

'AETHIOPIAN BULLS'

AELIAN, *De natura animalium* 17.45

„They are twice the size of bulls in Greece and move very quickly indeed. . . Usually they move their horns as they do their ears, but in battle they raise them, making them stand up strongly“.

The description is a mixture. Aelian says that these bulls have red hair and light blue eyes, which accords with certain mosaic pictures of bulls. [E. g., from Africa — G. V. Gentili: *La Villa Erculia di Piazza Armerina: I Mosaici Figurati*, (Roma 1959), plates 28 & 29. S. Aurigemma: *L'Italia in Africa: Tripolitania*, Vol. I, part 1, (Roma 1960), plate 1956]. But the ability to move the horns is a feature recorded, not of bulls, but the two-horned rhinoceros.

According to Cosmas Indicopleustes, „this animal is called the rhinoceros because it has horns on its nose. When he is walking his horns are mobile, but when he sees anything which makes him angry, he erects them and they become so rigid that they are strong enough to tear up even trees by the root,“ *Tipographia Christiana* 11.1 = Migne, P. G: 88.441. The drawing which accompanies this in the mss. shows an animal very much like a pony except for two erect horns growing from its upper snout, [88.469]. Cosmas's verbal description, however, is quite accurate.

Andres Sparrman, who later travelled with Captain Cook, made a journey to the Cape of Good Hope between 1772 and 1776, and while in Hottentot territory was able to dissect a two-horned rhinoceros. „The hindmost [horn]“, he wrote, „especially in the old ones, is most commonly noticed to be worn away in different parts, which is never the case in the foremost and larger one. This confirms, in some measure, the assertion of the Hottentots and the colonists, that the rhinoceros uses the shorter one only for digging up the various roots. . . it being endowed with the power of turning the larger horn at that time, on one side out of the way. I was even informed that in the live rhinoceros the horns were so loose and moveable, that when the animal walks carelessly along, one may see its horns waggle about, and hear them clash and clatter against each other“, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope*, English trans., (Perth 1789), Vol. II. 72. [It must be added that Sparrman had his doubts about this last piece of information].

Henry Salt, however, reaffirmed the tradition. „A Somali gave me the following description of it, that when feeding in the fields undisturbed, the horns are often depressed (which he showed with his hand on his head, inclined at an angle of about forty-five); but when alarmed, (raising his hand to a perpendicular over his head). the animal erects them thus“, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, (London 1814), 416 note.

How does one explain this tradition? The horn is not controlled by any muscular action on the part of the rhinoceros and therefore cannot be pushed on one side or moved upright. Horns may be broken or knocked off, especially in battle, so it is just possible that if a horn were not completely broken it might betray some movement. Occasionally, owing to infection or damage at its centre, a horn will bifurcate and this may give the impression that the two stems could „waggle about“ if the animal moved quickly. Infection too, or maggots, may cause rotting at the base of the horn and so produce very slight movement. All these are very particular cases and it may seem odd to suggest that a general observation grew out of them, but they are the only occasions I can think of when movement of any kind can be observed, or be thought to be observed, in the rhinoceros's horn.

It is, moreover, noteworthy that Aelian is the only one, out of many Classical writers who described the rhinoceros, to record this feature and since it is obviously sound native tradition and not a product of his own imagination, we may remark not only that Aelian is the earliest writer to mention it but also that he must have derived his account from someone who had actually visited Africa and brought back a piece of local bush-lore. So the tradition itself has a long history.

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