

Royal Hunting of Elephant in Greco-Roman Egypt

الصيد الملكي للأفيال في مصر اليونانية والرومانية

Sherihan Ibrahim GadAllah¹ | Enayat Mohamed Ahmed²

Article Info

معلومات المقالة


Article Language: English

لغة المقالة: الإنجليزية

Vol. 5 No. 3, (2022) pp. 87-97 | <https://doi.org/10.21608/SIS.2022.176076.1118>

Abstract

الملخص

The Royal Hunting of Elephant was one of the pursuits starting from pre dynastic until to Graeco-Roman, the hunting was limited to kings and wealthy people only. Elephant was very important for Egyptians, the elephants appeared in ancient Egyptian texts in different forms for instance *3bw*  and Hw

There were three types of elephants African, Indian and Asian, African elephants are rarely trained despite being larger than their Indian counterparts. The purpose of carving the hunting scenes were to show their ability to control chaos and achieve authority over the world in old kingdom and new kingdom.

In Ptolemaic period Alexander the Great's campaign, the Greco-Macedonian soldiers came face to face for the first time with these terrifying monsters "elephants" Later, elephants were also utilized in war by the Successors and later Hellenistic kings, his successors fought among themselves for control of the region he had conquered. Romans continue to use the elephant in their wars.

كان الصيد الملكي للفيل أحد الممارسات التي بدأت من عصر ما قبل الأسرات حتى العصر اليوناني الروماني ، اقتصر الصيد على الملوك والأثرياء فقط.

كان للفيل أهمية كبيرة للمصريين ، ظهرت الأفيال في النصوص المصرية القديمة بأشكال مختلفة

كانت هناك ثلاثة أنواع من الأفيال الأفريقية والهندية والآسيوية والأفيال الأفريقية حجما أكبر من نظيراتها الهندية. كان الغرض من تصوير مشاهد الصيد إظهار قدرة الملوك على السيطرة على الفوضى وتحقيق السلطة على العالم في الدولة القديمة والدولة الحديثة.

في حملة الإسكندر الأكبر واجه الجنود اليونانيون المقدونيون وجهاً لوجه لأول مرة مع هذه الوحوش المرعبة "الأفيال" فيما بعد ، تم استخدام الأفيال أيضاً في الحرب من قبل الخلفاء والملوك البطالمة الذين اهتموا بصيد الأفيال ، استمروا ملوك الرومان في استخدام الأفيال في حروبهم واعتبروه رمز الانتصار .

Keywords: Hunting; Elephant; Ptolemy; Roman.

الكلمات الدالة: الصيد الملكي؛ الأفيال؛ مصر اليونانية والرومانية.

¹ Lecturer in Tourist Guidance Department, High Institute of Tourism and Hotels, King Marriott Alexandria.

² Professor of Greco-Roman Archaeology, Alexandria University.


Introduction

Elephants hunting was one of the royal pursuits in Ancient Egypt over the ages, they were used for many purposes one of them for entertainment, hobby of Ptolemy the second to collect the animals among of them was elephant.



Alexander the great and his successors used elephants for military purpose and were continued by the Romans later on

Elephant in ancient Egyptian Language

“Elephant” is derived from the Latin word “elephas” (Spinage,1994, p.75). (Houlihan,1995, p.71),

which is the Latin form of the Greek ἐλέφας and  3bw in ancient Egyptian Language

(Grapow, & Erman,1926, p.15). Elephant performs as  dnhr (African elephant),

 Hw translated as "grown elephant". (Naiem, & El Din, 2016, p.55).  3bw

refers to ivory (Faulkner,1991). the elephant and all of its parts appeared in the ancient Egyptian

Language  ,  ,  ,  ,  (Naiem, & El Din, 2016, p.59).

Elephant during ancient Egypt

The Nile Valley and Fayoum have been inhabited for at least 65 million years by the four main elephant groupings: the Deinotheriidae, Gomphotheriidae, Mastodontiidae, and Elephantiidae (Haynes,1993,p.55) Hunting, climatic changes, and ecological disturbances are the causes of their decrease and local extinction (Freeman,1981,p.7).

