Unnatural History

An Illustrated Bestiary

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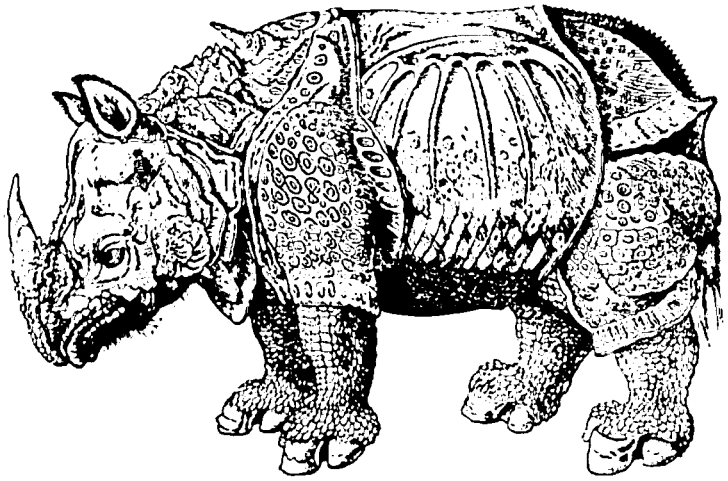


Rhinoceros
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Armed Rhinoceros

> Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
> The armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
> Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble.
>
> *Shakespeare: Macbeth*

In England, until fairly late, the rhinoceros was counted among the fabulous beasts, for although it had been seen in the Roman circus during the period of the later Empire, many centuries passed before it was ever seen beyond the Channel. Topsell calls it "the second wonder in nature," and adds, "as the beast is strange and never seene in our countrey, so my eye-sight cannot adde any thing to the description."

The rhinoceros is a true unicorn if we take the literal meaning of that word, and Marco Polo, speaking of the numerous unicorns to be found in Java the Less (i.e. Sumatra), is evidently describing the rhinoceros. "The head resembles that of a wild boar," he writes, "and they carry it ever bent towards

the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. 'Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon, and is not in the least like that which our stories tell us as being caught in the lap of a virgin." He alludes, of course to the commonly received story of the legendary unicorn delighting to lay its head in the lap of a virgin and thus suffering itself to be captured by the hunter (see page 78).

"That there is such a beast in the world," writes Topsell of the rhinoceros, "both Pliny, Solinus, Diodorus, Aelianus, Lampridius, and others, doe yeald erefrigable testimony. Heliogabalus had one of them at Rome. Pompey the Great, in his publike spectacles did likewise produce a Rhinocerot (as Seneca writeth). When Augustus rode triumphing for Cleopatra, he brought forth to the people a sea-horse and a Rhinocerot, which was the first time that ever a Rhinocerot was seene at Rome. Martiall also celebrateth an excellent epigram of a Rhinocerot which in the presence of Caesar Domitian did cast up a Bull into the aire with his horne, as if he had bin a tenyce ball. Lastly, to put it out of question that there is such a beast as this Rhinocerot, the picture and figure here expressed was taken by Gesner from the beast alive at Lysbon in Portugal before many witnesses."

Here Topsell is in error, for the woodcut of a rhinoceros which he includes in his *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes*, copied from the one in Gesner's *Historia Animalium*, was originally drawn by Albrecht Dürer before Gesner was born.

According to George Jennison (*Noah's Cargo*), tame rhinoceroses have been kept by Eastern princes for some thousands of years, and shown as emblems of royal power. "In 1398," he writes, "rhinoceroses and elephants were made to bow down before Timor, the conqueror of Delhi. They were taught to carry a howdah like the elephant, or, like so many other creatures, were set to fight for the royal pleasure, being painted in distinctive colours that the wagerers might follow more easily the fortunes of their champion."

Ulisse Aldrovandi in his *Natural History* has a woodcut of a two-horned African rhinoceros, with a collar round its neck. This may have been the one which was shown at Constantinople towards the end of the sixteenth century, for that was described as wearing a leather collar.

