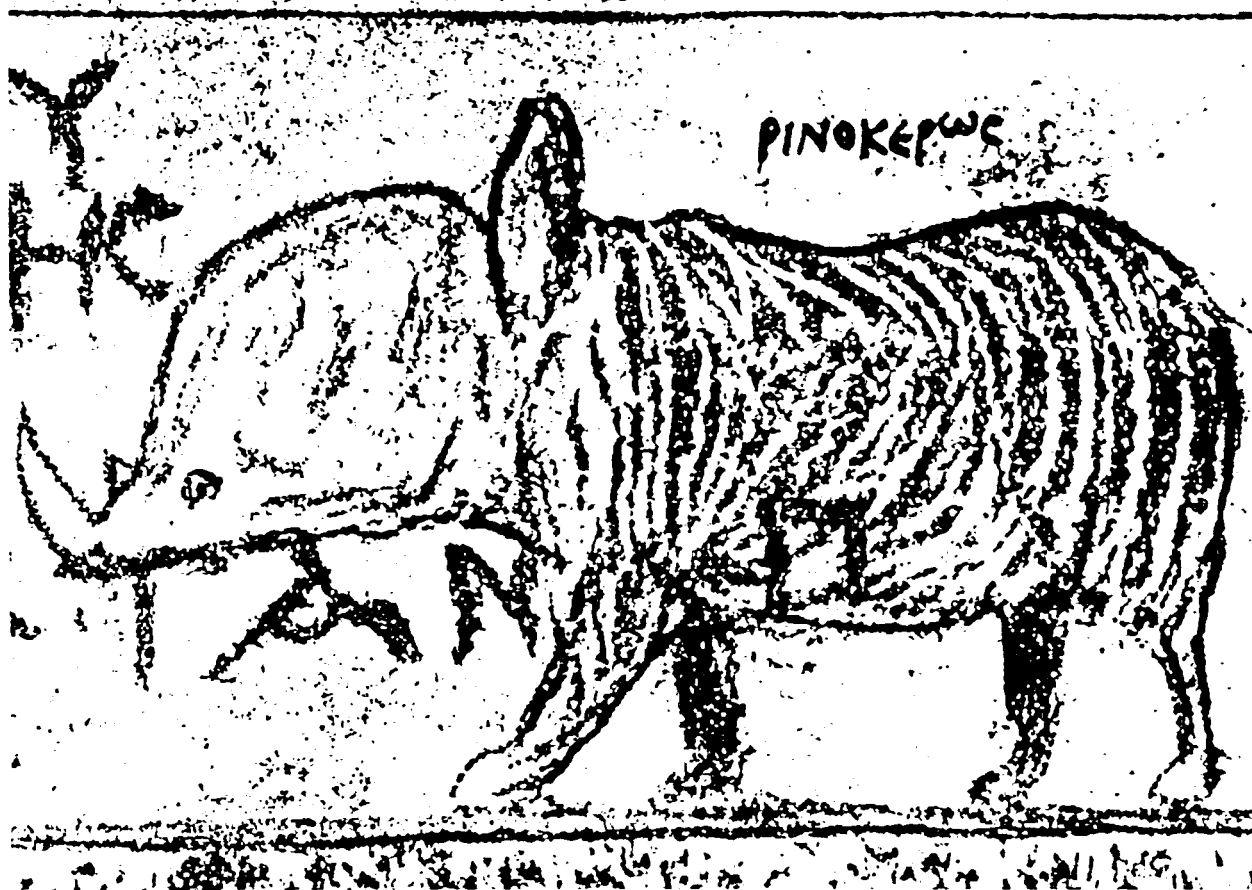


The Rhinoceros



in the Ancient World

Kathleen Coleman

The rhinoceros was named for us by the Greeks, who designated it 'nose-horn';¹ the Romans transliterated the Greek name into their own alphabet. Latin gave the word to English and, with modifications, to other modern European languages: 'renoster' (Afrikaans), 'rhinocéros' (French), 'rinoceronte' (Italian). How did the Greeks and Romans come into contact with the rhinoceros? We can piece together an answer by sifting the literary and artistic evidence.

