

## The Elephant in England

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[Transcript of presentation of paper]

We can start our journey at SOAS. This is our coat of arms. You see the elephant there. The elephant is looking rather strained. And likewise the camel. And our school motto: “Knowledge is Power”. I discussed this in a brief presentation yesterday evening. We are deconstructing the notion of “knowledge is power”, with a notion of “knowledge coming from the bottom”, so to speak. And regimes of knowledge are interesting to me.



Figure 1: SOAS crest

So, to get started. Our story of the elephant in England starts in Northern France, probably in the vicinity of Calais. A received truth is that in AD 43 20,000 Roman troops arrived, crossed the English Channel, and they were to stay in Britain for the next 350 years. After the landing the emperor Claudius travelled through Kent with war elephants as part of his military force.



Figure 2: The Romans in Britain – diorama, Dover town museum

For the next 1,000 years, however, we know nothing regarding the physical presence of elephants in England. But they certainly exist in the popular imagination. And as we come into the Middle Ages they begin to feature in illuminated manuscripts – for instance we have images referencing the military aspect of their usage. And also in ecclesiastical

illustrations, in prayer books and the like. Although most of the depictions are clearly not drawn from life, there is at least one realistic depiction of an elephant on a monk's seat, a *misericord*, to be found in Exeter Cathedral, dating from the late 1200s.

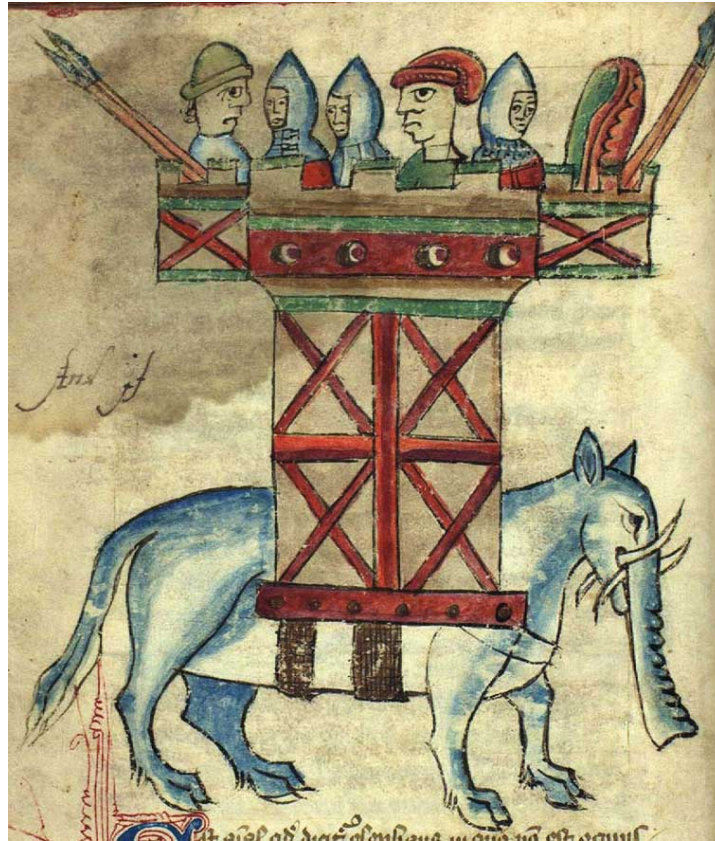


Figure 3: Elephant bearing armed men



Figure 4: Elephant attacked by flying serpent



Figure 5: Misericord, Exeter Cathedral

### Elephants and ways of knowing

What I suggest in this paper is that the elephant offers a very useful way of knowing not only about nature, in the case of the animal itself, but throughout history it has also provided human beings with a way of knowing *ourselves*. In other words it reflects back on us, in terms of how we apprehend the world. In medieval time the elephant was enlisted into that way of knowing the world which is allegory. The way in which the elephant is “known” is not through hands-on experience, but in reproducing received knowledge from ancient authorities. They are known from a distance, through a glass darkly. So, for example, citing the works of the Roman naturalist Pliny, who is drawing from Aristotle among others, and who offers many qualities of the elephant that would accept as true to this day, and including the observation about male elephants being used in battle carrying castles of armed soldiers on their backs, and also the notion that elephants are frequently in battle with fierce dragons or serpents. And both of these observations caught the medieval imagination, as we know from medieval bestiaries, books about beasts, which give precisely those images.

The qualities of the elephant are variously ascribed as fidelity, nobility, non-promiscuity and memory. The qualities are then cross-referenced into allegory. For example the elephant features in terms of the couple of Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. And the elephant is also read as the benchmark for *human* ways of behaviour. We compare ourselves to the elephant to see how we match up to their ascribed behavioural attributes.

Additionally there is a curious and pervasive claim, which we find as late as Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida*, that elephants have no knees and cannot bend their legs. And what you have there is “knowledge” about the animal body that is passed on in the same way as knowledge about the human body – based on ancient precepts, until Vessalius came along and started cutting people up and showing how musculature actually worked, and so on – with hands-on anatomy.

As it happens, elephant anatomy became available to science quite early on, because over the centuries the elephant has been a prestige object to be gifted among the kings and rulers of Europe. By medieval times the care and cure of elephants had become a known quantity. The crusades had given the Emperor Federico II the opportunity to capture an elephant in Palestine, and that animal was used in the capture of Cremona in 1214. In about 1255 an elephant makes its appearance at the Tower of London, gifted to Henry III by King Louis IX of France. This elephant – like the Roman elephants – also arrived by the sea route across the Channel from Calais. Kept in a 20x40-foot cage, the animal was portrayed in two beautiful drawings by the monk Matthew Parris. One of them notably



also portrays the elephant's keeper, Henri de Flor. One of these manuscripts is in the British Library; the other is in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.



Figure 6: Matthew Parris – Drawing of elephant and keeper c.1225

When this particular animal died, after only a couple of years in captivity, it was buried. But then its bones were later dug up again, on the King's instructions, presumably for some kind of anatomical examination. This, in a dissectionist impulse that attended the two elephants in the paper by Florencia Pierri, which we shall hear tomorrow, in the late 1600s, and the noted case of Chuneé the Elephant to whom I shall return later. This was an elephant that was shot dead in the City of London in 1811. The animal was anatomised, and interestingly phrenologised – the pseudo-science of the brain that was around at the time... we have heard reference to the huge brain of the elephant and its capacities ... so it was phrenologised in order to assess its capacities... Furthermore the surgeons ate steaks of its meat and the animal's skin was flayed and preserved.

## *The elephant in England*

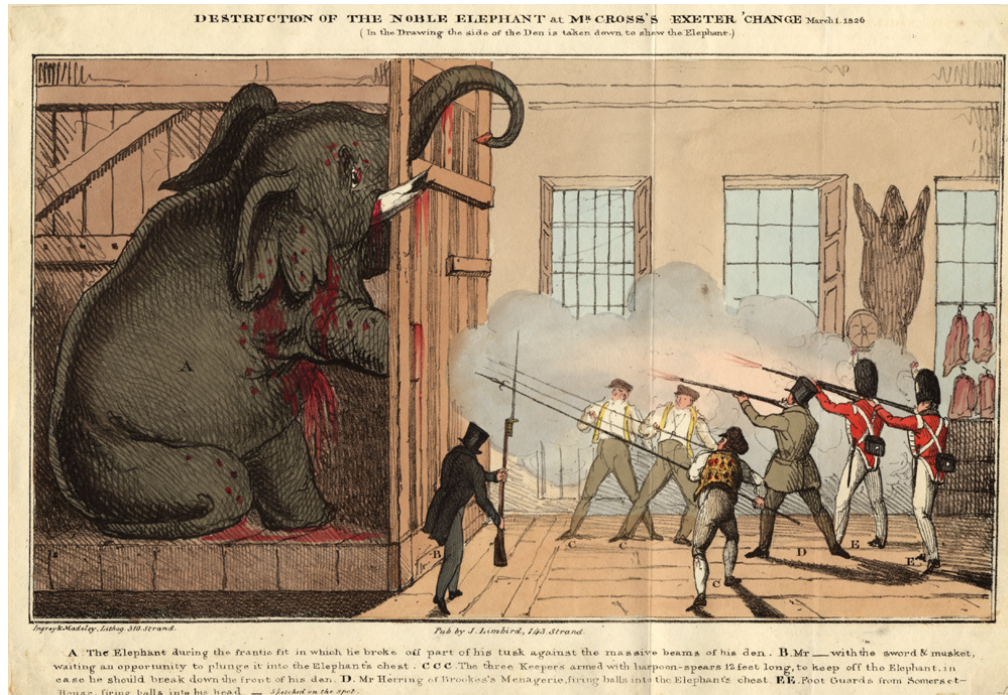


Figure 7: The shooting of Chunee the Elephant – Exeter Exchange, London

This picture was actually reproduced fifty years later, in *Punch* magazine, where the elephant was taken to represent the wildness of India, which had to be tamed by people shooting at it. A virtually identical picture, but it is not an elephant but rather an India that has to be tamed.

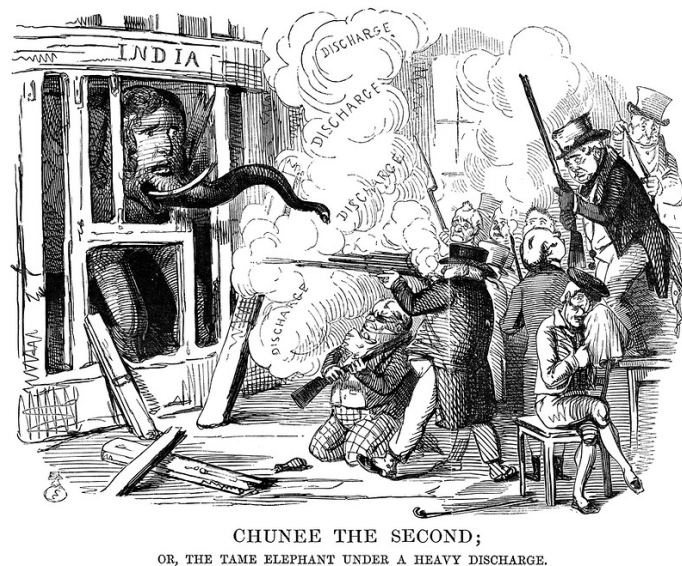


Figure 8: The shooting of India, as a wild elephant – *Punch* Magazine

### **The elephant and royalty**

So, elephant keeping continues to be a hobby of English royalty. Henry VIII was given one... somewhat unruly, apparently, but we do not know who gave it. Elizabeth I had one, gifted by Henry IV of France. James I had another, from the King of Spain. And



Queen Charlotte apparently kept an elephant and two zebras at Buckingham Palace in 1763. And here you have a picture of Queen Charlotte's elephant.



Figure 9: Queen Charlotte's elephant, 1763

It is with the great colonial adventures of the 16th and 17th centuries that the elephant moves from being a curiosity and a mere object of conspicuous consumption – because of course they were expensive to both obtain and maintain – and become a means of Empire. Now we are talking about new elephant knowledges. New knowledges come into play. The elephant is enlisted by the British both as a means of production and as a means of war. As a means of production it was used in the colonies for the hauling of timber and suchlike, and other rural work. And also as a means of war – but not as a frontline fighting animal, as had been the case with the old Eastern kings, but rather as a pack animal for the supplying of troops.

A small correction here, to Professor Sukumar's point yesterday, that Europe started learning from native knowledges with the arrival of the railways and so on. Actually elephant knowledge was being produced by the East India Company a long time before that. I referred earlier to John Corse's paper in 1799, about the dentition and also the breeding of elephants in India, as referenced in Sujit Sivasundaram's "Trading knowledge..." So what we are talking about is knowledge at ground level. In the field this necessitated an enlistment of local knowledges which were developed as an adjunct to the handbooks for the management of horses, pack animals and so on. That is evident in the accounts of the East India Company's operations.



