



IX. ORYX CAPENSIS: - THE GEMSBOEK.

## PLATE IX.

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### ORYX CAPENSIS.—THE GEMSBOK, OR SOUTH AFRICAN ORYX.

*Gemsbok* of the Cape Colonists.—*Kookaam* of the Matabili and Bechuana.

**GENERIC CHARACTER.**—Adult male three feet ten inches high at the shoulder; ten feet in extreme length. Figure equine, and carriage majestic. Horns upwards of three feet long; placed near the summit of the frontals upon the prolongation of the plane of the face; straight, or very slightly bent; round, divergent, and tapering to the points; sharp, black, and shining; the lower part annulated with from twenty-five to thirty rings, which usually occupy about one half the horn. In old specimens, the base is widened like the mouth of a clarionet. Eyes full, dark, and prominent; high in the head. A black space between the base of the horns, descending in a streak down the forehead and chaffron; another passing through the eyes to the corner of the mouth, connected by a third which runs round the head, over the nose; a fourth passes like a chin-strap from the base of the ears under the throat, completing the appearance of a head-stall: the rest of the head white. Ears round and white, with black edgings. General color of the coat, vinous buff, or bloom color; soft, sleek, and glossy. The breast, belly, and extremities white. A tuft of bristly black hair, like that on the breast of a turkey, upon the larynx, which is also edged with black. A mane reversed: and a black list stripe of reversed hair from the nape of the neck along the back, widening angularly over the croup, and terminating in a bushy black cow-like tail, three feet long, which sweeps the ground. A broad black bar across the elbow, embracing the arm, passing along the flank, and ending in a wide angular space on the thigh, above the hocks. A black spot upon each leg between the knee and fetlock, leaving the rest of the extremities pure white. Limbs wiry, and of exquisite proportions. Hoofs pointed and shining black. Nose ovine. No suborbital sinus.

Female similar, but slighter, with longer and more slender horns, less distinctly ringed, and sometimes slightly bent. An udder with two mammae. Occasionally gregarious, but more usually found in pairs on the Karroo, or on the open plains of Namaqua-land.

## CHAPTER IX.

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### THE ORYX.

From his steed's shoulder, loin, and breast,  
Silk housings swept the ground,  
With Scotland's arms device, and crest,  
Embroider'd round and round.

The double tressure might you see  
First by Achaius borne,  
The thistle, and the fleur-de-lis,  
And gallant unicorn.

ROMANCE, aiding the skilful hand of Nature with her brightest drapery, has succeeded in investing the group to which the Oryx belongs, with a degree of interest that few other quadrupeds can claim. The figure of the renowned Unicorn can be traced in all the ancient carvings, coins, and Latin heraldic insignia, to some one of the members of the Orygine family; and from our earliest childhood, the form of that fabled animal has been made to occupy so prominent a place in our juvenile imaginations,—the fictions of the nursery having first indelibly engraven its outlines upon the tablet of our minds,—that arriving at years of discretion, we are still almost tempted to regard it as a creature having actual existence. Of all the whimsies of antiquity, whether emanating from the unbridled and fertile fancies of the people of Egypt and Persia, or devised by the more chaste and classic taste which distinguished Greece and Rome, the Unicorn—unquestionably the most celebrated—is the chimera which has in modern ages engrossed the largest portion of attention from the curious. Like the Sphinxes of Egyptian sculpture, or the Centaurs of Grecian fable, the animal, as it is figured at the present day, can exist solely in imagination; but philosophers and zoologists, directing their energies and talents to the subject, and seeking amongst the actual works of the creation for the form which could first have suggested so strange a fiction, have selected as its most probable basis, the group to which the subject of the annexed portrait belongs. The Rhinoceros is supposed to be the animal so often alluded to in Scripture under the name of Reem or Unicorn; yet the combination presented in the Oryx of the antelopine and equine characters—the horns and cloven hoof of the one, blended with the erect mane, general contour, and long switch tail of the other—corresponds in all essential particulars with the extant delineations and descriptions of the heraldic Unicorn, which is universally represented to have been possessed of a straight slender horn, ringed at the base; and to have the hoof divided; to have worn a mane reversed, a black flowing tail, and a turkey-like tuft on the larynx—whilst both the size and ground color were said to be those of the ass, with the addition of sundry black markings imparting to the face and forehead, a piebald appearance.

