THE RELEVANCE OF THE ELEPHANT

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Abstract: The etymology of the term by which the Latins named the elephant is not spectacular: the connection with the Greek ἐλέφας is both obvious and unsurprising. However, it is worth researching the variants of the term (*elephantus, elephas, elephans*), the autochthonous periphrasis *Luca bos*, as well as the phonetics of some Romance forms (*e.g. olifant*). Beyond the etymology, the place assigned to the elephants in *Naturalis historia*, 8.1–11, has its own relevance.

Keywords: elephant, *elephas, ἐλέφας*, etymology, Plinius Maior.

The Latin name of the elephant is multifarious, displaying morpho-phonetic variants; the list is augmented by a phrase with a well-known historical origin, *Luca bos*, coined during the wars with Pyrrhus, who, in 280 BC, had brought to Italy an army enriched with twenty elephants, borrowed from Ptolemy II Philadelphus. *Luca bos* was the name spontaneously given by the Romans to this magnificent (and terrifying) animal, first seen in Lucania. The phrase is also to be considered from the perspective of a relative chronology, as *ebur*, "ivory", is a term that precedes the real encounter with the elephant. *Ebur*, on the other hand, has an etymology that is partially transparent, with a first element of obscure origin (*uide* Ernout-Meillet, *s.u.*).

Elephas slipped into a double meaning, "elephant" and "ivory", just like the Greek term it replaced (both formally and semantically), *ἐλέφᾱς*, in which we find the same uncertainty of identifying the initial element as in *ebur*: it would not be entirely unfounded to presume the Arabic article *al-*. In fact, *alfil* (where is to be recognized the *fil* of the Old Romanian texts and, particularly, of the works written by the turkophone Dimitrie Cantemir) is the name of a chess piece that has the appearance of a proboscidian (*uide* the chess piece called in Sanskrit *gāja*, "elephant", or *hastīn*, with the same meaning), whose game behaviour is somewhat similar to the "bishop", but more limited, in the sense of a diagonal movement on only two squares, just as the old equivalent of "queen" displays diagonal movements of only one square (hence the assumption that their evolvement in the Renaissance chess was generated by a re-evaluation of these weak pieces that eventually became the "bishop" and the "queen" as we know them now).

Returning to the etymology of the Greek *ἐλέφᾱς* (*uide* Chantraine, *s.u.*), is to be said that we are dealing with a loan, being comparable (and usually compared) to the Egyptian *āb, ābu*, the Coptic *εβου, εβυ* – closer, perhaps, to the Latin *ebur*. However, the origin remains uncertain, likely being in the second millennium BC, probably in Asia Minor, an important region for everything related to ivory. On the other hand, the terms that designate the elephant in Latin (except for the phrase *Luca bos*) have an obvious pathway, since they explicitly replicate the Greek *ἐλέφᾱς*. From this

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perspective, solely their formal diversification can be of interest. *Elephantus* has the oldest attestations (Plautus, Ennius) and seems to have appeared following a popular interpretation, which recreated a nominative form starting from the genitive *ἐλέφαντος*; what distinguishes it in the popular vocabulary is the erudite notation of the aspirate, unnatural at the level of the Latin phonetic inventory. The restoration of the direct (and morphologically correct) relationship with ἐλέφᾱς led to the emergence of its Latin pendant, *elephās* and, additionally, *elephans*, with a nasalization that is both related to an alignment to terms with a similar paradigm and to the frequent overlap of a long vowel with a nasalized vowel.

The phonetics of the Romance descendants (which belong rather to the cult level of the language) diversifies the timbre of the initial vocal element (*uide* Meyer-Lübke, *apud* Ernout-Meillet, *s.u.*): O.Fr. *olifant*, Prov. *olifan*, *aurif(l)an*, Cat. *olifant*, Port. *olifante*, O.It. (and Triestine) *lio(n)fante* (a popular etymology – similar to the reinterpretation of *lunicorno*, XIIIth c., composed by *lo+unicorno* – that creates a relationship with *leone*). The Germanic loan word underwent a change of meaning, coming to designate the camel (*e.g.* M.Eng. *olfend / olfent*, Got. *ulbandus*, from PGer. **ulbanduz*, from Lat. *elephantus*, which also generated the PWGer. **elpandu*, "elephant; camel"): it reminds us, once again, the rule of caution in interpreting linguistic paleontological data (including here the famous argument of "beech" and "salmon", exploited for a time by Indo-Europeanists).

