CHAPTER 3

A Search through Antiquity

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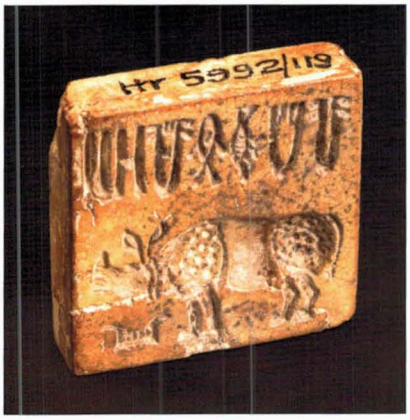


■ Indus rhino seal without trough.
Courtesy ASI.

■ A seal from Mohenjodaro showing a rhinoceros with a trough in front. Note the folds on the skin with tubercles and the prominent horn.
Courtesy ASI (after Joshi and Parpola, 1987: 381).

■ *A Harappan seal showing a fairly well-delineated rhinoceros with trough.*
Courtesy National Museum, New Delhi.

In the next episode of our narrative, we first approach the Indus civilization (circa 2600–1900 BCE)—the first urban civilization of the subcontinent. As is widely known, the pictographic Indus script is yet to be deciphered. Still, the civilization has much to divulge about the rhinoceros through the faunal and visual records it has left behind. As we approach the early historical period, the extent of the visual and archaeological evidence diminishes; however, the rich textual sources provide ample compensation, as we shall see.

Evidence from Indus Sites

Traces in the faunal collections from Harappan sites demonstrate the presence of the rhinoceros at the sites of Nausharo[1] in Baluchistan, Amri[2] in Sindh, and Harappa[3] in Punjab (all in Pakistan), and the Indian sites of Kalibangan[4] and Karanpura[5] in Rajasthan as well as several in Gujarat such as Surkotada,[6] Shikarpur,[7] Kuntasi,[8] Lothal,[9] Khanpur[10] and possibly also Oriyo Timbo.[11] What can safely be inferred on the basis of these records is the presence of the moisture-loving rhinoceros in protohistoric times in areas now known to be arid and semi-arid.

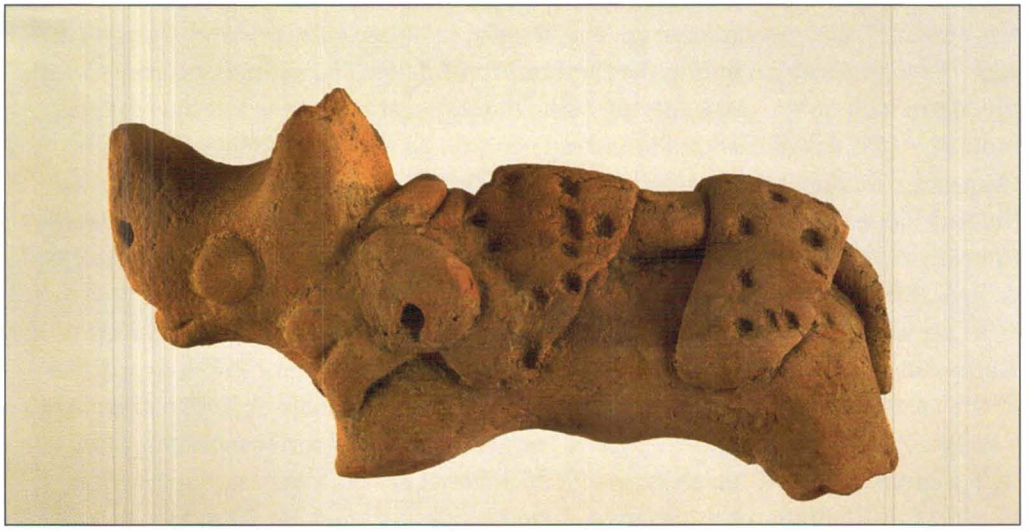
The factors that made for favourable rhino habitats in areas where the animal is now extinct invite some thought about past landscapes. How, for instance, do we reconcile the large amount of evidence pointing to a dry climate during the pre-Harappan and Harappan phases[12] with approaches that have considered the presence of the rhinoceros as an indicator of a humid Harappan environment?[13]

The answer perhaps lies in the ecology of the animal itself. Given the fact that the majority of Harappan settlements flourished in alluvial terrains created by mighty rivers,[14] it is not difficult to envision marshy-swampy patches of these tracts suitable for the one-horned rhino, known to be the most aquatic of the five rhino species. For instance, L.C. Rookmaaker, who has extensively studied the historical distribution of the species in the subcontinent, maintains that it is possible that the animals were encountered near Indus settlements either in the lower part of the valley or perhaps slightly more northwards where Harappa is located.[15]

What nevertheless needs to be explained is the presence, and in cases like Kalibangan, the profusion, of rhinoceros remains at some of the major urban sites of the civilization. Not just bones, even the Harappan visual archive consisting of seals, terracottas and copper tablets seems to suggest that the animal was seen around frequently. If we consider the argument that the bones of animals not usually domesticated or not normally eaten are likely to be rare in archaeological deposits,[16] then Harappan testimonies regarding the presence of the animal along with its evident popularity as a subject of portrayal raise numerous possibilities that must be explored. These range from the exploitation of the animal for its meat and other parts to the role of the animal in the religious life of the people.

