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## The elephant in the ceremonial and artistic culture of medieval Egypt

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**Abstract:** The elephant is well represented in medieval Egyptian sources, both visual and textual, between the Fatimid and the Mamluk periods. It is represented on ceramics and metal vessels, and the chronicles present accounts and anecdotes about the presence of the elephant in royal menageries and its use in parades and as a diplomatic gift. It is also mentioned in bestiaries and other literature.

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The elephant occupied a prominent place in medieval Egypt. This is documented in visual as well as textual sources. However, the elephant has a long tradition in Arabic culture that does not begin with or is confined to Egypt. It is documented in Islamic bestiaries and cosmological literature, much of it based on pre-Islamic traditions. The zoological lexicon *hayat al-hayawan al-kubra* or “the life of animals” compiled by the Egyptian scholar Kamal al-Din al-Damiri<sup>1</sup> (d.1405) perpetuates such traditions in the Mamluk period. Far more than a mere bestiary, it is an example of Mamluk encyclopaedic scholarship, a compendium that touches on a multitude of subjects and disciplines compiled from diverse literary sources. Damiri’s entry on the elephant is one of the longest in the book.<sup>2</sup> Besides its zoological features, he mentions the elephant’s virtues, describing it as a great fighter, yet discerning, wise and capable of learning, and adapting itself to the circumstances. It is venerated in India for its strength and its magnificent looks, the elegance of its movements and its longevity. He then concludes with a note on the interpretation of dreams according to which the elephant is a symbol of an awesome foreign king and is also associated with auspicious meanings, predicting fortune, victory and liberation.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, the entry refers at length and with a long poem, to the auspicious “year of the elephant”, when the army of the Abyssinian king Abraha, ruler of Yemen, marched towards Mecca with war elephants but their assault was prevented by their leading elephant Mahmud, whose name means “Praised”. This episode alluded to in the Koran (Sura 105/1) is believed to have taken place in the year when the Prophet was born.

The presence of elephants in the Egyptian capital, at that time still called Fustat, is already well established in the 9th century under the Tulunids when their rulers, probably following the Abbasid caliph’s example, held in their palaces elaborate menageries housing various exotic animals, each species in its designated stable. Among these were elephants, which explains the name of one of the palaces, the “House of the Elephant” (*Dar al-fil*).<sup>4</sup>

Cairo’s topography reveals several references to elephants, such as the Pond of the Elephant (*Birkat al-fil*), which occupied an important place in the city’s life for its mansions and gardens and its role as a venue of pleasure and entertainment. Its name refers to a person, one of the dignitaries of the governor Ibn Tulun, who might have been called al-Fil by reason of his voluminous looks.<sup>5</sup>

*Jazirat al-fil* was an island that emerged in Cairo’s landscape during the Ayyubid period, late twelfth–early thirteenth century, when the Nile was receding to the west. It developed around the wreck of a large boat called al-Fil probably so named for its size.<sup>6</sup>

*Jami‘ al-fiyala*, the Mosque of the Elephants at Fustat, was a lavish building founded in 1105 by the vizier al-Afdal Shahinshah and completed after his death by his successor Ma’mūn.<sup>7</sup> It owed its name to its vaulted profile that recalled from afar the appearance of

elephants carrying armoured palanquins “like those seen in festive processions”. The term for “armoured” (*mudarra*) is normally used in a military context, which suggests that the elephants performed battle games on festive occasions.

Such names and nicknames reveal the familiarity of the Cairene street with the elephant on ceremonial and festive occasions. This was also reflected in Fatimid art, which has been described as showing a pronounced taste for the depiction of individual animals.<sup>8</sup> In Fatimid lustre painted pottery, the elephant figures among other exotic animals such as the giraffe and felines, in a cycle of entertainment motifs, which echoes the display of these animals on festive and ceremonial occasions. Among the water filters for domestic clay jugs, which were traditionally decorated in the Fatimid period, the image of the elephant was one of the patterns used (Fig. 1). Figurines in the shapes of elephants and other exotic animals used to be made for decoration on festive occasions.<sup>9</sup> The elephant was also a favoured motif in the decoration of ceremonial textiles, including tents. This type of textiles was described as *mufayyal*, deriving from *fil*. There were also the *mutayyar* derived from *tayr* / bird.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1:** Fatimid water filter, Art Institute Chicago, no. 1925.483

