THE EMBLEMATIC ELEPHANT: A PRELIMINARY APPROACH TO THE ELEPHANT IN RENAISSANCE THOUGHT AND ART

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Summary
In the present article I shall attempt to give evidence of the twofold fortune of the elephant as it is exemplified in a number of Renaissance texts. On the one hand, the identification of the elephant with the king, which was prompted by Horapollo’s De hieroglyphicis, gave rise to a production which we may define as ‘pro-elephant’ on the whole. On the other hand, starting from the middle of the sixteenth century, the image of the elephant became an object of literary-zoological criticism. This was the natural consequence of the geographical explorations as well as of a more detached approach to tradition.

Key Words
Elephant, Art History, Literature, Emblems and imprese, History, Natural History, 15-17th centuries.

Résumé
L’Eléphant emblématique : premières approches de l’éléphant dans la littérature et l’art de la Renaissance

Cet article a pour objet de mettre en évidence la tradition ambivalente de l’éléphant durant la Renaissance. D’une part, son identification avec le roi, qui se fonde sur le traité d’Horapollon, De hieroglyphicis, a donné lieu à une production que nous pouvons définir comme ‘pro-éléphant’ dans son ensemble. D’autre part, à partir de la seconde moitié du XVIème siècle, l’image traditionnelle de l’éléphant est devenue l’objet d’une critique littéraire et/ou zoologique. Cette réaction fut la conséquence d’un certain détachement vis-à-vis de la tradition et des nouvelles explorations géographiques.

Mots clés

It is necessary to begin by making one point about the scope of the article. From among vast amounts of written and visual material, I have selected only a few items which were either significant or representative and which could be adequately explored within the limits of an article. I shall focus mainly on primary sources. My intention is to show that if on the one hand the elephant was used to represent, among other things, kings, rulers in general, or anyway gubernatorial qualities; on the other hand, it was subject, during the Renaissance, to various degrees of criticism, which originated precisely because of the great renown which it was enjoying. In pursuing this subject I have been very aware of the fact that the danger of interpreting works of art as the consequence of humanistic advice is, in this case, increased by the richness of the ‘folklore’ element in pageants and similar festivals, in which elephants were often exhibited or portrayed and which played an important role in celebrations, entrées, royal marriages and suchlike in the sixteenth century, particularly in the Low Countries, Italy and France.

In his article ‘The Quest for the Exotic’. Massing (1991) shows the effect which the sight of unknown or

(1) The Warburg Institute, London.


(3) For elephants in such pageants etc. in the Low Countries and England, see Williams (1960), Ehrmann (1960), Schrade (1956), Vanuxem (1956).
unusual animals had on Dürer. A contemporary piece of evidence for the impact of the arrival of such animals in Europe can be found in Piero Valeriano’s account of the elephant Hanno in his *Hieroglyphica* (publ. 1556): ‘... as to the wonderous things concerning the elephant which have come down to us, we saw with our own eyes Hanno equal the ancient stories, or even surpass them by far. For this we call on Rome itself to testify, the most populated theatre in the whole world. 4 Elephants were not absolutely new in Europe, but they had not been seen, or heard about, for around two centuries. 5 This fact has to be taken into account in order to understand fully the fame of the elephant in an age which ‘rediscovered’ ancient texts but which was also fascinated by the data provided by explorations. It cannot be overemphasized that in at least one Renaissance repository of elephants, the *impressa*, 7 the idea of the exotic appears intrinsically dependent on that of the invisible and the unattainable. A passage in Ercole Tasso’s *Della realtà, et perfettione delle imprese* (1612) provides a most interesting piece of evidence for such an interpretation of the exotic. It is worth quoting extensively: ‘If in forming somebody’s *impressa* one did not use images of things which do not exist in the country of the person to whom the *impressa* will belong, this would cease to be rare and wonderful, qualities which are the true ornament of an *impressa*; for an everyday familiarity with things deprives us of the sense of rarity and wonder. Otherwise, we had better stick to stables and hen houses and surround ourselves with kitchen tools, farmers’ tools, blacksmiths’ tools and the like, which are all infamous things and things by which an *impressa* is debased... the majority of us should then get rid of lions, panthers, eagles, swans, elephants, crocodiles, dolphins, mantinees, tigers, camels, parrots... all things by which an *impressa* is adorned and which cannot all be found in every region, nor in every sea... but instead some of them are found in Africa, some in Asia, some in Europe and some others in the Indies. 8

The Elephant as King: The Elephant as an Allegorical Portrait of the Ruler

Valeriano devotes a section of his *Hieroglyphica* (publ. 1556) to the elephant as a symbol for ‘king’ (‘rex’). 9 In a later Netherlandish reference work, Karel van Mander’s *Van de Wbeeldinghe der Figueren* (publ. 1603-4), we find under the heading ‘Of the Elephant, and Its Meaning’: ‘The Elephant means the king, and the Egyptians used it to mean that. 10 Although nowhere in Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* (publ. 1505) is the elephant explicitly said to stand for a king, the equivalence is implicit: in the 1518 Latin edition the elephant appears as a symbol for a ‘strong man and one who investigates useful things’ 11 (because of its tusks) and

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1Valeriano (1575, f. 20v): ‘... super elephanto verò quaecumque admiranda traduntur, nos in Hannone, vel paria, vel veteribus illsi longë maiora, ocultà fide reprehendisse, cuius rei Romam ipsam frequentissimum totius orbis theatrum testem appellamus.’ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Hanno was the elephant given as a propitiatory gift to Leo X by King Manuel of Portugal. A drawing of Hanno by Giulio Romano is now in Oxford, University Galleries (Popham, 1930, p. 185).

2Popham (1930) provides a thorough survey of elephants in Europe from the Middle Ages onwards; however, he does not mention the fact that between the elephant which René, Count of Anjou and Provence and King of the Two Sicilies, had received from Alfonso V, King of Portugal, around 1447, and the famous Hanno, an elephant had made a tour of Germany in 1483: *Martin Schongauer, maitre de la gravure rhénane, vers 1450-1491*. We will return to the Schongauer’s elephant later on.

3I should like to specify that I am using the term ‘rediscovery’ in the sense in which Garin (1984, 12), uses it: namely in the sense not only, or rather not so much, of a material rediscovery, as rather in that of a new approach to the ancients-and one which received an unprecedented amplification by the print.


5E. Tasso (1612, p. 86): ‘Quando nell’Imprese non si douessero mettere Figure di cose non vedute ne’ paesi di chi le porta; cessarebbe in loro la rarità, et la marauiglia, principale lor ornament: delle quali l’vsato veder, et sentire delle cose ci priuà; senza che conqueressimo bene spesso starò fra stalle, et pollari; frà vili ordegni di cucina, di villa, di fabri, et simili; tutte cose abiette, onde s’aulisce l’Impresa... altramente si darebbe dal più di noi, bando a Leoni, a Pantere, a Cigni, ad Elefanti, a Cocodrilli, a Delfini, a Vitelli marini, a Tigri, a Cemeli, a Papagalli... tutte cose di che s’adornano l’Imprese, et le quali non tutte però in ogni regione, in ogni mare... ma quale in Africa, quale in Asia, quale in Europa, et quale anco nelle Indie.’