Even when we consider the representations of the animal, the qualitative details and graphic fidelity suggest a close familiarity with the subject, which seems remarkable in the context of a civilization known for its urban character. In the terracotta figurines at Mohenjodaro, for instance, the wrinkled skin is realistically portrayed by hatching or pitting in some cases, while in others, strips of clay are used to show the folds in its hide.[17]

The frequency of representations too suggests that the animal was well known. Its popularity as an object of portrayal is reiterated by the fact that rhino depictions comprised 6.3 per cent of the terracotta collection at Harappa. This figure is



■ Rhinoceros figurines from Harappa. The animal can easily be distinguished because of its prominent horn in both cases. The strips on the back probably suggest the tubercled hide. *http://www.harappa.com/figurines/42.html. Copyright Richard H. Meadow/harappa.com. Courtesy Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan.*

■ Rhinoceros figurine from Harappa. Note the animal is strangely portrayed with a collar. *http://www.harappa.com/figurines/43.html. Copyright Richard H. Meadow/harappa.com. Courtesy Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan.*

■ Terracotta rhino head, Lothal, 3rd millennium BCE, 4.5 x 6.2 cm. *Courtesy National Museum, New Delhi.*

particularly striking since it is more than double the representations of commonly kept animals like sheep and goat.[18]

The animal's appearance on seals leaves no ambiguity regarding the fact that in every case it is the one-horned rhino that is depicted. Elaborating on one such seal, Ernest Mackay noted the well-represented thick hide with the nearly real wrinkles and folds of the skin. Rough excrescences on the skin were indicated in some cases with holes made with a fine drill while in others, hatched lines were employed.[19] The animal was delineated with remarkable faithfulness that even resulted in an exaggeration of detail at times.[20]

Apart from these solitary portrayals, there were more complex ways in which the creature fired the Indus imagination. Curiously, it is sometimes shown standing over a manger-like object. John Marshall was emphatic about the fact that these depictions bore no relation to domestication. His own sense was that these troughs were meant to symbolize food offerings, and that their presence implied that the animals to which these offerings were made, whether in captivity or in the wild, were objects of worship.[21] Equally intriguing is the presence of a collar of two bands in rhinoceros figurines from Harappa.[22]

■ The enigmatic Harappan unicorn: a bovid in profile or a chimera?
Courtesy ASI.

■ Drawing of an Indus seal with composite animal.
Courtesy ASI (after Marshall 1931).

■ "Pashupati seal" from Mohenjodaro, circa 2500 BCE.
Courtesy National Museum, New Delhi.

Several Indus seals present a hoofed animal with a single horn. This animal, likely a bovid, probably had two horns but appeared in profile to have one, and was depicted as such. Could a similar profile image of a horned animal be responsible for the conception of the equid unicorn in the European imagination?

Though not a common part of the hybrid compositions found in Indus imagery, one encounters a few representations where the composite figure was the outcome of the amalgamation of the anatomy of a rhinoceros with other animals.[23] Equally significant was the trend of depicting animals moving in single file. This was common on archaic Mesopotamian and Susian seals which showed antelopes and lions, and is also found on some of the seals from both Mohenjodaro and Harappa.[24]

Also relevant to our subject is the celebrated iconographic representation on seal no. 420 at Mohenjodaro. A subject of scholarly scrutiny since the time of its discovery, the seal shows a half-human and half-animal horned figure seated in a meditative posture on a dais. Famously and variously perceived as Pashupati or the prototype of the historic Shiva,[25] the "Mistress of the Animals"[26] or the "Lady of the Beasts",[27] the appellations, male or female, in either case, evidently have to do with the animals surrounding the therianthropic deity. The animals associated with the figure include the elephant, the tiger, the rhinoceros and the buffalo—species indicative of a tree-dotted tall grassland ecology. As far as the delineation of the rhinoceros on the seal is concerned, what is unmistakable in the tiny carving are the leaf-like ears, the folds on the skin, and most explicitly, its one-horned identity. Beneath the dais on which the figure is seated, are what Marshall identified as deer or ibex,[28] though Atre[29] perceived them as composite animals.

If we were to mentally assemble the portrayals of the animal in the context of the Harappan civilization, what immediately comes to mind are intriguing depictions of the creature feeding out of a trough the way tamed animals do, its portrayal with a collar, or even the composite figures combining parts of various animals often with a human face. In the absence of a deciphered script, it may not be possible to access the definite meanings of such portrayals, yet what can be said with a fair amount of conviction is that these had their own symbolic rationale that perhaps reflected a larger worldview in which these animals were used, feared and possibly even deified. Thus, portraying them in ways other than the actual was perhaps part of a vocabulary of shared meanings. It seems reasonable, then, to contend that the animal occupied a significant place in the Indus belief system.

