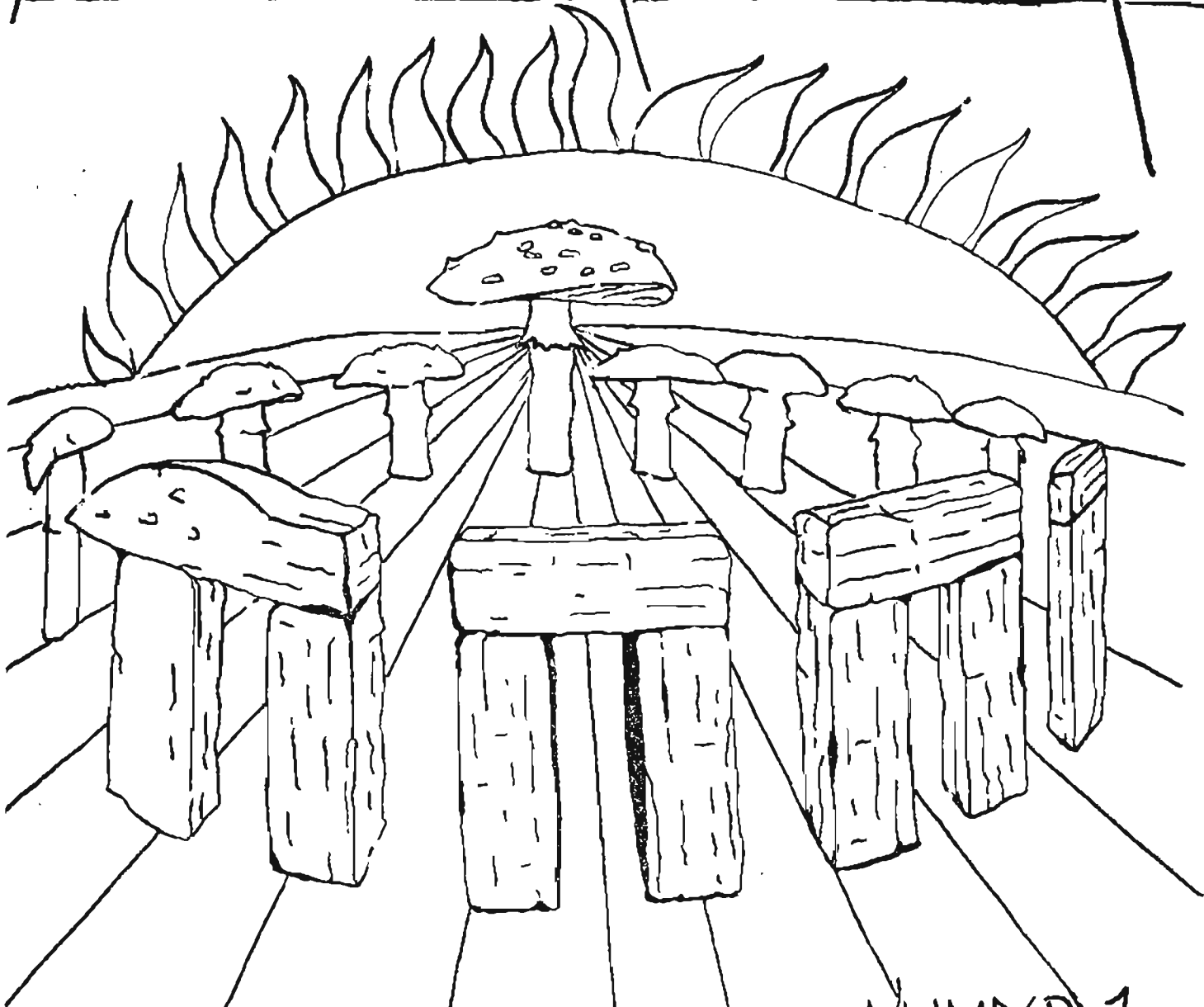


AMANTA



NUMBER 1

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF  
ECLECTIC MYCOPHAGY

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AMANITA is the predeliction of one Cyril Simsa. Thanks are due William Rotsler, Adam, Bogmorton, and Debora; also John & Eve (electrostencils, which arrived - so please ignore my morbid speculations elsewhere in the issue; I had visions of great doom and postal sorting offices, and as it happened both of these turned out to be no more than products of neurosis; sorry that I got impatient - it was my fault anyway).

