

Rhinoceros pulling a plough—fact or fiction?

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Some stories tend to lead their own life in the media and are repeated without any idea how they came about. One instance is the tale, usually set in Assam, that rhinos could be tame enough to be used by farmers to pull ploughs in the fields (Stracey 1963:98, Dutta 1991:151, Geer 2008:383, Mazumdar and Mahanta 2016:19). Perhaps, but when did this practice change, as surely currently no rhinoceros can be seen anywhere used in this way.

The earliest reports, which I could find are concerned with young rhinos being domesticated and being used as beasts of burden. At the outset, let us note that few people claim to have actually witnessed this.

According to an unidentified Mr Stephen of Calcutta, a rhinoceros was transporting an Indian family on the banks of a river: “the animal suddenly changed its disposition, and despite being beaten on its skin, it wanted to go and swim in the river, and dived in. After having followed the stream for an hour, it went on the opposite bank, with all what he carried being wet”, (Arago 1840:238, Glaire and Walsh 1848:634).

The books by François Arago (1790–1855) appear to be a mixture of fact and fiction, so again it is hard to decide about the veracity of his story when he says that “Some travellers assure us that they saw in some provinces in the interior of India and especially at the foot of the great chain of the Himalaya some rhinoceros tamed and docile listening to the authors of their master”, (Arago 1840:237).

Maybe we get to be on firmer ground when Major John Butler (1847:29) of the Bengal Native Infantry states that tame rhinos may be seen at Gowahatty “grazing on the plains as harmless as cows, guarded by a single man.” While T.A.D. (1872:248) just affirms that he has seen several tame and docile rhinos, Flex (1873:4) again repeats that near Gowahatty there are herds of

rhinos kept like domestic cattle.

To be even more specific, Money (1839:618) appears to speak from personal knowledge when he refers to a dhooby (washerman) in Gowahatty used to collect the clothes from the wash riding on a rhinoceros. He thought that it was sold to an Afghan, who was employed by the animal dealer Jamrach. This is repeated by Pollok and Thom (1900:87).

Tame and docile, used to carry burdens and even allowing people to ride on their back, yet it is still one step further to read that they were harnessed with ploughs to work in fields. A curious sight that would be, and the bravery of the farmers should be commended. How the story came into being is unknown, but when the French naturalist Victor Jacquemont (1801–1832) visited Barrackpore in Calcutta in 1826, he was told by the rhino keeper that the animals were used in agriculture in the lands on the other side of the Ganges (Jacquemont 1841:169).

For further evidence we may need to travel to the African continent. The French traveller Jean Chardin (1711:45) was the first to observe that rhinos were domesticated and used for labour by the Abyssinians (or Abechi). This is again repeated in the stories told by Jacolliot (1884:219, 1899:333) and translated by Kellogg (1888:212) that “there is one point on which naturalists cannot agree in regard to him [rhino], and that is whether in Abyssinia he is really used to replace the ox in field labor.”

From the sublime to the ridiculous. In 1823, the speculative genius Triptolemus Yellowley paid a visit to Calcutta. At the time, people would have known this character from the *The Pirate* (1822), one of the *Waverley Novels* by Walter Scott. The anonymous correspondent saw how Yellowley introduced the Rhinoceros Plough:

“He had about him several engraved copies of a most felicitous invention, which he modestly contended to have existed before the flood, and to have been merely revived, and reintroduced