A wall-painting dating from the third century BC, from a tomb at Marissa (Marêshah) in Jordan has been identified as the earliest Greek representation of a rhinoceros. The rhinoceros, with its grossly swollen head and stunted horns, is standing behind an elephant; both the animals are labelled in Greek, which suggests that the artist (or his patron) wanted to demonstrate that he knew their identity at a time when both animals were as yet unknown in that part of the world. Since this particular rhinoceros, shown above, recognisably has two horns, however tentatively depicted, it must represent an African species, either the White or the Black; the Indian species, by contrast, has only one horn.

Photo above: Detail of wall-painting from a tomb at Marêshah in Jordan



Scene on the river Nile from a mosaic at Palestrina, near Rome

At approximately the period to which the tomb at Marissa can be dated, the Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy II (known as 'Philadelphus'), displayed a so-called 'Ethiopian rhinoceros' in his grand procession at Alexandria in honour of the god Dionysus;² the Ptolemies probably kept rhinoceroses on a regular basis in the palace zoo. The 'Ethiopian' species of rhinoceros is also mentioned by the Elder Pliny, writing his *Natural History* around the time of the Roman emperor Nero; Pliny attributes its habitat to the upper reaches of the Nile.³ This may be a very general geographic designation, but it does at least suggest that the Nile was the main artery of the trade-route that supplied African rhinoceroses to the Mediterranean world.

In contrast to the Greek evidence, the first rhinoceros recorded as having been seen in Rome belonged to the Indian species: the animal was a single-horned specimen displayed by Pompey the Great in his extravagant games of 55 BC. This information, too, is recorded by Pliny;⁴ he goes on to repeat a piece of inherited wisdom about rhinoceroses that can be traced back to Greek geographical writers, namely that rhinoceroses fight elephants and make for the soft underbelly, which they slit with their horn.

Just as the enmity between rhinoceros and elephant was a commonly-held belief in antiquity, so too was an association between the rhinoceros and the River Nile: the Nile, teeming with fauna, was a favourite subject for mosaics, and frequently a rhinoceros appears among the hippopotami and crocodiles. A mosaic from Palestrina (ancient Praeneste), just east of Rome, furnishes an example; here, as in the tomb at Marissa, the most exotic animals are labelled in Greek. Clearly the artist's chief concern was to present an attractive composition: the jaunty rhinoceros perched on his rocky island above the water is hard to reconcile with the lumbering creature we see in the veld.



The stolid rhinoceros being lassoed around its horn in the Great Hunt mosaic at Piazza Armerina in Sicily may also reveal its associations with the Nile, as it is standing in water. This mosaic is full of African animals, and dates from the fourth century AD, a period when mosaic workshops were flourishing in Africa; so the mosaic was probably designed in Carthage, and then laid in its permanent home in Sicily. These circumstances make it all the more surprising that this rhinoceros has only one horn. A pattern-book may be responsible for this, or even simply a zoological error on the part of the artist from whom the original design had been commissioned. It is also likely that most people, if acquainted with rhinoceros at all, would know of the horn, a luxury commodity in the Roman world, and the fact that it grew not on the forehead but on the nose; and so it would be logical to assume that there would be only one horn on each animal.

