

African Animals in Renaissance Literature and Art



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are shown digging for gold in West Africa and the Kings of Manicongo and Quiloa are both represented. As in Alvares' map, mountains and rivers have been painted in, the most spectacular being the Mountains of the Moon, from which flows the River Nile. The continent is also decorated with monsters. Two monstrous men – one with six arms and the other with his head growing beneath his shoulders – are to be found in the most remote regions of the interior. African animals are one of the most striking features of the map. Along the north coast ambles a neatly painted camel. A grey ostrich, his feathers highlighted with gold, stands next to the King of Mauretania. Further south, beneath a tropical tree, a brown lion is crouching, ready to spring at a large camel which placidly faces him. North of El Minha are three elephants. One, painted pale grey, looks westward. A brown elephant faces the Sahara Desert. The third elephant, which is painted blue, looks back fearfully, with its trunk twisted to the east. A shaggy, brown beast is standing there. It is recognizable from the horns on its nose as a rhinoceros, sometimes considered the traditional enemy of the elephant.⁴ Beyond the Mountains of the Moon there is a yellow dragon with blue wings and a blue ring round his neck. He confronts a green reptile with a twisted tail. Further south there is a green serpent and, near the Cape of Good Hope, two brown African oxen are grazing among pink and brown rocks.

Such, in pictographic form, was the image that many men and women had of Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was a vast continent, inhabited by Arab and Negro peoples, where wild beasts, snakes and dragons could be found.

Descliers not only painted animals on his map. In a framed label, he wrote a brief description of the continent, which ended with the following list: 'The animals are: Lyons, elephants, camels, leopards, ounces, dromedaries, buffaloes, monkeys, giraffes, rhinoceroses, panthers, horned asses. Other beasts which in Latin are called: Rhises, hyaenas, hystrices, thoas, ciconias, pizardos and ostriches. The serpents are dragons, crocodrilles, basilisks, asps, ocrastes and others.'⁵ Similar lists of African animals are to be found in Renaissance books on cosmography. In 1520, Boemus wrote in his *De Omnium Gentium Ritibus*:

Affrike hath also many sondric beastes, and Dragones that lye in awaite for the beastes, and when thei see theme, so bewrappe and wreathe them aboute, that takying fro them the use of their ioynctes, thei wearie them and kill them. There are Elephants, Lyons, Bugles, Pardales, Roes, and Apes, in some places beyond nombre. There are also Chamelopardales and Rhizes, like unto Bulles. Heredote writeth that there be founde Asses with hornes, Hienas, Porpentines, wilde Rambes, a beast engendered of the Hiene and the Woulfe named Thoas, Pantheres, Storckes, Oistruthes,

and many kindes of serpentes, as Creastes, and Aspides, against whom nature hath matched the Ichneumon (a verie litle beast) as a mortall enemye.⁶

These lists of African animals are very similar and the ancient names are given. Boemus wrote that he derived the information for his book from: Diodorus Siculus, Berosus, Strabo, Solinus, Trogius Pompeius, Ptolemy, Pliny, Cornelius Nepos, Dionysius the African, Pomponius Mela, Caesar, Josephus and certain contemporary writers like Aeneas Sylvius and Nicholas Perotte.⁷ Not all these men had written in detail about Africa and her monstrous beasts. Nevertheless, classical writers like the Elder Pliny not only gave the names of the animals, but told many delightful and amusing stories about them as well.

Pliny's *Natural History* was immensely popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The work was printed many times and translated into several European languages. It was an informative, entertaining account of the world, its peoples and animals. Most African animals were described in Book VIII. Pliny claimed that this was an expanded version of the relevant parts of Aristotle's zoological books. The Greek philosopher's more exact and analytical approach to the subject was not taken very seriously, however, so Pliny's work proved more 'lightsome' and entertaining to read. It was interspersed with descriptions of the festivals in Ancient Rome when beasts had been brought from Africa to entertain and amaze the people. For example, he described how a hippopotamus and five crocodiles had been exhibited at the games in Rome by Marcus Scaurus.⁸ Pliny claimed that the animals could do many fabulous things – for instance, the elephant could understand human speech and lead the traveller who had gone astray to his destination. If an animal had featured in an ancient myth or legend, Pliny invariably related the tale. By reading Pliny, one could easily form the impression that Africa was a continent teeming with extraordinary creatures. It was from him that the proverbial expression, 'ex Africa semper aliquid novi', was derived.