The only elephant species that survived the end of the Ice Age, as far as is known from paleontological and archaeological evidence, were the African and Indian species. Although it can be trained, African elephants are rarely trained despite being larger than their Indian counterparts. Elephant bones have been found on the ground in Hierakonpolis where the elephants’ burials were discovered. Elephants have appeared in a number of predynastic paintings. Petroglyphs and ivory carvings, pottery decorations and models, and in one instance, a free-standing pottery elephant model discovered at Hierakonpolis (fig:1) (Adams,2012, p.49)



Fig:1 petroglyph of an elephant – Hierakonpolis (Adams,2012, p.49).

Elephant was very important for Egyptians, especially in prehistoric periods. Elephants were so common during this time that ancient Egyptians gave the first province its name after elephants (Elephantine Island) (Walker,2010, p.26). Elephant tombs were discovered in the same area, proving the animals' significance at the time. The Egyptians' fascination with elephants gradually waned by the end of the third dynasty, but by the fifth dynasty (Paine,2014, p.13), a trip made by Harkhuf to fetch an elephant from the south was much valued (Walker,2010, p.27). The presents given by the foreigners during the Middle Kingdom included ivory. Elephant was shown in the New Kingdom at the Tomb of Rekhmira (fig:2) (Lorber. 2012,p.23). Elephant hunts gained popularity in the New Kingdom as monarchs like Thutmose I and III pursued Syrian elephants in Syria, mostly in the region of present Apamea (Farid,Fekri,Abd-Elaal& Zaki. 2018,p.72).



Fig:2 Syrian elephant – tomb of Rekhmira (Lorber. 2012,p.24)

Egyptian kings utilized scenes of hunting to show their ability to control chaos and achieve authority over the world. The tomb paintings and inscriptions from Thebes during the New Kingdom describe the arrival of ivory in Egypt as part of the Kush tribute. The Red Sea started to become the center of the ivory trade in the second and early first millennia BCE. Elephant tusks were among the things the Egyptian queen Hatshepsut brought back to Egypt from the expedition to the Land of Punt. Although it was represented rarely in Egyptian art and inscriptions, the elephant was well-known in Egypt. (Dixon,1969, p.55). (Chrisomalis& Costopoulos, 2013, p.3,9).

Elephant during Ptolemaic & Roman Egypt

During Alexander the Great's campaign, the Greco-Macedonian soldiers came face to face for the first time with these terrifying monsters "elephants". These extremely enormous creatures presented practical and logistical difficulties, but Alexander was so moved by them that he created his own forces (Cobb, 2016.p.1). Later, elephants were also utilized in war by the Successors and later Hellenistic kings. The elephants belonged to Alexander the Great, who also issued coins to record his victories with representations of himself riding on a horse and hurling a weapon at an enemy riding a huge elephant (Van Oppen de Ruitter,2019, p.7). After Alexander's passing, Egypt minted coins showing him with an elephant scalp headdress (fig:3) (Lorber. 2012,p.26)and, in another form, with a chariot drawn by four elephants (fig:4). The elephant was so firmly associated with Alexander's adversaries' military might that it was possible to depict him as having vanquished them by donning the hide of a dead elephant. On the other hand, elephant was represented on many objects (fig:5,6,7,8)



Fig:3 Alexander in an elephant scalp headdress, silver, Alexandria Egypt museum of fine arts Boston (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019, p.8)



Fig: 4 Alexander riding in an elephant-drawn chariot,gold, Alexandria, Egypt museum of fine arts, Boston (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019,p.7)



Fig:5 A battle scene for an elephant and griffon, Memphis, Egypt,3rd century, Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019, p.15)



Fig:6 A hunting scene for an elephant with unicorn, Memphis,Egypt,third century ,Allard Pierson Museuem Amsterdam. (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019, p.16)



Fig:7 Elephant head, Memphis,Egypt, Allard Pierson Museum Amsterdam.
(Van Oppen de Ruiters,2019, p.16)



Fig:8 Attacking elephant,Memphis,Egypt, , Allard Pierson Museum Amsterdam.
(Van Oppen de Ruiters,2019, p.16)