6Valeriano (1575). The two elephants which accompany Valeriano’s narrative (the former of which is facing a serpent, the latter is)

7Valeriano (1575). The two elephants which accompany Valeriano’s narrative (the former of which is facing a serpent, the latter is

8Valeriano (1575). The two elephants which accompany Valeriano’s narrative (the former of which is facing a serpent, the latter is

9Valeriano (1575). The two elephants which accompany Valeriano’s narrative (the former of which is facing a serpent, the latter is


11Horapollo (1518, p. 46): ‘Fortem hominem ac utilium indagatorem’. The manuscript of Horapollo was taken to Florence in 1422 by Cristoforo Buondelmonte: for further details on the early history of this work and for a discussion on the identity of Horapollo, see Horapollo (1991). For general reference see e.g. Castelli (1979, 1992) and Riva (1982).
as a symbol for 'a king who wants to escape a most tedious man' (because of the animal's hatred for the shrill voice of the pig).\(^{(12)}\) The fact that in the Renaissance the elephant was used to represent a king comes as no surprise, if one considers the range of commendable qualities which were bestowed upon it by ancient authors and which were taken up and developed in the Middle Ages (Heckscher, 1947); along with its moral superiority, however, the elephant ('the largest land animal', as Pliny defines it) offered the perfect **physique du rôle**.\(^{(13)}\)

Before Valeriano, the moral and physical superiority of the elephant were combined in the fresco by Rosso Fiorentino at Fontainebleau known as 'L'Éléphant Fleurdelisé' (c. 1534-37). As Tervarent (1952, 31) indicates, the fleur-de-lis, the letter F and the salamander (the devise of Francis I) adorning the elephant suggest all together the identification of the elephant with the King. Then he goes on to quote the passages from Horapollo which we saw above and highlights the fact that a manuscript of the **Hieroglyphica** was in the library of Fontainebleau at that time (ibid., 32). Panofsky expands Tervarent's interpretation. After examining the 'subsidiary narratives' of the fresco, he concludes: 'The *Éléphant Fleurdelisé*, then, is a threefold encomium. It celebrates the King as a most wise and virtuous ruler. It represents him as a master of all the elements but one [i.e., the air, which is Jupiter's domain]. And it suggests - a suggestion made implicit, as by a footnote, by the little relief that shows The Cutting of the Gordian Knot - a further, climatic parallel from history: Francis I, presented in the opposite travée as a "new Vercingetorix" who created a "Gaule reduite à vn seul voulouir, aduis & consentement", is here extolled as a "New Alexander" (Panofsky, 1958, 135; also Carroll, 1987, 264).

\(^{(12)}\) Horapollo (1518, p. 46): 'Regem, hominem multarum nugarum, fugientem cum volunt signicare, elephantem pingunt cum sue fugit enim elephas auditu uoce suis'. Later on, a hieroglyphic was added, as can be seen in the 1727 text which G. Boas used for his translation: Horapollo (1950). Number 88 of bk II is entitled: 'A Man Who Has Prepared His Own Tomb', and it says: 'When they [i.e., the ancient Egyptians] wish to indicate a man who has prepared his own tomb, they draw an elephant burying his tusks. For when the elephant sees that his tusks have fallen, he takes them up and buries them'. It should be noted that this was actually a belief dating back to Pliny the Elder (1938-62 [publ. 1469]). Later on the elephant was also used to signify 'A King Fleeing From Folly and Intemperance': Horapollo (1950, number 85, vol. II, p. 104).

\(^{(13)}\) Actually, Pliny (1938-62) : 8.1 (III, p. 3), calls it 'maximum animal' *tou court.*

\(^{(14)}\) The elephant, says Dolce (1583, 49), 'honours and reveres only peace and justice, and it is so strong in faith that he who crazily dares to stray from religion is to be pitied' ('Solo pace e giustitia honora et cole/Et è sl saldo ne la santa fede,/Che misero co lui, che folle ardisce/Da la religion volger il pede').

\(^{(15)}\) Ibid.: 'Happy are those who happen to be governed by such a sovereign, for under his ample state leisure and tranquillity always flourish. The *imprese* of Emanuele Filiberto is praised by E. Tasso (1612, p. 90).

\(^{(16)}\) Capaccio (1592, bk 2, f. 19r) records a proverb which originates from the usual belief of the long duration of pregnancy: 'The she-elephant will give birth, before' ('*Ante pariet Elephas*'), meaning that a business is taking too long. The *imprese* of Emanuele Filiberto and that of Astorre Baglione are discussed in T. Tasso (1958, p. 1076).
understanding the motto are the traditional beliefs (dating back to Aristotle)\(^{(17)}\) that the duration of gestation in elephants was incalculably long and that it was the most long-lived of animals. Ruscelli first cites the ancient texts; then he lists the deeds performed by Astorre which eventually confirmed his youthful promise: "...it is evident", he concludes, 'that he [i.e., Astorre], being still so young, wanted to demonstrate to himself and to the world that a noble spirit must begin, as a child, if not to give birth, at least to produce seeds and fruits worthy of himself.'\(^{(18)}\) Further on he continues: 'And [it is evident] that above all he wanted to demonstrate to himself and to the world that a spirit must begin, if not to give birth, at least to generate seeds, and long-lasting as those, as I have said repeatedly, of elephants.'\(^{(19)}\) In an emblem by Sebastián Covarrubias Orozoco (publ. 1610) we find a similar treatment of the long gestation period of elephants. The picture shows a pregnant elephant of vaguely African features standing behind a palm tree with the motto: 'Nothing great quickly' (fig. 2).\(^{(20)}\)

Triumphs deserve a special mention in the history of the elephant in the Renaissance. The most influential example of triumphal elephants is Mantegna’s Canvas V of his The Triumphs of Caesar, which constituted a favourite model for Roman triumphs throughout the sixteenth century.\(^{(21)}\) In Canvas V (c. 1500-06) three elephants with peculiarly conspicuous African ears (so peculiar as not to look African at all) occupy the foreground on the left. The suggested classical sources for this panel have been discussed by Hope (1992, p. 350). Here, I should like only to compare Canvas V, the prototype of Renaissance triumphs, with a late Northern triumph, The Glorification of William I (De verheerlijking van Prins Willem I) which was commissioned to Hendrick G. Pot for the town hall of Haarlem in 1620. Three African elephants preceding William of Orange (visible in the right-hand corner, at the level of the upper leg of the third elephant: fig. 3) occupy the whole panel; they carry three women representing respectively Hope, Faith and Charity (as the banners indicate).\(^{(22)}\) Whereas Mantegna’s three elephants accompany Caesar’s triumph in a strictly

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\(^{(17)}\)Aristotle (1965-91 [publ. 1553]) at 6.27 (II, p. 333), says that gestation in elephants lasts a year and a half according to some, three according to others, whereas at 5.14 (II, p. 145) he says two years; Pliny (1938-62) : 8.10 (III, p. 23), says ten years.