With the revival of Greek letters during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the works of historians and geographers like Herodotus and Ptolemy were made available to Europeans. Men and women could learn many curious and interesting details about Africa and her animals from writers like these. In the British Museum there is a fifteenth-century Latin manuscript translation of Ptolemy's *Geography*.⁹ On the fly-leaf of the codex someone has drawn a large, naturalistic African elephant standing in front of his round feeding tray. A caption to the left of the elephant informs us that a beast similar to the one depicted (named an elephant) was taken to France by some Genoese and presented to King Louis XI in 1479. Unfortunately, the animal died in Avignon the following year, but, says the caption, 'In this book you will find the place where they live'.¹⁰

for the beasts to refresh themselves. A large crowd gathered to watch the event. All the stands and enclosures were full and people watched from the windows and roofs of the houses round the square. Many 'foreigners' came to Florence especially to see the fight. Among them were four Cardinals who had come up from Rome in disguise. Bears, leopards, stags and other wild beasts were let into the arena, with bulls, horses and dogs. Last of all came two lions. The crowd was frantic with excitement, but the first lion shied away because of the tumultuous noise. When some dogs approached him, the lion seized one with his paw, so that it dropped dead on the ground. He killed a second dog in the same way, but did not attack any of the other beasts. When the lion saw that the other animals would not molest him, he stood quite still and then walked away. The Florentines, however, had made a model tortoise and a model porcupine. Inside were men who wheeled the models all over the Piazza. They were armed with lances which they kept thrusting at the animals to tease them and make them fight more fiercely. Although the lions gave a disappointing performance, the *festa* was a great success. It was a dangerous sport, too, for many men were injured and three died.

While the Florentines devised this sort of entertainment for their guests, the Portuguese organized an animal combat on one occasion for another purpose. The Medieval Bestiary had claimed that the unicorn, the most fearsome of all wild beasts, often fought with elephants and vanquished them by wounding them in the belly with its long horn. Fights between the elephant and the unicorn had been depicted by Medieval artists – for instance, one of the marginal drawings in Queen Mary's Psalter shows a unicorn rushing at an elephant.⁴ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there were men who identified the rhinoceros with the fierce unicorn of Medieval lore.⁵ Therefore, when the King of Portugal was presented with both a rhinoceros and an elephant by some Portuguese merchants in 1517, the beasts were led into a specially constructed arena to see whether they would fight. At first the animals refused to do so, but when they did rush at each other, it was the elephant who was victorious. For many spectators this must have provided clear proof that the rhinoceros was not the Medieval unicorn. Nevertheless, this identification continued to be discussed for many years. As late as 1674 a Portuguese explorer is quoted as affirming that the unicorn 'is not to be confused with a rhinoceros because the rhinoceros has two horns a bit arched. The unicorn is as big as a splendid horse of dark bay colour, with mane and tail black and a long whitish horn'.⁶

Lions were kept in many cities and palaces in Europe. There had been a lion house in Florence since the end of the thirteenth century, near the Palazzo Vecchio, and close to the Via dei Leoni which still bears their name. The Florentines had become quite superstitious about these beasts. If a lioness gave birth to cubs it was considered a good omen; if



24. A Unicorn Fighting with an Elephant, marginal tinted drawing from the Queen Mary Psalter, English, c. 1310-20.

a lion died, it augured ill for the city. Even as sceptical an historian as Francesco Guicciardini wrote of the death of a lion which seemed to foretell the death of Lorenzo de' Medici. In his *Storie Fiorentine* he wrote: 'This death [Lorenzo's] was indicated to be of the greatest significance by many portents . . . some lions fought among themselves and a very beautiful one was killed by the others.'

