

Elephants as Enemies in Ancient Rome

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Abstract

The ancient Romans enjoyed watching spectacles in which elephants were tormented or killed because these animals had been endowed with symbolic significance. They were identified as agents both of a hostile nature which threatened human security, and of the human military opponents which had challenged the Romans in the third century BCE. The purpose of this paper is to explore the identification which the Romans made between elephants and enemies and to propose that this identification caused them to view elephants as a particularly satisfying target for abuse. I will examine how ancient writers reflected, fostered and exploited the association of elephants with adversaries, and I will discuss how the ability to dominate elephants in an arena spectacle symbolized Rome's ability to conquer, to civilize, and to bend both the natural and political worlds to its will.

Keywords

ancient Romans, elephants, animal domestication, domesticated species, animal spectacles, animal symbols, animal abuse, Hannibal, Pyrrhus, Lucretius

Introduction

Throughout our history as agriculturalists and pastoralists, humans have divided animals into two categories: domesticated species, which we have valued because their easy management and dependably docile natures have enabled us to exploit them for food, clothing, labor, and companionship; and wild species, which we have been eager to exterminate because they consumed our food supplies, threatened our lives, or occupied land that we wanted to inhabit. Designation as a domesticated species has not guaranteed humane treatment for an animal, but it has brought food, shelter, protection from predators, and encouragement to reproduce. Designation as a wild species, on the other hand, has made an animal a target for annihilation. With our anthropocentric vision, we have imagined and depicted the survival behavior of wild animals as being hostile or adversarial to us. In many cases, we have demonized wild species and portrayed them as consciously plotting our destruction, even as, ironically, we were plotting theirs. The big, bad wolf of Western folk tales, which cunningly lured children into deadly traps, was a beast created by human minds that attributed human-like malice and treachery to an animal. In turn, our construction of the wolf as evil made us even more determined to eradicate it. Wild animals have been feared and loathed because they remained beyond our control and because we could therefore not predict how they would behave. We have consequently been ruthless and relentless in our quest to destroy them. Of course, in today's highly urbanized and industrialized societies, we have now begun to view wild animals' independence from us as a positive thing. Wolves, lions, tigers, whales, eagles—these species have become, at least among urban dwellers, symbols of a natural world that is free of human contamination. And certainly it is easy to imagine and then cherish these animals as symbols of freedom because their activities no longer pose a risk to those of us who live in cities. Moreover our human activities have reduced the populations of many wild species to a number so small that we can, in fact, “manage” them. For most of our history, however, we have perceived wild animals as enemies.

The largest, and certainly one of the most potentially destructive of wild animals on land, is the elephant. Although most herds are now “managed” in parks and preserves, the elephant's categorization as a “wild” animal is confirmed by its being displayed in zoos and also in circuses, where it is made to perform, as are lions and tigers, in spectacles designed to demonstrate the superiority of humans over hostile wild beasts. However elephants have also been, and continue to be, utilized for draught labor, particularly in Southeast Asia. In this context, the

elephant is an ally, although it cannot be truly called domesticated.¹ The elephant is thus an animal whose categorization is ambiguous. It can be regarded on some occasions—when it is working for us—as a friend, on other occasions—when it threatens our crops or lives—as a foe. In the ancient world, moreover, the elephant was also utilized as a machine of war. Thus its categorization was further complicated by the fact that an army, which deployed elephants might consider them allies, while the opposing army would consider them adversaries.

The focus of this paper is on the attitudes of the ancient Romans toward elephants. Like modern circus audiences, the ancient Romans enjoyed displays of elephants, but, in their displays, the elephants were not just dominated, but tormented and killed. Their destruction had symbolic significance because they were identified by the Romans as agents both of a hostile nature, which threatened human security, and of the human military opponents, which had challenged the Romans in the third century BCE. My purpose is to explore the identification, which the Romans made between elephants and enemies, to propose that this identification caused them to view elephants as a particularly satisfying target for abuse, and to examine how ancient writers reflected, fostered and exploited the association of elephants with adversaries.

The Display of Elephants in Roman Arenas

Elephants occupied a distinctive position among the species exploited by the Romans for entertainment.² Like other wild species, such as lions and bears, elephants were placed in arenas and killed in spectacles which demonstrated the Romans' ability to dominate nature. In these situations, the animals were looked upon as representatives of a natural world which was wild, alien and hostile to human endeavors, and which therefore deserved to be destroyed. The elephant, as the largest land animal, and the lion, as the fiercest, were popular victims of these deadly displays. Unlike lions, however, elephants had the distinction of being

¹ Elephants are not considered domesticated animals because they do not breed in captivity. Their inability to reproduce when confined by humans has meant that humans have not been able to manipulate their breeding and select genetic traits favorable to human needs. It is, moreover, difficult for humans to maintain elephants in captivity because of both the quantity and the type of food they require. In order to be tamed, elephants must be wild-caught and removed from their kin group and society. They resist restraint and are therefore subjected to harsh methods of training. Adult males usually revert back to wild behavior; that is, they become unmanageable and unsuitable for human use.

² The Romans were acquainted with two species of elephants, *Elephas maximus* (Asian) and *Loxodonta africana* (African).

trainable. And, unlike bears, which could be trained, but only to perform tricks, elephants could be trained to do work which assisted human efforts to gain security and prosperity. Though never domesticated, elephants could be tamed and might even form close bonds with their human handlers. In India and Africa, where elephants were indigenous and where herds of them roamed in wilderness areas, while at the same time, individual tamed elephants were used as draught animals, these beasts could be constructed both as foes and as friends. In fact, where tamed elephants worked alongside humans and made human life easier, they could be perceived as allies in the struggle against the natural world. The people of Italy, however, had first encountered elephants only when these animals were used against them as war machines by their enemies. Thus, even after they had conclusively defeated these military opponents, the image of the tamed elephant as a representative of hostile humans remained firmly fixed in the Roman consciousness.

