

3. Early rhinoceroses in Rome, China and the Near-East

1. The Roman world

In the period that the Romans were in power, from the first century BC to the third century AD, a number of rhinoceroses were exhibited in Alexandria and Rome. Several summaries of the evidence about these rhinoceros are available, including Jennison (1937), Gowers (1950), Toynbee (1973: 125-127) and Störk (1977: 307-403). The information in the various contemporary sources is often limited to indications that a rhinoceros was present in a certain year or period. The animal is rarely described, and, even when it is, the details are often second-hand.

Specific identity

It is a vexing question as to which species of rhinoceros was known to the Romans. Some of the references dating from the first century AD refer to single horns. It is quite possible that these refer to specimens of the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The exact origin of these specimens from the Indian subcontinent will inevitably remain speculative. The species was found in Pakistan or Western India (Rookmaaker 1984b) and the rhinos may have reached Rome from there.

Other rhinoceroses in Rome were described as double-horned or 'Ethiopian'. Gowers (1950) suggested that such animals must have been white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*), presumably from the Sudan or Ethiopia. His thesis is not generally accepted. The latest contribution on this subject is by Colls *et al.* (1985), who recorded the discovery of a statuette of a rhinoceros in Port Vendres, France, dating from the second part of the second century AD (see Fig. 10). This statuette is clearly a black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). Although we can continue to argue about differences in species with regard to shape of the head, relative size, shape and size of the horn(s), there can now be no doubt that the majority of animals known to the Romans were African black rhinos. The Romans could have obtained them from the regions around the Red Sea coast or from the hinterland of the present Eritrea and Ethiopia. The black rhinoceros was found in those areas until at least the

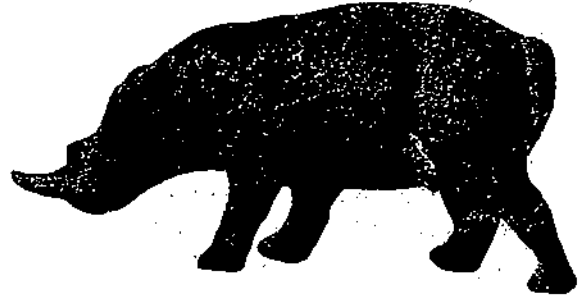


Fig. 10. Black rhinoceros statuette from Roman times, discovered at Port Vendres, France.

last century (Yalden *et al.* 1986:42-45, fig. 5). The white rhinoceros has not been recorded in those areas in recent times. We can conclude that the Romans knew both the single-horned Indian and double-horned black rhinoceros.

Alexandria, Egypt

275 BC, Procession for Ptolemy II

On an unspecified date, Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-246 BC) held a great procession in the city of Alexandria. Athenaeus, who wrote his *Deipnosophists* in the third century AD, based on earlier lost works, noted (V, 201c) that the procession included 'one Aethiopian rhinoceros'.

100 BC

Strabo's *Geography* (XVI.4.15) contains an argument on the size of the rhinoceros, taken from a lost work written around 100 BC by Artemidorus of Ephesus. Strabo disagrees with a statement made by Artemidorus, although the latter says that he saw the animal at Alexandria.

Rome, Italy

29 BC, the Games of Augustus

In *Roman History* (22, 5) written in the third century, Dio Cassius stated that the Emperor Augustus organized games in 29 BC, at which "wild beasts and tame animals were slain in vast numbers, among them a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus, beasts then seen for the first

time in Rome". The rhinoceros "has also a horn on its very nose". Gaius Suetonius (ca. 70-140 AD) wrote his *De Vita Caesarum* around 120 AD. He mentions (II, 43,4) that Augustus exhibited rare animals in the Roman arena, including "a rhinoceros at the Septa" and a tiger. He does not give a date.

8 AD, the Games of Augustus

Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, LV, 33,4) reported that a rhinoceros was once again seen at games organized by Augustus. This time, "an elephant overcame a rhinoceros".

55 AD, the Games of Pompey

Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79 AD) wrote about the animals seen at the games organized by the Emperor Pompey in 55 AD to celebrate the opening of a new amphitheater. Besides a lynx and a giraffe, there was "a rhinoceros with one horn on the nose [*unius in nare cornus*] such as has often been seen. Another bred here to fight matches with an elephant gets ready for battle by filing its horns on rocks" (Plinius, *Naturalis Historia*, VIII. 71). The second sentence in Latin starts with the words '*alter hic genitus*', which H. Rackham translated as 'another bred here.' While this is a rather intriguing statement, I assume that Plinius did not mean to imply that the animal was born in captivity, since the remark is rather too short and general.