Lions were kept in Venice, Siena and Ferrara, and Iacopo Bellini's sketchbooks⁸ show many studies of them. The beasts are drawn in every conceivable attitude. They crouch, they sit, they lie down, they pounce, they eat, they play with their young. Some are shown from behind the barred windows of their cage. Naturalistic lions form part of more complete compositions. Studies of St Jerome show him flanked by a lion and a lioness. Young David is shown astride a seated lion whose jaws he is opening with his bare hands. Lions are depicted fighting with horses. A warrior in ancient armour battles with a large lion and pierces its eye with his sword. The lion stands upright on its hind legs, with its front paws on the man's chest and shoulder. A dead lion lies at the warrior's feet. Among many sketches of men on horseback is drawn a naked faun riding a long, lithe lion with a furry mane. The faun clutches the mane as he rides through a stark, rocky landscape, pursued by two men armed with a crossbow and sword. A design for a tomb shows a cadaver on top of the tomb and a crucifixion scene. In front of the tomb sits a lion with three cubs. It looks back at two of the cubs rather fiercely. This naturalistic group of lions could be Bellini's version of the old Bestiary story of how lion cubs are brought to life three days after their birth, by their father breathing into their faces. If so, the group of animals, which at

Plate 24

Plate 25

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Plate 26

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Plate 27

bestiaries, the writers must have considered it possible that beasts like unicorns existed, but had not yet been discovered. After all, monstrous and marvellous beasts like the elephant, the giraffe and the rhinoceros had been seen abroad and had been brought to Europe. Was it not also likely that beasts such as the unicorn and salamander, which played such a great part in medieval European animal-lore, would also come to light? In the mid-sixteenth century they were confidently included in zoological works. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, zoologists were becoming more doubtful of their existence.) Sixteenth-century books were clearly illustrated with large drawings of the animals described. The descriptions of the animals were detailed and much information was taken from Aristotle, Pliny and other classical writers. Often anecdotes of how the author had examined an exotic beast himself were included. These books were scholarly works, not accounts of journeys to foreign countries or picture books of miscellaneous, curious details about the world, designed to delight the public. They were usually modelled on the relevant books of Pliny's *Natural History* and drew much of their inspiration from Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*. They were also in the tradition of the Medieval encyclopaedic works on nature.

As has been mentioned above (p. 34), Pierre Belon was a physician who travelled to Turkey, the Holy Land and Egypt in the 1540's. When he returned to Europe, he wrote a number of serious, scholarly works on natural history, in which he incorporated many of the exotic animals he had seen on his travels. Belon was particularly interested in ichthyology and ornithology. He also enjoyed writing about the more obscure, bizarre breeds of animals. This could be seen in his *L'Histoire Naturelle des Estranges Poissons* which was published in 1551.² In this work he described in particular the dolphin and the hippopotamus. He derived most of his information from classical sources, but he was eager to relate how he had seen a hippopotamus himself in Constantinople. It had been presented to the Grand Turk by the Sultan of Egypt. It was not kept at the menagerie near the Hippodrome with the lions, leopards and other wild beasts, but was housed in the ruins of the *Palace of Constantine* with the Grand Turk's elephants. It was the beast that visitors were most eager to see and its enterprising keeper extorted a large amount of baksheesh from them for that privilege. The spectacle was obviously worth paying for. The animal could perform the trick of opening its huge jaws to catch vegetables which were thrown at it. Belon was surprised to see it brought, unbound, out of its stable. The keepers were not afraid that it would bite. He wrote:

When some foreigner comes to see the aforementioned *Hippopotamus*, they show it to him, if he gives them some money.

They make it come out of its stable unbound, having no fear that it might bite. Then its keepers, wishing to please whoever

they are showing it to more, have some head of round cabbage, or a piece of melon, or a handful of grass, or, indeed, some bread, given to them, which they hold up in the air, showing it to the *Hippopotamus*. Understanding that they want it to open its mouth, it opens it so widely that the head of a yawning lion could fit inside it. Then its keeper throws it what he has shown it, as if he were throwing it into a large sack. The *Hippopotamus* chews this and then swallows it.³

Belon noted that the hippopotamus was an animal which lived on land and in the river. Other animals with this double habitat were the otter, the beaver, the sea-ox and the crocodile. The hippopotamus was similar to the dolphin, because, like that aquatic animal, it could stay in the water for a long time and only surface occasionally to breathe. Unlike the dolphin, it was a quadruped.