Further approbation goes to Ben for duplicating, and my votive thanks are offered with apology to the neglected cirripede. All correspondence should be sent to Cyril Simsa, c/c 18 Muswell Avenue, London N10 2EG, U.K. This issue free to anybody on request or whim: for future issues send a loc, a trade, or - failing that - some stamps to cover postage. I don't want your money, so don't send me any.

Contributions will be welcomed so long as I like them (I do not claim to be blessed with objectivity, alas). This issue dated 5th October, and is copyright (c) 1979 by the various contributors. And by the way, does anyone out there collect the labels off-of matchboxes? I have a fair selection I'd like to get rid of.

## EDITORIAL: CLUTCHING AT MUSHROOMS

There is a mural on the walls of a cathedral in the south of France, which represents the Tree of Knowledge as a Fly Agaric mushroom; the cathedral is abandoned now, and quite dilapidated, but it must have once supported something of an unexampled congregation.

It is quite unusual for a mushroom to receive a kind reception; much more frequently, all mushrooms are regarded with suspicion, and the Fly Agaric (Amanita) more so than a lot of other species. For a start, its common name comes from that quaint old British custom of preparing saucers full of Amanita chunks in milk; these saucers would be left upon the window-ledges of the house, and in due course they would begin to smell a bit.

It just so happens that this smell is irresistible to flies, and pretty soon the saucer would be crawling with the black and hairy hordes who, dropping by to sniff, stayed on the sup and then keeled over due to poisoning. In this way households used to rid themselves of their unwanted fauna, and indeed, before the advent of the aerosol insecticide, the mushroom method was undoubtedly the most effective way to fill your kitchen with the rotting corpses of unwanted pests.

One should not wonder, then, that Britons viewed the mushroom with ambivalence, and that they looked askance at habits such as mycophagy. Whereas on the Continent one has to rise at 5 a.m. in order to go mushrooming before the early morning rush, some Britons still refuse to eat a Continental packet soup, ostensibly because it might have bits of "toadstool" floating in it. One can trace this mycophobic attitude as far back as the Herbals: Culpepper, for instance, recommends that Mushrooms can be used in poultices - that nothing can out-do them at the ripening of any abscess - yet, he does not recommend straightforward gastronomic use. It would seem that mushrooms were not deemed a fitting morsel for the British palette; little did the British know what delicacies they were missing.

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Hi. This fanzine has sprung into being somewhat like a mushroom. Though I have been toying with the notion of a fanzine for some time, my efforts up till now have all proved pretty ineffectual. AMANITA took root suddenly, and sprouted fully-formed: I'm not at all sure where it came from, or what it sets out to do (perhaps its only role is, like the mushroom, to perpetuate itself).

I would appreciate a few more contributions for next issue, so please send me anything that seems compatible. I'd also be most grateful towards anyone Out There who can supply the authors/titles of unusual SF stories that, in one way or another, deal with ambulating plants. In order to qualify, the plant need only show a tendency to active locomotion: walking, in the strictest sense, is not a requisite (thus I'll be happy to receive a plant that's capable of crawling, climbing, strolling, mincing or hitch-hiking - but no triffids, please).

I don't think there is any more to say, except I hope that somebody enjoys this issue.

# MONTMORENCY,

## THE STONEHENGE KOHLRABI,

who has grown continuously in his plot between the bluestone circle and the altar stone since Neolithic times, today revealed the secret of the ancient edifice.

According to Montmorency, himself first planted as a seedling by one of the Celtish druids in what was at that time an allotment, the structures of Stonehenge are no less than a Bronze Age flyover. Montmorency's explanation has been greeted as providing the first adequate account of why so many ancient roads converge upon the spot; objections dwelling on supposed ritual and religious functions of the circle, which were raised by some more orthodox historians, have been described by members of the press as "uninspiring" and "redanttic".

