

The Concept of Elephant in Antiquity: A Passage from India to Iran

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Abstract

This article mainly concentrates on similarities and changes of cultural treatment toward “elephant” in transmission and mutation from old India to pre-Islamic Iran. This subject which is studied generally in four research materials (archaeological finds, documentary representations (such as objects of art like paintings, sculptures, monuments and...) and philological deductions (Shahbazi, *Iranica*II: 498)) raises the necessity to acknowledge co-existence and inter-relations between man and elephant in these two societies’ actual and mental treatment and is to determine the criteria by which the position of this creature is evaluated in Iranian religious society .

Key words: elephant, India, Iran, Ganesha, war, royal, king, white elephant.

1-Etymology

The Persian word “ fil “ (= elephant) , as Hassandust (1383 : 308) proposes , comes from the (old Persian) stock " *Piru* -" (=tusk) < (Middle Persian) " *pil* " (= elephant) which is originally derived from Hamitic word " *elu*" , adhering article " p – " , it entered old Persian through Egyptian language .

2-Zoology

Asian elephant is now found in Sri Lanka (as the largest Asian elephant), India, Pakistan, Malaya, Indo–china, Myanmar, Borneo, Sumatra (as the smallest Asian elephant) and other regions in the south east, among which Indian elephant (*Elephas Maximus*

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Indicus) makes up the bulk of the Asian elephant population . The Asian kind of elephant is larger than the African kind which exists mostly in North Africa. The oldest evidence for taming elephant is found in "Indus valley civilization", the date proposed, varies from 5 – 2 millennia B.C. This symbiotic relationship, enclosing care and commodities was meanwhile meant for the aim of "application" which at first time was for agricultural purposes in India (Asian elephant), around 1100 B.C – as mentioned in several Sanskrit hymns. The other purposes were considered like riding , transport , logging forests , for hunting , using their tusks in trade (see Vogelsang 1988:255; also Littauer and Crouwel 1979), used in wars, rituals, ceremonies and so on. During history taming elephant also suggested man's ability to control a fierce or large animal and was a challenge and proof of the physical prowess of individuals in ancient human civilization. Hunting procedure happened in Africa in Sahara, mainly by Egyptians and Carthaginians (and also by Mumidians and Kushites).

The major motif for taming this animal is the specific attributes devoted to elephant, like its intellect, being gentle, affectionate , loyal to the keeper (though destructive in unpleasant situations) .

3-Elephant in Indian mythology

One of fundamental aspects of myth (and religion) is creation phenomenon : Elephant is one of the nine substances at the beginning of the world while the Indian gods (Deva) and demons (Asura) churned the oceans for the elixir of life (amrit (nectar)) to be immortal, of the nine substances discovered , one was "elephant". Hencefore, the elephant is to be held like Jewels are. The other story talks about the first elephant which was emerged from Garuda's egg as "India's mount".

The creation and generation also is in some way related to elephants and with degeneration and destruction as well, as the apposite attributes of elephant. It symbolizes clouds and one of its mythological figures (Airavata) which is progenitor of all elephants is understood as the embodiment of huge clouds pregnant with monsoon rains. One other role of elephant in the universe -mythological- is that the world rests on the head of great elephant (Mahapadma) , if it moves , it makes earthquake (Ions, 1381: 203

; Warner, 1386: 546) ; of course there are a lot of legendary kinds of elephants like the first divine elephant created by Brahma , winged , white , god elephants or compound image of elephant -man many of which were (and still are) honorable and important through history , for different sects and religions in India ; beside these, there are also elephants in the figure of saints and praised persons such Buddha , mostly in white color (Ions, 1381: 246). Some times they are god's vehicle as India's mount in Indus Legends (Airavata) (Ions 1381 : 546) or Lashkmi (Lotus Goddess) who has a decorated elephant .

Elephants were believed to be symbol of good fortune, intellect and power in various Indian religions, especially they are firmly inter – related with Buddha in many respects, e.g. elephant stands for boundless power of Buddha awareness to Bodhisattva nature; also it was realized as “the high position” when Buddha's mother dreamt a white elephant entered her womb with lotus, so it was symbol of knowledge purity for his on coming son, (see Charles 2003:338) . Similar to this story it is seen in Jain mythology related to Mahavira dreaming a “white elephant” it came to be meant "getting high position "(Ions 1381:64; Pant 1997:87). Elephant in white color is of the highest respect, the myth relating to them began is Southeast Asia in Buddhists' stories. It is connected to fertility, knowledge and sacred power (Ions 1381:14). Besides there are legends about originally flying elephants - corresponding to clouds - which accordingly lost their wings for the sake of their weight – as an obstacle for flying - resulting in a hermit's curse. As hinted above, there is a major connection between deities and elephant in many ways, one of them well-known for all sects and portrayed as an elephant – headed God (and with human body): "Ganesha" , according to Mahabhartta and Puranas the elder son of god “Shiva”. According to the most popular story Ganesha is created by goddess Parvati. Ganesha is depicted with one tusk, several hands in different colors, accompanying a rat - as vehicle- and a snake in the world of art (Ions 1381:184); Ganesha is known also for intellect, intelligence, learning and power of discrimination. Ganesha is believed to remove the obstacles. Ganesha is too honorable, sacred and beloved in Indian religions and worshipping him confers

immortality and liberation (for more info. see Getty, 1971).