\(^{(18)}\)Ruscelli (1566, p. 71): 'si comprende, che primieramente egli uosless mostrà se, et al mondo, che da fanciullo, vn' animo nobile deue cominciàr, se non a partorire, almeno à generar semi, et frutti del ualor suo'. Erasmus (1603 [publ. 1500], 370-1), records the saying as follows: 'Celerius elephanti pariunt'.

\(^{(19)}\)Ruscelli (1566, p. 71): 'Et che sopra tutto sperava, che la sua natura, il suo sangue, la sua nobiltà, la sua diligenza, la sua sol­lectudine, la sua industria, la grandezza dell' animo suo, et ancora la sua fortuna, farebbono al suo ualore, et alla sua gloria partorir frutti così rari, et grandi, et notabili, et durabili, come s'è detto, et replicato, che è quello degli elefanti.'

\(^{(20)}\)The palm tree, the author explains, was chosen to accompany the elephant because it is slow in producing its fruits.

\(^{(21)}\)See Hope (1992). On the triumphs of Caesar see Payne (1962), particularly pp. 120-1 (reference to the elephants which took part in the triumph over Africa in 46 B.C. on p. 121; fig. with the elephants by Mantegna facing p. 208). For triumphs in antiquity and the Renaissance, see Weisbach (1919) and Chartrou (1928).

\(^{(22)}\)In Ripa (1603 [publ. 1593]), one of the suggestions for Piety ('Pietà') is the representation of a woman who, along with other attributes (a stork, a sword and a child), has an elephant at her side; the same words are used in the 1611 and in the 1625 Padua editions : pp. 427 and 514 respectively.
Fig. 3: Hendrick G. Pot. *De verheerlijking van Prins Willem I (The Glorification of William I).*
Copyright Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.
‘antiquarian’ reconstruction, those of Pot are also used to support the theological virtues.\(^{(23)}\) Pot's panel thus seems to represent a synthesis of pagan elements with Christian ones, which were inherited from the Middle Ages.

In the Renaissance the elephant as a symbol of power was frequently depicted fighting with a serpent.\(^{(24)}\) In his section on the elephant as ‘king’ Valeriano gives an interpretation of the reason for this struggle: ‘...the ancient writers recount’, he says, ‘that elephants fight a continual struggle against serpents because serpents stand for, among other things, ... the earth, the provinces, and the regions’.\(^{(25)}\) ‘If he wants to subdue these’, he adds, ‘the king must first of all invade them with his armies; then he must have means in abundance, so that he can easily prepare all that is necessary for warfare, and he must use weapons against the provinces all the time.\(^{(26)}\) The two woodcuts at the side of the text illustrate Valeriano’s statement: the first one shows a serpent preparing to attack an elephant, the second one the elephant crushing the serpent. These illustrations are said to have been based on a Roman coin in honour of Caesar.

The Middle Ages fixed the story of the contest in the ‘stylized topos’ of a mutually lethal battle (Heckscher 1947, 159). In this form it was repeatedly used throughout the Renaissance as an example of a Pyrrhic victory; Erasmus, among the others, mentions it in one of his Colloquies (publ. 1519), entitled Sympathy: one of the characters says: ‘And there is a deadly warfare between this animal [i.e., the elephant], a lover of man, and Indian dragons... often ending in mutual destruction in battle’ (1965, 521). In the Renaissance, the combat was also resolved in favour of the elephant, transformed into the triumphator (Heckscher 1947, 160). Paolo Giovio in his Le sentenziose imprese (publ. 1562) uses the impresa of the two rival brothers Fieschi (Sinibaldo and Ottobuono), which shows a serpent biting an elephant, and explains it with the following lines:

Poi ch ha sentito il serpentino dente/L’elefante, e ‘I velen gionto nell’ossa./L'ammazza, à ciò vantar non se ne possa./Et così debbe far l’huomo valente.\(^{(27)}\)

However, the medieval topos of a mutually lethal battle was also re-elaborated in favour of the serpent: in his Hecatongraphie (publ. c. 1540) Gilles Corrozet uses the story of the combat for one of his devices in order to demonstrate that, as the title states, ‘Subtlety is More Worthy than Strength’\(^{(28)}\).

### The Question of Flexibility

Besides representing kings (or other rulers), the elephant was used in the Renaissance as an allegory of various royal qualities. It was not just the moral and physical superiority of the animal that was the responsible for this: an anatomical peculiarity which was traditionally attributed to the elephant also played a part. Valeriano helps us to understand this point: ‘the Egyptians used the image of an elephant to signify a king’, he says, ‘not so much because the elephants always proceed in a group led by the oldest one’,\(^{(29)}\) but rather because the elephant has this mark of royalty, that it does not bend its knee so ostensibly as other animals do, although it can curve its ankle.\(^{(30)}\) The traditional view that the elephant cannot bend its knee is a leitmotif in Renaissance texts. We find another instance of its application to royalty in Stefano Guazzo’s Dialoghi piaceuoli (publ. 1586): in the second dialogue (a discussion of the question of whether a prince should be amiable or not)

\(^{(23)}\)For an excursion on the moral and religious relevance of the elephant, see Heckscher (1947).

\(^{(24)}\)The story of the struggle between the elephant and the serpent dates back to Pliny (1938-62): 8.11 (III, p. 25), where he says that in India serpents ‘keep up a continual feud and warfare with them… In this duel both combatants die together’; then, speaking about the cleverness of serpents, Pliny gives two more versions of how the battle takes place: in the one the serpent defeats the elephant; in the other, the serpent perishes together with the elephant: ibid., 8.12 (III, pp. 27-9).

\(^{(25)}\)Valeriano (1575, ff. 17r-v): ‘... scriptores rerum, assiduum cum serpentibus certamen gerere tradunt elephantos, serpentes inter alia significata... terrarum orbem, provincias, et regiones... significare’.

\(^{(26)}\)Ibid.: f. 17v: ‘... eas vero qui domitari voluerit, viribus in primis prreditum... /et cosi debbe far l'huomo va/ente.

\(^{(27)}\)Giovio (1562, p. 106): ‘When it has felt the tooth of the serpent, and the poison has reached its bones, the elephant kills it lest it should brag: a powerful man should do the same.’

\(^{(28)}\)Corrozet (1543, f. hvii r): ‘Subtilité vault mieux que force’ (fig. on hv i, showing an elephant with pointed ears, neither African nor Indian.

\(^{(29)}\)Pliny (1938-62): 8.5 (III, p. 11): ‘Elephants always travel in a herd; the oldest leads the column and the next oldest brings up the rear’.

\(^{(30)}\)Valeriano (1575, f. 17v): ‘... Aegyptij regem hominem per elephanti simulachrum intelligebant, non tantum de causa, quod cum gregatim semper ingrediantur, is qui maximus es natu gregem ducit... verum proptera quod habet hoc animi regij peculiare, vt genua non flectat adeo notabiliter vt animalia reliqua, calcaneum vero leuitier incurvet’
Guazzo says: 'I am quite pleased that princes should display the sort of grave appearance and dignity which makes them recognized to be what they are; but I think that they should imitate the elephant, which is their true symbol; for, although the elephant never bends its knees, nonetheless it bends its ankle rather well. Similarly, although kings do not perform acts of humility, as their subjects do, they should still seem somewhat affable and kind; and, to avoid falling into one extreme or the other, they would do well to show cunningly on their face a severe sweetness and a sweet severity.'

