

Sri Lankan Elephant in 17th Century - A Historical Record of Robert Knox: A Review

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Introduction

Many travelers to Sri Lanka from 4th century BC to early 20th century AD during the British colonial period recorded the Sri Lankan elephant in many aspects. Even travelers and tourists today have been commenting on them as a famed tourist attraction. Morphology of Sri Lankan elephant has been an eye catching attraction since ancient times. Due to the uniqueness of the morphology and excellent qualities of them, Sri Lanka was considered the motherland of Asian elephant by Dionysius Periegetes in 1st century AD (Pridham, 1849, p.6). Onesicritus (4th century BC), Megasthenes (4th century BC), Solinus Polyhistor (1st century AD), Aelian (170-235 AD) and Ludovico de Varthema (16th century AD) clearly mentioned the abundance of elephants in the country and they were bigger, sturdier and even wiser than those of India (Ponnamperuma, 1961, p.29,30,31,37,47,169; Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian, 1877, p.63). By the descriptions of Aelian, Cosmas (6th century AD) and Athanasius Nikitin (15th century AD), it is revealed that the Sri Lankan elephants were exported to mainland which is India and their price was dependent on physique of the creature (Ponnamperuma, 1961, p.47,77,157; The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian monk, 2010, p.371,372). Thus the elephants were considered as a luxurious commodity which was exported by Sri Lanka and their qualities resulted in them being bought by Indian kings as they were better to accompany in the war at the time. Accordingly, it can be identified that all the travelers who visited the country prior to 17th century recorded mainly the commercial value of elephants but rarely their usage in processional activities¹. Robert Knox (1641-1720 AD) who lived in Sri Lanka as a captive for nineteen and a half years was the first to write a long narration on elephants focusing on many aspects rather than their commercial value. So the description of elephants by him itself emphasizes the need to review his account based on a historical perspective when we are studying them in any aspect. Therefore the main objective of this study is to review his account to identify the condition of elephants at the time.

Robert Knox: a brief biography

Robert Knox was an Englishman who was held captive in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 17th century AD. He was born on 8th February 1641 at Tower Hill, London. He sailed to India for the second time adjoining to the East India Company under the captaincy of Robert Knox (elder) who

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was his father by the ship ‘Anne’ on 21st January 1657 when he was sixteen years old. When they were returning to the England after sailing to port to port in India for one year, they were suffered by a fierce storm and forced to cut down the mast of the ship. Therefore they put ashore on the port called Kot?iyâram in Sri Lanka to replace a new mast. The ship was impounded and sixteen of the crew including Knox and his father the captain were taken captive by king Râjasinghe II of the Kandyan kingdom. Captives were forbidden to leave the kingdom and settled separately but they were treated well. Father and son lived together and both suffered severely from malaria for several months. Fever caused elder Knox’s death in 1661 but son got well. He built his own house and was able to establish himself as a farmer and a moneylender. Knox’s age when he was taken prisoner was 19 years and continued prisoner for another 19 years. Eventually he escaped with one companion, Stephen Rutland on 18th October 1679 and left the country after long captivity. He appeared to Dutch and they treated him generously and transported him to Batavia (now Jakarta) from where he was able to return England. He arrived back safely in London in September 1680.



During his return, Knox wrote the manuscript, ‘*An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*’ and later published it in London in 1681. It was a descriptive account with illustrations of his experiences on Sri Lanka. Knox recorded many aspects of the country and its society, including royal administration, agriculture, religion, culture, education and bio-diversity. The book made him famous as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, but the story of the Knox was real not fiction. It was one of the earliest European accounts on Sri Lanka and was accepted as an invaluable record of the island in the 17th century.

¹ Fah-Hian and Cosmas recorded the two different occasions of using elephants in processions.

Fah-Hian described the religious procession for tooth relic of Buddha (i.e. Daladā perahāra) held in Anurādhapura as “...*the king magnificently caparisons a great elephant, and commissions a man of eloquence and ability to clothe himself in royal apparel and riding on the elephant, to sound a drum and proclaims as follows...*” (Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun, 2012, p.155,156).

