

PRUTKY'S
TRAVELS IN ETHIOPIA
AND
OTHER COUNTRIES

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CHAPTER 31

ANIMALS

Ethiopia breeds all the animals found in Europe, but to a higher standard of excellence, and their horses are of such distinction, speed, and beauty that no other country can equal them.¹ However, through lack of iron shoes the horses find the mountains difficult to climb and are the less used, for that reason, for everyday tasks: however handsome the horses they fetch a low price, or are given in exchange for a mule or an ass. Of the living creatures of the earth there is all the abundance and all the variety that nature can furnish as food for the table or spectacle for the multitude. Mules are found to be best for all mountain work and are large in size: they are highly valued, and even senior ministers and nobles mount themselves on mule-back for their surefootedness over the mountains, in this way securing their safety among the precipices, and in the confidence that an accident will seldom or never overtake them. The domestic ass also is a great boon to the inhabitants both in trade and for internal transport.

The *Zecora*,² or wild ass, is a most handsome and remarkable creature, striking in colour and delicate in physique, the first sight of which strikes the beholder with astonishment at its beauty. The zecora is no larger than the domestic ass, its head is oblong, its ears long like asses' ears, its body not unlike an ass's in shape, but its colour is altogether different and unusual, such as no painter's art could equal: its back is marked by a straight line of

¹ Ludolf, *New history*, p. 53, had rightly observed that the horses of the Ethiopians were 'courageous and strong', but were used only in battle, so that mules were used both on long journeys and for the transportation of supplies.

² Or zebra. This animal, which had been described with similar admiration by both Almeida and Tellez, was said by Ludolf 'for beauty to exceed . . . all the Four-footed Creatures in the World'. Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some records*, p. 52; Ludolf, *New history*, p. 56.

ANIMALS

glossy black, and the whole of the rest of the body by other lines of black and white mixed, a finger in width, terminating at the belly: the head is similarly striped, the ears black, white, and yellow, the legs marked also but with round not vertical stripes, in fact ring-shaped. Faced with such admirable order and proportion the stranger marvels at what an unusual creature he has met, and at the beauty and variety of nature's handiwork. The same unusual beauty and the same strangeness of colouring mark the camel, whose neck is long, and like the dromedary's thinner than in the desert camel: its whole form is naturally beautiful.

The rhinoceros, though not found in Europe, is known to travellers, and is commonly called *Abadam*: the name rhinoceros is Greek in origin, taken into Latin, and is derived from the horn which he bears on his nose: the horn is four feet long and tapers to a point, which turns a little upwards at its extremity. The beast is of the colour of boxwood, and its bodily frame as large as that of three oxen together. The horn is short for the size of the body, the eye is tiny, the ear small, sharp, and standing straight upright like the ear of a horse. The head is huge, the tail hairless and short, the whole body covered with scales whose surface is so hard as to be impenetrable by weapon or musket ball. When about to fight the elephant, his natural enemy,³ he sharpens his horn on a stone, seeking to rip up with it his enemy's belly, his softest part. He is naturally a beast of the forest, untameable, ferocious, arrogant, and there is no art by which to capture him, once he is grown. He is found in the province of Godgiam at the foot of the Mountains of the Moon, by the source of the Nile, and nowhere else; there he is hunted and killed by the use of an ape for a bait, the body being laid out on the ground to entice and deceive the beast. The horn is sought after as an antidote to poison,⁴ and is believed to be more effective if the beast be killed at a particular time. In the same province of Godgiam dwells the *Monoceros*,⁵ which is rarely visible, and which lives in the inaccessible parts of the Mountains of the Moon, whence it occasionally

³ Lobo had earlier asserted that the rhinoceros was the only animal which elephants feared. Lockhart, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁴ Bruce, *op. cit.*, v, 92, on the other hand reports that cups made from rhinoceros horn were 'sold to ignorant people as containing antidotes against poisons'.

⁵ Lobo had earlier claimed that the 'fabulous unicorn' had been seen in the kingdoms of Agaw. Lockhart, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

descends to the plains to change its horn, as stags do: it is by finding these horns that the country people know that the beast inhabits the mountain. This beast is like none other commonly depicted, its body almost equal to an elephant's, its feet likewise, in colour and hide it recalls the buffalo, in head the wild boar, and in habits the pig as it delights in muddy places; the horn in the middle of its forehead is black, hard, and pointed,⁶ and the tongue is so rough as to rasp what it licks.