Elephants were regularly seen in the flesh accompanying the caliphs' processions.<sup>11</sup> The caliph al-Hakim bi Amr Allah rode in a procession with six elephants and five giraffes to inaugurate his mosque in the quarter of Rashida in al-Fustat and to celebrate at the same time the feast of fast-breaking.<sup>12</sup> On such occasions, the elephants wore special caparisons of red gold-brocaded textiles.<sup>13</sup>

The elephant continued to hold its prominent position in Mamluk regal culture. The fact that it was a familiar sight in Cairo is documented by Ibn Iyas who writes that when, in 1510, a one-year-old African elephant arrived at the court of Sultan al-Ghawri, the Egyptians had not seen this kind of animal for more than 40 years, implying that elephants had a continuous presence in the city. He adds that “Cairo was rocked” by the sight of the beast.<sup>14</sup>

Among the things that European travellers regularly described in their accounts on Egypt, was the royal menagerie they visited near the sultans’ palaces at the Citadel. Although Europeans were generally not allowed into mosques, they could visit the sultan’s palace and his menagerie with its exotic animals that included elephants.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the critical political and economic situation at the time, following Timur’s invasion of Syria, the death of an elephant in 1402 was a matter of public concern in Cairo, to which the historian Ibn Iyas dedicates two pages. When this big elephant, called Marzuq (meaning “prosperous”), which belonged to the sultan’s menagerie, was taken for a walk to the outskirts of Cairo by its groom, they passed over a bridge, where it stumbled and had its foot caught in a breach from which it could not be freed in spite of all rescue attempts. It eventually died there. Crowds gathered to watch the sad spectacle and many poems were composed in commiseration with Marzuq’s tragic fate.<sup>16</sup>

In the following year 1403, an embassy from Timur’s court to Sultan Faraj ibn Barquq (r. 1282-9, 1390-9) brought an elephant carrying a large palanquin carrying ten musicians and a man waving green banners.<sup>17</sup> Elephants with such palanquins that could carry several passengers were described in detail by the Spanish envoy Clavijo when he visited Timur’s court in Samarkand in 1404.<sup>18</sup> Elephants with palanquins carrying soldiers or musicians; also figure frequently in medieval European bestiaries.

In 1512 an embassy from India marched in Cairo accompanied by two big elephants with lavish trappings, attracting a huge cheering crowd. The elephants were then displayed at the hippodrome where they performed a fight, similar to those with bulls and rams, accompanied by drums and trumpets, to the sultan’s great delight.<sup>19</sup> Clavijo described similar performances at Timur’s court.<sup>20</sup>

Egypt received elephants from Africa and from India via Yemen. The significance of the elephant in diplomacy is demonstrated by the message sent in 1283 from the ruler of Ceylon to Sultan al-Mansur Qalawun (r.1279-90), in which he offered him his friendship and invited him to deal directly with him without the intermediary of Yemen, praising the goods he could provide, which included elephants.<sup>21</sup>

A letter probably from Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad (r. 1294-1341, with two interruptions) to the Rasulid sultan of Yemen, al-Mujahid ‘Ali (r. 1321–63) praised the elephant he sent him, whose trunk “strikes like a polo stick, moves like a snake and swings like a dancer cajoling the audience with her sleeves”.<sup>22</sup>

The rulers of Egypt not only received elephants as diplomatic gifts, but they were also keen to offer them. The elephant along with the giraffe was one of the major and most sought after diplomatic gifts offered by Mamluk sultans to European monarchs.<sup>23</sup> The tradition may have begun with Harun al-Rashid, who is reported in European sources to have offered his unique white elephant to Charlemagne.

Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (r. 1266-77) sent an elephant to each of Alfonso X of Castile and Berke of the Golden Horde. Sultan Jaqmaq (r.1438-53) sent an elephant to each of the Ottoman sultans Murad II and Mehmed II, and Sultan al-Ghawri (r.1501-16) sent one to Selim.<sup>24</sup>

The Italian historian Paolo Giovio mentions an elephant and a tiger sent by Sultan Qaytbay to the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Sforza (r. 1466–76),<sup>25</sup> a gift which was



commemorated in a fresco painting that can be seen in the courtyard of the ducal castle of Milan, the Castello Sforzesco (*Fig. 2*).