The horn of almost any exotic animal was credited with the power of discerning the presence of poison in liquor, a superstition which was fostered and encouraged by Arab traders who made large profits from the credulity of their customers. Indian princes not only believed in the power of the rhinoceros horn as an antidote to poison, but thought that to drink from a cup made of that animal's horn conferred immunity from sickness.

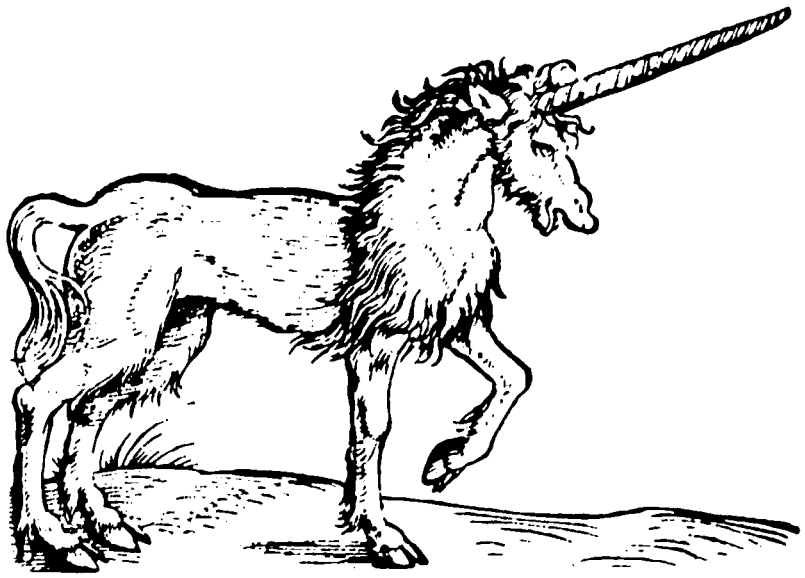
Both the *monoceros* of the later Greeks and the *unicornis* of the Romans were undoubtedly the rhinoceros; but the unicorn described by the earlier Greek authors, such as Ctesias (fourth century B.C.) seems to have been a composite figure made up of several animals, one of which appears to have been the onager, or wild ass of Asia.

Oppian declared that there was no distinction of sexes in the rhinoceros, and that all were males. This unnatural assertion Topsell discredits, saying, "from hence let nobody gather that there are no females, for it were impossible that the breede should continue without females."

"When they are to fight," he tells us, "they whet their horne upon a stone, and there is not only a discord between these beasts and Elephants for their food, but a naturall description and enmity: for it is confidently affirmed that when the Rhinocerot which was at Lisborne was brought into the presence of an Elephant, the Elephant ran away from him." This was that celebrated rhinoceros sent from India in 1513 as a present to the king of Portugal.

The rhinoceros depicted by Dürer has one horn; that shown in Aldrovandi has two. That is not an error on the part of either artist, for some of the smaller rhinos of Indonesia have

two horns, whereas other species have only one. The Javan one-horned rhino, *Rhonoceros sondaicus*, is one of the rarest of the great land mammals and is smaller than the one-horned rhino of India, *Rhonoceros unicornis*. The Javan rhinoceros was at one time found over a fairly wide area of tropical Asia, but was hunted almost out of existence in the nineteenth century, largely owing to the fact that great sums were offered for the horn on account of its legendary therapeutic value.



Unicorn
[Gesner: *Icones Animalium*, 1551-87]

The Unicorn

The Lion and the Unicorn
Were fighting for the crown.
The Lion chased the Unicorn
All round the town.

"We are come," wrote Topsell in 1607, "to the history of a beast whereof divers people in every age of the worlde have made great question, because of the rare vertues thereof; therefore it behooveth us to use some diligence in comparing togither the severall testimonies that are spoken of this beast, for the better satisfaction of such as are now alive, and clearing of the point for them that shall be borne hereafter, whether there bee a Unicorne; for that is the maine question to be resolved."