Even though it was not part of the fauna familiar to the Romans, the elephant appears with a surprisingly high frequency in works of a different status (*uide* the Stoic philosopher Seneca, for example). In order to remain within a predictable paradigm, we will register here the occurrences of the term in the Plinian encyclopaedia.

There is a sporadic reference in the "Dedication to Titus Flavius Vespasianus", which opens *Naturalis historia*: in par. 28[1], the example of the elephant is used as a counterweight to the works – unfinished for more than ten years – of those who criticize him, "while[2] even elephants have a shorter gestation period".

The section devoted exclusively to the elephant occupies no less than 34 paragraphs (*uide Summarium* for *Liber* 8: par. 1–11). In addition to the impressive extent, seems to be significant its specific place, in the succession of chapters: after the five books of cosmology and geography (*Libri* 2–6), Pliny presents the anthropology and zoology; the seventh book, dedicated to man, is followed by the description of the animals, and the first of them is precisely the elephant. We find the explanation, in an implicit formulation, in 8.1: among the terrestrial animals (with which it seems natural to Pliny to start the zoology section), the elephant is the largest; at the same time, it is

> the closest to human sensibility, due to the fact that these animals understand the language of their native place and listen to commands, remember the movements they have learned, know the pleasure of love and glory; moreover, they possess some qualities rare even among people, such as honour, prudence, the spirit of justice, even the worshiping of the stars and the veneration of the Sun and the Moon.

The *Summarium* (*liber* 1) registers the content of these 11+1 paragraphs (*uide supra* note 1), whose titles do not appear in the actual corpus of the encyclopaedia:

[1] References are made (except for c. 1, *Summarium*) to short paragraphs: these actually double the numbering of long paragraphs.

[2] The English translation is *ad hoc*, in order to emphasize the research of this paper.

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> (8.1) Elephants, their sense; (8.2) when first harnessed; (8.3) their docility; (8.4) remarkable achievements; (8.5) instinctive sense of dangers in wild animals; (8.6) elephants, when first seen in Italy; (8.7) fights between elephants; (8.8) modes of capture; (8.9) modes of domestication; (8.10) their propagation, and general physiology; (8.11) native habitat; hostility between elephants and great snakes; (8.12) intelligence of animals. (Loeb edition, 1938; translators: D.E. Eichholz, W.H.S. Jones, H. Rackham).

In the rest of the encyclopaedia, the elephant is mentioned in fourteen books (6, 7, 9–12, 18, 28, 32–37). Many of the occurrences are related to the presence of this pachyderm in the army, and Pliny frequently records their number that mirrors the military force of the various Asian or African kings. The king of the Calingans has 700 elephants (6.66), of the Taluts, 4000 (6.67), of the Andars, 1000 (*ibidem*), of the Prases (the strongest tribe in India), 9000 (6.68), of the Megals, 500 (6.73), of the Asmags, 300 (*ibidem*), of the Oratis, only 10 (6.75); the Suaratarats do not have in the army not even one elephant (*ibidem*); the king of the Sarsabas has 1600 (*ibidem*), of the Carms, only 600 (*ibidem*), the queen of the Panzes, 500 elephants (6.76). From the same perspective, we find out that in Taprobane "elephants are larger and more warlike than in India", as indicated by the source used by Pliny, namely Onesicritus, "commander of Alexander's fleet" (6.81).

They are also used in transportation: 6.66, 34.19 (with reference to the artistic representations of some chariots drawn by elephants) and are useful in field work, for ploughing (6.66). Their extraordinary strength enables them to carry "towers" on top of them (11.4).

Elephant hunting is practiced in order to capture them for taming (6.66), but also as food: nomads, among the megabars (also called adiabars), "feed on elephant meat" (6.189). The inhabitants of Tabrobane Island enjoyed hunting them, *gratissimam eam tigribus elephantisque constare* (6.91); the numerous African tribes of the Asahs live on elephant hunting (1.191), and the city of Ptolemais was founded precisely for this purpose (6.220).

Ivory, the major incentive for elephant hunting, is mentioned in *Naturalis historia* either generally (with a moralizing intent), as in 12.5 ("the statues of the gods used to be made of wood when the bodies of elephants had not yet been highly priced"), or as an example of great value, in the conclusion of the encyclopaedia (37.204): among the precious things taken from terrestrial animals, the elephants' fangs have the greatest value. In the same artistic dimension, several works are mentioned, including four wonderful elephants of obsianus (a glass named after the "resemblance to the stone found in Ethiopia by Obsius"), dedicated by Augustus, in the temple of Concord (36.196).

