

CAPTAIN SMITH'S VLGRIE

GEORGE H. SCHEETZ
Sioux City, Iowa

Harry B. Partridge, in "Ad Memoriam Demetrii" (August 1986), introduced a newly-discovered word ending in *-gry*. I was very interested in this announcement, since I have been working on a little treatise of such words; *ulgry* increased my list to nineteen examples.

Unfortunately, Partridge only quoted from his source (without page or chapter number), and did not venture a definition, much less an etymology. As it turns out, he took some liberties with his new discovery.

John Smith, the man whose life was allegedly saved by Pocahontas, used *Vlgrie* (Partridge's *ulgry*) five times on two pages of The True Travels, Adventures and Observations (London, 1630):

1. ...and a coat made of Vlgries haire, guarded about with a peece of an undrest skinne (Chapter 12, p. 24)
2. The Tymor and his friends fed upon Pillaw, which is boiled Rice and Garnances, with little bits of mutton or Buckones, which is rosted peeces of Horse, Bull, Vlgrie, or any beasts (Chapter 13, pp. 24-25)
3. ...but our common victuall, the entrails of Horse and Vlgrie; (Chapter 13, p. 25)
4. ...but the In-land Countreyes have none but Carts and Tents, which they ever remove from Countrey to Countrey, as they see occasion, driving with them infinite troopes of blacke sheepe Cattell and Vlgries, eating all vp before them, as they goe (Chapter 13, p. 25)
5. One or two thousand of those glittering white Carts drawn with Camels, Deere, Bulls, and Vlgries, they bring round in a ring, where they pitch their Campe; (Chapter 13, p. 25)

Modernizing *Vlgrie* to *ulgry* may be quite logical, but the reader deserves to know that such a transformation is taking place. What if, for example, the modern form of the word should be *ulgrie* or *ulgree*? (Henceforth, for simplicity, the word appears as *ulgry*.)

Nonetheless, two basic questions require an answer: What is an *ulgry*? What is the derivation of the word *ulgry*?

The Ulgry

Smith's locale is Tartary or Scythia; he was captured by the Turks and sold into slavery. Tartary was the land of the Tartars, or Tatars, or Mongols. Smith also mentions that "those we call the

Crym-Tartars, border upon Moldavia, Podolia, Lituania, and Russia." A glance at an historical atlas shows that the area in question is very large, and encompasses much of eastern Europe and western Asia. Smith obviously began his trials and tribulations near the Ottoman Empire.

The ulgry itself has the following characteristics:

- a. It has hair (cf. passage 1, above); it is probably a mammal.
- b. It is eaten (cf. passages 2 and 3, above).
- c. It is herbivorous (cf. passage 4, above).
- d. It is a herd animal, a draft animal, or both (cf. passages 4 and 5, above); it may or may not be domesticated.

It is clear what the ulgry is not. Smith names the following kinds of animals on pages 24 through 28: Horse, Bull, mares, Vlgrie, blacke sheepe, Cattell, Camels, Deere, Oxen, kine, Ramme, kid, dogges, goats, sheepe, Elkes, Bisiones, swine, Beares. Bisiones probably were European bisons or wisents (*Bison bonasus*), which are no longer found in the wild.

The evidence suggests that the ulgry is some kind of hooved mammal. Animals which fit the general characteristics in passages 1 to 5, but which do not necessarily appear in the list above, are the ass, the wild horse, the antelope, and the buffalo. Species indigenous to the area described by Smith include the Asiatic wild ass (*Equus hemionus*), Przewalski's wild horse (*Equus przewalskii*), the Saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*), and the water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*). Each of these has one or more subspecies, many of which are now extinct, or nearly so.

The water buffalo is found both wild and domestic (*Bubalus arnee bubalis*), but during the 17th century were probably not found outside India and southeast Asia, at least not in the quantity implied by Smith. The Tatars had oxen of some sort; water buffalo, with their large horns, would have been unusual enough for Smith to distinguish them from Bisiones, Bulls, Oxen, kine, or Cattell. The Saiga antelope, which long ago ranged in very large herds, is found on the steppes of southern Russia, but is not known to have been domesticated.

The Asiatic wild ass was domesticated in prehistoric times, but is not known to have been domesticated during the 17th century. There are seven distinguishable subspecies, some now extinct. One candidate, the kulan (*Equus hemionus kulan*), is still found in Turkmenia and Kazakhstan; another, the onager (*Equus hemionus onager*), is still found in Iran. Wild horses, including the now extinct South Russian Plains Tarpan (*Equus przewalskii gmelini*) would have been recognizable to Smith as horses, although it is doubtful that the Tatars were able to domesticate this unruly and independent animal.

An excellent candidate for the ulgry is the domestic donkey ass or donkey. Donkey meat is still eaten in the Middle East and China, and it seems logical that passage 3 might refer to the entrails of similar animals ("Horse and Vlgrie").

Etymology

Perhaps the answer to both questions can be found linguistically. The **ulgry** may be a different-looking breed or race of an otherwise common animal. It is not unlikely that Smith is attempting to record the Tatar name for the animal, without the benefit of knowing the Tatar spelling. In other words, **ulgry** may be a phonetic transliteration of a Tatar word.

The beast Smith names is obviously uncommon to him, but common to his captors. Reconstructing the protonym of Smith's **ulgry**, and comparing the result against the languages of the Tatars, or other eastern European peoples, may result in the original word from which Smith constructed **ulgry**. (The OED (3:686), as Partridge points out, cites Smith's book in its entry for **Drubman**; the absence of **ulgry**, or some variation thereof, is inexplicable.)

It is possible, of course, that Smith coined the name **ulgry**. For example, it could be derived from the Greek *oulos* (woolly), if the animal in question was notably hirsute.

Does anyone care to take up either gauntlet?

Finally, is it correct to modernize the spelling from **vlgrie** to **ulgry**? The temptation is great, and perhaps it is not unreasonable, to do so. Before a satisfactory answer can be formulated, however, it would be desirable to ascertain a more precise meaning and etymology for **ulgry**.

Additional Sources Consulted

- Grzimek, Bernhard. *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia: Mammals III (Volume 12) and Mammals IV (Volume 13)*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, c1972, c1975.
- Morris, Desmond. *The Mammals: A Guide to the Living Species*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965.
- Smith, John. *The True Travels, Adventvres and Observations: London 1630*. New York: Da Capo Press; Amsterdam: Theatrvm Orbis Terrarvm Ltd., 1968. Facsimile of the 1630 edition published by Thomas Slater, London.