In the Artemidorus Papyrus: The papyrus' scene V16 is partly damaged, but it is still obvious that a strong elephant is engaged in combat with an amphibian snake, as the legend claims, that are wrapped around the pachyderm's torso as it stands on its two rear legs. According to the legend, the serpent is the enemy of the elephant, and when the elephant discovers it, it stamps the serpent and kills it (Stroppa,2019, p.45). (Fig :9)



Fig:9 An elephant is engaged in combat with an amphibian snake (Stroppa,2019, p.47)

After Alexander the Great passed away, his successors fought among themselves for control of the region he had conquered. Ptolemy I who was most talented, seized charge of Egypt. Ptolemy succeeded in gaining control of Syria, a portion of Asia Minor, and the League of Islanders in the Aegean. Huge infantry and cavalry troops were used in the fights between the successors. Battle-elephants, however, were among the most renowned and highly prized elements of ancient armed forces (Cobb, 2016.p.1).

Ptolemy II built a route across the desert (fig:10) to connect Berenice Troglodytica (Murray & Warmington,1967, p.28), the principal Egyptian port on the Red Sea and a crucial one for the handling of elephants, with Coptos, the closest significant port on the Nile. (Casson,1993, p.249). Ptolemy II was making a significant move when he decided to hunt elephants in Africa, as the establishment of his first bases required a number of crucial initial steps that required meticulous and comprehensive planning. Prior to his time, India was the only nation where elephants were abducted and trained for military purposes. . (Casson, 1993, p.249).

