

The elephant in England

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Abstract: In the West, knowledge about the elephant is a discursive field that extends across the centuries. Schematically, the elephant is known for its size, its strength, its association with kingship, and as an engine of war. Devoid of the deep-rooted knowledges generated by centuries of experience in the East, western knowledge of the elephant is received at second-hand, or is the result of limited hands-on experience. The periodisation of apprehension of the elephant speaks eloquently of society's knowing of itself. In other words, human society apprehends itself, and develops knowledge of itself over the centuries, through the relationships that it entertains with elephants, and through the changes in those relationships.



Figure 1: Coat of arms of the School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS]

Our story of the elephant in England starts in Northern France. A received truth is that in 43 CE, 20,000 Roman troops crossed the English Channel and landed at Dover – an occupation that was to last for 350 years. After the landing, the Emperor Claudius reportedly travelled through Kent with war elephants as part of his forces.¹



Figure 2: Roman army with elephants: Diorama, Dover Town Museum

For the next thousand years we know nothing of the presence of elephants in England. However they certainly exist in the popular imagination. As we come into the Middle Ages, they begin to feature in illuminations in prayer books – here the military aspect of their usage is particularly interesting – and in ecclesiastical illustrations. .

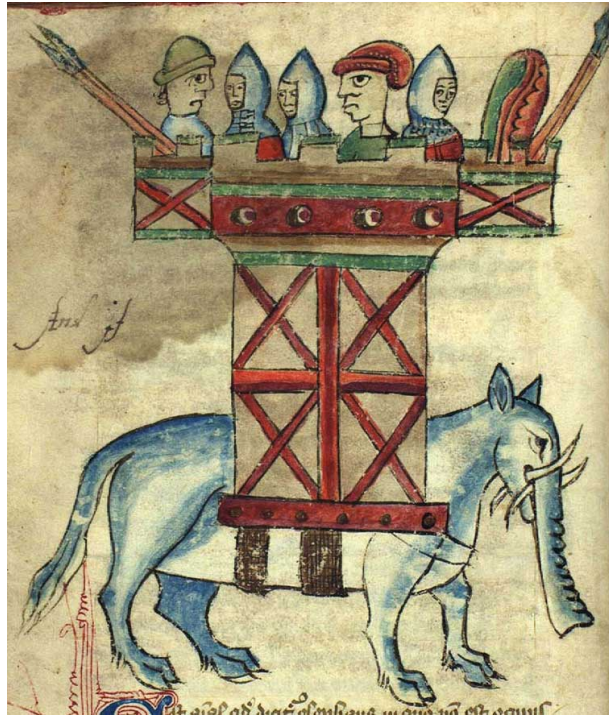


Figure 3: Bestiary elephant. Kongelige Bibliotek, Gl. kgl. S. 1633 4°, Folio 6v

Although most of them are plainly not drawn from life, there is at least one realistic depiction on a monk's seat (*misericord*) in Exeter Cathedral dating from the late 1200s.

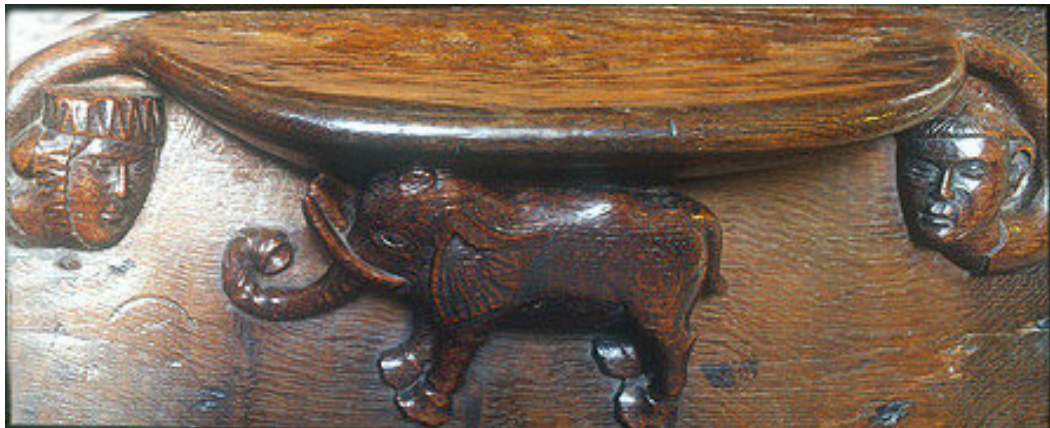


Figure 4: Misericord, Exeter Cathedral

What I suggest is that the elephant offers a very useful way of knowing not only about nature – in this case the animal – but also, throughout history, a way of knowing *ourselves*.

In medieval times 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.

For example, the authors who cite the writings of the Roman naturalist Pliny who, drawing from Aristotle among others, offers many qualities of the elephant that we would accept as true today – and including by the way the observation that “male elephants are used in battle, carrying castles full of armed soldiers on their backs”; and that “elephants are frequently in battle with fierce serpents” – both of which observations caught the medieval imagination, as we know from medieval bestiaries (books about beasts).²



Figure 5: Bestiary elephant, under attack by flying serpent. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 6838B, Folio 4v

Its qualities are variously ascribed as fidelity, nobility, non-promiscuity, memory. These qualities are then cross-referenced into allegory (for instance, the elephant couple equated as Adam and Eve), in which the elephant is also read as a benchmark for human behaviours.

Plus a curious and pervasive claim (found as late as Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*) that elephants have no knees and cannot bend their legs.³

This in the same way that the human body was “known” by ancient precepts, and remained unchallenged until Vessalius came along and did 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 kings and rulers.

Elephants come to be owned and curated by kings

By this time the care and cure of elephants was a known quantity – the Crusades had given the Emperor Federico II the opportunity to capture an elephant in the Holy Land, and that animal was used in the taking capture of Cremona in 1214.⁴

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 also arrived by the sea route from Calais. Kept in a 20- by 40-foot cage, the animal was portrayed in two beautiful drawings by the monk Matthew Paris, one of them featuring its named keeper Henri de Flor.⁵



Figure 6: Matthew Paris – Elephant. Corpus Christi College ms. 0161.

The dissectionist impulse

When the animal died (after only a couple of years) it was buried. However, its bones were subsequently disinterred, on the king's instructions, presumably for anatomical examination.

This was an early example of the dissectionist impulse that later attended the two elephants recorded in Florenca Pierr's paper for the late 1600s,⁶ and also the noted case of Chuny the Elephant, to whom I shall return. Shot dead in the City of London in 1811. Chuny was anatomised, and, interestingly, phrenologised (the pseudo brain science of the time). The surgeons ate steaks of its meat, and the skin was flayed and preserved.

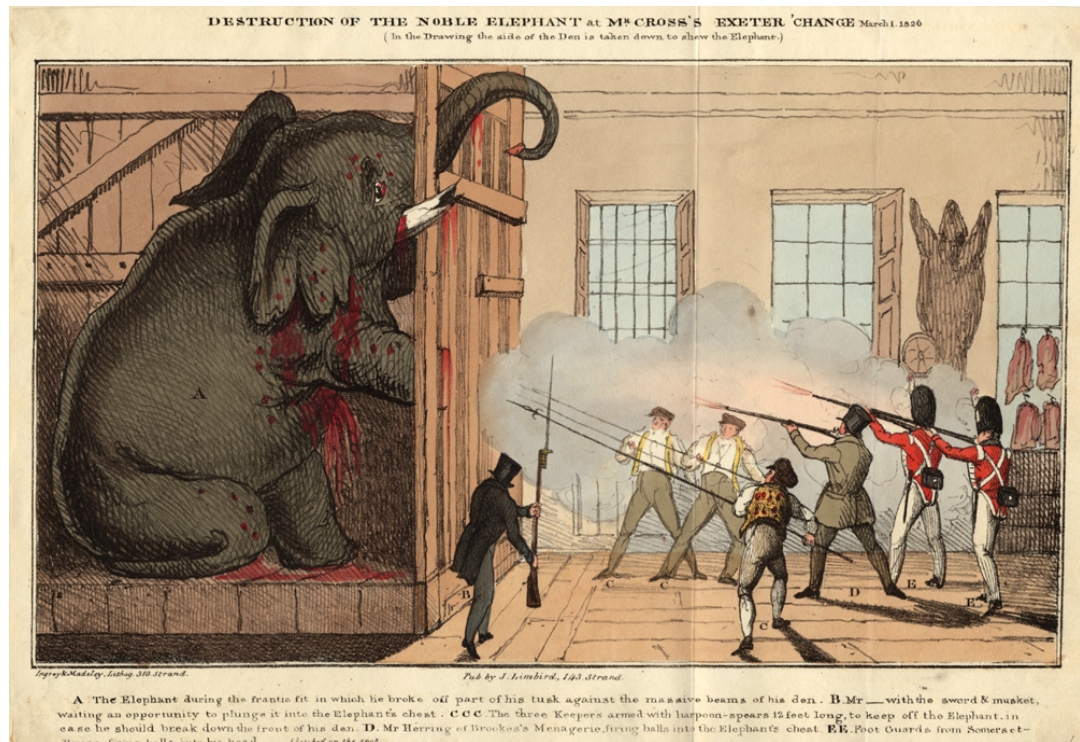


Figure 7: The killing of Chuny, Exeter Exchange, London, 1811. George Cruikshank.