Montmorency, undeterred, has stated "Just you wait, you turnip-eaters. You'll be sorry when I'm famous."



## THE TIGER'S BRIDE: A Long, Pretentious Book Review

by Cyril Simsa

Angela Carter broke the ice at a short story-writing course I once attended. There were nineteen strangers sitting round a lounge being polite to one another; then Ms Carter wandered in and started to recount the story of her bed.

When she first started out in life, she got herself a house. This house was tall and "pencil-shaped"; the rooms were long and narrow, and connected by a winding staircase in a stairwell that had been tacked onto the end of the house, as if in afterthought.

There was no furniture inside this house except one great, big double bed: the bed looked pretty happy where it was, but Angela conceived the notion that it should be shifted up one floor into the room above. Now, this meant problems, 'cause the stairwell wasn't wide enough to take this great, big, monstrous double bed - but in a flash of inspiration, our protagonist decided all she had to do was saw the bed in half. And this she did - or rather, this a friend did for her. It was something of a shame that she did not have any kind of saw at hand: they ended up by sawing through the bedstead with a breadknife.

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When I heard that anecdote, I was reminded of Ms Carter's stories: they are something like that house, concealing oddities and strange events in their unusual, quirky, almost Gothic antechambers. In The Bloody Chamber (out from Gollancz; £4-95), Ms Carter has collected a selection of her recent stories: all of them in some way are derived from folkloristic sources, and in fact are the result of background research she conducted for a new translation of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault (this new translation also published, on the Gollancz Children's list).

Despite their origins, her stories do not follow the tradition: by a series of amusing and amazing twists of mind, they turn our comfy notions of the folktale giddily askew. The fairy tales we all think we remember suddenly seem changed: the tale of Sleeping Beauty is retold with vampirism added; Beauty has a hateful father, so she goes and joins the Beasts; and little Riding Hood confronts a were-wolf on her way to Granny's (this last story may in fact be no more than a restoration of an early version of the myth, before the story was deloused for safe consumption by the youth of Christendom: belief in werewolves was so rife in France that one translation of the Bible, dated 1394, contains the passage: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wer-wolves" - Matthew, Ch.7, v.15).

This is the sort of way in which Ms. Carter juxtaposes fairy tale motifs; in many cases, she then plays with permutations of the stories thus produced (indeed, The Bloody Chamber may be just an interim collection, for another story - called "The Bridegroom" - has been published in BANANAS, but is not included in the pages of this book). However, even in The Bloody Chamber, it is not unusual

to discover two or more alternate versions of one story nestling back-to-back: for instance, "Beauty and the Beast" is present as two variants. One tells the story in accordance with tradition, but is set against a strictly modern background (so that Beauty gets a phone-call from her father, where tradition would have had her see his image in a magic mirror). In the other, motivations and the resolution are inverted. Both succeed in adding new dimensions and new insights to the time-worn story.

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All but three of the short stories in The Bloody Chamber use an intricate, always precise, and often rather complex style. On rare occasions (as in the first few pages of the last tale in the book), this lapses into an impenetrable surplus of verbosity, but on the whole the writing works extremely well: Angela Carter subtly changes tense and changes from third person into first (or even second); what is more, she does this unobtrusively. By means of this device, she makes some portions of each story seem a good deal more immediate than others, and she captures an authentic feeling of the timeless, placeless yarn told simply by lay storytellers at the hearthside on a winter's night. Although three stories use a more straightforward style (keeping to one narrative tense throughout), even in one of these the tense she chooses is the present, thereby lending it a slightly oral - as opposed to written - feel.

The longest story in the book is also - curiously - the least typical of all the tales collected in its pages. It is set against a well-defined locality, and a specific time (the story's main events occur in Paris and in Brittany, and I would guess the date as being roughly the fin de siècle). It begins almost as if it were a straight piece of historic fiction: not till later is it made apparent that its plot is very close to that of a particularly gruesome fairy story. Nowhere is this fairy-tale connection made explicit (and in this it differs from the other stories in the book); but even so Ms Carter's leading male protagonist shows quite a number of quite startling parallels to the protagonists of other, more overtly folkloristic stories. For example, he has eyes which call to mind those of "The Erl-King," and in other ways he calls to mind the tiger of "The Tiger's Bride" (for instance in his pungent odour, and his face that seems as perfectly unblemished as a mask).

