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## Rhinoceros in Borneo: and Traded to China\*

by TOM HARRISSON

There are five kinds of Rhinoceros extant in the world today. Three of these are Asian, all perilously reduced in numbers. They are normally classified as:

1. Sumatran Two-horned Rhinoceros  
(*Didermocerus sumatrensis*)
2. Javan One-horned Rhinoceros  
(*Rhinoceros sondaicus*)
3. Indian One-horned Rhinoceros  
(*Rhinoceros unicornis*).

Of these the first two are relatively smallish and confined to South-East Asia; only the first is found in Borneo (as well as Sumatra). In addition, there are two African species, both large and with two horns, — like (in this) the Sumatra-Borneo rhino and *unlike* the other Asians.

This distribution and hornage should be borne in mind as the context (and corrective) to the following discussion, which is focussed from the Bornean, two-horned angle.

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\*My interest in this subject stems from two main sources:

- (i) I am perhaps the last non-Bornean to have crossed the fresh tracks of the Two-horned Rhino. In October 1945 at about 3,000 ft. in the uninhabited mountainous Indonesian area between the headwaters of the Bahau (Poedjoengan) and upper Batang Kayan rivers one rushed ahead of our path.
- (ii) Mr. Soame Jenyns of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum, who has stimulated me to take an interest in this and other semi-abstruse aspects of Chinese culture—in this case both personally and through a wide review of horn-carving which he gave to the Oriental Ceramic Society in December 1955 (shortly to be published).

**Sad Tale (— 1946)**

We know, from the Chinese end, that rhino horn was of high value centuries back, principally for libation cups (see Frontispiece) with supposedly magical (links to afterworld) and prophylactic (anti-poison) faculties. Later, the ground-up horn, nails and other parts became more in demand for allegedly aphrodisiacal properties.

At one time, Borneo must have been one main source of this supply, from the endemic two-horned species, *D. sumatrensis*. There is already ample proof of extensive direct Borneo trade with the mainland at least as far back as the T'ang Dynasty, more than a thousand years ago. There is also strong evidence that at that time very much of Borneo was virgin jungle, sparsely inhabited and in large areas not at all under settled cultivation. It is, therefore, likely that Borneo was a particularly strong source of supply quantitatively.

Rhino abundance continued into modern times. In the memory of the oldest Kelabits of the interior rhino came out onto the Plain of Bah (Bario) at 3,500 ft. from the mountains; they even interfered with the cattle-fences round the irrigated, inland, Kelabit ricefields. Plenty of living Kelabits and Kayans of the Indonesian and Sarawak interior have taken part in rhino hunts, some bagging over ten adults. The records of the District Office, Marudi (Baram) in the Fourth Division of Sarawak listed rhinos known to be killed before the Oxford University Expedition (of which I was organiser) visited the Baram in 1932, as:

1925 .....	18
1926 .....	14
1927 .....	8
1928 .....	12
1929 .....	11
1930 .....	12
1931 .....	4

Marudi was only one of the slaughter-stations; others were Lawas, Limbang, Belaga, Sibul, Kapit, Kanowit and Bintulu in Sarawak alone.

Unbelievable though it may seem, Government took no realistic action to protect an obviously vulnerable, slow-moving,

heavy-spoored, nearly blind beast. The Curator of the Sarawak Museum at that time (E. Banks) wrote with composure of the process, which was greatly stepped up as firearms became numerous and cheap in the thirties. (It is not so easy, though by no means impossible, to kill a rhino with spear or poison darts).

Thus, in 1931, Mr. Banks was able to look at the statistics and augment them with the following curatotic observation:

"There can at the moment be no fear of Rhinoceros becoming scarce for as many as 36 trophies were brought into Belaga in two years not so long ago, and I have met men who have claimed to have shot over 30 in the course of their life time ..... the matter will one day have to be attended to."

So it continued until the Japanese occupation and during it.

In 1946, when I returned to England from wartime Borneo, I drew attention to the catastrophic results of continuing inattention, in a letter to *The Times* (of London). Very soon after, a new Game Ordinance was hurriedly introduced in Sarawak, giving nominally full protection. In 1949 I wrote (*Malayan Nature Journal* IV, 2, 71) of the species as:

*"Virtually exterminated in Sarawak"*.

In 1955 I had to report to the Fauna Preservation Society (see *Oryx* III, 3: 134) that:

*"The rhino has been hunted to near extinction in Borneo"*.

