Caesar, the *Geographoi* and Lewis and Clark:

The Use of Animals in Describing New Lands

[**slide]** The slide on the screen shows the current bits of Caesar required for AP courses. They stop just before that point in Book VI where Caesar describes the brooding and enormous Hercynian Forest. **[slide]** Its exact location is not definite but think of the Black Forest writ large. **[slide]** The passage is an oasis amid the dreary slog of marching, killing, pitching camp, killing, making treaties, envoys’ speeches, killing envoys, followed by more marching and killing.

Of course, something this entertaining in a work of Caesar has caused concern. Surely, the wise say, Caesar never wrote something of this nature. It is unparalleled, goes against his practical nature, and must surely be a marginal interpolation into the text. Others, like Emily Allen-Hornblower in a recent article, defend the passage.

Today I propose to do two main things. The first is to disregard totally whether the passage is authentic or not. I will rather focus on what it has to say about ancient ethnography and geography. This will come second. First, **[slide]** let us take a quick look at the animals involved.

We are looking for three creatures. The first is a cow/stag that has a single, very large horn in the middle of its forehead. At the top, the horn sprouts palmate branches. Most tellingly, the animal does not exhibit sexual dimorphism. That is to say, the males and the females look alike; the author thus seems to say that they both carry horns.

**[slide]** The second creature is given a name -- the *alces.* Most translations and commentaries identify this as the elk. Note that the *alces* is supposed to have a varicolored pelt, most likely dappled or spotted. They are shaped like a goat and, of all things, have no knees. As a result, they are easily hunted. They lean on trees to rest and sleep since they cannot lie down, and resourceful hunters need only cut a tree half through and then pick up the leaning *alces* when the tree breaks through and the animal falls down. **[slide]** This is the product of a school related web site from Germany. I can understand the Latino-German dialogue here, where the hunter conquers love, but this one **[slide]**, where love conquers all, is beyond me, maybe a dialect. I’d appreciate any help with it you can offer.

**[slide]** The third beast also has a name -- the *urus*. They are just a bit smaller than an elephant and they have the shape and coloration of a bull. They are dangerous to hunt and their enormous horns made excellent drinking vessels.

Scholars have exerted a lot of energy and a great deal of ink in identifying these animals. A careful study, though, shows that only one of them is identifiable beyond question. Let’s look at the options. **[slide]**

Cervus elephus, the red deer, certainly was found in Germany **[slide]** at this time. And it does have an impressive set of horns, **[slide]** which are spreading and palmate as Caesar specifies. Yet, as you see, they have two horns, not one. More on this below.

**[slide]** The next creature is the *alces*. Some have claimed this is the elk, *Cervus canadensis*. But as the map to the right shows, their range rules them out of any real contention.

To complicate matters **[slide]** modern scientific nomenclature uses, “alces” to describe the moose genus. Two major species concern us. *Alces americanus* is, well, American, and out of the question. But its cousin, the Eurasian elk, repetitively named *Alces alces alces*, seems to be a good candidate. **[slide]** Its modern range certainly makes it likely that in Caesar’s time it was in the Hercynian Forest. But we cannot have our cake and eat it too, for *alces*, be she American or Eurasian, does in fact have knees and can lie down.

Not to get too sidetracked, but this knee-less detail is one of the reasons people reject this passage in Caesar. Why? The exact same story is told, equally untrue, about elephants. It can be traced as far back as Strabo (16.4.10) who wrote shortly after Caesar’s death, yet Rome had seen elephants long before this time. The connection between the knee-less elks and elephants cannot really be traced.

Before we move on to the *uri*, there are a couple of horn-issues to deal with. First, the *alces* is supposed to have only one horn, carried by male and female alike. It is also “multilae … cornibus”.

The good news is that we can find reality behind both statements. The bad news comes apace. First, it is quite easy to see a one horned member of the cervid family. All cervids shed their horns with one exception, **[slide]** the Chinese water deer, which I show you only to make you happy that Caesar did not describe one of these.

**[slide]** One horned cervids (a word used to describe all deer-like animals) are born. Others **[slide]** do not shed both horns at once, and, when seen at a certain angle, can seem unicorn-like. **[slide]** What then about “mutilae?” Two answers present themselves. **[slide]** As new antlers grow out each year they emerge covered with what is called velvet. The velvet is rich with blood supply and, when scraped off, can look mutilated indeed. **[slide]** Another idea is that *mutilae* may imply being stunted or misshapen as is the case in growing antlers.

A final impossibility must be discarded. Some commentators look to one cervid whose males and females alike bear horns….. **[slide]** the reindeer. But the range rules them out.

What we are left with is a hodgepodge of information. And if the evidence is considered rationally, we have to admit that Caesar’s first two animals cannot be fully identified but probably represent a mix of traits of several animals.