The elephant is found in plenty, much larger than the Asian elephant, and lives in the open in the high places in the forest, whence morning and evening it descends from the hills to drink in the rivers and forests. One follows behind another in great numbers, causing damage to the crops and pasture, and those who climb into the hills must beware of them, lest they do them an injury or kill them; their long ears hang down behind their eyes going uphill, so that they quickly notice a man and chase him, but going downhill their ears fall over their eyes so that they can see little, and then they are innocuous. To kill an elephant confers a great honour upon an Ethiopian and is a signal mark of courage: one method is to dig a deep pit and cover it with branches and leaves, then, engaging the attention of the elephant in the forest, to retreat towards the pit: in blind pursuit the beast falls into the pit, is prevented by its weight from climbing out, and is thereupon transfixd by the lances of a crowd of men, who rush up and kill it in a hail of blows. The tusks are removed and sold at no great price in Arabia Felix and Arabia Petrosa: they are of enormous size, such that it takes three or four men to carry one quite a short distance. There is another easier way to take an elephant: two mounted men, armed with lances and swords, rouse the elephant to fury and take it in turns to retreat before him: the elephant charges in pursuit of his tormentors, whereupon one horseman leaps from his horse and conceals himself in a tree or large thicket, while the elephant, not noticing the one enemy in hiding, pursues the other horseman. The man in concealment skilfully directs his weapon into

⁶ Ludolf, *op. cit.*, p. 59, states that John Gabriel in Damot had caught a glimpse of 'a Beast with a fair Horn in the Fore-head, five Palmes long, and of a whitish Colour, about the bigness and shape of a middle-siz'd Horse, of a Bay Colour, with a Black Main and Tayl, but short and thin'. He adds that the Portuguese had seen 'several such *Unicorns* feed in the Woods' of Gojjam.

the beast's rear hamstrings, or his arteries, and the wound soon causes the elephant to stop, unable to charge. The man then breaks from his tree, cuts the other hamstrings, and as the beast lies helpless the pair beset him with renewed ardour and slaughter him with their lances:⁷ sometimes the flesh is eaten, at other times it is left where it lies and only the tusks removed, which fetch a price anywhere. The ivory of Abyssinia is of two kinds, the white and the yellow: if the tusks are not immediately removed from the body of a slaughtered elephant but are allowed to remain for a few days in the putrefying corpse, they turn a yellow colour, but if they are removed immediately they remain white.

Frequently great lords take sport in capturing elephants alive: a stockade is built in the forest with three gates, into which is introduced a domesticated female, who has been well treated: each day the female is freely permitted through the gates into the forest, whence she returns daily for her food, and when she comes on heat male elephants follow her into the stockade. The elephant tamer, who is watching at the gate, admits the female, with the male, through the first and second gates, which are closed behind them. The elephants are then left for a day or two without food, until the tamer throws in some food from afar, or sugar cane, or some fruit, talking to them meanwhile as though they were beings endowed with reason 'What unfortunate creatures you are, kept here without food or attendance, you who are the king of the animals.' This continues for several days, the tamer approaching ever closer, until at last he gets quite close and feeds them by hand. So little by little they become tame, and can be mounted and ridden, their taming and training making them as manageable as horses.⁸ Of their intelligence and sharpness of wit I judge it superfluous to write, seeing that many years ago Cicero in *De natura deorum* has declared that their intellect approaches the human. I saw in India various activities of these creatures, who carried on their backs pieces of cannon, loads of iron, and enormous weights: a single servant sat on the beast's

⁷ Bruce, who reports that this method of hunting was practised by the 'Agageer' people on the borders of the Sudan, describes the way they cut the elephant's tendons in some detail. Bruce, *op. cit.*, iv, 298-9, v, 94. For a later account see S. W. Baker, *The Nile tributaries of Abyssinia* (London, 1867), pp. 171-4.

⁸ Elephants do not appear to have been tamed in Ethiopia, at least in this period, and Prutky must therefore be assumed to be here describing a custom he had learnt of in India.