1743-1795), commander of the garrison, reached the banks of the Gamka River on 2 November 1778, three of his hunters had the

opportunity to shoot a specimen of the black rhinoceros (Raper & Boucher 1988: 190). Gordon carefully examined the animal, made a number of sketches and made copious notes about the external morphology, measurements and anatomy of the animal (Cave & Rookmaaker 1977). While he never published his material, Gordon used his important position at the Cape to collect specimens and information and he made his drawings and descriptions available to friends in Holland. Thus, his remarks on the rhinoceros of Africa were published by J.N.S. Allamand (1713-1787), professor of natural history at the University of Leiden, in a supplement to the Amsterdam edition of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* published in 1781 (fig. 5). Allamand quoted extensively from the material provided by Gordon, which showed that the rhinoceros in Africa did not have the conspicuous skin-folds of the Indian rhinoceros and always had two horns. Gordon also studied the animal's dentition and found 28 teeth, seven in each side of the two jaws, but no frontal teeth (Allamand 1781). Although Allamand must have realized that these observations were inconsistent with the views of Buffon, he must have hoped that these first-hand reports would not antagonize the Frenchman. In fact, Buffon appeared to agree and he repeated this additional chapter written by Allamand in a supplement to the Paris edition of the *Histoire Naturelle* dated 1782. There was, however, one significant alteration to the text. In Buffon's version, the rhinoceros shot by Gordon also had 28 teeth in total, which were six molars in each side of the jaws, as well as two canines in the upper and another two in the lower jaw (Allamand 1782). Buffon therefore felt justified to stick to his original opinion that there was but one species of rhinoceros in the world.

The Solution of Petrus Camper

One can only marvel at the reluctance of the scientific world to accept the existence of more than one species of rhinoceros, in a period when new kinds of animals were found with great regularity and spurious creatures like the unicorn were still discussed at length and rarely dismissed. Through publications and specimens, the evidence had built up to such an extent that it was increasingly difficult to deny the existence of at least two types of rhinoceros. The matter would be finally settled by Petrus Camper (1722-1789), professor at the University of Groningen. He not only had the necessary anatomical and zoological background, but he had a more than fleeting interest in the rhinoceros, among other rare species of mammals.

He often requested specimens from his contacts and students around the world and he was regularly supplied with curious objects by Joachim van Plettenberg, governor at the Cape (Visser 1985: 40). In 1771, Camper received from him the complete head, skull and horns of a rhinoceros killed in Africa. Camper examined the specimen in great detail, discussed it in a public lecture in February 1772, and reviewed the knowledge about the rhinoceros in a monograph published in 1782 (fig. 6). Camper at first agreed with the conclusions presented by Buffon, unconvinced by the morphology of the skull in his possession, because the front parts of the jaws in this specimen were either missing or damaged (Visser 1985: 41). The observations made by Sparrman and Gordon had finally settled the matter for him. When he wrote his treatise of 1782, he emphasized that the number of horns in an animal could not be altered by gender, age or climate. He pronounced that all rhinoceroses in Africa, without exception, had two horns, while those in Asia had just one horn. Although he could guess about the difference between the species in their dentition, he did not use this as a characteristic, because he knew that this needed further research and observation. However, he was convinced that there were two species of rhinoceros: the first, found in Asia, with a single round horn and conspicuous folds in the skin; and the second, with two flat horns, without folds in the skin, found only in Africa (Camper 1782). It took time for this idea to spread around Europe, but finally in 1782, some 130 years after the Dutch settled at the Cape of Good Hope, the matter of the African rhinoceros was settled.

Discussion

Most of the early information about the rhinoceros in Africa originated in the southern part of the continent, where the VOC had a settlement since the middle of the seventeenth century. Similar to other animals, knowledge about the rhinoceros built up through word of mouth, written reports, drawings and the collection of parts or live specimens. It is to be expected that VOC personnel of many ranks were involved in the transfer of knowledge from the African bush to the collectors and academics in Europe. When expeditions were organized to explore the interior in search of opportunities for settlement or trade, VOC officers like Van der Stel, Gordon or Van Plettenberg were part of the teams. They also had contacts with institutions or individuals in Holland, where the fruits of their travels were gratefully received and analysed. At the same time, it must be