Today (1956) there are almost certainly *not more than two* living in **Sarawak**. One killed in the upper Rejang since the war was confiscated, so that we now do at least have some bits of skin and a good horn in the Museum. There may possibly be a few more in the Iwan-Bahau tract of **Indonesian Borneo**, but lasting protection there is quite ineffective.

There has been rather a lot of talk about the number left in **North Borneo**. I fear it is mostly out-of-date talk. There are really very few indeed (if any) there, too. I was repeatedly told by Government officers in 1952 — when I travelled through North Borneo — that there were still plenty about Mt. Trus Madi and eastward into Kinabatangan. Such talk is only too easy an alibi

for unease. In 1956 I asked two trained investigators to conduct wide enquiries while they spent some months on scientific work in these areas — John Boys of the Cambridge Expedition in the former, Robert Inger of the Chicago Natural History Museum in the latter. Both were accompanied by experienced Sarawak Museum Dayak collectors (R. Nyandoh and Gaun anak Surang). All four observers reported blank: no sign of rhino; and *all* natives interrogated unaware of any for years.

So it is that today the use of rhino and rhino horn are strictly becoming of historic significance only, in Borneo terms. It has to be admitted that just as Borneo Governments did practically (or absolutely) nothing to protect rhinos until too late, similarly Borneo's only Museum long seemed blissfully unaware of the contemporary historic (and prehistoric) interest of its largest native mammal. Although any Dayak was free to kill one on sight, *the Sarawak Museum has no specimen!* It is the bitterest, most shameful void in all our collections . . . . .

#### **Eye Witness (1889)**

It is today difficult to imagine—but important to the present theme to recognise—that rhinos were once common and came out into the lowlands. To be sure of this you only need to read one or two old diaries. Resident Pretymann's account, which is being serialised in this journal, of a rhino shot on the river near present day Jesselton, was an incident (to him, then) of no great interest. A decade later, H. Edgar Hughes, then a timberman in North Borneo, wrote of another such casual occurrence in his (unpublished) reminiscences. This incident was not extraordinary at that time. I am indebted to Commander A. Hughes, R.N., for the loan of his father's manuscript, of which we hope to publish more presently.

The relevant extract, dated 1889, reads:

We had some Contractors working up the Kinabatangan River, the largest River in B.N.B. On one of my visits to see how the work was going on, I was in the "**Eleanor**" steaming up the River, when the Serang (Captain) suddenly said "Babi Tuan", and there about 100 yards ahead, appeared to be a Pig wallowing in mud, close under the bank: "Half speed, slow. Stop her". Out came my 44 Winchester Repeater, and I laid down on the Deck, put the Rifle through the forward bit, drew a bead on what looked like the shoulder of a Pig, pulled the trigger, and up jumped a Rhino. It stood on the

Bank for a moment or two, made a few furious grunts at us and bolted into the Jungle. I knew that I could not have missed, so landed. We soon found blood, so followed his spoor. Three times we came to where he had stopped, turned round several times, and had smashed down some of the undergrowth. At the third stop, there were signs that we were very close, so moved forward very cautiously, as they are nasty tempered Beasts. However, we very soon came upon him; he had just died, and was lying on his back, all four feet in the air.

He had a nice horn and a small one just behind it. These I took, but there was no getting away for me for some time, as both the Malays and Chinese have great faith in the medicinal properties of Rhino Blood, hairs and tail. The latter skinned is carefully preserved, for if a woman is going to have a baby, the mere fact of having a tail hung up in the room assures her having no pain. Ting (Mr. Hughes' Chinese cook) collared the tail, and the Malays took as much blood as they could, also a whole lot of the hairs. The amazing thing about this kill was that a Rhino should be killed by such a small bullet as a 44, though the Bullet was an expanding one, and he was shot in the lungs.

Higher up the River from where we were working was the Koyah Tobacco Estate, managed by a man named Reeve, an Australian; so I steamed up there to spend a night with him.

While Borneo cannot have been at any period a *sole* source of rhino for the northern mainland trade, it must have been a significant one for quite a time. The exact duration of rhino carving and craftwork in China and Asia generally is subject to disagreement among the few who have hitherto paid attention thereto; I will return to this again, briefly, later (p.274). Here notice need only be drawn to two main aspects of rhino usage, irrespective of date:

- usage inside Borneo;
- libation cups and other objects made elsewhere.