It would be almost true to say that in this story (which takes pride of place in opening the book), Ms Carter introduces as analogies some of the themes she later goes on to explore as fantasies. Indeed, the stories, read in sequence, start to build on one another - playing with (inverting or reintroducing) common themes, progressively diversifying, and becoming more and more bizarre. The very best of this collection - stories like "The Company of Wolves," "The Lady of the House of Love," and, possibly, "The Tiger's Bride" - are honed and polished so as to incise the intellect and the emotions, cleanly as a scythe - and come to rest with a resounding thunk as all their parts fall



HUNTING THE HIPPOPOTAMUS:

by Cyril Simsa

Sifting Through Ancient Hippo-Lore

"I shoot the hippopotamus  
With bullets made of platinum,  
Because if I use leaden ones,  
His hide is sure to flatten 'em"

- HILAIRE BELLOC, The Bad  
Child's Book of Beasts (1896).

It is now over eighty years since Belloc wrote this piece of kiddies' verse, and maybe its jocular reference to the armour-plated hippo's hide seems just a little bit far-fetched today. And yet, before the advent of the modern rifle, hippo hide did genuinely pose a problem to the would-be big-game hunter. Monsieur Thevenot, a French explorer, tells of when he came across the fresh cadaver of a hippopotamus (1): "(The hippopotamus) was brought to Cairo by the Janissaries, who shot it on land, where it had come to feed." The beast took an unspecified, but large number of shots to fell; apparently, the musket balls seemed hardly to puncture its skin.

This property of hippo hide is vouched for by numerous other writers: Dr Klockner, for example, a physician of the eighteenth century, remarks upon the hardness of the hippo's crupper (2), whilst the Roman writer Pliny (3) tells us that the hippo's skin was used extensively in the production of helmets and bucklers. (In more recent times, the excellence of hippo hide for making whips has given rise to a small cottage industry in Southern Africa). The hardness of the hide, therefore, presents a stumbling block, and it is not surprising, then, that some elaborate techniques to circumvent the problem have at times developed:

The first European author to describe a hippo hunt is probably Diodorus, the Ancient Greek historian (4): "The hunting of the hippopotamus requires several men, who... attack with several boats, and strike (him) with hooked harpoons. To some of these...they fix a rope, and then leave the animal to exhaust himself with struggling and the loss of blood." This is substantially the same technique used by Dutch settlers of South Africa in Klockner's day; the other settlers of the area, however, chose to hunt the hippopotamus on land (5): "According to other historians, his return to the river is cut off by trees and ditches; because they know that he uniformly inclines to regain the water...rather than to fight on land...they try to break his legs by blunderbusses, charged with iron wedges."

The first scientist after the Renaissance to write an accurate description of the hippopotamus was an Italian, Zerenghi; he did not go to quite such extremes of viciousness in capturing his specimen, instead positioning "men on the Nile, who, having seen two of these animals go out of the river, made a large ditch in the way through which they passed, and covered it with thin planks, earth, and herbage.



In the evening, when returning to the river, they both fell into the ditch. I was immediately informed of the event, and hastened to the place along with my Janissary. We killed both animals by pouring three shot into each of their heads from an arquebus. They almost instantly expired, after uttering a cry which had more resemblance to the bellowing of a buffalo, than to the neighing of a horse." (6)

This extract illustrates a common misconception of pre-scientific writers on the hippopotamus - a misconception all the early scientific writers felt obliged to comment on, correct, and even justify when their own observations demonstrated its obvious fallacy. This misconception was, of course, that hippopotami (a word derived from the Greek root hippos - a horse, and potamos - meaning a river) were in actual fact no more than water-loving species of the common horse. This misconception can be traced to Herodotus, who said of the hippopotamus. "It is a quadruped with cloven feet...a horse's mane and tail, huge tusks which are very conspicuous, and the neigh of the horse...its hide is so tough that when dried it is made into javellins." (7)