Figure 10: Elephant brought to Germany – 1709

Curiously Karl Marx, who has a lot to say about the India question, and a tremendous amount to say about the development of the means of production in the Industrial Revolution and subsequently, to my knowledge makes no mention whatever of elephants. I suppose we could take this as a classic case of “the elephant in the room” – in other words, something that is large and obvious science cannot actually see it.

### **Knowing the elephant, knowing ourselves**

Moving on with the idea of knowledge. You will be familiar with the story of the six blind men in the room with the elephant, and they each feel a bit of it, and one decides that it is a kind of rope, the other decides it is a wall, and so on, with many variations in the telling. Whereas of course, as we know, it is an elephant, because we can see it in totality, while they could not. The story bears out a particular truth, that “we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning”. A quotation there, from Werner Heisenberg.

I suggest also that the elephant is not only something that we come to know, but, as I said previously, throughout the history of human-elephant relations it is a creature that enables us to know ourselves; it is in relation with these superb creatures that we come to understand ourselves.



Figure 11: Performing elephants in Ringling's Circus, USA

Here is an image of Ringling's Circus in the United States. In episodes like the killing of Chunee and the account of the killing of Topsy the elephant by Thomas Edison (of which Kim Stallwood has given us an account), we learn a lot about humans and about ourselves. And it is true that the slow development of the movements against the national – and the international documentation of – campaigns against the use of animals in circuses, arising in part from campaigns in the USA, that we now come to a new kind of knowing about animal-human relations, assessing our own humanity and its worth relative to an animal's right to live in dignity. New views of animal-human relations.

Now, as part of our pre-Conference build-up, we had a grand notion. I tried desperately hard to bring an elephant to our School of Oriental and African Studies, because a couple of years ago, for our Camel Conference, we brought two gorgeous Bactrian camels to visit the School. The beauty of the animals – and also, I might say, the beauty of SOAS students – was rather precious to behold. So I phoned the lady who advertises that she does elephants for Asian weddings in the UK. A distinctive niche operation that she has, there. I said: "Madam, could you please bring an elephant to SOAS". And she said: "No."

I discovered that this is simply not possible, because in the UK we now have local municipal legislation in place which bans elephants from working. The laws are supported by a central government declaration of intent in 2012, intended to prevent wild animals being used in circuses and the like, but this has been blocked at the legislative level by a group of Conservative members of Parliament who prefer to keep elephants operating in circuses. Incidentally, this is at odds with the situation in Calais, in Northern France, just across the Channel, where a couple of months ago the Medrano Circus was advertising *Aladdin and the 1,001 Nights*, complete with performing elephants. This is just one of those cultural isobars, as we might term them – for instance, across a 20-mile span of water, on the one side the French eat horses; on the other side the English categorically do not.

These threads of relations and new epistemologies and ways of seeing knowledge have developed through into a new anglophone school amply represented here in our Conference by the work of Piers Locke and his associates, in ethno-elephantology.

Now the elephant is also constantly being enlisted for one thing or another in a metaphysical sense. The problem of the elephant – unlike the earthworm and more humble forms of life – is that it has always been coopted into what the French call *l'imaginaire* – the imaginary (as a translator I can tell you that this term is virtually untranslatable into English). Enlisted not for what it is, but for what we imagine it to be.



And that is certainly true for the English. Most of us have had one or other significant elephant moments in our lives – an elephant ride as a child, a cuddly toy, a Jumbo, a Dumbo, a wish to flap our ears and fly, whatever. Sadly I don't have time to tell you about Rudyard Kipling's wonderful story about how the elephant got its trunk. But what is fundamental about it resides in the field of knowingness, of the right to knowledge. If you read that story, you come to a fabulous little poem at the end, which is about the right of *girls* to have intellectual curiosity at every level, and to ask any questions that they choose to ask. And also to resist patriarchal authority in the society in which they live – and effectively to come out and *be scientists*. That is why I am so happy to see all these wonderful women elephant researchers here in Professor Sukumar's lab in Bangalore. It is a real testimony to how things should be.

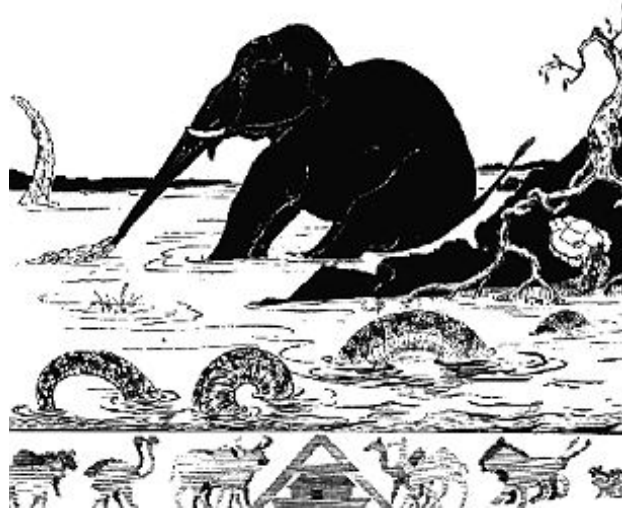


Figure 12: Rudyard Kipling – “The Elephant's Child or How the Elephant Got His Trunk”

### **Democratisation of the elephant**

So now we move on through history. To the *democratisation* of the elephant. As I said, the East India Company as bringing elephants in, in a performative sense, to amuse the population. This developed at a certain point into the phenomenon of the menagerie. Here we have a picture from Caroline Grigson's recently published book on the menageries. In 1820 Edward Croft kept a public menagerie till about 1829, and you can see the conditions in which the animals were kept.



Figure 13: Menagerie operated at Exeter Exchange, London, 1773-1829

I said that royalty had a lot of elephants. William IV, however, had no interest in maintaining royal menageries. He decided to shut them down. However 1831 saw the foundation of the Zoological Society in Regent's Park, and by 1832 the "Zoo" as we came to know it featured an elephant complete with an elephant bath. So the elephant had been democratised, and had become a public property. The public paid for admission (or apparently you could "pay" by bringing a cat or a dog to be fed to the animals, rather than paying cash). The elephant cage, as you can see, barely had room for the animals to move around, and that inevitably led to all kinds of problems.

The killing of elephants... The fact that royalty decided to offload their menageries does not remove royalty from the elephant's domain. Far from it. In order to be known as the rulers of Empire, the duty of British kings, queens, princes, and princesses (*nota bene*) was the establish face to face relationships with the animals of that Empire, and to kill them. Here you see a picture of the Prince of Wales, later to become Edward VII. He arrived in India on a particularly triumphalist and bloody elephant shoot. He shot lots of elephants, returned to London, and was duly renamed by an Act of Parliament to be an Imperial prince, as opposed to a mere prince. We should note that the mass killing of animals on safari and elsewhere by British royalty continues more or less to our present day. They have determinedly maintained that splendid tradition, although there have been some wobbles among the younger generation of the royal family.