Although the ancient authorities had described the hippopotamus, they had not done so very thoroughly and Belon felt that it was necessary to give a new description. He declared, however, that he would only write down what he himself had observed.⁴ He must have studied the beast carefully, for he noticed many details.

To give his readers some idea of what the hippopotamus looked like, Belon constantly compared and contrasted it with familiar, European animals. His readers should visualize it as a very large, well-fed pig, whose head was like a cow's, but it did not have horns. The hippopotamus' skin was like a pig's, but its head was enormous. It opened its jaws so widely that a man could easily put his whole head into its mouth. Its nostrils were swollen like those of an ox and it ate grass like an ox or a horse. Its teeth resembled those of a horse. They were long and strong, but not sharp like those of carnivorous animals. It lived on sugar-cane and papyrus leaves. Its big eyes resembled those of an ox; its short, fat tail was like that of a pig.

Belon did not know what kind of noise it made - 'ie ne scay quelle grande voix il fait'. Herodotus had claimed that it neighed like a horse, but Belon was rather doubtful about that. He had only heard the animal make a grunting noise as it cleared its throat.

Although he did not sketch the animal in Constantinople, Belon published two illustrations of it. One was copied from an antique statue of the *River Nile*, which Belon had seen in the Belvedere Gardens in Rome. In this composition, a hippopotamus had been represented, biting the tail of a crocodile. Belon observed that the artist had carved the beast's feet unrealistically. The other illustration was taken from a medal of the Emperor Hadrian, which Belon's friend, M. Grollier, had shown him. Again, it represented the Nile. Next to a river god, leaning on a sphinx and holding a cornucopia, stood a hippopotamus.

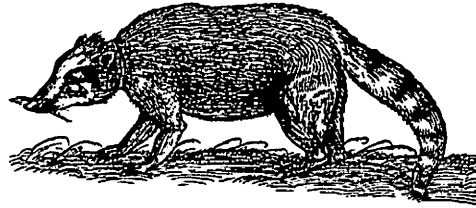
In 1555, Belon wrote a Latin work on ichthyology *De Aquatilibus*.

Plate 53

Plate 54



65. Ape, from P. Belon. *Observations*.

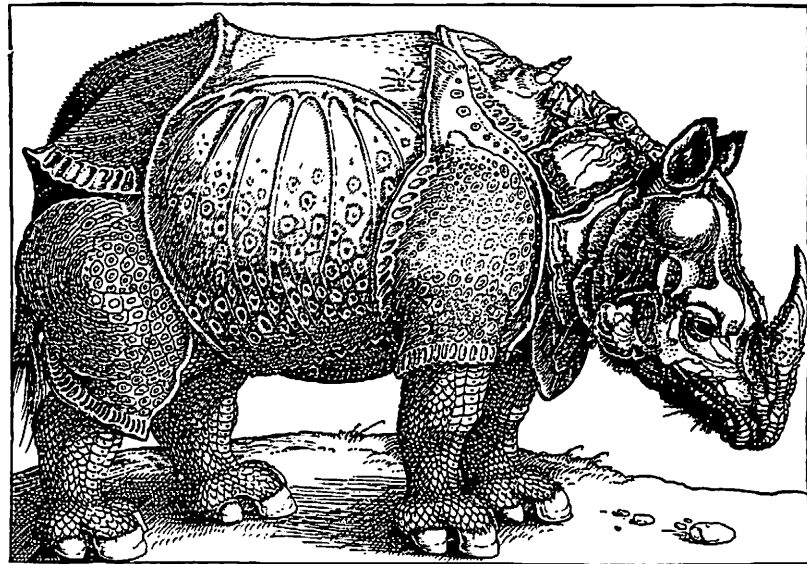


66. Two illustrations of the Ichneumon.
C. Gesner. *Historiae Animalium*.

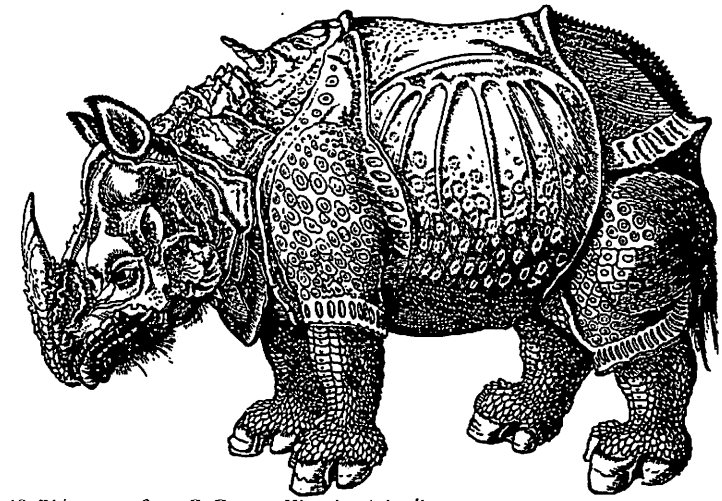
toes. (Pierre Belon had also sketched and described an ape, although his illustration of the beast was somewhat different.) Gesner stated that his picture of the beast came from a certain German book describing the Holy Land.¹⁶ He was careful to quote the source of his illustrations (which was not always the case with sixteenth-century zoologists) and he tried to have drawings that were as accurate and up-to-date as possible. When he found two rather different versions of the ichneumon, he

Plate 65

Plate 66



67. Rhinoceros.
A. Dürer.



68. Rhinoceros, from C. Gesner. *Historiae Animalium*.

Plates 67, 68

printed them both, one below the other, so that the reader could see both variants. When he printed Dürer's Rhinoceros, he explained where he had obtained his picture of this marvellous beast.

Gesner's scholarship was careful and thorough, but, because he had not seen many of the exotic animals he described, his information could be misleading. Probably because of Gesner's scholarly reputation, Dürer's beautiful, but largely imaginary, figure of the Indian 'Gomda' became the standard picture in Europe of a rhinoceros for nearly two hundred years.¹⁷ It appeared in a book by André Thevet, on a coat of arms, in a solemn procession in Paris in the sixteenth century and its fantastic features found their way into most seventeenth and eighteenth-century pictures of the animal. When Edward Topsell wrote his *Historie of Four-Footed Beastes* in 1607, he took most of his information and illustrations from Gesner. He found Dürer's Rhinoceros a most wonderful beast and wrote enthusiastically of it:

We are now to discourse of the second wonder of nature, namely of a beast every way admirable, both for the outward shape, quantity and greatness, and also for inward courage, disposition and mildness . . . And being now come to the story of this beast, I am hartily sorry, that so strange an outside, as by the figure you may perceive, yealding no doubt through the omnipotent power of the creator, an answerable inside, and infinite testimonies of worthy and memorable vertues comprised in it, should through the ignorance of men, lye un-

fouled and obscured before the Readers eyes: for he that shall but see our stories of the Apes, of the Dogs, of the Mice, and of other small beasts, and consider how long a treatise we have collected together out of many writers, for the illustration of their natures and vulgar conditions, he cannot chuse but expect some rare and strange matters, as much unknowne to his minde about the storie of this Rhinoceros, as the outward shape and picture of him, appeareth rare and admirable to his eies: differing in every part from all other beasts, from the top of his nose to the tip of his taile, the eares and eies excepted, which are like Beares.¹⁸

Embellished by Dürer's imagination, here was one of the most curious and bizarre animals known to Renaissance zoologists. It is not surprising that it was thought a very marvellous beast and was copied again and again. F. J. Cole has shown that it had such a powerful influence on the people who saw it, that when Bruce went to East Africa in the eighteenth century, although he claimed that the animal representing a Rhinoceros was nothing like the real one he had seen personally, his own drawing of the African rhinoceros was still similar to Dürer's Indian Gomda.

Another sixteenth-century zoologist of the calibre of Belon and Gesner was the Italian, Ulysses Aldrovandi. Jean Cornelius Wyterver wrote beneath Aldrovandi's portrait: 'Aristotle, this is not a picture of you, but of Ulysses: the face is different, but the talent is the same.'¹⁹ While Gesner was often referred to as the 'modern Pliny', Aldrovandi was compared with the other master of ancient zoology, Aristotle.