The fact that elephants could be trained to work with humans meant, in the Roman world, not that they were treated more humanely than other wild species, but that they were used in a wider variety of spectacles than other species. Elephants appeared in mock battles which recreated for Roman audiences the harrowing situations encountered by Roman soldiers as they successfully extended and protected the boundaries of the empire. Elephants were also exhibited in other types of spectacles. In some they were made to perform stunts, such as dancing; in others, they were tormented, mutilated and killed.³ To modern sensibilities, the two displays—one lethal and the other non-lethal—seem quite different, the former demonstrating an elephant's talents and its willingness to co-operate with humans, and the latter producing only a show of its suffering and death. Roman audiences, however, did not make the same distinction. For them, the function of the spectacles was to amaze and to amuse, and ultimately to provide reassurance that the Romans were in control of their environment. Spectators were equally entertained by the "tricks" of a trained performer and the "tricks" which an injured elephant might employ to escape its tormentors. The pain and death of the tormented animals provided pleasure for audiences that were accustomed to think of elephants as adversaries. Even in non-lethal displays, spectators found enjoyment in displays that ridiculed and humiliated the enormous beasts which had posed a threat to their society.

³ For an account of the different types of elephant shows, see Shelton, "Dancing and Dying."

Elephants as Ancient War Machines

The Romans first encountered elephants in Italy in the third century BCE. At that time, elephants were native to India and Africa, including those areas of north Africa now known as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. They were used as war machines by armies in those regions, much as modern armies use tanks. Howard Hayes Scullard's book, *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*, is an indispensable study of how elephants were utilized by armies in the Mediterranean area and Asia Minor from the time of Alexander the Great to late Roman antiquity. Scullard provides exhaustive examinations of how elephants were deployed in specific battles such as those at Hydaspes (Alexander vs. Porus), Paraetacene (Antigonos vs. Eumenes) and Raphia (Ptolemy IV vs. Antiochus III). Of particular importance to this paper are Scullard's evaluations of the role that elephants played in battles between the Romans and the Carthaginians. Although the number of elephants, as a percentage of the total resources deployed in ancient battles, was quite small, their contributions to the success of a military campaign could be immense.⁴ A line of these huge, trumpeting beasts in the front row of a battle was an intimidating sight and sound, particularly for men and cavalry horses new to the experience. Soldiers riding in "towers" (boxes) on the elephants' backs could launch arrows or javelins down on the enemy troops. And when the elephants charged, they crushed beneath their feet the opposing soldiers. Even late in the history of Rome, elephants continued to inspire terror. Ambrose, writing in the fourth century CE, described the effect, which war elephants had on their opponents:

Who would dare to approach them, since he is easily wounded by weapons from above or trampled below by their onrush? Elephants advance against their opponents with a force that is irresistible. They cannot be withstood by any line of soldiers with their shields arrayed. They have the appearance of mountains moving in the battle field. Emitting a loud trumpeting sound, they cause fear in everyone. What good are swift feet or strong muscles or quick hands to those who must face a moving tower holding armed men? How useful is his horse to a cavalryman? Frightened by the enormity of this beast, the horse flees in terror. (*Hexameron* 6.5.33)

⁴ Scullard also collects some of the information about the natural history of the elephant that is presented by ancient authors, such as Aristotle, Pliny, and Aelian. Also invaluable to the study of elephants in the ancient world is Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee's *Animals in Roman Life and Art*.

Ammianus Marcellinus, who, like Ambrose, wrote in the fourth century CE about military conflicts between Rome and Persia, provides this account:

The lines of elephants marched slowly, creating terror with their wrinkled bodies, loaded with armed men, and causing fear beyond every atrocity of hideous spectacle. . . . Human minds perceive nothing more horrifying than the roar and the monstrous size of the elephants' bodies. . . . Fearful minds could scarcely endure the frightening sight and savage jaws of the glistening elephants. The horses were even more terrified by their roar and smell and unusual appearance. (19.2.3 and 7.6)

Elephants had served as war machines long before the Romans first met them. When Alexander the Great, in the fourth century BCE, had marched his army eastward to northern India, he was opposed by military forces that employed units of elephants. As he defeated these armies, he took possession of their elephants and commemorated his victories by issuing coins which depict him astride a horse, thrusting a lance at his opponent, who is riding an enormous elephant.⁵ After Alexander's death at Babylon in 323 BCE, coins issued in Egypt show, in one example, Alexander wearing an elephant-scalp head-dress,⁶ and, in another example, Alexander driving a chariot pulled by four elephants.⁷ The message on the coins is clear. The elephant was so closely identified with the military might of Alexander's opponents that his defeat of them could be symbolically represented by portraying him cloaked in the hide of a dead elephant. Depictions of Alexander in an elephant-drawn chariot allude to his triumphant return from India. Although Alexander did not actually make the westward journey in such a vehicle, the depiction symbolized the magnitude of his achievements in several ways. It signified that he had crushed the eastern armies and gained possession of their most formidable war machines, that he had acquired the power, rank, and territory of those eastern sovereigns who rode in elephant chariots, and that the people of the east, like their elephants, had been forced to submit to the "harness" of Alexander's rule.⁸

⁵ Scullard, Plate XIII: a and b, provides photos of coins of this type which are located in the British Museum; for discussion of the coins, see Scullard 75.

⁶ Scullard, Plate XIII: c; for discussion see Scullard 76, 81.

⁷ Scullard, Plate XV: c; for discussion see Scullard 254.

⁸ This portrayal of Alexander returning as a victor may also have been designed to suggest an association of the military genius with the god Dionysus, who is similarly depicted as making a

The First Elephants in Italy

After Alexander's death, one minor contender for the role of his heir was Pyrrhus, King of Epirus in western Greece. In 280 BCE, he sailed from Greece and invaded southern Italy with a military force that included 20 elephants which were probably derived from Alexander's herd (Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 15). When Roman soldiers were faced, for the first time, with these strange-looking, -sounding, and -smelling animals, whose charge one historian compared to an earthquake, the cavalrymen were unable to control their terrified horses, and the infantrymen were forced to retreat or be trampled.⁹ The memory of this rout—and of the hideous animals that had facilitated it—endured for a long time in Rome. Pyrrhus was finally defeated in 275 BCE when the Romans managed to turn the elephants back against his troops.¹⁰ The commander of the Roman forces, Manius Curius Dentatus, captured some (perhaps four) of the elephants and later exhibited them at Rome in the triumphal parade which celebrated his victory.¹¹ The display gave residents of Rome the pleasure not only of viewing exotic and astonishingly large animals, but also of being reminded that their army had prevailed over these dreadful beasts and thus saved Italy from subjugation by a foreign ruler. And it undoubtedly won popular favor for Curius Dentatus, who had not only led the troops to victory, but also arranged to bring the elephants to Rome so that people there could share in the triumph over the enemy.

