

THE
IMPERIAL TREASURY
OF
THE INDIAN MUGHULS

1931

BY

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SOME CURIOSITIES

We have so far dealt with substances and articles commonly known and recognized as useful or ornamental. But there is another class of things which stands by itself. Some substances were credited in good old days with certain curative and other properties, for which they were highly prized. They are interesting as a study in superstitions that we have outlived. Indeed, there is something picturesque about the ignorant credulity of a great and civilized people, to whom we owe so much. And yet who knows, there may be some stray particles of truth in popular superstitions and exploded beliefs.

(1) RHINOCEROS-HORN

Mysterious properties were supposed to belong to the horn of the rhinoceros from ancient times.

The medical dictionaries like the *Muhit-i-A'zam* tell us in detail how various diseases could be cured, some by the patient wearing a ring cut out of the horn, others by grinding the

horn and drinking the juice, or again by drinking from a cup made of it, or else through vapours rising from the horn held on fire (*Muhit-i-A'zam*, Cawnpore, 1313 A.H., IV, p. 61).

Cups made of rhinoceros-horn indicated the presence of poison, and were consequently held in high esteem among nations where poisoning was a common form of taking life. Besides drinking-cups, knife-handles and rings were carved out of the horn.

‘*Ajā’ibu'l-Makhlūqat* has a long article on the rhinoceros, where the wonderful properties of its horn are set out in detail.

We find there was a similar belief current in the West, which continued down to the seventeenth century ; but there the horn was known as the “unicorn’s horn”; that is to say, the Europeans ascribed imaginary properties to the horn of an imaginary animal. This was natural enough, since we know that the rhinoceros did not exist in Europe.

We learn from Fuller’s *Worthies of England* that there was a “unicorn’s horn” in the

Tower as well as another in Windsor Castle. As for its properties, he says, it is reputed to be not only an antidote against several poisons, but it resists 'poisons which kill by second qualities, that is, by corrosion of parts.' Dr. Fuller himself heard a report of a successful experiment made with it, where some grains of the horn proved an effective antidote against poison.¹

Whether these horns were of the rhinoceros, or of the narwhal, or of some other animal, is entirely a matter of conjecture.

It has been remarked that the belief about the properties of a "unicorn's horn" was later transferred to the horn of the rhinoceros, when no unicorn was found to exist.² Obviously this cannot apply to the eastern peoples, who from the beginning stuck to the rhinoceros, and in whose mythology the unicorn had no place.

¹ Thomas Fuller, *History of the Worthies of England*, London, 1840, II, 338 and 340.

² Linschoten, II, p. 9, footnote 2.

But we are concerned chiefly with the rhinoceros-horn in Mughul India and the popular belief about its virtues in that country.

After describing the rhinoceros and its horn, Linschoten says: 'The Portingales and those of Bengala affirme, that by the River Ganges in the Kingdome of Bengala, are many of these Rhinoceros, which when they will drinke, the other beasts stand and waite upon them, till the Rhinoceros hath drunke, and thrust their horne into the water, for he cannot drink but his horne must be under the water because it standeth so close unto his nose, and muzzle: and then after him all the other beastes doe drinke. Their hornes in India are much esteemed and used against all venime, poyson, and many other diseases: likewise his teeth, clawes, flesh, skin and blood, and his very dung, and water and all whatsoever is about him, is much esteemed in India, and used for the curing of many diseases and sicknesses, which is very good and most true, as I my selfe by experience have found; but it is to be understood, that all Rhinocerotes are not a like good, for there are some whose hornes are

sold for one, two, or three hundred pardawes the peece, and there are others of the same colour and greatnes that are sold but for three or foure Pardawes, which the Indians know and can discerne. The cause is that some Rhinocerotes, which are found in certaine places in the countrie of Bengala have this vertue, by reason of the hearbes which that place only yeeldeth and bringeth foorth, which in other places is not so, and this estimation is not onely held of the horne, but of all other things in his whole body, as I saide before (II, 9-10).