Indeed the testimonies are many, and for centuries a great deal of discussion centered upon what particular animal

was intended. The lore of the unicorn is probably more extensive than that of any other mythical animal, and the natural historians of the Renaissance devoted much space and ingenious argument to the curious belief in this animal. Aldrovandi has no fewer than sixty-seven pages on the subject.

If the unicorn has been surrounded by miraculous legends during the whole of the Middle Ages, a considerable part of this has come down from remote antiquity. Ctesias, the companion of Alexander, speaks of it, as does Pliny. The latter tells us that "the Orsean Indians hunt an exceedingly wild beast called the *monoceros*, which has a stag's head, elephant's feet, and a boar's tail, the rest of its body being like that of a horse. It makes a deep, lowing noise, and one black horn, two cubits long, projects from the middle of its forehead. This animal, they say, cannot be taken alive."

Although the unicorn was already a legendary creature in these far-off times, it was during the Middle Ages that the most fanciful legends grew around it until it became one of the outstanding features of popular mythology. For the unicorn has no place in the classic literature either of Greece or of Rome, though the belief in the magic powers of the horn of the unicorn goes right back to Ctesias, who says that in India "the dust filed from the horn is administered in a potion as a protection against deadly poisons." This superstition was widespread for centuries, and we shall have more to say about it later.

Topsell writes at great length about the unicorn. "These Beasts," he writes, "are very swift, and their legges have no Articles [joints]. They keep for the most part in the desarts, and live solitary in the tops of the Mountaines. There was nothing more horrible than the voice or braying of it, for the voice is strain'd above measure. It fighteth both with the mouth and with the heeles, with the mouth biting like a Lyon and with the heeles kicking like a Horse."

Most of the early writers dwell on its ferocity and the

fact that it was "an untameable beast by nature." Bartholomew tells us: "An Unicorn is a right cruel beast and hath that name for he hath in the middle of the forehead an horn of four foot long; and that horn is so sharp and so strong that he throweth down all or thirleth [pierces] all that he reseth [rages] on." Julius Solinus, in his *Polyhistor*, translated by Arthur Golding, speaks of the unicorn as "a Monster that belloweth horriblie, bodyed like a horse, footed like an Oliphant, tayled like a swyne, and headed like a Stagge. His horne sticketh out of the midds of his forehead, of a wonderfull brightnesse about foure foote long, so sharp that whatsoever he pusheth at, he striketh it through easily. He is never caught alive; kylled he may be, but taken he cannot bee."

Although Solinus thus affirms that the unicorn is never caught alive, and Guillim, in his *Display of Heraldry*, quoting Farnesius, likewise declares it impossible for the hunter to capture the unicorn since "the greatness of his Mind is such that he chuseth rather to die than to be taken alive," nevertheless Philip de Thaun, in his bestiary, tells us how its capture may be brought about. His narrative is written in old French, but Topsell gives us the story in English as follows:

"It is sayd that Unicorns above all other creatures doe reverence Virgines and young Maides, and that many times at the sight of them they grow tame, and come and sleepe beside them, for there is in their nature a certaine savor, wherewithall the Unicornes are allured and delighted; for which occasion the Indian and Ethiopian hunters use this strategem to take the beast.

"They take a goodly, strong, and beautifull young man, whom they dresse in the Apparell of a woman, besetting him with divers odoriferous flowers and spices . . . the Unicorne deceaved with the outward shape of a woman, and sweete smells, cometh to the young man without feare, and so suffereth his head to be covered and wrapped within his large sleeves, never stirring, but lying still and asleepe, as in his most acceptable repose. Then, when the hunters, by the signe of the young man, perceave him fast and secure, they come uppon him and by force cut off his horne."

