

Mikołaj Hussowski (c. 1480–1533)

A POEM ON BISON

(selections)

Mikołaj Hussowski, born in a poor family in Hussów, was the author of panegyrical works and of *A Poem on Bison* (1523). This poem is a detailed descriptions of the bison, its life and habits. Written in Latin for Pope Leo X, an avid hunter, it stems from Hussowski's experience in hunting and observing bison, and contains no literary comparisons with ancient legendary creatures.

This wildest beast is born in Lithuanian woods
And is well known for such an enormous body,
That when it bends down its defeated head, dying,
Three big men can place themselves right between its horns.
But its gigantic neck may appear far too small,
If you would like to compare it with other limbs.
The large beard sticks out, hanging from terrible long mane,
The fiery eyes glare with horrible anger,
Monstrous hair of the mane falls down on its shoulders,
Covering fully the knees, front, and the whole chest.
But if I am to combine great matters with small,
If it is permitted to use the hunting words,
It appears from its figure like a goat with horns,
Although from all limbs one can see it's a born bull.
It is of darksome hue; from the yellow and black
It is blended, forming an intermediate shade.

[.....]

I will try briefly to describe the animal
And its practices, going along with this tale.
It's more fierce than other animals or equal,
Dangerous to man only when wounded by him.
With the greatest caution it protects its own life,
It's hard for anyone to imagine greater.
It casts its eyes around, looks in all directions
And can perceive the most distant points of its path:
It can detect a swift twitch of a man's eyelid
Even if one kept his movements under control.
It'll catch with its ears the faintest rustle behind,
Watchful to be guarded carefully from the rear.
Quite often it promenades with a solemn stride,
If arrows do not glimmer and arms do not shine.
When the cow sets her eyes on you with a long look,
She halts, as human gaze captivates her so much.
But if she is leading, watchful, her little ones,
She gets rabid at once, struck by the clang of arms.
She announces with dreadful roar her awful rage,
This is a sign not to come up too close to her.
But won't charge anyone needlessly, save a foe,
When safe, she will not harm those trying to escape.
An agile tribe of calves plays merrily, set free,
They do not bring on their fathers any worry.

And they are so able that with effortless leaps
They make their way, following mother's every step!
Before long they skip over the broken down logs
Or race along the plain, as if chased by someone,
They know how to jump over wide ditches in swift run,
Shake their little horns with threatening appearance.
In endless wrestling they exercise soft bodies,
Using only rare moments to take a rest.
It is a steadfast creature, ready for great toils,
It's hard to imagine this, looking at its shape!
An when in a tight place it begins to circle,
From mere movement it passes into rapid pace.
It turns around, and snatches manure thrown high up
And before it falls, it strews on its horns this dung.

Translated by Michael J. Mikoś