It seems likely that this author never saw the beast he was describing; being a respected writer, though, his words served as the source of later writers, who in turn embellished his erroneous description. By mediaeval times, the hippo had become to all intents and purposes a creature no less fabulous than, say, the unicorn: none of the clerics who expounded on the beast in their innumerable bestiaries ever saw a living specimen (or even, like as not, the dead remains of one). In consequence, there was a shortage of real information which was filled by the creation of a large number of speculative "facts" (a process paralleled by present-day investigators of phenomena such as the "Sasquatch"). Any scrap of even the most tenuous significance was seized upon and written up, complete with an illuminated margin. In this way, the half-myth hippo came to be compounded with the mythic centaur:

"In that country is a species of animal called hippopotami, which are equally at home in water and on land. One half of these beasts is shaped like a man and the other half resembles a horse. They devour men whenever they can catch them, preferring them above all other kinds of meat." (8)

It is thus easy to imagine the confusion felt by Belon when he saw a living hippo at Constantinople in the sixteenth century, and why his subsequent accounts of his encounter seem to draw upon the Ancients much more than upon experience; whilst hardly having the importance of, say, Galileo's heresies, the struggle between scientific thought and the accepted dogmas is discernible even in this backwater of biology. The early scientific writers had to face a staggering accumulation of inaccuracies copied and compounded by one writer from another: in conjunction with each other, these inaccuracies gave

a strong impression that the hippo was more horse-like than it really was; to make the matter even worse, those few explorers who actually saw the living hippo, modified their stories and descriptions by making concessions to the wisdom of the Ancients. In this way the hold this misconception exercised was so pervasive that even a thinker as original as the Comte de Buffon felt he was obligated to rebut the Ancients, one point at a time; hence Buffon states "there is no mane," and then goes on to say that though the hippo's voice may possibly resemble horses' neighing, hippos differ from the horse "in every other respect." (9) Buffon puts to rest the misconceptions of a couple of millenia.

Throughout this time, of course, alongside all the learned writings of the scholars like Zerenghi, there had been a larger number of unscholarly reports; these intended chiefly to amuse, and so poetic licence was quite often exercised. "Accuracy" was, in many cases, not a by-word of their authors, and indeed there are a number of such tales which have since proved to be unmitigated fictions (the most famous case of this is probably Mandeville's Travels, in its day highly regarded, but now thought to be the product of a pseudonym - a pseudonym, to boot, who showed an utter lack of inhibition when it came to playing with his fancy). (10)

Notwithstanding the unlikely features of so many of these tales, they found a large, undoubting and enraptured audience; even the scholars like Buffon had to rely on some of them, simply because in many cases there was nowhere else to go for information. Not that this was in itself enough to make the tales reliable: there are those tales, like Captain Dampier's, which - whilst not outright fabrications - do at least enhance the truth a bit. Thus, Dampier recounts how he once saw a Dutchman's boat get beached after the tide had stranded it upon an ocean-hippo's back (he also tells how once a hippo bit a hole right through his boat, causing the boat to sink; "and after he had done, he went away shaking his ears"). (11)

These stories of the hippo taking chunks out of explorers' boats were almost de rigueur for any self-respecting travel-writer, and as recently as just this decade such a story was reported in the British press (12). Like most of these stories it is slanted to uphold the humans, whilst the hippo is decried in almost propagandist terms. All the creature did was to destroy a rubber boat, but you would think from the report that it had urinated on a chaplain. I mean, you should try to see it from the hippo's point of view: what would you do if you were relaxing in your bath and all these silly rubber objects started floating past your nose? That's right! - So, playfully, it dunked the boats, and just for that the Telegraph insists that it attacked this poxy little bunch of jerks. If only people were more understanding, we would have a nicer world. Why is it that this gentle creature so extremely rarely gets the public sympathy so often granted creatures as effete as, say, the common panda?

