War Elephants in Greco-Bactrian and Indo-greek Armies

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Abstract: In the scientific literature we may find the works of P.D. Armandi, J.M. Kistler, H.H. Scullard, which dedicated to war elephants. The most popular theme of these researches is the classical epoch in the history of war elephants – the Hellenistic period and the Punic wars. But these authors didn't use the material from Greco-Bactria and the Indo-Greek kingdoms. This article is dedicated to war elephants in these Hellenistic states. The most important material sources are the Elephant’s falar from the Hermitage collection, the coins’ mints of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek monarchs. Among the literary sources we have the works of the classical authors (the most important of them is Polybius) and the Indian tractate “Arthashastra”, which are depicting war elephants of Indian origin.

Key words: War elephants • Indian elephant • The Antiquity • The Hellenistic period • Greco-Bactria • Indo-Greek kingdoms • Bactria • India

INTRODUCTION

In the scientific literature there are many works which are dedicated to military history of the Antiquity. But the theme of the war elephants’ history not often attracted researchers. One of the first works which dedicated to war elephants was the research of P.D. Armandi [1], the French artillery officer of the XIXth century. This material have become the basis of monographs of H.H. Scullard [2] and J. M. Kistler [3].

Despite the fact that the authors of these works tried to open this subject as full as possible, but there are some aspects, which still are out of researchers’ horizon. Mainly this explains the fact that the scientists placed higher emphases on the Hellenistic epoch and the Punic Wars. Much more interest for example was attracted to secondly elephants’ appearance on the battlefields in III –VI centuries AD. Ph. Rance had justly marked that these period’s events were not appreciated at their true value among scientific works [4]. However there is a part of elephants’ war history which nowadays is totally unexplored. Strangely enough but this plot isn’t connected with the Late Antiquity, but with the Hellenism and with war elephants in forces of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek rulers. There is only an episode about these martial animals in research by V.P. Nikonorov [5], which was dedicated to military science in the ancient Bactria. There is the Greco-Bactrian elephant’s reconstruction in the work by D. Head [6], which concerns the armament of the Hellenistic epoch and the Punic Wars.

The information about history of Greco-Bactria and states which evolved from its ruins, was very fragmentary, that’s why there was no opportunity to research this subject very closely for a long time. But in the second part of the XXth and the beginning of the XXIst century huge researches were carried out: the Hellenistic settlement Ai-Khanoum on the banks of Amu Darya, the Hellenistic temple in Takhi Sangin, the archaeological complexes in Dalverzin-tepa, Halchayan, Kampir-tepa, Tillya tepe, Old Termez and etc. These archaeological finds give us an additional information about the war organization of the Greco-Bactrian army, the main part of which were war elephants.

The Greeks had known about Indian elephants early enough. Skylax apparently was among the first who had known about them, having been on service in Persian kingdom during the Darius’ I reign (VI century BC), he’d conquered and researched Indus’ valley [7]. Afterwards Skylax’s materials were used by Hecataeus of Miletus [8], who supposed that war elephant was one the India’s symbols [9].
Ctesias of Cnidus (V–IV centuries BC) had composed India's description, where he wrote about elephants as «walldestroyers» [10]. This Ctesias' information is also proved by later Greek authors, for example, by Aristotele [11], Onesicritus and Nearchus [12], who took part in Alexander’s the Great campaign, also by Megasthenes, who was the Seleucus' ambassador to the court of the Indian king Chandragupta [12; 13]. Starting with the Alexander’s epoch the war elephant of Indian origin became the integral part of the ancient historical literature.

The record of it is to be found in descriptions of the Battle of Gaugamela, of the Battle of Hydaspes and also in many battles between the Diadochi, which followed after this Macedonian conqueror’s death.

Bactria had been the province of the Seleucid kingdom for a long time. Right from here the war elephant contingents were delivered for Syrian army. It is known that on March of 273 BC the 20 four-footed giants were send by the Bactrian governor to Syria to Antiochus II army, who at the same time waged war with the Ptolemaic Egypt.

In the middle of the IIIrd century BC Bactria became an independent state. Undoubtedly that the first Greco-Bactrian rulers already had war elephants, which they used in battles against their neighbours. It's a difficult to say which was the role of elephants in the war of independence in Bactria. We know that in the middle of the IIIrd century Diodotus I proclaimed himself as a king and his son Diodotus II provided anti-Seleucid policy in an alliance with Parthians.