### Use of Rhino by Borneans

The high value put on portions of the rhino by Chinese and other northern Asians, whether for carving or medication, naturally favoured an export trade rather than local use. In the past, probably the three most valuable wild things which the Bornean's had to offer the Chinese — in exchange for ceramics, metals, fine textiles they loved — were all animal products: rhino, *ho-ting* hornbill ivory and edible birds' nests. Of these, the first is now unobtainable and the craft of working it artistically has vanished entirely. The second is no longer used; and is barely known even to experts, (there are, for example, no specimens in the British Museum); but instead hornbill casques are still considerably work-



ed as ear, belt, and sword ornaments *inside* Borneo (cf. *S.M.J.* V, 3: 401). The third remains highly valued — first quality untreated nests selling at \$86.40 a kati (1½ lbs) as of September 1956 *locally* (cf. elsewhere in this issue, p.460).

But although edible nests must now be about the most costly food, by weight, in the world, and although *ho-ting* was once more valued than ivory or jade, the rhino was the Borneo equivalent of a great diamond in Africa or gold nugget in Australia. That is: it was the way to get rich quick. We have no knowledge of early prices, but in historic times a good male rhino might earn the skilful hunter thousands of dollars. There was no other way for a Kelabit or Sea Dayak to get anything like such a large sum of money. That was why the hunting pressure was so severe. It was nothing for a rhino party to go off into the interior for months at a time, living on wild sago, fern-tops, fruit and game — hunting the rhino, foolish but fast-moving in the tormented mountain country, day after day.

After allowing for prehistoric premium rates on rhino, the non-use of it for any ordinary Bornean purpose does seem rather strange. The rich and intelligent aristocracies of the Kelabits, Kenyahs and Berawans, for instance, esteemed rare, peculiar, expensive things for themselves. Such neglect, however, corresponds with the feeble place which the island's most impressive animal occupies in native mythology, symbolism and superstition. Even when it does occur (e.g. in anecdotes like "The Animals Go Tuba Fishing" at p.326 of this issue), it is nearly always as second string to the non-endemic elephant.

The rhino's ugliness and related attributes may be partly responsible. But it's penis has a special place of respect among many Borneans, by virtue of the *palang* cross-bar (see below). It may be that this association with one of the few really private parts of local life has produced a special, suppressed attitude?

Still, when we recall the big part rhinos play in the arts of other countries, such as the European stone-age, the cursory treatment in Borneo is striking enough. Nor is it confined to Borneo in Asia. This is a field which requires further exploration and analysis. Meanwhile, we may quote a passage from the recently published and masterly "The Art and Architecture of China"

(London: Penguin Books, 1956). Authors Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper discuss the famed, unique, 3,000 years old, bronze rhino in the Avery Brundage collection, Chicago, U.S.A. This matches, in body proportions and the horns, a mid-grown Borneo-Sumatran rhino. They say of it (p.7):

No more impressive example of the innate Chinese genius for animal sculpture could be found than the large bronze rhinoceros in the Brundage Collection. This vessel was found in Shantung about 1843 and bears an inscription that has been the subject of considerable study by Chinese scholars. There is very good reason to believe that it may date from the reign of the last Shang ruler, about mid twelfth century according to the traditional chronology, or the end of the first quarter of the eleventh century B.C. according to the most generally accepted revised chronology. This remarkable vessel belongs to the first great early phase we know so far, the period embracing the Shang-Yin and Early Chou dynasties. The animal is modelled with great accuracy. The species with two horns and lacking the heavy skin folds, which occur only on the single-horned variety now limited to Africa, is found in Burma and the Malay peninsula.

.... Was it the product of a local school that flourished in Shantung? Did this art of animal sculpture come to a dead end, or was it outmoded by *beliefs that demanded quite different concepts?*

The Sarawak Museum need not, then, feel so worried that it has not *one* single *representation* — realistic or ritualistic — of the Bornean rhino in its collections. Nor have I seen one, ancient or modern, in eleven years of travel through all four Borneo territories. We have, in fact, only two rhinocerotid objects worked by man, at all.

### **Rhino Pieces in the Sarawak Museum:**

(i) *Mounted Foot*. Sarawak Museum No. 2443. (Plate IIIa).

The catalogue entry for this number (in Curator Banks' handwriting) of 1929 is:

"One rhinoceros horn and three feet presented by H.H. The Rajah".