In 264 BCE, the Romans became embroiled in a war with another foreign army, that of the north African city of Carthage, whose military force included units of elephants. In 251 BCE, Roman troops in Sicily, under the command of Lucius Caecilius Metellus, won a victory over the Carthaginians, captured some of their elephants, and shipped about 140 of them to Rome.¹² There are two different accounts of the elephants' fate.¹³ One source recorded that they were forced to

triumphant return journey from India in an elephant-drawn chariot. See Toynbee 39, 44, and 49. The association would invite viewers to regard Alexander as a divine-like figure. See also Rice 83-86.

⁹ Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 17; Zonaras 8.3; Pliny, *NH* 8.6 [16]. (All references to Pliny are to Pliny the Elder.) Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 21.7, reports that, in a battle in the following year, the Roman soldiers thought that facing the elephants was like facing an enormous destructive wave or earthquake.

¹⁰ During this battle, a young elephant, which was injured by Roman soldiers, cried out in pain. When its mother rushed to protect it, she created confusion among the other elephants in Pyrrhus' battle line; see Florus 1.13.12; Zonaras 8.6.

¹¹ Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae* 13.3; Eutropius 2.14.

¹² Polybius 1. 40.15; Pliny *NH* 8.6 [16]; Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae* 13.8; Diodorus Siculus 23.21. The elephants were ferried on rafts from Sicily to mainland Italy.

¹³ Pliny *NH* 8.6 [17] preserves both accounts.

parade around the Circus while being prodded with blunted spears “in order to increase contempt for them.”¹⁴ Another source recorded that they were killed in the Circus with javelins. The common thread in the two variants is that the elephants were presented to the city crowd not simply as curiosities. In either scenario, they were brought to the Circus as exhibits of the equipment used by the hated Carthaginian military, and they were therefore treated abusively, being either tormented with blunted weapons or killed with sharp ones. The abuse of the elephants was a method of recreating the defeat and humiliation of the Carthaginian state, and of providing spectators with the pleasure of feeling that they, too, were participants in the process of conquest and debasement.

Although Pliny maintains that, if the elephants were prodded, but not killed in the arena, their ultimate fate is unknown (*NH* 8.6 [17]), it is unlikely that they were kept alive. The difficulty of maintaining a large number of elephants would be an important factor in deciding their fate. In addition, killing the elephants, especially if the killing was done in the arena, would give the Roman public a spectacle of execution which mirrored the executions of some human war captives. For example, in 270 BCE, about 20 years before the display of the elephants, some captives from Campania were brought to Rome and led in a parade to the Forum, where they were first beaten and then executed. The abuse continued after their deaths; their bodies were dragged to an open space outside the Forum and left to be scavenged by birds and dogs.¹⁵ Such horrific public executions of war captives were usually reserved for enemy leaders and mutineers. For example, in 206 BCE, in the Spanish theater of the Second Punic War, the leaders of a group of mutinous soldiers were tortured, beaten and beheaded in a spectacle witnessed by all the soldiers. And the Roman general Aemilius Paulus celebrated his victory at Pydna in 168 BCE by providing Romans with a spectacle in which army deserters were trampled to death by elephants. Most war captives, however, were not killed, not because the Romans were merciful, but because the captives could be sold as slaves. The enslavement and sale of war captives was very profitable for the state, and it was therefore financially prudent to keep them alive. The Roman poet Horace articulated the traditional policy: *Vendere cum possis captivum occidere noli*, “Don’t kill a captive when you can sell him” (*Epistle* 1.16.69). However the lust of the Roman public to

¹⁴ The Romans’ eagerness to prove that the elephants were worthy of contempt can be contrasted with the Carthaginians’ concern that their enemies should remain in awe of their elephants. Pliny *NH* 8.7 [18] records that, about 40 years later, when a Roman prisoner of war killed an elephant in a Carthaginian arena event, Hannibal immediately had him murdered lest the report of his success produce contempt (Latin *contemptum*) for the huge beasts.

¹⁵ Polybius 1.7.12; D.H., *R.A.* 20.16.2.

see Carthaginians tormented and executed could be satisfied by watching the abuse and slaughter of their precious elephants.

Thus Caecilius Metellus, like Curius Dentatus before him, used the display of captured elephants to win the favor of the Roman people and increase their admiration for his achievements. And later generations of his family continued to remind the Romans of his exploits (and suggest that they, too, were worthy of honor) by placing elephants on coins which they issued.¹⁶ As with the coins of Alexander and his successors, the elephants on the coins of the *gens Caecilia* were symbols of a defeated enemy.

The War Elephants of Hannibal

In 241 BCE, the Romans finally won the First Punic War,¹⁷ but the victory did not bring a permanent end to hostility between the two nations. In the decades following that war, Carthage sought to expand its empire into Spain and accordingly sent to that region troops and elephants under the leadership of Hamilcar Barca and, later, his son Hannibal. So proud were the Barcids of their successes in bringing Spain under Carthaginian control that they issued coins bearing images of elephants. Here, of course, the elephants represented not enemies, but rather the military might and victories of the Barcid family and, by extension, of Carthage.¹⁸

In 219 BCE, the Carthaginians in Spain came into conflict with people who were allies of Rome, and Rome declared war (the Second Punic War). In 218, Hannibal, with his infantry, cavalry, and 37 elephants, made the arduous and still famous march from Spain, across the Alps, and into northern Italy, where they overwhelmed a Roman army that had been sent to intercept them. The elephants played an important role in this victory, but most perished soon afterward, either of wounds or of the cold weather. By 217 BCE, Hannibal is reported to have had only one elephant left, and to have ridden it at the head of his army as it moved southward. Whether or not the story is true, the image of the dreaded Hannibal riding an elephant was firmly impressed on Roman minds and, even centuries later, it sustained the association which the Romans made between elephants and enemies. For example, about 100 CE, the poet Juvenal, in his satire on the vanity of human ambitions, uses Hannibal as an *exemplum* of a man who tried, but failed, to capture

¹⁶ Scullard, Plate XXIV: a, b, c; for discussion see Scullard 152. See also Sydenham, Plate 27: 1051.

