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War Elephants of the Indian and the African Origin in the Classical Literature

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Abstract: In the Antiquity many authors were sure that the African elephant yeilded to the Indian elephant because the last one was much bigger than the first one. This topos has not real foundations. The centuries-old Indian training traditions have the importance but not the size. The African elephant was smaller than the Asiatic one but it was defined only by the age. The examples of the modern time prove that the African elephant could be tamed only in youth, while the Indian elephant could be tamed in the any age. Trying to tame the African elephants the Ptolemies and the Carthaginians must have the same problems that the Belgians had in Congo in the beginning of the XX century.

Key words: War elephants · The Indian elephant · The African elephant · The elephant's domestication · The Antiquity · The Hellenistic period · The Ancient Rome · The Classical literature

INTRODUCTION

The Greeks and the Romans were absolutely sure, that the African elephants yeilded to the Indian ones by their natural qualities. The classical authors explained it that the Indian elephant was much bigger than the African elephant [1-6]. However, to the beginning of the XX century, it was determined, that the size correlation between two elephants species in the modern times and in the Antiquity are right the opposite. This contradiction between the ancient authors' dates and our modern knowledge about the elephant species' differences could be explained the next way:

The Indian elephants were bigger-it was strongly implanted mistake in the Antiquity, it was the topos, (common place) that had not any real foundations.

The best training of the Indian elephants, which was achieved thanks for the conservation of the centuries-old training traditions had the importance, but not the size.

In the Antiquity in the military aims was used only the African elephant's subspecies, which was really smaller than the Indian one.

The African war elephant was smaller than the Asiatic one, but it was defined only by the age but not the belonging to particular subspecies.

There is the great likelihood that the idea of the superiority of the Indian elephants over the African ones belonged to Aristotle [9]. He could have such a belief under the widespread influence of the fact, that everything from India, but not from the other countries, must be bigger and better [10].

Perhaps the incorrect conception about the animals' size became consolidated because of the unique surviving description of the duel between the Indian and the African elephants in the Battle of Raphia (217 BC) by Polybius. But Polybius himself was not the eye-witness of this historical event and he could only hear about it from the participants at best [11]. However alive and vivid picture, depicted him, let us to suppose that he could see the elephant battles on the circus ring in Rome, as after the Battle of Pydna the Romans had both the Asiatic and the African elephants as well [12]. But the result of the animal battle was not the important for the historian, who knew how the Battle of Raphia was ended. To see how the elephants fight with each other that was the main aim for him, to include this episode in his "History". As regards the elephant battle's result near Raphia there were not any questions: the Egyptian elephants were defeated, they either perished on the battlefield, or were

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captured by the enemies [2]. The conclusion was-the Indian elephants were the bigger and the stronger than the Africans ones.

This Polybius' description could exert the strongest impression on the following ancient authors and definitely influenced on the modern researchers. The first was not in any doubt about the superiority of the Asiatic species over the African, the second needed to find acceptable explanation of the difference between the ancient authors' materials and the science' dates of the Modern period. At the same time the unsuccessful actions of the Egyptian elephants against the Syrian ones were not only because of the physical differences. Saying about the Battle of Raphia we have to think about the numerical superiority: Antiochus III had half as much again elephants than the enemy (60 against 40). We may suppose that the physical animal skills from the both sides were quite the same and the Egyptian cornacs' skills were also equal. Anyway the Syrians had more chances to win the battle. They could oppose to every Egyptian elephants' pair their three ones. While the two elephants fought against each other, the one Egyptian elephant had to stand against two Syrian elephants. The same we can say about the correlation of the warriors in the towers on the animal backs. Having the numerical superiority, the Syrians were able not only successfully to annihilate the enemy, but to gash their elephants.

Polybius contradicted his own assertion about the innate fear, which the African elephants felt at the sight of the Indian ones, when he told that exactly the Ptolemy's elephants dashed to the enemy the first. On the opposite flank of the both armies, where the numerical elephants superiority was not so great (42 against 33), probably, the Antiochus 's army could not achieve a fast success. Echecrates, who was the commander of the Egyptians on the right flank, according to Polybius, watched for the elephant battle, which took place on the left wing of the Egyptian army. Only then, when he realized that the Egyptian elephants run from the enemy, he made up his mind not to wait for the battle's end on his flank and started the fight. It lets suppose that the elephants on the Egyptian right flank still were fighting, when the Echecrates made his forethought manoeuvre.

There is the interesting opinion of H. Delbrück about the Polybius' dates, that the African elephants run away at the sight of the Indian ones. The cornacs in the Seleucid armies, as at the Diadochi's times, were the Indians, while the Ptolemies had to use the Egyptians and the Greeks, who were less empirical in the elephant training and driving [13].