However the earlier literature illustrations about presence of war elephants in the Greco-Bactrian army concerns the reign time of the third ruler of this state Eutydemus I. During his Eastern campaign the Seleucid king Antioch III the Great set a problem to get back the lost eastern provinces, mainly Parthia and Bactria. The result of this campaign was making the peace agreement with Eutydemus (206 BC), under which conditions the Greco-Bactrian king had to give all their elephants out [14].

Another written source is one of the Buddhist literary monuments «Milinda Panha» (The Questions of Milinda), which has the information about war elephants. But this document concerns the time of the later epoch, when the united Greco-Bactrian kingdom had fallen to the several independent states in Central Asia and India. According to «Milinda Panha», Milinda, or the Indo-Greek king Menander I (the middle – second part of the 1nd century BC) had the army, which consisted of infantry, cavalry, chariots and war elephants [15]. Thus the tradition of using war elephants in the Greco-Bactrian army remained and, obviously, strengthened among the Indo-Greek monarchs. This information is quite logical, because the estates of latter were situated directly in the region, that was the habitat of the huge four-footed animals.

The others evidences about war elephants in Greco-Bactria we can get thanks to archeological finds or to objects surviving in different collections. Among the art monuments of great important we had to mark the falars from the Hermitage collection, which was ascribed to Greco-Bactrian works of art by K.V. Trever [16] (Illustration 1a).

These falars are the part of collection of Peter the Great epoch and have been founded near 1725. From 1722 it having been stored in Summer Palace of Peter I and then - in the Chamber of Curiosities of Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1859 falars were brought to the Hermitage. In the schedule of the Chamber of Curiosities № 135 one of these falars was named «The shield, on which the elephant have been depicted» and was between items which has been founded «partly near Astrakhan and in the country between Kama and Volga, partly have been excavated from Tatar's graves in Siberia». Falar have been made from the thin sheet and the image on it have been incused. Its overall dimensions are: diameter 24,7 sm and weight 635,5 gr [17].

On the falar depicts the war elephant, carrying the tower on his back, inside which there are two warriors [16]. The tower on the elephant has battlements and loopholes of cruciate and arrowy forms, that shows the Hellenistic influence. One of the warrior has the typical Greek helmet. The other has either thick chevelure or turban. Both of them are armoured with the not long spears, the head of which are jutted out of the tower.
On the elephant’s neck, judge by outward appearance, sits the Indian driver in turban, holding the goad (ancus) in his hand. Among the elephant’s adornments one can mark the massive bell and horsecloth with the hippocampus’ image, the ophidian monster. This image is the often motive in Gandhara art [18]. Another falar from the Hermitage has the same image but the elephant is going to the right (Illustration 1b).

Another falar from the Hermitage is Tower presence or absence on the elephants the horse harness adornment [17]. However it’s not improbable that it can be one of the war elephant’s decoration element, like that, about which Pliny told us. «When Antiochus was sounding the ford of a river, an elephant named Ajax, which on other occasions had always led the van, refused to enter the stream; upon which proclamation was made, that the first rank should belong to the one which should take the lead in passing over. One called Patroclus hazarded the attempt and as a reward, the king presented it with some silver pendants, a kind of ornament with which these animals are particularly delighted and assigned it all the other marks of command.» [19]. Probably it was the sign which having been given like a medal to an elephant for its valor [18].

The elephant on the falar depicts with the tower on his back. We know well, that in the Hellenistic states armies the towers were very often placed on the elephants. Polybius, Livius [14] and many other ancient authors told about it. But the question emerges, whether the like constructions were the Greek engineers invention or its prototypes were in Indian armies long ago, while the Greeks just improved them. It is known that the Indian king Porus in the Battle of Hydaspes had fought being on the elephant’s back. It is confirmed both the ancient historian’s evidences [20-23] and Alexander’s commemorative coin-medals, minting in commemoration of this battle [24]. In «Arthashastra», the Indian treatise about politics and military science, there is the information of the war elephants’ actions in different situations [25], but their there is no any mention about the towers.

