

III.III First sightings of Asian rhinos

In May 1515, a ship arrived in the harbour of Lisbon, carrying the first living rhino to be seen in Europe since Roman times, presented by an Indian ruler to the Portuguese king. Although it only lived for a couple of years before drowning on the way to Rome, the animal achieved eternal fame through a woodcut made by Albrecht Dürer – showing a rhino with an armour-like skin, one horn on the nose, and a small twisted hornlet on the shoulder. This image was copied so often in books and art works in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, that everybody knew this to be the appearance of the rhinoceros.

Four other rhinos came to Europe before 1750, the most famous of which was “Clara” who toured most countries in western Europe with her Dutch owner between 1741 and 1758. She looked very much like the animal figured by Dürer, except that she did not have the small horn on the shoulders. The species was first named by Linnaeus in 1758 as *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the greater one-horned rhinoceros with a single horn. All reports about rhinos in other parts of the world were compared with this animal, and although it is easy enough to tell the five species apart when you can compare them in a zoo, this is not so easy when you have to rely on eye-witnesses who only saw a short glimpse of a large animal in the forest.

Another one-horned rhinoceros in Asia looks very much like the Indian one, but it is somewhat smaller and differs in details of the skull. Jacobus Bontius went out riding in a forest in Java around 1630, when his party was chased by a rhinoceros. He only escaped because the rhino got stuck between two trees and was unable to move. The adventure was well-known at the time, but nobody suspected that the rhino involved would be different from the ones known in Europe. Two rhinos were shot in Java in 1787 and the skulls were sent to Holland, where they were studied by Professor Petrus Camper, who made a special study of rhinos. However, he died before he could publish his conclusion that the rhinos in Java differed from those in India. The species was only recognised to be separate when an animal shot in Sumatra by the Frenchman Alfred Duvaucel was studied by the famous French scientist, Georges Cuvier in 1822, who named it *Rhinoceros sondaicus*.

The rhinoceros of Sumatra is an elusive animal. One was shot 10 miles from Fort Marlborough on the west coast of the island in 1793. William Bell, a young surgeon stationed there, made some drawings of the animal and he wrote a description, which he sent to Joseph Banks, the president of the Royal Society of London. Although the paper was published, the Sumatran rhino was only named twenty years later, in 1814, by Gotthelf Fischer, Director of the Museum of Natural History in Moscow.

In 1822, finally, all five living species of rhinoceros had been described and named by European scientists.