

Depictions of Elephants in Ancient Indian Manuscripts

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge about the elephant is provided in several Indian manuscripts and treatises since ancient times. The role played by elephants in war made their management very essential for the kings and a lot of literature on various aspects such as elephant capturing, training and husbandry came into existence. Notable amongst these are the *Hastyayurveda* by Palakapya, the *Hastividyarnava* by Sukumar Barkaith, the *Matanga Lila* by Nilkantha, the Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the *Brihat Samhita* by Varahamihira, the *Manasollasa* by Someshwara, the *Gaja Sastram* and *Gajalaksana Chikitsa* by Vyasa (Vaisampayan), the *Gajayurveda* by Bhattakrishnadasa, *Feelnama* and *Kursinamah* by Sayyid Ahmed al – Kabir, the *Hati Puthi*, and the *Lava-Kushar Yuddha* of Haribara Bipra etc. All these texts are rich sources of information on the elephants, sometimes supplemented by illustrations and paintings. These ancient sources deal with the status of distribution of elephants, their behavior, ecology, diet, genealogy, anatomy and physiology, growth and development, psychology, conflicts with people, diseases and their treatments, medicines and surgery, capturing, keeping, taming, management, care and training of elephants in royal captivity, and deployment in war. One can get knowledge about the changes in elephant habitat from comparisons of texts from different historical time periods. Much of the ancient knowledge about elephants is centered around the need to maintain them in captivity, and train and organize them in large numbers in the battlefields. Such aspects are covered in depth in the above cited ancient Indian manuscript texts. The paper gives brief summaries of these texts.

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