The persistence in the Renaissance of the conviction that the elephant could not, or could not quite, bend its knee found expression in Camillo Camilli's *Imprese illustri* (publ. 1586). One of the *imprese* is dedicated to the memory of his relative and patron, the late Cardinal Giovan Battista Giustinianio. The motto says: 'As Long As It Stood', and the woodcut shows an elephant upside-down on the ground and behind it a palm tree which has also collapsed. The commentary begins, as was customary, with a paraphrase of Pliny: 'Perhaps no animal offers more opportunities to construct *imprese* than does the elephant, given the fact that none is more akin to man than it is; for its understanding of the language of its native country, its obedience to commands, its remembering of what it has learned, its desire for love and glory; in short, all that is worthy of notice and wonder (goodness, prudence, equity, adoration of the stars, the worship of the sun and the moon), all such things the elephant alone seems to share with man.'

It should be noted that whereas Valeriano and Ercole Tasso refer the element of 'wonder' with the sphere of the exotic, Camilli associates it with that of religion. After enumerating the various techniques used to capture elephants, Camilli clarifies the meaning of this *impresa*: '...wanting to represent his present situation, he [i.e., Camilli] could not find a better image of himself than the elephant fallen on the ground, where the tree sawed off and cut down represents the cardinal, who, when he was alive, protected him and let him lean on him (this thought is revealed by the motto "As Long As It Stood", which is to say that as long as it stood, I could lean on him and received favours); but,' he adds, switching to the first person, 'when he fell, I fell with him.'

What follows constitutes the core of Camilli's invention: in order to refute the accusation of being 'too base and prostrate,' he explains that he imagines God to be the hunter who cut the tree down and eventually tamed the elephant - which is to say, himself. 'Therefore', he concludes, 'the *impresa* comes out as not only clever and beautiful, but also Catholic, religious and worthy of a refined and a Christian soul.'

Camilli's *impresa* was taken up by the Spanish Juan de Solórzano Pereira for his *Emblemata regio politica* (publ. 1651) which he dedicated to Philip IV: emblem LIX shows an elephant which has fallen off a tree. The motto is: 'Do Not Trust Princes' (fig. 4). Solórzano uses here Camilli's device, and he reinforces it by referring to the Bible, where it is said: 'Do not trust

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(31) Guazzo (1587, p. 59-60): 'son ben contento che i Principi mostrino nell'aspetto quel graue sembiante, et quella dignità, che li fà conoscere quei, che sono, mà mi pare che habbiano ad himirar l'elefante loro uero simbolo; perché se ben l'elefante non piega mai le ginocchia come gli altri animali, piega però alquanto il calcagno; così essi quantunque non facciano atto d'umiltà come i sudditi, deono però in qualche maniera mostrarsi umani et cortesi; et per non correre ne gli estremi dell'uno, ò dell'altro, conuerrebbe che con discreto modo rappresentassero nella faccia vna rigida dolcezza, et vna dolce rigidezza.'

(32) Ibid.: 'Non è forse alcuno animale, che dia più campo di fabricare Imprese, che l'Elefante, conciosia cosa che nessuno habbia più conuenienze con l'huomo di lui. Impereche l'intendere il parlarle del paese, doue egli nasce, l'obedire à chi comanda, il ricordarsi delle cose altra uolta imparate, il desiderio dell'amore et della gloria, et in somma quello che più è da mettere in considerazione, et degno di marauiglia, la bontà, la prudenza, l'equità, la religione delle stelle, et l'adorare il Sole, et la Luna, sono tutte cose, che à questo solo animale par che sieno communi insieme con l'huomo'. Camilli goes on to cite examples of 'most beautiful' ('bellissime') *imprese*, such as those of Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Savoy, and Astorre Baglione, which we examined earlier on. Pliny (1938-62): 8.1 (III, p. 3): 'The largest land animal is the elephant, and it is the nearest to man in intelligence: it understands the language of its country and obeys orders, remembers duties it has been taught, is pleased by affection and by marks of honour, nay more it possesses virtues rare even in man, honesty, wisdom, justice, also respect for the stars and reverence for the sun and moon.'


(34) Camilli (1586, p. 58-9): '... volendo figurar lo stato della uita sua, non hà saputo à cui meglio assumigliar se stesso, che all'Elefante caduto per terra, prendendo l'arbo segato, et atterrato per lo Cardinale, il quale in uita fù appoggio, et sostegno suo, scorrendo tal pensiero col motto, DVM STETIT, cioè mentre egli stette in piedi, io fui sostenuto, et fauorito, mà cadendo egli, caddi anch'io.'

(35) Ibid.: p. 59: 'troppo abietto, et prostrato'.

(36) Ibid.

(37) Ibid.: 'Et cosi riesce l'Impresa non solo ingegnosa, et bella, mà catholica, religiosa, et degna d'un animo ciuile, et Christiano.'

(38) Solórzano (1653 p. 487): 'Nolite confidere in principibus' (fig. on same p.).
prices, nor the sons of men... The Camilli and the Solórzano elephants are iconographically rather different. The coiled folds of the tusk of the Solórzano elephant suggest that the illustrator used a model which, as far as we know, derives from Pier Paolo Dicembrino. In both cases we have an elephant which cannot be defined as either African or Indian.

A Few Cautious Approaches

I shall now examine some examples which illustrate the rise of a critical or scientific approach to the elephant in the Renaissance. My intention is to provide evidence for the fact that the decline of the elephant’s fame, which William S. Heckscher states took place ‘in the course of the seventeenth century’ had its intellectual origin in the second half of the sixteenth century. In particular, I shall attempt to prove that this decline was not only the consequence of ‘the change in man’s attitude towards beasts’ (Heckscher 1947, 176-7), but also a development inspired by tradition itself. It should be emphasized that during the Renaissance criticism of the traditional image of the elephant was carried on by scientists and men of letters separately. To the best of my knowledge, the only non-scientific text in which a scientific work is discussed is Justus Lipsius’s letter on the elephant. Ironically enough, the author of the scientific text, Christóval Acosta, is cited by Lipsius in a context of mockery. (42)

The forerunner of a scientific approach to the elephant was Angelo Poliziano, who, in his Miscellaneorum centuria secunda (1978 wr. 1493-4), traces back the history of the flexibility of the elephant’s limbs on a purely philological basis. After examining Ambrose and Basil, who both state that elephants do not have knee-joints, he considers the views of Aelian and Pliny, and the ‘greater Aristotle’, who all testify to the flexibility of the animal’s knee. (43) I shall limit myself to quoting Poliziano’s conclusion: ‘Who is right, since I have never seen a real, live elephant, I would not at all dare to judge.’ (44)