Detail from the Great Hunt mosaic in the villa at Casale, near Piazza Armerina, in central Sicily

From looking at the pictorial evidence, one might gain the impression that the Romans always visualized the rhinoceros in its natural habitat. But Pompey's games of 55 BC were the first of a long series of occasions on which rhinoceroses were displayed before audiences at Rome. The association of rhinoceroses with the Nile probably caused them to be included, alongside hippopotami, in the triumphal procession in 29 BC when Octavian (later to be known as the emperor Augustus) celebrated his victory over Cleopatra.⁵ Then, as the popularity of wild-beast shows at Rome increased, rhinoceroses were pitted against other ferocious animals in the arena: in the memorial games for his stepson Drusus in AD 6, Augustus staged a fight between a rhinoceros and an elephant.⁶ At the dedication of the Colosseum by the emperor Titus in AD 80, a rhinoceros attacked a bull and tossed it into the air 'like a straw dummy'.⁷ This rhinoceros is described as 'tilted forward' for the attack, an expression which



Reconstruction of the interior of the Colosseum, showing the arena landscaped for a beast-hunt

exactly fits the posture of the White rhinoceros: it charges with its head lowered, with the result that the hump on the back of its neck stands out and makes its headlong dash look all the more menacing.

The impression that this Colosseum specimen was a White rhinoceros is confirmed by another poem from the cycle commemorating these inaugural games, which describes what was probably the same animal.⁸ This time its terrified keeper had to goad the lumbering creature into action: the animals in the arena must often have been too placid by nature and, under the circumstances, too frightened to display the savage behaviour expected of them; furthermore, initial docility is characteristic of the White rhinoceros. When this one did finally attack the other animals in the ring, it tossed a bear and then two bullocks, a buffalo and a wisent (a kind of bison), and won great admiration from the spectators. Its movement in tossing the bullocks was 'a jerk of its neck', a phrase which conveys the posture of a charging rhinoceros: head down to impale its victim on its horns, then tossed sharply backwards to throw the victim into the air. Finally, Titus's rhinoceros chased a lion which, in its efforts to escape, rushed towards the edge of the ring, where armed attendants were stationed ready to spear any runaway animals to death. The lion's plight is confirmed by modern knowledge of the veld: the rhinoceros is one of the few animals that lion go out of their way to avoid, and, if an encounter occurs, the rhinoceros is invariably the winner.

The heroic rhinoceros displayed in Titus's games may not only be the one whose exploits we hear of in greatest detail; we may also have a portrait of it, if it is the same specimen depicted on a coin minted by the emperor Domitian at least three years after Titus's games.⁹ The purpose of this coin-issue was to advertise the exotic fauna which the emperor displayed at Rome for the entertainment of his people. Indeed, right into the



Coin minted by the emperor Domitian showing a rhinoceros with two horns

second century and beyond, emperors continued to exhibit rhinoceroses at Rome: one of the latest datable references is to a rhinoceros displayed by Philip the Arab at the celebrations held in AD 248 to mark the thousandth anniversary of Rome's legendary founding in 753 BC.¹⁰

Today the rhinoceros is at risk of extinction because its horn, ground down, fetches exorbitant prices for its supposedly aphrodisiac properties. Yet the Romans seem merely to have used the horn, intact, as an oil-flask;¹¹ to them, the animal itself was an object of intense curiosity for its outlandish appearance and its physical strength. In the arena, in contrast to modern methods of poaching, it was at least given a chance to fight for its life; and one famous specimen certainly acquired a following of fans among the 45 000 spectators in the Colosseum. If de-horning specimens in the wild today is the only way to guarantee their survival, it is a great irony that this animal will no longer live up to the graphically descriptive name by which the Greeks designated it for posterity.

Notes

- 1 From 'rhin-', the root of the word for 'nose', and 'keras' for 'horn'
- 2 Athenaeus 201c
- 3 Plin *NH* 6.185
- 4 Plin *NH* 8.71
- 5 Dio 51.22.5
- 6 Dio 55.33.4
- 7 Martial, *Liber Spectaculorum* 9
- 8 Martial, *Liber Spectaculorum* 22
- 9 H Mattingly and E A Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*. Vol II *Vespasian to Hadrian* (London, 1926; repr 1968), 208 s v Domitian 434-5
- 10 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae: Gordiani Tres* 33.1-2
- 11 Martial 14.52.