The alterations required to reduce the African Oryx to the standard of this model, are slight and simple; nor can it be doubted that they have been gradually introduced by successive copyists, the idea of the single horn having been derived in the first instance from profile representations of that animal given in bas-relief on the sculptured monuments of ancient Egypt and Nubia. Excepting in the position and forward inclination of the horn, the *cartazonon* of the ancient Persians, figured on the monuments of Persepolis, and described by *Aelian*, tallies in every respect so exactly with the Algazel, or North African Oryx, as the latter would appear *en profile*, with the straight and almost parallel horns precisely covering each other, that little question can exist as to that animal having furnished the original of the design. Accident may indeed have contributed still further to strengthen the opinion, once conceived, of the existence of a monocerine species, for it is well known that among the savage tribes of Africa, the art of twirling, carving, and otherwise adorning the horns of their domestic animals, was carried to a singular extent—the most fanciful forms being imparted, and the two even sometimes twisted together. It is, however, unnecessary to look beyond the ignorance of the limner and the credulity of the describer, satisfactorily to trace the progress of the whole delusion. Unacquainted with the science of perspective, the sculptor could contrive nothing beyond a rude representation—exhibiting a single horn, and often also a single leg only, before and behind; and his clumsy designs being, by Ctesias, Herodotus, and other writers, handed down as the matter-of-fact delineations of realities, a general belief in the existence of one-horned asses became rapidly disseminated. Both the Oryx and the wild ass inhabit the same regions, and possess in common the essential attributes of figure, colour, and carriage; nor is it at all unlikely that the mutilation of individuals of the first-named species, by the fracture of a horn, may afterwards have tended to strengthen the belief derived in the first instance from these imperfect representations. A pair of oryxes thus partially humbled, were seen by Belon at Mecca: and the fierce and frequent encounters in which the males engage during the rutting season, cannot fail to multiply the number of specimens continually. Having once caught the idea, the classical fancies of the Greeks soon added the details, and modified

the figure of the Unicorn so as to suit their *beau ideal* of its attributes;—its beauty, strength, and agility, being readily perfected by reducing the voluminous proportions of the body, and elongating the limbs; arching the neck at the same time, to bring it to a hostile attitude, and shifting the long slender horn to the centre of the forehead. Such would appear to have been the origin and progress of the fable of the Unicorn, from its foundation in ancient Persia, to its diffusion over the whole of western Europe; and such, at the present day, is the figure of the fictitious animal forming the sinister supporter of the Royal Achievement of England.

That the Romans saw the Oryx in their games, is attested by Martial; and the straight horned species would even appear to have been known to English Heraldry at the close of the fourteenth century, the earliest indication of this kind being among the cognizances of the Plantagenet branches, issuing from King Edward III. The Antelope was a symbol of honor held by the house of Lancaster. John of Lancaster, the great Duke of Bedford, bore his arms supported by this animal. Amongst various embellishments which are painted in the Bruges style of the period, in a Prayer-book once the property of that Prince, are found his armorial devices, with the Antelope black; the straight spiral horns of which, although placed almost at right-angles with the head, are evidently designed from those of the Oryx. The animal is adorned with gilded tusks, but in other respects is not ill drawn. It is conjectured that this book was illuminated on the marriage of the Duke of Bedford with Anne, Princess of Burgundy; but in no case can it be later than the period of his death in the year 1435, which fact would almost prove, that the straight horned Oryx must have been known anterior to the Portuguese voyage round the Cape of Good Hope; and Mr. Pennant was probably well informed when he asserted an Oryx to exist in Egypt; for the figure of the animal is found among the ancient hieroglyphical representations in the tombs of its kings. The office of *Antelope Pursuivant* was instituted in the time of King Henry IV., and continued to the end of the Lancastrian branch. Whether Heralds had an obscure knowledge of the animal through their intercourse with the Crusaders, cannot now be ascertained; but the name itself appearing nowhere in classical Greek or Roman writers, seems derived, according to the learned researches of Baron Cuvier, from Ανθολόψ, used by Eustathius, Bishop of Antioch, who wrote during the reign of Constantine.\*