Topsell, generally credulous, finds it difficult to accept this legend and says: 'I leave the reader to the freedome of his owne judgment to believe or refuse this relation; neither is it fit that I should omit it, seeing that all writers since the time of Tzetzes* doe most constantly beleeve it."

But Topsell's account differs from that of de Thaun inasmuch as the latter makes no mention of a man dressed in woman's clothing, but tells us the lure was in the shape of a young virgin with breast exposed, which the unicorn kissed before going to sleep. Presumably that was too immoral for the Reverend Edward Topsell.

The *Physiologus* tells the same story quite simply — "men lead a virgin to the place where he most resorts, and leave her there alone. As soon as he sees this virgin he runs and lays his head in her lap. She caresses him and he falls asleep. The hunters then approach and capture him."

For centuries the horn of the unicorn was in great demand on account of its presumed powers of detecting poison. The horn was usually referred to as "alicorn" to avoid the far from euphonious "unicorn-horn." It was particularly prized in court circles, for a ruler knew from the experience of others that death might come to him at any moment from poison in his meat or drink. Few potentates could feast without fear, and as a consequence they were willing to pay handsomely for such a powerful antidote against poison as the alicorn was reputed to be. And as the demand increased, so did the price; a piece of horn was deemed a princely gift. At the marriage of Catherine de Médicis to the Dauphin of France, the bride's uncle, Pope Clement VII, gave the bridegroom's father, Francis I, a piece of "true" alicorn.

*Tzetzes (*c.* 1110 - *c.* 1180) was the author of a long poem on historical subjects in which he quotes more than 400 authors.

In his *Gull's Hornbook* Dekker speaks of "the unicorn whose horn is worth a city," and in old inventories the "essai"* of the horn of a unicorn is frequently mentioned. At the head of an inventory taken in the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth (Harleian MSS 5953) we read: "*Imprimis,* a piece of unicorn's horn," and Peacham places "that horn of Windsor, of an unicorn very likely," among the sights worth seeing. This was presumably the piece of horn seen by the German lawyer Paul Hentzner, who, when at Windsor in 1598, was shown among other things, "the horn of a unicorn about eight spans and a half in length, valued at about £10,000." It was said to have been found in 1577 on an island in Frobisher's Strait.

"One little cup of unicorn's horn" was also in the possession of Queen Elizabeth, and was subsequently presented by James I to his queen, Anne of Denmark. In Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* we are told that "in 1641 the Marquis de la Ferté Imbaut, Marshal of France, saw in the Tower of London a Unicorn's horn covered with plates of silver and estimated at £40,000." That, in terms of money today, would be almost a million pounds!

Even parings from the horn could be sold at high prices, and only very few knew how to distinguish the "real" from the false, for high prices and a buyer's market led to all kinds of adulteration. However, we are told in an old book of infallible recipes how to avoid being swindled when buying alicorn. "For experience of the Unicorn's horn, to know whether it be right or not; put silk upon a burning coal, and upon the silk the aforesaid horn, and if so be that it be true, the silk will not be a whit consumed."

As there really was no such animal as a unicorn, the gullible were offered a variety of substitutes, such as rhinoceros horn or the horn of the narwhal, and the demand was kept up by the eulogies of contemporary writers.

*Assay.

Centaur
[Aldrovandi: *Historia Monstrorum*, 1642]

The Centaur

A well-known, yet curious, example of a combined human and animal form is found in the centaur. In Greek mythology the centaurs, part horse, part man, dwelt in the mountains of Arcadia and Thessaly. According to legend they were the offspring of Ixion and Nephele, or as a variant, of Kentaurus (the son of these two) and certain Magnesian mares. While the Lapithae were holding a feast in honour of the wedding of their king, Pirithous, to Hippodamia, the centaurs tried to carry off the bride and other women.* A battle ensued, in which Theseus, who was present, took part, and the centaurs were defeated and driven from their haunts on the slopes of Mount Pelion.

In early art the centaurs are depicted as human beings in

*A representation of this event is shown on the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia.