

DURER'S RHINOCEROS AND ITS HISTORIANS

By CAMPBELL DODGSON

ONE of the most popular of Dürer's drawings is that of a rhinoceros; the drawing entered the British Museum at its foundation, in the collection of Sir Hans Sloane. Many people must have wondered how Dürer was in the position to draw such a relatively accurate portrait of an animal that he can have never seen, even though, in some of its details, the portrait is imaginary, the artist being evidently unable to resist the temptation to invent fish-like or reptilian adornments for the pachyderm. The answer is that a sketch sent from Lisbon must have provided the material for his drawing. He is confused about dates; having first written "153" in his inscription, he corrected this in the woodcut to "1513," which is still wrong; the day of the month is also incorrect. The woodcut—dated, like the drawing, 1515—went through many editions, and is, of course, owing to its wide dispersion, far better known than the original drawing.

The beast itself excited great interest, and all its doings were "news" in the years 1514-16, for it was the first rhinoceros to be seen in Europe since the days of ancient Rome. Pliny records that there was one at Rome at the time of Pompey the Great. The animal which Dürer drew, certainly not from the life, was brought to Europe from India by the Portuguese. In 1901, when writing the text to the Dürer Society's fourth portfolio, I took great pains, with the aid of Mr. R. S. Whiteway, author of "The Rise of the Portuguese Power in India," to extract such references as could be found in Portuguese historians to this rhinoceros; but more documents have since been discovered, and the fuller story of this animal's "deambulations," as he calls them, has recently been published at Lisbon in very quaint "English as she is spoke," by the Portuguese writer Senhor A. Fontoura da Costa.

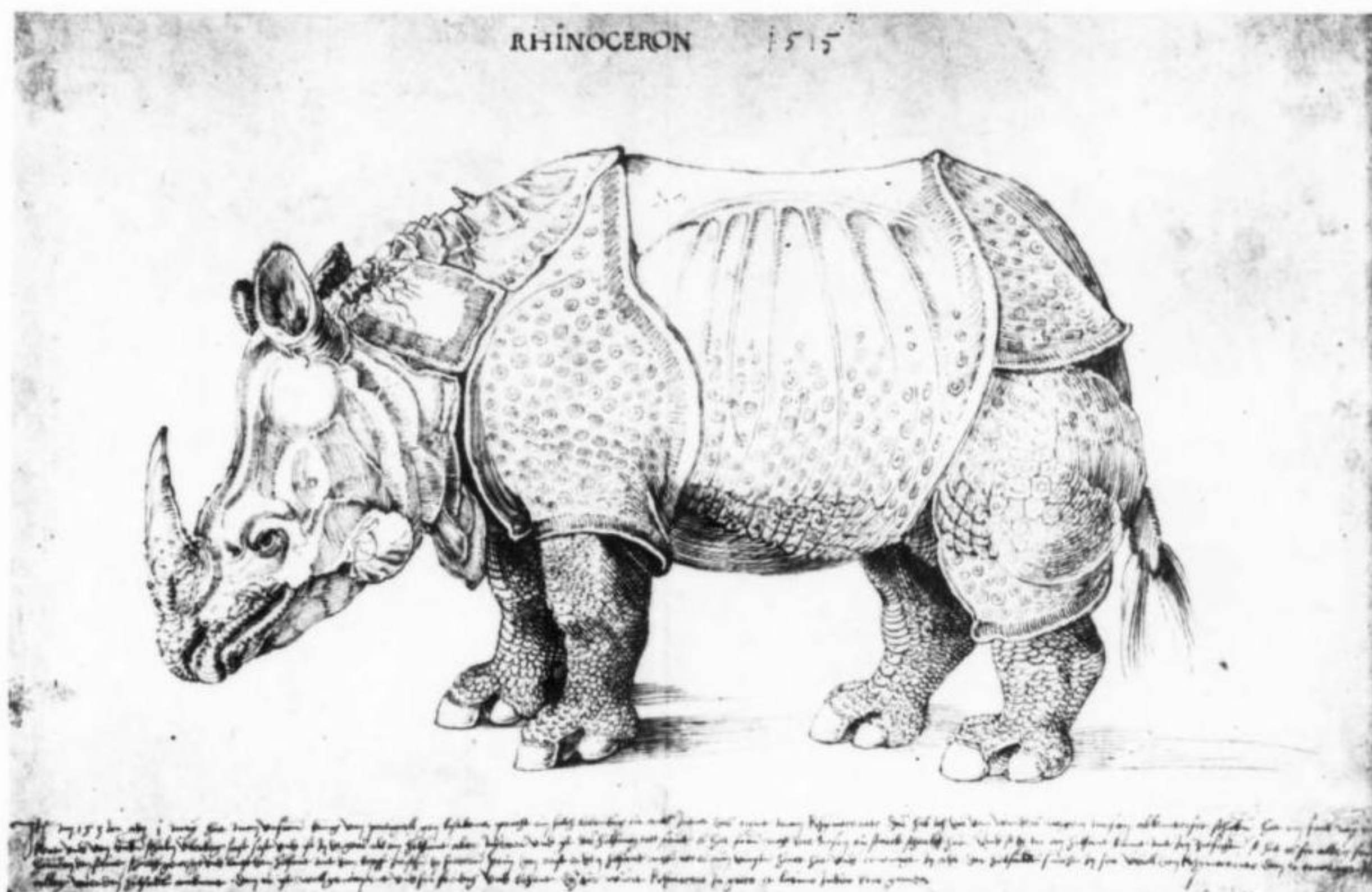
Before relating it, let me translate the inscription on the drawing, which explains how much Dürer knew about the matter. It appears, from the wording, to be the copy or German translation of a letter from Lisbon, the author of which was perhaps a Portuguese, for he speaks of Emanuel I as "our king." "Item in the year 15(1)3, on May 1st, they brought our King of Portugal at Lisbon such a beast alive from India, which they call a Rhinoceros. For the wonder's sake I have had to send you a likeness of it. It has a colour like a tortoise and is covered nearly all over with thick scales, and in size is like the elephant but lower, and is the elephant's mortal enemy. It has in front on its nose a strong sharp horn, and when the beast comes at the elephant to fight him it has always first whetted its horn sharp against the stones and runs at the elephant with its head between his forelegs, and rips him up where he has the skin thinnest, and so kills him. The elephant is very badly afraid of the rhinoceros, for it kills the elephant whenever it comes at him, for it is well armed and very lively and active. This beast is called 'Rhinoceros' in Greek and Latin, but in Indian 'Ganda.'" In the woodcut the text is slightly modified: Emanuel is called "the mighty King of Portugal," and the Indian word for rhinoceros is not given. The account of the enmity between elephant and rhinoceros is taken from Diodorus Siculus; as we shall presently see, the quotation moved Emanuel I to test its correctness by experiment.