People have found some benefit in processing elephant skins for shields, "that cannot be pierced" (11.227). The Indians used to wear as pendants their long beryls, highly esteemed (37.78), hung by some threads taken from elephants.

Not only is their long gestation taken as a reference (*uide supra*, "Dedication"), but also their impressive dimensions (9.10):

> "The skeleton of the monster to whom is said Andromeda had been offered, brought – among other wonders, by Marcus Scaurus – to Rome from the city of Ioppe in Judea: […] the ribs were taller than Indian elephants."

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The medicines and remedies attained from these animals are not infrequently mentioned:

> "The blood of an elephant, especially that of a male, stops all the flows called 'rheumatism'" (28.87); "With the help of ivory pieces mixed with Attic honey, the stains on the face (*nubeculae*) are said to be removed, and with the help of ivory filings – the *paronychia*. Touching the trunk calms the headache, especially if the elephant sneezes. The right side of the trunk, attached to the neck together with red Lemnos clay, stimulates sexual appetite. Their blood is good for a weakened body, and the liver, for epileptics." (28.88)

A generic remark (from the series of moralizing comments) appears in 35.50: "Now that the purple has moved on the walls and India sends us the mud of its rivers, the sanies of its elephants and snakes – now there is no famous painting". This *draconum elephantorumque sanies* (whose Indian name overlapped the minium, *cinnabaris*, generating confusion) is obtained in most unusual conditions: "the viscous runoff coming out of a snake crushed by the weight of the elephants collapsing to death, and the blood of the two animals mixes […]; there is no other colour that better reproduces the blood in the painting" (33.116).

Various observations are scattered all over the encyclopaedia, sometimes repeating some of the data accumulated in the section dedicated exclusively to elephants (*liber* 8): they are able to be educated (10.128), give birth to a single calf (10.175), whose size is comparable with a three-month-old cow (10.179); some information about mating (10.173), their tusks (11.160) and the teeth used for mastication (11.165), their tongue, which is hidden (11.173), their four stomachs (*sic*), their digestive tract (similar to that of a pig) and lungs, approximative four times the size of the ox lungs (11.203), the two mammary glands and where they are placed (11.233), about the "fingers", the paws, the testicles and about how they bend their knees (11.248), the sounds they make ("Apart from the sound coming from the nostrils, the elephant makes a sneezing noise. The sound of the nostrils is hoarse", evoking a trumpet, 11.269), the effects of their breathing (which "takes the snakes out of the burrows", 11.279), the way they sharpen the tusks by rubbing them against a tree (18.2), about their size (32.144) and other animals that share their name, by homonymy ("a species of black lobster with four forked legs", 32.148).

The fabulous remarks – not at all rare in Pliny's encyclopaedia – regarding this magnificent animal could not be absent: in the land of the Sesambres, "all four-legged animals, including elephants, are without ears", *quadrupedes omnes sine auribus*, (6.192); Alcippe "gave birth to an elephant" and this was a bad omen (7.34); during the reign of Tiberius, a miraculous event took place: the low tide left on the shore "more than three hundred monsters, of an extraordinary diversity and size, […] among other, elephants and […] many nereids" (9.10).

Coming back to the chapter exclusively assigned to the elephants, it is to be noticed that the description is far from being monotonous, as the encyclopaedist chooses fascinating information, choice that has a negative effect on a more scientific approach. The "cult of the stars", mentioned in the opening paragraph of the eighth book, is supported by a bibliographical reference not infrequently found in *Naturalis historia* and which can be understood only by resorting to the two paragraphs that conclude each chapter of the *Summarium*, *id est* a double list of authors (and works),

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Romans and foreigners[3]: "some authors report that..." (8.2). The introductory text can be seen as placing the elephants on a level that might be compared to that of the humans, or is even higher, as sometimes they seem to surpass them, manifesting qualities that are "rare among humans" (8.1).

The ability of the elephants to recognize divine supremacy is the peak of their astonishing behaviour, and the image outlined by Pliny (extracted, as he points out, from descriptions known to his contemporaries) is plausible, beyond the embellished interpretation (8.2):

> In the woody mountains of Mauretania, when the new moon begins to shine, herds of elephants descend on the bank of a river called Amilo and sprinkle themselves with water, in a solemn ritual of purification; after greeting the moon this way, they return to the woods.

