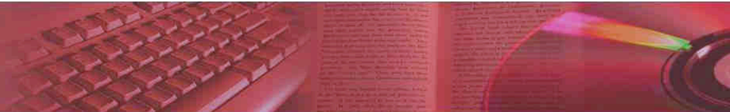

Thomas R. Trautmann. *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History.* Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015. xvi + 372 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-26422-6; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-26436-3; ISBN 978-0-226-26453-0.

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"Tour de force" best describes this monumental work of historical and ecological scholarship. And only a scholar of the caliber of Thomas Trautmann, with long experience in doing "deep history," could have written it—a book that spans three thousand years and a geographical area ranging from China to Rome and North Africa, and encompasses political histories, wars and armies, forests and ecology, elephants in the wild and in captivity, and the millennia-long interaction between elephants and humans.

Elephants and Kings is thus a book about both human and ecological history seen through the unique lens provided by elephants and their use in war and as symbols of authority and kingship. Why are there no elephants in China? What was the ecological impact of the disappearance of wild elephants from China? What social and political differences between China and India account for the fact that elephants have thrived in the subcontinent for many millennia? How did western nations from Persia to Egypt and Rome obtain elephants and, even more importantly, knowledge about taming elephants and using them as engines of war? These are a few of the riddles and questions—among a myriad others—that Trautmann addresses in this "deep history" of the human-elephant interaction.

Its central thesis is that the domestication of the elephant happened first in India, and it was carried out by kings for the purpose of using these enormously powerful animals in war. So was born the "war elephant" (p. 68) and with it the complicated history of human interaction with elephants, both domestic and wild. This interaction has had both beneficial and, far more often, detrimental effects on the survival of the wild elephant, which is now in retreat in both Asia and Africa. Trautmann argues, "Given the threat, it is helpful to learn everything we can about the causes of elephant *retreat*. It may be even more helpful to understand the causes of their *persistence* in the face of forces pushing them toward extinction" (p. 1). The book is thus not simply a historical exercise; it is also an environmental history aimed at encouraging an informed ecological activism to preserve the wild elephant.

The first chapter lays out the big topics addressed in the book. The most significant for me is the discussion about why China has no elephants, except for a few on the border with Myanmar. Historically elephants were found in almost every region of China. Basing himself on the works of Wen Huanran and Mark Elvin, Trautmann traces the retreat of elephants from the Chinese landscape from around 5000 BCE to modern times. Wen, followed by Elvin, argues that the cause of this retreat was climate change reinforced by human intervention in clearing forests for cultivation and human habitation. Deforestation, for Elvin, was the main reason, and the driving force behind this was "the pursuit of power and profit" (p. 10). While accepting much of their analysis, Trautmann questions the latter diagnosis and presents the concept of "land ethic" as the dominant ideology behind the ecological choices made by the Chinese rulers. "Land ethic" is a powerful idea that Trautmann pursues in the rest of the book. He concludes: "the difference between India and China" can be defined "as the difference between two quite different land ethics" (p. 307).

The contrast between China and India is stark and instructive. India pursued a land policy that favored the maintenance and fostering of forests for a variety of

purposes, including as elephant habitat. Ancient Indian texts, especially Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra,* identify eight major elephant forests, and by and large this ecological framework remained intact until the Mogul period. There is consensus between the *Arthaśāstra* and Abu'l Fazl's *Ā'īn-i Akbarī,* written over a thousand years later, with regard to the range of elephant habitats in India. A comparison between these two works shows that "the tempo of retreat of wild elephants and their habitat was very slow till about 1800 [i.e., for a period of close to two millennia], and ... it then dramatically increased. The present predicament of elephants in India is of very recent making. For thousands of years of the use of elephants by Indian kings the practice appears to have been more or less sustainable" (p. 181). Why did India and China go is such different ecological directions? For Trautmann, the catalyst was the invention of the "war elephant," an invention that took place solely in India (p. 68). And the war elephant is intrinsically and inextricably linked to kingship, and it is the age of kings and royal warfare that created the war elephant. There are different opinions as to when the elephant was domesticated to be used in war, and Trautmann quite reasonably opts for a broad time frame between 500 and 1000 BCE. The elephant as a war machine became an essential component of the Indian theory and practice of war. The elephant corps was the major element of the fourfold Indian army, along with infantry, cavalry, and chariot corps (*caturaṅga,* the basis for the later game of chess). Given that elephants are mature enough to be used in the military only after the age of twenty and given the enormous amount of fodder they consume each day, it was uneconomical either to capture young elephants or to breed elephants in captivity. Elephants, usually males over twenty, were captured from the wild in well-orchestrated elephant hunts. Hence the impetus to create and maintain forests as elephant sanctuaries and to protect them from poachers. The situation was diametrically different in China, which deliberately chose not to incorporate the elephant within its military organization. Elephants were a threat to farmers and crops, and the Chinese land ethic was based on this perception of the elephant. The two land ethics of the two largest civilizations of Asia resulting in quite different forest ecologies are contrasted at the end of the book: "We cannot measure how effective [the protection of Indian elephants in the wild] was. But China provides evidence for the effect of the *absence* of conservation measures. While Indian kings tended to protect wild elephants even against the interests of their farmers, in China kings tended to clear forests of large wild animals including, above all, elephants, to make forest land safe for humans, and for conversion to farmland" (p. 305).