CHUNEE THE SECOND;
OR, THE TAME ELEPHANT UNDER A HEAVY DISCHARGE.

Figure 8: India, portrayed as a wild elephant to be tamed. *Punch* cartoon, 1844.

Elephant-keeping continued to be a hobby of English royalty. Henry VII was given a (somewhat unruly) elephant, but it is not known by whom; Elizabeth I had one, gifted by Henry IV of France; James I had another (from the King of Spain in 1623); and Queen Charlotte kept an elephant, plus two zebras, at Buckingham Palace in 1763.



Figure 9: Queen Charlotte's elephant. *The Universal Museum or Gentleman's and Ladies Polite Magazine*, 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 (they were expensive to obtain and maintain) to becoming a means of Empire.

New elephant knowledges

Here *new* knowledges come into play. The elephant is enlisted by the British as both a means of production and a means of war. As a means of production in the colonies, where it is used for the hauling of logs and other rural work; and as a means of war – not as a front-line fighting animal, as used by the old Eastern kings, but as a pack animal for the supplying of troops.

At ground level – “in the field” – this necessitated an enlistment of *local knowledges*, which were incorporated as additional materials in the livestock handbooks published for the management of horses, pack animals etc. This is evidenced in accounts of the East India Company's operations in India.

We note that, drawing on native knowledges, in a paper produced for The Royal Society in 1799 the naturalist John Corse, who lived for 10 years in Bengal, described how he had applied scientific method in India to the breeding of an elephant in captivity, which then led to the instigation of a programme for the same (which by the way then became a tourist attraction).⁷

Curiously Karl Marx, who has a lot to say about the India Question, and a lot about the development of the means of production, to my knowledge makes no mention of elephants. A classic case of “the elephant in the room” – something that is large and obvious, but science does not see it.

Knowing

You will recall the story of the six blind men in a room with an elephant. Each tries to identify what it is. The story bears out a particular truth: “We have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.”⁸

I suggest also that the elephant is not only something that we come to “know”. Throughout the history of human-elephant relations, it is a creature that also *enables us to know ourselves*. It is in our relations with these superb creatures that we come to understand ourselves.



Figure 10: Elephants in Ringling’s Circus

In episodes such as the killing of Chuny – and Kim Stallwood's account of the electrocution of Topsy by Thomas Edison, in the present volume – we learn a lot about humans. And it has been through the slow development of movements for the international documentation of, and campaigns against, animals in circuses (arising in part from campaigns in the USA) that we now come to a new kind of knowing – assessing our own humanity and its worth relative to an animal's right to live in dignity.⁹

New views of animal human relations

As part of our pre-Conference build-up, I tried to bring an elephant to SOAS for a mini-conference, as we had done with two camels previously. I discovered that it is simply not possible. In the UK there is now (local municipal) legislation in place which bans elephants from working. The laws are supported by a central government declaration of intent (2012) – but this has not yet become law nationally, because it has been repeatedly blocked by a small group of Conservative members of Parliament.

This, incidentally, is at odds with the situation in Calais in Northern France – Calais again – where in February 2016 the Medrano Circus was advertising “Aladdin and the 1,001 Nights”, complete with performing elephants. One of those cultural isobars whereby, for example, the French eat horse meat but the English do not.

These threads have developed through into a new anglophone school amply represented here in our conference by the work of Piers Locke and his associates – in the field that they have termed “ethnoelephantology”.

The elephant's child – or how the elephant got its trunk

The elephant is also enlisted in a metaphysical sense. The problem for the elephant (unlike the earthworm and more humble creatures) is that it has always been coopted into what the French call *l'imaginaire* – not for what it is, but for what we imagine it to be. That is certainly true for the English. Most of us have at least one significant elephant moment in our lives – an elephant ride as a child, a cuddly toy, Jumbo at the circus, Dumbo at the movies, and so on.



