

# CATHAY AND THE WAY THITHER

BEING A COLLECTION OF  
MEDIEVAL NOTICES OF CHINA

TRANSLATED AND EDITED

BY  
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NEW EDITION, REVISED THROUGHOUT IN THE LIGHT  
OF RECENT DISCOVERIES

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PRELIMINARY ESSAY

ON THE INTERCOURSE BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN  
NATIONS PREVIOUS TO THE DISCOVERY OF THE CAPE ROUTE

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where you halt, that all the stones which have rolled down from the mountains are written over with Hebrew characters. And to this I can myself bear witness, having travelled that ground on foot. And these inscriptions were explained to us by certain Jews who could read them, and they were to this effect: 'The departure of So-and-so of such a tribe, in such a year and such a month;' just such things in fact as you often find scribbled on the walls of inns by people among ourselves. But the Israelites, as is the way of people who have but recently learned to write, were always making use of their new accomplishment, and were constantly writing, so that all those places are quite covered with Hebrew characters. And these have been preserved to this day,—for the sake of unbelievers as I think. And anyone who likes may go there and see for himself, or may ask from those who have been there, and learn that I am saying what is true." (Pp. 205–6.—M<sup>c</sup>Crindle, pp. 159–160.)

Nearly the whole of Book xi is worth translating. It contains "*Details regarding Indian Animals, and the Islands of Taprobane.*"

"*Rhinoceros.*

"This animal is called Rhinoceros because he has horns over his nostrils; when he walks his horns jog about, but when he is enraged with what he is looking at he erects his horns, and they become so rigid that he is able to uproot trees with them, especially if they are straight before him<sup>1</sup>. His eyes are placed low down near his jaws. He is altogether a fearful beast, and he is somehow especially hostile to the elephant. His feet and his skin are, however, very like those of the elephant. His skin when dried is four fingers thick, and some people have used it instead of iron to put in the plough, and have ploughed the ground with it! The Ethiopians in their own dialect call him *Arue Harisi*, using in the second word an aspirated *a* with *rhis* added. The word *Arue* expresses the beast as such, but *Harisi* expresses *ploughing*, a nickname that they give him from his form about the nose, and also from the use to which his skin is turned<sup>2</sup>. I saw this creature

<sup>1</sup> ? τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς μάλιστα τὸ ἔμπροσθεν. The fact about the animals carrying the horn loose when not irritated is confirmed by Salt. (*2d Travels, French Trans.*, 1816, ii, 191.)

<sup>2</sup> Ludolf mentions *Arweharis* as a great and fierce beast, of which his friend Abba Gregory often used to speak. He quotes Arab. *Hharash*, *Hharshan*, "Unicorn," but I do not find these in the dictionaries. Salt again says: "The name by which the rhinoceros (two horned) is designated to this day all over Abyssinia is absolutely the same as that given by Cosmas. In the *Gheez* it is written *Aruê Hâris*, pronounced with a strong aspiration of the *Ha*... *Aruê*, signifying always *fera* or *bestia* in genere; a coincidence so extraordinary as to convince me that the language spoken at the court of Axum was the *Gheez*" (Ludolf, i, 10, 78; Salt as above).

*Hhars* means 'ploughing' in Arabic, which may illustrate the etymology of Cosmas.

alive once in Ethiopia, but I kept a good distance from him. And I have seen one dead, skinned and stuffed with straw, standing in the king's palace, so that I have been able to draw him accurately.

“ *Taurelaphus*.

“ This creature, the *Taurelaphus* (or Bull-stag), is found both in India and Ethiopia. Those in India are tame, and they make them carry loads of pepper and other such articles in sacks; they also milk them and make butter from their milk. We also eat their flesh, Christians cutting their throats and Greeks felling them. Those of Ethiopia again are wild beasts, and have not been domesticated<sup>1</sup>.

“ *Cameleopard*.

“ The *Cameleopard* is found only in Ethiopia. These also are wild beasts, and have not been domesticated. But in the palace<sup>2</sup> [at Axum] they have one or two which they have tamed by the king's command by catching them when young, in order to keep them for a show. When milk or water to drink is given to these creatures in a dish, as is done in the king's presence, they cannot reach the vessel on the ground so as to drink, except by straddling with their fore-legs, owing to the great length of their legs and height of the chest and neck above the ground. It stands to reason therefore that they must widen out their fore-legs in order to drink. This also I have drawn (or described) from personal knowledge.