At a slightly different level, still retaining the religious perspective, Pliny reveals that the elephants understand the essence of an oath: "when they are about to cross the seas, they go into the ship only after their leader has given them, by oath, assurances of return" (8.3). When dying, they seem to bring offerings: "they were seen throwing, overturned on their backs, grass into the sky, as if they had taken the earth as witness of their prayers" (*ibidem*). Transferring the religious acts to the field of human relations, Pliny notes that the elephants kneel before the king, to whom they "offer crowns of plants" (*ibidem*).

The "elephant" section of the eighth book advances from one passage to another by terms or images that trigger another observation or even an entire line of development. From the tired little elephants gently pushed by the adults of the herd and from the obedience to the king, he turns to the small elephants (called "bastards") used by the Indians to ploughing and, from this point to the historical moment when the Romans saw for the first time elephants that were pulling a chariot, in Pompey's triumphal procession (8.4). The historical moment of the real encounter with the elephants is recorded by Pliny in 8.16, with precise information and data:

> Italy saw elephants for the first time during the war with King Pyrrhus; they were called Lucanian oxen, because they were first seen in Lucania, in the year 472 *ab Vrbe condita*. But, seven years later, Rome also met them, during a triumph, and saw even more, captured in Sicily from the Carthaginians, in 502 [*a.V.c.*], after the

[3] The eighth book, which sums up "787 data, notes and observations", has the following Plinian bibliographic description:

> "Roman authors: Mucianus. Procilius. Verrius Flaccus. Lucius Piso. Cornelius Valerianus. Cato Censorius. Fenestella. Trogus. *Acts*. Columella. Virgil. Varro. Lucilius. Metellus. Scipio. Cornelius Celsus. Nigidius. Trebius Niger. Pomponius Mela. Mamilius Sura.
> Foreign authors: Iuba the King. Polybius. Herodotus. Antipater. Aristotle. Demetrius the Naturalist. Democritus. Theophrastus. Euanthes. Scopas, who wrote Ὀλυμπιονίκες. Hieron the King. Attalus the King. Philometor the King. Ctesias. Duris. Philistos. Archytas. Phylarchus. Amphilochos of Athens. Anaxipolis of Tasos. Apollodorus of Lemnos. Aristophanes of Miletus. Antigonus of Cumae. Agathocles of Chios. Apollonius of Pergamum. Aristandrus of Athens. Bacchius of Miletus. Bion from Soli. Chaereas of Athens. Diodorus of Priene. Dion of Colophon. Epigenes of Rhodes. Euagon from Tasos. Euphronius of Athens. Hegesias of Maronea. The two Menander, from Priene and Heracleea. Menecrates the Poet. Androtion, who wrote about agriculture. Aeschrion, similarly. Lysimachos, similarly. Dionysios, who translated Mago. Diophanes, who summarized Dionysius. Archelaos the King. Nicander."

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> victory of Pontifex Lucius Metellus. There were one hundred and forty-two or, according to other writers, one hundred and forty, transported on rafts that Metellus had ordered to be made using slats of barrels tied together.

Because the Romans did not know how to use them, other than in the circus (as "it was neither convenient to feed them nor to give them as gifts to kings", 8.17), it seems that they were killed with spears.

The abilities of these pachyderms are evident in public performances: fights in the arena (8.18, 8.20, 8.22), recorded for the first time (8.19) when Marcus Antonius and Aulus Postumius were consuls, a wonderful behaviour ("when they lost hope to survive, began to implore, with indescribable gestures, the mercy of the public, and mourned themselves in a kind of wailing", 8.21), sketching of some dance steps (8.4), accurately throwing weapons in the air, mimicking gladiatorial fights, frolicking a pyrrhic rhythm, walking on a rope, four elephants carrying a fifth elephant, elephants walking among participants in symposia without touching the people (8.5).

From this point to the praise of their memory is only more steps, but the series is surprisingly opened by the story of an elephant less gifted from this point of view, who – in order to escape the punishments that were often applied to him – used to train himself at night (8.6). Due to their memory, they manifest a rare ability to learn, illustrated by a phantasmagoric example (even if Pliny elevates his bibliographic source on a pedestal of authority): "Mucianus, who was three times consul, argues that one of them learned to draw the Greek characters, and that he usually wrote in this language, without abbreviations, the words 'I myself have written these things, and have worshiped the gods of the Celtic wars'" (*ibidem*). All the same, their docility depends on the easiness with which they (even the violent ones) are able to learn; the usual method of teaching them is "by starvation and beating" (8.27): "if trained, the elephants participate in military campaigns, where they carry some towers; in most of the Orient, they decide the fate of wars: they disrupt the battle lines, they crush the soldiers" (*ibidem*). The affection to humans can experience unexpected, sometimes touching developments (8.13–14):

> It is said that an elephant once fell in love with a florist in Egypt; do not think that he chose her at random: she was the lover of Aristophanes, the illustrious grammarian. Another elephant fell in love with Menander of Syracuse, a young man in Ptolemy's army; when not seeing him, he refused to eat, confessing this way his longing. Iuba reports that a perfume saleswoman was once loved by an elephant. There were plenty of evidences: joy at the sight of the loved one, clumsy caresses, coins received from the world, well kept and abundantly poured into the bosom of the loved one.