Cosmas recorded “*the king of Taprobane (i.e. Sri Lanka) ordered great honour to be paid to Sopatrus, causing him to be mounted on an elephant and conducted round the city with drums beating and high state.*”

(Cosmas says that the above circumstance was told him by Sopatrus himself who was a merchant visited Sri Lanka for business in 5-6th century AD (The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk, 2010, p.369,370).

Sri Lankan elephant in Knox's account

Knox's record was the first descriptive travel account of Sri Lankan elephant of three pages and scattered throughout the printed book. His statement "...*the creature that this country is famed for above any in India*" (Knox, 1681, p.21) as many travelers had mentioned before, defined deep rooted idea of Sri Lankan elephant among foreigners at the time. This also expressed why he was interested to write such a long narration on them. In his description Knox has focused on five (5) main aspects as:

- i. Nature of Sri Lankan elephant
- ii. Attitudes of people towards elephants
- iii. Activities of elephants
- iv. Capturing and taming of elephants
- v. Damages to the people by elephants

The details he recorded of elephants can be compiled as follows:

Nature of Sri Lankan elephant

Knox recorded excellent details of nature of elephants not restricted to Sri Lankan ones but common to all the breeds. Its greatest motherhood above other wild creatures and caring of little ones is highly appreciated as:

"...for the Shees² are alike tender of any ones young ones as of their own: where there are many she elephants together, the young ones go and suck of any, as well as their mothers; and if a young one be in distress and should cry out, they will all in general run to the help and aid thereof; and if they be going over a river, as here be some somewhat broad, and the streams run very swift, they will all with their trunks assist and help to convey the young ones over." (ibid, p.22)

Its general behaviors and physical infirmities were also mentioned. Knox wrote:

"It is their constant practice to shove down with their heads great trees, which they love to eat, when they be too high, and they cannot otherwise reach the boughs.... They take great delight to ly³ and tumble in the water; and will swim excellently well. Their teeth they never shed." (ibid)

"At some uncertain seasons the males have an infirmity comes on them, that they will be stark mad, so that none can rule them. Many times it so comes to pass that they with their keepers on their backs, run raging until they throw them down and kill them; but commonly

² The female elephants

³ lie

⁴ oil

there is notice of it before, by an oyl⁴ that will run out of their cheeks, which when that appears, immediately they chain them fast to great trees by the legs. For this infirmity they use no medicine, neither is he sick; but the females are never subject to this.” (ibid, p.23)

He compared wild elephants with tame ones.

“As he is the greatest in body, so in understanding also. For he will do anything that his keeper bids him, which is possible for a beast not having hands to do... Wild ones will run much faster than a man, but tame ones not... Neither will they ever breed tame ones with tame ones; but to ease themselves of the trouble to bring them meat⁵, they will ty⁶ their two fore-feet together, and put them into the woods, where meeting with the wild ones, they conceive and go one year with young.” (ibid, p.22)

Attitudes of people towards elephants

Comparing with other wild animals, elephant is rather important in cultural activities including art even today. One reason for considering it as a special animal is revealed by Knox’s description. He mentioned that the Sinhalese people had an idea on great motherhood of elephants as:

“And as the Chingulayes⁷ report, they bear the greatest love to their young of all irrational creatures.” (ibid)

It can be identified that the speckled elephants were considered more beautiful and special at the time as today. Knox says:

“The king hath⁸ also an elephant spotted or speckled all the body over, which was lately caught; and tho⁹ he hath many very stately elephants, and may have as many more as he pleases, yet he prefers this before them all.” (ibid, p.21)

As the people believed hunting elephant was an adventure as well as the fighting against the enemy and catching a wild boar. He says:

“For the people make valour to consist in three things, one is to fight against the enemy, another to hunt the elephant, and the third to catch hoggs¹⁰.” (ibid, p.27)