Nevertheless, we have the one evidence, allowing to suppose that the Indians, at least in the end of the IVth century BC and perhaps earlier knew about tower using. Megasthenes, the Seleucus’ ambassador, had visited the Indian king Chandragupta I – the Mauryan dynasty founder. There is the information about war elephants in this state in his «Indica» excerpts, which has been preserved to our time. Megasthenes graphically described the Chandragupta’s army review [12]. Among the everything he told about «carriage», which the four-footed giant carried on his back. There were only four men on the elephant: driver and three warrior-riflemen. There is the question: how did three riflemen take place on the animal back? Were they in the tower or did they sit on the horsecloth? It is clear that if two riflemen sit one after another, it was very difficult, virtually impossible to use their weapon effectively. Thus, logically to suppose, that there was a small tower on the elephant back, probably, in the form of the wicker basket, where warriors were.

Tower presence or absence on the elephants depended not only on the animal size. Most likely there is the particular hierarchy and in compliance with it the war elephants were divided in. The biggest and the strongest from them were able to carry on themselves the tower with four soldiers, as there were in the Battle of Magnesia (190 BC). On the Hermitage falar depicted, apparently, middle variant: the crew consists of a driver and two «rifleman lance-knights» (in all three men). We can see on the Alexander’s coins «battle crew» which consisted of a driver and a rider, being on the elephant back. And at last the «light» battle crew consisted of one man, who was at the same time both a driver and a warrior.

The information in our sources, which touch the quantity of the warriors in the tower on the elephants is discrepant. According to Heliodorus there were six warriors in it, two of them stand before, two – near right side and two - near left side [26]. Aelian and Strabo affirmed that there were only tree fighters, not counting the driver [9]. Livius told that in the battle of Magnesia there were four warriors in the towers on the Antiochus’ elephants [20]. Philostratus imparted that their were from 10 to 15 persons [27]. At last in the Old Testament there is the information that there were 32 persons in the tower moreover missile machines [28]. To decide the question.

Illustration 1b: Elephant’s falar from the Hermitage (foto made by A.V. Bannikov, A.A. Popov)
about the real quantity of people in the tower on the elephant’s back, P.D. Armandi based on power and shape of this animal. The maximum weight, that it could lift up, is varied from 2000 to 2500 pounds (from 907,18 to 1133,98 kg). The elephant could carry slowly, such burden escorted by the caravan. However it was excessive on the battlefield where this animal had to be mobile. Therefore the researcher supposes, that the weight that elephant carried must be about 1200 pounds (544,31 kg). The tower together with 5–6 warriors was about such weight. We must remember, that if the weight on the elephant did not retard its motion, the tower had a quite definite dimensions, which, by P.D. Armandi, didn’t exceed the five pounds (1,52 m) lengthwise and in width [1].

The additional information about war elephants in Greco-Bactria and the Indo-Greek states we can receive on the basis of the numismatic sources. The Greco-Bactrian king Demetrius I (about 190–171 BC) on his silver coins was depicted in the helmet in the form of the elephant’s head [29] (Illustration 2). This type of portrait we can see on the commemorative issue of the king Agathocles which is dedicated to Demetrius [29]. We know that Demetrius had conquered the territory of India, which was much bigger than Alexander’s the Great conquests in that region [12; 30]. Most probably, these campaigns of the Greco-Bactrian troops were accompanied by battles with the elephants. At that, it is difficult to say what helped to Demetrius I to become famous, who had got the nickname Aniketos («Invincible»), whether the victory over the big number of enemy four-footed giants, or wide and effective using of these animals during the military operations. We can only guess, how the events had happened. The helmet on the triumphant monarch’s head is the peculiar symbol of his victories over the Indians and the conquest of India. The image of elephant’s head with the bell on its neck we can see on the Demetrius’ I bronze coins [29].

On the Lisias’ I silver coins (about the second part of the IInd century BC), one of the Indo-Greek rulers, just the same head-dress was depicted, as on the Demetrius’ I one [29]. Probably, thus Lisias I tried to show his adherence to Eutydemid dynasty, whose represent was Demetrius I and most probably Lisias I himself. Like image we can see also on the square bronze coins of the Indo-Greek king Demetrius III Invincible [29].