¹⁷ The Romans used the words *Punici* and *Poeni* to refer to the Carthaginians, whose ancestors had migrated from *Phoenicia* about 800 B.C.E.

¹⁸ Scullard, Plate XXI: a-f; for discussion see Scullard 156.

Rome. Juvenal juxtaposes Hannibal's humiliating death in exile with his moments of greatest glory: when he was carried through Italy by "a monstrous African beast" (*Gaetula belua*; 10.158). Although the satirist belittles the Carthaginian general and his aspirations, the effectiveness of the *exemplum* depends on the fact that the specter of the elephant-riding Hannibal could still, after 300 years, prompt fear and loathing among Roman readers.

In 207 BCE, Hannibal's brother, Hasdrubal, brought military reinforcements, including ten elephants, across the Alps from Spain. However in a battle in northern Italy, the Romans defeated Hasdrubal when his wounded elephants ran amok, trampled their own troops, and stampeded, "wandering like ships without a steering-oar" (Livy 27.48.11). The Carthaginians were forced to kill six of the rampaging elephants by having the riders pound a chisel between their ears and into their brains with a mallet (Polybius 11.1.12; Livy 27.49.1-3). In Spain, in 206 BCE, Roman troops under Publius Cornelius Scipio faced a Carthaginian battle line which included elephants that "from afar had the appearance of forts" (Livy 28.14.4). However, in yet another situation which demonstrated the risks of using animals as war machines, the elephants ran out of control, doing as much damage to the Carthaginians as to the Romans (Polybius 11.24.1).

In 202 BCE, the armies of Scipio and Hannibal met at Zama, in North Africa, in the final battle of the long war. Hannibal put 80 elephants in the front rank of his infantry, but they were frightened by the Roman bugles and panicked. The Carthaginians lost the possibility of a quick rout and, in the subsequent infantry battle, the Romans prevailed (Polybius 15.12; Livy 30.33). Although the unpredictable behavior of the Carthaginian elephants had, on several occasions during the Punic Wars, caused havoc to their owners and thus facilitated Roman victories, the Romans nonetheless judged these animals to be a grave threat to their security. The terms of the peace treaty stipulated that the Carthaginians surrender all their elephants and agree not to train any in the future (Polybius 15.18.4; Livy 30.37.3; Appian *Lib.* 54; Dio Cassius 17.83). To commemorate his glorious victory, Scipio was honored with the title *Africanus*, "conqueror of Africa." He took back to Rome many of the elephants seized from the Carthaginians and displayed them in his triumphal procession, where they provided visible proof of his right to boast of his conquest of Africa (Zonaras 9.14; Appian *Lib.* 66). As residents of the city gawked at the lumbering elephants, they surely rejoiced, knowing that their legions had finally crushed the Carthaginians and reduced to the status of parade exhibits the animals which had once threatened them and which had been chosen by Hannibal's family to symbolize its prowess. The memory of Hannibal and his

elephants continued, however, to haunt the Romans for many generations. Never before—and not again for many centuries—did a foreign army defeat Roman legions so many times on their own soil and exact such an enormous toll in human life and property.

The Memory of Pyrrhus and Hannibal

Long after the wars against Pyrrhus and the Carthaginians had been concluded, the Romans continued to look back at these successful battles against foreign invaders as the experiences which were preeminent in testing and defining their national character. The figures of Pyrrhus and Hannibal acquired proverbial status as Rome's most challenging opponents, and the wars against them were immortalized as having produced Rome's most desperate, but also, finally, most glorious moments. Roman writers, both of prose and of poetry, made reference to Pyrrhus and Hannibal when they wanted readers to recall situations when Rome had been close to ruin. The poet Lucan, for instance, describing the devastation of the Civil War of the first century BCE, compares the damage done in that war to the damage done by the foreign invaders, Pyrrhus and Hannibal (*De Bello Civili* 1.23-28). Writers depicted the Second Punic War in particular as one in which their state had been brought almost to the brink of annihilation and also as one whose outcome was pivotal in determining the future of the entire world. The historian Livy, for example, has a Locrian ambassador to the Roman Senate in 204 BCE say that the entire human race is in suspense about whether it will see the Romans or the Carthaginians become the rulers of the world (29.17.6).

References to the war became a rhetorical commonplace whose employment caused readers to reflect upon the traumas and triumphs of their nation's past. When, for instance, the poet-philosopher Lucretius, who wrote about 150 years after the Second Punic War, wanted to use an *exemplum* of an historical event whose impact all his readers would immediately recognize, he composed a vivid account of the Carthaginian invasion and its import. "The Carthaginians came (to Italy) from all directions to do battle. All the world was shaken by the alarming turmoil of the war, and shuddered and trembled under the high borders of heaven, and pondered this uncertainty: to the power of which of the two opponents must all people, on land and on sea, fall subject" (*De Rerum Natura* 3.833-37). In choosing this *exemplum*, Lucretius depended for its effectiveness on the fact that his readers concurred in the belief that the war against Hannibal was the most stressful event in Roman history. And when Livy declared that the war against Hannibal was "the

most memorable of all wars that have ever been waged” (21.1.1-3), he based his judgment not only on the enormous number of resources which were deployed by both sides, but also on the intense hatred which the two sides had for one another.

Constructing Elephants as Enemies

Although the Romans emerged victorious from this conflict, were then emboldened to wage war against other foreign opponents, and ultimately achieved supremacy over many nations, they never let go of their hatred for the Carthaginians. The mere mention of Carthage had the power to evoke feelings of anxiety or hostility. Nor did the Romans ever forget the role that elephants had played as instruments of the Punic military. The family of Hannibal had used elephants as symbols of its power; for the Romans, they became symbols of the hated enemy. And therefore the abuse of elephants continued to delight Roman spectators long after the victorious Caecilius Metellus had brought Carthaginian elephants to Rome in 251 BCE to be displayed and tormented in the Circus. Indeed, it was his family which was in part responsible for perpetuating the identification of elephants with military adversaries when, as noted above, his descendants used the depiction of elephants on their coins, many generations after these wars, to keep fresh the memory of victory over the Carthaginians and their terrible beasts of war.