Figure 11: Rudyard Kipling's Elephant Child

Sadly, in presenting this paper I do not have the time to tell you about Rudyard Kipling's wonderful and foundational story about how the elephant got its trunk. It is paradigmatic for the right of young women to express insatiable scientific curiosity about the world, and to free themselves from the multiple violences of patriarchy.

Thus the elephant is enlisted into the imaginings of childhood potentialities – in the same sense as Dumbo, when he declares “I can fly!”

The democratisation of the elephants

With the advent of colonialism, the ownership of elephants becomes democratised. The likes of the East India Company, founded in 1600, had as its specific brief the bringing back of “strange beasts and fowles” along with exotic fruits and spices, as part of its monopoly of trading with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and India. The strange beasts included elephants.

As I said, in 1810 the elephant Chuny arrived in the City of London, brought aboard a ship of the East India Company. As described in detail in a fine article by Sujit Sivasundaram (“The East India Company's elephants in India and Britain”, *The Historical Journal*, 2005), Chuny was sold for exhibition in a menagerie, and it is with this question of the menageries that we enter a new phase of *knowing, perception and management* of the elephant.

Caroline Grigson's recently published *Menagerie* carries an illustration of the Royal Menagerie in London, circa 1820, where the entrepreneur Edward Cross maintained a public menagerie until 1829, including an elephant, along with a lion, a tiger, apes and parrots.¹⁰



Figure 12: Royal Menagerie in London, c.1820

King William IV (1765–1837) had no interest in maintaining royal menageries. They were eventually closed down. However, 1831 saw the foundation of the Zoological Society in Regent's Park, and by 1832 this would then turn into what became known as “the zoo”, and it featured an elephant, complete with a bath of its own.

The elephant had been democratised, and became a public property. The public paid for admission (or could pay with a cat or dog to be fed to the zoo's animals). The elephant's cage barely had room for the animal to turn around, and here we have a pivotal problem. Kept in such conditions it was likely to turn violent.

Killings of elephants

The offloading of the royal animals does not, however, remove royalty from the elephant's domain. Far from it. In order for them to be known as the rulers of Empire, the duty of British kings, queens, princes and princesses was to enter a face-to-face relationship with the animals of that Empire. And to tame them and kill them. Thus, for instance, in 1875 the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII arrived in India.



Figure 13: The Prince of Wales in a shoot using elephants.

He proved himself to be a prince by performing in a particularly bloody and triumphalist elephant shoot. [This took place in Ceylon – with upwards of 1,200 beaters engaged in flushing out the prey and building a corrall, he managed to shoot one female elephant.]¹¹ Upon his return to London he was duly accorded the title of “Imperial” by Act of Parliament.

The mass killings of animals on safaris and elsewhere by Britain's royalty has continued more or less to our present day, although the younger generation of royalty has latterly been showing signs of conscience.¹²

The humanitarian impulse.

But just as the phase shift from menageries to zoological societies (with their manifestly scientific intention) signaled a changed relationship with the animals, so too today we have a further shift.

The evident problems related to the holding of elephants in zoos, and the fact of elephants being banned from circuses, has led to a re-allocation of the elephant, both in spatial terms, and in terms of public perception.

Elephant Eden

Such a centre of spatial relocation is the *Elephant Eden* enclosure at Noah's Ark Zoo located six miles out of the south-west city of Bristol, opened in December 2015, and extending across 20 acres. Here “wide open habitats” are the order of the day. The owners describe the farm as “an Elephants’ paradise, [which] has since become a wonderful new home for displaced Asian elephants”.¹³ Somewhat in line with the “salvationist” ethic of the nearby Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth, here the ethic is “Hands On”, and “Family Fun”.