Eucratides I (about 171–145 BC) had also minted on his coins the elephant’s image, but without the armaments. It is known that this ruler was able not only to excite the rebellion in Bactria against Demetrius I, but to tear away from his kingdom the Indian domain [12]. In the last years of his life Eucratides made the campaign to India [30]. The coins with the legend on the Greek and the Indian languages are the evidences of his dominion over the Indian territory [29]. The coins with the elephant’s image were minted by the Indo-Greek rulers both silver and bronze. At that, there is the silver Attic mint of the standard round form (Appolodotus’ I coins [29] and Antialcidas’ I [29]) and the silver mint of square form, which was the typical mint for Indian territories (Appolodotus’ I coins [29]). Also bronze coins were both of the round form (Antimachus’ I [29], Lisias’ I [29], Zoilos’ II [29] coins) and square form (Antimachus’ I [29], Menander’s I [29], Lisias’ I [29], Antialcidas’ I [29], Helioles’ II [29], Epedander’s I [29], Arhebios’ I [29] coins).

There is one more interesting find. This is the bronze statuette, which was discovered in Egypt and today is stored in the Metropolitan museum in New York [31] (Illustration 3). This statuette depicts the naked warrior in the helmet in the form of the elephant’s head. It’s impossible unambiguously to say, who does exactly this statuette depict but there is the opinion, that this is Demetrius I – the Greco-Bactrian king, who probably was on the elephant’s back. Thus the monarch, the warrior, the army commander demonstrated his physical dexterity, military bravery, valour. All of these qualities were the tribute to ancient Greek tradition, the manifestation of the agonal spirit and the aspiration of kalokagathia.
Illustration 4: The battle of the Greco-Bactrian army with the Indians (the reconstruction made by A.V. Bannikov, A.A. Popov)

Among the archeological finds in Ai Khanoum the goad (ancus) was found probably for driving an elephant [5]. In that way we have even the goad for driving an elephant from the most famous and great archeological complex, belonging to Greco-Bactria.

Probably the Greco-Bactrian war elephant was armored and equipped like the Seleucid one. Elephanteria in Greco-Bactria copied the traditions of Syrian army [18].

In Greco-Bactria there was the ordinary tactic for the Hellenistic period. The main power of the army was the phalanx of the heavy armed spearmen-sarissophoroi, who were armed and trained in the Macedonian way. Along with phalanx the large role on the battlefield belonged to war elephants. Usually they were marshaled before the troops front. The aim, that these quadrupeds must do, was the break of the enemy line. In case if the enemy showed the stubborn resistance, the Greco-Bactrian phalanx opened to give a retreat way for the elephants. After elephants’ retreat, different pedestrian and horse departments marched into a battle.

In the skirmish between the Greco-Bactrian, the Indo-Greek and the Indian troops, most likely, quite often were the elephants single combat, like those, that Polibius told, describing the Battle of Raphia.

India at the IIInd century BC was the theatre of different rulers’ resistance, who had the contingents of war elephants.

As noted above, in «Arthashastra» there is the information about different aims, that war elephant had to do in the troop of the Mauryan epoch. Among them are «movement in avant-guard, organization of the descents, stands and roads; envelopment the (enemy) as by the hands; getting past the water points and descents (i.e. the help to others at that time); the penetration to hard and dangerous places; the firing (of the enemy's camp and the extinguish the fire (in its own camp); the victory over one of the enemy army’s part; the joining (their) partitioned (forces); the partition of the conjoint (enemy forces); (sowing) of the fear and panic; the infusion of the greatness; the capture (of the enemy); the saving of the own people; the destruction of the walls, gates and towers; the transfer of the treasury» [25]. It goes without saying, that neither in the Seleucid’s armies, nor in the Ptolemy’s or the Carthaginians’ armies the elephants ever carried out such different functions. It is interesting, that the Indians could teach their elephants not to afraid of fire, while the elephants in the armies of the Hellenistic states were afraid of it and were not trained to do it. Perhaps the Greco-Bactrians were in this case the exception and the huge quadrupeds were used for the same aims like in «Arthashastra».

The similar supposition is quite logically, as drivers himself in the Greco-Bactrian and the Indo-Greek kings’ armies were mostly the Indians and immediate contact during several centuries with the Indian civilization could not pass without leaving a trace and had to teach the Hellenes to many tactical positions of the Indians.

REFERENCES