The other feet are missing; and as the small existing horns are not numbered, these cannot be checked.

This foot is quite well preserved, the toe-nails, sole and skin above in position. From two inches above the base-line of the three nails there is another two inches of finely woven basketwork in the manner of the upper Baram. Although said to be of Kayan origin, I strongly suspect it was made in the Kelabit country. The Kelabits were the great

rhino hunters of the area and also specialised in this type of close woven basketry made from an exceptionally strong but fine rattan. There are almost fifty rows of threaded over rattan. The simple design and the finish is also thoroughly Kelabit. Black and uncoloured bands of rattan alternate; and on the well-fitting lid a ring is coloured reddish. There are three "bows" of rattan for suspension, and a simple toggle device (now broken) for securing the lid.

The exact use of the resulting box is not recorded. Probably it was for circulating cigarette leaf at parties. There is no bottom except the natural skin and the untouched insides of the nails — so that it is hardly suitable for tobacco or betel. (Containers for charms are more rugged and always begrimed into semi--dereliction.)

(ii) '*Palang*' (Penis). No number or catalogue entry. (Plate IIIb).

One of the exhibits that excites the most interest in our Museum is that of the *palang*. This is the tube or rod of bamboo, bone, hardwood, etc. with which the end of the penis is pierced among many inland people, principally the Indonesian Kenyahs, but also many others — and lately even spreading to the Kelabits in the uplands. In each end of this centre-piece may be attached knobs, points or even blades of suitable materials. Some men have two *palang*, at right angles through the penis tip.

The function of this device is, superficially, to add to the sexual pleasure of the women by stimulating and extending the inner walls of the vagina. It is, in this, in my experience decidedly successful.

We also have a "natural" *palang*, exhibited alongside. This is the penis of a Borneo rhinoceros. In the natural state this powerful piece of the anatomy has, about four inches behind the tip, a similiar sort of cross-bar, projecting nearly two inches out on each side. When tense, this becomes a fairly rigid bar, much like the human *palang* in general implication. The one we have on show in the Museum has had a hardwood rod fixed in it (to keep it rigid). As such, these things were included among the *esoterica* of inland longhouses, along with sacred stones, beads, strange teeth and other charms used mainly in connection with human head and fertility ceremonies.

Many who have handled this pachyderm device have been unable to credit that it is "genuine". However, in the untouched state it can be even more impressive. The penis of another male (with not full-size horn) in our possession

measures over a foot and a half (relaxed), has a longer tip and cross-pieces than the Museum's displayed one, (as illustrated in Plate IIIb).

### Rhino Cups and other things from outside Borneo

There is no record of a libation cup (see Frontispiece) or similar Chinese style object made of rhino being found *in* Borneo. Those illustrated here in the plates (IV-V), are either in European Museums, as cited; or in my home at Kuching, but purchased in Europe. Very many thousands must have been made and used on the Asian mainland.

These lovely cups, made normally from the basal part of the horn, were the principal objects made from rhino; imported raw; treated, before carving by mainland craftsmen. Rhino halberds for swords, plaques for belts, toggles on straps, handles of knives and buttons were also popular in China. But although maybe thousands of examples survive in public and private collections all over the world, astonishingly little has been written—or, at least well written—about them. We do not even have anything (worth mentioning) about the different uses of the different *sorts* of rhinoceros (3 Asian, 2 African, others extinct), each of which has peculiarities of horn, shape and substance.

Museums in Britain have generally poor collections of rhino objects or none at all. The best in Europe are probably at Rotterdam and Munich, the latter assembled by the Royal House of Wittelsbach (Crown Prince of Bavaria). My wife and I examined much of the European material in 1955-6; and for help in this we must especially thank Mr. Soame Jenyns, Mr. Louis Clarke, Dr. R. Goepper and Graf Solms.

From Borneo (our base) we cannot get much further until more comparative studies have been carried through. Some lines may usefully be indicated from this end, though: however feebly.

The average libation cup is about 4" high, and up to 5½", occasionally more. The maximum width at the mouth (= base of horn) is 5" to 7", normally. But some, rarer, go smaller, such as one of mine 1½" high, 4" maximum mouth width — the smallest I have anywhere seen (Plate IVb).