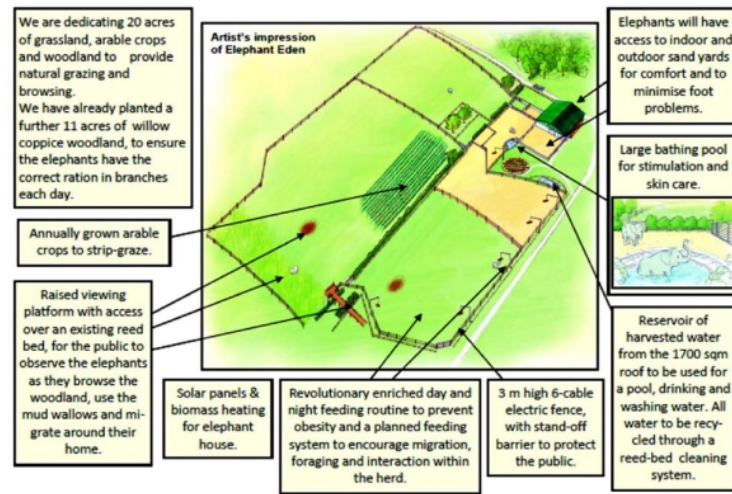


Figure 14: State visit of Edward VII to India – 1875-6

### New paradigms in elephant discourse

This now brings us to the humanitarian impulse. Just as there was the phased shift from menageries to zoological societies, with the manifest scientific intention of study, that signalled a changed relationship with the animals, so also today we have a further shift. The evident problems associated with holding animals in zoos and the fact of animals being banned in circuses has led to a relocation of the elephant both in spatial terms and in terms of discourse and public perception. You have the creation of centres such as the Elephant Eden, which is located in the Southwest of England, at Wraxall near Bristol. This establishment opened really recently, in December 2015. Extending across 20 acres... a wide open habitat. The owners describe the farm as an elephants' paradise which has since become "a wonderful new home for displaced Asian elephants". Here "displaced" is the key word, because what you have here is something similar to the salvationist ethic of the nearby Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth. In other words, the housing of rescued animals and orphaned animals. Somehow it is legitimate to have such animals in these kinds of centres. In short, saving them from a fate which might have been worse than what they will get here. Here, we note, the ethos is mainly "hands on"

and “family fun”, and the place is not particularly political or with a programmatic approach.



*Figure 15: Elephant Eden – Layout*

But there is then the developmental brief, the developmental aspect of zoological practice, which now comes to the fore. So in a further extension of the “knowingness” about the elephant, and indeed about ourselves, we now have the Zoological Society of London’s initiative on behalf of the endangered species of African elephants in Central Africa – endangered on account of ivory poaching, habitat reduction and fragmentation, and so on. So that the observation when you go to the zoo – actually you’re not allowed to call it the Zoo any more, the tube train announcement tells you to alight here for ZSL... And what you have now is an outreach practice that involves practical work and advocacy work in the field, identifying elephant populations, enhancing law enforcement, protecting vital areas of habitat and improving conservation in elephant range states.



*Figure 16: Zoological Society of London – Conservation outreach – Marking tusks*



### No Borders...



Figure 17: Municipally sponsored “Elephant Parade” – Calais 2016

Meanwhile we are back in Calais in Northern France, where I have been spending a lot of my time. At the end of last year the town was absolutely full of elephants... A striking and remarkable development. The mayor of the town had brought the so called “Elephant Parade” to town. A municipal act in the fine old tradition of “bread and circuses”. The display was funded by the town council. It featured large numbers of fibreglass elephants, each decorated and painted by local artists. Now what is phenomenal – for those of you who know the treatment that has recently been handed out to migrants and refugees in Calais – is the quotation from Mahatma Gandhi that is inscribed on the side of one of the elephants: “Be the Change that You Want to See in the World”. There were a lot of volunteers who had gone over to Calais specifically to try and enable that notion to come about in the refugee camps in that town. But the same mayor who funded this Elephant Parade (and hence this fine ethical statement), Natacha Bouchart, has been at the forefront of a statist and racist campaign designed precisely to drive out the refugees and migrants from her town – many of whom come from elephant territories, from places that have elephant cultures. These people who have managed to penetrate the borders of Fortress Europe and have arrived there and find themselves at the receiving end of this kind of treatment.



Figure 18: Police evict migrant camp – Calais 2016

Now, a couple of points by way of conclusion.

My principal point is that we are looking at elephants, but these *peoples* also need to be taken into account. An ethical stance is immediately and necessarily implied. Our knowingness about ourselves is reflected as much in the way that we treat those peoples, as it is seen in the way that we treat the animals. The brown and black peoples of the world need to be taken into account in our discussions of the elephant cultures. From a purely personal point of view (as you know, I am a musicologist) I am particularly interested in hearing the voices of the peoples in and around elephant cultures, in the societies, and how the societies work. It is my opinion that there could be a lot to be gained by having a paper at our next conference, on elephant songs – songs and dances associated with elephants... The voicing of the elephant and its peoples. As a musicologist I would welcome that. So we shall see what we can do.

And finally, to add that elephant cultures can also be read in terms of No Borders perspectives. One thing that really heartened me in discussion with our colleagues from India yesterday, was the story about working with elephants in the India-Burma region. You arrive at the border, and as researchers you cannot get across... But elephants get across. Elephants, as we see, are fundamentally No Borders creatures...

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is as much as I have to say. Thank you for your attention.

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