

# EARLY RHINOCEROS IN EUROPE

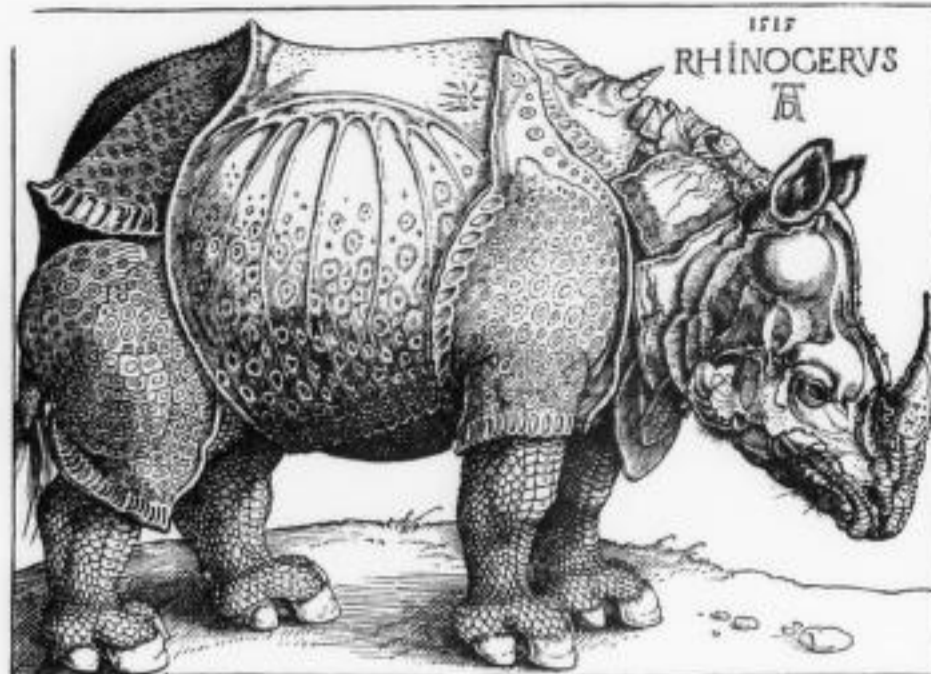
By SIR WILLIAM GOWERS

THE well-known woodcut of an Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) that Albrecht Dürer executed in 1515 (Fig. 1) was for some two and a half centuries the standard—indeed, the only—likeness of a rhinoceros generally known to students and naturalists; and it was reproduced line for line in all the great illustrated natural histories of the 16th and 17th centuries, notably those of Gesner (1550), Aldrovandi (1580), Topsell (1607) and Jonstone (1653). Strictly speaking, this was not the first rhinoceros to reach Europe in historical times. It was the first Indian rhinoceros to do so, so far as we know, and the first rhinoceros of any sort to do so since the days of the early Roman Empire (up to c. A.D. 250), when African rhinoceros were often brought to Rome and are shown on coins of the emperors Domitian and Trajan.