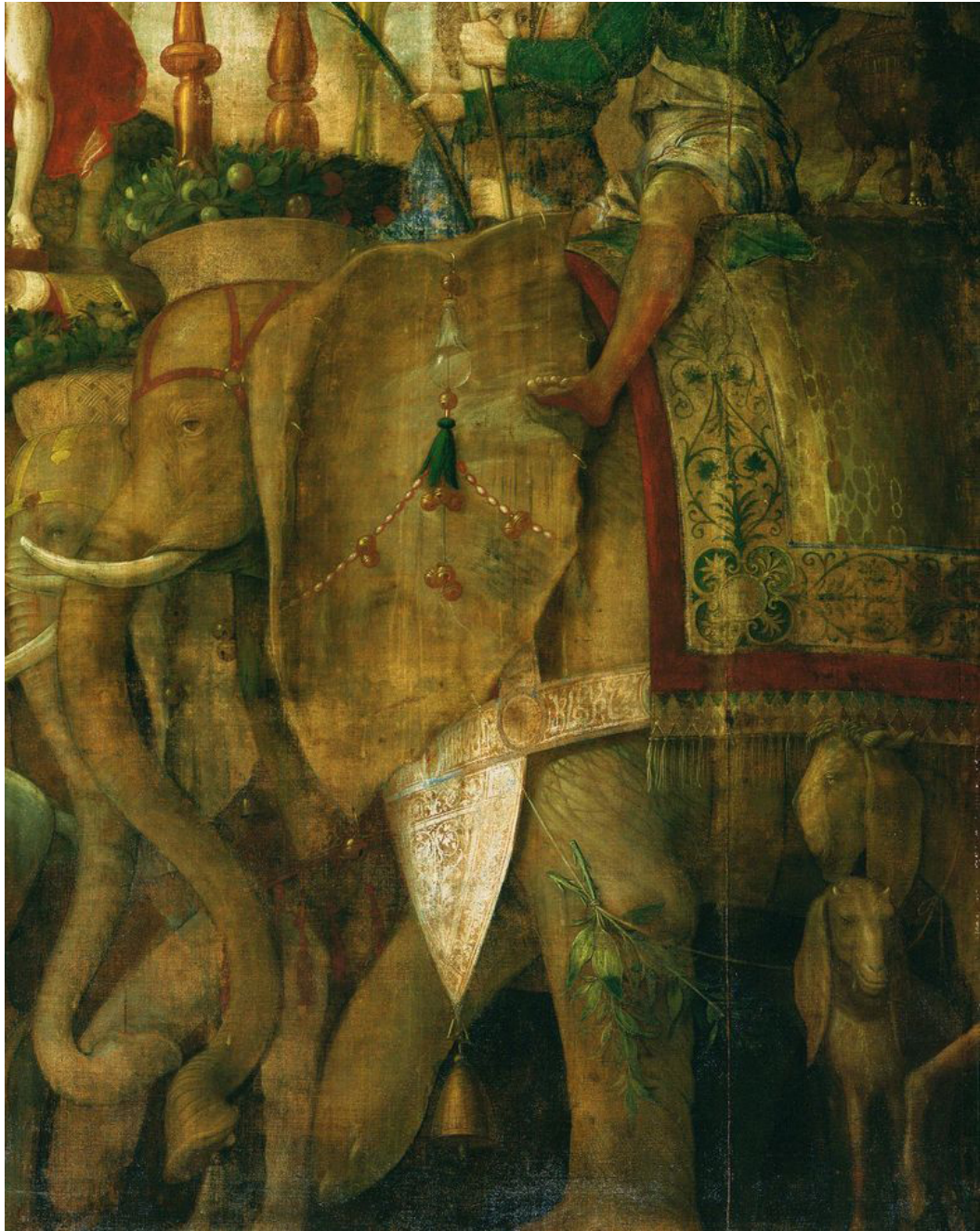
**Figure 2:** Elephant with groom, fresco at the courtyard of Castello Sforzesco, Milan, unknown artist, 1480s. Commune of Milan, photo by Fabio Saporetti.

A decade later, in his famous series of paintings representing Caesar's triumphs, displayed at Hampton Court, Mantegna depicted an elephant with sumptuous trappings that include a band with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions, which the artist may have seen on Qaytbay's elephant (*Fig. 3*).