Around 200 AD, Solinus wrote in his *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium* (chapter 43) that the rhinoceros was unknown at the Roman games before the time of Pompey.

80 AD, the Games of Titus

On the occasion of the dedication of the Colosseum in Rome in 80 AD, the Emperor Titus organized shows lasting for 100 days. Martialis (40-102 AD) wrote two epigrams in his *Liber de Spectaculis* (IX and XXII) indicating the presence of a rhinoceros. Apparently, the rhinoceros was made to fight a bear. The penultimate line of the 22nd epigram, in which Martialis wrote, "*namque gravem gemino cornu sic extulit ursum*" ["for a heavy bear he tossed with his double horn"] has become famous. This 'double horn' greatly bothered chroniclers in the 16th and 17th centuries, trying every ingenious trick to explain this anomalous number of horns (summary in Rookmaaker 1981:111-112).



Fig. 11. Coins from the reign of Domitian with double-horned rhinoceros.

81-96 AD, the Reign of Domitian

Several coins showing a double-horned rhinoceros are known, dating from the reign of the Emperor Domitian (e.g., Gowers 1950:69, Störk 1977:371; see Fig. 11). There is no independent information about the rhinoceros itself. It is quite possible, as suggested by Toynbee (1973:126), that these coins were modelled on the rhinoceros exhibited at the games of Titus in 80 AD.

98-117 AD, the Reign of Trajanus

A coin with a double-horned rhinoceros was produced during the reign of the Emperor Trajanus (Störk 1977:371). A rhinoceros may have been shown in Rome during this period.

127 AD, the Reign of Hadrian

Another double-horned rhinoceros can be seen on a coin made during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD), dated 127 AD (Gowers 1950:69, Störk 1977:371).

138-161 AD, the Reign of Antoninus Pius

In his *Historiae Augustae* (Anton. Pius, X. 9), Capitolinus recorded that 'rhinoceroses' (plural) were among the animals shown during the reign of Antoninus Pius. This possibly refers to the games of 148 AD, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Emperor's accession.

180-192 AD, the Reign of Commodus

The Emperor Commodus was famous for personally slaying many animals in the circus, including five hippopotamuses and a giraffe. Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, LXXIII, 10, 3) writes that there were 'rhinoceroses' among these victims. The word is in the plural, but is not qualified further.

211-217 AD, the Reign of Caracalla

A rhinoceros was killed in the arena during one of the blood-thirsty games organized by the Emperor Caracalla (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LXXVIII, 6, 2). There was a medal struck during Caracalla's reign showing a wrecked ship, with underneath it a rhinoceros which is clearly single-horned.

218-222 AD, the Reign of Elegabalus

Lampridius (*Historiae Augustae*, XXVIII, 3) reported that many Egyptian animals were imported during the reign of the Emperor Antonius Elegabalus. Among them there was a 'rhinoceros' (singular), as well as hippopotamuses and a crocodile.

248 AD, the Games of Philippus Arabicus

The *Historiae Augustae* (XXXIII, 1) contains a list of animals brought together for the Persian Triumph of Gordianus III, but which were shown by Philip the Arabian in 248 AD. There was only one rhinoceros, which may point to its relative rarity, as other species were present in large numbers, for instance, 32 elephants, ten tigers, 60 tame lions, 30 tame leopards, ten hippos, ten giraffes, and many others.

2. Early China

The rhinoceros was frequently seen at the Chinese court. These animals were given as gifts by the rulers and citizens of the different Chinese provinces and neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Brentjes (1973:253) illustrates a bronze statuette of a double-horned rhinoceros made in the Shang-Yin period (second century BC). As it is quite naturalistic, he suggests that it was made from a captive specimen (see Fig. 12).

The rhinoceroses seen at the Chinese courts or other animal collections before 1500 have not been documented in detail. I have no access to the Chinese literature and have only been able to find a few references, and it is likely that this is just a fraction of the available evidence. Laufer (1914:80-81), in one of his lengthy footnotes, gave a list of rhinos received as tributes until about 1400. This is supplemented by Shafer's review (1985:83).

