

THE INDIAN RHINOCEROS AS A SACRED ANIMAL

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THE UNICORN and the rhinoceros have occupied a place of importance both in folklore and in religion from the most ancient times to the present.

The unicorn appears as a supporter of the Royal Shield of Great Britain and is known to Shakespeare and Spenser. He belongs to the symbolism of the medieval Church, as the type of Christ and the emblem of purity.¹ In Russian Cossack standards of Ermak (sixteenth century) there appears a horse with a horn (antelope) in its forehead; and in a carved ivory throne, a wedding gift from Byzantium a century earlier, one panel exhibits a horse with one horn (antelope) in the forehead. A Greek manuscript (fifteenth century) of the Proverbs of Solomon and other fragments, including pharmaceutical recipes, has a painting showing the unicorn and depicting a Buddhist story which was brought from India in the seventh century; and a panel in a bronze door (fourteenth century) of the Uspenski Monastery of Aleksandrov depicts the same story. On an ivory casket (eleventh century), in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, of Syro-Egyptian workmanship, a unicorn (an ox) appears among the animal groups. This motif is known in Mycenaean, Byzantine-Coptic, and Perso-Sassanid art. Both the bull and the antelope were early used as interchangeable forms for the same motif. The bull, shown in profile, often appears with one horn, often an antelope horn. Belonging to the early centuries of the Christian era, is the Gallo-Roman discus of silver with its spirited animals in pairs, including the unicorn; and in a wall painting in a grave chamber at Palmyra (third century) likewise. To the pre-Christian millenniums belong numerous representations of the unicorn. A celebrated relief of Cybele (second century B. C.) has along its base a lion and a bull in conflict. (The unicorn is usually found in such association). On either side of the stairway of Artaxerxes Ochus (355-340), at Persepolis, are colossal representations of the lion and the unicorn

¹ The basis for the summary which makes up this and the following paragraph is an article, "The Lion and the Unicorn", by Cyril G. E. Bunt in *Antiquity* for December, 1930.

(bull). The same creature is depicted on Babylonian and Assyrian cylinders, on vases, on seals and on sculptured stones of the epoch of Atrides, and on the tomb of Xanthos. On an ostrich egg from a Phoenician tomb (seventh century) the object (bull) occurs. Coins of Croesus (sixth century) show the unicorn (bull). On an Egyptian papyrus of Rameses III (c. 1200 B. C.) a lion and a unicorn (ass?) are shown playing at "chess". Still earlier (2250 B. C.) on Babylonian tablets, and on a fragment of a bowl (c. 3000 B. C.) the unicorn (bull) appears. Most interesting of all, perhaps, is the recently discovered checker-board at Ur, composed of fourteen (7 x 2) engraved shell plaques framed with lapis lazuli, showing among the motifs that of the lion and the unicorn in opposition.

It is clear, then, that the symbol of the unicorn is very old. The creature, whether horse, bull, ass, or antelope, is in conflict with the lion. And it has been suggested that the meaning is to be interpreted as seasonal, of spring being overcome by summer, the lion (Leo) triumphing over the bull (Taurus), one-horned. Bunt calls attention, in confirmation of this suggestion, to the *Grande Acedrex*, a modification of the Indian chess, played on a board of 12 x 12 squares, and points out that among the names of the pieces occur both the lion and the unicorn. He mentions also the circular chess game of *Los Escaques*, which consists of seven rings each divided into twelve parts, the "houses" of which are allotted to the signs of the Zodiac.

In pre-historic sites in Europe the remains of man are associated with extinct species of rhinoceros. In the sixteenth century these caves were searched for the horn of the rhinoceros, which was believed to be an antidote to disease.² From the horn were made goblets that were supposed to counteract poison in liquids, and it is said that as late as 1789 such containers were used in court ceremonial in France to test the royal food for poisons.

The rhinoceros is known in China and it is recorded that it was imported for use in the sacrifice by Han Wu Ti. At times nobles had the rhinoceros painted on their chariot wheels.³ Further, in the *China Review*,⁴ the following is reported: "The Sung emperor

² *Encycl. Brit.* (11th Ed.), II. 346.

³ See E. Chauvannes, *Les Memoires Historiques de Se Ma Ts'ien*. Paris, 1898. Vol. 3, p. 214.

⁴ 1886, p. 359.

was so good a man that he actually gave the people of his capital two rhinoceros horns to be made into medicine to cure cholera, saying (with great truth), 'what do I want with rhinoceros horns?'"