The association of elephants with enemies became embedded in the rhetoric of the Romans. Juvenal’s image of the elephant-riding Hannibal has been discussed above. In another satire (12.102-10), in which he remarks that men would offer religious sacrifices as large as elephants if they were allowed to purchase them, Juvenal notes that, in Italy at his time, private individuals were not permitted to own elephants. Only the emperor maintained a herd, and it was, Juvenal writes, appropriate that these animals submit only to him because their ancestors were accustomed to obey Hannibal and Pyrrhus and Roman generals in war. Here Juvenal suggests that the emperor deserves this monopoly on elephant-ownership because only he is the equal or superior of the military geniuses of the past who used elephants. In order for the comparison of the emperor to Hannibal and Pyrrhus to be compelling, Juvenal calculated that his Roman readers would still recognize those two foreign commanders and their war elephants, even 300 years after their invasions of Italy, as Rome’s most formidable challenges, but challenges which the Romans had successfully overcome.

Lucretius, too, makes reference to the war elephants which aided the invasions of Hannibal and Pyrrhus. In a passage in which he expounds on the human folly of

deploying animals in war, he comments that, subsequent to the domestication of horses, “the Carthaginians taught elephants—those hideous, snake-handed creatures with towers on their bodies—to suffer the injuries of war and to throw into turmoil the great battalions of Rome” (5.1302-04).¹⁹ Elsewhere in this section of the poem, Lucretius mentions that horses had been trained to serve in battle (5. 1297-1301) and that humans had then even experimented with the use of bulls, boars and lions as weapons of destruction (5.1308-12). However he does not attempt to identify the nationalities of the people who initiated the use of horses or tried to employ the other species. It is only the elephants who are linked to a particular nation—Carthage—and described as troublesome to a particular nation—Rome. The specificity of lines 1302-04 presents a striking contrast to the generality of the rest of the section, and all the more so because the information given in 1302-04 is inaccurate. The Carthaginians were not, of course, the first or only people to utilize elephants. And Lucretius certainly knew this; elsewhere he mentions that “India is fortified by a wall of ivory from its many thousands of snake-handed elephants” (2. 537-38). Thus, when he attributes, in 5. 1302-1304, the first use of war elephants to the Carthaginians and against the Romans, his interest is not in being historically accurate, but rather in creating an image that he knew was emotionally-charged. He designed the image to invite readers to think in very specific terms about the horrors of war by envisaging the most horrific war in Roman history.

There is, moreover, in 5.1302-04, a reminder of the war with Pyrrhus. The words which Lucretius uses here to denote “elephants” is *boves lucae*. He could have used, as he did in 2.537 and 5.1228, the word *elephantii*. His choice of *boves lucae* in 5.1302, and again, in the same section, in 5.1339, is quite deliberate. It encourages the reader to recollect Rome’s other great challenge: the invasion by Pyrrhus. The phrase *bos luca* (plural: *boves lucae*) means “Lucanian ox.” Pliny the Elder, *NH* 8.6 [16], records that “Italy first saw elephants during the war with King Pyrrhus and called them *boves lucae*, ‘Lucanian oxen,’ because they had been seen in Lucania” (a region of southern Italy invaded by Pyrrhus). Varro, *DLL* 7.39-40, gives a similar account of the origin of the phrase: “When, during the war against Pyrrhus, our ancestors, who were fighting in the region of the Lucanians, first saw elephants in the enemy ranks, they called the elephant a *bos luca* because they thought that it was a Lucanian ox.” As an example of the use of the phrase *bos luca*,

¹⁹ More precisely, the passage states that the Poeni taught elephants to throw into turmoil the great battalions of Mars: *inde boves Lucas turrato corpore, tetras, anguimanus, belli docuerunt vulnera Poeni sufferre et magnas Martis turbare catervas*. On the use of Poeni as a synonym for Carthaginian, see n. 18. Mars was the Roman god of war; here his name is used to represent Rome.

Varro cites a line of poetry by Naevius, who lived in the decades immediately following the invasion by Pyrrhus. Varro himself prefers an alternate etymology, that *luca* is derived from *lux*, “light,” and denotes the gleam of the shields which adorned the towers which the elephants carried into battle. Whatever the correct etymology of the phrase may be, the comments of Varro and Pliny reveal that the phrase was still in use during their lifetimes (first centuries BCE and CE respectively) and that it was generally believed to preserve a reference to Pyrrhus’ invasion of Italy. In fact, the phrase was used at least as late as the end of the second century CE and in a context that would imply widespread familiarity with it. In a busy area of the city of Lepcis Magna, in the part of north Africa governed by the Romans, a resident set up a marble statue of an elephant and an inscription which records his dedication of “two tusks of a Lucanian ox,” *dentes duos lucae bovis*, to a patron deity.²⁰ The appearance of the phrase, first in a writer from the period shortly after the invasion of Pyrrhus, and then persisting over several centuries, suggests that Latin speakers continued to employ an image of elephants that linked these animals to the trauma of Pyrrhus’ assault on Italy. As a result, when Lucretius calls elephants *boves lucae* in 5.1303 and 1339, he induces the reader to think not just of Rome’s enmity with Carthage, but also of its struggle against Pyrrhus.