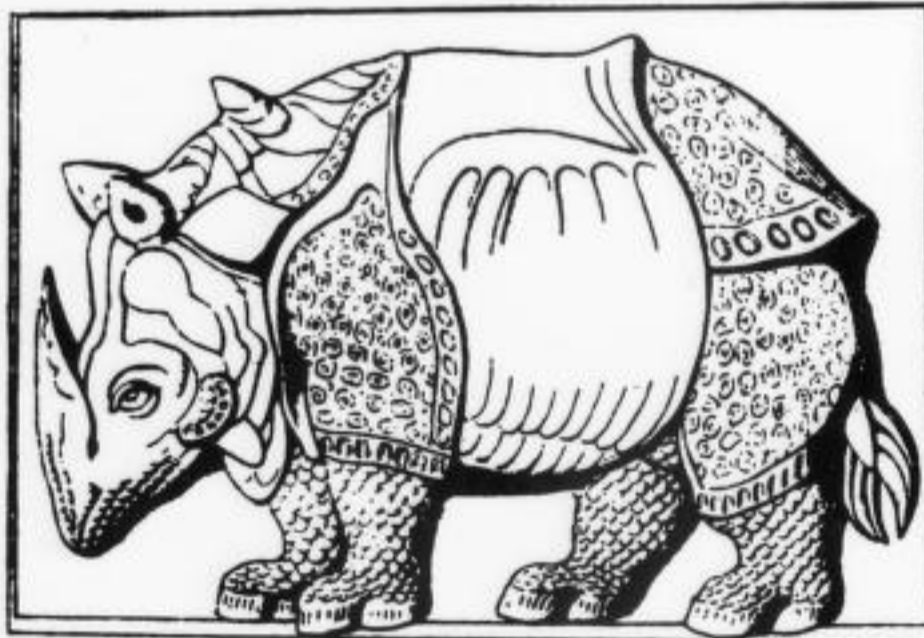
No other rhinoceros reached Europe after the one we may call Dürer's, which came to Lisbon, for 170 years, until 1684, by which time England had succeeded to the dominant position in India held first by the Portuguese and after them by the Dutch. In this year a rhinoceros was brought from India to London. John Evelyn records in his diary of October 22, 1684, that he went to see it—"the first that I suppose was ever brought into England. She belonged to some East India merchants and was sold (as I remember) for above £2,000." This rhinoceros is also mentioned by the great naturalist John Ray in his *Synopsis Animalium*, published in 1693, as "*ille magnus qui anno 1684/1685 in Anglia spectandus circumferebatur. Foeno, raparum summitatibus, et frumento (cuius modium et semissem mensura nostra uno die vorabat) pascebatur.*" (The great beast that was paraded round England in the year 1684/1685.

It fed on hay, turnip-tops and corn, of which it consumed a peck and a half a day by our standard.) There was some difference of opinion at the time among naturalists as to whether the rhinoceros was a ruminant or not, and Ray goes on to say that its keepers on being asked said that they had never seen it chewing the cud. I doubt whether Ray had actually seen it and in spite of his use of the masculine gender, I think that Evelyn, who had certainly seen it at close quarters, is more likely to be right about its sex, and that it was a female. I have not been able to find out anything more about it, neither how long it lived nor what means were used to "carry it round" England. Indian rhinoceros seem to be very amenable animals in captivity, and perhaps it walked from place to place. It would be interesting to know whether the enterprising purchaser at £2,000 (worth I suppose quite £20,000 of our present money) managed to make a profit. Monmouth's insurrection and the Bloody Assizes, which happened in 1685, may have been detrimental to the show business. I cannot trace any published print or drawing of the rhinoceros.

Dürer's woodcut remained, therefore, the unchallenged likeness of a rhinoceros until 1739. In that year a young rhinoceros arrived in the Port of London, sent by Humphrey Cole, the head of the East India Company's factory at Patna. It was exhibited in London, in Eagle Street near Red Lion Square, and was there drawn by Dr. James Parsons, naturalist and antiquary, who wrote a paper on it which was published in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, together with the drawing of the young animal (reproduced as Fig. 3), in 1743. I suspect it did not live long, for exactly the same drawing



1.—WOODCUT OF A FULL-GROWN INDIAN RHINOCEROS, PROBABLY THE FIRST TO BE SEEN IN EUROPE, BY ALBRECHT DURER, 1515. (Below) 2.—WHITE MARBLE PANEL WITH COPY OF DURER'S RHINOCEROS IN RELIEF. Probably 18th century



was printed in 1739, and, of course, the animal would have been entirely different four years later.

