



ELEPHANT II. IN THE SASANIAN ARMY

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The Sasanian military deployed Indian elephants in siege warfare and, more infrequently, in set piece engagements where the beasts had a psychological impact on enemies not accustomed to facing them. Elephants were otherwise used for pioneering/engineering duties and, presumably, for general logistics tasks.

Origin and sources. Until the advent of Islam in the 7th century, the Sasanian army in the field was regularly accompanied by elephants, although the preceding Parthian dynasty did not appear to deploy elephants in warfare. Unlike the Carthaginians and Numidians, who used the smaller African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), the Sasanians, like many of the Hellenistic armies of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, employed the larger Indian species (*Elephas maximus*). These animals were procured from their Indian allies (see [INDIA iv.](#)), since breeding elephants within Persia seems to have been difficult. In the anonymous 12th-century Persian chronicle *Mojmal al-tawāreḵ wa'l-qeṣaṣ*, an Indian elephant born in Persia among the allegedly 900-strong elephant corps of Ḳosrow II (r. 591-628) is considered a miracle (Rance, p. 384; cf. Briant, pp. 180-87).



Many historians mention elephants in the Sasanian army, but establishing chronology, use in combat, and equipment remains difficult. Particularly problematic is that most of our information is provided either by Greek and Latin writers wont to color their accounts with information drawn from the Hellenistic era or the Roman Republic, or else by chauvinistic and thus unreliable Armenian sources. The Arabic sources describing the Muslim conquest of the Sasanian Empire provide an “invaluable ‘control’” (Rance, p. 378) to these earlier accounts, although they also present their own problems.

Chronology. There is some uncertainty surrounding when the Sasanians first used elephants in warfare. The *Historia Augusta* (*HA*, late 4th century?) informs us that, during the campaign of 232 CE against [Ardašir I](#) (d. 241/42), Emperor Severus Alexander (r. 222-35) encountered 700 Sasanian elephants, of which he captured 30 and then exhibited 18 in a triumphal parade through Rome (*Severus Alexander* 56.3 in *HA*). The account’s veracity is disputed, especially in view of the unknown author’s propensity to mix fact with hyperbole and, sometimes, with pure fiction (Charles, pp. 305-6). Indeed, the more sober account of Herodian (d. first half of 3rd century?) does not mention elephants at all (6.4.4-6.6.6). Elephants were perhaps included in the *Historia Augusta* in order to more closely align the deeds of Severus Alexander with those of his Macedonian namesake (Scullard, p. 201), who reportedly faced Achaemenid elephants at [Gaugamela](#) in 331 BCE, and local beasts later in India. Since the Parthian dynasty was deposed in 224 CE and Ardašir’s campaign dates to 232, the elephant army must have been developed very rapidly indeed. This casts doubt on the claims of the *Historia Augusta*. Another reference to elephants in the *Historia Augusta* (*Gordian* 33.1) presumably relates to the victory of Gordian III (r. 238-44) over [Shapur I](#) (r. 239-70) at Resaina, yet this is also uncertain.

A fragment of the poet ‘Amr b. Ilah, found in the chronicle of Ṭabari (839-923), also associates elephants with Shapur I, though its poetic nature makes this information very questionable (Ṭabari, 1999, p. 36). In addition, one of the Latin *chronica* mentions that Diocletian (r. 284-305) and Galerius (r. 303-11) led thirteen elephants in a triumphal parade through Rome, shortly after the latter’s victory over the Sasanians in 297 (Charles, p. 310). But these elephants were not necessarily captured on the battlefield and may have been circus beasts employed to give the spectacle an eastern appearance (Rance, p. 362).

Elephants were most notably used from the reign of Shapur II (r. 309-79) onwards, when they were regularly encountered in battle with Roman forces.



A variety of sources attest their use in warfare during this period. Ecclesiastical accounts mention elephants in the various sieges of Mesopotamian cities under Roman control, most notably the three sieges of Nisibis in 337/38, 346 and 350. Julian (r. 361-63) makes extended mention of Sasanian elephants in his description of the third siege of Nisibis (*Orations* 2.63b-66a), where their employment was entirely unsuccessful. The Persians also used elephants against Armenia, but the precise chronology is difficult to establish (Charles, pp. 318-20; Rance, pp. 367-68) since the incidents are recorded in the chronologically confused late-5th-century *Epic Histories* (3.8, 3.21), traditionally, though erroneously, attributed to P'awstos Buzand (see [FAUSTUS](#)).

[Ammianus Marcellinus](#) (ca. 330-35-ca. 395) provides much information about Sasanian elephants in his description of Julian's expedition in 363. Ammianus (19.2.3) had previously encountered elephants at the siege of [Amida](#) in 359. In his description of set-piece battles, the elephants are placed towards the rear of the Persian lines (24.6.8, 25.1.14), a position which differs markedly from the norms established in the classical Mediterranean world. For example, the Carthaginians ranged their elephants in the front line at the Bagradas valley in 255 CE, and at Zama in 202 BCE, while Hellenistic princes were wont to array their elephant forces on the wings. The Sasanian deployment of elephants ensured that the Romans never came to grips with the beasts. Only in ambush situations, where the elephants were used together with heavily armored horsemen (*cataphractarii* or *clibanarii*; see [ASB-SAVĀRĪ](#)), did the Romans enjoy any success. Ammianus (25.3.4-5, 11) records the deadly use of the beasts against the Roman column late in the campaign, during which encounter Julian was mortally wounded. Upon the installation of the new emperor Jovian (r. 363-64), the Persians again unleashed their elephants in a surprise attack (25.6.2-3). Despite the arguably counterintuitive notion of elephants being used thus, the 6th-century writer Zosimus (3.30.2-3) provides corroborating details.