The rear of the two horns on the rhinoceros of Borneo would seldom be large enough to provide raw material for even the *smallest* of those libation cups (Plate II). Average height and width for Borneo untreated rear horns is well below 2" and 3½" respectively. Many adult females have *front* horns under 3" to 4". And this does not allow for the cutting and cleaning of the rough and in places visibly 'hairy' edges—rhinoceros 'horn' is, of course, strictly hair solidified, and not horn in the buffalo or antler sense. A male *front* horn, widely regarded locally as large when taken, measures just over 17", with a cuppable base of 4½" (height) and 5½" (width). An unnumbered front horn, the only largeish one in the Sarawak Museum collection [perhaps that referred to under the "foot" at (i) above] is just over 19" long; even this offers a maximum of only 3½" height of workability and 5¼" maximum mouth diameter. That is still a *very small libation cup*. Banks ("*Bornean Mammals*", Kuching 1949: 81) states:

"19" is the longest Sarawak horn and 10" is a good size. Posterior horns are mostly just a swelling, but may reach 5"."

For the larger rhinos of India and Africa there is much more information. But these do not concern us here, except in so far as they once "competed" with the Borneo trade. It is, on the whole, probable that *at first* the main such trade to China was from or near Borneo and the islands generally, with the Two-horned ("Sumatran"), which alone occurs in Borneo, and the One-Horned ("Javan") forms. Then, as trade expanded and communications improved, the big rhinos occurring in India and further west became more important; while *some* of their horn had surely always come along the old overland caravan routes north of and out of India.

As regards *size*, the three species of westerly Indo-African rhinos are far the best bets. As regards propinquity, the two sorts of Sumatran-Borneo-Javan rhino *were* best. As regards quality and texture, colour, workability, we as yet have no sure idea — absurdly. My suspicion is:— the Asian are finer? There are conspicuous differences, certainly, in the appearance and 'feel' of horns as of cups; especially as between the few which can with some certainty be called 'old' (500 + years) and those relatively 'recent' (none are *really* recent). How far these differences are

due to properties inherent in the horn or its exposure, how far to changing methods of treatment, remains an unexplored blank on the art map of Asia. The problem lends itself to the latest laboratory methods and is herewith recommended to the attention of larger museums with wider facilities.

It may be that the smaller cups came more from the smaller horns of S.E. Asia, including Borneo; and during particular periods, when—as we are learning from ceramic and coin evidence—trade was at a peak.

### Dates of Chinese Cults?

There is, so far, no definite proof of anything made *from* rhinoceros occurring early in Asian culture. As we have seen, representations *of* rhino date back before the Christian era; but are rare (in any period).

Current opinion seems to favour the view that Chinese libation cups and most lesser rhino objects are nearly all late, post-Ming: within the past few centuries. The craft certainly died out some time ago, perhaps as supplies dwindled and medicinal and aphrodisiac demands grew. By the last century fine horns which survived the mincer seem to have been largely left unworked, but often well mounted. Such is the pair presented royally from Siam to the last Buonaparte Empress, now in the dim little Musée Chinois, at the Palace of Fontainebleau, near Paris.

For myself (and for what it is worth) I cannot see why oriental scholars (more scholarly than I) have been keen to date these libation cups and other rhinomorphs so late. A lot of them (the cups, not the scholars) look or *feel* late. But the “old-looking” ones are often dismissed as derivative, as imitative of earlier forms; such imitation of course did occur repeatedly in Chinese and related arts. Yet I just *cannot* see anything necessarily late about some of the pieces. And why not be early, be Sung?

Among the first things of which there is fair record as Chinese imports are “ivory, rhinoceros horns and tortoise shell”—the three which a party, claiming to be sent by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius, brought by sea to (or about) the court of the Chinese Emperor Huan in the year 166 A.D. There are doubts about the claims of these men; but little doubt