Yule and Burnell (1886:363, sv. ganda) refer to a statement by Fernao Mendes Pinto that, during their siege of Peking, China, in July 1544, the army of the Kings of the Tar-

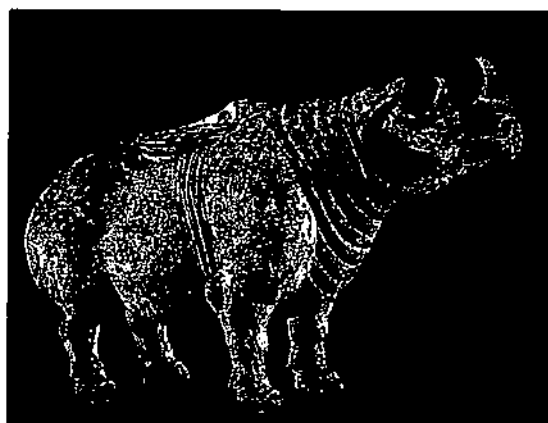


Fig. 12. Rhinoceros wine container from China, Eastern Zhou Dynasty (475-221 B.C.).

tars included 'four score thousand rhinoceroses'. The word used in the original seems to have been 'bada', normally (like 'abada') referring to the rhinoceros. A modern edition of Pinto's *Travels* edited by Rebecca D. Catz (University of Chicago Press, 1989) argues that the animal meant was more likely to be the yak, and she (p. 241) translates the passage to say that the army travelled "overland with a train of 80,000 yak laden with all their food and supplies". Surely, this would be a more sensible translation.

2 AD

The country of Huang-Chi, south of Tonkin, sent a living rhinoceros as a tribute to the court of China (Ts'ien Han shu, chapter 27B, p. 17b). Huang-Chi may have been the Malay Peninsula (Laufer 1914:80, Reynolds 1961a: 18).

84 AD

A living rhinoceros was offered to the Chinese court by the Man I beyond the boundary of Jinan (Laufer 1914:81 from Hou Han shu, chapter 116, p. 3b).

94 AD

The tribes of South-Western Szechuan made a gift of a rhinoceros and an elephant (Laufer 1914:81 from Hou Han shu, chapter 116, p. 8b).

168-188 AD, the Reign of the Emperor Ling
Kiu-chen of Tonking despatched a living rhinoceros to the Chinese court (Laufer 1914:81 from Ta Ming i t'ung chi, ed. 1461, chapter 90, fol. 5).

568 AD

Funan sent a living rhinoceros to the Chinese court (Laufer 1914:81 from Liang shu, chapter 54, p.4).

ca. 620 AD

Early in the seventh century (at the beginning of T'ai Tsung's reign), the Chams of Champa sent a tame rhinoceros to Ch'ang-an (Schafer 1985:83 from Chiu T'ang shu, 197, 3609d).

640 AD

The people of Champa sent 11 rhinoceroses 'communicating with the sky' to China (Schafer 1985:83 from T'ang hui yao 98, 1751).

ca. 650 AD

Sometime in the seventh century, a trained rhinoceros arrived as a gift from an unidentified country called Ziam-pak (Schafer 1985:83 from Ts'efu yuan kuei, 970, 15a).

730 AD

A rhinoceros arrived as a tribute from Persia (Schafer 1985:83 from Ts'efu yuan kuei, 971, 8a).

746 AD

Another rhinoceros was received as a tribute from Persia (Schafer 1985:83 from Ts'efu yuan kuei, 971, 15b).

ca. 750 AD

A trained rhinoceros was sent from the Khmer kingdom of Chinrap during the eighth century (Schafer 1985:83 from Ts'efu yuan kuei, 971, 18a; T'ang hui yao, 98, 1752).

793 AD

Another rhinoceros came from Champa in 793 AD, and was displayed in the Grand Shrine to delight the dead as well as the living sovereigns (Schafer 1985:83, from Chiu T'ang shu 13, 3103a; Ts'efu yuan kuei, 972, 5b; T'ang hui yao, 98, 1751). Perhaps this is the same animal as the following one.