Parsons was a very severe critic of Dürer's design. He wrote: "Albert Dürer's figure of this creature has led several natural historians who have written since his time into errors, for such have always copied him and indeed many have exceeded him in adorning their figure with scales, scallops and other fictitious forms. Now from the badness of his figure I am induced to believe that that great man never saw the animal, for if he had he certainly could not have been so mistaken in the performance." In this point Parsons was quite right, though no proof was available in his day. It is only much later that it has become generally known from contemporary documents that Dürer never did see this or any other rhinoceros. His woodcut was done from a sketch from life drawn at Lisbon by a Portuguese artist and sent to Germany with a letter in German which is reproduced almost verbatim in the legend at the head of the woodcut. The most serious defects from a naturalistic point of view are the excessive conventionalisation of the animal's "coat of mail" and the introduction of a second, purely imaginary, horn on the back of the neck.

This rhinoceros had been sent by Albuquerque, the Governor-General of India, to King Emmanuel of Portugal—then the foremost maritime and colonial nation in the world. It was a present from the King of Cambay (Guzerat) and seems to have been already full-grown in 1514. It was shipped from Goa in January, 1515, and landed at Lisbon on May 20, 1515. It is a great tribute to its adaptability and equanimity that it survived the voyage,

during which it must have had a very scanty diet, and landed in good health and good temper. I infer the good temper from the fact that soon after its arrival it became King Emmanuel's custom to have it led in front of his horse as he rode through the streets of Lisbon.

The naturalists and scholars of Portugal knew nothing about the rhinoceros except what they had read in the ancient writers and they were all agog to discover by experiment what truth there was in Pliny's account of the mortal enmity between rhinoceros and elephant—how the rhino after sharpening his horn on a rock attacks the elephant and kills it by thrusting its horn upwards into the elephant's belly. This story made such an impression that it is even included in the brief description at the top of the woodcut.

The value of the experiment was somewhat reduced, although the spectators did not know this, by the fact that Pliny (like Agatharchides, from whom he copied the story) was writing about African, not Indian, elephants and rhinoceros. The Indian rhinoceros never uses its rather short horn as a weapon of offence, as do both species of the African rhinoceros. Its weapons of attack are the triangular razor-sharp tusks or teeth in its lower jaw, which are capable of inflicting serious and painful gashes but not of inflicting mortal injury on anything so large as an elephant. It is, however, true that the Indian elephant is disinclined to run the risk of a charge by an Indian rhinoceros, though Pliny could hardly have known this, since there is no reason to suppose that these two Indian animals had ever been seen together at Rome.

However, an attempt was made to stage a fight between the newly-arrived rhinoceros and a very small elephant belonging to the King. The latter turned tail as soon as the rhinoceros made a move towards him, burst through the barrier of the arena and made his way back to his own stable as fast as he could. He "lost confidence," writes one of the spectators, "being very young, with tusks not more than a foot long."

It is to be assumed that this rhinoceros lived peacefully at Lisbon for the next six months, but in December King Emmanuel decided that to advance his interests with Pope Leo X it was advisable to send more magnificent presents, including this unique animal, already famous throughout Europe. He had already sent an elephant, the celebrated Hanno, the year before with his ambassador Tristan da Cunha, and it was hoped that the people of Rome might be regaled with a fight between elephant and rhinoceros such as had been staged in the Circus in the palmy days of the Roman Empire. The goodwill of the Pope was of supreme importance to the two great maritime and colonising or conquering powers: it was only about 20 years earlier that a Papal Bull had divided the whole discoverable world between Spain and Portugal.

A small sailing vessel was chartered to take the presents to Rome. The rhinoceros was shipped, with accoutrements, including a gilt iron chain and green velvet collar with gilt roses and carnations. The ship reached Marseilles in January and Francis the First, King of France, who happened to be there, persuaded the captain to land the famous rhinoceros on one of the islands in the Bay for his inspection. After leaving Marseilles for Rome the ship had the bad luck to be caught by a severe