The Perfidy of Elephants

In 5. 1308-40, Lucretius describes as catastrophic the experiment of bringing animals of several species to the battlefield. In panic, the animals ignored or injured their handlers, attacked one another, and fled in many directions. To help his readers visualize the situation, Lucretius compares it to a phenomenon familiar to his readers. He writes that the animals ran about wildly “just as now elephants, badly injured by iron weapons, often run about wildly after they have done much damage to their own people” (5.1339-40). The words “now” and “often” indicate that Lucretius knew that it was not uncommon for elephants to trample the men who had brought them to the battle. During the Pyrrhic and Carthaginian Wars,

²⁰ Reynolds and Ward-Perkins, 92, # 295. See also 67, # 231, where the phrase *dentes duos Lucae bovis* appears in an inscription from the north Africa town of Oea. Both these inscriptions offer evidence of the trade in ivory. And both record gifts to Liber Pater. Liber was the Roman god of wine and was identified by the Romans with Dionysus, also a god of wine. Toynbee suggests that inscription 295 contains an allusion to Dionysus’ triumphant return from India with elephants (51). The association of Dionysus with elephants has been mentioned in n. 8. Perhaps a gift of elephant tusks was considered a particularly appropriate gift for Liber/Dionysus. (Evidence of the traffic in live elephants for arena events is suggested in 159, #603.)

there were several occasions when, as mentioned above, out-of-control elephants contributed to the defeat of the Romans' opponents. The unpredictability of the responses which elephants might make in battle earned them a reputation for being untrustworthy. Livy, recording a battle of 209 BCE, in which the Romans drove the Carthaginian elephants back against their own line, remarks of the elephants that their species is *anceps* (27.14.9). The literal meaning of *anceps* is "two-headed," "facing in two directions." When describing a blade, it means "double-edged," and thus capable of causing damage with either edge. Scullard interprets Livy's designation of elephants as *anceps* as meaning "a two-edged weapon" (249). This interpretation encourages the reader to see a war elephant (or perhaps a line of them) as resembling a blade which has the capability of injuring both parties in the conflict, that is, the soldiers ranged on one side of it and the soldiers ranged on the other. The problem with this interpretation is that it ignores the fact that the elephants were not an independent, third unit; they belonged to one of the parties. In contrast, then, to a double-edged blade, which can be wielded by one person, to his advantage, against opponents attacking from two sides, elephants entered the battle as the weapons wielded by one of the two parties, but might turn back against that party, obviously to its disadvantage. Thus, the use of *anceps* to describe the behavior of elephants means something more than "two-edged" or "double-edged."

Elsewhere in Latin, the figurative use of *anceps* conveys an image of wavering between two allegiances, and therefore of being dangerous because of being unwilling to make a commitment to one side or the other. For example, in another section of his account of the Second Punic War (24.45.2), Livy uses the word *anceps* to mean "untrustworthy"; a man who offered to betray his own townspeople is described as a "common enemy with an untrustworthy character," *ancipitis animi communis hostis*. Thus Livy's employment of the adjective *anceps* in 27.14.9 probably reflects the Romans' observation that elephants could not be trusted to remain loyal to their owners, and it is best translated as "unreliable" or "untrustworthy."

The use of the word *anceps* may, however, inform us about more than just Livy's recognition that it was impossible to predict how elephants would behave in the heat of battle. Livy uses *anceps* in the phrase *ut est genus anceps*, which means "so untrustworthy is the species." The phrase implies that it is the nature of elephants—an innate component of their behavior—to be faithless, and it suggests that the Romans attributed to elephants the same characteristic that they attributed to the Carthaginian people: the characteristic of being perfidious. *Punica fides*, "Punic trustworthiness," was a proverbial expression. Sallust uses the phrase to describe the treachery of the Moorish warlord, Bocchus, who was willing to

befriend or betray either side in a conflict (*Jugurthine War* 108.3). And Livy, when cataloguing the enormous vices of Hannibal's character, comments that he possessed a perfidy that was "even greater than Punic," *perfidia plus quam Punica*. (21.4). Similarly, Horace describes Hannibal as *perfidus* (*Odes* 4.4.49). Thus, when Livy reports that elephants had been turned in battle by the Romans and had trampled the Carthaginian troops (27.14), he perhaps chose the phrase *ut est genus anceps* because there existed a belief that the unreliability of elephants was yet another manifestation of the treacherous nature of all things Punic.

There is an irony, of course, in the notion of the untrustworthy Carthaginians being trampled by their own untrustworthy animals. However Livy's statement about the customary unreliability of elephants, written more than 150 years after the Second Punic War, was also influenced by experiences which the Romans had had when they tried to utilize these animals. Although they had fought against elephant units for about 80 years, the Romans did not use them in their own campaigns until after the war against Hannibal. Then, in 199 BCE, elephants surrendered by the Carthaginians were included among the equipment of a Roman military expedition sent to Greece. In 153 BCE, when the Romans deployed elephants during a war against the Celtiberians in Spain, they suffered a fate all too familiar to the Carthaginians. Appian reports that the Celtiberians, like the Romans who first faced Pyrrhus' army in 280 BCE, had never encountered elephants in battle, and both they and their horses were terrified (*Hisp.* 46). However, when one injured elephant caused the others to run out of control, the Celtiberians were able to rout the Roman attackers. Appian notes that some people called elephants "the common enemy on account of their faithlessness [*apistia*]."

Appian's comment seems to reflect, as does Livy's, a widespread belief that elephants were perfidious in character. Although their response to injury and terror—panic, flight, stampede—is no different from that of other herd animals, it is elephants, but not cavalry horses, that receive the designation of being "untrustworthy." Certainly a frightened horse is easier to control than a much larger elephant, and stampeding elephants, because of their size, do much more damage than stampeding horses. The Romans were therefore justified in being apprehensive about the risks of using elephants. However modern ethologists would contend that neither elephants nor horses retreat from battle in a conscious act of betrayal. It is therefore significant that ancient writers attributed to the African beasts the same characteristic of faithlessness that they attributed to the humans who lived in North Africa. The attribution suggests that the animosity that the Romans maintained for the Carthaginians influenced their perception of elephants.

Human Culture and Elephant Nature

There may also be other implications in the designation of elephants as untrustworthy, implications regarding the elephant's ambiguous status as both a wild and a tamed animal. The Romans knew that elephants were wild animals and, like lions and bears, dwelled in regions not inhabited by humans. Wild animals were representatives of a hostile and chaotic nature that impeded human efforts to create a world that was predictable and secure for human life. This wild nature was antithetical to human culture and it nourished animals that threatened this culture. And yet the Romans also knew that captured elephants could be trained to cooperate with humans and to perform tasks by which humans profited. Elephants were therefore different from lions, which remained savage and intractable even when captured, and from bears, which could be trained, but only to do tricks. Unlike other elements of the wild and hostile natural world, elephants could be harnessed to serve human culture. And yet, elephants were also different from those species that had been integrated into human culture, such as oxen, horses and donkeys, because elephants could not be truly domesticated through breeding in captivity. They were wild-caught and, although tamed, retained a tendency to resist human mastery and to fall back on wild instincts in stressful situations. Trained elephants were liminal creatures in the sense that they lived in the human world, but easily reverted back to the natural world. Their reputation for unpredictability arose in part from the fact that they could not be counted on to be either always savage, like lions, or always docile, like donkeys.

