

Matthew Paris and Henry III's elephant

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Matthew Paris's drawings of Henry III's elephant are well-known, and popular accounts of the Tower of London often mention the elephant's brief residence there.¹ These accounts mostly derive from Paris, and from references in the Liberate and Close rolls which were noted long ago by Thomas Madox and Frederic Madden.² There are also some further references to the elephant in the Exchequer records which add a little detail to its short, unhappy story.

Matthew himself made three references to elephants in his Great Chronicle.³ The first entry in 1229 records an alliance between Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Sultan of Babylon, which was sealed by an exchange of gifts, one of which was an elephant which the Sultan gave to Frederick. This entry was not in Roger of Wendover's Chronicle, which Matthew used as a source for this period. The fact that he chose to add the information indicates the significance he, and his contemporaries, gave to this event.

The second reference occurs in 1241. Richard, earl of Cornwall, passed through Italy on his way home from the Holy Land. Richard was Henry III's brother and the Emperor's brother-in-law, and had reinforced the Emperor's achievements in the Holy Land during his own crusade. As a result he was given safe conduct by the Emperor, and fêted by the towns through which he passed. At Cremona in northern Italy the people came out to greet him led by an elephant. Matthew includes a drawing of an elephant in the margin of his manuscript.⁴ This drawing, however, differs from the drawing Matthew made of Henry's elephant later in his Chronicle. The elephant at Cremona is shown as a standard depiction of an 'elephant and castle' in the style of the medieval bestiary illustrations, whereas Matthew claims that he drew his version of Henry's elephant from life. Matthew would probably have known of a bestiary from the St Albans Abbey book collection.

Matthew's third reference to an elephant is in his chronicle for 1255:

'Of an elephant in England. About this same time, too, an elephant was sent to England by the French king as a present to the king of England. We believe that this was the only

¹ For example, Phillip Drennon Thomas, 'The Tower of London's royal menagerie', *History Today* 46 (August 1996), 29-35; Daniel Hahn, *The Tower Menagerie* (London 2004), 22-8; and the Tower's own website: <http://www.hrp.org.uk/TowerofLondon/Stories/Palacehighlights/RoyalBeasts/Stories>. The British Library drawing can be seen online: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/cottmanucoll/a/zoomify75383.html>

² Thomas Madox, *The History and Antiquities of the Exchequer*, 2nd ed. (London 1769), I, 377; F.M. (Frederic Madden), 'On the knowledge possessed by Europeans of the elephant in the thirteenth century', in *The Graphic and Historical Illustrator*, ed. E.W. Brayley (London 1834), 335-6, with illustration on p. 352. Madden was later to edit Paris's *Historia Anglorum*.

³ *Chronica Majora*, ed. H.R.Luard, (Rolls Series, London 1872-83) III, 179; IV, 167; V, 489.

⁴ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 16, *Chronica Maiora*, fol. 151v; Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (Berkeley 1987), 281-2.

elephant ever seen in England, or even in the countries on this side the Alps; wherefore the people flocked together to see the novel sight.⁵

Other chroniclers also noted its arrival, but more briefly, and with little detail, although the London annals add that the elephant, a gift from the king of France, arrived in Lent 1255.⁶

But how did the king of France happen to have an elephant available as a suitable present for a fellow-monarch? The elephant appears to have reached Europe as a by-product of the crusades. Louis IX of France, the king who was later to be known as Saint Louis, led a crusade to Egypt in 1249. This ended in defeat and captivity. After payment of a ransom, Louis was released, but stayed in the Holy Land, trying to bolster the defences of the beleaguered crusader state. The rulers of Egypt then attempted to form an alliance with Louis against Syria. According to Louis' faithful companion Joinville, in 1252-53 the emirs of Egypt sent the king an elephant, which the king sent to France.⁷

This is presumably the elephant which in 1254 Louis presented to Henry III. Louis had returned to France in July 1254. Meanwhile, Henry had been in Gascony, and was returning to England through France. He went on pilgrimage to Pontigny, and in November and December 1254 met Louis in Orleans and Paris.⁸ Although Henry was still claiming the return of the provinces of France which he and his father had lost, this meeting was a friendly family gathering – the kings' wives were sisters. The first mention of the elephant in the English records is from 13 December 1254, when Henry was on his way home from Paris, travelling through northern France. Henry appointed his clerk, Peter of Gannoc, as senior keeper of the king's elephant. Peter was sent to join John Gouche and the other keepers, so that they could arrange the transfer of the elephant from France to England. Peter was to find