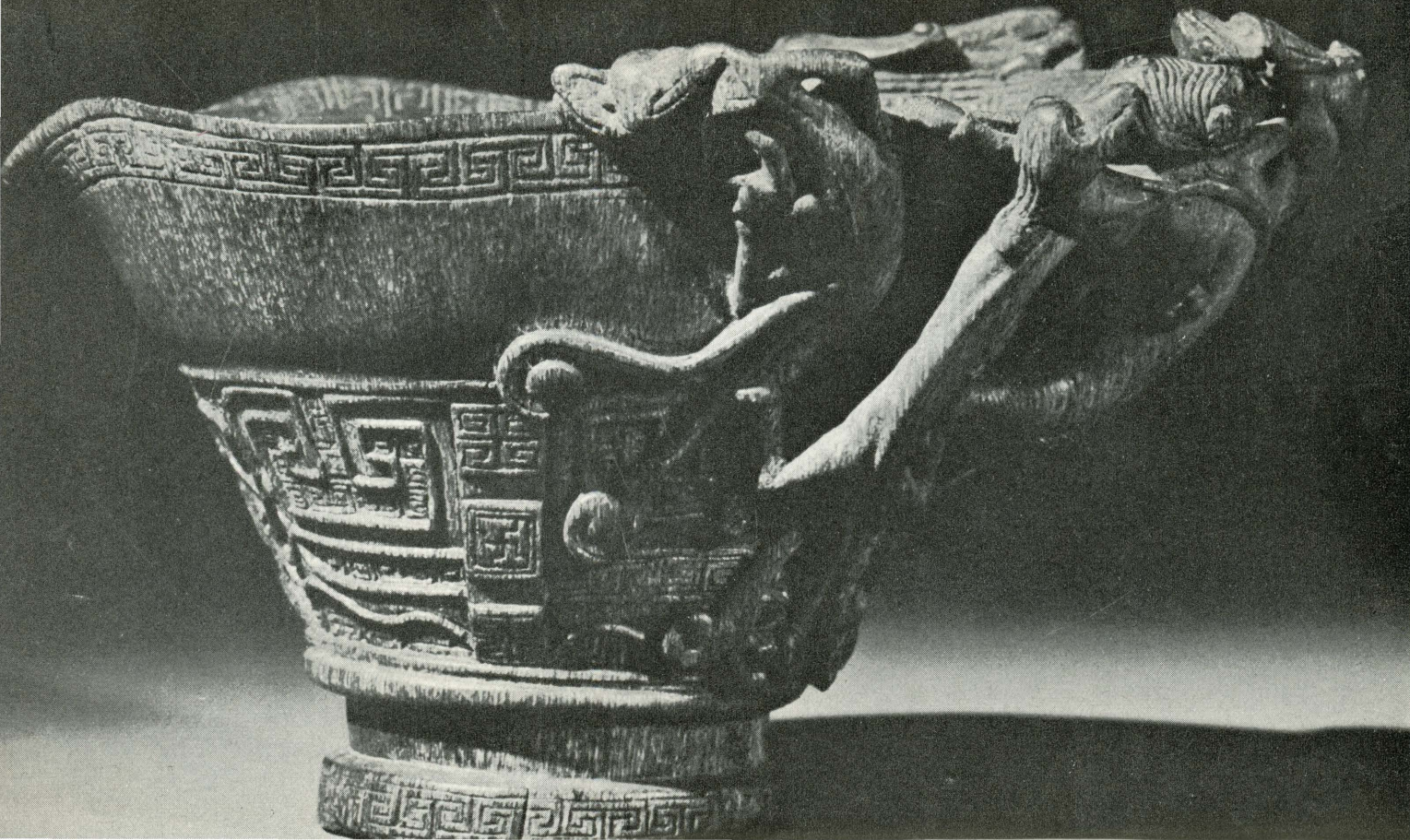


Plate I

Libation Cup of  
Rhinoceros Horn  
in Archaic Style,  
(cf. p.262) (Collect-  
ion, Crown Prince of  
Bavaria)

