

Asian Elephants in Christianity (India and Abroad)

Jason Johns¹

Introduction

The Asian Elephant (*Elephas Maximus*) once held sway over vast regions comprising West Asia to South and South East Asia¹. They are now restricted to hilly and green areas of India and other South Asian regions like Sri Lanka, Sumatra, etc. The Asian Elephant has many cultural and religious representations in the South and South East Asian region. This stands true for the Indian subcontinents as well, wherein we find earliest representations of it in the seals of the Indus Valley Civilization. This type of cultural representation continues in formal religious contexts in the historic period. Here we get representation of the elephant in Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain art, literature, etc. The main reason for this is, the elephant was physically present in the spatial and temporal context of India. Through its physicality it influenced man and was thus represented in the theology or religious constructs of the various religions that flourished in India. Whether it is Ganesha, Abhisheka Lakshmi (Gajalakshmi) and Airavata in Hinduism, Queen Maya being shown with a white elephant in Buddhism or an elephant or tusks as an auspicious dream of Trishila Mata in Jainism, the physical presence of the elephant in the environment of the subcontinent facilitated their entry into the religio-spiritual domains of these religions. Hence in the case of Brahmanism, the elephant is revered and worshipped as the elephant headed god, Ganesh, god of wisdom and remover of obstacles. In Buddhism as the white Elephant, suggestive of the Buddha' birth and elephant in the auspicious dream of Trishila Mata also leads to their reverence in these faiths.

But what can be said of religions which were born outside India, like Christianity? Christianity is based on collection of books termed as the Bible - comprising of the Old Testament and New Testament. Though it focuses on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, as popular saying goes the New Testament is hidden in the old and the Old Testament is revealed and fulfilled in the new.

Elephants in Christianity

Thus for the study of elephants in Christianity our first reference will be from the Bible, specifically the Old Testament. Popularly we see that when Noah, his ark and the flood which destroyed the Earth are depicted, elephants and giraffe along with other animals are shown. So could elephants actually have climbed the ark? In Gen. Ch. 7:2 we get a reference to seven clean animals and two unclean animals in pairs and seven pairs of each bird alighting the ark. Logically there neither seems to be a direct mention of the term elephant nor a description of the two kinds of unclean animals which climbed aboard the ark.

¹ Visiting Faculty for post- Graduation, Dept. of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Mumbai, India.

In 1 Kings Ch.10:18-22 we get references to a throne of Ivory covered in gold, which gives a description of the commodity of trade. Along with this, we get a reference that King Solomon had merchant ships sail at sea with that of King Hiram once every three years. Merchants brought gold, silver, ivory, apes, monkeys and peacocks (are some versions), etc. The above verses thus talk about the mercantile activity, formation of a fleet, duration of trade and the commodities. But this leaves a very important question open as to where these ships were headed. This question is also answered in 1 Kings:10:11 where in “Ships of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir, brought great quantities of almug wood and precious stones from Ophir”. ‘Ophir’ as scholars put it, could be located either in Africa, America or Asia. With exception to the export of gold, in Asia the most probable location is the India, specifically the South Indian coast².

There is another reference to a creature called Behemoth in Job 40:15 which is described as “eating grass like an Ox, strength in his hips and power in his stomach muscles, tail like cedar, sinews of his thighs tightly knit, bones like beams of bronze, ribs like bars of iron, lies under lotus tresses, indeed the river may rage, he is confident though the Jordan gushes into his mouth”, etc. The creature described here most probably is a large animal; amphibious in nature and rather powerful, which could possibly be a hippo or composite between a hippo and an elephant.

Thus in the Bible we get reference only to the product of the elephant. , Ivory also known Shenhabim – ‘tusk of Elephant’ in Hebrew, but no reference of the animal or word elephant itself directly.

Elephants in Christianity in the Indian scenario

The above phenomena repeats with the emergence of Indo-Roman trade in the first few centuries C.E. Ivory and exotic animals including elephants had been traded to Rome. This is supported by numerous finds in India and abroad e.g. similar ivory figurines at Ter, Bhokardan and Pompeii³. Pliny also mentions that elephants were taught to pay reverence to people for e.g. the king⁴. With the decline of Indo Roman trade the search for Ivory was extended to Africa, although we know that in Ptolemaic times occasional forays to establish contact with the Red Sea to get to countries bordering the Indian Ocean for this specific purpose were undertaken⁵.

¹ Sukumar R. The Asian Elephant: Ecology and Management, Cambridge University Press, New York, First Published-1989, Reprint, 1992, p.1.

² M’Clintock John, Strong James, Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Volume 1, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1877,p.384.

³ Behrendt Kurt A., The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art , Yale University Press, New York ,2007,p.17.