There have been, needless to say, exceptions, notably that of Huberta, who in 1928 began the celebrated trek that

gained her household-hippo status on three continents, no less! Hedley A. Chilvers later wrote a book (13) (a tatty little publication, marred by cutesy writing and its side-swipes at the Bloody Natives), in which he unfolds the story of Huberta's growing reputation, starting with a small disturbance in New Guelderland, and finishing with leading articles in Punch, The Morning Post, and even The Chicago Tribune! When, eventually, a hunter made the error of despatching her, not only was he had in court and fined, but also an M.P. brought up the matter of her death before the House of Commons! I have often wondered at this scene, and what kind of reception greeted the respected Member: it seems quite bizarre that, at the height of the Depression, an M.P. should call upon the House to talk about a hippopotamus.

Whatever, this remains an isolated case: now the latest concept in man's attitude to hippos is that one ought to adopt an attitude of gentle, balanced exploitation. Thus, a newspaper reports that Dr. Magnus Pyke suggested we should harvest any surplus hippos as a food resource, each hippo having in one body the same weight of meat as a whole flock of sheep (14).

Of course, the use of hippos as a source of meat is scarcely new: Kolbe wrote, two centuries ago, "the flesh ...is most delicious" (15), and went on to comment at the price the meat could fetch, whilst Dallas (1860) stated that the flesh was "very good" and not dissimilar to pork (16). He further states that certain parts - the feet, the tongue and tail especially - were in greater demand, and consequently more expensive. Klockner, though, has us believe the blubber is the most sought-after part: "this fat or lard," he says, "in relish exceeds all others," and "when pressed, it yields a mild oil, white as cream ..." (17). Klockner is corroborated by a statement made by Kolbe: "It is very mild and wholesome and is used instead of butter..."

Hippo produce is not just restricted to the kitchen: it is likely that, without the hippo, dentistry might never have discovered artificial teeth. Prior to the introduction of alternatives like china, dentures were produced by carving them from hippos' teeth; hippos' teeth produced a denture of high quality, and were preferred to ivory (as Desmarchais observed in his Voyage (18), "the finest, whitest teeth...are harder, whiter, and do not turn yellow quite as soon").

An upshot of the widespread use of hippo teeth in dentistry was that, in 1890, there was published, by a man named Moore, a paper called "Description of a new species of gigantic beaver-like rodent." In this paper, Moore described a creature he named Castoroides; working from a single tooth which had been found in northern Georgia, Moore succeeded in deducing much about the creature's life-style. This achievement was extremely worthy, even if quite wrong - for as it happens, E.D. Cope identified the tooth (correctly) as a modern hippo's canine, not a fossil rodent's tooth at all; it was probably discarded by a passing dentist (19).

One last use to which the hippo has quite frequently been put is that of the circus diversion: hippos had already been imported into Europe long before the current glut of captive hippos was begun. According to Capitolinus: "fuerant sub Gordiano Romae...hippopotamus" (20); a further reading of the text reveals that Gordian intended to put on a specially exciting set of Games (it was unfortunate for him that he got murdered, so he never saw his hippo romping gaily, a delight that fell on his successor). Others were not slow to get themselves in on the act: therefore, Commodus showed not one but five, and slew some of them by his hand; Antonius, a modest chap, did nothing more than show them; whereas Hadrian, a boring wimp, just simply put a picture of a hippo on his coinage (21).

It seems likely that these hippos came to Rome by way of Egypt, Egypt having at that time a population of the creatures. Klopfer-Swets, whose contribution to biology has been forgotten, largely in the shadow of his colleague de Buffon, has nonetheless put forward a convincing argument that once this population must have been precariously overcrowded (22). Quoting at some length from Bogmortonius the Corsican, he outlines how at twilight hefty hippo-jams developed as the hippos lined up nose-to-tail along the paths that led to pasture.