4-Elephant in Indian art and literature

After domestication , elephant motifs and depictions of elephant armies began appearing in seals, sculptures, friezes and other archaeological finds, it can also be sought in Indian sacred literature and epics like Mahabharta and Puranas and in oral literature; it has even influenced creations of proverbs like “*riding elephant* ” meaning “ get to target , obtaining fortune or having upper hand”.

5-Elephant in Indian Games

Modern chess is the game in which “war elephant” has a prominent role. (Chess is developed from Indian game "*chaturang*" which entering Iran – under Khosrow I, Sassanid king – was called "*shatranj*")(see Akba’i Khavari 2001). Elephant as bishop in chess took the name "*fil*" and turns into “al – fil “ in Spanish and Arabic. It is worthy to know that chess originated from India, later exported to Iran about 600 B.C. Beside chess, elephant is included in a kind of Indian play cards. In this game king’s powers lay in the number of elephants.

6-Elephant and Hunting

Elephants had an important role in hunting as taking the role of hunters or the target, by which men-hunters tested their skill; these were mostly done by the kings at the same time for fun.

7-Iranian visage of elephant

As stated before (and archaeologically proved), elephant was first tamed in India but it does not imply that it was just privileged to India; it was expanded in the other parts of the world too, for some kinds of application other than transmission, rituals, the pomp and alike. Use of elephants found some way to enter Iran and influence the Zoroastrian belief in society towards this animal. At that time two different views encountered each other: tradition and practical application, but lack of Persian documentary evidences fail to show us in what scale each can resist the other or how these could be

justified. The orthodox documents given us yet complicated views, though non-Persian historians' narrations show that at least two main purposes were realized in using elephants. It is necessary to notify the position of elephants in Zoroastrian orthodoxy in Iran, and then to consider the revision actually raised ever after (de Blois 1962:360; Charles 2007:338).

Elephant was classified as an evil or harmful beast (*xrafstar*) according to the texts like " *Rivayat – hay- e Pahlavi* , 31:2-2 " and " *minu ye xrad* , 26-33", (two Middle Persian texts), and is an evil beast proposed by demons to Legendary king "Jama", to be exchanged with sheep , but Jama didn't accept that. This refusal was a sign for his goodness (Mirfakhraee, 1367: 75; Tafazzoli, 1385: 23). In one other Middle Persian text " *Bundahishn* " two kinds of elephants are observed as "badly created beasts " of which some are capable of being tamed and some wild (Bahar, 1378: 100). This latter view , seeming a bit different, yet not to be taken as "contrary" to the former one ; on the other hand, it should be considered rather as enduring *a new experience* , not a substituting idea ; very probably this mutation occurred encountering Indians , making use of elephants mainly for political aims and out-boundaries , as "war force" (according to Iranian tactics) and also as kings' mounts , participating at pomp , royal hunting (as in *Tāq e Bustān* relief which depicts Sassanid king on a hunting expedition (Charles, 2007: 303) and so on.

8-War elephants in history

Elephants took part in combats after taming process but this was not so widespread in ancient military history. War elephants were exclusively male animals of which main usage was charging and trampling enemy, carrying warriors and troops, or to breaking the ranks (see Charles, 2007:317), being able to learn tricks. By the 3rd century B.C they were valuable military force both in India and in North Africa. There are historical reports about elephants taking part in many combats in Asia – first in India , about 1100 B.C – and later in other countries and legions like Iran , Cambodia, Egypt and Greece -in the Hellenistic period (see Charles 2007:311) . Some significant historical wars, using war elephants are mentioned below:

When Alexander in 327 B.C invaded northwest India, he was confronted with war elephants in the Indian army , having been scared , he refused going further and was banned there ;to get familiar with this tactic and made use of it (for more info. see Vieillefond 1970:63-64), he defeated his enemy the Indian king "Porus "in Hydaspes battle (Charles 2007:306) . Seleukos Nikator – Alexander's captain (400 B.C), Hannibal , Carthaginian general (280 B.C) , Diodoch against cavalry attacks , Antiochus III(217 B.C) Egypt army , Dutugamunu, Srilankan king (2000 B.C), Julius Caesar (48 B.C) were some warlords , kings and ... who made use of elephants in their army, to these all Thapsus Battle must be added as the last significant use of elephants in the west (see also Charles 2007:302).