A fabulous, composite beast, called the unicorn, may be traced to the east. Ctesias states that there were in India wild white asses celebrated for their fleetness of foot, having on the forehead a horn a cubit and a half in length, colored white, red, and black. And he remarks, further, that from the horn were made drinking cups which were a preventive of poison. Aelian, quoting Ctesias, reported that India produced also a one-horned horse. And Strabo says that in India there were one-horned horses with stag-like heads.⁵

There are references to the unicorn from the Far East. In Chinese mythology it is the king of all animals and full of gentleness. It is represented with the body of a deer, hoof of a horse, tail of an ox, and as having a single horn with a fleshy growth upon it. Supernatural appearances of this animal are associated with events as far back as 2600 B. C.⁶

Mr. Bertram Thomas, in his description of his journey across Arabia, notes, with reference to the gazelle of Dakaká:

This creature's two horns appear one when seen in profile, and thus it is supposed to have given rise to the ancient myth of the unicorn. This legendary guardian of chastity allowed none but virtuous maidens to approach it, when its anger turned to joy; and singularly today in the southern borderlands, where it is common, almost the only musical instrument known is the pipe made of its horn, and this the Arab maiden plays on the joyful occasion of marriage.⁷

The so-called unicorn ram of the Himalayas is simply a Barwal sheep with the two horns artificially fused by the use of a hot iron while they are budding.⁸

This fabulous beast from the East, may very well, in the beginning, have been a rhinoceros. In a fresco of the third century B. C., found at Marissa (Moresbeth, home of Micah), at the tomb

⁵ *Encycl. Brit.* (11th Ed.), XXVII. 581-2.

⁶ Reference from Doré, *Recherches sur les Superstitions en Chine* (p. 446) in *The Encyclopaedia Sinica*, London, 1917, p. 95.

⁷ *New York Times Magazine*, May 24, 1931.

⁸ Richard Lydekker, *The Sheep and its Cousins*, London, 1912, p. 163.

of the family of Apollophanes, head of the Sidonian colony settled there, is shown a rhinoceros associated with an Indian elephant.⁹

Three kinds of rhinoceros are found in India today: (1) *Sumatrensis*, the smallest of them, occurs from Assam, where it is rare, to Borneo, being rather common in Tenasserim. It has two horns. (2) The *Javan* (*R. Sondaicus*) is found in Bengal and locally through Burma and Malaya. This variety, which is one-horned, is not so large as (3), the Great Indian Rhinoceros (*R. unicornis*), still found in Assam and in considerable numbers in the Nepalese Tarai.

Landon says¹⁰ that, although the rhinoceros prefers swamps and high grass, it is found along the Rapti in wooded jungles and up ravines and low hills in the Tarai. Many are shot each year, still there is no appreciable diminution in their numbers. Kirkpatrick, in 1793, reported that the forests on the southern slopes of Nepal were greatly infested with them.¹¹ Formerly they occurred along the base of the Himalayas to Peshawar. Babar, early in the sixteenth century (1519) hunted the rhinoceros in the north-west. His account is as follows:¹²

After sending on the army towards the river (Indus) I myself set off for Swāti, which they likewise call Karak-Khaneh (*Kark-Khāna*, "the rhinoceros haunt") to hunt the rhinoceros, but as the country abounds in brushwood we could not get at them. A she rhinoceros, that had whelps, came out, and fled along the plain. Many arrows were shot at her, but . . . she gained cover. We set fire to the brushwood, but the rhinoceros was not to be found. We got sight of another, that, having been scorched in the fire, was lamed and unable to run. We killed it, and everyone cut off a bit as a trophy of the chase.

A rhinoceros was sent from India to Portugal about 1553, and was later lost while being forwarded as a gift to the Pope.¹³

The "horn" is a mass of hairs cemented together by cells, and not a true horn.

The rhinoceros and the unicorn have claimed renewed attention through the publication of seals from Harappa and Mohenjo Daro,

⁹ *Palestine in General History*, Oxford, 1929, Plate 5.

¹⁰ Landon, *Nepal*, Vol. I, p. 292 (1928).

¹¹ *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (in 1793), London, 1811.

¹² Taken from *Hobson-Jobson* (ed. of 1903), p. 762. Earlier accounts are quoted, 1387 and 1398.

¹³ *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 363-4.

in 1924, and in the years immediately following. At both sites along the Indus many seals showing a unicorn with uplifted head over some object not clearly identified, have been found. In 1925, C. J. Gadd compared these with bulls on contemporary seals from Sumeria. The resemblance is striking. The object in front of the animal has been described as suggestive of a drum or of a sheaf of corn and as referring to some sort of cult. The thought of an altar where the beast was to be sacrificed has also been suggested. But, one of the pictures shown on Plate XLV of the *Archaeological Survey of India, Report for 1925-26*, leads me to suggest that the object may be some sort of a head-stall. Sir John Marshall thinks that all these seals depict bulls.¹⁴ But there is one figure, Plate XLV, number 7, in the *Report for 1925-26*, which shows the animal, with long neck and upraised head, *without* the horn in front of the ears, *but with one horn rising out of the snout*.¹⁵ Moreover, both on seals and in terra cotta of the same date, there are realistic pictures of the Great Indian Rhinoceros.¹⁶

The beast is clearly known in India from very early times and occupies a place of some sort in the cult even then.