796-797 AD

A tame rhinoceros, sent as a tribute to the Chinese court, was kept in the Shang-Lin Palace. The animal died in the winter of 797 AD due to the cold weather. A poem celebrating the rhinoceros was composed by Yuan Chen and Po Ku-i (Laufer 1914:81, Schafer 1985:84).

819 AD

The people of Ho-Ling [Java] presented a living rhinoceros to the Chinese court (Laufer 1914:81 from Kiu T'ang shu, chapter 197, p. 2b).

824 AD

A rhinoceros was sent from Tibet together with other wild animals (Schafer 1985:83 from Ts'efu yuan kuei, 972, 8a).

ca. 850 AD

During the ninth century, a trained rhinoceros arrived from Kalinga (Schafer 1985:83 from Chiu T'ang shu 197, 3610a; Ts'efu yuan kuei, 972, 7b; T'ang hui yao, 100, 1782).

854 AD

From a country to the south of China, 'the Man of the South' sent a royal tribute to China, which was promptly returned (Schafer 1985:83 from Chiu T'ang shu, 18b, 3131d).

1009 AD

The people of Kiao-chi [Annam] presented a tame rhinoceros to the court (Laufer 1914:81 from Sung shi, chapter 489).

1260-1367, Yuan Dynasty

The people of Annam presented a rhinoceros to the Chinese court (Laufer 1914:81 from Ta Ming i t'ung chi, ed. 1461, chapter 90, fol. 5).

3. Northern Africa and the Near East

There are a few, probably quite incidental reports of rhinoceroses kept in a captive setting in Northern Africa in the sixth century and in the Near-Eastern countries in the 16th and 17th centuries.

6th century

Cosmas Indicopleustes wrote *Christiania Topographia* around the year 548 AD. In this book, he described a rhinoceros with horns on its nose (XI, 441B). He claimed that while he was "in Ethiopia", he "once saw a live rhinoceros while I was standing at a far distance, and I also saw the skin of a dead one stuffed with chaff, standing in the Royal Palace". It is likely that the living rhinoceros was seen in the wild, not in a captive situation.

975/996 AD, Cairo, Egypt

During the reign of the Cadhi el-Aziz (975-996 AD), a rhinoceros of unknown origin was transported to Cairo; it died on the way. It had a single horn. The skin was mounted, filled with hay, and exhibited in Cairo (Brentjes 1978:151).

1502, Mecca, Saudi Arabia

Ludovico di Varthema from Bologna travelled in Asia from 1502 to 1508. He also visited Mecca. In one of the sacred sites of that city, he saw an enclosure with "two live unicorns, and these are shown as very remarkable objects, which they certainly are". He proceeds to describe their appearance and size. He was told that "these two animals were presented to the Sultan of Mecca ... by a King of Ethiopia, that is, by a Moorish King" (Varthema 1928:22, original Italian published in 1510). The use of the word 'unicorn' would seem to point at an Asian rhinoceros, which contradicts its provenance.

1550, Cairo, Egypt

The traveller André Thevet (1556:145) saw a rhinoceros in the Castle of Cairo in 1550. He did not provide a description, except to say that it had four legs, a single horn on the snout and that it was the enemy of the elephant.

1575, Aleppo, Syria

Leonhart Rauwolf from Augsburg was a medical doctor, who wrote a book about his travels in the Near East from 1573 to 1575. While in Aleppo, Syria in February 1575, he noted that 'a young rhinoceros was carried through the town to Constantinople. It came from the most Eastern parts, and had killed about 20 men before they could take it' (from an English Translation, Rauwolf 1738, II: 181; original German published in 1582). If the animal had in fact come from the East, it must have been an Asian species.

1588, Istanbul, Turkey

Samuel Kiechel of Ulm (1866: 415) saw a rhinoceros in Constantinople during his travels in the Middle East. He gave a rather long description showing that the animal had two horns. Jennison (1928:151) mentions the possibility that it was this animal that was illustrated by Ulisse Aldrovandi, *De Quadrupedibus* (1616), as the 'Asinus cornutus' (see Fig. 13). This small engraving shows an animal

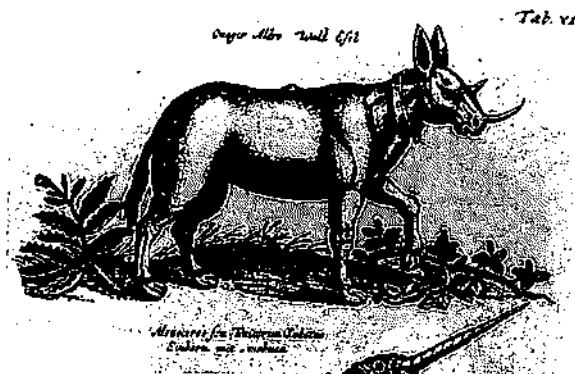


Fig. 13. The 'Asinus Cornutus' of Aldrovandi, 1616.

with two horns on the nose and above the eyes, similar to those of African rhinoceroses. It has a collar around the neck, which could point at a captive life (Rookmaaker 1985:283).