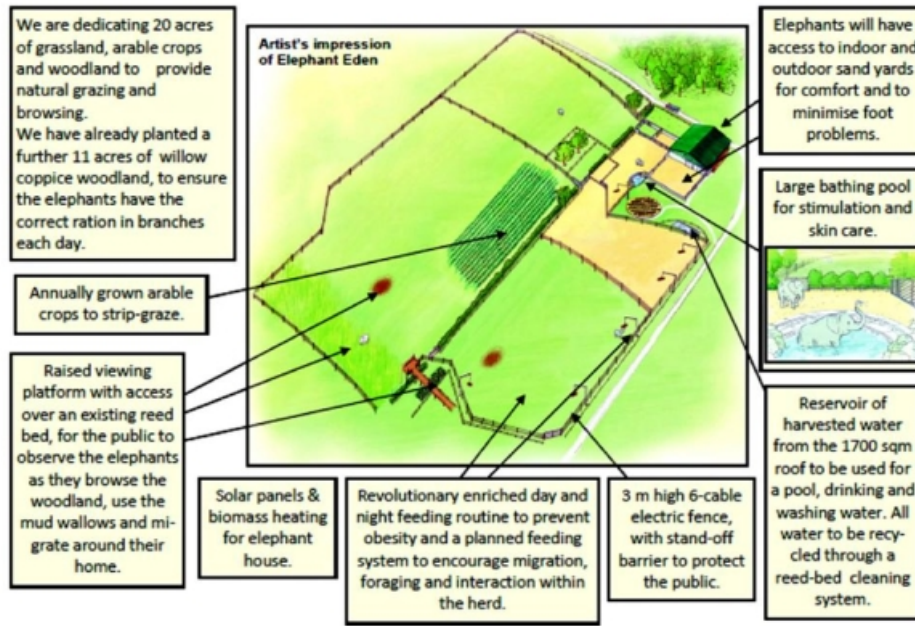


Figure 14: Elephant Eden

What about the developmental brief?

In a further extension of “knowingness” about the elephant, we have the Zoological Society of London’s initiative (formerly the London Zoo) on behalf of the endangered species of African elephant in Central Africa (threatened by ivory poaching, habitat reduction and fragmentation, etc).¹⁴



Figure 15: ZSL – Ivory marking in Cameroon

Their initiative 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.

In short, this is an operation of *outreach*, which in turn is what guarantees funding these days.

Brown and black peoples of the world

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Channel, back in Calais again, at the end of 2018 the town was absolutely full of elephants. The so-called “Elephant Parade” had come to town,

courtesy of the mayor and the municipal council. Several dozen fibreglass elephants, each painted and decorated by local artists.

The plaque declared that they were there to raise elephant awareness among the people of Northern France. There was even one elephant that bore the following citation:

“Be the Change You Want to See in the World” – signed Gandhi.



Figure 16: Gandhi elephant, Calais, 2015

But here we have an irony. This is the same Mayor, Natacha Bouchart, who has been at the forefront of a statist and racist campaign to drive out the refugees and migrants from her town – many of them from elephant territories – who have managed to penetrate the barricades of Fortress Europe. At the start of October 2016 their “Jungle” camp was razed to the ground.



Figure 17: Police eviction of migrant camp, Calais

I suppose that my point in concluding is that these *people* also must be taken into account. They are not separate from the fortunes of the animals, and the human-animal relations, that we are studying.

And incidentally, in that light, through my work as a musicologist, I suggest that there is no better way to enter into the consciousness of the elephant peoples than to research (and maybe even learn) their songs.

A little project that we have been exploring, but that will be a story for another time.

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NOTES

1. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 60.21. According to the *Stratagems* of Polyaeus (8.23.5), Julius Caesar also used a war elephant against the Britons.
2. In Book 6 of his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder reports on the presence of elephants in Roman Italy. In Book 8 he goes on to describe the qualities of the elephant.
3. “The elephant hath joints, but none for courtesy; his legs are legs for necessity, not for flexure”. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 2, Sc. iii, 98-99.
4. The Cremona elephant is depicted in the *Chronica maiora*, Part II, Parker Library, MS 16, fol. 151v
5. Account of the Matthew Paris elephant:
<https://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/05/the-elephant-at-the-tower.html>
6. Florencia Pierri, “What a spectacle: Touring elephants and scientific investigation in the early Royal Society”,
http://www.geocities.ws/soaselephantconference2016/#_What_a_spectacle
7. John Corse and Joseph Banks, “Observations on the Manners, Habits, and Natural History, of the Elephant. By John Corse, Esq. Communicated by the Right Hon. Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. KBPRS.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 1799, Vol. 89 (1799), pp. 31-55.
8. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1989.
- 9 After 35 years of public campaigning, the president of the US circus company Ringling Bros. announced the termination of elephant acts in their circus performances as of 2018.
10. Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: the history of exotic animals in England, 1100-1837*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016.
11. Prince of Wales elephant hunt: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/30600402>
12. The royal change of stance is reported at www.princeofwales.gov.uk/features/end-wildlife-crime-conference
13. Elephant Eden: <https://www.noahsarkzoofarm.co.uk/blog/elephant-eden-1-year-on>
14. Zoological Society of London involvement in elephant conservation:
<https://www.zsl.org/asian-elephant-conservation>

[Return to top](#)