

Three rhinos on maps of India drawn in Faizabad in the 18th century

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In an *Atlas of India* produced in 1770 at the court of Oudh, there are three illustrations of a rhinoceros inserted on the maps. These were the work of Indian artists, and do not appear to rely on earlier representations of the animals. The Atlas was based on the investigations of Colonel Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil (1726–1799), a French military officer who lived and worked in India for 25 years in the second half of the 18th century, from 1752 to 1777. He spent the last 10 years as the official French agent at the Court of Oudh (Awadh), which at the time of the ruler Shuja-ud-daula (1732–1775) was located at Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, India, on the banks of River Ghaghra. While Gentil was at the court, he had time and leisure to collect data on the history and geography of India, which he compiled in a number of manuscripts which largely remained unpublished during his lifetime.

By studying the *Ain-i-Akbari* written in the 16th century for the Mughal emperor Akbar, Gentil was able to develop new maps of the different parts of India. He employed a number of Indian artists, whose identity has been lost in time, but may have included Nevasi Lal and Mohan Singh. All maps were embellished with little drawings of scenery, people, plants and several animals, both within the cartographic part and around the borders.

The three images of a rhinoceros are found on the maps of 'Bengale' (Bengal; Figure 1), 'Bear' (Bihar; Figure 2) and 'Avadh' (Oudh, Uttar Pradesh; Figure 3). It might be argued that the little figures on the maps were entirely decorative. At the same time it is remarkable that the animals appear only on maps of regions where at one time the rhinoceros would have occurred, maybe even were still present when Gentil was in the country (Rookmaaker 1984). In the map of Bengal the rhinoceros is seen just outside the north-eastern border of the state, in Bihar near the Himalayan foothills, and in Oudh in the northern parts



Figure 1. Rhinoceros and elephant on the map of 'Bengale' in the Atlas produced for Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil in Faizabad in 1770. British Library, London.



Figure 2. Rhinoceros on the map of 'Bear' (Bihar, India) in Gentil's Atlas. British Library, London.

which would now be in the area between Balrampur and Gorakhpur.

The figures show that all rhinos were single-horned, but at the same time they differ in small details. I don't believe that this in any way signifies that the artists had any intention to indicate the presence of different types of rhinos, it is more likely that these were merely different ways to depict the animal. Although the drawings do not lend themselves to strict naturalistic determination, they all must show the Indian (greater one-horned) *Rhinoceros unicornis*.

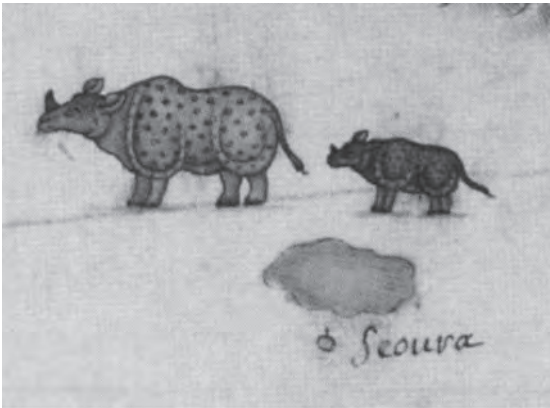


Figure 3. Rhinoceroses (mother and young?) on the map of 'Avadh' (Oudh) in the Atlas produced by Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil and dated 1770. British Library, London.

The drawings are remarkable for the early age and for the fact that they were made by Indian artists, as very few similar representations are known. There is no information where the artists might have seen the animals, or earlier drawings of them. However, the court of Oudh had a special passion to keep and exhibit rhinos, certainly in later years, but maybe even in the 1770s although details are absent (Rookmaaker 1998: 90).

Gentil had two copies of his Atlas, but only the principal one includes the animal drawings. This document is now in the India Office Library of the British Library, London. The Atlas was introduced, annotated and reproduced by Gole (1988), but has not been noticed in the zoological literature.

References

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