

The Royal Menagerie of the King of Oudh

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Oudh, Yule & Burnell (1886) tell us, was "the province in which Ayodhya was situated, but of which Lucknow for about 170 years (from c. 1732) has been the capital, as that of the dynasty of the Nawabs, and from 1814 kings, of Oudh. Oudh was annexed to the British Empire in 1856 as a Chief Commissionership. This was re-established after the Mutiny was subdued and the country reconquered, in 1858". The Nawabs or Kings of Oudh had quite a good collection of animals, in an unidentified place in Lucknow, especially during the first decennia of the 19th century. Only a few glimpses of this remarkable collection, which boasted many rhinos and even a giraffe all the way from Africa, have been uncovered to date.

The rhinoceros plays a major part in the known history of the menagerie in Oudh or Lucknow. It is only right that the first glimpse of that collection concerns a specimen of the Indian rhinoceros. In 1790, this animal was exhibited by Thomas Clark in the Exeter' Change in the Strand of London (and it lived until June 1793). According to the Rev. Bingley (1804: 487), it "came from Laknaor, in the East Indies, and was brought over in the Melville Castle, East Indiaman, as a present to Mr. Dundas". Laknaor, I suggest, would be Lucknow.

Bishop Regional Heber (1783 - 1826) narrates in his Journal how he visited Lucknow in October 1824. "There is a menagerie, with a greater number of scarce and curious animals, but in far worse order, than that at Barrackpoor.' There are no further details about this menagerie, not where it was located or which animals were seen, but Heber continues with information about a second place: "on the other side of the river Goomty, in a well-wooded park, is a large collection of different varieties of cows, camels and deer, and five or six very large rhinoceroses, the first animals of the kind I ever saw, and of which I found that prints and drawings had given me a very imperfect conception. They are more bulky animals, and of a darker colour, than I had supposed, and the thickness of the folds of their impenetrable skin much surpasses all which I had expected. These at Lucknow are gentl and quiet animals, except that one of them has a feud with horses. They seem to propagate in captivity without reluctance, and I should conceive might be available to carry burthens as well as the elephant ..." (Heber 1843: 58-59). About 3 miles from the city, the king had a summer palace called 'Di-koushar' surrounded by a park with "not only neelghaus (nilgai) and the common Indian deer, but some noble red deer" (Heber 1843: 60). The same park had, of course, many monkeys, which sometimes were fed in a sort of cage in the middle of the park.

William Knighton stayed at the court in Lucknow during the reign of Nawab Nasir Ud-Din Haidar (died 1837). He had the following to say about this king's rather remarkable collection of rhinoceroses: "The extent to which these various animals were kept at Lucknow for purposes of 'sport' may be conceived from the fact of the royal menagerie having contained, when I served the king of Oudh, from fifteen to twenty rhinoceroses. They were kept in the open park around Chaungungé, and were allowed to roam about, at large, within certain limits" (Knighton 1834: 162). This relative freedom had its price, since the rhinos were made to

fight with each other, with elephants and even with a tiger.

The animals of the menagerie in Lucknow were supposed to be sold in 1856 after the kingdom was annexed to the British crown. Edward Blyth (1810 - 1873), the Curator of the Museum of the Society of Bengal in Calcutta from 1841 to 1863, was in the neighbourhood in July 1856. He judged that the tigers were the "finest caged specimens in the world", so he tried to buy the entire collection, supposedly at his own expense, as he could only manage with the help of a German friend. (One wonders, was this Jamrach, the animal dealer ?). Blyth was lucky, according to a biography by Grote (1875: x), as "he bought the bulk of the collection for a trifle. Eighteen magnificent tigers were sold at 20 rupees (2 pounds) a head ! Some casualties occurred on the passage down the river; but his collection, when exhibited in Calcutta (probably in Barrackpore park), contained sixteen tigers, one leopard, one bear, two cheetas, three caracals, two rhinoceroses, and a giraffe, which carried a saddle and was daily ridden". Blyth had problems of finding transport to take the animals to England, and it appears that only one tiger in fact was shipped, which was sold for 140 pounds. It is likely that Loisel (1912, III: 20), quoting a report of 1857, referred to the same general period that the collection was sold, but he only mentioned the presence of tigers, buffalos, and a ferocious horse in a cage.

One would expect that this was the demise of the Lucknow Menagerie. It is rather curious, therefore, that Sanyal (1892:131) reported that an adult female Javan rhinoceros (*Rh. sondaicus*) living in the Calcutta Zoo since 1887 had "also lived for about ten years in the menagerie of the late King of Oudh." A riddle that has not yet been solved.

The Menagerie of the Kings of Oudh in Lucknow was remarkable place between 1790 and 1856, of which one would like to know a bit more.*

References

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* Editor's note : the book mentioned in the last issue, Vol. No 1, Sept 1996, by Abdul Halim Sharar, Lucknow: *The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* by Abdul Halim Sharar one can find some of the answers to the mystery to which the author refers. The Oudh Nawab was exiled to Calcutta for some time and kept an enormous menagerie there. We will include more on this in a subsequent issue.