THE RHINOCEROS OF CHINA

By Berthold Laufer
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In 1792 the Earl of Macartney was received as the first ambassador of the British king to the court of China. Before the audience took place, the ceremonial to be observed was discussed by British and Chinese officials, the latter insisting that the earl perform the kotow before the emperor. The British envoy declined to suffer this humiliation. The Chinese officials were embarrassed but after deliberation solved the problem. They explained to the emperor that "the foreign barbarians" were not built like Chinamen—that they had no joints in their legs, and if bowed down to the ground were unable to rise. The emperor was thus persuaded to waive the kotow, as he did not desire a casualty or an unseemly spectacle.

The officials' stratagem is traceable to an old Indian fable concerning the rhinoceros, related by a sea captain who came to China in the ninth century. He reported that the rhinoceros has straight legs with no articulation, and sleeps by leaning against trees. Hunters of rhinoceroses in India, he declared, erect frail wooden shanties to trap the beasts. The rhinoceros, he said, would lean against the decayed timbers of the trap, which would collapse, causing the animal to fall. Unable to rise, it became an easy prey to its captors.

No animal has been surrounded with more wondrous lore, fabulous notions and bizarre speculations than the rhinoceros. In ancient times climatic conditions in northern China were different from now. The hills were crowned by dense forests haunted by huge pachyderms, including rhinoceroses. During the first millennium B.C., the rhinoceros was still abundant in central and southern China. It is mentioned in ancient songs and accounts of hunting expeditions. Its horn was carved into ornamental drinking cups and used in making bows, and its hide was the favorite material for arrow-proof armor. As agriculture gradually advanced, deforesting the hills and plains, the large mammals were exterminated or took refuge elsewhere.

The common notion that the rhinoceros is ferocious, using its horn as a weapon of offence (the sharp low tusks are its real weapon) is erroneous. On the contrary, the animal appears to be of a gentle and harmless disposition, easily tamed and kept in confinement, or transported over long distances. Numerous Chinese records extending over many centuries indicate that live rhinoceroses were brought from Indo-China to the Chinese capital as gifts to emperors. They were housed in animal parks attached to the palaces, and cared for by officials especially appointed for the purpose. Some of the greatest poets of China have sung the praises of interned rhinoceroses.

Rhinoceros horn was regarded by all oriental nations as a marvel of nature. It was believed to neutralize poison, because the animal devours all sorts of vegetable poisons with its food. Another ancient fable ascribed to the rhinoceros an arrow-proof hide that formed an impervious armor over its body. As a matter of fact, its skin is quite soft and sensitive, and arrows, spears, knives and bullets can easily penetrate it. Only when properly prepared and dried does the skin assume that iron-like hardness which has made it valuable for cuirasses and shields.

In China rhinoceros skin and feet are boiled into a jelly that is a highly esteemed medicine. In Siam the skin is sliced and boiled together with spices into a gelatinous mass that is regarded as a delicacy and a good tonic for feeble persons.

There are many interesting representations of the rhinoceros preserved in bronze, clay, and wood-engravings. The Museum possesses a gilt bronze figurine of a recumbent two-horned rhinoceros with well modeled head and body. The skin folds especially are well brought out. This figurine is on exhibition in Stanley Field Hall (Case 7) and was presented to the Museum by the American Friends of China, Chicago, and Mr. Herbert J. Devine.

EXTINCT "FOUR-LEGGED FISH"

A sensational discovery of large numbers of fossils of a so-called "four-legged fish that walked ashore" was recently reported in the newspapers, on the return to Copenhagen of Dr. Lauge Koch, Arctic explorer, from an expedition in Greenland. These creatures were identified as belonging to the order Stegocephali, the earliest four-footed vertebrates.

Dr. B. E. Dahlgren, Acting Curator of Botany at Field Museum, calls attention

Early Amphibian

Restoration of one of the first of the four-legged vertebrates, on exhibition in Ernest R. Graham Hall.

to the fact that restorations of an extinct amphibian of this order are on exhibition in the Museum. One of these may be seen in the reconstruction of a Coal Age forest which occupies the south end of Ernest R. Graham Hall (Hall 38). The second restoration is shown separately in its place among the chronologically arranged collections in that hall of prehistoric creatures of all ages.