The last acting Mamluk sultan, Qansuh al-Ghawri (r.1501-16), was particularly fond of luxury and regalia, to which he dedicated great attention, introducing reforms and innovations. He must have been particularly fond of elephants, which are mentioned on multiple occasions during his reign. They performed fights<sup>26</sup> and walked in his processions, as well as in the processions of emirs on the occasion of the Nile festival, when the dike of the Cairo canal was opened to the yearly flood, and in the processions of the departing pilgrimage caravan.<sup>27</sup> They carried banners and were preceded by an orchestra playing drums and trumpets. To impress an Ottoman envoy in 1514, al-Ghawri sent two elephants to accompany his procession from the Citadel down to his residence in the city.<sup>28</sup>

On the last procession that took him to the battlefield of Marj Dabiq in Syria to meet the Ottoman sultan Selim, where he eventually met his fate, al-Ghawri was accompanied by the three elephants of the royal menagerie. According to Ibn Iyas they were intended to be used in the warfare, which would have been an innovation in Mamluk military practice.<sup>29</sup>





**Figure 3:** Detail of Mantegna's *Caesar's Triumph* at Hampton Court, showing an elephant with Arabic inscribed trapping.

With the fall of the Mamluk sultanate in 1517, and the annexation of Egypt into the Ottoman Empire, which terminated Cairo's regal culture, the ceremonial role of the elephant comes to an end.

Although Mamluk art does not have a great pictorial tradition comparable to that of other contemporary Muslim regimes, the elephant does figure in bestiaries, in the *Kalila wa Dimna* fable books,<sup>30</sup> and in some decorative arts. In a unique illustrated manuscript of al-Jahiz's (d. 868-9) bestiary, undated but attributed to the mid-fourteenth century, the unknown illustrator introduced an original feature to the subject by depicting most of the animals, including the elephants, in mating posture.<sup>31</sup> Although his painting style was not in any way remarkable, this iconographic interpretation was artistic freedom and a humorous note of his own initiative, not founded on al-Jahiz's text (*Fig. 4*)





**Figure 4:** Mating elephants from a Mamluk manuscript of al-Jahiz's bestiary, 14th century, drawn after Löfgren.

The elephant was also celebrated in the elephant-clock invented and illustrated probably in Mosul by Ibn al-Razzaz al-Jazari (d.1206) in his famous book on mechanical devices.<sup>32</sup> The manuscript originally illustrated by its author with great artistic skill, was copied several times in Mamluk Syria and Egypt (*Fig. 5*).<sup>33</sup>

Although the Mamluks did not use the elephant in warfare, a rare fourteenth century illustrated manuscript on martial arts includes the image of an elephant with a palanquin carrying soldiers.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike its Fatimid and Ayyubid predecessors, where animal representations occupy a prominent place, Mamluk pottery shows rather a predilection for abstract geometric and vegetal motifs. However, animals are present in the art of metalwork. The animal frieze in particular, which has a pre-Mamluk tradition in the decorative arts, continued to figure on luxury objects made of silver-inlaid metal alloy. These friezes used as frames in the decorative composition, display quadrupeds running in the same direction, some of which are fabulous creatures. The elephant figures among the quadrupeds, and is consistently tailed by a unicorn pointing its horn towards it (*Fig. 6*).<sup>35</sup> Although the fabulous unicorn has been mentioned in bestiaries in East and West since antiquity, it seems that its earliest association with the elephant goes back to Isidore of Seville in the seventh century, who

noted that in fights with the elephants the unicorns kill them by piercing their belly.<sup>36</sup> In his cosmology *'aja'ib al-makhlukat*, Qazwini (d. 1283) writes about the unicorn piercing



**Figure 5:** The elephant clock, manuscript of al-Jazari, Syria or Iraq, dated 1315, Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 57.51.23

the elephant with its horn and lifting it up in the air with the intention of letting it fall, but according to the legend, its horn gets stuck inside the elephant, thus killing both of them. The fatal connection with the unicorn is not mentioned in Ibn Bakhtishu's (d.1058) bestiary *manafi' al-hayawan*, but it is repeated by al-Damiri<sup>37</sup> and it is also mentioned in the *1001 Nights*, in the tale of Sindbad's second travel. The theme of the elephant pierced by the unicorns had a great iconographic echo, being represented in various media of Islamic art, as documented by R. Ettinghausen; it is not peculiar to Egypt.<sup>38</sup> The enmity of the elephant and the unicorn is also recorded in European bestiaries.