The history of the "ganda" opens with its presentation to the Portuguese envoys, in 1514, by Muzafar, King of Cambay or Sultan of Guzerat, in return for presents sent by Albuquerque in the hope of obtaining permission to build a fort at Diu. Albuquerque, Teixeira, and Béja received the rhinoceros at Surat on May 16th, and they sailed to Goa, arriving on September 15th. On October 20th Albuquerque ordered presents to be given to the native Oçem, who was taking the "ganda" to Portugal. The Portuguese fleet sailed early in January, 1515, Teixeira and the rhinoceros being on board *Na. Sa. da Ajuda*. The return trip from India lasted 120 days, and the route lay between Madagascar and the Continent, calling at Moçambique, then round the

Cape of Good Hope to St. Helena, and thence to Lisbon. Though deprived of its main article of diet, grass, the rhinoceros, fed presumably on hay and rice, reached Lisbon safely on May 20th. It was, doubtless, not stabled at Paço dos Estaos, Rossio, where King Emanuel kept elephants, but probably in some outhouse of the Palacio da Ribeira. Adjoining this palace there was the Casa da Mina, which had a courtyard in front of

it surrounded by high walls and battlements, with iron-barred windows.

Fontoura da Costa has discovered, in a letter written by a Moravian, Valentin Ferdinand, addressed to a friend at Nuremberg, and extant in an Italian translation, a description of an encounter which took place on Trinity Sunday, 1515, between the "ganda" and one of the King's elephants. The brief account of an eyewitness is somewhat embellished by the more imaginative pen of the modern Portuguese



DURER'S DRAWING OF THE KING OF PORTUGAL'S RHINOCEROS

"It has a colour like a tortoise, and is covered nearly all over with thick scales"

author. "On the 3rd June," he writes, "the Royal Family with Court and guests gathered in the courtyard. The native Oçem had led the rhinoceros by a chain and placed it behind the tapestries hanging from the passage, where it remained well hidden. Then, from a stable at Paço dos Estaos, was brought the youngest of the elephants kept there. The elephant entered the arena, and the King ordered that the tapestries be drawn. The rhinoceros appeared furious and ready for the attack, and rushed forward so violently that it broke loose from the chain. The elephant was standing with its back to the "ganda," but, as soon as he perceived the enemy, turned round and, lifting its trunk, uttered a tremendous cry, then seeing with its bright eyes the strong horn of the rhinoceros, got such a fright that it fled in the direction of one of the barred windows. Wrenching off, with its trunk, the iron bars which were as thick as an arm, the elephant succeeded in getting its head through the window, then with mighty strength the bars gave way and broke, and it got its whole body through and, finding itself free, started on a mad career until it reached the stables at Rossio. Thus ended this interesting festival, which enlivened the 1515 life of Lisbon."

The wealthy and splendour-loving Emanuel I, who had sent Tristan da Cunha to Rome in 1514 with rich presents to Leo X, including an Indian elephant and a cheetah, whose powers Leo promptly tested in the Vatican gardens, resolved in the following year still further to impress the Pope, with the aim of obtaining concessions, and to send him the rhinoceros as a gift—perhaps, as Giovio says, with the further intention of providing a rhinoceros-elephant fight at the Vatican. In a document dated October 9th, 1515, Emanuel specifies vessels of silver and gold, adding "and for the ganda the following articles: gilt iron chain; green velvet collar with gilt roses and carnations, trimmed with fringe." "How dandy poor ganda must appear in such harness!" is the comment of our Portuguese author. João de Pina, captain of a sailing vessel unnamed, was charged to take the presents to Rome. The ship arrived at Marseilles in January, 1516, and the rhinoceros was put ashore on one of the islands in the bay, probably Pomègues or Ratonneau, to be seen by Francis I, King of France, who with Queen Claude was at Marseilles, returning from La Ste. Baume, where he had gone to render thanks for victory at Marignan. Late in January, or in February, João de Pina sailed for Rome, but a storm caught the vessel in the Gulf of Genoa, and it was lost with all aboard, being dashed against the rocks a little north of Porto Venere. Paolo Giovio describes the wreck in his "Dialogo dell' Imprese Militari et Amoroze," saying "it was impossible for the beast to save itself, although it swam wonderfully, since it was in chains, and the rocks are very high on all that coast." Damião de Goes adds that the corpse of the ganda was washed ashore, and, after being stuffed, was sent to the Pope. "And so," concludes our author, "in this sad manner ended the deambulations of the ganda of Muzafar, King of Cambaia."