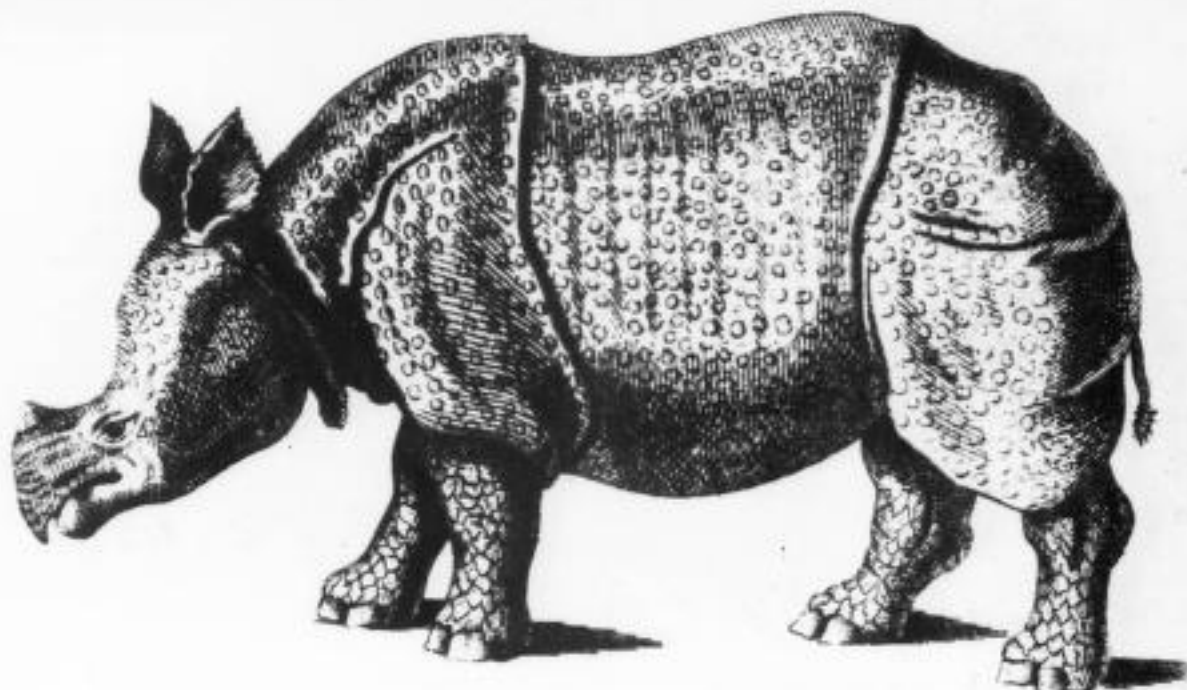
storm in the Gulf of Genoa, probably near the rocky coast south-west of Spezia, and was sunk with the loss of all hands. The body of the unlucky rhinoceros is said by one chronicler to have been washed ashore and eventually stuffed and sent to the Pope, but this seems doubtful. A story was started—I know not when or where—that the rhinoceros was responsible for the loss of the ship. It was given wide currency, I am sorry to say, by Cuvier, who wrote that the animal "ayant un accès de fureur fit périr le bateau qui le transportait"—a libel for which there is not a shred of contemporary evidence.

A letter from King Emmanuel to his ambassador at Rome, dated eight months after the tragedy, gives no support to the story that the body of the rhinoceros was retrieved and stuffed and taken to Rome; if this had been done it is clear that Emmanuel had not heard of it. It does, however, suggest that rumours were circulating in Rome, inspired presumably by the enemies of Portugal, that the animal had never been shipped at all. It reads:—

"We the King send you our greetings. We were very sorry to hear about the total loss of the vessel we sent to Rome which was carrying aboard an Indian rhinoceros as well as other presents for the Holy Father. Please tell His Holiness that we were informed of this loss only a few days ago. Please tell His Holiness how grieved we were because it was very rare and never seen in these countries before. Nor could it be found in the books. In view of all this when brought to us we valued it at more than 100,000 *dobras*, and when we decided to send it to His Holiness we valued it at more than 200,000 *dobras*. We thought that His Holiness would accept with pleasure what we were sending with such good will and love and had never been sent to His Holiness before. Although fortune decided otherwise we hope that His Holiness believes that the presents were intended for him. They were so new and from such distant countries that His Holiness would have been pleased to see them. Now we very humbly ask His Holiness to accept at least our love and the great pleasure we had to send Him everything; also the very good will we shall always feel for all things appertaining to His service. Knowing His Holiness will receive you as we have requested Him we hope he will hear our sorrow for not being able to send Him such great novelties."