Our search through antiquity for our one-horned protagonist would be incomplete without a mention of its presence in the scintillating hoard of bronzes from Daimabad, a chalcolithic settlement in Ahmadnagar district, Maharashtra, assigned to a Late Harappan context, and chronologically placed between circa 2000 and 1800 BCE. The find, a chance discovery by a farmer, consisted of four bronzes: a chariot pulled by a pair of bulls, an elephant, a rhinoceros and a buffalo. The rhinoceros stands on two horizontal bars placed on the axles of two pairs of wheels. The folds of the skin on the animal's body are stylistically depicted, with those on the back and the belly forming a rectangle. The ears are small, but the muzzle is too elongated for that of a rhino. The tiny horn on the tip of the snout, however, is a definite marker of its identity.[30] Given their bulk and magnitude, these bronze figurines do not seem to have been toys but may possibly have had a religious or ritualistic significance.

■ Bronze rhino from Daimabad, Maharashtra, circa 2000 and 1800 BCE. Set on wheels, this rhino sports prominent folds on the skin, a short horn and a rather elongated mouth. *Courtesy National Museum, New Delhi. Acc. No. 74.77/3.*

As we travel along gathering tangible as well as intangible traces of the animal, it may also not be out of context to point out how archaeological excavations have demonstrated that the animal's popularity transcended spatial and temporal barriers, by drawing attention to distant sites that have yielded Harappan or Harappan-influenced seals with rhino depictions. At the Sumerian site of Tell Asmar in Iraq, for instance, it is on a cylinder seal of glazed steatite that one encounters the armoured giant in the company of an elephant with a gharial above. The peculiarities of design as well as the subject show such resemblances to the seals of the Indus region that its Indian origin is considered certain. The setting of the ears of the rhinoceros on two little stems is reminiscent of its depiction on Indus seals.[31]

Similarly, a square-shaped Indus seal depicting a rhinoceros along with Indus pictograms also comes from the Harappan settlement of Shortughai, located at the confluence of the Kokcha and Amu Darya rivers in northeast Afghanistan. On the basis of the finds, it was asserted that all the artefacts and technology from the first period of Shortughai clearly originated in the Indus region, and that nothing in those levels could be attributed to another culture or civilization.[32]

Trudging along in the endeavour to reconstruct the past of the animal, we are able to unearth more imprints, though intermittent, of the animal in the subcontinent. One is led, for instance, to Dangawada in Madhya Pradesh, where the chalcolithic level yielded a terracotta figurine of the animal.[33] As mentioned in Chapter 2, though rhino depictions in later rock art are far from common, one does encounter them in the chalcolithic paintings at Ramchaja in Raisen district and Deurkothar in Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh.[34] Similarly, we are also led to Kanyadeh in the Chambal valley, to a composition with letters in post-Harappan characters. It shows a rhinoceros trapped and aimed at by a hunter. Though its antiquity is yet to be fixed, this forms the earliest written record in Indian rock art.[35] Varsus, a site yielding Late Harappan material in the Dhulia district of Maharashtra, revealed a terracotta mask of a rhino.[36]

The Early Historical Period

Though rhino depictions persisted, portrayals progressively lessened. As far as the tradition of portraying the animal in art is concerned, Joseph Manuel points out that something went amiss after the Harappans.[37] The paucity of evidence regarding the animal thereafter is intriguing, and the reasons can best be speculated. What is palpable is a steady distancing of the animal from popular imagination which gradually gets captured with imageries of the mightier elephant and the faster horse.[38] Whether this had to do with the regularity with which these animals were encountered, as also their potential to be tamed, controlled and used vis-à-vis the rhino, is worth considering. We have ample testimony to the existence of the rhinoceros outside its present stronghold in areas of the Northeast until not so long ago, and its unfortunate retreat thereafter.[39] What seems certain, then, is that the dwindling fortunes of the animal had little to do with the diminishing of the species itself. Rather than the animal becoming a rarity, factors engineering the shift seem to have had more to do with changing social and cultural perceptions, conditioned perhaps by new forms of human settlement and production, as also the ebb and flow of kingdoms and cultures. It may well be argued that as agriculture and the clearing of forests became important, both horses and elephants found greater use as domesticates for harnessing and other purposes. The rhino, on the other hand, was

not encountered or engaged with on a regular basis. Rhinos could be tamed, but had no draught or domestic use.[40]

There is more about the animal that evokes reflection. What is perplexing, for instance, is that, despite being the second-largest land mammal after the elephant, the rhinoceros figures but rarely in early Indian sculpture. Art historian Joachim Bautze observes that the animal is shown mainly in the earlier periods, but its importance could never rival that of the elephant.[41] What is being emphasized here is not an absence of representations, but a gradual petering out of the tradition, particularly as we approach the historical period in India. This seems peculiar in the context of an animal which had enjoyed relative eminence in the visual records of prehistoric and protohistoric India.

It is equally strange that, despite its impressive size, famed ferocity and legendary association with divinities,[42] the rhino never got assimilated in Hindu mythology and iconography as the vehicle or *vahana* of any major deity in the pantheon[43] (the goddess Dhavdi Ma whose temple is at Dhrangadhra in Gujarat has a rhinoceros *vahana*). An attempt to explain this anomaly speculates if an "ugly" animal befits a god.[44] But a quick look at common mounts like the tiny mouse accompanying the elephant-headed Ganesha, or the buffalo with Yama, the god of death, calls for a reconsideration of this view that underlines a charming exterior as a prerequisite for qualifying as a *vahana*. One wonders if this had something to do with the rhino's infrequent encounters with humans as also the fact that the animal was neither domesticated nor ridden, nor did it induce mortal fear of the kind that the big carnivores did.