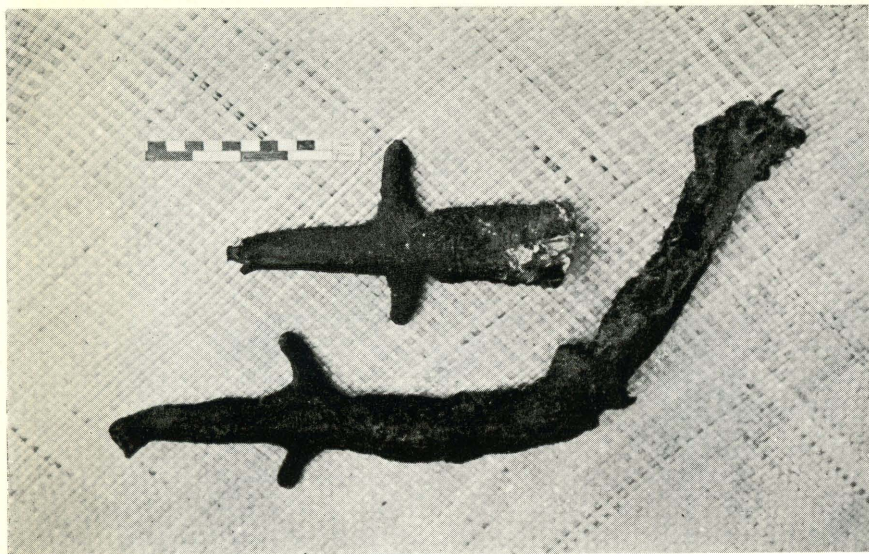


a. Pair of horns, female rhinoceros, Borneo

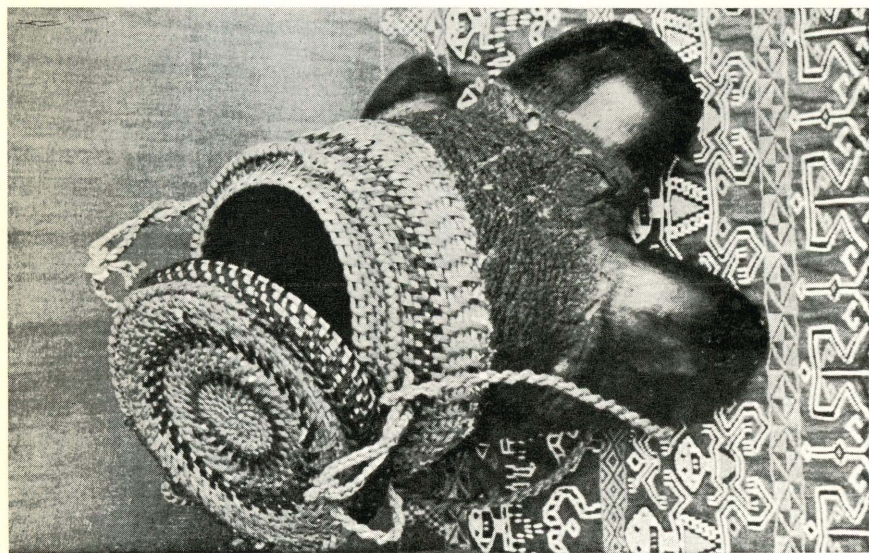


b. Forward horn of male rhinoceros, Borneo (Sarawak Museum).





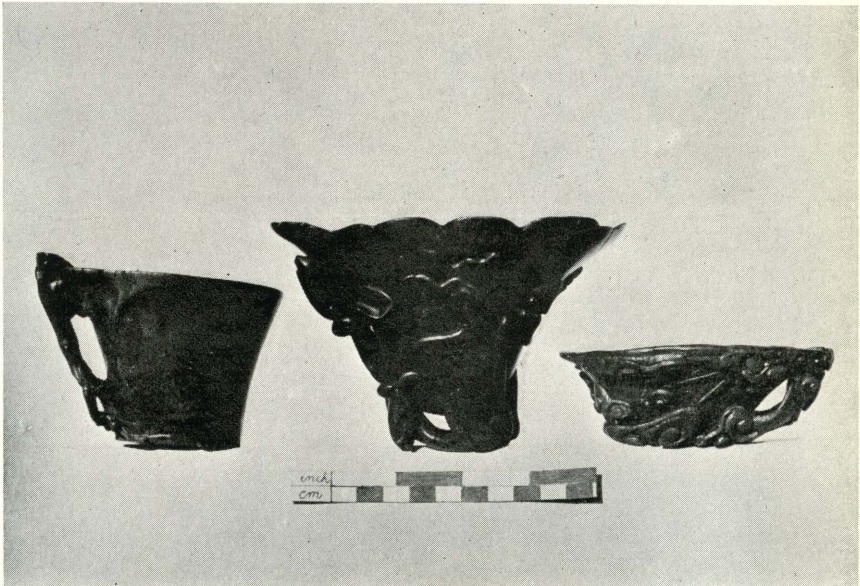
b. Rhino's penis and "Palang" (Sarawak Museum).



a. Rhino's foot as box



a. Libation Cup, ?16th Century (Frankfurt Museum).



b. Small libation cups (private collection)



Plate V

“Later” type of  
Libation Cup from  
rhino horn (Col-  
lection, Crown  
Prince of Bavaria).