If the position of the rhinoceros can not be fully established as sacred in the remote past, still there are fairly old references in India that do suggest it. In one of his Pillar Edicts, Asoka declared the rhinoceros to be a sacred animal.¹⁷ Of course the famous refrain from the *Sutta Nipāta*,¹⁸ "Let him wander alone like a rhinoceros", comes to mind. Manu (III, 271, 272) refers to the flesh of the rhinoceros as giving pleasure to the manes for twelve years, and states that its flesh is productive of satisfaction for endless time. Hopkins notes in his *Epic Mythology* (p. 33), among the families of the *pitrs* one of the *mārtimantas* (embodied) as bearing the name *ekaśṛṅga* (unicorn). Is this an evidence of totemism? It is to be noted that it is by means of the *śrāddha* feast that the *pretas* are released and raised to the rank of *pitrs*. H. H. General Kaiser Sham Sher Jang Bahadur of Nepal says

¹⁴ *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1925-26*, p. 86.

¹⁵ This figure is reproduced in *Antiquity*, Vol. II, Plate II, in the article on pages 83-5.

¹⁶ *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1925-26*, Plate XLV, No. 19; 1924-25, Plate XXII, (c).

¹⁷ Radhakumud Mukerji, *Asoka*, London, 1928, p. 181; but he questions the rendering of the word *palasate*.

¹⁸ In the *Khaggavisāṇasutta*.

that the flesh and blood of the rhinoceros are considered pure and highly acceptable to the manes.¹⁹

Let us now consider present-day customs and traditions centering around the rhinoceros which suggest that it is a sacred animal.

Powdered rhinoceros hide is used by yogis as a dusting for wounds. The rulers of Nepal and others who come to look at the rhinoceroses in the Zoological Gardens at Calcutta always worship them. In their adoration of the sun, yogis wear a ring of rhinoceros horn on the second finger of the right hand; and in other forms of worship the same practice obtains. Some who do not wear the *cuṭiya* (scalp lock) use a ring of rhinoceros horn while making oblations of water. Earrings of rhinoceros horn are much prized by those yogis whose distinctive mark is the huge rings worn in the cartillages of the ears.

Why is the animal sacred? One explanation that Śāivites give is that it bows its head slowly like an elephant, and so is sacred to Śiva, whose son has an elephant's head. In the Mahābhārata, *gandalin* is an epithet of Śiva.²⁰ In the Kālikā Purāna, Rudhirādhyaya chapter, it is stated that the flesh of the rhinoceros pleases the goddess for 500 years. And besides, Rāma Chandra possessed a shield of rhinoceros hide. Kānphaṭa yogis, who, after initiation wear huge earrings of clay, say that the beast is associated with mud, the substance of their rings.

But the most interesting legends are associated with the *śrāddha* sacrifice and the traditions which have gathered about the Pāṇḍavas and the Kāuravas of The Great Epic. This is the same cycle of tradition to which belongs the family name *ekaśṛṅga*. The five Pāṇḍavas once killed a rhinoceros and used the hide as a vessel in which to offer water to the sun. An elaboration of this tradition will be given shortly.

¹⁹ Professor G. W. Brown has sent me the following quotation concerning the rhinoceros, from the *Hindī Shabdā Sāgara*, Vol. I, p. 840.

Is ke camre kī dhāleṅ bantī hāin
Is ke thūthan par ke sīng ke
Bhāratvarṣ meṅ arghā bantā hāi
Jo pitrapan ke liye uttam mānā jātā hāi.

"From its hide shields are made; upon its snout there is a horn; in Hindusthan proper they make (from its hide) the oblation-vessel deemed best for offerings to the manes."

²⁰ 13. 1204. *Gaṇḍa* = rhinoceros.

The body and legs of the rhinoceros are offered to Gorakhnāth the master yogī, intimately related to the Gurkhas of Nepal. Landon (*Nepal*, Vol. I, p. 292), quoting from H. H. General Kaiser Sham Sher Jang Bahadur, says that its urine, as an anti-septic, is hung in a vessel at the principal door of the house as a charm against ghosts and evil spirits of disease. And further that, in connection with the sacrifice of the rhinoceros, most Gurkhas offer libations of blood to the manes after entering its disemboweled body. On ordinary *śrāddha* days libations of water and milk are made from a cup carved from its horn.

Finally, as illustrating both the offering of the funeral oblations and the pilgrimage of the Pāṇḍavas through the Himalayas, the following legend may be given, translated rather literally from the Hindī as it was given to the writer in one of the villages on the Ganges, above Hardwār, on the pilgrim road to Kedārnāth and Badrināth.

As the result of the great war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kāuravas (the ancient war which is the central theme of the Mahābhārata) the Pāṇḍavas, by slaying their kinsmen in battle, were disqualified from performing the funeral rites for them. They appealed to Brahmā for absolution. In reply, the Creator commanded: "First make the pilgrimage to Badrināth and Kedārnāth". The Pāṇḍavas straightway set off upon the journey. Returning from the Himalayas, they reported to Brahmā and then asked for permission to perform the funeral rites for their slain kinsmen (ancestors). Brahmā then gave them the following instructions: "Kill a rhinoceros, make a vessel of its hide, and in that offer water to your relatives. They will receive the oblation and then will be able to proceed to Paradise." So the Pāṇḍavas slew a rhinoceros, made a vessel of its hide and, from it, poured out water as an oblation to their kinsmen. The *pinḍa* was then offered (i. e., the funeral rites were then performed), and the slain relatives attained Paradise. Since that time the rhinoceros has been considered a sacred animal.