The demand for hippos must have nonetheless exceeded the supply, because the Roman Ammianus Marcellinus writes that hippos were unknown in Egypt by the time of Julian (23), and they have never been recorded since, up to the present day: if hippos have returned to Egypt in the interim at all, it can only have been in tiny numbers and with greatest rarity. When, in 1850, Obaysch - the first hippo to go on display at London Zoo - had to be put on board a steamer at the docks of Alexandria, he attracted roundabout ten thousand curious spectators (and indeed, it took the intervention of Egyptian troops in order for the routine docking operations to proceed). (24)

It's hardly surprising that in London there was quite a stir: Obaysch was the first live hippo to be shown in modern Europe. His first weeks at London drew two thousand visitors per day, and newspapers refer to the "long lines of carriages" arriving at the entrance of the Zoo (25). He was made the subject of a long, unreadable, but often-quoted letter by the famous Dr Richard Owen (26), and upon his death was granted a full notice in the Times (27).

There is much that could be said about the hippos of the London Zoo; all of it is really grist for quite another mill:

I have tried to give an outline of the folklore that grew up around the concept of the hippo, whilst it was a mythic (or at least a semi-mythic) beast. Even when its dead remains had been examined by Zerenghi; even when the outright fictions had been recognised as such; even when the Afrikaners started spreading hippo fat on bread, there still existed room for doubt and room for speculation: hippos were a kind of creature heard about but rarely seen.

After 1850, all the mystery was gone, and once the novelty and lustre of discovery wore off, all that was left was yet another tarnished facet to reality. It takes Magnus Pyke proposing hippo-ranching the Savannah to awaken the mystique and mystery again.

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(3) PLINY, the Elder: Natural History, book viii, ch. 25, and book ix, ch. 12. See, for instance, Loeb Classical Library edition.

(4) DIODCRUS SICULUS, quoted by KLOCKNER, (2) above.

(5) KLOCKNER, as above. See (2).

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(7) HERODOTUS, quoted by both BUFFON and Anne CLARK, see (9) and (8) below. The translation is a composite of the two versions.

(8) Unknown author quoted by Anne CLARK in Beasts and Bawdy, pp. 14-15. (Dent; London, 1975). Translation by Anne Clark.

(9) BUFFON, G.L. le Clerc, Compte de: Natural History, second edition, volume 6. (London, 1785). Translation by William Smellie.

(10) MANDEVILLE, Sir John: Travels. The origins of this book are obscure, however it is known to have been written sometime during the mid-13th century. Earliest printed edition by Wynkyn de Worde, printed in 1499. Most recent printing was in 1967 by the Oxford University Press.

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(12) DAVIES, Hugh: "Zaire River Explorers attacked by hippopotamus," in DAILY TELEGRAPH, Monday, October 28, 1974.

(13) CHILVERS, Hedley A: Huberta Goes South: A Record of the Lone Trek of the Celebrated Zululand Hippopotamus, 1928-1931. (Gordon & Gotch; London, 1931).

(14) Unknown author in the DAILY TELEGRAPH, Wednesday, September 19, 1973.

(15) KOLBE, Peter: Description de Cap de Bonne-Esperance, volume 3. (1742). Translation by William Smellie.



And now, my fellow, Bogmorton, brings to the space inside the cover his translation of a song recorded and released on Supraphon (the Czech state record company). It was released in 1968, soon after Czechoslovakia had been "normalised" by Soviet armed forces. It was banned, but not before it had become a minor cult. We do not know what happened to the artist who recorded it, but he has stopped recording singles for the state.

NIGHTMARE; a song-lyric

Death and all his reapers sang their warning;  
Blotting out the light with a tarpaulin;  
Sowing seed of fear under its awning;  
- Hope that it was only a nightmare.

Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
Tell me it was only a nightmare.

Nighttime came and brought the rule of darkness;  
Truth betrayed and bowing down to starkness;  
Khaki swarms of harridans in harness;  
- I just hope that it was a nightmare.

Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
Tell me it was only a nightmare.

Peace of mind returned to me one morning;  
Ending my bad dreams with early yawning;  
Lending me new faith that hope was dawning;  
- Faith that it was only a nightmare.

Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
Tell me, please...  
- Tell me it was only a nightmare

Freely translated from the Czech by Bogmorton. This song originally surfaced as performed by Karel Carnoch on a single fleetingly released as SUPRA O 45 0570 h.

