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Indian Elephants are Bigger than African: an Ancient Indian Perspective

Since the publication of H. H. Scullard's The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World, his explanation of the ancient belief that the Indian elephant was larger than its African cousin, contrary to their modern counterparts, has been repeated in works within the field of classical studies (Bigwood, AJPH 114, 549; Toynbee, Animals in Roman Life and Art, 35, e.g.) and has even been adopted by a few specialists on elephants (Chadwick, The Fate of the Elephant, 32; Wylie, "Elephants as War Machines," Elephants, Shoshani ed., 147, e.g.). According to Scullard, the ancients were acquainted primarily with the smaller African sub-species, the Forest Elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*) and not the larger Bush Elephant (*Loxodonta africana africana*). This explanation, although ingenious, attempts to resolve the question solely from a Graeco-Roman perspective. The question can also be answered by using ancient Indian sources on the elephant and interpreted from the Indian perspectives which emerge from them.

As Scullard himself recognizes (237), Graeco-Roman knowledge of the elephant came originally from interaction with the civilizations of northwest India. The Mauryan kings who succeeded Alexander in controlling this area had a highly organized system for the maintenance of their herds of elephants. The Arthashastra (2.31-32), a treatise of government probably dating to the Mauryan period, reviews the responsibilities of the king's elephant keeper, under whom worked physicians, trainers, riders, foot-chainers, stall-guards, and other attendants. Reserves were maintained for the elephants, where the animals were allowed to live in a semi-feral state while guards observed their movements and kept careful records (2.2.6-11). These elephants were then captured as needed for military or other purposes. These practices are verified by references in the extant inscriptions of the Mauryan king Asvoka. (See Minor Rock Edict II, I-K and Fifth Pillar Edict, line I.)

As the first elephants to be used in the Mediterranean were obtained from India, it is predictable that Indian methods of organization would be adopted. A position of elephantarch was established by the successors of Alexander in their respective realms (Plutarch, Demetrius 25, e.g.), and the term $\text{ÆIndov}\beta$ was appropriated to refer to elephant drivers in respect to the first Indians who trained the Greek kings' elephants (Polybius 1.40.15, e.g.). The existence of elephant reserves in the African interior, corresponding to those created by the Mauryans in India, might explain the ability of the Carthaginians to assemble an elephant corps so quickly at the end of the Second Punic War (Appian, Libyca 9). Moreover, similar accounts of the capture, diseases, and habitats of elephants are found in the Arthashastra, the Maṛtanṅga-Līlā, the Aristotelian corpus, and later Graeco-Roman treatments of these topics.

With regard to size of the elephant, we would expect the Indian perspective to be influenced by the social structure of Indian society. Just as ancient Indian society was divided into four *varṇas*, or endogamous social classes, the Indian elephant was not viewed as a single generic group, but divided into four types--*bhadra*- 'state', *mandā*- 'slow', *mr̥ṣga*- 'deer', and *sam̐kīrṇa*- 'mixed' (Maṛtanṅga-Līlā 1.26-30; 6.3, 12.7).

Elephants were thought to decrease in size through the descending ranks of the hierarchy. We can assume that the African elephant, to the extent that the Indians knew of its existence, was placed in the lowest of the four classes--the non-Aryan strata. Thus, from an Indian perspective, the African elephant, as a non-native, would be expected to be smaller in size than any Indian (Aryan) elephant .