The second important text of literary-scientific interest is represented by André Thevet’s Cosmographie de Levant (1554), the account of a journey from Mantua to Marseilles. (45) The author begins by repeating almost word for word Pliny’s praise of elephants: ‘As to the elephant’, he says, ‘it is certainly the biggest animal in the world and the one closest to man for its intelligence and sensitivity, for they understand the language of their country, and (which

(39) ‘Nolite confidere in principibus; in filiis hominum... ’: David, 145.3.
(40) See infra.
(41) It is interesting to note that in another passage of his Emblemata Solórzano refers to a tradition according to which on virtue of the fact that the elephant cannot bend its knee ‘it is usually taken as a symbol for an equanimous and a caring king or ruler (emblem LXX, p. 583: ‘... pro symbolo iusti, et vigilantis Regis, ac Gubernatoris sumi solere... ’).
(42) Lipsius (1605 [publ. 1590]). It is interesting to note that this letter appears under the title ‘Laus elephanti’ in Lipsius (1638).
(44) Poliziano (1978, p. 82): ‘Utri ergo verius dican, equidem, quando elephantos vivos verosque vidi numquam, minime ausim iudicare.’
(45) Thevet’s work is discussed in Barclay Lloyd (1971, 31-4, 65-6, 91, 96-7, 108-9, 116, 121; for information about his life, see pp. 31-4, 65-6 and 96).
seems too strange by far) they obey what they are ordered to do.\(^{(46)}\) Still following Pliny, he continues: ‘They revere the king and bend their knees according to their master’s command.\(^{(47)}\) Later on, Thevet goes back to the point that elephants are provided with knee-joints: ‘They have knee-joints, so that when their master commands them to go down on their knees, they do so quickly, which contradicts the opinion of several people who have described the nature of the elephant: true, their joints are lower than those of the ox’.\(^{(48)}\) In order to reinforce his argument Thevet reports what he has heard tell and what he has seen with his own eyes: ‘To cut a long story short, in the town of Alep, which is in Syria, a young elephant was skinned… and joints were found in its legs; and in the town of Cairo I myself saw some being made to bend their knees several times in a row’.\(^{(49)}\)

According to Barclay Lloyd (1971, 32), Thevet has a passive attitude to Pliny: ‘To give the work a veneer of erudition, Thevet embellished his own descriptions with frequent references to classical authorities like Pliny, Strabo and Solinus’. However, if one considers what Thevet says towards the end of the chapter, when he cites Pliny and Solinus, one realizes that what he is actually expressing is an intentionally anti-traditional opinion about the elephant’s supposed sense of religion: ‘They say that the elephant worships the sun as its sovereign, which I find very hard to believe, although Pliny and Solinus testify to this’.\(^{(50)}\) And he continues with a rhetorical and a philosophical argument: ‘If you appeal to other authors who say the contrary… I shall tell you that they were great personalities, but nonetheless men; or, to speak frankly, I shall say that they used a manner of speech which is called abuse, which is when we deliberately misuse the correct meaning of words; or else, following the Platonic doctrine, I shall reply to you that if beasts worshipped the king or celestial things, and if they had some knowledge of them, they would then be likely to participate in intelligence as well as in immortality, which is promised to men and angels only. This is a view which a man in his wits would never want to think, let alone assert’.\(^{(51)}\) The chapter is illustrated by a drawing of an elephant bending its forelegs to the ground before a man dressed in oriental clothes: the animal has clearly African features (convex forehead and big ears), and we may take it to portray the one which Thevet says he had seen in Cairo bending down on its knees, rather than the one which he had seen being skinned in Syria.\(^{(52)}\)

A few years later, a small treatise by Pierre Gyllcs entitled Descriptio noua elephanti (publ. 1562) appeared. The author reports on some anatomical features of an elephant with which he had travelled and which, when it died, was dissected.\(^{(53)}\) He begins by recollecting the tolerance with which the animal endured, before the journey started, the playful assaults of which it was an object on the part of a group of children: ‘For it would tolerate gladly and good-naturedly’, he says, ‘its opponents taking hold of now its trunk, now its tusks, now its neck; although it could have easily flung them back, it would

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\(^{(46)}\)Thevet (1554, p. 69): ‘Quant aux Eléphants, c’est bien le plus grand animal qui soit au Monde, et qui approchent plus au sens et entendement humain: car ilz entendent le langage du pays ou ilz fréquentent, et, ce qui semble trop plus estrange, obeissent à ceux qu’on leur commande’; for Pliny’s text, Pliny (1938-62): 8.1 (III, p. 3). It should be noted that in sixteenth-century French estrange had the meaning of ‘strange’, as well as that of ‘unusual’, so the sense of the sentence is slightly ambiguous.


\(^{(48)}\)Thevet (1554, p. 70): ‘Ilz ont iointures aux iambes, tellement que quand leur maitre leur commande de se mettre a genoux, ilz s’y mettent promptement, qui est contre l’opinion de plusieurs qui ont descri et Solinus testify to this’.\(^{(50)}\) And he continues with a rhetorical and a philosophical argument: ‘If you appeal to other authors who say the contrary… I shall tell you that they were great personalities, but nonetheless men; or, to speak frankly, I shall say that they used a manner of speech which is called abuse, which is when we deliberately misuse the correct meaning of words; or else, following the Platonic doctrine, I shall reply to you that if beasts worshipped the king or celestial things, and if they had some knowledge of them, they would then be likely to participate in intelligence as well as in immortality, which is promised to men and angels only. This is a view which a man in his wits would never want to think, let alone assert’.\(^{(51)}\) The chapter is illustrated by a drawing of an elephant bending its forelegs to the ground before a man dressed in oriental clothes: the animal has clearly African features (convex forehead and big ears), and we may take it to portray the one which Thevet says he had seen in Cairo bending down on its knees, rather than the one which he had seen being skinned in Syria.\(^{(52)}\)

\(^{(49)}\)Ibid.: ‘Brief, à la ville d’Alep, qui est en Syria, fu escorché vn ieune Elephant... et lui furent trouuees iointures aux iamhcs, & moy mesme en ay veu mettre par plusieurs fois a genoux en la ville du Caire.’

\(^{(50)}\)Ibid.: p. 73: ‘On dit que l’Elephant adore le Soleil pour Souverain, ce qui m’est fort difficile à croire, encore que Pline, et Solin le tesmoignent.’ Pliny (1938-62): 8.1 (III, p. 3); Solinus (1864 [publ. 1491]): 25.3.5-6 (p. 125).

\(^{(51)}\)Ibid., 73: ‘Si tu m’allegue aucun auteurs au contraire, desquez j’ay fait mension par ci deuant, ic te dy qu’ilz estoient grans personnages, mais toutefois hommes: Ou pour en iuger ronmente, qu’ilz ont vse d’une faisons de parler, qui s’appelle Abus ion, saouir est quand nous abusons de la propriete, et significacion des mots: ou bien suivant la doctrine des Platoniques ie te respondray, qu si les bestes brutes adorez ont le Souverain, ou bien les choses celestes, et qu’ilz en eussent quelque connoissance, elle seroient semblablement participantes de l’intelligence, et immortalité promise seulement aux hommes et aux Anges. Ce que iamais homme sobre en iugement ne voudroit penser, tant s’en faut de l’affermer. ’Before passing on to the longevity of elephants, he adds: ‘Leaving at last all these impudent quibbles, which derogate greatly from our religion, ‘...’ (Ibid.: ‘Laissant doncques toutes ces subtilitez impertinentes, et qui deroguent grandement à notre religion, ‘...’ ).