Elephants must have been frustrating animals to deal with because they could be an enormous asset to an army if they submitted to human control, but a devastating liability if they acted on their own impulses. In the passage from Appian cited above, the historian describes a situation in which war elephants suddenly moved from being an asset to a liability (*Hisp.* 46). He reports that, during the assault on the Celtiberian town, one elephant was hit on the head by a large stone. His behavior then became wild. He bellowed loudly, turned upon his friends, and destroyed everything in his path, no longer making a distinction between friend and foe. And all the other elephants, thrown into confusion by his bellowing, acted in a similar manner, trampling on the Roman soldiers, lacerating them, and flinging them aside. Appian then adds that, when they are excited, elephants are always accustomed to react in this way and to consider everyone an enemy. Finally he states, as quoted above, that some people call elephants the common enemy on

account of their faithlessness. Thrown into turmoil by their elephants' rampage, the Roman soldiers fled, but were pursued by the Celtiberians; many were killed.

The significance of attributing to elephants the same characteristic—faithlessness—which was attributed to the people of Africa has been discussed above. Equally significant are Appian's observations that, in the stress of battle, elephants are accustomed to revert to wild behavior, by which he means behavior outside the control of humans, and that, when they are behaving wildly, they are accustomed to consider all people their enemies. The notion that elephants are "a common enemy" appears also in the *Belli Africani* 27. The author of this work notes that it is a difficult and slow process to train elephants for use in battle. Moreover, they remain scarcely trained, even after many years of discipline and prolonged practice. When they are led into battle, the author comments, they are a common danger, that is, a danger to both sides.

Appian and the *Belli Africani* author make similar comments about what they believe is the nature of elephants. From their accounts, we are informed that the nature of elephants is such that they abruptly regress to wild behavior even after a long and careful process of training which is intended to make them allies of men. The evidence of the elephants' wildness is not the fact that they do damage—they have, after all, been brought to the battle to do damage—but the fact that they do damage to their friends and refuse to recognize any humans as allies.

In an alliance between human parties, each party agrees that it "owes justice" to the other, that is, it undertakes an obligation not to harm the other. Ancient philosophers denied that humans could owe justice to animals or could form alliances with them. They based their denial on their belief that animals are irrational and thus incapable of forming contracts and understanding that contracts require reciprocity.²¹ Outside of the philosophical schools, however, in everyday life, people *did* speak about domesticated animals as their "allies." (The Latin word for "ally" is *socius*, from which we obtain the English words "society" and "social.") Pliny the Elder, for example, declared that humans have, in the ox, an ally, *socius*, in our agriculture.²² Ovid stated that he is an ungrateful man who is able to slaughter the ox that has just pulled the plough in his field (*Metamorphoses* 15.122-

²¹ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Sorabji, 7-28, 107-69.

²² Pliny, *NH* 8.70 [180]. Similar comments about oxen being the allies of humans are made by Varro, *DRR* 2.5.3; Columella, *DRR* 6; Praef, 7; and Aelian, *VH* 5.14. Both Pliny *NH* 8.1 [3] and Dio Cassius 39-38 record a belief that African elephants refused to board ships unless their handlers swore oaths that they (the elephants) would suffer no harm and would return safely to Africa. The elephants mentioned in the Dio Cassius passage were, however, taken to Rome and slaughtered in a spectacle in the Circus.

26). Thus Appian and the *Belli Africani* author reflect a popular belief about the ability of humans and animals to form alliances when they depict the elephants' failure to obey in battle as if it were unwillingness on their part to abide by a social contract which obligated them to assist the men who trained and brought them to battle. Modern readers may contend that, from the elephants' point of view, there was no advantage to their being on a battlefield (in contrast to an alliance where an ox receives food and protection from predators in return for its agricultural labor). Even if the elephants could comprehend the concept of a contract, they would have no reason to agree to terms which obligated them to risk life and limb in an activity undertaken for the benefit only of humans. Nevertheless ancient authors portray the elephants' behavior in battle not just as a "fright and flight" response, but as a rejection of human conventions of alliance and, correspondingly, as a preference for the chaos that exists in the natural world. Elephants that trampled their own men were, in effect, refusing to remain in the role that humans had assigned to them. On those occasions when they harmed their friends and became wild, they threw into confusion the boundaries which humans had constructed to differentiate between friend and foe and between culture and nature. Human culture had flourished because humans had been able to discriminate the potentially helpful from the potentially harmful and then to cultivate alliances with the helpful and to destroy or ward off the harmful. The damage which stampeding elephants did was, of course, immediate and material, but it could also be perceived as an undermining of the stability of boundary construction.

Elephants shared with horses the distinction of being used in battle. And horses, like elephants, were known to panic in the turmoil of war. Indeed, as noted above, horses that had not previously seen elephants were likely to be overcome with an impulse to turn and flee. Thus both species could not always be counted on to conform to human expectations and fulfill the tasks for which they had been trained. Nonetheless, horses are not characterized by Roman authors as being untrustworthy creatures. The difference in the authors' attitudes toward horses and elephants may be attributed in part, as argued above, to the fact that horses did less damage if they panicked in battle. There are, however, other reasons why elephants, but not horses, were considered untrustworthy by nature. The Romans had a long history of successful partnership with horses. The utility of horses, moreover, did not depend solely on their performance in battle; they served a variety of purposes, and their domestication offered humans many advantages that were not obliterated by an occasional panic in battle. Elephants, on the other hand, had first been seen by the Romans as the war machines of invaders, and, even when adopted for

exploitation by the Romans, their primary practical function remained as military instruments. When they failed to perform this function, they seemed not just to be useless, in the sense that wild animals like lions or bears are useless to humans, but to have betrayed the humans who offered them an alliance.