recognized that there was no official program to study the fauna and flora. Data collection and dissemination was haphazard, depending either on a personal interest in the subject or, in the case of sailors, on aspirations of personal gain when specimens were sold after returning home. This may be one of the reasons why it took such an inordinate length of time before detailed and exact information about the rhinoceros filtered through to the informed public in the European countries. The data recorded during the first century of VOC presence at the Cape of Good Hope were disjointed, contradictory and casual. This reflected the state of science in Europe rather than a lack of interest in Africa. The new method of classification and nomenclature introduced by Linnaeus in the middle of the eighteenth century was of paramount importance in the zoological discovery of the world (Pratt 1992). Using the Linnaean system, it was possible to ensure that a certain individual animal either belonged to a species already known or had not yet been described. As long as the specimen was observed carefully and its characteristics recorded in detail, it was a relatively easy task to compare it with all other animals described previously. At last, it was no longer admissible to argue that the posterior nasal horn of the African rhinoceros was structurally similar to the dorsal hornlet of the animal in Dürer's woodcut. At last, scientists could declare with conviction what everybody today can see at a glance, that the rhinoceros of India with one horn and an armour-plated skin is completely different from the rhinoceros of Africa with two horns and a smooth skin.

Tab. xxxviii

RHINOCEROS Stormvogel Rhinocer



0 cm 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
DEN HAAG, KB, 540 B 13, pl.38

Figure 1. The rhinoceros as depicted by Albrecht Dürer, from J. Jonston's *Historiae Naturalis* of 1653.
(Source: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague)



Figure 2. The armour-plated rhinoceros with Dürer-hornlet on the shoulders in an African landscape, from Albrecht Herport, *Kurtze Ost-Indianische Reiss-Beschreibung* (1669, p. 12). (Source: Museum of Zoology, Cambridge)

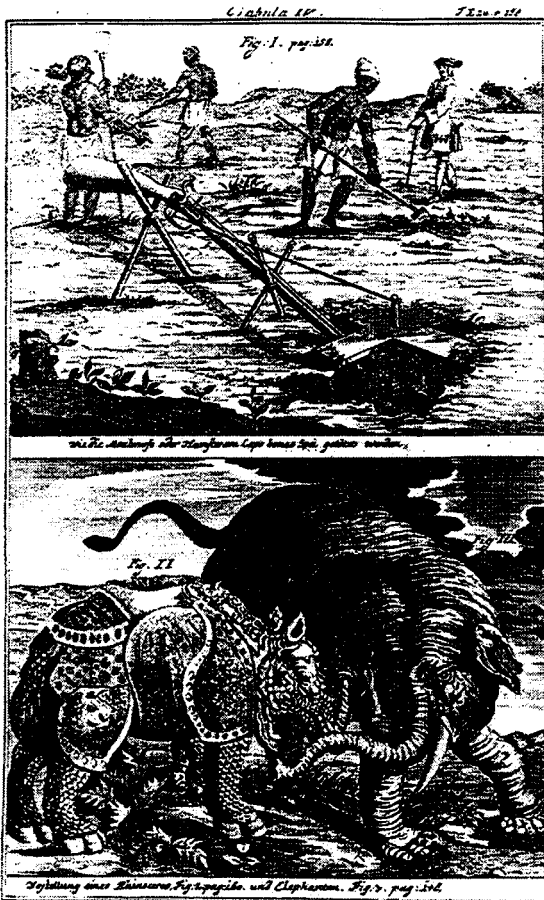


Figure 3. The rhinoceros fighting with an elephant as depicted in Peter Kolb's *Caput Bonae Spei Hodiernum* (1719, pl. IV). (Source: Museum of Zoology, Cambridge)

Figure 4. Jan Wandelaar's depiction of the African rhinoceros, in the Dutch edition of Kolb's description of the Cape of Good Hope (1727). (Source: Zoological Museum Amsterdam; archival number 2578)

