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ELEPHANT I. IN THE NEAR EAST
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ELEPHANT (Pers. *pīl*, *fīl*).

i. IN THE NEAR EAST

Although elephants are normally associated with the humid tropical regions of sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, in antiquity their natural habitat extended more widely. According to Assyrian and Egyptian sources, elephants lived wild on the middle Euphrates and it was there that the ancient Babylonians encountered the animal that they called *pīru* or *pēru*, from which name is derived the words for "elephant" in the Iranian languages: Old Persian *pīru-* (attested only in the meaning "ivory"), Middle and New Persian *pīl*, Sogdian *pyδ*, Ḵᵛārizmian *pyz*. The word has also entered some Semitic languages (Syr., *pīlā*, Ar. *fīl*) and even languages of Northern Europe (Old Norse and Icelandic *fīll*, evidently borrowed from Arabic or Persian by Viking raiders in Southern Russia). In Southern and Southeastern Asia elephants have from ancient times been used as work animals, but in the Near East they have always been known only as sources of ivory and as instruments of warfare. By the Achaemenid period elephants must already have died out in Syria; one of Darius' inscriptions from Susa (DSf 43), while listing the exotic materials which the king had had imported from the various provinces of his empire, mentions ivory brought from Nubia (*Kūša-*) and Sindh (*Hindu-*), but also from Arachosia (*Harauvati*, modern Southern Afghanistan).

The Achaemenids must also have made some use of war elephants, for Greek authors mention their presence on the Persian side during Alexander's battle at Arbela in 331 B.C. The Seleucids used elephants in their wars against the Romans. Masʿūdī (*Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, p. 321) says that the Sasanian Ḵosrow II Parvēz kept a thousand white elephants, and other Arabic sources speak of the Persians' use of elephants against the invading Arabs during the battle of Qādesīya in 14/635. Zoroastrians, who divide all animals into the good creatures of Ahura Mazda and the noxious creations of Ahreman, put elephants in the latter category. The *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, chap. 23) mentions elephants and lions as examples of those noxious creatures (*xrafstar*) which, unlike snakes, lizards and the like, physically resemble the good creatures. A curious passage in the *Pahlavi Rivayat* (ed. Williams, 31b, 2-3) tells how the demons (*dēwān*) offered to give elephants to mankind if the latter agreed to "kill the cattle" (i.e., presumably, to sacrifice it to the demons), but Jamšēd stopped them from accepting the offer. Compare also *Mēnōg ī xrad* (ed. Anklesaria, 27.33a; missing in the Pāzand/Sanskrit version), which praises Jamšēd for the fact that "he did not give the cattle to the demons in exchange for elephants." However, the use of war elephants and of ivory both by the Achaemenids and by the Sasanians suggests that religiously inspired repugnance to elephants may not have been universal. In the Islamic period it was the Ghaznavids who first and most famously made extensive military use of elephants, imported from their possessions in Northern India, and elephants evidently played a major role in the Ghaznavid ideology as symbols of power and authority. A thousand elephants are said to have been kept in a *pīl-ḵāna* in Ghazna, some of which were distributed as gifts to allied rulers (Bosworth).

Later the Ghurids also made wide use of elephants in warfare, but after the Mongol conquest elephants ceased to play a significant role in the military history of Persia. Elephants play an important part in the heroic episodes of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* (which was dedicated to the Ghaznavid Maḥmūd) and in similar works by his imitators (see EPICS), where the heroes are often compared to elephants, especially "drunken" (*pīl-e mast*) or "rampant" (*z/žanda-pīl*) ones. "Elephant-bodied" (*pīl-tan*) is a common epithet of the Iranian heroes, especially Rostam.

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