⁵ From J.A. Giles's translation, *Matthew Paris's English History* (London 1854), III, 115. Latin in Paris, *Chronica Majora*, V, 489: 'De elephante dato domino regi. Tempore quoque sub eodem, missus est in Angliam quidam elephas, quem dominus rex Franciae pro magno munere dedit regi Anglorum. Nec credimus quod unquam aliquis elephas visus est in Anglia, immo nec etiam in partibus cisalpinis, praeter illum; unde confluebant populi ad tantae spectaculum novitatis.' Paris also gave a briefer version of the elephant's arrival in his *Abbreviatio Chronicorum* for 1255, in *Historia Anglorum*, ed. F. Madden (Rolls Series, London 1866-9), III, 344, repeated in *Flores Historiarum*, ed. F.R. Luard (Rolls Series, London 1890), II, 407.

⁶ Burton chronicle, in *Annales Monastici*, ed. F.R. Luard (Rolls Series, London 1864-9), I, 329; *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*, ed. H. Ellis (Rolls Series, London 1859), 201; London annals in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, London 1882-3), I, 48.

⁷ Joinville, 'Histoire de Saint Louis', in *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, vol. 22 (Paris 1840), 269. There is also an entry in Louis IX's accounts on wax tablets from 1256, recording a payment of 20s. to 'Pelua, qui gardet l'orifant' (*Recueil*, vol. 21, 355) – but *orifant* can mean both an elephant and a horn, like a hunting horn.

⁸ David Carpenter, 'The meetings of kings Henry III and Louis IX', *Thirteenth Century England X*, 3, 5. Oddly, Jacques Le Goff, in his massive biography *Saint Louis* (Paris 1996), 258, says that Henry and Louis celebrated Christmas 1254 together in Paris, and that Louis accompanied Henry to Boulogne, where Henry embarked, 'et il lui fit peu après cadeau d'un éléphant que lui avait offert le sultan de l'Égypte.' This seems too late, as Henry witnessed writs at Paris on 9 December, and at Boulogne on 18 December, by which time the elephant was already Henry's responsibility.

whatever resources John and his colleagues needed until they reached England, and they were to answer to him.⁹

As Louis had kindly given the elephant to Henry while he was in France, it was Henry who had the problem of transporting the beast. Or, to be precise, it was the sheriff of Kent's problem. In February 1255, Henry was back in Westminster, and he ordered the sheriff to go to Dover in person, with John Gouche, to arrange transport for the elephant, which was then at Wissant, on the French coast near Calais. The sheriff was to find a ship and any other requirements for carrying the elephant; if the sailors advised that it was possible to bring the elephant by water as far as London, he should have that done.¹⁰ Later in 1255, the Exchequer was ordered to allow the sheriff of Kent £6 17s. 5d. which he had spent on transporting the elephant.¹¹ The bill for the elephant's Channel crossing was combined with those for messengers from the king of France and a clerk with Henry's treasure, which together came to £9 6s., recorded in the sheriff of Kent's account for 1255.¹²

When the elephant reached London, it became the problem of the sheriffs of London. Towards the end of February 1255, they were ordered to have a building made without delay at the Tower of London for the king's elephant. It was to be 40 feet long, 20 feet wide, and to be built in such a way that it could be put to other uses if required.¹³ They would be allowed to claim the cost in their expenses, which they did in the 1255 pipe roll. The roll records that they had spent £22 20d. on the elephant house, duly certified by expert testimony.¹⁴

The sheriffs of London only held office for one year at a time, and when new sheriffs took office late in 1255 they were given new orders. They were to provide whatever was reasonably necessary for the elephant and its keeper, so long as the elephant was in London and they held office as sheriffs. This order was repeated for the next year's sheriffs in October 1256.¹⁵ The bill for the sustenance of the elephant and its keeper, from December 1255 to the end of September 1256, was £24 14s. 3½d.¹⁶ To put this in context: at that time, a builder's labourer might earn from 1½d. to 2½d. a day, while £15 a year was enough to support a knight.