Apart from the animal frieze with the unicorn connection, the elephant figures in Mamluk metalwork as an individual figure. It is depicted in a medallion on a late 13th or early 14th century basin at the V&A, where it carries a palanquin occupied by three musicians (*Fig. 7*).<sup>39</sup> It also fills a medallion on a 14th century Mamluk bowl in the Hermitage Museum, where it is depicted caparisoned and adorned with rings around its feet, reminiscent of festivities, like in the illustration of al-Jahiz's bestiary.<sup>40</sup> Animal representations tend to vanish from the decorative arts of the fifteenth century. However, a ewer at the V&A in the name of Sultan Qaytbay's wife brings the elephant back on metalwork.<sup>41</sup>



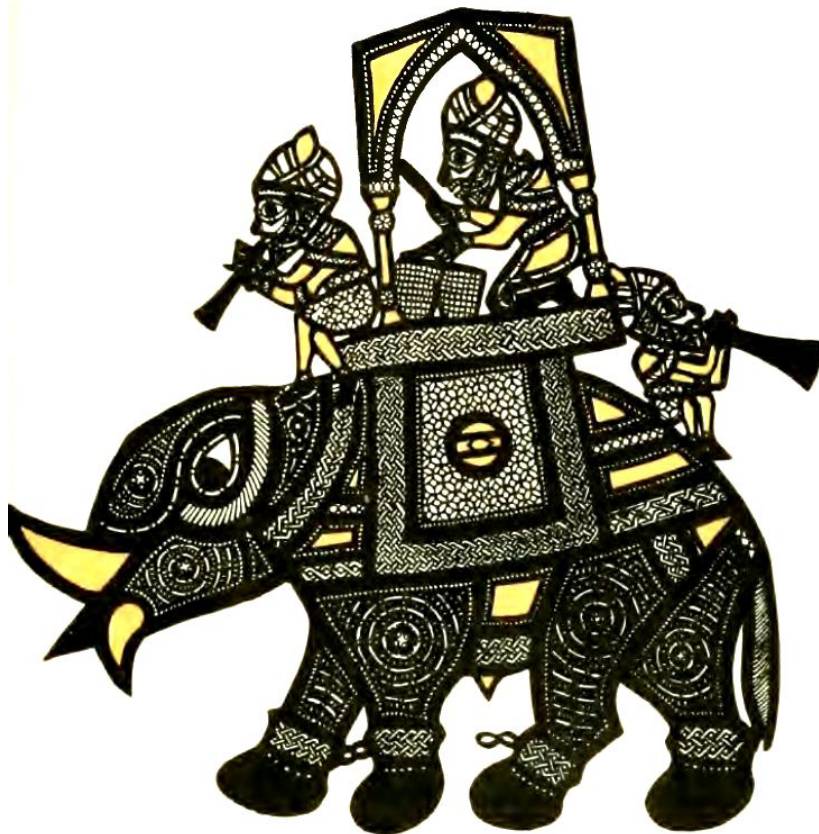


**Figure 6:** Detail of animal frieze with elephant and unicorn, (after D.S. Rice, *The Baptistère de St Louis*, Paris 1951)



**Figure 7:** Detail of a Mamluk basin showing an elephant with palanquin in a medallion, V&A Museum no. 2734.1856.

The shadow-play was a major entertainment in Egypt and Syria in the Mamluk and post-Mamluk eras. The leather puppets used in the performances have been studied and collected by Paul Kahle.<sup>42</sup> The subjects of the plays covered a variety of themes, often satirical and political. Some of them were anonymous and continued to be performed until modern times. The documented puppets represent various subjects as well. One of them is in the shape of an elephant carrying a palanquin occupied by a man, while two musicians, one sitting in the front and the other behind the palanquin, play the trumpet (*Fig. 8*). Although the figure is adorned with a Mamluk blazon, it could well have been made in the Ottoman period, as the shadow-play tradition continued. It is not known to what story the elephant belongs; however its theatrical function confirms the familiarity of the elephant to a wide audience over a long period.



**Figure 8:** Shadow-play puppet after Paul Kahle,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ElephantMusicKahle.jpg> accessed 22.10.2020

In popular culture the elephant, like the crocodile, possessed talismanic auspicious virtues, which led people to suspend effigies of it above the entrance of their houses (*Fig. 9*).

Although the elephant came to the Arab world from remote places and at high costs, it occupied a prominent place in the medieval courtly and ceremonial culture of Egypt. Rather, it was its rarity and associations with the exotic Far East, where silks, gems and the spices that brought wealth to Egypt came from, that enhanced its value and prestige. Yet, the merit of its own aesthetic and functional features contributed to the elephant's wide popularity and iconic status. Besides its regal function, the elephant was a subject of cosmological, scientific, encyclopaedic literature and at the same time a figure of fairy and theatrical entertainment.





**Figure 9:** Talismanic elephant above a house door in Cairo, 19th century, by C. Rudolf Huber.<sup>43</sup>

## NOTES

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