THE RHINOCEROS COMES TO EUROPE

Kathleen Coleman

As Rome's influence spread throughout the Mediterranean, the Romans came into contact with exotic flora and fauna. From the cherry trees of Pontus on the north coast of Turkey to the crocodiles of the Nile, they brought examples back to Rome to display as prized imports. The generals and statesmen of the late republic competed fiercely in the acquisition of such plants and animals. The plants took root on their estates and in the courtyards of the public buildings they sponsored; the animals were displayed at public venues and hunted in violent spectacles, but apart from elephants there is no evidence that they were bred in Italy. Elephants are the one exotic species known to have been reared in an imperial gamepark a few kilometres from Rome.

The rhinoceros, with its massive body, folded skin and distinctive horn on the tip of its nose, was one of the most impressive beasts known to the Romans. The Greeks encountered it first. The Roman name for it, which is ours, too, is transliterated from Greek: *rhinoceros* means 'nose horn'. One of the Greek rulers of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, displayed a rhinoceros in his grand procession in Alexandria in the early third century BCE, and a pig-like animal with two horns – one enormous, the other merely vestigial – is drawn on the wall of a roughly contemporary Hellenistic tomb at Tel Maresha, about 33 miles south-west of Jerusalem, and labelled 'rhinoceros' in Greek. Because the second horn of both of the African species, the white and the black, can sometimes be a mere excrescence, as is the case with the rhinoceros at Maresha, the Romans and their Greek predecessors seem sometimes to have confused the two-horned African rhinoceros with the other species known to them – the single-horned Indian rhinoceros. The native habitat of the other two Asian rhinoceroses, the Sumatran and the Javan, was too distant for the Romans to have encountered them.

The first rhinoceros to be displayed at Rome was one of the starring attractions at the opening of Rome's first permanent theatre, built by the Roman general and politician Pompey in 55 BCE. Alongside the display of this exotic beast, Pompey also showed off his capacity to import exotic plants by building a portico behind his theatre and planting plane trees and other exotica in the courtyard. Ten years later, Pompey's arrival, Julius Caesar, gained comparable kudos by displaying Rome's first giraffe. Caesar's heir, Octavian (later to become the emperor Augustus), defeated Mark Antony and his consort, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE. At his formal triumph to celebrate this victory, he displayed a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus, two species appropriately associated with the African continent. A victory over a ruler meant the acquisition of his (or her) territory; the territory could not be moved to Italy, but its characteristic products could.

The Romans and the tribes who helped them to import rhinoceroses could probably have fed them an adequate diet if they could have stored enough of it or guaranteed a constant supply. Both species of African rhinoceros can survive on a diet of clover or lucerne, supplemented with hay for the white rhinoceros, which is a grazer, and with grass and vegetables for the black, which is a browser. Crucially, their skin would have to be kept damp to prevent it from cracking. If an African rhinoceros captured in sub-Saharan Africa and destined for Rome had been shipped down the Nile to Alexandria, it would still have had to survive a minimum voyage of nine days to reach Italy, where it might have arrived severely debilitated.

Animals acquired for spectacles at Rome were often too weak to put on a vigorous display, a misfortune bitterly lamented by sponsors and spectators alike.

Yet the poet Martial in the late first century CE comments on the excitement generated by a rhinoceros, which, although apparently sluggish at the beginning, eventually charged a bull and tossed it into the air as though it were a ball stuffed with straw. In a second epigram, Martial describes an even more impressive spectacle, in which the attendants in the arena had almost despaired of goading the rhinoceros into action when it suddenly recovered its former aggressive spirit and tossed a series of animals with its horn, including a bear, two bullocks and possibly also a bison and an aurochs (a shaggy-haired ox); a lion, no less, fled from it in fright. The terror sown by Martial's rhinoceros has been borne out by modern observation: when it has young to defend or when water is scarce, the black rhinoceros has been known to attack lion, buffalo and even elephant.