Ulysses Aldrovandi was born in Bologna in 1522 and died there in 1605. As a young man he led an adventurous life, leaving home at the age of twelve to go to Rome. He and a friend then travelled in Italy, France and Spain and had many exciting experiences: on one occasion they were attacked by brigands, on another by pirates. Later, Aldrovandi became passionately interested in natural history. He studied logic, mathematics and medicine at the University of Bologna and also translated and commented on the first book of Dioscorides. Aldrovandi remained at Bologna where a circle of students of botany and zoology gathered round him. He kept in touch with many of the great contemporary scholars, who sent him information in much the same way as Gesner's friends sent him details about animals he had never seen. Aldrovandi also employed a number of artists to prepare fine pictures of animals. Among these men were Lorenzo Bennini, Cornelius Schwind from Frankfurt, Jacopo Ligozzi – one of Veronese's most brilliant pupils, Francesco Ligozzi – Jacopo's brother – and Pastorino de' Pastorini.

Aldrovandi was a bibliophile and collected a huge library. Many of his manuscripts have survived.²⁰ They include his compositions and



69. Ostrich, from U. Aldrovandi.
Ornithologiae Libri.

Plates 69, 70

notes – for example, there are his notes on quadrupeds ('Ulyssis Aldrovandi: Adnotationes quadrupedum') and his extract from Lucian on ostrich eggs ('De Ovis struthionum. Ex Luciano, to.2. f.804.').²¹ There are also catalogues of items which interested him – for instance, a catalogue of rare articles in the possession of Signior Balda Agiola in Assisi.

Aldrovandi projected an enormous work, entitled *Storia Naturale*, which he was to write in collaboration with other scholars, but which remained incomplete at his death. He himself wrote the volumes on birds and insects. An ostrich and a guinea-fowl appeared in the former; many different kinds of locusts were described in the latter. Like Gesner, Aldrovandi wrote about each animal in a systematic way. He wrote down its names in as many languages as possible. He described its external appearance and commented on abnormal or monstrous features. (He must have been particularly interested in abnormalities, because he wrote a long book on monsters.) Each animal's habitat was noted, its habits described. The mode of reproduction was given. Its sympathies and antipathies were mentioned. The ways in which it was captured, reared or used by man were described. Aldrovandi related the legendary, allegorical, mythological and religious stories associated with it. If an image of the beast appeared in the *Hieroglyphics* of Horapollo, this was mentioned and its symbolical importance was discussed.²² Aldrovandi listed the proverbs and maxims in which each animal featured. He described its use in emblematic, heraldic or artistic images. He noted which animals were good to eat and which provided remedies for disease.

An interesting section of his work was devoted to a discussion of snakes.²³ Aldrovandi's main preoccupation in this was with the poison

beware how he passe over deepe rivers with them, for they will sodainly dive under water.'¹⁴ Pory had obviously taken the Greek name too literally and imagined that the hippopotamus was like an ordinary horse except that it lived in the rivers of Africa.

When Leo Africanus wrote about African animals, he tried to give them the names which would have been familiar to his reading public. Thus he wrote of the lion, the elephant, the ostrich, the chameleon, the locust. Sometimes he too tried to show that he knew the correct Latin name. Writing of the hawk, he gave the Arabic name, 'Bezi', in the chapter heading, while he mentioned that the bird was called 'accipiter' in Latin. Sometimes he did not give the Latin or Italian equivalents. He wrote of the 'Creature called Dub' and the beast 'called Lant or Dant'. He tried to identify the mythological beast, the Hydra, but it seems he did not really understand the story about it.

'This serpent,' he wrote, 'being short in proportion of body, and having a slender taile and necke, liveth in the Libyan deserts. The poison thereof is most deadly, so that if a man be bitten by this beast, he hath none other remedie, but to cut off the wounded part, before the poison disperseth it selfe into the other members.'¹⁵

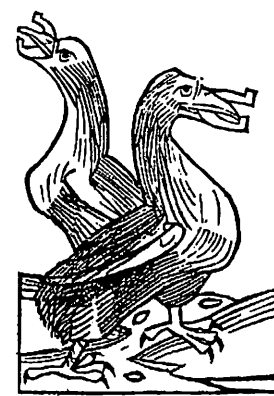
This was rather different from the monster with which Hercules had had to grapple.