A fitting epitaph for the first rhinoceros to arrive. I learn on the best authority that the *dobra* of that period was a coin containing very nearly as much gold as the present, or recent, British sovereign.

I must now turn to a second rhinoceros



3.—YOUNG INDIAN RHINOCEROS BROUGHT TO LONDON IN 1739 AND DRAWN BY DR. JAMES PARSONS

mentioned by James Parsons in the course of his paper read in 1743. It was a female and made its landfall in an English port, but did not stay, and went on to the Low Countries and thence to Germany, in 1741. It was probably about two years old when it reached England; Parsons says it was about the same size as the young male which arrived in 1739 and which he described. It really deserves as much fame as Dürer's, since it became the model for the earliest reasonably accurate portraits from life of a full-grown rhinoceros, and these likenesses held the field until well into the 19th century. Moreover, it must have in person shown far more people what a living rhinoceros is like than any other one had. It spent the early years of its life in Europe in Nuremberg, where it was painted in 1747 by the accomplished animal painter and delineator J. D. Meyer, in whose *Pictures of Animals* (1756) it appears in two plates. It came originally from Bengal, where it had been captured, its mother being killed, when only a month old and brought up by hand. Its Nuremberg owner told Meyer that even when full grown it was "as tame as a lamb." In 1749 or earlier it started on a long pilgrimage, being taken on exhibition by its owner on tours in Holland, Germany, France and Austria. In this year Buffon saw it at St. Germain, and had a picture made of it as an illustration for his

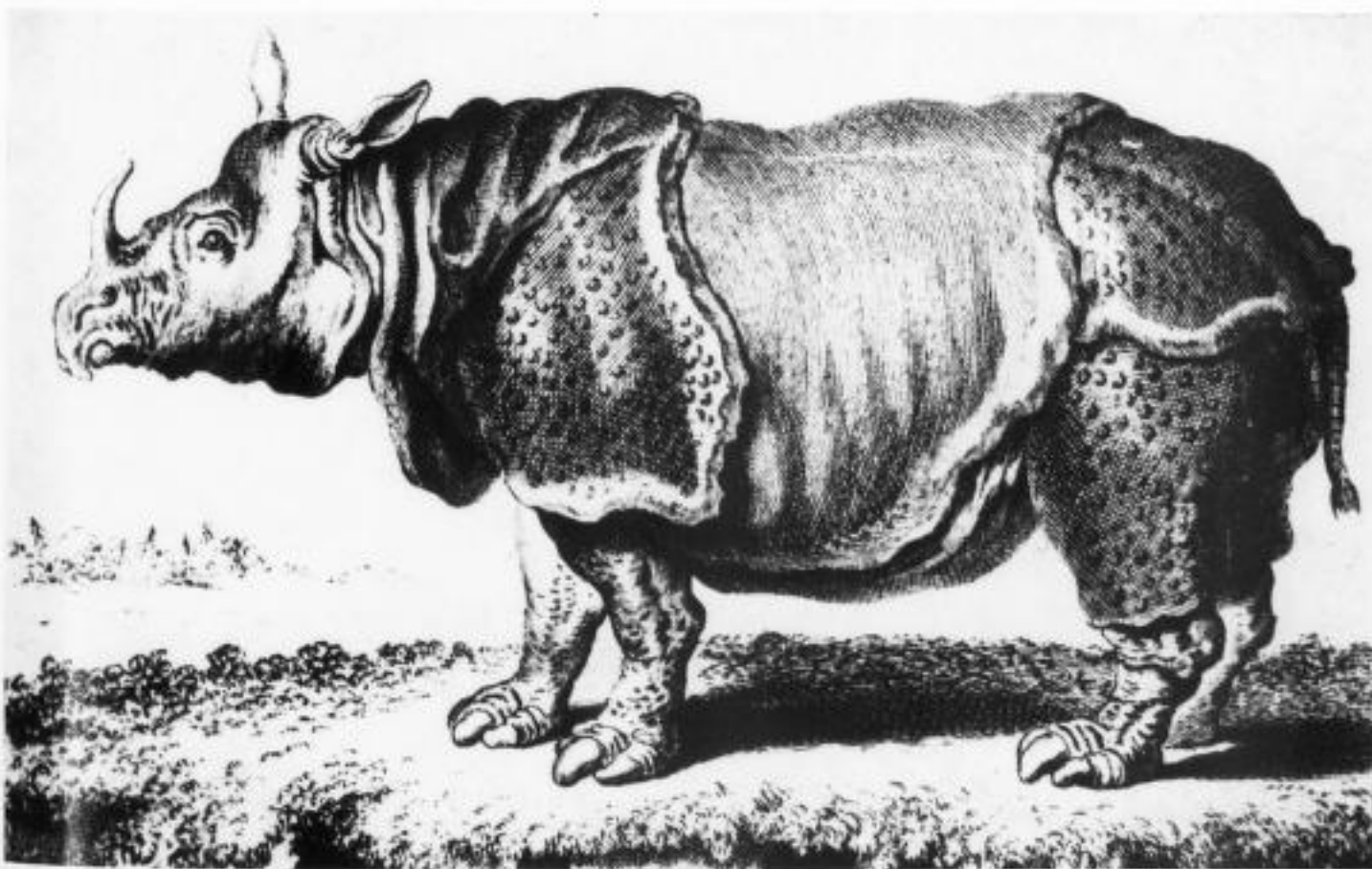
monumental *Natural History*; the photograph reproduced as Fig. 4 is from the plate in the first (1749) edition. It is very like the picture by Meyer, who, however, does not go so far as Buffon's illustration does in unaccountably exaggerating and distorting the quite unnaturally splayed out toes and toe nails.