\(^{(52)}\)A reproduction of this illustration can be found in Barclay Lloyd (1971, p. 117).

\(^{(53)}\)Gyllcs translated Aelian’s work on animals: Aelian (1533). Then, he translated it again basing himself on that of Conrad Gesner (1556). The reference for Gyllcs’s revised translation is Aelian (1565). We will return to Gesner later on. Gyllcs travelled in the Levant with Thevet but remained there when his companion returned to France (Barclay Lloyd, 1971, p. 31).
nonetheless tolerate being flung back itself, attacked on its sides, thrown down, thrown over, so that even after lying on the ground on its back alone and with its feet in the air, it would turn easily without any help and would stand up and renew the playful battles eagerly.

Then Gylles sarcastically rejects some beliefs about elephants: ‘Who would not laugh at Strabo and all the others’, he says, ‘who write that hunters spot the trees against which the elephants are acostomed to lean, then cut the trunk on the opposite side to the one where the animal has clung, so it falls down together with the tree; and that finally, since it cannot rise up again because its knee has an uninterrupted and inflexible articulation, they jump out from behind the trees and slaughter it’.

In a later text, Christóval Acosta’s *Historia des drogues* (publ. 1587) we find a more mature and detailed attack on Pliny; in the chapter devoted to ‘L’Elephant’, Acosta subtly draws a distinction between good pieces of fiction and stories based on facts: ‘In several passages of his first book, Pliny recounts many things about elephants which are worth telling; here we will give some which are most worth believing’.

Acosta’s pride as an explorer who has defied adversities emerges in his presentation of the treatise: ‘Our most learned Garcia du Iardin, has composed with great scrupulousness and diligence commentaries on the elephant as well as on several other medicaments which were brought to Europe from the Indies; he mainly used reports of others, whereas I (the reader may judge for himself) only what I saw with my own eyes. For, in order to get an authentic picture of these things in the very same place where they grow, I was often in danger of losing my freedom as well as my life…’

It is interesting to note that the two supposedly Indian elephants which illustrate the chapter one of which is flexing its knee-have an altogether African appearance, with their rather big ears and convex forehead.

In *L’Apologie de Raymond Sebond* (1937), which is a long chapter in his *Essais* (publ. 1580), Montaigne discusses a number of episodes from ancient texts (Plutarch, mainly) concerning several animals, and among them elephants. In order to achieve his general plan, which is here to debunk the concept of anthropocentrism, in the first part of the essay Montaigne aims at demonstrating not only that beasts are not inferior to man, but that, on the contrary, they are sometimes superior to him. Montaigne’s style is densely paradoxic, which makes it very risky to analyse his reasoning selectively; however, it is worth examining a few passages. The very first sentence on elephants is exemplary of Montaigne’s intentions: ‘As for force’, he says, ‘no animal in the world is liable to so many shocks as Man. No need for a whale, an elephant, a crocodile or animals like that, any one of which can destroy a great number of men’ (Montaigne 1993, 517). Montaigne’s reasoning is made clear a little further on: ‘But so many of their actions bring elephants close to human capacities that if I wanted to relate in detail everything that experience has shown us about them, I would easily win one of my regular arguments: that there is a greater difference between one man and another than between some men and some beasts’ (ibid., 520).

That Montaigne is trying to make a point can be deduced from what he says about elephants in combat: ‘Those are special cases’, he concludes after having related stories about elephants which unmasked their deceitful feeders, but we all know from eye-witnesses that the strongest elements in the armies based in the Levant were elephants; their effectiveness surpassed what we can obtain

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(54)Gylles (1614, 4-5): ‘Hilariter enim et facile patiebatur a suis concertatoribus corripi, nunc promuscidem, nunc dentes, nunc collum, nunc crura, quibus singulis, cum eos facile rejicere potuisset: tamen se rejici, in latus impelli, supplantari, prostemi ita facile patiebatur, atque erigebat, alacriterque pugnans ludicras redintegrabat.’


(56)Ibid. used the French translation: Acosta (1619, 24): ‘Pliny en plusieurs passages du premier liure, raconte beaucoup de choses dignes de recit des Elephants: nous en mettrons icy quelques vnes des plus dignes de foý.’ (I assume that Pliny’s ‘first book’ is actually bk 8, ch. 1).

(57)Ibid. : p. 30: ‘Nostre tresdocte Garcie du Iardin a fait auce grand soing et diligence des Commentaires tant de l’Elephant que de plusieurs autres medicaments qui sont apportés des Indes en Europe, ce qu’il a fait sur le rapport d’autrui pour la pluspart, et moi (le lecteur en juge) pour l’auoir vue moymesmes. Car pour en auoir le pourtrait au vif sur les mesmes lieux où telles choses croissent, ce n’a pas esté sans danger de ma libertet et de ma vie…’ De Iardin’s treatise was published in the same volume as Acosta’s one in the 1679 ed. of *Histoire des drogues*.

(58)Ibid. : p. 23.

(59)He could find them in Aelian (1958-9): 6.52 (II, p. 75).
nowadays from our artillery, which more or less replaced elephants in line of battles (as can easily be judged by those who know their ancient history)” (Montaigne 1993, 520). Montaigne could not ignore the danger of using the assistance of elephants. One has the impression that he does not want to conceal the audacity of his pronouncement: in fact, he highlights it by means of a parenthesis: ‘(as can easily be judged by those who know their ancient history).’ Further down, we find another interesting parenthesis, which also gives the sentence a sudden, perhaps amused, twist of detachment. M. A. Screech does not preserve the round brackets of the original, so I have attempted a translation myself: ‘I once saw (Arrius says) an elephant which had a cymbal hanging on each thigh and another stuck to its trunk, at the sound of which the others were dancing in a circle, raising themselves up and leaning down, following the cadences of the instrument.’

In his analysis of this section of the Apologie, George Boas, being perhaps absorbed by his concern for paradoxes (1933, 10-17) does not take into account what seems to me a most important passage, one in which Montaigne speaks about the elephant in a neutral, non-paradoxical tone: ‘We can also go on to say that elephants have some notion of religion since, after ablutions and purifications, they can be seen waving their trunks like arms upraised, while gazing intently at the rising sun; for long periods at fixed times in the day (by instinct, not from teaching or precept) they stand rooted in meditation and contemplation; there may not be similarities in other animals, but that does not allow us to make judgements about their total lack of religion.’ And he concludes: ‘When matters are hidden from us, we cannot in any way conceive them.’ Although the section on elephants appears on the whole intensely paradoxical, one cannot ignore this declaration of suspension of judgement on Montaigne’s part.

