

Reviews of Books

Elephants & Kings: An Environmental History. By THOMAS R. TRAUTMANN. Chicago: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2015. Pp. xvi + 372, illus. \$30, £21 (paper).

This wide-ranging book covers a temporal span from pre-prehistory to the present day and an area encompassing a large part of three continents: Asia, from the northeastern reaches of China to the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Mediterranean edges of Europe—though it concentrates on greater India during the historical period, from the Mauryan empire through the Mughal period. It also draws on material from very different fields: archaeozoology, archaeology, art history, ecology, (wild) animal husbandry, but again concentrates on textual evidence (philology broadly conceived). Despite the aggregation of data and analysis from such a disparate variety of fields, it reads like a novel (I mean this as a high compliment)—*and* it has a tight focus and a solidly argued thesis towards which all the materials mentioned above are directed.

The thesis is a paradoxical one: that elephants and their habitats remained viable in India through most of the historical period because of the singular value attached by kings to war elephants, to elephants as a major component of a properly constituted and successful army—a concept developed in India but exported both to the West (remember Hannibal) and to Southeast Asia, though not to China. Despite the great numbers of elephants that had to be taken from the wild (breeding war elephants not being economical or practical) to support the war-elephant habit across this vast terrain, the need for more and more elephants resulted in land-management practices that facilitated the survival of the elephant forests and thus of the elephants themselves. As Trautmann repeatedly emphasizes, he is not claiming that the kings in question were consciously “green” and ecofriendly, rather that the survival of substantial populations of elephants into modern times resulted from an almost accidental conjunction of royal ideology and a favorable natural environment. This contrasts strongly with the situation in China, where the sad and dramatic shrinkage of elephant ranges from 5000 B.C.E. to 1830 C.E. is graphically portrayed in the second map of the book (fig. 1.2, p. 7) and where one of the factors contributing to the retreat of elephants was, in the author’s view, the fact that the war elephant never made inroads in Chinese military organization.

The book has had, like an elephant, a long gestation—over thirty years—during which the author both collected materials and cogitated on the issues (see pp. xiii–xv), and this shows in the depth of the analysis and the range of materials considered. The book consists of two major sections, preceded by a prologue and followed by an epilogue (though not so titled). The prologue (“The Retreat and Persistence of Elephants”) gives an overview of the history of the elephant into deep prehistory and its distribution across the globe over this same period, with more detail devoted to the distribution in the Indian subcontinent from the Arthaśāstra till modern times, and describes the physical characteristics and behavior of the elephant that determine its environmental needs.

The two main sections consist of three chapters each. The first section, “Elephants and Indian Kingship,” concentrates on India proper and is the real heart of the book. The first chapter of this section, “War Elephants,” begins with quotations from the epics and other literature, both technical and not, on the characteristics of the ideal war elephant, then takes a detour through evidence for elephants in the ancient civilizations of the Near East and of China—returning to the Indus Valley and then to the Vedic period. He concludes, I think correctly, that the war elephant postdates most of the Vedic period, and suggests that its invention came somewhere between 1000 B.C.E. and 500 B.C.E. and probably originated in eastern India. The next chapter, “Structures of Use: *caturāṅga*, *vāhana*, *vyūha*,” begins (p. 107) “Producing a war elephant requires the coming together of a king, a forest, forest people, and a wild elephant, followed by a long period of elephant training”—thus reinforcing the interdependent factors that gave rise to the institution of the elephant corps. Taking up in turn the Sanskrit technical terms that form the subtitle of the chapter, Trautmann discusses the different uses of elephants

expressed by those terms, relying in great part on the epics and the Arthaśāstra. The third chapter, “Elephant Knowledge,” treats the practicalities of keeping and training elephants from the ground up—food, handlers, etc.—based on the specialized treatises on elephant science and, again, the Arthaśāstra as well as the much later *Ā'in-i Akbarī*.

The second major section, “The Spread of the War Elephant,” first treats the spread within greater India, to “North India, South India, Sri Lanka.” The spread began with the rise of Magadha, whose location gave it privileged access to the eastern elephant forests and enabled it to incorporate organized war elephants into its army, further facilitating its conquest of much of north India, spreading the institution of the war elephant beyond its origins (a spread later continued in the succeeding Mauryan empire). This northwestern spread resulted in Alexander’s encounter with Indian armies with elephants and eventually encouraged the importation of the war elephant into the Near East and the European and North African Mediterranean regions, a development treated in the following chapter. Utilizing literary sources, Trautmann then briefly provides evidence for a similar spread to South India and, in more detail, relying on the *Mahāvamsa*, to Sri Lanka.

The second chapter of this section, “The Near East, North Africa, Europe,” gives us a whirlwind tour of elephants and Alexander, the Seleucids, the Ptolomies, the Carthaginians, the Greeks and Romans, the Sassanians, and the Ghaznavids. Emphasized throughout is the problem of supply: there being no longer any native elephants in most of those parts, new war elephants had to be obtained from India (by ruler-to-ruler gift or capture in war, generally) and the specialized knowledge of their care either carried by native Indian handlers who accompanied their large charges or transmitted to locals by such people. That the prestige value and military effect of elephants were considered enough to outweigh the considerable difficulties of obtaining and keeping them is little short of remarkable.

These practical problems were far less acute going in the other direction, covered in the last chapter of this section, “Southeast Asia,” for wild elephants were plentiful in those territories. But Trautmann makes the important point that, despite this abundance, capturing and training war elephants came quite late (1st c. C.E.) to Southeast Asia and only arose when the model of Indian kingship was imported to this area (p. 262 and passim)—necessitating a digression into “the vexed issue of *Indianized states*” (starting p. 262), which leads to a succinct sketch of the poetics and ideology of Southeast Asian kingship in this period. In a certain way Southeast Asia is the limiting case for Trautmann’s thesis, that (Indian-style) kings and (war) elephants are, as it were, two sides of the same coin, and the presence of elephants is not enough to produce the sociological phenomenon.

The book ends with the third section, “After the War Elephant,” whose single chapter, “Drawing the Balance, Looking Ahead,” presents a fairly bleak picture of the fate of elephants after kingship as an institution disappeared in the modern era.

The term “page-turner” is seldom applied to books in our field, but *Elephants & Kings* certainly deserves it. Yet the ease and pleasure of reading it should not distract the reader from the persuasive arguments and innovative points made about the accidental but persistent interdependence between the great beast (elephant) and the great man (king).

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Choix d'articles. By GÉRARD FUSSMAN. Edited by Denis Matringe, Éric Ollivier, and Isabelle Szelagowski. École française d'Extrême-Orient, Réimpressions no. 14. Paris: ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE D'EXTRÊME-ORIENT, 2014. Pp. 598. €40.

This monumental collection consists of a selection of thirteen out of the author’s innumerable articles, chosen by him on the grounds that they “pour des raisons diverses, me paraissent importants ou typiques de ma manière” (p. 15). This explanation comes in the introductory section entitled “Quelques explications” (pp. 13–27), in which Fussman provides a biographical summary of his professional