Beyond history, in Buddhist Jakarta stories and Hinduism there are so many war elephants -sometimes in a very high rate- in two parties of fighting gods (Ions 1381:169).

9-Elephant in Iranian army

Doctrine for using elephants especially war elephants spread from India to Persian Empire (see Charles, 2007:390), in three main periods, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid periods.

10-Achaemenid army (550-330 B.C)

It is not certainly known how and when Iranians had elephants taken part in combats but it is almost proved that using them is adopted from Indians. The historical reports inform us that elephants in the eastern norm were armored and had been employed for different expedient roles (according to different tactics) (see Charles, 2007:336).

Achaemenid Persians relied heavily on their cavalry armament, at the same time they used elephants for various ends in wars (see also Jonas Jeff, 2001).

The most significant Achaemenid combat fifteen trained elephants were reported to have a part in, is in the battle of "Gaugamela" in Iraq , in 337 B.C between Darius and Alexander the Macedonian (Tafazzoli 1385:19; Charles 2007 : 303). The elephants would normally be armed and used under a special chief called **zand - hapet**, commander of Indians, since they were from

India.

There are some reports of Indians attending Xerxes' army roster (see Vogel sang, 1988:256). This battle probably can be known as Alexander's greatest success and the first main confrontation of the Europeans with (so to speak) war elephants. It is noteworthy that the presence of elephants in battlefield doesn't mean certainly direct physical encounter with enemy as Charles observes. It might be just because of "glory" accompanying the king, elephants were part of king's royal entourage (Charles 2007:336). One of the other values of elephants for kings in this period is shown on the relics on Persepolis relief: elephant "tusks" presented by the delegation of India to the great Persian king – if Hindush can indicate India (Vogelsang 1988:255).

11-Parthian army (160 B.C -226 A.D)

There is no firm evidence for Parthian usage of war elephants (see Charles 2003:309; Shahbazi (Iranica II): 492). It is possible that they had used elephants against Romans. The camels had the role of protection horse for warriors in the army.

12-Sassanid army (224-652 A.D)

There are more resources about Sassanid battles than two former periods, however the conditions and their troops, is not yet quite clear.

The Sassanids mostly used elephants against the Romans and later the Eastern Roman Empire (Tafazzoli, 1385:79; see also Christensen, 1380:153) possibly with eastern norms (Charles, 2007 : 303); some like battle of Callinicum (363 A.D) , Ctesiphon , Antioch (613 A.D) , Nisibis (530 A.D) , Dara (530 A.D), (see Charles, 2007), such battles occurred in dependant parts of the country as rebellious Armenian saint Vartan – battle of Avaryr – against his Sassanid overlords who made use of war elephants and won the war; it was one of the greatest battles in world history in 363 AD, Roman Julian, the apostate intended to ravage Ctesiphon , under Shapur II. The Persians led forth with a heavy military force of cataphracts and elephants won the war. This battle was one of the greatest of Shapur the second (Fraye 1380:498). There is report of “Nevshapur” ruin by Shapur II who destroyed the city after

rebellion in Susa, trampling it by elephants (Frye, 1380:499).

Beside all these campaigns, there were two memorable ones, one, the last triumph of Iranian army under auspices of sepahbod Rustam Farrukh-Hormazd led by his general Bahman against Muslim Arabs named “the battle of Bridge \Aljir” in which Arabs, driven back to a river in battlefield, himmed in by a charge of elephants and their general having been trampled to death by a white elephant, lost the war. It was the last victory of the Sassanids (Coyajee, 2007:3).

Being the last triumph, of course it was not the last battle; it was the battle of Qadissiygah in which Rustam used war elephants against the invader Arabs. Iranian army though bravely fought, lost the combat and Rustam was slaught. This was one of the two fatal wars (Frye,1380:538), ended the last pre-Islamic empire to be overthrown (Charles, 2007:74).

Taking "presence of elephants in these wars" for granted, Charles (2007) challenges the idea of "direct fighting" of elephants for Sassanid tactics. He believes that "presence" is different from "attack", and they were used for the sake of “psychological shock value” and at the same time to show “king’s splendor” following the Achaemenid tradition (Ibid , 336).

13-Elephant outside battles

Making use of elephant is also referred to in some middle Persian epic texts like "yādgar e zarirān" in combat between Iranian army and Hephtalites (de Blois 1998:360) . One other cause of mutation in treating elephants was the role "white elephant" played transmitting from India to Iran which is very similar to Indian origin.

The major significance on these animals was the relationship to the “royal pageantry”; as “white elephant” was distinctive depiction of king and kingdom in both Iran and India, such an idea was generated from the factual events since white elephants -rare in nature- were sacred in India (Anvenry, 2007).