James Bruce, in *Abyssinian Travels* (1790), gives what he asserted was a drawing from life of an African rhinoceros from the promontory near Guardafui—"the first drawing of a two-horned rhinoceros ever presented to the public." Buffon had died two years before and unfortunately never saw that Bruce had produced his African rhinoceros by the simple process of making an exact copy of Buffon's illustration of an Indian rhinoceros and inserting a small squarish horn behind the real one. Cuvier showed up this fraud in 1834.

Buffon's rhinoceros, as we may call No. 4 in the order of their advent to Europe, quite superseded Dürer's as a naturalistic illustration. But in the present century the latter enjoyed, or suffered, a resuscitation of a rather curious kind. In the 18th century, or perhaps earlier, a white marble panel with an accurate copy of Dürer's rhinoceros in relief was executed by some unknown artist and eventually found its way to the National Museum at Naples as part of the *Collezione Borgia* among classical antiquities. Evidently some people must have thought it had been excavated at Pompeii, in which case its date must be earlier than A.D. 79. What is more, a well-known work of reference on the fauna of antiquity—*Die Antike Tierwelt*, by Otto Keller (Leipzig, 1909)—contains a drawing of this panel and describes it as a "white marble relief of an Indian rhinoceros from Pompeii" with the caption *Pompeianische Relief* below the drawing, which is reproduced as Fig. 2 and which must have misled quite a lot of people, as it did me, into believing that the Indian rhinoceros was known in Rome before the last days of Pompeii.

Perhaps it would have amused Dürer to know that after four centuries his own design of the first rhinoceros to reach modern Europe would be displayed by one of his own countrymen as a product of ancient Rome.

The photographs of marble busts of Newton by Rysbrack, of Samuel Clarke by Guelfi and of John Locke by Rysbrack were reproduced last week by permission of His Gracious Majesty the King.



4.—ILLUSTRATION OF AN INDIAN RHINOCEROS IN BUFFON'S *NATURAL HISTORY* (1749).  
When it first appeared in Europe in 1741 it was probably two years old