Activities of elephants

All the elephants in the country wild or tamed, were owned to king. Accordingly the tamed elephants were highly considered as his property. Knox’s says:

⁵ mate

⁶ tie

⁷ Sinhalese

⁸ has

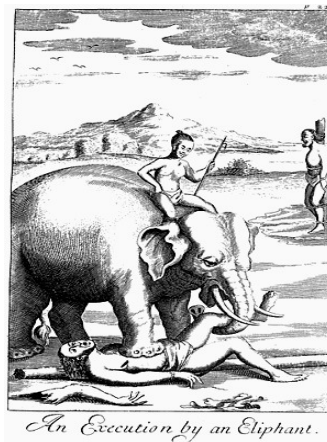
⁹ though

¹⁰ hog

“He hath some hundreds of elephants, which he keepeth¹¹ tame, and could have as many more as he pleaseth¹²; but altho¹³ not caught¹⁴, yet they are all his, and at his command when he pleaseth.” (ibid, p.39)

As he mentions, the king employed men to capture elephants not for any use or benefit, but only for his recreation and pastime (ibid, p.22,42). That expresses the capturing and taming elephants was always not for use of them in activities but was the king’s hobby.

“Other pastimes and recreations he hath (for this is all he minds or regards) as to make them bring wild elephants out of the woods, and catch them in his presence.” (ibid, p.42)



The manner in which they get them unto the city is mentioned under capturing and taming. Although the wild elephants were not captured for prior decided purpose, later the tamed ones were used in many activities as king’s will. One major activity of them was using them for execution.

“The king makes use of them for executioners; they will run their teeth through the body, and then tear it in pieces, and throw it limb from limb. They have sharp iron with a socket with three edges, which they put on their teeth at such times; for the elephants that are kept have all the ends of their teeth cut to make them grow the better, and they do grow out again.” (ibid, p.22,23)

Elephants were beneficial in night watching. Because it is considered that they were a good army in the war front to trample down any rebellion against the palace.

“There are also elephants, which are appointed all night to stand and watch, lest there should be any tumult; which if there should, could presently trample down a multitude.” (ibid, p.35)

As Knox mentions, the king rides upon an elephant when he goes outwards, but very rarely. Usually he was carried out in a palanquin.

¹¹ keep

¹² please

“Sometimes, but very seldom, he comes forth riding upon an horse or elephant.”
(*ibid*, p.36)

Sometimes the king’s elephants were used to break the wood for an unhampered way for following king and his escort as:

“They were fain to drive an elephant before him, to break the way through the woods, that the king with his followers might pass.” (*ibid*, p.58)

One distinctive activity for using elephants is religious processions. One such procession which he described in detail, could be identified as Ēsala or Daladâ perahëra (means procession for tooth relic of Lord Buddha) in Kandy. As the king was the prime patronage of this procession, a large number of tamed elephants treaded in it in the following manner.

“...(The priest) gets up upon an elephant all covered with white cloth, upon which he rides with all the triumph that king and kingdom can afford, thro¹⁵ all the streets of the city. But before him go, first some forty or fifty elephants, with brass bells hanging on each side of them, which tingle as they go....After these comes an elephant with two priest on his back...Then within a yard after him on each hand of him follow two other elephants mounted with two other priests...” (*ibid*, p.79)

As Knox says, the keepers of the king’s elephants sometimes make a sport with them.

“They will command an elephant to take up water, which he does, and stands with it in his trunk, till they command him to squirt it out at some body, which he immediately will do, it may be a whole paleful¹⁶ together, and with such a force, that a man can hardly stand against it.” (p.23)

Capturing and taming of elephants

According to Knox, though the elephant is so big and wise, it is easily captured. They drive a tamed and well trained female elephant to woods and let her delude and fetch wild ones to where the keeper beck her to come. This interesting part of capturing and taming of elephants is mentioned in the description after this manner:

“When the king commands to catch elephants, after they have found them they like, that is such as have teeth; for tho there be many in the woods, yet but few have teeth, and they males onely¹⁷: unto these they drive some she-elephants, which they bring with them for the purpose; which when once the males have got a fight of, they will never leave, but follow them wheresoever they go; and the females are so used to it, that they will do whatsoever either by a word or a

¹³ although

¹⁴ caught

¹⁵ through

¹⁶ pail

¹⁷ only

beck their keepers bid them; and so they delude them along thro¹⁸ towns and countreys¹⁹, thro the streets of the city, even to the very gates of the kings palace; where sometimes they seize upon them by snares, and sometimes by driving them into a kind of pound, they catch them. After they have brought the elephant which is not yet caught together with the she, into the kings presence, if it likes him not, he command to let him go; if it does, he appoints him some certain place near unto the city, where they are to drive him with the females; for without them it is not possible to make him stay; and to keep him in that place until the kings further order and pleasure is to catch him, which perhaps may not be in two or three or four years; All which time there are great men with souldiers²⁰ appointed to watch there about him: and if he should chance to stray a little out of his bounds set by the king, immediately they bring him back, fearing the kings displeasure, which is no less than death itself.” (ibid, p.21,22)

Damages to the people by elephants

People had more fear of wild elephants today due to the damage they did to the properties as well as to life. More aggressive wild elephants rarely leave a man without attacking or killing him. Fear for the elephant of people and the damage they did is clearly mentioned as:

“The people stand in fear of them, and often times are kill’d²¹ by them. They do them also great damage in their corn and likewise coker-nut²² trees & c. So that in towns near unto the woods, where are plenty of them, the people are forced to watch their corn all night, and also their outyards and plantations; into which being once entred²³ with eating and trampling they will do much harm, before they can get them out. Who oftentimes when by lighting of torches, and hollowing, they will not go out, take their bowes²⁴ and go and shoot them, but not without some hazard, for sometimes the elephant runs upon them and kills them. For fear of which they will not adventure unless there be trees, about which they may dedg to defend themselves. And altho here be both bears and tygers²⁵ in these woods, yet they are not so fierce, as commonly to assault people; travellers and way-faring men go more in fear of elephants than of any other beasts.” (ibid, p.22)

Not only the wild ones in woods did damage to the people but the elephants who were captured for the king and not deployed in any activity or not tamed also did great damage. An interesting part of this is that the damages done by those elephants should be considered the punishment of the displeasured king and tolerated it. Knox mentioned:

“Here these elephants do, and may do, great dammage²⁶ to the country, by eating up their corn, and trampling it with their broad feet, and throwing down their Coker Nut trees, and oftentimes

¹⁸ through

¹⁹ countries

²⁰ soldiers

²¹ killed

²² coconut

²³ entered

²⁴ bows

²⁵ tigers

²⁶ damage

their houses too, and they may not resist them. It is thought this is done by the king to punish them that ly under his displeasure. And if you ask what becomes of these elephants at last; sometimes after they have thus kept watch over them two or three years, and destroyed the country in this manner, the king will send order to carry them into the woods, and let the, go free.” (ibid)

Conclusion

Comparing with the travel accounts prior to 17th century, Knox’s account has a lot of significance. While the others focused on abundancy, morphology, cultural and commercial value of Sri Lankan elephant, Knox was concerned of their nature, capturing and taming, activities they engaged in and damages they did. The most considerable point is that Knox has not mentioned any single word on exporting elephants to neighboring countries as a commodity. That allows us to explore whether the commercial value of elephants and their exportation had not existed at the time. Not like others, Knox’s account was based on his own life experiences in Sri Lanka for about nineteen years. Therefore, the details which were mentioned by him are more reliable. It can be concluded that themes like its greatest motherhood and caring for little ones, general behavior and seasonal physical infirmities, differences between wild and tame ones, attitudes of people towards them, king’s hobby of capturing them, using them in execution, night watching, travelling and in religious processions, way of making a sport with them by their keepers, the way of capturing and taming, damages they did to the people and their properties by both wild and captured elephants are discussed clearly in Knox’s account.

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