Undoubtedly, that the Syrian kings got the elephants from India with the cornacs, as exactly the cornacs taught and trained the elephants. Every animal obeyed the exactly man. It is not inconceivable, that even under Seleucus I a lot of cornacs were the Syrians.

As for the Egyptian cornacs we can hardly accuse them of the unskillful elephant driving. The art of the war elephant training they adopted, most likely, directly from the Indians (when Ptolemy I Soter had the elephants and the cornacs following the victory over the Demetrius' army in the Battle of Gaza (312 BC)) [14]. During hundred years of the existence of the Ptolemaic elephanteria they fully had to learn this art.

The more widespread and accepted by almost all researchers of this problem became the hypothesis by W. Gowers [15]. According to it the Ptolemies, the Carthaginians and the Numidians used in the war aims the particular elephant subspecies, which differed with his small size and allegedly could be easy to tame [11, 15-18]. The majority of the specialists consider that such subspecies was Loxodonta africana cyclotis (it is a forest elephant). In the Antiquity it lived in all area between Magrib and the Nile mouth. Some people consider that the matter can concern extinct Loxodonta pharaonensis. These animals abounded at the contiguous area with Egypt as early as the beginning of the XX century. The last group, which was found, consisted from one old female, two young males and two old males. The female height in the withers was 7 feet 8 inches (223,52 cm) and the biggest male was 7 feet 4 inches (223,52 cm) [20]. W. Gowers accepted these sizes as the basic for this subspecies [11]. On basis of the image on the Barcid coin from Spain W. Gowers drown a conclusion, that the elephants, using by the Carthaginians, run up to 8 feet 6 inches (259,08 cm) [16].

In our opinion there are three counter-evidences to the W. Gowers' theory about the particular African elephant subspecies, using in the Antiquity.

In the first place, the size of the Loxodonta africana cyclotis is not so small and the big male of this subspecies can be like the Indian elephant of the medium height. Moreover, there are grounds to believe that under some conditions the African forest elephant could be bigger then the Asiatic one. The fact is, that the Asiatic females could be twice smaller then the adult males. The African elephants have not such difference in the size between the sexes [19]. It is well known, that in the war aims the ancients used both males and females. Therefore, even according to the forest elephant theory, we could only affirm that on the battlefields several of the

Syrian elephants could be bigger than the Egyptian ones. As to the tusk size of the African elephants there are contrary evidences of that, what W. Gowers based on. Cosmas Indicopleustes, in particular, affirms that the Ethiopian elephants had so large tusks, that they[tusks] were removed from the country to sale in India, Persia and the Roman Empire [20].

In the second place, we have not any grounds to consider that the ancients could not know about the big Savannah elephants. The ancient authors said that the African elephants, which the ancients had seen, were two different subspecies. Herodotus affirmed that the country, where the elephants had lived, was "very mountainous and wooded" [21]. Thus both Forest and Savannah elephants could live there. According to Plinius, the province Tingitana, mountainous on the east "gives birth to the elephants even on the mountain Abila and on the mountains of the Seven brothers" [1]. He described the African elephants as the animals, which were able to undergo the thirst and the sunny heat in the Libyan deserts, where the Garamantes hunted them. The huge animals were caught by the horsemen on the special trained horses [1]. These dates of the Roman naturalist are proved that in such case the matter concern the Loxodonta africana africana or the Savannah elephant.

In the third place it is well known that the Asiatic elephants were trained very well. In the XIX century hunters preferred to catch the elephants at the age between 15 and 18 years, when the animals young enough to become used to man and they already strong enough to do the necessary works right after the training [22]. It is typical that Kautilya in the "Arthashastra" advised to catch elephants beginning with the 20 years old age, but the best age is 40 years old, when they become the greatest and they are in the prime of life. "The best elephant species, - Kautilya wrote, - is following: 7 cubits height, 9 cubits long and 10 cubits volume. These characteristics must have the 40-years old elephant. The average elephant is 30 years old, the worst elephant is 25 years old" [23].

Unlike the other mammals, the elephants continue to grow during all their life. At that, the elephant's age does not prevent to train it. The another situation with the African elephants. Right up to the end of the XIX century it was considered, that they could not be trained and as against the Asiatic ones could not be tamed [24]. However, at the beginning of the XX century, the theory about the untamed African elephants was totally dispelled. The Belgian king Leopold II was the initiator of the African elephant's domestication. In 1899 Leopold, inspired the examples of the several missionaries, who could tame the African elephants, organized the expedition to the Northern Zaire under J. Laplume. Only in 1901 J. Laplume could at last catch the young males, their growth was no less than 1 m, they became the first domestication African elephants by the Belgians. In 1904 in Ape was founded the first Elephant training center. In 1913 there were 36 animals, whose growth was varied between 1,4 and 2 m.