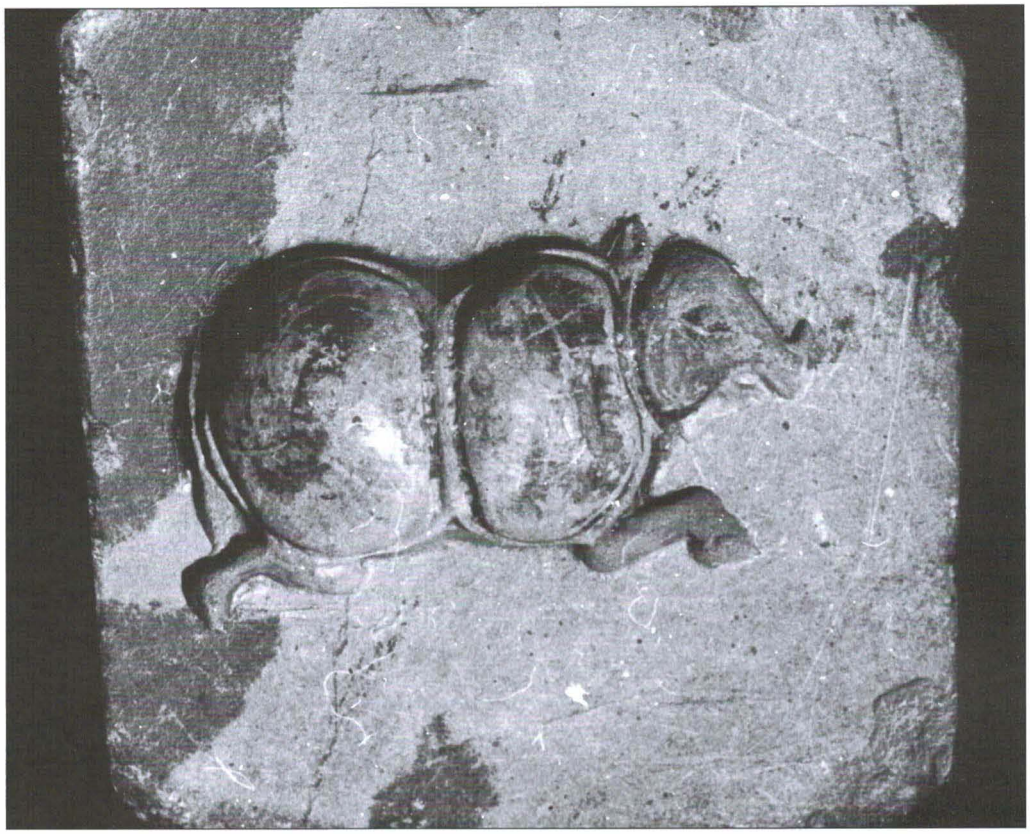
Having dwelt upon the chequered past of the animal, we return to see what the archaeological record holds for us as we enter the early historical and historical periods in ancient Indian history. The rhinoceros figures in popular imagination during the Northern Black Polished Ware period. The realistic modelling of the terracotta figurine of the animal in deep red ochre paint retrieved from sub-period IB of Period II (circa 600 to the 2nd century BCE) at Kausambi in Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh clearly indicates the familiarity of the potter with this creature.[45]

We meet our hero again during a survey of the gamut of Mauryan and late Mauryan art objects. Although largely confined to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, some of them are believed to be a century or so later.[46] These include a red and grey soapstone seal dated to about the 3rd century BCE, from Bhita in Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh, showing a rhinoceros.[47] The mega mammal also figures on a stone disc of the Murtaziganj-Patna group.[48]

It was, however, the sculptors at Sanchi who firmly ensconced the animal in the enduring medium of stone. Amidst the reliefs of the ground balustrade of Stupa 2 (sculptures dating from the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE), we find the rhinoceros. Compared to the care taken in carving the elephant, for instance, amidst a range of other animals, it is not a very successful attempt.[49] What provides a suitable pretext for the presence of the animal on the lower half-medallion on Pillar 24a, is perhaps, the oft-repeated entreaty in Buddhist texts to emulate the solitary behaviour of the rhinoceros.[50]

A lesser-known tryst with the animal is on a coping stone assigned to circa 100 BCE from Mathura, where "a little rhinoceros strides along with stocky stiff legs".[51] The mega herbivore also figures on an *ayagapata* (votive tablet) belonging to the same period at the site.[52] What deserves mention is that the rhinoceros appears in

■ Sri Dhavdi Mataji, popular print sold in Dhrangadhra market.
Courtesy Ranmal Jhala, Dhrangadhra.



■ Red and grey soapstone seal from Bhita, Allahabad, circa 3rd century BCE. *Photograph: American Institute of Indian Studies. AIIS: 86.13. Acc No. 84070.*

later Jain iconography as the *chinha* (symbol) of the eleventh Jina, Shreyansnath.