A few years later Justus Lipsius (1582) wrote a letter to his friend Jan Hauten entirely devoted to the elephant. The first few sentences contain the key to the interpretation of the text: ‘Yesterday,’ he says to his friend after greeting him, ‘we had amiable guests (their discourses still wander in my ears): elephants. The introduction of the noun at the end of the sentence, after the attributes (which is allowed by the Latin language), is further delayed by the round brackets: the effect which ensues is almost comic. The choice of words, not only their position, is also indicative, from the very beginning, of Lipsius’s approach: ‘We prattled for quite a while’, he continues, ‘about their talents and amazing nature.’ The verb garrire (which I translated with ‘prattle’) conveys a sense of ‘chattering’, of ‘blabbing’, even, which has to be taken into account in order to understand the author’s attitude. This emerges also on a less minute level of analysis, as the subsequent words show, when he declares his scepticism, while at the same time pretending to feel sorry about it: ‘[We prattled about] everything light-heartedly, apart from the fact that I feel outraged at not being able to believe fully in several things.

The letter is mainly a discussion of Pliny’s praise of the elephant: Lipsius quotes it, then he enucleates a few qualities of the animal one by one and adds references from other authors which should support Pliny’s testimony. For instance, on the point of ‘Memory of what has been taught to them’ (i.e., elephants), he uses Plutarch’s story of the
elephant which at night repeats the lesson which it was not able to learn by day: 'Plutarch (my author along with Pliny)', he says, 'states] that a slow-of-mind elephant which had been repeatedly scolded and whipped was found practicing under the moon’s beams the gestures and movements which had been assigned to him. What great, great things!' The use of the alliterative 'verbis verberibusque' ('scolded and whipped') produces an effect of amusingly detachment. Paronomasia is also used the same effect: for instance, on the point of 'Memory', Lipsius says: 'Ea autem pars tam magna in hoc animante, ut homini non dicam nihil cedat, sed eum excedat': 'This faculty is so great indeed in this beast, that I shall not say that it is not inferior in any way to man, but that it is superior to him' (Lipsius 1675, 67).

The only case when Lipsius expresses his scepticism by means of actual textual criticism is on the point of chastity. At first he tackles the question by making the elementary deduction that if elephants really copulated only once in a lifetime 'their species would have disappeared.' Then he refutes this view by means of a philological consideration: he suggests that the 'once' in the passage in Aristotle—once the male has impregnated the female, he does not touch her... was 'either wrongly expressed or it was misinterpreted [by Aelian]' and taken to signify that elephants only copulate once in a lifetime. In taking leave from his friend Lipsius distances himself from the whole subject-matter by claiming that it was all a jeu d'esprit: 'Here is a joke for you,' he says to his friend, 'which came to


(71)Other instances of the same rhetorical device are found frequently in the text: I shall quote here another one: 'this animal is shy and shamefuf': p. 64 ('pudens et pudicum hoc animal').

(72)Ibid. ('Prohibus' [italics in the text]): ‘defecert id genus’.

(73)Ibid.: ‘Marem quam semel inierit. non vítrà tangere’ [italics in the text].

(74)Ibid.: ‘malè aut lecto aut intellecto’ (with an interesting instance of ‘figura etimologica’). For Aristotle references, Aristotle (1965-91): 5.14 (II, p. 145): ‘The male... never touches again a female it has once impregnated’ [my italics].
me from the funny jokes in the middle of a wine-session; I do not claim that many serious and true things are contained in it. However, for more than ten dense pages Lipsius has been seriously ridiculing the figure of the elephant by means of rhetorical, philological and logical arguments.

A most interesting text is Giulio Cesare Capaccio’s Delle imprese (1592), in which three chapters are devoted to the elephant. Although he begins by citing Valeriano, he distances himself from him immediately. The pretext is offered by the customary discussion about knee-joints: ‘On the contrary, it is most true that the elephant bends its knee just as other animals do; I do not intend to be considered one of the hoi polloi who please themselves by believing that it does not possess joints, as if motion were allowed to animals without them’. He then concludes with a sceptical comment which is the sign not only of a new critical attitude towards the ancients, but also of a new approach to the elephant on the part not of a scientist stricto sensu, but of a man of letters: ‘I leave it to him [i.e., Valeriano].’ Capaccio says, ‘to consider such a patent truth; as to his interpreting philosophically what pertains to the foot as a clue to the affections, this is such an invention that not even the elephant of Trapobane would tolerate it’. His attitude becomes clearer when he refers to the anecdote concerning the elephant’s fodder, which also dates back to Aelian: ‘As to what they recount in order to demonstrate its equanimity namely that once, after its servant mixed stones and dust into the fodder, which also dates back to Aelian: ‘Asto what they believed that it does not possess joints, as if motion were allowed to animals without them’. He then concludes with a sceptical comment which is the sign not only of a new critical attitude towards the ancients, but also of a new approach to the elephant on the part not of a scientist stricto sensu, but of a man of letters: ‘I leave it to him [i.e., Valeriano].’ Capaccio says, ‘to consider such a patent truth; as to his interpreting philosophically what pertains to the foot as a clue to the affections, this is such an invention that not even the elephant of Trapobane would tolerate it’. His attitude becomes clearer when he refers to the anecdote concerning the elephant’s fodder, which also dates back to Aelian: ‘As to what they recount in order to demonstrate its equanimity namely that once, after its servant mixed stones and dust into the ration of its fodder in order to cheat on the weight, the elephant, happening to be in the kitchen, when it saw the roast meat, threw ash on it-, let those who want to believe it believe it, since, after all, many things were made up by the mendacious Greeks’. On the point of religion, a shade of doubt emerges: ‘And if they have some disease’. Capaccio says, ‘they seem to be asking help from the gods by casting grass towards the sky’. Speaking about the use of the elephant in imprese, Capaccio amusingly emphasizes its terror of fire, a characteristic, which, despite Montaigne’s view, is not one of its most commendable ones (although it is one of its most frequently cited characteristics in the Renaissance): ‘This animal’, Capaccio says, ‘would provide the material for an extraordinary imprese, if one depicted an elephant with a castle being scared by fire in order to signify a ruler who, after spurring others on to war, when he saw his state in danger, got scared and withdrew (for, since elephants flee at the sight of fire), this stratagem was many times the cause of turmoil in the armies of the Carthaginians)’. As to the dance of elephants testified to by Arrian, Capaccio’s scepticism is clear: after reporting, without making any comment, the story of Seneca about the elephant which was taught to walk on ropes, he says: ‘But as for what Arrian says about having seen an elephant playing the cymbal and the others jumping, I cannot imagine how this could be believed’. It is interesting to note that the two elephants which illustrate Capaccio’s narrative are not identifiable as either African or Indian.

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(75) Ibid. : p. 66: ‘Habes lusum, naturum non importunè mihi ex hesterno lusu et joco inter vina, cui vt seria multa et vera inesse nihil ambigo, ita quedam maiora vero: nec vsquequaque in talibus veteres illos Fidei litasse, faciél tecum credam.’ It should be remembered that Lipsius’s knowledge of elephants was based on his extensive studies of Roman military history.