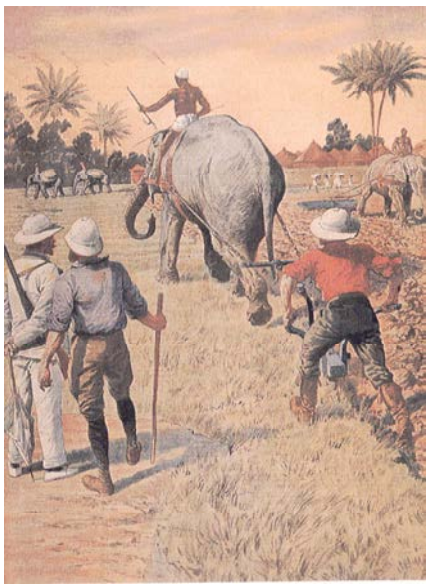

Fig 1: The ground ploughing on the elephants. The post-stamp from Belgian Congo (1911) [25]

In 1930s men usually hunted the elephants, whose height in the withers was between 1,5 and 1,8 m and whose age was between 12 and 18 years. At that time it was difficult to keep the younger elephants in good health, it was necessary to wait while they become enough strong to use them at works. The elder animals were not trained.

Fig 2: The ground ploughing on the elephants. The photo from Belgian Congo (the end of the 1940s). These animals' height in the withers no more than 2 m [25].

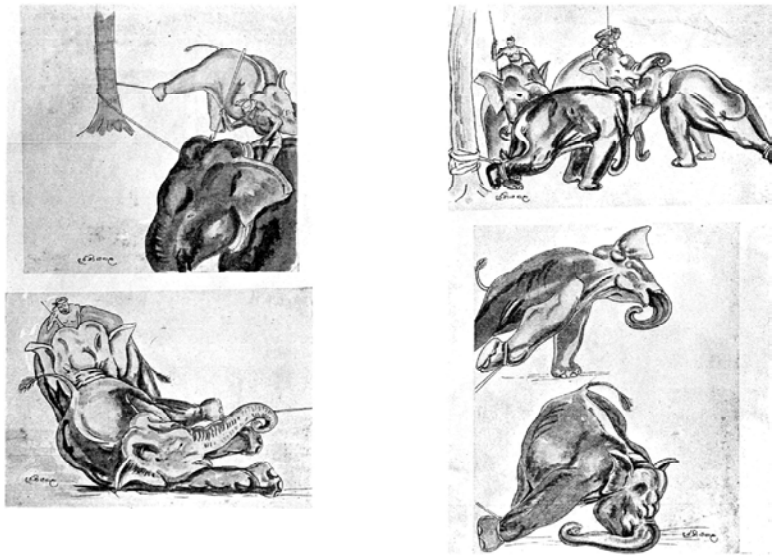

Fig 3: The pictures, depicted the way of the elephant catching on Ceylon (the XIX century) [27].

In the modern situation, mainly the elephant calves become the aim of the hunting. It is explained the fact that with the tractor appearance the necessity of the huge four-footed using fell off. It is easier to catch and to train the elephant calf than the elder one. We must draw particular attention on the important difference in the criteria of the hunting the African and the Indian elephants. Kautilya, as pointed before, demanded to catch only 20 years old elephants. "Elephant calf, uncultivated, the elephant without tusks, ill, the pregnant female and the nursing female could not be the objects for the hunting". The elephant calf could be caught, according to Kautilya, only "for fun" [23]. These demands are very well explained: the Indian elephants were tamed very quickly in any age, therefore people caught only those animals, that could be used for works at once.

The Belgian experience showed visually that to tame the African elephant it needs to catch it in the very early age. There are not any reason to think that in the Antiquity it was easier to tame the African elephant than in the XX century. Cosmas Indicopleustes, for example, marked that the Ethiopians for the domestication caught only young animals [20]. Besides, the African elephants are taught much slower than the Asiatic ones and their training is very long and heavy. It is most likely that this is the result of the best evolution of the cerebral motive coordination by the Asiatic species than by the African one [26].

It would be very bravely to affirm that in the Antiquity lived the African subspecies that so much differ from another representatives of this species, that it could be domesticate. Therefore it is logically to suppose that, trying to tame the African elephants (it is not important what species is), the Ptolemies and the Carthaginians must have the same problems that the Belgians had in Congo in the beginning of the XX century. It proves, that they could catch exceptionally the young animals, whose size was much less than 2 m. It explains why the Ptolemaic elephants on the battlefields greatly yielded to the Seleucid elephants in size and easy yielded to the fear. It is also necessary to mark, that the training difficulty of the African elephants demanded too much time. Just so we have to understand "African War" author's words as used here:

"…Rudes enim elephanti multorum annorum doctrina usuque vetusto vix edocti tamen communi periculo in aciem producuntur" (Stupid elephants are tamed very hard even for many years during the permanent training and when they appeared on the battlefield they are equally dangerous to both sides) [28].

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