Although it is true that the protection of elephants and elephant habitats was undertaken, as Trautmann notes, "not out of a sentiment favoring wildlife, but purely for reasons of state, or king-centered self-interest of the most direct kind" (p. 305), it is important, I think, also to take into account other dimensions of the Indian land ethic. These relate to the broader economic imperatives for forest conservation, the religious ideal of *ahiṃsā* deploring the killing of animals, and what I would call the aesthetic of the wild. The first is evident in the two other kinds of forests advocated by Kauṭilya: produce forests for timber and other products, and animal forests for the hunt (especially the royal pleasure hunt, but probably also for procuring meat). If these were based on economic interests, the other kind of forest is not: it is a sanctuary where animals are treated as guests, supporting the notion of *ahiṃsā.* And finally, and importantly, the aesthetic of the wild is intertwined with the tradition of asceticism that located hermitages in the forests and with the aesthetic valorization of forests, woods, and parks, all of which are termed *vana* in Sanskrit. We find the aesthetic of the wild in the Indian literature from at least the last centuries BCE.

Trautmann's study of "elephant knowledge" (ch. 4) in ancient India is rich and textured, drawing especially from the detailed descriptions found in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra.* This knowledge, including the iconic goad *aṅkuśa* (ankus) and the mahout, derived from the Sanskrit *mahāmātra,* as well as the capture, training, and medical treatment of elephants, a knowledge produced indigenously in northern India, spread to western countries as far as Italy and to the countries of southern and southeastern Asia, along with the war elephant.

The third part of the book comprising chapters 5–7 is devoted to the spread of the war elephant. It is probable that the war elephant was an invention of eastern India; at least, the best elephants and elephant drivers came from there. From that region this military institution spread to the rest of northern India. Trautmann argues that Magadha was "very advantageously placed in relation to elephants" (p. 187) and suggests that "elephants played a key role" (p. 189) in the Maurya conquest of most of northern India. The Mauryas, further, made the elephant a royal monopoly and probably restricted the access to war elephants by other kings. As the best elephants came from eastern India, so the best war horses, to which Trautmann profitably contrasts the

war elephant, came from the regions of the northeast, especially Afghanistan, Iran, and central Asia. Kings placed in the middle of this trade in war animals—horses from the west to the east and elephants from the east to the west—could block the access to these essential ingredients of the army by other kings. The war elephant spread from North India to South India, as well as to Sri Lanka and later to the countries of Southeast Asia. In the latter region, the war elephant emerged along with the rise of kingdoms around the first century CE, supporting Trautmann's view that the war elephant is inextricably linked to kingship. Southeast Asian kings *could* have reinvented the war elephant on their own, given the abundance of elephants in the forests of the region, but they did not. Truatmann concludes that "the knowledge of Indian (possibly South Indian) hunters, trainers, mahouts, and physicians was transmitted to Southeast Asia, but not the elephants themselves," and surmises that "the means of transmission were king-to-king transactions" (p. 289).

Perhaps the more significant spread of the war elephant was to the western armies—Persian, Greek, Macedonian, Carthaginian, Roman, Ghaznavid Turk, and the like. The early Achaemenid rulers appear not to have embraced the war elephant, even though they were sure to have encountered them in their conflicts with Indian kings. The emperor Cyrus is supposed to have died when Debikes ambushed the Persians with an army that included an elephant corps. But by 331 BCE, when Alexander defeated Darius III, the latter had a contingent of elephants. Alexander himself encountered the war elephant in his battles with the Indian king Porus, who is supposed to have had two hundred elephants. Trautmann traces the spread of the war elephant from Persia to the countries farther west, including North Africa, where local elephants were captured and trained for war. A Hellenistic innovation was the "tower" (Greek: *thōrakion*) that was the predecessor of the later howdah, which was absent in ancient India. The significance of Indian elephant knowledge is indicated by the Hellenistic usage of referring to the elephant driver (mahout) as simply "the Indian," *Indos* (p. 238).

Although this is basically a historical investigation, in the concluding chapter, "Drawing the Balance, Looking Ahead," Trautmann looks to the future of elephants and elephant habitats. The age of the war elephant ended several centuries ago, and following its demise "the timber elephant came to the fore" (p. 319). In the modern period elephants were privately owned, and bought and sold in the open market. The age of the timber elephant has also ended, along with the age of colonial rule. Trauttman's indictment of colonial rule is severe, finding that the major cause of the great decline of elephant numbers in India since 1800 was "sport hunting by Europeans" (p. 334). The attempts by modern nation-states of Asia and Africa to manage their elephants and elephant habitats have often been thwarted by the lack of political will and the international demand for ivory: the European trophy hunters have been replaced by ivory poachers. The picture for the future of the Asian elephant is bleak, with occasional bright spots revealed in the forthcoming book *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia,* edited by Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham.

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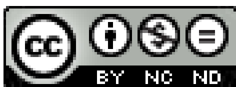

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