The Oryxes, of which no less than four distinct species are recognised, are disposed over an immense extent of territory, inhabiting the more desert and thinly peopled districts from Moultan, and even the borders of China, through Southern Persia, and Arabia, over the deserts of Northern and Central Africa, to Senegal, and south to the Cape of Good Hope. Their great strength, swiftness, and power of endurance, added to their ability to subsist upon the most scanty vegetation, including acrid succulents and thorny shrubs, are facts which sufficiently account for the vastness of their native regions; as they are thus enabled to pass rapidly over a great extent of country, and to shift their position as reasons or circumstances may dictate. Although possessed of the graceful and symmetrical proportions which characterise the Genus *Antilope*, there is yet in their aspect a certain *bovine* expression, which generally has obtained for them a nomenclature having reference to that class. The Arabs, indeed, and other natives of the climates which these animals inhabit, never consider them as Antelopes, but as species of the Buffalo, an idea which they extend also to the Bubalis and other species of that genus. The Chinese Nicu Kyo Fo, or flying cow, with one horn only, remarkable for its swiftness and love of salt, if not the Leucoryx, or the Kemas, is probably an Oryx. The white Antelope, with lyrate annulated horns, rode by the goddess Chandra in Hindu Mythology, and which appears to be the Ruru of the *Institutes of Menu*, must likewise be referred to this class. The Dutch colonists of the Cape alone have fancied some resemblance between their Oryx and the Chamois of Europe, and have therefore named it Gemsbok.

The South African Oryx very nearly corresponds with the Algazel of the Northern regions of that vast continent, and with the Beiza of Abyssinia.† It is a most wild and warlike looking animal, not less remarkable for beauty, speed, and vigour, than famed for the excellence of its venison, which is everywhere held in the highest estimation. Although usually found in pairs on the Karroos, and unfrequented stony districts, which form its invariable habitation,—the males sometimes possess two females, constituting, with their young, a family of five or six individuals. The calves, which are born of a reddish cream color, become whiter as they increase in bulk, and are easily domesticated; but their uncertain temper renders it difficult at any time to pronounce them tame. Their horns, at first blunt and round at the tips, are soon ground to a fine needle-like point, by dint of raking and whetting them against rough stemmed trees,—thus becoming most formidable weapons, whether of offence or defence. The horns of the females are much longer and more *bodkinish* in appearance than those of the males, who never meet during the rutting season without desperate battles, their courage and quarrelsome disposition frequently rendering their duels fatal, one of the combatants often being run slap through the body by a lounge from the long rapier-resembling weapons of his antagonist. The natives of Southern Africa occasionally arm their spears with the horns of the Oryx; and the Hollanders of the Cape have them polished, and headed with silver, to serve as walking-sticks, for which purpose they are frequently too long! Strong, active, and vigorous, the Gemsbok boldly defends itself, when pressed

\* The Baron indeed writes Antholops, probably from an error in the press: it occurs in the *Hexameron*, and is sufficiently curious. The Antholops is represented as very swift, and hunted with difficulty; it has long jagged horns in the shape of saws, with which it saws trees of considerable elevation and thickness. When thirsty, it approaches the Euphrates, and gambols along its borders in the brambles, where it is sometimes entangled, and there caught and slain.

† The Algazel (*O. Besoastica*) was considered famous for a concretion in its intestines called the *oriental bezoor*, which in former times was so much esteemed for its great virtue in expelling poison from the human frame, that Bewick tells us a stone weighing four ounce sold for £200 sterling! From an authority not cited, J. Mayor, in the *Ephem. Cur.* viii. (1677) first described the bezoor as procured from these animals.

by the hunter, using its horns with amazing energy and address, by striking right and left at its assailants with prodigious violence. Oppian, the modern Arabs of the desert, and the Hottentots, are all agreed in describing the danger of approaching these animals before they are totally disabled. It is said that even the lion dreads the encounter, and never ventures upon an attack unless irresistibly compelled by the cravings of hunger, when his temerity often costs him his life. To prove this, it is stated that the skeleton of the Oryx has not unfrequently been found locked in that of the king of beasts, the assailant having been transfixed by the formidable horns of the quarry in a conflict which has proved fatal to both. Of the truth of this somewhat improbable story, however, I do not pretend to offer an opinion—merely hinting, that a single blow from the heavy paw of Leo, falling with the force of a sledge-hammer, will deprive the largest ox of life more effectually than the pole-axe of a Smithfield butcher.