We can also turn to the eastern part of the subcontinent, where the discovery of terracotta plaques depicting the animal amongst the antiquarian finds at Chandraketugarh and Dum Dum, in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, suggests its presence in this region in the early centuries of the Common Era. At Chandraketugarh, approximately 37 kilometres northeast of Kolkata, the terracotta plaque under consideration depicted a standing rhinoceros, chronologically placed between circa 1st century BCE and 1st century CE.[53] This has been assigned to the Kushana period on stylistic grounds. Similarly assigned to the Kushana period, the animal on the plaque from Dum Dum gives away its identity by characteristically displaying a horn on the snout, folds on the skin, and tubercles on the shoulder, thighs and rump. The emphasis on such details makes it a realistic rendition, suggesting the familiarity of the artist with the species.[54]

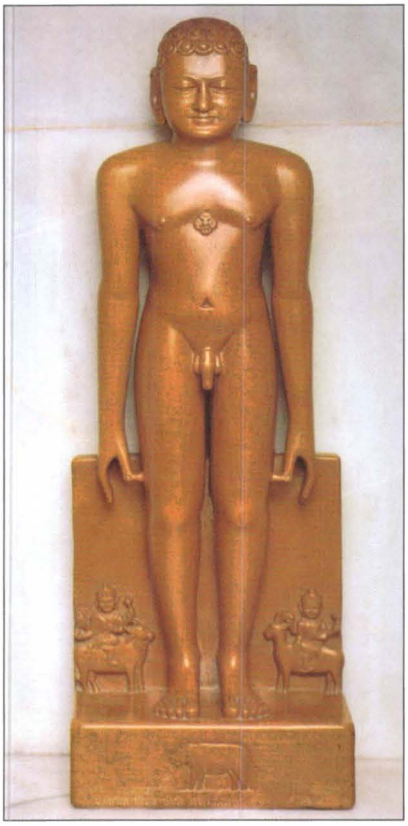
By far the most outstanding and dramatic representation of the animal in the historical period is encountered on a gold coin issued by the Gupta ruler Kumaragupta I (circa 413/415–455 CE). Classified as the rhinoceros-slayer type, the use of the mega herbivore as a symbol on the coin by the sixth scion of the Gupta dynasty stands out as an innovation against the tiger-slayer type of Samudragupta (circa 350–370 CE) with the legend *vyaghraparakramah*, and the lion-slayer type of Chandragupta II (circa 376–413/415 CE). The obverse of the rhino-slayer coin shows Kumaragupta with a sword drawn in his right hand, mounted on a fully caparisoned horse. The spotlight however, seems to rest on the rhinoceros being pursued by the emperor. As the animal turns its head around to see the imminent danger trailing it, the alarmed look on its face is unmistakable. What also cannot be missed are the attempts to delineate its anatomy.

■ Pillar 24a at Sanchi Stupa 2, medallion with rhino.
Photograph: American Institute of Indian Studies. AIIS: 311.98. Acc. No. 39438.

Pompous legends are used to accentuate the prowess of the ruler. On the obverse is *bharta khadgatrata Kumaragupto jayatyanisam,* while on the reverse is *Sri Mahendrakhadga*. What deserves to be underlined here is the use of the word *khadga* which can be interpreted as a rhinoceros as well as a sword, both of which are seen on the coin. One translation would be: "Ever victorious is the Lord Kumaragupta who is *khadgatrata*, that is, a protector by the sword from the rhinoceros." The legend on the reverse has been interpreted as "Sri Mahendra, the slayer of rhinoceros".[55]

The significance of this coin has been a matter of much deliberation, with suggestions ranging from political and military ones to those that have attributed a religious significance to it. Then there are others that have perceived the coin simply as another of the *mrigaya* or hunting type issued by the Gupta rulers, celebrating their love for big game.

Notwithstanding such interventions, what can perhaps be safely presumed is that the tiger and the lion having already been appropriated by his illustrious predecessors, it was Kumaragupta's quest for a new symbol which led him to the rhinoceros. The sovereign, evidently, seems to have been more ambitious as well as eager to augment the numismatic legacies of his forerunners. The attempt, therefore, was not only to integrate old symbols but also to introduce new ones and the burly unicorn readily offered itself for adoption. The elephant of course would have been a more obvious choice but, given the centrality accorded to the creature, both as a war and as a state animal, it was probably considered prudent to portray it as a mount aiding access to the game rather than as the game itself. It has been argued that although the coins of Kumaragupta depict the rhino, these are aberrations since they are not popular representations. Rather, they are clearly in exaltation of the ruler



■ Shreyansnath, the 11th Jain tirthankar, has a rhino for his "chinha" or symbol. The standing statue is that of the Digambara sect of Jainism.
Courtesy Sudhanshu Kasliwal.

■ Jina Shreyansnath depicted in the Shvetambara sect tradition of Jainism. The symbol remains unchanged—the rhino—though the sect is different.
Courtesy Daivesh N. Shah.

slaying the animal and overpowering its might.[56] While that may be one perspective, the depiction of the animal on the coin should not be merely seen as a device employed to assert the prowess of the ruler vis-à-vis forces to be reckoned with. It is also an indication of the animal having been sufficiently present to be encountered during hunts, at least in the Ganga valley.