⁴ Noyes Deborah, One Kingdom: Our Lives with Animals: the Human-animal Bond in Myth, History, Science, and Story, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 2006, p.23

⁵ Bard Kathryn A. (Ed.), Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt, Routledge, Oxon, UK, 1999, p.685.

According to Bagly (1989) in India, the Portuguese in around 1514 observed that low caste Christians were not allowed to enter parts of towns and villages in Malabar. Though in Cochin, St. Thomas Christians were the only local non-polluting Christians allowed to enter the temple precincts and urban streets (Bagly 1989). In addition to being considered as donors, patrons and sponsors at Hindu shrines by Nayars⁶ and temple festivals all over Kerala in the pre – colonial times, a Syrian Church was also constructed adjoining a Hindu temple (Bagly 1989). Christians used Hindu style torches, umbrellas, and bands in festivals, sometimes a single collection of processional regalia was shared between both religious groups (Bagly 1989). It is also noted that at least on temple lent out its temple elephants to Syrian worshippers for festival procession⁷.

These late references of sociological bearing have a connection to the elephant and seem to be a resultant of some preceding cause. This may be thus traced to The Thomas of Cana Plates or Mar Jacob Plates (seen by the Portuguese in 18th Century) refer to a period around 345 A.D (Thomas, 2008). In this we have reference to King ‘Cocurangon’ (also known as Cheraman Perumal) calling Thomas and giving him privileges like seven kinds of musical instruments, palanquin riding and riding on elephant among other things⁸. The Tarisappalli or Quilon plates dated to 849 A.D. also talk of privileges given to the Christian community along with other communities⁹. The privileges did include riding an elephant wherein we get references to families being granted the privileged status, not because of their foreign origin but because of their contribution to maritime trade and commerce between India and the Middle-East. Thus the elephant was used as a rewarding privilege for the economic contribution provided by the Christian community with others, to the Indian scenario.

Elephants in Christianity in outside India

The West had not seen the likes of an elephant for centuries post the decline of Ivory trade with India and Africa. This is proven by its absence in art or its distorted representations in art. The memory of the elephant would have all been forgotten in Rome, if not for February 1962. In Vatican City preparations were on going for the Second Vatican Council, during which workers were digging up one of the courtyards of the Vatican library under some old steps, there they found bones and teeth. Another author points out that this was not simple digging but an archaeological dig on Vatican hill¹⁰. The objects were taken to the Vatican Archives as no one could recall that this could be some rather large animal, let alone an elephant in the Vatican¹¹. In 1990 the bones were rediscovered by Silvio Bedeni, Italio-American Historian who sent it to the National Museum of Natural History or the Smithsonian, Washington wherein it was confirmed that the bones were of an Asian elephant, Hanno who travelled from India to Rome¹².

⁶ Thomas Pradip, *Strong Religion, Zealous Media: Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India* SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008, p.50.

⁷ Bayly Susan, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1989, p.253.

⁸ Neill Stephen, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, Cambridge University Press, 1984 London. Paperback, Reprint, 2004, p.388.

⁹ Varghese Alexander P., *India: History, Religion, Vision and Contribution to the World, Volume 1*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd, Delhi, 2008, p.314

¹⁰ Elvins Mark, *Catholic Trivia*, Gracewing Publishing, London, 2002, p.157.

¹¹ Miller Sam, *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*, Penguin Random House, UK, London, 2014, p.157

¹² Ibid.11.

Who was Hanno? How did this Asian elephant travel from India to Rome and for what purpose? How did it stay in Rome, which has a different environment all together? And lastly how did its bones land under the steps of Vatican Library? The whole story begins in India with the purchase of Hanno the white elephant from the King of Cochin as a gift for Manuel I by Alphonso de Albuquerque. Initially there were two elephants which were transported with two Nairs by the King of Cochin to Lisbon in the summer of 1511 A.D. Cheetahs, leopards, parrots, India fowl, dogs and Persian horses also accompanied the elephants as gifts to the King of Portugal¹³. The hide of the elephant was smeared with oil to protect it from salty air¹⁴. The elephant was kept in a royal park at Riviera from where it went by land to the harbour of Lisbon. A story regarding the handler says that the man fell in love with a girl in Lisbon and whispered to the elephant that it was going to barbarious land convincing it not to go aboard the ship, on the king's intervention the keeper had to do the opposite¹⁵. The route which the ship took was from Lisbon passing through the Straits Gibraltar and Western Mediterranean stopping at Alicante, Ibiza and Majorica¹⁶. It was reported that huge crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of Hanno and even climbed the boat, after which no further stops were made till Porto Ercole, Rome(Miller 2014). Swiss Guards were sent to protect it and cardinals came to catch a glimpse of it, as the elephant walked several weeks (around 120 Kms) in winter rains to reach Rome¹⁷. Hanno, named after Ānā, Malayalam for elephant reached Rome on Sunday 19th March 1514, the first Sunday of Lent, presented in Crimson, velvet and gold brocade with a tower and turrets of gifts¹⁸.