(76) Capaccio (1592, bk 2, ch. 7, f. 17v): ‘E’ verissimo che l’Elefante, come gli altri piega il ginocchio, per non esser del volo, a cui piace che non habbia giontura, come che senza giontura si conceda ad animale il moto.’

(77) Ibid. : ff. 17v-18r: ‘Quel, notabilmente, lo lascio considerare a lui; e quel che filosoficamente applica del piede ch’è indito dell’affetto, è tanto grande inuentionc, che non la sosterrrebbe l’Elefante di Trapobana.’ The elephants of Trapobane owed their fame to Aelian (1958-59: 16.18 (III, 283).

(78) Ibid. : f. 18v: ‘Quel che raccontano per l’Equità, ch’essendogli meschiato nella mistura della sua Biada pietre e polvere, e questo era dal servitudo fatto per ingannar nel pesa, egli una volta in Cucina vedendo l’arrosto, l’asperse di cenere; credalci vuole, hauendo molte cose finte i Greci bugiard.’ Ibid. : f. 19r: ‘E se hanno alcun morbo, par che chieggiano aiuto a gli Iddij, col menar herbe verso il Cielo.’

(79) See supra.

(80) Ibid. : f. 20v: ‘Darebbe materia di singolare Impresa quest’animaie, quando per significar vn Principe ch’hauesse spronato gli altri a far guerra, veduto poi il suo stato in pericolo, temesse, e se ritirasse adietro, si pingesse l’Elefante Turrito che tema il fuoco, che questa (sic) stratagemma fè turbar molte volte l’esercito a’ Cartaginesi.’ To the best of my knowledge, the belief of the elephant’s hatred of fire dates back to Aelian (1958-9): 16.36 (III, pp. 311-13), where he relates the anecdote of an attack against elephants from the part of pigs on which fire had been set on.


(82) Ibid.: ‘Ma quel che racconta Arriano di hauer veduto l’Elefante sonare il Cembalo e gli altri saltare, non vedo come possa esser creduto.’ Cfr. Montaigne supra.
The only instance of visual parody which I found in my research is represented by Martin Schongauer’s elephant-and-castle (c. 1483)(83), where the elephant is a mere reproduction of a type of elephant which seems to have been extremely popular during the Renaissance, but the ‘castle’ is, to the best of my knowledge, unprecedented (fig. 5). The castle contains two tiny little figures: the one, apparently a king, is visible from head to shoulders and is about to cast what looks like a stone; the other is hardly visible at all and seems to be hiding behind one of the merlons. The effect which the engraving generates is on the whole, if not comic, certainly quite bizarre. As far as we know, Schongauer’s elephant has its prototype (whether through direct or indirect influence is still not clear) in the illustration to a manuscript of Pier Paolo Dicembrio (Barclay Lloyd 1971, p. 117 : fig. 6). The only details by which the two elephants are differentiated are the position of the trunk -which is bellicosely raised in Schongauer’s elephant and relaxed in that of the Dicembrio’s manuscript– and the presence, in the former, of a ‘castle’.

The section ‘De elephanto’ in Gesner’s De quadrupedibus (1551) is illustrated by a watercolour of an elephant which is an exact reproduction of the one which we find in Dicembrio-and, partially, as we have seen, in that engraved by Schongauer. It is interesting to note that the elephant which illustrates Edward Topsell’s History of Foure-Footed Beastes… (1607; repr. 1658), is also identical to that of Dicembrio-Gesner. Last but not least, the elephant in question was also adopted by Ulisse Aldrovandi (1616) for his De quadrupedibus solidipedibus… for his chapter ‘De elephanto’. It is not beyond the scope of my research to discuss briefly on the diffusion of the ‘Dicembrio elephant’. The fact that Topsell and Aldrovandi used the same elephant as Gesner testifies to the ‘flexibility’ of natural studies in the Renaissance and to their strong dependence on the philosophical-literary tradition. The elephant with peculiarly scaly trunk and ears which occupies an entire folio page in Gesner, Topsell and Aldrovandi was certainly meant to be more attractive than any less fantastic.(84)

To sum up: the fortuna of the elephant in the Renaissance was made possible by a variety of factors. The reappearance of elephants in Europe in the flesh starting from the late fifteenth century was one such factor. We have seen in Valeriano the sense of wonder experienced by the city of Rome before the performances of Hanno. The

(83)See note 5.
(84)For some valuable observations on the link of natural studies in the Renaissance with the philosophical, religious and literary tradition, see Olmi (1976, 1977).
element of the taste for the exotic also had a part in the diffusion of elephant imagery (the reason is clearly explained by Ercole Tasso). Furthermore, the enthusiasm which the sixteenth century had for emblems and imprese, which descended from the Hieroglyphics of Horapollo, proved to be a fertile ground for elephant symbolism. This observation leads us on to a point which would be wrong to neglect: the elephant’s physical supremacy.

Although parallels between kings and elephants were often made on a mere zoological basis (the elephant’s knee articulation; the proverbial duration of pregnancy), the implicit link—what we may call the ‘metaphorical bridge’—is to be seen in the physical, if not also the moral, superiority of the elephant to all other animals (both kinds of superiority had been exemplarily described by Pliny, as we have seen).

In other words, the ‘king of animals’ became the perfect symbol for representing the king tout court. This aspect is visually expressed in Rosso Fiorentino’s ‘Elefant fleurelyse’ and in the triumphs by Mantegna and Pot; and it is visually as well as verbally expressed in Valeriano, Dolce, Ruscelli, Covarrubias and Givio. The other side of the coin was the vulnerability of the king: the story of the combat of the elephant with the serpent-dragon (which Givio, for example, resolved in favour of the former and Corrozet in favour of the latter), and the story of its seizure by hunters—owing to, once again, the inflexibility of its knee-gave rise to Camilli’s and Solórzano’s devises of a king whose strength cannot be surmounted by that of God.

(85) See note 32.

Parallel to the thriving of elephant symbolism in the Renaissance, a break with tradition took place. Poliziano constitutes a unique case, with his strictly scientific philological approach to the question of flexibility even before (half a century before) explorers reported on live elephants. Lipsius was the only humanist who seemed to be aware of the zoological ‘discoveries’ and who attacked—even if ‘just for fun’—the elephant on both rhetorical and philological, as well as logical grounds. Finally, it is interesting to note the scant preoccupation with visual realism which Capaccio and Thevet, the only ones among the ‘censors’ to have pictures attached to their narratives, show towards the elephant as such—if one is allowed to consider them at all responsible for the pictures. On the whole, attitudes towards the elephant oscillated among the most critical writers from a more or less tenuous scepticism (as in the case of Montaigne) to mockery (Lipsius). However, the authority of Pliny and the other traditional sources was such that it could not be simply ignored: the various misconceptions concerning elephants dating back to antiquity had to be refuted one by one.

As to the elephant-kings, in our survey which look genuinely African are that by Rosso, the only ones in Fontainebleau and those in the Pot panel in Haarlem. The ones by Mantegna, which ought to be African, have in fact too small heads and ears extraordinarily big to appear really African, or Indian. The others are neither African nor Indian in appearance, but are to be regarded as merely fantastic.

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