Even as late as the 9th and 10th centuries, the rhinoceros found a place in the terracotta assemblage retrieved during excavations at Shyam Sundar Tilla in South Tripura district.[57] This comes as no surprise as, even in the 18th century, northern Bengal and Assam were known to be so rich in rhinoceroses that a French map of India describes that area as "Contrée de Rhinoceros", and late medieval temples in Bengal, approximately from the same period as the map, are decorated with terracotta panels showing rhinoceros hunts (see Chapter 5).[58]

Notwithstanding this evidence, we have to acquiesce that with the dawn of the historical period, there is a gap in the archaeological record. This can primarily be attributed to historical archaeology's preoccupation with prehistory and protohistory. The drying up of archaeological evidence is, however, made up for by the vivid imageries derived from texts and textual traditions. In what follows, we run through some principal texts of ancient India in search of the mega herbivore. These glimpses are merely illustrative and not exhaustive. The intention is not to convey a linear progression from one corpus to the other, but to carve out a narrative of the fortunes of the animal within religious and secular traditions separated in time and space.

Literary Sources

The Vedas provide the earliest glimpses of the human-rhino interface. We tread on firm ground in our search for the armoured giant when we encounter the *khadga*. A pointer to the identity of the animal is that several Vedic passages situate it "in the realm of fierce wild beasts and suggest that its hide is armour-like", an observation that accurately describes the Indian rhino.[59]

Our search for the *khadga*, for instance, leads us to the scene of the *ashvamedha* sacrifice where animals dedicated to different deities are tied to the 21 *yupa*s (sacrificial stakes) and in the intermediate spaces. While domestic animals are bound to the stakes, in the spaces between them are confined wild animals including the elephant and the rhinoceros. However, not all these animals are killed, some including the rhinoceros being temporarily confined till the culmination of the ceremony.[60] In the enumeration of the animals assigned to different deities, the rhino is dedicated to the Vishvadevas (all gods) who are worshipped through the Vaishvadeva *homa* (rite).[61]

Though such contexts do not suggest anything more than a ritual significance of the mighty animal, we can perhaps turn to more telling clues for allusions which reflect an interest in the use of the animal. One learns, for instance, about the Vedic use of rhinoceros hide (*khadgakavacha*) in a ritual *dakshina* or priestly gift at the one-day Soma rite known as the Apachiti.[62] The *Sankhayana Shrautasutra* mentions that "the sacrificial fee is a horse-chariot, coated with rhinoceros-hide, covered with tiger fell, with a quiver boar-hide, with a bow-case of panther-hide, drawn by brown horses."[63] Similarly, in a ritual context, the *Jaiminiya Brahmana* stipulates the use of armour of rhinoceros hide.[64]

It is likewise possible to retrieve glimpses of the animal from the corpus of early Buddhist literature based on the Pali *Tipitaka*. Our search for the rhino here, leads

■ Kushana-period terracotta plaque with the image of a one-horned rhino, Chandraketugarh, West Bengal.
Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

us to the *Khaggavisana Sutta* or the rhinoceros sutra of the *Sutta Nipata*, a text which immortalized the animal by extolling its solitary character. The constant refrain *eko care khaggavisanakappo* urges one to wander alone like a rhinoceros.[65] Though allegorical, it is remarkable how this *sutta* shows familiarity with animal behaviour.

In the oft-told Jataka parables narrating the stories of the Buddha's former births, the rhinoceros puts in an appearance in the *Sudhabhojana Jataka* as part of the setting of a hermitage.[66] Similarly, the *Vidhurapandita Jataka* envisions a captivating view of the landscape, rich in fauna including the rhinoceros, when it mentions a magic jewel through which the entire world could be seen.[67] The contexts suffice to convey the ecological sensibilities of ancient India by situating the rhino in environs typically conducive as habitats.

Assigned to the 1st century CE, the narrative in the non-canonical *Milindapanha* centres around a chain of discourses between King Milinda and Nagasena the Elder regarding a number of points of Buddhist doctrine.[68] An interesting allusion occurs to "an elephant hemmed in by rhinoceroses".[69] Though clearly allegorical in the given context, it may be worthwhile to point out that the elephant-rhinoceros

■ Tiger-slayer type gold coin of Samudragupta (ruled circa 350–370 CE). *From http://coinindia.com/Samudra-4792tigerB-491.10.jpg. Courtesy Indian Museum, Kolkata.*

■ Lion-slayer type gold coin of Chandragupta II (ruled circa 376–413/415 CE). *From http://coinindia.com/Chandra-4814.2Ev-503.20.jpg. Courtesy Indian Museum, Kolkata.*

animosity (not conclusively proved in the wild) is often referred to in later popular writings.

As in Buddhism, the animal elicits attention because of its solitary character in the Jaina world. The *Kalpasutra*, for instance, extols the fortitude of Mahavira by saying that he was "single and alone like the horn of a rhinoceros".[70] The natural behaviour of the mega herbivore, thus, makes for an image which cuts across traditions.