⁹ *Rôles Gascons*, ed. Francisque Michel, Vol. I (Paris 1885), 435. Peter of Gannoc was clearly a versatile character: in 1248 he was sent to York to take charge of the mint (*Close Rolls 1247-51*, 37); he was granted an ecclesiastical benefice in 1254; and in 1258, he was at Chester, in charge of supplies for the king's arrival there (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls 1247-58*, 311, 627-8).

¹⁰ *Close Rolls 1254-56*, 34. The elephant was said to be at *Wythsand'*, one of the many ways of spelling Wissant to be found in the rolls. Wissant was the usual port for the Channel crossing, but for some reason this reference has sometimes been read as meaning that the elephant was at Sandwich (e.g. Hahn, *Tower Menagerie*, 22, which also puts its arrival at Michaelmas 1255).

¹¹ *Calendar of Liberate Rolls 1251-60*, 245.

¹² Pipe roll E 372/99, rot. 17.

¹³ *Calendar of Liberate Rolls 1251-60*, 197. Also a cancelled entry in *Close Rolls 1254-56*, 46.

¹⁴ Pipe roll E 372/99, rot. 14.

¹⁵ *Calendar of Liberate Rolls 1251-60*, 260 and 325. Full text of both orders in Madox, *History and Antiquities of the Exchequer*, vol. I, 377.

¹⁶ Pipe roll E 372/100, rot. 3.

The next bill was, alas, the last. The sheriffs of London claimed £16 13s. 1*d.* for the sustenance of the elephant and the keeper, from the end of September 1256 to 14 February 1257, when it died.¹⁷

That is as much as we learn of the elephant's life from the government records and from the printed text of Matthew's chronicle. But there are two manuscript versions of the chronicle; one in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, the other in the British Library in London. Both versions are illustrated by Matthew with a drawing of the elephant, but Matthew inserted a more detailed description of the elephant in the Cambridge manuscript as an amendment to his text. According to Matthew the elephant was ten years old and ten feet high, was greyish-black, and had no fur but a very hard, rough hide. It was ponderous and robust, and indeed was a prodigious and monstrous animal. It used its trunk to obtain food and drink, and had small eyes in the upper part of its head.¹⁸ Suzanne Lewis reproduces both of Matthew's drawings, and suggests that, while Matthew sketched one from life, he then made a more finished version for the Cambridge manuscript.¹⁹ The Cambridge version includes a drawing of a man, to give an idea of the relative size of the animal. The man is described as Henry de Flor', master of the beast; he had evidently replaced John Gouche, who had left the king's service by late May 1255 (evidently on good terms, as he was given a robe for Pentecost).²⁰

But the elephant's death was not its last appearance in the record. In August 1258, the king ordered the constable of the Tower of London to let the sacristan of Westminster Abbey have without delay the bones of the elephant recently buried within the bailey of the Tower. Mysteriously, the order just says that the sacristan was to have the bones for doing with them what the king had instructed him.²¹ We can only speculate as to what that meant: was the order really only concerned with the valuable ivory, or was Westminster Abbey collecting curiosities? We will probably never know.

Matthew Paris, like many writers in the middle ages, was fascinated by unusual and disturbing events in the natural world. He delighted in recording the stories of strange animals and inexplicable events which visitors to St Albans told him. In 1240 he records 'an unusual battle amongst the fishes, beasts and monsters of the deep,' which 'the sailors and old people, dwelling near the coast' had recounted to him. The entertainment value of such stories is underlined by the satirical verse with which he concludes the story.²² In 1252 he describes the first appearance of buffaloes in England, which had been sent to Richard of Cornwall, who was one of Matthew's regular informants: 'The buffalo is of a kind similar to the ox, well adapted for carrying or drawing burdens ... fond of water; and provided with large horns to defend himself.'²³

In addition to animals Matthew was fascinated by unusual events in the natural world, and speculates on their origin. The occurrence of earthquakes in 1247 and 1250 in London and

¹⁷ Pipe roll E 372/101, rot. 13.

¹⁸ Richard Vaughan, *Matthew Paris* (Cambridge 1958), 256-7.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Art*, 213-5.

²⁰ *Close Rolls 1254-56*, 89.