When learned works were written on zoology in the sixteenth century, the fashion arose of writing down as many classical and modern names of the animals as possible. The Latin name, or names, were always included. Many of these zoological works were written in Latin, so students of zoology and other scholars who wrote in Latin had to know the Latin variants. French, Italian, German or English equivalents were often given too. If possible, the Greek name was included. This practice was followed by Belon in his books on natural history. Even the picture book which was made of his illustrations, *Portraits D'Oyseaux, animaux, serpens etc observez par Pierre Belon du Mans*¹⁶ included the names of the birds and animals in Greek, Latin, Italian and French. The ostrich was called Struthio, Struthio Africus, Struthiocamelus, Struthio Lybicus and Struthius in Latin; Strutza in Italian and Autruche in French. It was obvious that there was not as yet one generic name given to the bird in Latin, to be used by all zoologists. Rather, Belon seemed to display his classical learning by mentioning as many Latin variants of the name as possible.

It was as well that he did so. In the fifteenth-century *Hortus Sanitatis*, strange animals were often described more than once, because each Latin variant of their name was ascribed to a different creature. There were three descriptions of the giraffe – one under *Arafula*, one under *Camelopardus* and one under *Orafflus*. There was similar confusion



73. Camelopardus. *Hortus Sanitatis*.



74. Struthio, *Hortus Sanitatis*.



75. Struthiocamelus, *Hortus Sanitatis*.

Plates 74, 75

about the ostrich. It was described once as *Struthio* and again, immediately afterwards, as *Struthiocamelus*. Two illustrations were given of the creature. One showed it as a bird, with a horse-shoe in its beak; the other as a strange, winged beast whose body resembled a horse.

When Conrad Gesner wrote his *Historiae Animalium*, he too gave the Latin names of the animals, as well as their Italian, French and German equivalents. For Gesner, the ostrich had the Latin names: *Struthio*, *Struthocamelus*, *Struthio Africus*, *Struthio Lybicus*, and *Struthiocamelus*; it was *Strutza* in Italian; *Autruche* or *Autrouche* in French; *Struss* or *Strauss* in German. The guinea-fowl was '*Melcagris*, *Gallus Numidicus* vel *Mauritanus sylvestris*' in Latin or, more simply and descriptively in German, '*Ein fremnder wilder han auss Africa oder Barbarijen*'. On the subject of the rhinoceros's name, Gesner explained that the Greek was usually used in other languages although the beast could be referred to as '*Naricornis*' in Latin.¹⁷ In German it was '*Nasshorn*'. The Chameleon was an exception. It had only one name. This was because it came from Africa.¹⁸ In German he called it '*Chameleo*', hardly changing the Greek at all. The Genet did not have a good, classical name. This caused a problem which Gesner tried to solve by giving it the name '*Genetha*', '*Genetta*' or '*Ginetta*', on the authority of Albertus Magnus and other 'more recent writers'. Perhaps, he thought, it could be called a type of panther or leopard – a 'little panther'.¹⁹

A scholar should know what the strange, wild animals of Africa had been called in Antiquity. He should be able to discourse about them in Latin and should therefore know their Latin names. However, it was not necessary as yet to codify them systematically, indicating the beast's genus and species. This system was only devised much later on, in the eighteenth century.