This was something beyond the ordinary elephants; gradually it was devoted to highest position: the king. Kings kept white elephants in their stables-well- fed, outside war fields and highly honored. Vahris, a Sassanid nobleman, under Khosrow I, knew

elephant as the most magnificent mount for the kings (Tafazzoli 1385:20) . This kind of treatment was gradually well - established and made white elephant symbolize “royal power”.

Sometimes it was believed that the life of white elephant is a sign of life, prowess and fortune for kingdom but these two contrary approaches, royal fortune and elephant found a way to be adjusted and somehow complement in Iran.

As stated above these subjects were encountered separately and in irrelevant fields before acknowledgement , " elephant" was regarded as a sinister animal and the royal fortune (coming from an inter-changing political-religious based society) about which there had been a strong belief in " xwarah\ farah " (Avestan xvarənah) extinct in Zoroastrian sacred book “Avesta” which means royal divine fortune and glory, so legal power sustained to “the possessor king” which was considered an exclusive “right” and prosperity (see Mackenzie1373:166; Reichelt 1968:287 ; Gegnoux 1972:22; Nyberg 1974:221). Losing Farrah anyway meant “to be overthrown”. The other subject to be taken into consideration is the position elephant had; it was treated as an evil creature in Zoroastrian orthodoxy , so there can be a sharp contrast in classifying these two , one as Ahuric/divine, and the other as devilish /Ahriman created. But the texts show us it was not the case in India. Elephants, serving the people, were of great importance and the special kind, “the white elephant” was honorable and a symbol of nobility, fortune and power, so (white) elephant and royal power were of the same place and interwoven , such an idea entered Iran with "war elephant " serving in army , meanwhile making two apposite subjects as coherent and it got to be Justified with former established ideas; so in a gentle and moderate conglomeration elephant was accepted as a **serving** (but) **devilish creature**, respecting religion and considering its services in army or presence in the king’s stable , at the same time . The idea of relation between the king and the white elephant, both as mount or symbolism, transmitted to Iran accompanying war elephant, adopting Iranian ethics, generated a harmonized treatment in Iran. Royal fortune and prosperity was embedded in kingship context in Iran and the white elephant was emblem for kingship in India , so in new trend, these turned to be considered as one context : white

elephant and fortune (called farrah) in Iran – however tradition resisted any swift change as seen in middle Persian texts and Bondahishn (see above).

In “Karnamag e Ardashir Pabagan 1-10” riding a decorated white elephant represents the meaning of kingdom, a sign of power and triumph (Gernet, 2003: 56; Tafazzoli, 1385: 19; Mashkoo, 1329: 2; Fravashi, 1354: 5). In the other Pahlavi text, “abar madan e Shah Bahram”, shah Bahram as coming elephant riding savior is hoped to be back from India with 1000 elephants and the royal flag , and save Iran (Oryan 1382:159,333; Bahar 1384 : 198 ; Amuzgar 1384:76), for this case Tafazzoli supposed elephant may represent one of Bahram’s incarnations which in turn is close to the meaning of " kingdom" in Zoroastrianism (1385:20), so this is probably how an Iranian coming noble man and savior unites with the elephant and as a result with India .

14-Conclusion

As stated above treating *elephant* and its position – as just one social ethic – which is traditionally regarded an evil creature, could not be substituted, but endures some revisions and more flexible attitude. The circumspect orthodox society prohibits any sharp apposition; the society tries to cope with new trends and to improve equipments. These two seemingly contrary views to a single being must be integrated as a whole; so the want of new and mean theories come to be touchable, and as a result different attitudes are born in this atmosphere. The changes in theories following changes in the society beholding religious ethics is a wise reaction, or better to say harmony, the with inevitably changing society toward development .

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مفهوم فیل در عهد باستان:

گذر از هند باستان به ایران

فریبا ناصری^۱

هدف مقاله حاضر بیان تشابهات و تغییرات فرهنگی نسبت به مفهوم «فیل» در انتقال و دگرگونی از هند باستان به پیش از ایران اسلامی است. این موضوع که به طور کلی در چهار تحقیق مطالعه شده است (یافته‌های باستان‌شناسی، اسناد تصویری مانند نقاشی‌ها، تندیس‌ها، آثار تاریخی و استنباط‌های فقه‌اللغهای (شهبازی، ۴۹۸)) نشأت گرفته از ضرورت قبول همزیستی و ارتباط بین انسان و دیگر جاندارانی مانند فیل در برخوردهای فکری و واقعی و تعیین معیاری برای ارزیابی موقعیت این موجود در جامعه مذهبی ایران است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: فیل، هند، ایران، فیل سفید، جنگ