Significantly, ancient Indian texts suggest that an interest in the skin of the animal, as seen in the Shrautasutras, graduates to an interest in its meat. This, for instance, clearly comes through in the Dharmasutras of Apastamba,[71] Gautama[72] and Baudhayana,[73] which widely forbid the eating of the flesh of "five-nailed" (*pancanakha*) or "five-toed" animals, except for a restricted list comprising the porcupine, hedgehog, monitor lizard, hare, tortoise and very often the rhinoceros. A similar injunction occurs in the *Manava Dharmashastra*.[74] The rhinoceros, though, is a strange inclusion, since it has only three toes on each foot. Nevertheless, if we remind ourselves of the importance assigned to the animal in Vedic ritual contexts, it seems reasonable to argue that this inclusion was possibly an extension of a tradition which had firmly embedded itself in early human consciousness.

Overall, what manifests are attempts to sanction the eating of rhino meat which is further amplified when the Dharma texts unanimously reinforce its preeminence in appeasing ancestors. Apastamba, for instance, tells us that the meat of a rhinoceros (*khadgamamsa*) offered on a rhinoceros skin (*khadgopastarane*) is said to gratify ancestors for an unlimited time.[75] In a similar vein, the *Manava Dharmashastra* spells out the periods for which the flesh of animals offered at rites for ancestors satisfies them, and rhinoceros meat is enlisted amongst the items that are "efficacious in perpetuity".[76]

What clearly emerges from this maze of injunctions and the attempts to explain them is the interest ancient India had in the skin and meat of the rhinoceros. Though the contexts of use in Brahmanical sources are primarily ritual and relate to socio-religious prescriptions, texts like the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* (dated to the first half of the 1st millennium CE) and the *Arthashastra* (c. 300 BCE–200 CE) demonstrate how these extended to strategic and medicinal realms as well.

In an eightfold classification in the *Charaka Samhita*, based primarily on feeding habits and habitats, the rhinoceros belongs to the *anupa* class of animals or those which are inhabitants of marshy lands.[77] The meat of the animal is said to impart strength and alleviate *vata dosha* (the body substance derived from the element air). According to Charaka, it is sweet, unctuous (oily), nourishing, beneficial for

■ Rhinoceros-slayer type gold coin of Kumaragupta I (ruled circa 413/415–455 CE).
From http://coinindia.com/Kumara-Rhino-R8.0-17.jpg. Courtesy Indian Museum, Kolkata.

the complexion, and relieves fatigue.[78] Olivelle contends that strength here may well suggest sexual potency.[79] Elsewhere, the physician is urged to give the well-spiced meat of the animal as a cure for emaciation.[80] Apart from an interest in the flesh of the animal, the text also mentions the use of its horn, stipulating that amulets to be worn by a child be made of the tip of the "right horn" of a living rhinoceros, deer, gayal or bull.[81] The allusion, though ambiguous, does give an inkling of the beliefs associated with the horn of the animal.

In a more complex classificatory system, in the *Sushruta Samhita,* we encounter the *anupa* category again, but here it is divided into five sub-groups where the rhinoceros, along with elephants, boars, buffaloes and other animals, appears amongst those living on banks (*kulachara*).[82] Significantly, the flesh of these animals is said to be sperm-producing and effective in eliminating imbalances in *vata* and *kapha* (the latter *dosha* deriving from the elements of water and earth). While the flesh of these animals is said to be sweet in taste and cooling,[83] the flesh of the rhinoceros specifically is said to have an astringent taste. The meat of the animal is pleasing to ancestors, is sacred, imparts longevity, tends to suppress the discharge of urine, is dry and pacifies *vata* and *kapha*.[84]

Such classificatory systems not only reflect an engagement with the ecology of the animal but also underline the preservation of the lore recommending rhino meat. The *Sundarakanda* of the *Ramayana* recounts how, as part of his quest for Sita, Hanuman explores Ravana's palace, searches the harem as well as the drinking hall with the aroma of delicacies which also include "*vardhranasakas*".[85] J.L. Brockington emphasizes as an oddity this sole occurrence of the rhinoceros—*vardhranasa* in the text, as one of the items in the banquet that Hanuman sees spread in Ravana's dining hall.[86]

It may, however, be pointed out that the interpretation of the term "*vardhranasakas*" as rhinoceros does not appear in the popular translations of the *Ramayana*.[87] For instance, the Goldman translation refrains from interpreting the term and uses it verbatim, expounding that no commentator could specify with certainty what sort of a creature it was.[88] Hence, notwithstanding the thrill of finding the rhinoceros amidst the gastronomic spread for Ravana, the presence of the animal in the text in general, and in the banquet hall of Ravana in particular, should best be considered a possibility rather than a certainty.

The *Adiparvan* of the *Mahabharata* preserves a rather quaint reference to the animal. Vashistha consecrates the Paurava as the sovereign of all baronage "to become the one horn (*vishanabhutam*) of the entire wide earth".[89] The expression lacks clarity but has been interpreted as a reference to the horn of the rhinoceros,

a symbol of uniqueness and solitude.[90] It is, however, the *Karnaparvan* which unambiguously establishes the identity of the animal as our one-horned hero, when it describes a grim contest between Bhima and Ashvatthama, where the latter strikes the Pandava on the forehead with an iron arrow. Bhima is then said to have borne the arrow protruding from his forehead like a "proud rhinoceros bears his horn in the forest".[91]