Although rather common in Namaqua-land, the Gemsbok was of sufficiently rare occurrence throughout the regions we traversed, to render it an object of the greatest interest. The first specimens we met with were on plains that skirt the northern bank of the Molopo, a spot which had been previously indicated to me at Graham's Town, by a trader named David Hume, as one in which the animal was always to be seen. That wild country, dotted over with isolated groves of the *acacia capensis*, and clothed with a species of wild basil, yielding an aromatic scent when crushed beneath the foot, afforded the subject of the plate annexed;—the river, which constitutes the western boundary of Moselekatse's territories, having a broad shallow bed, covered with turf, and traversed by a deep *cunette*, forming a stream about ten yards wide, completely overgrown with high reeds. We had taken the field about daybreak to look for the promised Unicorns, and were admiring the long slender horns of a bleaching skull on the ground, when one of the Hottentots pointed out a distant figure *statant gardant*, among a group of Hartebeests. The magnifying powers of a pocket telescope presently corroborated the assertion of the discoverer, that this was a *bona-fide* Gemsbok. There he stood, clad in half mourning, looming as large as a donkey, and scanning our party most attentively—his long taper toasting-fork horns, like a pair of walking sticks, standing out in bold relief against the blue horizon, and his black bushy tail whisking over his piebald sides. "L'on comprend," observes M. le Comte de Buffon, in speaking of this superb animal, "que ce bizarre assemblage de couleurs, offre un coup-d'œil très frappant,"—and never were words more truly spoken. I was mounted on my favourite horse, who, before he came into my possession, by virtue of a disbursement of one hundred and fifty Rix dollars, had carried off several stakes on the Cape turf; and the infallible Hottentots being unanimously of opinion with myself, that "*Breslar could catch de Bok*," my companion made a circuit to intercept him from the jungles, whilst I cantered slowly towards him, looking of course in the opposite direction, affecting most profound ignorance of his princely presence, but treating myself, as I drew nearer and more near, to an occasional peep from under my cap.

On my arriving within eighty or a hundred yards, the beast uttered a shrill cry, and dropping his wild head, which looked exactly as if encased in a black patent leather head-stall with nose-band and chin-strap complete, wheeled to the right about, and scoured off with amazing swiftness, leaving the Hartebeests in the rear to pursue their own devices, and making straight as an arrow for the densest jungle. Here however the appearance of the party fortunately turned him, and as he crossed a-head of me, luffing up in the wind, I obtained a beautiful lay in. Unable to shake me off, his object now appeared to be to gain a gorge, formed by a conical tumulus which stood in advance of a low range of hills. Thus far, the ground, in parts covered with detached patches of long, white, hay-like grass, was a perfect bowling green; but a few seconds brought us to the end of it, and after threading a narrow strip of the *acacia detinens*, the hooked thorns of which shrub have obtained for it the title of *wagteen bityes* or stop-a-little, we dashed through the gorge together—the quarry leading by ten yards. The chase now lay over undulating stony ground, the vegetation of which had recently been cleared off by fire—the white slabs that were bared around, strongly contrasting with the black charred bushes which grew amongst the crevices. In order to burn off the withered grass, a considerable tract of country had been set on fire a few weeks before, and the bountiful thunderclouds having caused the young green blades to make their appearance, large herds of game had been attracted to the spot. Without gaining or losing a single inch upon each other, on we clattered, the strait antennæ-looking horns of the fugitive laid back along his magpie flanks—his belly almost touching the ground at every stride, and his ample tail sweeping behind him. Now the dust raised by a retreating herd of zebras and ostriches, whose feet rattled over the hard soil, caused a momentary diversion in his favor; and now, regaining my lost ground, we passed together under the sneering noses of three statue-resembling Rhinoceroses, who had literally not time to make up their minds what was to be done, before, meteor-like, both pursuer and pursued were far beyond their reach.