“ *The Wild Ox*.

“ This Wild Ox is a great beast of India, and from it is got the thing called *Tupha*, with which officers in the field adorn their horses and pennons. They tell of this beast that if his tail catches in a tree he will not budge, but stands stock-still, being horribly vexed at losing a single hair of his tail; so the natives come and cut his tail off, and then when he has lost it altogether he makes his escape! Such is the nature of the animal<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This appears to be the buffalo. Everything applies accurately except the name, which does not seem a very appropriate one. The picture is that of a lanky ox with long *tusks*.

<sup>2</sup> Cosmas here uses the Latin word: *παλατίω* (M<sup>c</sup>Crindle).

<sup>3</sup> This is evidently the *Yak* [*Bos grunniens*], which Cosmas could only have known by distant hearsay. *Tupha* is probably *Túgh* or *Tau*, which according to Rémusat is the Turkish name of the horse-tail standard, applied also by the Chinese to the *Yak-tail*, which respectively with those nations mark the supreme military command (*Rech. sur les langues Tartares*, 303; also D'Ohsson, i, 40).

“ *The Musk Animal.* ”

“ This little animal is the Musk. The natives call it in their own tongue *Kasturi*<sup>1</sup>. When they hunt it they shoot it with arrows, and after tying up the blood collected in the navel, cut it off. For this is the fragrant part of the beast, or what we call the *musk*. The rest of the body they throw away.

“ *The Unicorn.* ”

“ This creature is called a Unicorn. I can't say I ever saw him, but I have seen bronze figures of him in the four-towered palace of the King of Ethiopia, and so I have been able to make this drawing of him. They say he is a terrible beast, and quite invincible, and that all his strength lies in his horn. And when he is encompassed by many hunters so that he is hard put to it, he makes a leap over some high precipice, and as he falls he turns over, so that his horn bears the whole force of the fall, and he escapes unhurt<sup>2</sup>. So also the Scripture discourses of him, saying : ‘ *Save me from the mouths of lions and my humility from the horns of the Unicorns*<sup>3</sup>; ’ and again in the blessings wherewith Balaam blessed Israel, he saith twice over : ‘ Thus hath God led him out of Egypt like the glory of the unicorn<sup>4</sup>; ’ in all these passages testifying to the strength and audacity and glory of the creature<sup>5</sup>.

“ *The Hog-stag and Hippopotamus.* ”

“ The Chærelaphus (or Hog-stag) I have both seen and eaten. The hippopotamus I have not seen indeed, but I had some great teeth of his that weighed thirteen pounds which I sold here [in Alexandria]. And I have seen many such teeth in Ethiopia and in Egypt<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Kastûri* is a real Sanskrit name for the perfume *musk* (see Lassen, i, 316; and iii, 45). This author says that in the Himalaya *Kastûri* is also applied to the animal. He observes that “ Cosmas is the first to mention the musk animal and musk as products of India, but he is wrong in representing the animal as living in Taprobane.” Cosmas does nothing of the kind.

<sup>2</sup> From this story some kind of Ibex or Oryx would seem to be meant. The practice is asserted of animals of that class in parts of the world so remote from each other that it can scarcely be other than true.

<sup>3</sup> “ Save me from the lion's mouth : for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.” (*Ps.* xxii, 21.)

<sup>4</sup> “ God brought him out of Egypt : He hath as it were the strength of a unicorn.” (*Numbers* xxiii, 22 ; xxiv, 8.)

<sup>5</sup> [Unicorn Monoceros, see Ctesias of Cnides. Yule-Cordier's *Polo* ii, 291.]

<sup>6</sup> The *Chærelaphus* is represented in the drawing as a long-legged hog with very long tusks. It has certainly nothing to do with the so-called hog-deer of India, which has no resemblance to a hog. It looks a good deal like the *Babirussa*, but that is I believe peculiar to the Archipelago. Yet this description by Pliny of a kind of swine in India comes very near that animal : “ In Indiâ cubitales dentium flexus gemini ex rostro, totidem a fronte ceu vituli cornua, exeunt ” (viii, 78).