Confirming Pliny's assertion that Asian Elephants could be better trained to pay respects to people, the Elephant paraded and knelt before the Pope, dipped his trunk in a trough of water and sprayed it. Hanno, the female Elephant once a circulating gift from Portugal soon became the most prized possession of Pope Leo X amongst his collection. It used to perform tricks and lived in Vatican City State at Cartile de Belvedere¹⁹. Despite the fact that this elephant was held in captivity under the personal care of the Pope, it lived a "lavish" life despite being so far away from home and in a different climate altogether. Being four years of age when she arrived in Lisbon, her life was rather short, due to a combination of lavish care, climate and other factors. She passed away in 1516 but not without one last complication. Due to the above factors she developed constipation. Even the best doctors of Rome had not even heard of an elephant forget treating one for real. Hence with all expenses from the Pope as her sponsor she was given a fatal dose of gold glazed purgative which killed her²⁰, with the Pope at her death bed.

What followed her death has more cultural impact than her life. The grief stricken Pope wrote her epitaph, commissioned Raphael to execute a life size mural of her on one of the wall adjacent to the entrance of Vatican(Plate 1)²¹ (which was destroyed later), the tusks were hung in the Vatican for

¹³ Mason Peter, *The Lives of Images*, Reaktion Books ,London,2001,p.9

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁵ Miller, *Op.cit.*, p.158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 15, .p.159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 15, p.159

¹⁹ Lach Donald F., *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume II: A Century of Wonder. Book 1: The Visual Arts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, p.138.

²⁰ York Tripp ,*The End of Captivity?: A Primate's Reflections on Zoos, Conservation, and Christian Ethic*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Cascade Books,, Eugene,Oregon,2015,p.xvi.

²¹ Miller, *Op.cit.* , p.159.

years to come. The effect of Hanno went on in the cultural realm as depictions in art and literature. The book the “Last will and Testament of the Elephant Hanno” by Pietro Aretino was a satirical text on the condition of society, the elephant and the clergy during the period. It is said that Raphael also designed the tomb of Hanno commissioned by the Pope via Branconio dell’Aquila.

Elephant or animal depiction combined with admiration and love by the Pope and his commission of various works to commemorate the elephant was either running in one of the two directions - firstly almost worshipping the elephant (out of love) and second portraying it as part of creation, worshipping the Creator at Catholicism’s most sacred church. The Elephant continued to be portrayed and duplicated in art forms through the 16 Century, usually termed as ‘Raphael’ and ‘After Raphael’. The elephant fountain in a niche at Villa Madame, North of Rome done by Raphael, Udine and Giulio Romano is based on the elephant²², firstly and secondly it served as a memorial (possibly a copy of the tomb itself) with a box like feature. We also have stucco panels of the Vatican Loggias by Giovanni da Udine, a student of Raphael who specialized in ornamentation, portrayed all the animals in the shipment sent by King Manuel²³. Raphael’s sketch, Adoration on the Magi, 1520 suspiciously has an elephant. The same drawing served as an inspiration for the Adoration of the Magi Tapestry in the Vatican Museum, Gallery of the Tapestries Galleria Degli Arazzi done after 1513(Plate 4)²⁴. “The Creation of animals” mural by Raphael in the Apostolic Palace, Vatican again has an elephant (Plate 2). All these were no doubt inspired by Hanno.

Analysis of elephant use in India and Abroad

In India via the copper plate grants we see that Elephant riding was given as a privilege to the merchant Christian community and used as a status symbol by those to whom it was given by the rulers of Ancient South India. Later it was used as a status maker among St. Thomas Christians in Malabar who could enter the temple premises and shared the same set of elephants and processional regalia for their festival processions. It is interesting to note that when Christian symbols as a cross cultural influence were carved in the form of the St. Thomas Crosses – the Indian Lotus was incorporated with the cross along with the dove, in some representation we find the peacock and sea creatures also incorporated, but the elephant is not to be found. May be this was because only the Biblical symbol could be portrayed, and that in the Oriental Churches only symbols and as of now only two dimensional images are preferred unlike in Catholicism.