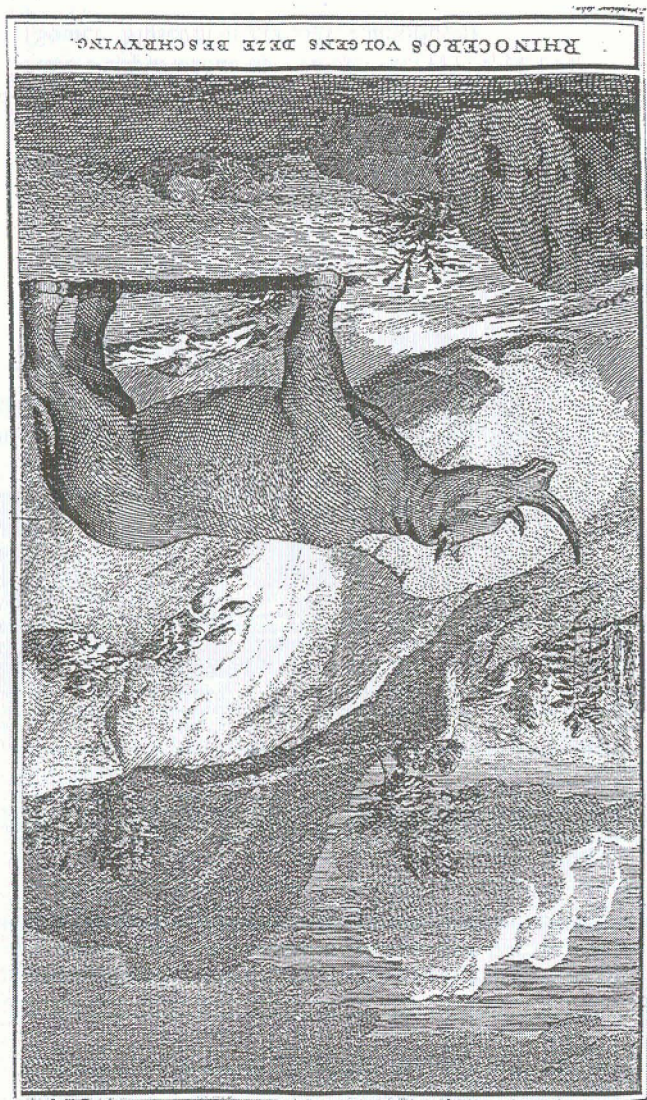




Figure 5. The rhinoceros observed by Robert Jacob Gordon in South Africa in 1778, published by Allamand in the Amsterdam edition of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (Supplement 5, 1781, pl. 5). (Source: Museum of Zoology, Cambridge)

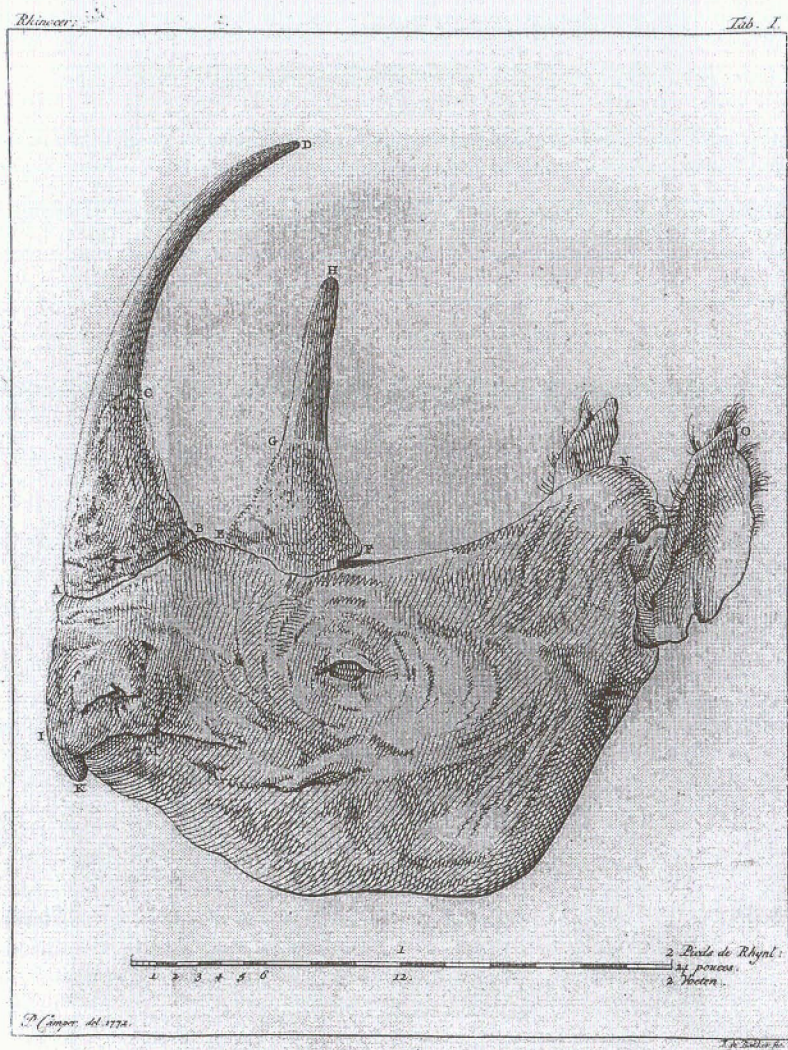


Figure 6. The head of the African rhinoceros depicted in Petrus Camper's *Natuurkundige Verhandelingen* of 1782 (pl. 1). (Source: Leiden University Library, signature 219 B 22, plate 1)

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