**[slide]** The last animal, the *urus*, is easy, however. **[slide]** Two main candidates have been offered, the aurochs and the European bison, also known as the wisent. The wisent is *possible*, but the evidence for the aurochs **[slide]** seems indisputable. Now extinct, the aurochs was the size Caesar relates and **[slide]** its huge horns were in fact, used as drinking vessels, such as this 1620 drinking horn of Sigismund II of Poland. If **[slide]** you have any doubts, another Sigismund made it all clear. “I am the urus, the tur to the Poles and the Aurochs to the Germans. Fools have given me the name bison.”

While interesting, I do not think the most important thing is whether Caesar wrote these words or to identify the animals described. Rather, let us ask, why they are here in the first place. Whether **he** put the Hercynian Forest section here or a later commentator did, what is most important, and not commented upon often enough, is that it is a fact someone felt it should be there. Ancient geographers and ethnographers routinely used animals to help describe new places and peoples --- ethnography, geography, botany and zoology were often rolled into one. In what follows, pay attention to how the authors try to describe new animals to their readers back home.

Among the earliest to do this in detail is Herodotus. When describing far off lands he often mentions the animals there. **[slide]** In Egypt he tells us (2.68.3), the crocodile has “eyes like a pig’s” and “unlike all other beasts he grows no tongue.” **[slide]** The hippopotamus (2.71) is is four-footed, cloven-hoofed like an ox, **[slide]** with a tail and voice like a horse, **[slide]** flat-nosed, with a mane like a horse and **[slide]** teeth like tusks,

Note the following statement (3.103). “As to the form of the camel, I do not here describe it, since the Greeks for whom I write are already acquainted with it, but I *will* tell that which is not commonly known about it, which is this: — the camel has in the hind legs four thighs and four knees, and its organs of generation are between the hind legs, turned towards the tail.” The knee part is a misperception, but the other is right.

His gold digging ants (3.102.2f.) “are smaller than dogs but larger than foxes.” **[slide]** And the notorious flying snakes of Arabia have (2.76) “wings that are not feathered but most nearly resemble the wings of the bat.”

I turn now to Ctesias of Cnidus. He flourished around 400 BC and served as royal physician for Ataxerxes II of Persia. He left two books, a *Persika* and an *Indika*. They are lost, but large portions are preserved in the works of others, especially Photius. Listen to samples from his *Indika*. **[slide]** His is the first description of the fierce *martichora* (we know it as the manticore) which is bright red, has blue eyes, three rows of teeth, and shootable quills. It is “hairy like a dog,” its ears are “human in shape” and its size and claws are like those of a lion.

**[slide]** A horribly poisonous snake that does not bite but “vomits” forth poison probably is the spitting cobra. **[slide]** He tells us of the one-horned Indian ass, which is, of course, the rhinoceros, but he says they have a white body, a crimson head, and blue eyes. **[slide]** The *bittakos* (which we know as the Rose Ringed Parakeet) is as big as a falcon, speaks fluent Indian but can also learn to speak Greek.

**[slide]** Or consider Hanno the Carthaginian. At around 480 BC, when Athens was fighting for its life against the Persians, Hanno went on an expedition out the Pillars of Hercules and down the western coast of Africa. According to Arrian his journey lasted 35 days and near its end, he was attacked by what he calls “wild men” which his interpreters called “gorillae.” After a fierce fight three females were killed and their skins were put on display in Carthage.

The examples could go on and on, and it pains me to omit authors like Aelian and Pliny, but I will end with Agatharchides of Cnidos **[slide]** who wrote a description of the Erythraean Sea in the second century BC. Agatharchides also is preserved only in fragments but there is enough left to tell us that he observed all sorts of things -- plants, minerals, indigenous peoples, and, of course, animals. **[slide]** In his Book 5 he describes the “camelopard,” i.e. the giraffe. It has the spotted coat of a leopard, is the size of a camel, is very fast, and its neck is so long that it takes food from the tops of trees. **[slide]** He says the hyena, which he calls the crocotta, is a composite of wolf and dog, has exceptionally strong jaws, and can digest anything. He rejects stories that they can imitate the human voice.

The pattern is clear. Ancient author/travelers often included animals in their description of strange places and, in an era lacking pictures taken on cell phones, resorted to describing strange animals in terms of animals the folks back home already knew. This is not a unique trait.

**[slide]** From 1804-1806 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, at the request of President Jefferson, set out to describe the lands west of the then inhabited United States. Like the ancients we have just looked at, they too described new species and did it in terms that the folks back home could relate to.  **[slide]** The prairie dog or barking squirrel is described as is shown on the slide (pardon the spelling ... it is theirs, not mine). **[slide]**  And this is the description of the coyote. There is much, much more, but time presses.

I would like to believe that somewhere in Caesar there was the soul of an Agatharchides or a Meriwether Lewis and that he penned the chapters of the Gallic Wars in question. But if he did not, then some anonymous scholiast did it for him, bringing Caesar’s narrative full into the tradition of all the travel authors that had come before him.

**[slide]** In closing I would like to say how much I would have liked to discuss this idea with Jim. He surely could have made this feeble attempt better and would have done so with that good-natured fellowship that was his hallmark.