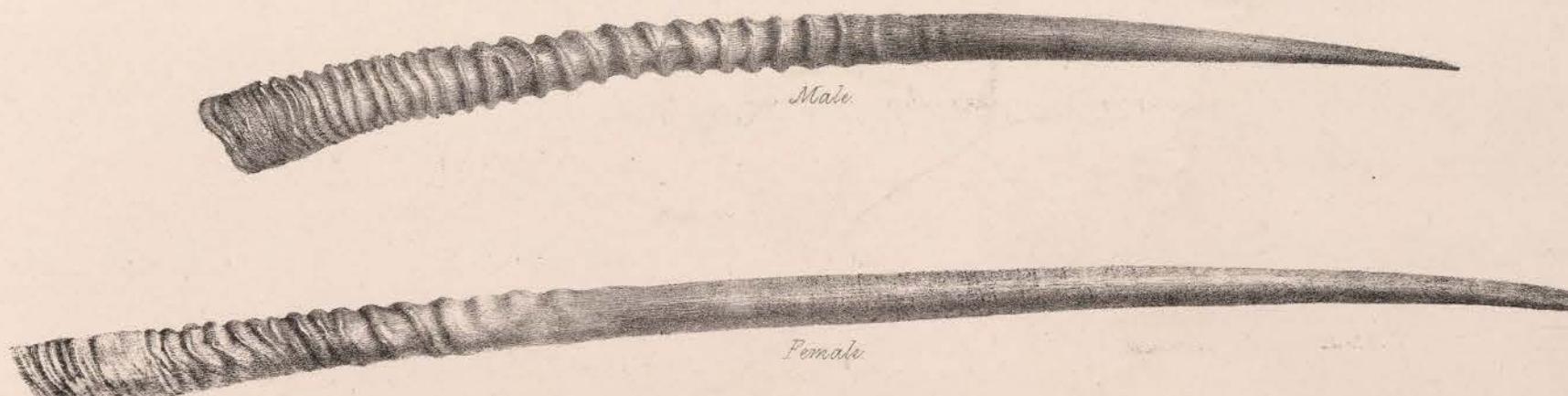
Rapidly was the peach-blossom coat of the Gemsbok growing darker with sweat and charcoal, and fast were the fleshless sides and bleeding flanks of my exhausted steed, getting whiter with froth, as we continued to leave the ground behind us, clearing stones, ravines and bushes, without swerving one inch from our arrow-like course. At length the tongue of the quarry was lolling out, and his tail drooping between his tired legs; but although his black list stripe was almost under my bows, he was far fresher than my blowing horse, and I perceived, beyond a shadow of doubt, that another hundred yards would see me planted. Taking a strong pull upon the bridle, therefore, and cramming in the rowels, I gained a few strides upon the quarry, and throwing myself from the saddle, let fly both barrels of my rifle. The first bullet knocked up the dust behind his heels, as it glanced off the stony ground at a tangent—whizzed through the vacuum with the music of a humming-top, and finally fell harmless to the earth. To my inexpressible delight, however, the second discharge was responded to by a dull heavy pat, which was instantly followed by the dangling of a hind leg. Hurrah for the hard-earned spoils! Resuming my seat, I was pre-

paring to follow up this success, when the wounded animal saved me the trouble. Uttering a shrill, tremulous, warning cry, brandishing his bushy tail, tossing his piebald head with a menacing air, and then dropping it low betwixt his fore legs,—thus inverting his bodkins, and bringing them to bear upon the enemy, down he darted with lightning-like velocity—another shot finishing the affair, and affording breathing-time to my unfortunate nag, whose sides heaved like blacksmith's bellows, and who was within an ace of being expended in the truly arduous achievement.

The passion for hunting wild animals, when it has once taken root, is probably one of the most powerful affections of the human mind—the manifold difficulties attending the performance, serving only to enhance the pleasurable excitement that it affords. During the stirring alternations of hope and despair—of promised success and anticipated disappointment—how did my heart riot within its cage—how at one moment did my bosom beat high with nervous expectation, and sink the next from dire misgivings of the result. If the humiliation of every wild beast were of easy accomplishment, no longer should we revel in all those delicious changes that depress or animate us during a chase like this, and—equally stimulating us to still further exertion—constitute the chief charm of venerie. The ground gone over on this occasion could not have been less than five miles, and returning whence I had set out by retracing my own *spoor*, I found that Richardson had meanwhile been engaged in the pursuit of a troop of five lions, on his wounding one of which the Hottentots, to a man, had deserted him; nor did they return to the waggons until the afternoon, asserting that they had killed two out of the three Rhinoceroses, for which, when at leisure to attend to them, *we* had sought in vain. So completely exhausted was my poor steed, that I was obliged to drag him home, carrying the saddle on my own head,—another noble bull Gemsbok trotting across the path as if in derision, and escaping with a slight flesh wound. It was nearly dark ere we regained our camp under a solitary thorn-tree a few miles below the source of the Molopo—fairly drenched to the skin by one of those startling thunder-showers which visit those arid regions. Amidst flashes of the most vivid lightning, the loudest claps of thunder suddenly burst above our heads; and when near the waggons, a black cloud which had rapidly formed in the serene blue sky, proceeded forthwith to empty its contents for our especial benefit—pouring for five minutes with such violence that the horses, unable to face it, were compelled to turn their backs upon the storm, but ceasing as abruptly as it had commenced, so that we passed on at once to parched and dusty land, from a tract which had in that short time, become perfectly covered with pools of water.



*Head of Oryx preserved in the British Museum.*



*Horns of the Oryx preserved by Capt<sup>n</sup> Harris.*