The signs of love are explicitly linked to their well-known memory: "Iuba writes that an elephant recognized in his old age, after many years, a man who had been his master while still very young" (8.15). A certain resemblance to humans is even better valued by what Pliny calls "the inclination to justice": "King Bocchus, who, after enchaining to pillars thirty elephants, which he had decided to torment, and after placing other thirty elephants in front of them […], failed to determine them to enrol in the service of cruelty" (*ibidem*). Dignity (as an intense perception of shame and dishonour) is the term that seems to epitomize the behaviour of these pachyderms, as outlined in another historical episode, which contains precise data, including names (8.12):

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> Once, when King Antioch was probing the depth of a river, the elephant Aiax, who was always at the head of the column, refused to advance. […] Patroclus [*id est*, the other elephant] had the courage to do that and received for his deed some silver *phalerae* (which elephants like very much) and all the other insignia of pre-eminence. […] Aiax preferred the death by starvation to this dishonour.

The way these animals are organized as a group is equally astonishing (8.11): "Elephants always walk in herds. The eldest one leads and the elephant closest to him in age is the last one. When they are about to cross a stream, the little ones are sent in front of them, lest the level of the river gets higher once the larger ones enter the stream". The ultimate praise comes with a bibliographical reference: "Cato – although he deleted the name of commanders from his *Annales* – wrote that the elephant who fought hardest in the Carthaginian ranks was called Surus, because he lacked one of his fangs[4]" (*ibidem*).

Data on anatomy and physiology are grouped in the specific section of *liber* 8, paragraphs 28–31: gestation, maturation (by the age of sixty), mouth, trunk, skin (including the peculiarity that it defends them against flies, by a contraction that catch the annoying insects); some notes about mating, but also about fidelity, are included in 8.13; about the difference between fangs (valued as ivory) and the rest of the bones, including the relationship between young age and teeth whiteness, in 8.7. Elephants seem to understand that their vulnerability to the people who hunt them stems precisely from the quest for their main weapon of defence. If they lose their fangs, by chance or in old age, they bury them (*ibidem*); otherwise, they take great care of these weapons that nature endowed them with (8.8). "When surrounded by hunters, at first they fight, but then, exhausted, break their fangs […] and leave them behind" (*ibidem*).

Elephants' fears sometimes seem strange (beyond the general observation that females are "much more fearful", 8.27): a pig squeal can make them turn against their own army. It is not difficult to understand that "African elephants[5] are afraid of the Indian elephants and do not even dare to look at them; they are, indeed, much greater" (*ibidem*). Absolutely spectacular is the description (from various perspectives, in several passages of the encyclopaedia) of the confrontation with snakes (*e.g.* 8.33). The elephant section of *liber* 8 actually concludes with a depiction of this lifelong war (offering, all the same, a transition to the next section, dedicated to the ophidians), seen as a show offered by nature ("What other cause would have had such a great conflict if not the desire of nature to create, for her pleasure, a show with two suitable opponents?" 8.34), but also with an insertion of gloomy humour (*ibidem*):

> Elephants are said to have very cold blood; therefore, snakes attack them especially in hot days. To do this, they dive into the rivers and set a trap for the elephants when they come to drink water: twisting around their trunk, they immobilize it and stick their teeth in the elephants' ears, because it seems that this is the only place that cannot be defended by the trunk. The serpents are so large that they absorb all their blood; thus, the elephants that come to drink end up being drunk themselves and collapse, dried up, and the satiated snakes are crushed and die in their turn.

[4] *Surus*, in Latin, means "stake".

[5] Pliny probably refers to the African forest elephants, as the African bush elephants are larger than the Indian ones.

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This ludicrous image of a magnificent animal, whose nobility makes him equal to the humans (or superior to the humans), is astonishing, mostly in a concluding paragraph. We can only assume that Pliny, once more, praises the omnipotent nature that doesn't absolve any of its creatures.

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