The Demarcation of Animals as Friends or Foes

I have been suggesting that the Romans perceived elephants as preferring the chaos of nature to the order of human culture and therefore as deserving the designation of enemy rather than ally. There is, of course, an irony inherent in the Romans' grievance that elephants refused to be regulated when they were exposed to that most disorderly and destructive activity of human culture: war. Lucretius exploits this irony in a section of his poem to which reference has already been made above (5.1297-1340). A main theme of his poem, *De Rerum Natura*, is that humans cause themselves misery because they are ignorant of the true sources of pleasure. In several passages, he contends that humans engage in war because they mistakenly believe that the acquisition of power and wealth will bring them security. For Lucretius, however, security and the pleasure it fosters are located in the agricultural community where humans have learned both to domesticate some plants and animals, thus producing a reliable source of food, and also to protect themselves and their food supplies from wild animals.²³ He develops an argument that the progress of humankind from primitive, wretched savagery to civilization was facilitated, in part, by maintaining a clear line of demarcation between domesticated animals (our allies) and wild animals (our foes).

In 5.1283 ff., in a passage designed to illustrate that humans will go to any extreme in their pursuit of military advantage, Lucretius describes the early escalation in the development of weapons of destruction, and notes that humans began to utilize animals in order to increase their military capability. The first species they used were domesticated horses. Then, according to Lucretius, the Carthaginians initiated the training of elephants for war, and some people even tried to turn bulls, boars and lions into weapons. Finally, to startle his readers into a realization of how insane the arms race could be, Lucretius depicts a scene where humans have introduced these several species to the battlefield all at the same time. There is no historical record of such an experiment having taken place, but in his creation of this scene, Lucretius has conjectured the disastrous consequences of the

²³ On Lucretius' development of the theme that peace of mind is achieved, in part, by co-operation with some species and separation from others, see Shelton, "Lucretius" 48-64.

arms race. The frenzied lions, bulls, and boars injured their handlers and attacked the horses. In turn, the horses, in their desperate attempts to escape the assaults, ignored their riders. The humans had, Lucretius notes, greatly misjudged their ability to make these animals obey their commands.

In this passage, Lucretius presents his readers with a horrific picture of chaos, but it is a chaos arising not from nature, but from human activity. Humans who were intent on achieving military superiority in order to make themselves safer ultimately returned themselves to the unpredictability and vulnerability of the primitive existence of their ancestors who had lived in fear of attacks by wild animals. In an effort to enhance their military capabilities, these humans were willing to experiment with unnatural alliances and to try to train wild beasts to be savage on command. In doing so, they thus blurred the distinctions between enemies and allies and between nature and culture which had permitted the development of a secure society.

Lucretius' description of the extreme consequences of pursuing military success may be speculative, but it prompts readers to reflect upon our relationships with other species. He places elephants in the middle of his catalogue of species exploited as war machines. They serve as a transition between two conceptual opposites, the domesticated horses (unmistakably friends) and the wild boars and lions (unmistakably foes). The elephants' middle position in the passage reflects their ambiguous status as tamed wild animals (ones which we might mistake as friends) and reinforces Lucretius' point that the regression of human military experiments from the rational to the irrational is exemplified by the attempted utilization of species that ranged from, first, the co-operative, and then to the occasionally and unreliably controllable, to, finally, the wild.

The elephants are not mentioned in the description of the catastrophic melee; Lucretius focuses on the reactions of the other species and the damage done to the horses, our true allies. However he concludes this scene by comparing the chaos of all the animals running about wildly to the behavior of elephants that, in his own time, "badly injured by iron weapons, often run about wildly after they have done much damage to their own soldiers" (5.1339-40). The sudden introduction of a scene from his own time, into the conclusion of a passage which could be dismissed as an implausible fantasy, jars readers into reflecting not simply that elephants are unpredictable, but, much more importantly, that they, the readers and their contemporaries, know that elephants are unpredictable, and yet are still willing to take the risks of using them. In doing so, they engineer their own misfortune. Lucretius' contemporaries might not admit the relevance to their own lives of a

conjectured experiment with lions, but, with his reference to the elephants, he forces them to realize that they, too, endorse the folly of using species which cannot be regarded as suitable for alliance.

In 5.1341-49, Lucretius anticipates criticism that the experiment with several species in battle is a fantasy and comments that, if the experiment did occur, it must have been undertaken by desperate people, intent on damaging their opponents at any cost to themselves. It is significant that Lucretius does not interpret the animals' reversion to natural instinct and refusal to obey their handlers' commands as a demonstration of untrustworthiness. In contrast to Livy and Appian, who, as noted above, imply that elephants that trampled their handlers were unfaithful, Lucretius clearly places the responsibility for the chaos on the humans who ignored the distinctions between helpful and harmful animals because they were intent on military superiority. Nonetheless the effectiveness of this passage in stimulating readers to think about war as a repudiation of culture depends on their holding a belief that elephants are unreliable allies. Moreover, Lucretius' reminder of the hazards of putting elephants into battle, and his final comment that only desperate people would do such a thing, forces us to reconsider his earlier statement that the Carthaginians initiated the training of elephants for war. When we first read this statement, we are led by the specific reference to the Punic Wars to think about the terrible devastation which war brings. At the end of the passage, we are encouraged to think that, of all nations' intent on military success, the Carthaginians must have been the most foolish and most desperate because they tried to exploit elephants. Their lack of good judgment and therefore their ineligibility to rule the world was proved by the defeat of them and their elephants at the hands of the Romans. Lucretius' passage thus includes an admonition to the Romans not to repeat the mistakes of their most hated opponents.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that when the Romans saw or thought of elephants, their response was negative. First, they perceived elephants as elements of the wild nature which threatened human security. Second, they believed that elephants trained for war could never be trusted not to revert to wild behavior, that they were resistant to attempts to give them a role in human culture, and thus that they betrayed their handlers. Third, the Romans associated elephants with their most memorable military challengers, Pyrrhus and the Carthaginians. Spectacles in which elephants were tormented and killed were popular with Roman crowds

because these animals had been endowed with symbolic significance and identified as agents both of a hostile nature and of human military opponents.

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