Roman depictions of the rhinoceros on coins and in artistic media testify to a combination of acute observation and erroneous detail. A *quadrans*, worth one quarter of an *as* (the lowest denomination of the Roman currency), would have reached most people's pockets. Its capacity to disseminate an official message was therefore enormous. Putting a rhinoceros on a coin confirms the propaganda value of this curiosity. A *quadrans* minted by the Senate under Domitian (reigned

Figure 1. Rhinoceros on a bronze quadrans of Domitian (84–85 CE).
Photographs: ANS 1944.100.54620. Images courtesy of the American Numismatic Society

Figure 2. Rhinoceros (middle row, right) on a mosaic from a Roman bath beneath the former church of S. Elisabetta, now the Dipartimento di Chimica, Università degli studi di Perugia. Photograph: DAI Rome 76.1849R

81–96 CE) shows a two-horned rhinoceros advancing left with its head lowered and its tail curling over its back, which is precisely the attitude of a white rhinoceros in motion (fig. 1). On the coin, however, the animal's hindlegs have an 'elbow' like a horse, instead of being 'graviportal', straight up and down, to bear the enormous load of its body. Some fifty years later, a very similar depiction, with the head held even lower, was created in a mosaic at Perugia representing the standard mythological scene of Orpheus charming multiple species with his lyre (fig. 2).

On the Mosaic of the Great Hunt at the fourth-century villa at Piazza Armerina in central Sicily, a rhinoceros with a pointed snout – so probably a black rhinoceros – is being lassoed around its horn by one hunter and prodded with a goad by another (fig. 4). It is depicted standing in a marsh, perhaps to allude to its habit of wallowing in mud to keep its skin moist and get rid of ticks. A jaunty rhinoceros perched on a rock in the middle of the Nile on the Palestrina Mosaic faithfully displays two horns, but the effect of zoological exactitude is belied by the fanciful details of its row of menacing teeth and

its ears, which are not only fringed but also flop instead of standing upright (fig. 3). Yet this animal is definitely meant to be a rhinoceros, because it is so labelled in Greek, most likely copying the caption and, doubtless, the representation from an illustrated manual of Greek zoology.

After the Roman era, it was another thousand years before a rhinoceros was seen in Europe again. It belonged to the Indian species and was presented to the governor of the Portuguese Indies by the sultan of the Gujarat kingdom, who sent it to Lisbon as a gift for King Manuel I. Two weeks after its arrival in the spring of 1515 it had recovered sufficiently from the journey to terrorise an elephant against which it was pitted in a display in the royal courtyard. The elephant, in panic, charged through a wall, and the rhinoceros' performance generated an outburst of fandom. This impressive beast, named Ganda (or Genda), soon set sail again, destined this time for the Vatican as an offering to Pope Leo X, whose fascination with exotic animals was well known, but a shipwreck off the coast of La Spezia cheated the pope of an exotic new acquisition.

The animal lives on, however, in Dürer's immortal print, the equivalent of the epigrams, coins and mosaics that have memorialised for us the place of the rhinoceros in the spectacle culture of ancient Rome – even if Dürer's rhinoceros is less zoologically accurate, its heavily folded hide more closely resembling armour plating than skin. For each rhinoceros that entered the arena, we cannot know how many shared Ganda's fate before they reached their destination. Those that survived, however, although slow to be roused to action, earned the admiration of the spectators and their place in the history of the ancient world.

Figure 4. Detail of rhinoceros on the Nile Mosaic from Palestrina. Museo archeologico nazionale di Palestrina. Photograph: Drew E. Griffin

Figure 3. Detail of rhinoceros being captured on the mosaic of the Great Hunt in the Villa Casale at Piazza Armerina, Sicily.
Photograph: Erich Lessing / Art Resource NY, ART200328

Rhinoceros foetus skin. American Museum of Natural History Collection.
Photograph: Fritha Langerman, 2017

Ceratotherium simum cottoni. Skull in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.
Collected by Heller, E, 1910. Lado enclave, Uganda. Catalogue number: USNM 164596.
Photograph: Fritha Langerman