
The Rhino's Fame and Fortune

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Historically, more extravagant claims have been made about the rhino than any other large wild animal. Long before he was linked to the unicorn, his horns were attributed magical properties. At one time, his strength was synonymous with the concept of power. In another age, when even dragons could be slain, rhino hide was believed to be impervious to arrows and, later, to bullets.

It is no fault of the rhino's that he has not lived up to expectations, but every time in history that this has happened, he has consequently fallen into disrepute, sometimes even into oblivion. However, he is rather like the proverbial Phoenix and when he arises, there is always something fabulous about him. This has been his fate since the beginnings of history.

In Esmond's and my book, *Run, Rhino, Run* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), I recounted some of the more colourful anecdotes about rhinos in mythology and history. For fun, here are a few others. Let's start with the description of rhinos by Cosmos Indicopleustes. It is one of the first written records on the black rhino. Cosmos was an intellectual merchant from Alexandria. In the early sixth century A.D. his commercial pursuits led him through the Red Sea, into the western Indian Ocean and to the Persian Gulf. He visited Axum, then the capital of Ethiopia, in 525. Elesboas was the King and appears to have taken a liking to Cosmos, with whom he conversed in Greek. He granted the merchant freedom of travel in his realm, and Cosmos states that in Ethiopia he actually saw a live rhinoceros from a distance, as well as 'the skin of a dead one stuffed with chaff, standing in the Royal Palace'. Some twenty years later, in the seclusion of a cloister, back in Alexandria, he wrote:

This animal is called the rhinoceros from having horns upon his snout. When he is walking his horns are mobile, but when he sees anything to move his rage, he erects them and they become so rigid that they are strong enough to tear up

even trees by the root, those especially which come right before him. His eyes are placed low down near his jaws. He is altogether a fearful animal, and he is somehow hostile to the elephant. His feet and skin, however, closely resemble those of the elephant. His skin, when dried, is four fingers thick, and this some people put, instead of iron, in the plough, and with it plough the land.

Despite being called an authority on geography for the Middle Ages, barely a trace of Cosmos' influence can be found: His rhino, like so many real animals, became muddled in the medieval world, where fact was not as valued as 'significance'. It was believed that God made the lower creatures for the spiritual instruction of mankind. Marvellous Bestiaries were composed, describing animals for the purpose of teaching edifying morals. The rhino and other horned animals were confused in descriptions of the unicorn, and for the ordinary man a unicorn was just as real as a lion or an elephant. Hardly anyone saw large wild animals, other than dancing bears at village fairs, but their existence was taken for granted.

Unicorn lore has been the subject of vast

research; more has been written on its possible origins than anyone would wish to know today, and there's still no definite answer. Nevertheless, it's curious to note that along with the standard version of the legend in which the unicorn places his head on a virgin's lap, allowing her to pluck from him his wondrous horn as an example of the virtue of purity in Christian symbolism, there is a risqué version that gained momentum in some courts in the later Middle Ages. This has the eroticism of the East embodied in the attraction of a horn for a lonely girl sitting in the bush. In some such tales, the animal sporting the horn is obviously a rhinoceros, an ugly beast of great bulk and ferocity. One might say the prestige of the rhino had fallen to one of its lowest ebbs then.

Yet there was more infamy for the rhino when a Jesuit priest during the Renaissance returned from the Dark Continent with an account of how tribesmen killed the creature. He wrote that rhinos lived in valleys below the Mountains of the Moon. When villagers sighted one they would go after it, but they had to get very close to the dangerous beast to make certain of being able to kill it. So they trained a female monkey for their hunt,



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teaching her to leap and jump about in front of the rhino. Using 'a thousand monkey tricks', she would gain the rhino's attention and it would become curious and allow her to approach. Soon she would jump onto its back and begin scratching and rubbing it in the most delightful manner, giving the rhino more and more pleasure. Then, jumping back onto the ground, she would begin to tickle the rhino's belly. This sensual gratification would be the rhino's undoing. Lying down and stretching out to revel in all the ecstasy the she-monkey could give, the rhino would be oblivious to the villagers creeping up on this scene and he could easily be dispatched by their crude, simple weapons.

About the same time that this story was circulated in Europe, a Hebrew commentator on the Talmud wrote an essay on Noah's Ark. He said that the rhino was too big and bulky to fit into the Ark and that he could only be saved from the Flood by being towed with a rope tied around his horn.

The belief that rhino hide was impenetrable probably spread from reports of those who saw shields made from it. When properly cured it becomes extremely hard but not terribly heavy—consequently ideal for deflecting arrows. During the 17th century some Dutch settlers in the Cape Colony tried to maintain this myth. Johan Nieuhof in 1654 wrote:

We heard that a rhinoceros, or nose-horner, was fallen into a marsh, and because of its weight could not get out. Commander Rietbeek sent some soldiers with muskets, but the bullets rebounded from its hard wrinkled skin. They cut an opening in its withers and fired into this

until at last they killed it. The horns are still preserved in the Fort at the Cape and from them at times healths are drunk.

However, that rhinos were very vulnerable soon became well known; by the 1680s practically all the black rhinos had been wiped out by the Free Burghers, farmers who had been released from service in the Dutch East India Company. A few live specimens were captured and sent to Europe where they were toured from city to city in specially built carriages pulled by teams of horses. The Empress Maria Theresa obtained one of these rhinos for her menagerie at Schonbrunn, but it did not survive long.

It is a pity that the Roi Soleil, Louis XIV, did not have a rhino for his magnificent wild animal collection at Versailles. There he built the first zoological garden. Shrubbery and vines camouflaged fences; the animals could watch one another and the nobles who visited them, accompanied by musicians. The food was ample and of good quality; no expense was spared for their care and well-being. However, a rhino did not reside at Versailles until Louis XVI's reign, and by that time there was neither money nor interest in the project. Only a few months after the Revolution began, angry Parisians invaded the zoo and demanded the release of the animals—as food for the hungry. 'Certainly,' replied the Curator to the roll of drums. 'Just tell me who is going to eat the rhinoceros; he can be rather dangerous!'

The looters preferred the exotic birds and antelope and left behind the rhino. Later, the Director of the Jardin des Plantes in Vincennes was called. He was urged to take all the remaining animals, but he was

totally aghast at the possibility of spoiling the plants by contaminating them with animals. In fact, the Director was a very cantankerous individual, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, better known for having written the ludicrous *Paul et Virginie*, a story about a young maiden in Mauritius who drowned because she would not remove her petticoats when she was shipwrecked. The Curator is said to have caused visible horror on the author's face when he told him that a superb rhinoceros was one of the animals destined for the Jardin des Plantes—but he could do nothing to prevent the move.

Rhinos were not very popular even during the heydays of the circus in the mid-19th century. Only one rose to fame, and he belonged to Dr. G. R. Spaulding, the man who had the first circus railroad train and a fabulous boat on the Mississippi, called *The Floating Palace*. In its huge amphitheatre 2,000 spectators could be accommodated to watch his animal show. The rhino had a suite of his own below deck.

In the middle of this century, rhinos in Kenya were considered absolute nuisances. They were shot by the hundreds to open up land for cultivation and referred to in books as 'stupid', 'brutish' and 'ugly'. It was not really until the 1970s that interest in rhinos was revived, and that was due to the fact that they were being poached everywhere. People said that their horns were being shipped to the Far East for use as aphrodisiacs. When that was disproved, a leading conservationist voiced his dismay. He claimed that the story was the only way to gain the attention of the public to raise money 'to save the rhino'.



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