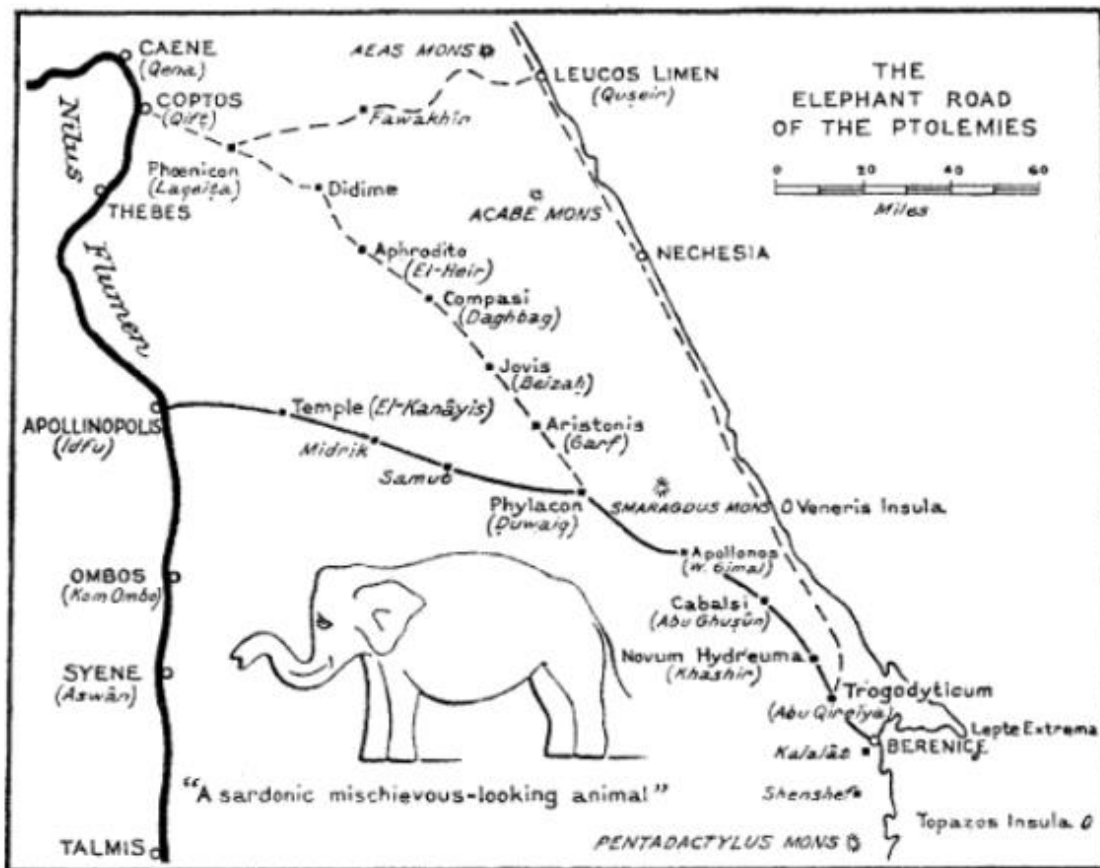


Fig:10 The elephant road of Ptolemies (Murray & Warmington,1967, p.29).

The expansion of more convenient hunting grounds along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts of Africa was the main factor that led to a drop in Ptolemaic elephant hunting. The Seleucids' inability to obtain Indian elephants from the East by the middle of the second century was another contributing reason. It's possible that the Ptolemies wanted to preserve an advantage at first, but given the increasing costs and difficulty of procuring them and the diminished need to defeat the Seleucid elephants on the battlefield. (Cobb, 2016.p.17). Elephants underwent a new phase in which the Ptolemies were prepared to acquire the slaughtered elephant to construct their ports in the Red Sea and to serve as centres for hunting and breeding. The African elephants suffered a defeat in the fight, so perhaps all this attention did not result in the anticipated result. The African elephant defeated after its first fight, which took place in Rafah.

The Ptolemies and Kushites relied on Indian trainers, known as mahouts, for the training of their elephants. Even though they were African by birth, they had names that suggested South Asian ancestry. They also dressed in that manner. African people could have used the same techniques to catch and domesticate Indian elephants using cages or pits. In contrast to horses, only specific people are allowed to ride elephants (Haaland,2014). An individual rides each elephant. Elephants develop a trusting relationship with each individual rider and trainer over the course of their lifespan (Bagnall& Rathbone,2017). The hunters constructed a mud enclosure. Depending on the level of hunger the elephant is experiencing and its inability to resist, the trainer will ride it inside the corral. Then the man squatted and bound both feet. A raw-ox hide thong was also used to secure the animal's neck. The elephant was prepared to follow instructions due to its suffering and famine. The trainers benefited from this operation and were able to bring the hunted elephants to Egypt (Casson, 1993, p.249). In addition, the hunters slaughtered elephants for their ivory. To the locations where the elephant herds lived, they followed them. Then they shot them with bows or poisoned arrows from snakes. In this technique, the bow was utilised by three people, two of them held the bow, and the third one pulled the strings.

Ptolemies stopped using African elephants in battle after the battle of Raphia against the Seleucid Empire demonstrated that they were no match for Asiatic elephants brought in from the East. However, the trade in ivory and exotic animals from the Nubian province remained lucrative, and elephants continued to be exported for a variety of uses (Lobban & de Liedekerke,2000. p.235).

The Romans continued to use elephants in their wars during and they referred to them as "the bulls." They continue to use the elephant in their wars. They practiced hunting of African and Asian elephants, as a recreational sport in the fields of Roman wrestling, in which they demonstrated their strength and control (Shelton, 2006, p.17). Elephants were represented on many objects in the late Roman period (fig: 11,12)

A Roman mosaic dating from the fourth century AD, represents the elephants transfer from the port to the ships, which gives us an idea of transporting the elephant after hunting during The Ptolemaic era, which continued during the Roman era (fig:13)



Fig:11 Turreted elephant, limestone, late roman, Delta,Egypt,Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019,p.14)



Fig:12 Cupids in elephant terracotta,bubastis,Egypt,the british Museum,London. (Van Oppen de Ruiter,2019, p.21)



Fig:13 An African elephant being loaded onto a ship, mosaic, Veii, Italy, , 3rd-4th century CE, Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe, Germany.

<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/3925/roman-mosaic-showing-the-transport-of-an-elephant>
(20/11/2022 at 3:35am)

Conclusion

Depending on the previous there are various forms of elephant appeared in ancient Egyptian texts for example and Ḥw, Elephant was very important for Egyptians, and its tombs were discovered in the same areas.