Use in combat. Elephants were most effective in the context of siege warfare and logistics. Rance (p. 365) has even argued that, since a foreign incursion deep inside Persian territory was atypical, the appearance of elephants in set-piece combat during Julian's campaign of 363 was a result of dire necessity rather than normal deployment. The beasts' general lack of impact, especially in planned battles, suggests a lack of familiarity with using elephants in combat. Aside from the 4th-century references to elephants in siege warfare, the later writer Procopius, active during the reign of Justinian I (r. 527-65),



repeatedly mentions the use of Sasanian elephants in siege operations. For example, they were used at the siege of Archaeopolis, in Lazica (8.14.10, 8.14.32-37), and against other strongholds of the Lazi (8.17.10-11). Yet results were mixed since the elephant naturally provided an inviting target for defenders of walled positions, especially archers and missile troops. Elephants also found other applications in the field. The Byzantine historian [Agathias](#) (ca. 536 or 537-about 580) records an instance during the reign of [Kosrow I Anōšīrvān](#) (r. 531-79) when elephants were used to blockade a river (3.20.5).

The Sasanians, like others before them, discovered that the beasts, when they came under concerted attack, were wont to turn on their own men. This behavior became a *topos* and is, for example, recorded at the siege of Nisibis in 350 (*Chronicon Paschale*, p. 537 lines 16-19; Theophanes, A.M. 5841). Ammianus (25.1.15) states that Persian mahouts were thereafter equipped with knives in order to scuttle their charges if something should go awry. Agathias (3.27.1-4) refers to an occasion in the mid-6th century when maddened Sasanian elephants caused damage to their own army.

Equipment. There is reasonably compelling, though sketchy, evidence that Sasanian elephants probably carried turrets or howdahs, especially in siege warfare. The turrets mentioned in the *Historia Augusta* (*Severus Alexander* 56.3) might well be disregarded, while Julian's description of iron turrets (*Orations* 2.63b) at the third siege of Nisibis is possibly hyperbolic, since he was not an eyewitness. Ammianus describes elephants as "loaded with armed men" (*armatis onusta* 19.2.3) at the siege of Amida in 359, but does not specifically refer to turrets. Nor does he mention that elephants carried turrets into battle during Julian's campaign. Procopius seems more reliable when he observes that wooden turrets allowed the Persians to tower over the walls of a besieged city and loose arrows at will (*De Aedificiis* 2.1.11). Both Procopius (8.13.4, 8.14.35) and Agathias (3.27.3) also refer to elephant-borne fighting men without specifically mentioning turrets, though they were undoubtedly used on these occasions.

Sasanian elephants could also be equipped with decorative paraphernalia such as crests (Ammianus 25.3.11), and possibly even defensive [armor](#) —at least if "gleaming elephants" (*elephantorum fulgentium*, Ammianus 25.1.14) is interpreted as a reference to metallic armor rather than other accoutrements, or even the animal's [ivory](#). Rance (p. 365, with n. 48), however, has highlighted the verbal similarities between Ammianus and Livy (d. 17 CE) with regard to describing elephant equipment (esp. 37.40.4). Still, protection of some sort is



mentioned within a 4th-century context (*Chronicon Paschale*, p. 537, line 13; Theophanes, A.M. 5841).

Strategic value. The generally poor performance of elephants in warfare, especially in view of the enormous costs involved in feeding the beasts (Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* 7(8).9 = 596a; cf. Bosworth, p. 108; Shean, pp. 174-75), raises the question of why the Sasanians deployed them at all. It is possible that the use of elephants, first and foremost, was of psychological import (Charles, p. 339). They were rarely used in set-piece engagements and paradoxically achieved one of their greatest successes in hit-and-run maneuvers during the later stages of the campaign of 365. While elephants may have been inefficacious in contests with more sophisticated foes such as the Romans, or their Byzantine successors, they would have been of greater value against various subject peoples. Rance (p. 381) adduces Arabic texts, in particular Ṭabari's description of the battle at Šumiyā in 634 or 635 (1993, pp. 204-5), in addition to Egishe's Armenian account (pp. 166-67), to conclude that elephants were used as command posts for senior officers, or as a spearhead for tactical breakthroughs on the battlefield.

Cultural significance. Elephants appear very infrequently in Sasanian art (Gyselen, p. 247). The most famous instance is the hunting expedition with elephants in the relief at Ṭāq-e Bostān (late-6th/early-7th century; cf. Holmes Peck, p. 102; Movassat, pp. 10-18 for the date, pp. 86-89 for the scene; for images, see Fukai and Horiguchi; Movassat, pls. 28-31, 36-37). Yet Sasanian imagery, scanty as it is, does not seem to show elephants in an unequivocally military context. In Zoroastrianism, elephants belonged to "the noxious creatures [*xrafstar*] of Ahreman" (de Blois), perhaps because of their initially "unfamiliar appearance" (Moazami, p. 313), though the beasts, along with the similarly regarded lions, clearly had a royal symbolic value Sasanian times. The military deployment of elephants, however, was not a royal prerogative, since they were used by the king's generals and satraps. The Armenians captured, on one occasion, some elephants along with camp followers, documents of state, and royal women (*Epic Histories* 3.21). Their presence with the baggage train implies that elephants accompanied the king on campaign and thus had some royal significance. This is also borne out by Ammianus in his treatment of Julian's campaign. Indeed, the King of Kings' ability to gain access to herds of elephants, at least in Persian eyes, demonstrated the power of the dynasty to his neighbors and rivals, and his kingdom's preeminence.



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