

*Monserate, Antonio*  
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THE COMMENTARY  
OF  
FATHER MONSERRATE, S.J.

On his Journey to the Court of Akbar

Translated from the Original Latin  
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they see a female. Some are trained to carry guns on their backs. When the black powder is ignited and the gun is discharged with a thunderous roar, the elephant does not become in the slightest terrified or unmanageable. The King directed that fifty elephants thus trained and armed should bring up the rear of the advancing army. They were under the control of Indians.

The Mongols, Persians, Parthians, Turks, Sogdians, Bachtræ and Scythians (or Tartars) all use the same fighting tactics. To pass over details, they are most dangerous when they seem to be flying in headlong riot. For, turning round on their horses, although they are going at full gallop, they fling their javelins with such deadly aim that they can transfix the eye of an enemy.

I must further remark in regard to elephants, that they become accustomed to the voice of their keepers and obey them implicitly. They can tie and untie knots, push anything, lift it, put it down again, turn it over. They can cast nooses, and unfasten them: gather up tiny straws and coins. They can even be taught to dance. In short they are ready to do anything that they are told by their keepers. They live in herds in the forests, having a sort of joint family life under the leadership of the father (as it were) of the herd and family, who is obeyed by his offspring and followed like a general in the wars which they carry on with the other elephants. When they are being hunted the herd retreats or attacks according to the command of this leader, who marches with a proud and insolent air, like a true general in the midst of his forces, and seems to threaten all who approach. He paces slowly to and fro, terrible to behold, and spares none but those who grant himself and his family feeding ground.

Zelaldinus takes as much pains to see that these herds of elephants in the forests are properly fed, as if they were droves of cattle. Every now and then he orders them to be brought before him, both that he may

exhibit them as a spectacle, and that he may choose out the best of them. For the members of a herd who number about twenty, vary considerably, according to their age, in their size and the length of their tusks. Those are regarded as the best which have low hind quarters and strong legs and necks. Strabo writes that their period of pregnancy is normally eight months, but sometimes six or ten: that the mother suckles her young for six months: that the females reach maturity at ten years: that they live as long as a long-lived man: that some even reach two hundred years: that their health is delicate, and that they cannot be cured if once they become diseased. Pliny says that they choose for fighting those which excel in strength, size and vigour. Their keepers say that elephants live to two hundred years of age, reach full maturity at fifty, maintain their full strength for a hundred years, and grow old after they are over one hundred and fifty, dying at about two hundred. But they are very liable to diseases and especially to fever. If they are exposed to severe cold, or become ill of ague, they waste away and die in twenty-four hours. When they are sick they groan, toss themselves about like a sick man in his bed, weep, and allow themselves to be treated medicinally without resisting as do other animals. The females are extraordinarily timid. They are especially afraid of fire, and the noise of guns, muskets or thunder. They fly in such headlong panic as to endanger the life of anyone who is caught unawares. Their young are at one year old hardly as big as a pig. They are first submitted to training when they are ten. Those that are being trained to fight are fed by impious barbarians on human flesh, in order to make them more savage against man. Criminals are crushed to death beneath their feet. This, I think, must be the origin of the fable that elephants are incited to fight by showing them blood. For in reality they are no more moved by the sight of blood than by that of water. On account of this training they are apt to crush anyone who slips or falls down in

mounting on to their backs ; for they think that he has been thrown before them for that purpose. One of the priests ran a great risk of perishing in this way when compelled to cross the Narbada on an elephant. Through ignorance of their habits he was slow in mounting. For elephants bend down and allow one to mount on to their back by means of their feet and thighs, as though by a ladder. But one must mount as quickly as possible, for they try to get up as soon as they feel one's feet on them. Certain ancient writers, misled by falsehoods and absurd travellers' tales, have reported that elephants lack the joints in the legs which other quadrupeds have. But there is no truth in this.

Finally it is extraordinary and well nigh incredible what fierce enmity elephants are apt to entertain towards each other. For if two or more have conceived a mutual dislike, they attack each other on sight with great ferocity, dashing headlong together. They never look up towards, much less hurt, the keepers who ride upon them. It is hard to say what a dread elephants have of the rhinoceros, although it is a much smaller beast. Moreover the rhinoceros has an insolent contempt for the elephant. When an elephant sees a rhinoceros, he trembles, cringes, bends down, hides his trunk in his mouth, and humbly retreats until the rhinoceros has passed by. For the rhinoceros attacks from beneath, and buries the sharp horn on his nose in his opponent's belly. Meanwhile the elephant can do him no harm. The elephant sleeps with his trunk in his mouth. He is afraid of ants and still more of mice. He is as fond of water as a buffalo or a pig or any other such animal.

In order that this great animal might be tamed and trained, God—the Creator of all natural things, who made everything for the sake of man, and made man also that he might obey Himself—willed that the elephant should be weak and defenceless in two points. In the first place he cannot bear to have any of his legs tied. For if he is caught in anything, either through his

own weight or through becoming entangled in a rope, he suffers the greatest pain, and kicks and struggles, most violently. Hence he is easily caught by means of a chain fastened in a pit-fall. In the second place his trunk and forehead are extremely tender. He cannot bear to be pricked on the forehead, as his skin there is very thin and weak. Hence he is easily guided and controlled by the blow of a hook. These hooks have long handles studded with nails, and are applied with great force to the elephant's forehead. If he becomes unmanageable and will not obey the hook, he is blindfolded, or his keeper fastens his foot by means of a long chain to a post buried in the ground. If he receives a blow on the trunk beneath his eyes he retires at once. If he is threatened with fire he seeks safety in a flight swifter than that of the south-east wind. For this reason, when the King is looking on at the Circus, he is protected from the elephants by a body-guard of soldiers who carry sharp hooks fixed on long handles and bombs filled with powdered sulphur. These bombs are lighted and thrown into the arena, where they explode loudly. If an elephant attacks the King these men interpose themselves. Elephant-fights are also stopped by the same means. In order that the cavalry horses may not be terrified in battle by the huge size of the elephants, the grooms accustom them not only to the sight of the elephants but also to attacking them in a warlike fashion.

To return to my subject—although the infantry, which has various types of arms, is entirely a fighting force,<sup>135</sup> yet the cavalry is regarded as in every way the flower of the army. Hence the King spares no expense in order permanently

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<sup>135</sup> The Infantry were useless as a fighting force according to Irvine. "To keep night watches and to plunder defenceless people were their greatest services." True, Irvine's remarks refer to a subsequent period, but as applied to Akbar's time, they are substantially correct. Further, Irvine has it, "The high figures for Infantry as shewn in *Ain-i-Akbari* should commonly be accepted