African elephants are rarely trained despite being larger than their Indian counterparts while Elephant bones have been found on the ground in Hierakonpolis where the elephants' burials were discovered, as Elephant's hunting widely appered in the New Kingdom in Thutmose I and III.

The hunters constructed a mud enclosure. Depending on the level of hunger the elephant is experiencing and its inability to resist, the trainer will ride it inside the corral.

During Alexander the Great's campaign, the Greco-Macedonian soldiers came face to face for the first time with these terrifying monsters "elephants", so After Alexander the Great passed away his successors fought among themselves for control of the region .

Romans continue to use the elephant in their wars just like their predecessors.

References

- Adams, B. S. (2012). Discovery of a predynastic elephant burial at Hierakonpolis, Egypt. *Archaeology International*
- Bagnall, R. S., & Rathbone, D. W. (Eds.). (2017). *Egypt from Alexander to the Copts: an archaeological and historical guide*. IB Tauris
- Casson, L. (1993). Ptolemy II and the Hunting of African Elephants. *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974)*, 123, 247–260.
- Chrisomalis, S., & Costopoulos, A. (2013). *Human Expeditions: Inspired by Bruce Trigger*. University of Toronto Press.
- Cobb, M. (2016). The Decline of Ptolemaic Elephant Hunting: An Analysis of the Contributory Factors. *Greece & Rome*, 63(2), 192-204.
- Dixon, D. M. (1969). The transplantation of Punt incense trees in Egypt. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 55(1), 55-65.
- Farid, M., Fekri, M., Abd-Elaal, M., & Zaki, H. E. E. (2018). Archeological Study of Wild Animals in the New Kingdom. *Journal of the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels-University of Sadat City*, 2(2)..
- Faulkner, R. (1991). A concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian.
- Freeman, D. (1981). *Elephants, The vanishing giants*. Putnam Publishing Group.
- Grapow, H., Erichsen, W., & Erman, A. (1926). *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*. JC Hinrichs.
- Haaland, R. (2014). The Meroitic empire: Trade and cultural influences in an Indian Ocean context. *African Archaeological Review*, 31(4), 649-673.
- Haynes, G. (1993). *Mammoths, mastodonts, and elephants: biology, behavior and the fossil record*. Cambridge University Press.
- Houlihan, P. F. (1996). *The animal world of the pharaohs*. American University in Cairo Press.
- Lobban Jr, R. A., & de Liedekerke, V. (2000). Elephants in ancient Egypt and Nubia. *Anthrozoös*, 13(4), 232-244.
- Lorber, C. C. (2012). An Egyptian Interpretation of Alexander's Elephant Headdress. *American Journal of Numismatics (1989-)*, 21-31.
- Murray, G. W., & Warmington, E. H. (1967). Trogodytica: the Red Sea littoral in Ptolemaic times. *The Geographical Journal*, 133(1), 24-33.
- Naiem, A., & El Din, E. B. (2016). Elephant in ancient Egypt (A Philological–Religious Study). *Journal of Association of Arab Universities for Tourism and Hospitality*, 13(1), 55-62.
- Paine, L. (2014). *The sea and civilization: a maritime history of the world*. Atlantic Books Ltd
- Scullard, H. H. (1974). *The elephant in the Greek and Roman world*. Cornell University Press.
- Shelton, J. A. (2006). Elephants as enemies in ancient Rome. *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 32(1), 3-25.
- Smith, W. S. (1962). The land of punt. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 1, 59-60.
- Spinage, C. (1994). Elephants. *T & AD Poyser, London*, 319.
- Stroppa, M. (2019). The Physiologus and the Papyri from Egypt. In *Christus in natura* (pp. 39-52). De Gruyter.
- Van Oppen de Ruiter, B. F. (2019). Monsters of Military Might: Elephants in Hellenistic History and Art. In *Arts* (Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 160). MDPI.
- Walker, J. F. (2010). *Ivory's ghosts: the white gold of history and the fate of elephants*. Open Road+ Grove/Atlantic.