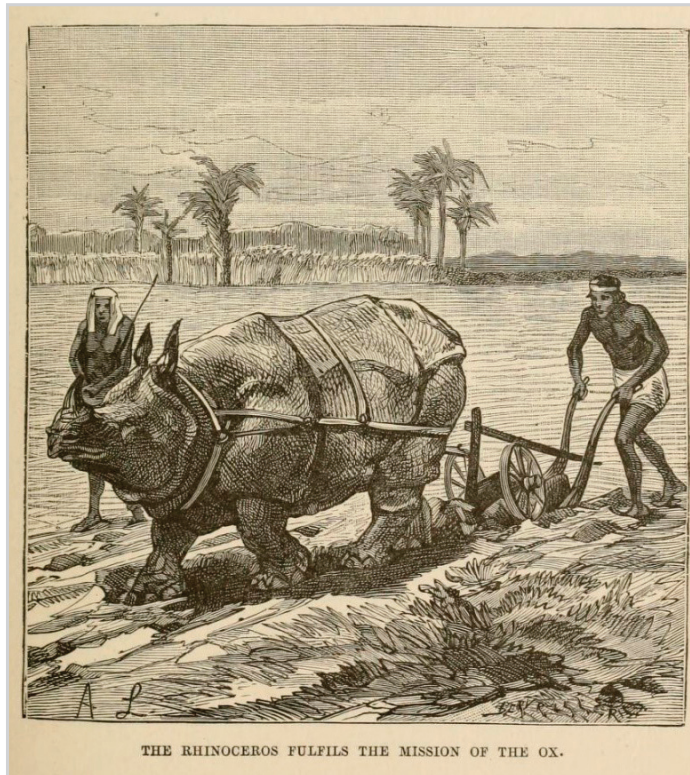


Figure 1. Farmer ploughing his fields with a harnessed rhinoceros, said to illustrate a scene in lower Egypt, but the rhino looks distinctly Indian. First published by Jacolliot (1884) and reprinted in Kellogg (1888) and Jacolliot (1899).

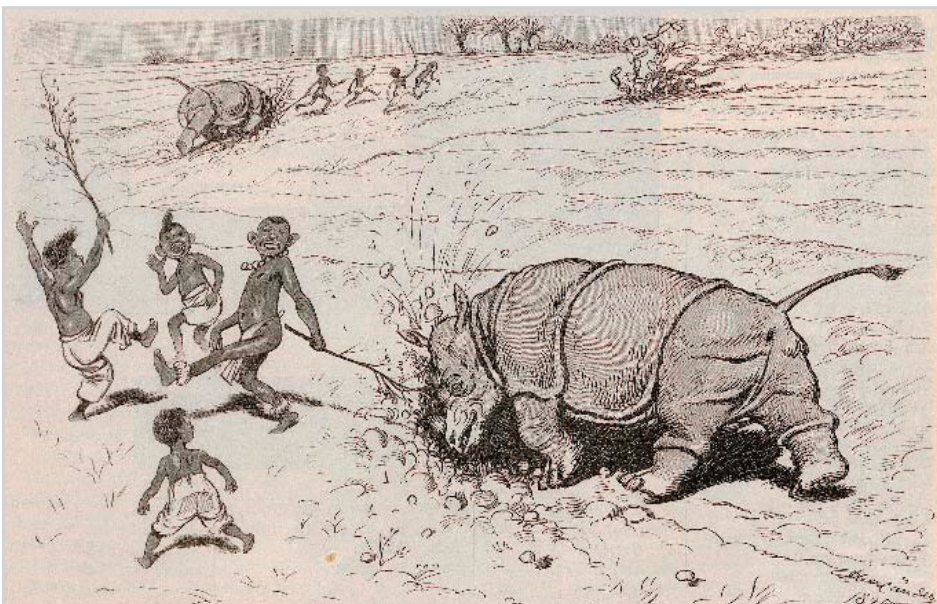


Figure 2. The agricultural rhinoceros in Cameroon drawn by Adolf Oberlaender in 1895.

by himself. This was a machine yolept [called] ‘The Rhinoceros plough with the Living principle; or self-acting Antediluvian Coulter, respectfully submitted to the agricultural society, as adapted in a peculiar manner to the Light soils of Hindostan’. The plough in question was drawn by three rhinoceroses, the first and foremost of whom had his horn performing the duty of a supplementary coulter, for it was buried in the ground” (Anon. 1823).

Such an engraved copy of the Rhinoceros Plough has not survived. Not surprising, as the whole account is of course entirely fictitious. However, many odd notions in the human mind find their origin in such fanciful accounts. Maybe the appearance of Yellowley somehow was in fact the origin of more serious references to the rhinoceros used to pull a plough.

The stories may be equivocal, but that cannot be said of the only two illustrations which I could find of a rhinoceros labouring in the field. The French judge Louis Jacolliot (1837–1890) may have lived in India for a while, but his books are largely imaginary. The story of the Abyssinian rhinoceros is illustrated with an engraving by Auguste-André Lançon (1836–1887). Though said to be African, there is no denying that the rhinoceros is distinctly Indian with its great body armour, and may have been drawn from a specimen in the Paris Zoo (fig. 1).

A distinctly more humorous image was created by the German artist Adolf Oberlaender (1845–1923) in a drawing published in 1895 (fig. 2). Set in Cameroon, the rhinoceros looks Indian, but the horns are hidden in the earth.

It is probably time to relegate the story of the rhinoceros used for ploughing fields to the realms of fantasy and newspaper cartoons.

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