In the case of abroad, in Biblical times as can be traced to that of Solomon and Hiram, ivory and not the elephant itself is used as a status marker. This is documented by the use of the throne of Ivory covered in gold by the King. In the case of 16th Century and the coming of Hanno, it was now the elephant and not it’s ivory which served as a status symbol for Manuel, who used it as a ‘circulatory gift’ to the Pope²⁵. The depiction and love allotted to the elephant Hanno by the Pope, is ascribed by a certain author as putting a “certain affinity between animal and mankind” and the “assertion of almost

²² Lach, Op.cit.,p.142

²³ Mason, Op.cit, p.9.

²⁴ Elvins, Op.cit.

²⁵ Ibid. p.158.

being tempted to put faith in idolatry”²⁶. This assertion is proved not only by the depiction of the Elephant as commemoration after its death, but the continuation after it -like the stucco, paintings, sketches and tapestries. The post Hanno episode continues to spread to various countries as artists get influenced by the depiction of Hanno and take it to their respective countries.

Analysing the depictions of the elephant in art, besides its depictions in early Roman mosaics, with the disappearance of the Circus in Rome with the growth of Christianity²⁷ we have the disappearance of the elephant in depictions too. Although distorted representations may be found. This phenomenon without the subject is similar to the description of Behemoth in the Bible. In the period when Hanno arrived in Rome; the fresh depictions in the West reoccur, some of them realistic others which are not very realistic. Realistic depictions are but obviously attributed to the Renaissance artists like Raphael and his students along with the artists who are inspired by their depictions. The depiction added new vitality to the depictions in Christianity as it increased the repertoire and included an animal that may have got left out the creation narrative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with regard to the Asian Elephant in Christianity, though it was not part of the temporal and spatial zone of the Holy land and for the fact that it is neither explicitly mentioned in the Bible nor as part of Christian theology; it did find its place in this faith. The niche that it carved for itself was not only on the social-political and artist sphere but also in the hearts and minds of people including the Pope. In the Indian context, it was into the realm of socio-economics where it was a symbol of status of being favoured by the local ruler. Whereas in the West; though it was a status symbol, its portraiture and papal obsession increased to an extent almost equalled to idolatry by some. Forgotten and distorted in portraiture after the Hanno episode in the West it only came back in the minds of the people post 1962, whereas in India it still lingers on as a bond between two communities of Hindus and Christians.

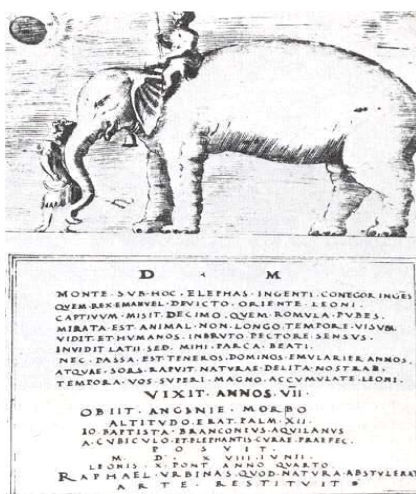


fig. 1 Sketch of Hanno’s memorial fresco and epitaph.



fig.2 “Creation of the animals” by Raphael, 1518–1519, a fresco on the second floor of the Palazzi Pontifici in the Vatican

²⁶ York, Op.cit. p.xv.

²⁷ Kistler John M., War Elephants, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, USA, 2007, p.171.



fig.3 Sketch of Hanno and mahout, School of Raphael, c.1514.



fig.4 Vatican Museum, Gallery of the Tapestries Galleria Degli Arazzi done after 1513

References

Alexander P. Varghese, *India: History, Religion, Vision and Contribution to the World*, Volume 1, Atlantic Publishers & Distributers (P) Ltd, Delhi, 2008,

Deborah Noyes, *One Kingdom: Our Lives with Animals: the Human-animal Bond in Myth, History, Science, and Story*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 2006.

Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume II: A Century of Wonder. Book 1: The Visual Arts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

John M'Clintock, James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Volume 1, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1877

Kathryn A. Bard (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, Routledge, Oxon, UK, 1999.

Kurt A. Behrendt, *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press, New York, 2007.

Mark Elvins, *Catholic Trivia*, Gracewing Publishing, London, 2002.

Peter Mason, *The Lives of Images*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001.

Pradip Thomas, *Strong Religion, Zealous Media: Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008.

Sam Miller, *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*, Penguin Random House, UK, London, 2014. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1984, Paperback Reprint, 2004.

Sukumar R., *The Asian Elephant: Ecology and Management*, Cambridge University Press, New York, First Published-1989, Reprint, 1992.

Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1989.

Tripp York, *The End of Captivity?: A Primate's Reflections on Zoos, Conservation, and Christian Ethics*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2015.

The Open Bible, *The New King James Version*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Thomson Press, India, 1982.