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MIRABILIA DESCRIPTA.

THE
WONDERS OF THE EAST,

BY
FRIAR JORDANUS,
OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS AND BISHOP OF COLUMBUM
IN INDIA THE GREATER,

(CIRCA 1330).

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN ORIGINAL,
AS PUBLISHED AT PARIS IN 1839, IN THE RECUEIL DE VOYAGES
ET DE MÉMOIRES, OF THE SOCIETY OF GEOGRAPHY,

WITH THE ADDITION OF A COMMENTARY,

BY
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LONDON:
PRINTED FOR THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY.

M.DCCC.LXIII.

MARVELS DESCRIBED

BY

FRIAR JORDANUS,

OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS, NATIVE OF SEVERAC,
AND BISHOP OF COLUMBUM IN INDIA
THE GREATER.

I.

1. BETWEEN Sicily and Calabria there is a marvel in the sea. This is it: on one side the sea runneth with an upward current, and on the other side cometh down towards the island with a swifter stream than any river; and so in the middle is caused a wondrous eddy, sucking down ships that hap to fall in with it, whatever be their bigness. And 'tis said that in the bottom of the sea there is a horrid kind of a whirlpool, from which the water cometh forth so wondrous dark that even the fishes nowhere dare to come near it.¹

¹ Admiral Smyth says that the currents in the Faro are so numerous and varied, that it is difficult to ascertain anything precise about them. In settled seasons a central stream runs north and south, at the rate of two to five miles an hour. On each shore there is a *refluo*, or counter-set, often forming eddies to the central current. When the main current runs to the north it is called *Rema montante*, or flood; when it runs south, *Rema scendente*, or ebb; and this has obtained, perhaps, even from the days of Eratosthenes. He considers that the *special* danger from the Faro currents

There is [also] a tree harder than all, which the strongest arrows can scarcely pierce.

12. The trees in this India, and also in India the Greater, never shed their leaves till the new ones come.¹

13. To write about the other trees would be too long a business, and tedious beyond measure; seeing that they are many and divers, and beyond the comprehension of man.

14. But about wild beasts of the forest I say this: there be lions, leopards, ounces, and another kind something like a greyhound, having only the ears black and the whole body perfectly white, which among those people is called *Siagois*.² This animal, whatever it catches, never lets go, even to death. There is also another animal, which is called *Rhinoceros*,³ as big as a horse, having one horn long and twisted; but it is not the *unicorn*.

15. There be also venomous animals, such as many serpents, big beyond bounds, and of divers colours, black, red,

shadow of which had a circumference of five hundred yards. Just about half this size is the largest I have seen, near Hushyárpúr in the Northern Punjab. It is remarkable in some of the largest of these trees, that you cannot tell which has been the original and "mother-tree," that having probably decayed and disappeared. The age of these trees is sometimes by no means so great as first impressions suggest. There is a very fine one in the Botanic Garden at Calcutta, (its exact size I do not remember, but the shade is not less than a hundred and eighty to two hundred feet across), whereof the garden tradition runs, that it originated in Roxburgh's time, *i.e.*, eighty or ninety years ago. It has, however, been carefully tended and extended, the vertical fibres being protected by bamboo tubes when young. It is said to have grown originally in the crown of a date tree, as often happens.

¹ True in a general way, but with exceptions, specific and local.

² *Siya-gosh* (black-ear), the Persian name of the lynx. I have not been able to hear of a *white* lynx. The lynx of the Dekkan, which is probably meant (*felis caracal*), has only the under part white, the back being a pale reddish brown. Its tenacity is a noted feature.

³ "*Quod vocatur rinocerunta*"! The rhinoceros is not now, I believe, found in any part of India south (or west) of the Ganges; but it has become extinct in my own time in the forests of Rajmahl, on the right bank of that river; and very possibly extended at one time much further west, though our author's statement is too vague to build upon, and scarcely indicates personal knowledge of the animal.

white, and green, and parti-coloured; two-headed also, three-headed, and five-headed. Admirable marvels!¹

16. There be also coquodriles, which are vulgarly called *Calcatix*;² some of them be so big that they be bigger than the biggest horse. These animals be like lizards, and have a tail stretched over all, like unto a lizard's; and have a head like unto a swine's, and rows of teeth so powerful and horrible that no animal can escape their force, particularly in the water. This animal has, as it were, a coat of mail; and there is no sword, nor lance, nor arrow, which can anyhow hurt him, on account of the hardness of his scales. In the water, in short, there is nothing so strong, nothing so evil, as this wonderful animal. There be also many other reptiles, whose names, to speak plainly, I know not.

17. As for birds, I say plainly that they are of quite different kinds from what are found on this side of the world; except, indeed, crows and sparrows;³ for there be parrots and popinjays in very great numbers, so that a thousand or more may be seen in a flock. These birds, when tamed and kept in cages, speak so that you would take them for rational beings. There be also bats really and truly as big as kites. These birds fly nowhither by day, but only when the sun sets. Wonderful! By day they hang themselves up on trees by the feet, with their bodies downwards, and in the daytime they look just like big fruit on the tree.⁴

¹ Two-headed and even three-headed serpents might be suggested by the portentous appearance of a cobra with dilated hood and spectacles, especially if the spectator were (as probably would be the case) in a great fright. But for *five* heads I can make no apology.

² This has puzzled me sorely, and I sought it vainly among Tamul and Malayalim synonyms. At the last moment the light breaks in upon me. It is, Fr., *cocatrix*; Ital., *calcatrice*; Anglicè, a *cockatrice*!

³ Polo says: "Here and throughout all India the birds and beasts are different from ours, except one bird, which is the quail." (iii, 20.)

⁴ A literally accurate description of the great Indian bat, or flying fox. They generally cluster on some great banyan tree. These, I presume, are what Marco Polo quaintly calls "bald owls which fly in the night: they have neither wings (?) nor feathers, and are as large as an eagle." (iii, 20.)