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THE ELEPHANT AND ITS KEEPERS

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## The Elephant and its Keepers

A postscript on P.Mich.inv. 4290

The sketch of an elephant and human figures on the reverse of a Byzantine papyrus, published in this Journal in 1989, admits perhaps of some interpretation beyond the possibilities canvassed by T. Gagos in his discussion.<sup>1</sup> The strange headgear — a pair of horns? — worn by the figures flanking the elephant led Gagos to the spheres of religion or magic, neither of which provides a good context for the elephant. A more likely home for it would be the circus, in which case the horns sported by the figures might distinguish them as exotic handlers of the beast. Although there is no close parallel for the Michigan sketch, the appearance of the elephant and other animals with exotic figures elsewhere in Late Roman and Byzantine art suggests this as a possible interpretation.

Elephants appeared as both combatants and entertainers in the Roman Circus,<sup>2</sup> accompanied on at least some occasions by native handlers - Seneca refers to the “*minimus Aethiops*” at whose command an elephant walked the tightrope,<sup>3</sup> and Martial describes a beast dancing at the bidding of its “*nigro ... magistro*”.<sup>4</sup> The figure with a stick standing at the left in the sketch has a distinctly *magister*-like appearance, and gestures towards the elephant’s trunk as though he were about to make it perform a trick. If we can place any trust in the amateur sketcher, the beast’s concave back and large ears would indicate that it is an African elephant;<sup>5</sup> it has been suggested that the supply of live specimens for entertainment in the Roman world may have been dwindling by the beginning of the 5th century,<sup>6</sup> but an African elephant may not have been such an unusual sight in Egypt even later than this.

Both India and Africa were sources of elephants in the classical world, but the former country seems to have provided the standard iconography of elephants with the appropriate ethnic figures. The type is exemplified by the Barberini Ivory, where the procession of submissive tribute-bearers below the victorious Emperor (Justinian?) includes an elephant and a tiger accompanied by two Indians who wear patterned garments which extend from waist to ankle, and distinctive turbans of similar material with two hornlike projections at the front which may be feathers.<sup>7</sup> These projections appear in an even more pronounced form on the headdress worn by the personification of India on a silver dish from Lampsacus of the 4th - early 5th century, and are echoed in the headgear of the two animal-handlers depicted below her; the artist seems to have been familiar with the conventional representation of Indian dress but did not understand it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T.Gagos, Three Short Byzantine Papyri from the Michigan Collection, *ZPE* 79 (1989), 271-80, especially 273-5 and Pl.VII b).

<sup>2</sup> H.H. Scullard, *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World* (London, 1974), 250-54, especially 252-3 on their performing tricks; J.M.C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (London, 1973), 46-9.

<sup>3</sup> Epistulae 85,41.

<sup>4</sup> Epigrams I, 104, 10.

<sup>5</sup> For the distinctions in physiology between the African elephant and the Indian (convex back and small ears) see Scullard, *op.cit.*, 16-17, 19 and Pl.I.

<sup>6</sup> Scullard, *op.cit.*, 252.

<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, third to seventh Century* (K. Weitzmann, ed; New York, 1979), 33-5, no.28.

<sup>8</sup> H. Graeven, Die Darstellungen der Inder in antiken Kunstwerken, *Jdl* 15 (1900), 195-218, especially 202-3; the type of headdress is discussed on 209-10, and the Barberini Ivory on 214.

Exotic figures with strange headdresses appear elsewhere in decorative art in association with other animals; two mosaics roughly contemporaneous with the Barberini Ivory combine scenes drawn from three different spheres in which animals and humans interact - hunting, rural life and the procession of exotics: on a pavement from Beth-Shan, a dark-skinned figure in long patterned skirt and headgear with a whole series of projections, like a radiate crown, leads a giraffe-like creature,<sup>9</sup> while a mosaic in the basilica on Mount Nebo shows a similarly dark and long-skirted figure leading an ostrich: a ribbon flutters on either side of his thick, dark hair, and a pair of X-shaped projections surmount it.<sup>10</sup> A precise link between ethnic dress and the geographical regions from which the animals come may have become obscured in such depictions.

In the Michigan sketch the curious “horns” worn by the figures might be distinctive headgear similar to that worn by Indians (possibly the “typical” elephant handlers) or the figures in the mosaics cited above, who are perhaps to be identified as Africans; like the ostrich-handler on the Mount Nebo pavement, the figures on the papyrus seem to have thick heads of hair rather than turbans. Further details of dress which might confirm their exotic status are absent in the sketch. It might be that only one actual figure is involved - the enlarged (and apparently incomplete) detail of the head and shoulders at the right could be an attempt to show the unusual appearance of the elephant’s master more accurately, though the difference in the two hairstyles (if it is not the result of inept draughtsmanship) would argue against this.

Where might the sketcher have seen an elephant? P.Oxy. XXXIV, 2707, of the 6th century AD, furnishes a list of entertainments given as interludes between the races in the hippodrome in which a performing elephant would be quite fitting. Other examples of pictures recording popular entertainments have survived on papyri: P.Oxy. XXVII, 2470, dated to the 3rd century AD, is the most accomplished, the remnants of a painted scene involving a bear and a trapeze artist. But less accomplished pictures, similar to the Michigan sketch, also exist: a corpus of illustrated papyri of the Roman Period on which the writer is working includes a number of doodle-like sketches of scenes from the arena or the races, including gladiators in combat and a jockey urging his mount on. Perhaps the Michigan picture is a similar record of someone’s childlike pleasure in the unusual sight of a performing elephant and its exotic masters.

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<sup>9</sup> G.M. Fitzgerald, *A Sixth-Century Monastery at Beth-Shan* (Philadelphia, 1939), 9 and Pl.XVI. Dr. Marlia Mango kindly brought this and the following reference to my notice.

<sup>10</sup> M. Piccirillo et al, *I Mosaici di Giordania* (Rome, 1986), 63-4, 136-7 and Fig.99; the figure is here described as “un etiope”. The mosaic is dated by an inscription to AD 531: P.-L. Gatier, *Inscriptions de la Jordanie, 2: Région Centrale* (Inscriptions Grecques et Latines de la Syrie, XXI; Paris, 1986), 87-9, no.74.