Plate 73

with many black and white spots: I could scarce reach with the points of my fingers to the hinder part of his backe, which grew higher and higher towards his foreshoulder, and his neck was thinne and some three els long, so as hee easily turned his head in a moment to any part or corner of the roome wherein he stood, putting it over the beams thereof, being built like a barne, and high for a Turkish building . . . by reason whereof he many times put his nose in my necke, when I thought myself furthest distant from him, which familiarity of his I liked not; and howsoever the keepers assured me he would not hurt me, yet I avoided these his familiar kisses as much as I could. His body was slender, not greater, but much higher than the body of a stagge or hart, and his head and face was like to that of a stagge, but the head was lesse and the face more beautifull: he had two hornes, but short and scarce halfe a foote long; and in the forehead he had two bunches of flesh, his ears and feete like an oxe, and his legges like a stagge.⁴

It is interesting that Fynes Moryson wrote that he had seen a picture of a giraffe before he went to Constantinople 'in the mappes of Mercator'. Medieval and Renaissance maps were beautifully decorated with pictures of the people, animals and plants which were to be found in every quarter of the globe. On these maps, Africa was often the continent which was most richly ornamented with beasts. Usually, elephants, camels and lions were to be found there. Often, ostriches, monkeys, rhinoceroses, dragons and crocodiles were also shown. Sometimes the chameleon appeared. Cartographers were eager to place specifically African animals in Africa. Their maps were supposed to be a true picture of the world, showing men at a glance what different parts of the globe were like. (Cartographers also showed that Africa shared many species with the Far East and depicted elephants, rhinoceroses and crocodiles in India too.) Renaissance maps differ from Medieval ones in that the shape of the continent of Africa is more accurately drawn; and the animals, which are still often quite formal in some of their features, are more easily recognizable. In the sixteenth century, elephants were shown with stout pillar legs and large ears, but their tusks frequently came from their lower jaw. In the seventeenth century, they were consistently painted with their tusks in their true position, in their upper jaw. Many different drawings of rhinoceroses appeared on maps before it became the general practice to use Dürer's engraving. The rhinoceros in Descliers' map of 1550,⁵ is a shaggy, brown beast with rather strange horns. In 1553, he redrew this animal more correctly on another map. On the Medieval Ebstorf map of the world, a picture of a giraffe is painted in Africa, but the creature looks rather like a horse with a spotted coat and cloven hoofs. Without the label, 'Camelopardalis', it would be

Plate 12

Plate 1

difficult to identify it. The map on which Fynes Moryson saw a giraffe, however, would have shown a more realistic picture of the animal.

Cartographers and zoologists were able to depict African animals more accurately because, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many travellers saw these beasts in Constantinople, Cairo or in the wilds of Africa. They brought back sketches of them and often described them carefully. Many beasts were brought to Europe at the same time and were housed in the menageries of princes or rich citizens. When they arrived, the effect on the people who saw them was sensational, for these creatures were very colourful, bizarre, exotic and delightful. There were so many different animals to see; so many beautiful, ugly, immense and small African beasts that it must have seemed as though a whole new animal world had been discovered by Europeans.

Educated men were delighted to see African animals because they had been described and mentioned in classical literature. They had figured in the games and festivals of Ancient Rome. Humanists wanted to visualize every detail described by classical authors. They wished to see the animals which had been mentioned themselves. In imitation of the Ancients, they organized the sort of fights between wild beasts which had entertained the Ancient Romans. In order to be able to identify the animals more easily, they were eager to give the animals their ancient Greek and Latin names. By doing this, they also provided a terminology which could be understood by scholars all over Europe.

Educated men were able to relate the animals they saw to what they had read in the works of classical authors like Pliny, Solinus and Aristotle. These books had been known in the Middle Ages as well, but the Renaissance scholars read them more avidly and had access to more classical literature than their Medieval counterparts. They could also refer to Greek literature, unknown in the Middle Ages. In particular, they could read the geographical works of Ptolemy and Strabo and the description of Egypt given by Herodotus.

There were other Greek authors who influenced their attitude towards animals. In the fifteenth century, the works of Plato and Neo-Platonists like Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus became known in Western Europe.⁶ Scholars began to look for true wisdom in very ancient traditions and philosophy. It was believed that the men who had lived closest in time to Adam, who had named all living creatures so fully and appropriately, had had true knowledge of the world. Ancient sages among the Egyptians and Persians had possessed this wisdom. It could not be imparted to all, but those few who could grasp it would gain a complete, mystical understanding of the world. Real knowledge of this sort was intuitive; it was expressed in images rather than in discursive reasoning. Plotinus had written:

It must not be thought that in the Intelligible World the gods