1620, Istanbul, Turkey

A Turkish illustration made between 1620 and 1622 shows a (single-horned) rhinoceros being taken by a Persian ambassador as a gift for the Turkish Sultan Osman II (1603-1622), together with four elephants (Störk 1977:480).

1669, Bukhoro, Uzbekistan

In 1669, an emissary from Russia, Boris Pazuchin, was sent to King Khan Abdul Aziz of 'Buchara'. While being entertained at the court, a rhinoceros ['karka'] was paraded in front of him: "und dem am Hofe des Khans, unter anderen Tieren, auch ein Rhinoceros vorgeführt wurde" (Unbegaun 1956:549).

1675, Esfahan, Iran

Jean Chardin (1711: 45, pl. XL) saw a rhinoceros in the Royal Stables at Esfahan, when he first arrived in the city. He had many opportunities to observe it and he gave a good description of the animal, accompanied by an obviously original drawing. The animal shared its quarters with two elephants and had been presented by an Ambassador from Ethiopia. The rhinoceros depicted in the plate is clearly single-horned (Indian). In his description, Chardin also mentions only one horn. It is hard to explain this presumed African origin.

The Englishman John Fryer visited Esfahan in 1676, and among the animals kept by the Emperor, he saw a rhinoceros said to have come from 'Bengala'. It could be the same animal seen by Chardin. Fryer (1698:287) gave a long description of the animal with a single horn.



Fig. 14. Engelbert Kempfer's Karkadann in Esfahan in 1683.

1683, Esfahan, Iran

Engelbert Kempfer was given an album of drawings during his stay in Esfahan in 1684 and 1685. It contains a depiction of a 'karkadann' (rhinoceros) which was seen alive in the Royal Gardens on 30 July, 1683 (preserved in the British Museum, Department of Oriental Drawings; see Rookmaaker 1978b:33, No. 8.4). The drawing itself would appear to be a copy of an engraving of the second Lisbon rhinoceros made in 1586 by Philippe Galle (Clarke 1986: 166, Fig. 131; see Fig. 14).

1699, Persia

A rhinoceros was donated by an Indian ruler to the King of Persia, but it died on the journey. It contained a bezoard stone, which was taken to Paris and preserved in the Cabinet du Roi (Daubenton in Buffon 1764: 210, No. 1056).

Chronological list of rhinoceroses of unknown species

275 BC	Alexandria: Ptolemy
100 BC	Alexandria
29 BC	Rome: Augustus
2 AD	China: court
8 AD	Rome: Augustus
55 AD	Rome: Pompey
80 AD	Rome: Titus
81 AD	Rome: Domitian
84 AD	China: court
94 AD	China: court
98 AD	Rome: Traianus
127 AD	Rome: Hadrian
138 AD	Rome: Pius
168 AD	China: Ling
180 AD	Rome: Commodorus
211 AD	Rome: Caracalla
218 AD	Rome: Elegabalus
248 AD	Rome: Philippus
568 AD	China: court
620 AD	China: court
640 AD	China: court
650 AD	China: court
700 AD	Ethiopia (Cosmas)
730 AD	China: court
746 AD	China: court
750 AD	China: court
793 AD	China: court
796 AD	China: court
819 AD	China: court
824 AD	China: court
850 AD	China: court
854 AD	China: court
975 AD	Cairo: el Aziz
1009 AD	China: court
1260 AD	China: court
1502 AD	Mecca
1550 AD	Cairo
1575 AD	Aleppo
1588 AD	Istanbul
1620 AD	Istanbul
1669 AD	Bukhoro
1675 AD	Esfahan
1683 AD	Esfahan
1699 AD	In transit to the King of Persia