IVORY OBJECTS FROM CHINA

Until comparatively recent times physicians attending women of the upper class in China never saw their patients except for a hand extended from behind a concealing curtain or screen for the taking of the pulse. For the rest of their diagnosis the doctors had to depend upon a proxy in the form of a small carved figure of a woman upon which the patient indicated the location of her complaint.

One of these figures, carved from ivory, is on exhibition in a collection of various Chinese ivory objects installed in George T. and Frances Gaylord Smith Hall (Hall 24). The exhibit comprises objects of many and various kinds from different parts of China, and covers a wide range of time beginning with the archaic period (1122–247 B.C.).

Included in the exhibit are several pairs of ivory chopsticks; some exquisite fans of the Manchu court, plaited from ivory threads and overlaid with colored ivory carvings; cages for keeping singing and fighting crickets; and a miscellany of fans, tablets, writing-brush holders, figures of goddesses, saints, monks and other revered persons, various kinds of ornamental objects, a desk screen, scent box, foot-measures, girdle pendants, combs, back scratchers, opium smokers' equipment, and other material.

NEW METEORITE SPECIMENS FROM TEXAS CRATER

By Oliver C. Farrington
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Two specimens of a meteorite recently received through the kindness of Dr. C. T. Elvey of the Yerkes Observatory are of interest as the first acquired by Field Museum from a "meteor crater" other than the well-known one at Canyon Diablo, Arizona. These specimens came from the "crater" at Odessa, Texas. First noted as a "blowout," later observations showed that the area is roughly circular in outline, with a diameter of about 500 feet, a depth of about eighteen feet, and a rim raised two or three feet above the surrounding plain. As at Meteor Crater, Arizona, the inner slopes are steep and dip away from the center.

About the "crater," small iron meteorites and pieces of "iron shale," a name given to meteoric masses altered by exposure to limonite, are found. Both of these varieties are represented in the specimens received from Dr. Elvey.

No exploration has yet been carried on at the Texas locality to determine whether a large meteoric mass such as might have made the crater lies buried there. Meanwhile other "meteor craters" have been discovered elsewhere. Besides the series found on the Stony Tunguska River in central Siberia which have as yet yielded no meteoric material, a group of thirteen craters has been discovered near Henbury in central Australia, and a large one at Wabar in southern Arabia. About Henbury many pieces of meteoric iron, "iron shale," and "silica glass" have been found. Concerning the Arabian locality, the Arabs have a legend that it was once a city which was destroyed by fire from heaven as a punishment for its wickedness.

PARADISE NUTS

Paradise nuts are the seeds of several species of large forest trees of South America, especially of the Amazon region, where they are known as sapucaia nuts. They are related to Brazil nuts, and like them are produced within large woody fruits. The Brazil nut fruits, however, drop from the trees intact and must be split with a machete or ax, while the sapucaia fruits remain on the tree and open by a lid which permits the seeds to drop and scatter. These are therefore difficult to obtain in quantity, especially because they are a favorite food of large native rodents.

A fruiting branch of a sapucaia tree was obtained in Pará by the Marshall Field Botanical Expedition to the Amazon in 1929. This branch, its perishable parts restored, and a section of the fruit, have been added to the exhibits in the Hall of Plant Life (Hall 29). The exhibit was prepared by the Stanley Field Plant Reproduction Laboratories.

Gift from Viennese Scientist

An exceptionally valuable collection of type specimens of plants of the family Nyctaginaceae (the "four o'clocks") has been presented to Field Museum by Dr. Anton Heimerl, of Vienna, foremost student of this family. The specimens will be of much use to Associate Curator Paul C. Standley in his work upon this group of plants, and in conformity with the wishes of Dr. Heimerl they will be preserved permanently in the Museum Herbarium where they will be accessible to students.