²¹ *Close Rolls 1256-59*, 256

²² Paris, *Chronica Majora*, IV, 81; translation from Giles, *English History*, I, 316.

²³ Paris, *Chronica Majora*, V, 275; Giles, *English History*, II, 475.

the Chilterns causes him to speculate on the existence of underground caverns and deep cavities to which they might be attributed, only to discount the idea because the ground is solid. He notes, however, that the birds were also disturbed by the earthquake. Matthew believes that such events are indicative of future events and quotes apocalyptic references in the Gospels.²⁴ He associates these events with the end of the world which he expected would take place in 1250, a belief that colours many of his interpretations of the natural world. Anything out of the ordinary – eclipses of the sun, comets and meteors, earthquakes, storms and floods, frost and unseasonable weather – was seen as a reflection of disturbances in a mysterious, unseen world which could not be explained, and whose consequences could only be coped with through faith in a divine purpose and prayer.

Faced with Henry III's elephant, Matthew could only record what he saw, and speculate on the nature of the beast. When the elephant died and the king required the bones to be transferred to Westminster, what were the implications of such a decision?

It is interesting to speculate on the significance of the relics of this great animal. Henry III was undoubtedly a pious and orthodox Christian king who would not have confused the remains of an animal, however fabulous, with anything comparable to the relics of the saints. Nevertheless, the possession of something so mysterious and mythical as the bones of the elephant may have encouraged Henry to treat the remains with particular care.

Are there any grounds for this suggestion? There is nothing in the records which directly accounts for the king's request, but if we place ourselves in the cultural landscape of the thirteenth century we shall discover a fascination with the fabulous, the mythical, and the unknown. Such an interest is not peculiar to the thirteenth century, but at that time it was expressed in a particular form which was the Bestiary.

The Bestiary was a collection of texts and illustrations relating to animals, birds, and fish, which did not seek to describe the creatures as part of the natural order but to attribute a moral and spiritual significance to them.²⁵

The contents of the Bestiary had a long history reaching back to late Antiquity. Its contents were determined by tradition; only the commentary might vary. But it was not simply a book of marvels, nor a collection of fantasies; it was intended to be a source of moral and spiritual development.²⁶ Large numbers of these books were produced: there are approximately forty surviving English manuscripts.²⁷ They were written for the nobility and the Court, but were also found in monastic communities, and would probably have been part of the output of the scriptorium.²⁸ Matthew Paris would have known them and had probably seen one; Henry also would have known them.

Amongst the creatures described in a Bestiary was the elephant, and that entry was often one of the longest. The writer of a Bestiary inherited a written tradition which set out the characteristics attributed to the elephant: it was a symbol of fidelity, gentleness, great strength

²⁴ Paris, *Chronica Majora*, IV, 603 and V, 187; Giles, *English History*, II, 210 and 401.

²⁵ *Bestiary: being an English version of Oxford M.S. Bodley 764*, trans. Richard Barber (Woodbridge 1993), Introduction, 7. Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge 1995).

²⁶ Barber, *Bestiary*, 10.

²⁷ Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 1.

²⁸ Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 5.

and longevity; it was said to mate only once and to produce a single calf. To do this the elephant travelled to an earthly paradise in the east, where the male guarded the female while she gave birth in water to protect her and the calf from their enemy, the dragon. The text of the Bestiary equated the elephant with Adam and Eve in paradise, and with the redeeming work of Jesus on the Cross. The elephant, therefore, would have a significance for Matthew and Henry when they confronted Louis's gift, which was even greater than its physical presence, although that also would have been a powerful experience.

Although Matthew makes no explicit reference to the traditions of the Bestiary in his account, his drawing of the ceremonial elephant which greeted Earl Richard in Cremona is closely modelled on similar drawings in the Bestiaries; and elsewhere in his chronicle his art forms have resonances with the art forms of the Bestiary.²⁹ Henry would undoubtedly have shared this awareness. When the elephant died, it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that its bones would have had a heightened importance, derived from the significance attributed to the elephant when it was alive. And that may well have resulted in Henry requesting that the bones of the elephant should be treated with particular respect, and transferred to Westminster, to the place Henry created to be a royal burial place.

²⁹ Lewis, *Art*, 282, 338, 341, fig. 211.