The epic saga also evinces an interest in the utilization of the animal itself. Karna is consecrated according to scriptural prescriptions on a seat covered with linen, with sanctified golden and earthen pots, with water-filled tusks/horns of elephants, rhinoceroses, great bulls and other animals filled with jewels and pearls and pleasant-smelling herbs.[92] Yudhishthira questions Bhishma regarding the duration of offerings which gratify the ancestors, and is told that the gratification received from the flesh of the rhinoceros (*khadgamamsa*) was inexhaustible.[93]

The animal finds use even in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya which spells out as forest produce: "Skin, bones, bile, tendons, eyes, teeth, horns, hooves and tails of the lizard, *seraka*, leopard, bear, dolphin, lion, tiger, elephant, buffalo, *camara*, *srmara*, rhinoceros, bison and *gavaya*, and also of other deer, beasts, birds and wild animals."[94] *Nistrimsa*, *mandalagra* and *asiyasti* are swords whose hilts are made of the horn of the rhinoceros and buffalo, the tusk of the elephant, wood and bamboo-roots.[95] It is further expounded that "a coat of mail of metal rings or metal plates, an armour of fabrics and combinations of skin, hooves and horn of dolphin, rhinoceros, *dhenuka*, elephant and bull are armours."[96]

Beyond the use of its flesh and body parts, the animal seems to have been used in contests to entertain the sovereign as well as a befitting item of gift for him. Chandragupta Maurya enjoyed seeing animal fights in his arenas. These included wild bulls, tame rams, rhinos, tusked elephants and more. We are also told that the animals brought to the king as gifts included stags, antelopes, gazelles, oryxes and rhinos.[97]

Our next encounter with the armoured giant is in the fifth pillar edict of Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE). Amplifying the principle of *ahimsa* or non-destruction of life, the proclamation suggests that human depredations on wildlife had begun as it decrees: "[When I had been] anointed twenty-six years, the following animals were declared by me inviolable, viz. parrots, *mainas*, ..., the rhinoceros, white doves, domestic doves, [and] all the quadrupeds which are neither useful nor edible."[98] Ashoka's word for the rhino is *palasate*.

Garbled allusions to the animal also occur in the fabulously exaggerated classical Western accounts hovering between legend and history. Ktesias (400 BCE), we know, earned himself the distinction of being the first writer to give to the Greeks the only systematic account of India till the time of the Macedonian invasion. The "horned wild ass" he elaborately describes seems to be the rhinoceros, though not all the details furnished by him correspond with the animal. Notwithstanding the muddled nature of the reference, it is the first possible allusion to the Indian rhino by a Western author.[99] A brief reference to the "one-horned Indian ass" by Aristotle (384–322 BCE), a contemporary of Alexander of Macedon, is also a likely allusion to the Indian rhinoceros.[100]

In the histories of Alexander compiled several centuries after his death, it is from Quintus Curtius Rufus (100 CE) that we learn that, following the arduous yet memorable triumph at Hydaspes, when Alexander was rousing his soldiers for the

conquest of the East, they were told that the region was abundant in timber and also had the rhinoceros, an animal rarely found elsewhere.[101]

Despite its occasional inaccuracies, the *Indika* of Megasthenes, which can be retrieved only through the works of later writers, is perceived as more reliable than the mosaic of images culled from writers who never visited India themselves, and were writing on the basis of wisdom received from diverse sources. Strabo (circa 60 BCE–19 CE) for instance, cites Megasthenes when he mentions "one-horned horses with heads like those of deer".[102] The observations of Megasthenes can also be found in the work of Claudius Aelianus (Aelian), who lived around the middle of the 2nd century CE, and described a one-horned animal called the *kartazon*. The description, though inaccurate, unmistakably relates to the rhinoceros, referring to its horn and solitary behaviour, and associating it with secluded pastures.[103]

The horn of the rhinoceros, which seems to have enthralled without exception all classical writers, also figures frequently in the items of trade mentioned in *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* attributed to an anonymous writer of the 1st century CE. An embassy comprising a group of Western merchants trying to buy silk directly from the Chinese, instead of through Indian middlemen, were offered in exchange, ivory, rhino horn and tortoise shell—all available in India.[104]

In his *On the Peculiarities of Animals*, Aelian mentions a horn brought from India to Ptolemy the Second, which held three amphorae (about 26 gallons). He presumes it to have been from an ox "which grew a horn so prodigious", and attributes to report the breeding of one-horned horses and one-horned asses in India. He affirms that drinking cups were fashioned from the horns of these animals, adding that if a deadly poison was thrown in, the drinker would escape unharmed since the horns of the horse as well as the ass were an antidote against poison.[105] More captivating is the fragment where he recounts how the "great King of the Indians" chose a day every year for fighting between men as also between brute animals which were horned, and included "unicorn asses".[106]

What emerges from these narratives is the sense of awe, wonder and curiosity with which the Western world perceived the one-horned rhino. This, along with the fact that many of the classical writers had not seen the animal themselves, accounts for some of the fanciful descriptions we encounter. Nevertheless, not all can be attributed to imagination since some of the characteristics, such as the mention of the single horn, the habitat of the animal, its solitary behaviour as well as the reference to the tradition extolling the properties of rhino horn, leave little room for doubt that we are on apt terrain in our search for the protagonist of this story.