William Finch has the following : 'Here [near Ajodhyā] is great Trade, and such abundance of Indian Asse-horne, that they make hereof Bucklers, and divers sorts of Drinking Cups. There are of these Hornes, all the Indians affirme, some rare of great price, no Jewell comparable, some esteeming them the right Unicernes Horne ' (Purchas, IV, 66).

' Great Prices ', says Fryer, ' are offered for those [rhinoceros-horns] that are inadulterate ; which they in *India* pretend to try by the

Liquors presently fermenting in them ; but notwithstanding that Experiment they are often deceived by false Horns made into drinking Cups' (II, 298).

'They ascribe very much likewise to the Rhinoceros Horn in *India*', says Ovington, 'as it is an Antidote against all poysitious Draughts, and hugely extol in it that Medicinal Excellence and singular Quality. The Character of this Horn prevail'd so far with a former President of ours at *Suratt*, that he exchang'd for a Cup made of this Horn a large capacious Silver Bowl of the same bigness.'¹

We read in an Armenian's report that 'there are many beasts with one horn in their forehead like unto an unicorn, which horn they say is good against poison, there are of them which weigh 8 lb., some 7, 6, 4, and 3 lb., the greatest and fairest worth some 4 rials per piece, and those of a lesser sort worth less. Amongst the Turks and Moors in Arabia every lb. is worth one rial of 8' (*Letters*, 1, 193).

¹ Ovington, *Voyage to Suratt*, London, 1696, p. 297.

Bābur tells us that 'out of one of the largest of these horns I had a drinking-vessel made, and a dice-box, and about three or four fingers' bulk of it might be left' (*Memoirs of Bābur*, tr. Leyden, Erskine and King, II, 210).

Sir Thomas Roe once laid a nice little plot against Prince Shāh Jahān. He tried to win his good graces by offering him a "unicorn's horne" at a price, pretending that he did not speak of it to Jahāngīr since he wanted to give him (the Prince) an opportunity of securing it and offering it in due course to the Emperor. The ambassador spoke in glowing terms of the virtues of the horn, and represented that it was so valuable that he had no power to sell it, and that the merchants made a secret of it, and did not allow it to come out of the ship. He made an offer, however, that if the Prince wished to buy it and would accede to certain demands of Sir Thomas's then pending, he could let the Prince's officer see the horn. 'This I hoped,' continues the ambassador, ever a clever diplomat, and at this moment at his best, 'would both sett an extreme appetite on the Prince to passe it at a

high price, and would insinuate an extraordinary desire in mee to doe him service ; and if hee reavealed it to the King, I would answere : because it was not in my power to give His Majestie, I was ashamed to name yt, but had mooved the Prince to buy it for his use' (P. 255).

The Prince, always a match for the tactician, was in this case too clever for him. He returned formal thanks, but matters proceeded no further.

The above entry is under October 16, 1616. Eight months later Roe records that 'the unicornes horne was returned as without vertue' (P. 366). It was then sent on to Sūrat and then to Ahmadābād, where John Browne, a factor, showed it to Muqarrab Khān, asking 5,000 rupees for it. The factor says that he tried the efficacy of the horn on the lives of 'a pigeon, goate, and man, which they loosing, itt also lost his esteeme, and soe I returned it aboard from whence I had ytt.'¹

¹ *E. F. I.* 1618-1621, p. 12.

Muqarrab Khān not buying it, the horn was sent to Achin,¹ and then on to Bantam.² Finally it passed into the hands of the Dutch, and was sold in Holland for £400.³

(2) BEZOAR-STONE

Bezoar-stone (from Pers. *pād-zahr*, lit., protecting from poison, *i.e.*, an antidote) is a concretion found in the stomach and intestines of ruminants and some other animals. We are here concerned only with the Oriental species, and not with the Occidental, which is obtained from the llamas of Peru, nor with the German, which is obtained from the chamois.

We may note in passing, however, that Ben Jonson had heard of the bezoar-stone: 'Body o'me, a shrewd mischance! why, had you no unicorn's horn, nor bezoar's stone about you, ha ?' (*Every Man out of his Humour*, V, 4).

¹ *E. F. I.* 1618-1621, p. 58.

² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11, f. n.