THE DEATH OF AN ELEPHANT

(On Elāra's Mahāpabbata)

Puradakkhiṇadvāramhi ubho yujjhiṃsu bhūmipā;
tomaraṃ khipi Eḷāro, Gāmaṇī taṃ avañcayi,
vijjhāpesi ca daṇtehi taṃ hatthiṃ sakahatthinā,
tomaraṃ khipi Eḷāraṃ, sahatthī tattha so pati.

(Near the south gate of the city the two kings fought; Elara hurled his dart, Gamani evaded it; he made his own elephant pierce (Elara's) elephant with his tusks and he hurled his dart at Elara; and this (latter) fell there, with his elephant.)[1]

With a brevity which is remarkable by any standards the *Mahāvaṃsa* tells the story thus of the encounter between Dutugemunu and Elāra, which resulted in the death of the Damila king and his elephant, Mahāpabbata. Climaxing as this single combat did the battle of Anuradhapura, which was itself the culmination of a series of twenty eight battles which Dutugemunu had fought to defeat the Damilas in Sri Lanka, it completed the victory over them with the death of the king at the hands of the conqueror himself.

What better episode could an epic poet have asked to elaborate upon, and what better opportunity could there have been to glorify the individual prowess of his youthful hero, who, as we are told, had reserved for himself the glory of doing battle with the enemy monarch - and did so in single combat? Here was a theme which, within

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1. *Mhv.* 25. 69-70; W. Geiger transl. *The Mahāvaṃsa* (P.T.S.) Oxford (1912) xxv. 69-70, p. 175. Chapters indicated in Roman numerals in the case of the *Mahāvaṃsa* refer to the Geiger translation.

proportions, was worthy of the treatment Homer gave the duel between Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*, or Virgil that between Aeneas and Turnus in the *Aeneid*. Here was occasion for epic elaboration descriptive of the flight of Elāra from the field of battle and Dutugemunu's hot pursuit of him round the walls of the great city, Elāra's inability to escape and his decision to turn around and fight at the southern gate, the charge of the huge elephants, the ram of their foreheads and the clash of their tusks amid the trumpeting, while upon their backs the kings hurled their weapons at each other or evaded those that came at them - until finally, and at the same moment that his elephant thrust his tusks into Mahāpabbata, Dutugemunu pierced Elāra with his spear, toppling him from the back of the elephant, even as the elephant himself sank to his knees and fell over, both mortally wounded. What we have instead is a classic anticlimax - a deliberate attempt to play the encounter down, even after the promise of something more sensational, when Dutugemunu had it proclaimed by beat of drum that none but he shall engage the enemy king.[2] It may be to assuage this disappointment that we are feasted beforehand with the curious episode of Sūranimala's killing of the acrobatic Dīghajantu,[3] and immediately afterwards with the dramatic archery engagement between Dutugemunu and Bhalluka.[4]

Admittedly the *Mahāvaṃsa* is a more cursory and terse narrative, especially when it deals with war, than are the great literary epics of antiquity, with portions that are absolutely sketchy and thread-bare even for such a work. But even for writing such as this, the treatment meted to the Dutugemunu-Elāra combat, which administered the *coup d'grace* to Damila domination and completed the

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2. *Mhv.* 25.67.

3. *Mhv.* 25. 58-64.

4. *Mhv.* 25. 88-93.

victory of the hero of the chronicle is, to say the least, downright niggardly. Why? I have heard it said nowadays by those who, for some reason or other, seek to play down the victory of Dutugemunu over his rival or extend some partiality to the latter in a pretence of ethnic impartiality, that it was nothing remarkable for a prince in the prime of youth to have killed in combat an ageing monarch with as much as forty-four years of rule behind him. But this is not very much to the point when the fight was one with spears from elephant-back and did not involve the pitting of the strength of one against the other at any time; besides, Elāra did have his throw first, and missed. Nor could the nature of the *Mahāvaṃsa* description be attributed to the possibility that the chronicler, knowing nothing about the combat except that Dutugemunu killed Elāra (or perhaps doubting even that?) sought to keep the action to the minimum required to achieve that result, of course without discredit to Dutugemunu. There is much in the tradition of epic everywhere in the world that justifies the intermingling of fantasy and romance with fact, especially in the case of events which belonged to the distant past, which the several hands which continued the compilation of the *Mahāvaṃsa* were not chary to use, even with respect to contemporary happenings and much that could well have evoked quite other emotions than those that were conducive to the "serene joy of the pious".

The reason for this terse and lacklustre account of the single combat between the two kings may well be the result of a combination of factors. On the one hand, it may have been an unwillingness on the part of our chronicler to exult in the death of a noble monarch, whose penchant for justice, even if somewhat eccentric, had won his love and approbation.[5] On the other hand, this may have been the way tradition had said the event took place, and the chronicler, from doubts of his own, thought it

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5. *Mhv*. 21. 13-34.

wise not to improve upon it. But brief as the account of the encounter is - just three lines of Pali - it still holds within it an element or two which must be suspected of being mythic with a view to the dramatic. This has to do with the death of Elāra's elephant, Mahāpabbata.

For, while a question does occur about the kings themselves, there is nothing remarkable either about the way Dutugemunu pierced Elāra or the death of Elāra itself. On the other hand, questions do occur about Kandula's piercing of Mahāpabbata and the death of Mahāpabbata, which suggest that the chronicler (or his source at one or more removes) has created a parallel with the mounts to match the encounter between their masters, which will not as easily stand up to the application of factual standards as the latter. And if this is so, we must be prepared to accept even less of this brief account that the chronicler gives of the Dutugemunu-Elāra single combat at face value, relegating to the mythic the drama of Mahāpabbata's death.

The *Mahāvamsa* clearly seeks to establish a sentimental link between Dutugemunu and Kandula, as there had been between another hero and his famous mount, of which our chronicler may well have known. I mean that of Alexander and Bucephalus. For, even though it is an elephant we are dealing with here that was left, as if as a gift for the new-born prince, by his parent (an elephant of Chaddanta caste),[6] a story of the recognition by a horse of a warrior worthy of riding him had already just been told about Velusumana in the preceding chapter,[7] and the parallel of this to the Alexander-Bucephalus anecdote remarked by Geiger himself.[8]

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6. *Mhv.* 22. 61-63.

7. *Mhv.* 23. 71-74.

8. *op.cit.* p. 161, note I to xxiii. 74.

Introducing the episodes which led to the levying of the warriors, Nandimitta *et al.*, the *Mahavamsa* pays special tribute to Kandula, the story of whose acquisition had already been told, by saying: "Foremost in strength and beauty, shape and the qualities of courage and swiftness and of mighty size of body was the elephant, Kandula." Part of the excellences of his physique and temperament Kandula surely owed to the fact that he was a Chaddanta, the most favoured of the castes of elephants, and part to his own individual qualities, as with the much beloved Huratala of later times, whom the starving Portuguese in the beleagered fort of Colombo did not have the heart to slaughter and eat, as they did the others.[10] To the latter must be attributed his size, since the Chaddanta was not necessarily a large animal. The largest of the extant elephants in the island are the great swamp elephants of the Eastern Province, whom Deraniyagala had identified as a separate sub-species and named *Elephas maximus vilaliya*.[11] This is now taken to be a case of overspecification, and the size of the *vilaliya* largely the result of the rich fodder available to them in the villus that stretch along the eastern side of the Mahaveli from Yakure through Manampitiya and Mutugala, northwards to Kodiyar Bay. It is true Kandula was found abandoned near a watering place, but this was in Ruhuna, the Rhogandani of Ptolemy (Plate I), so that the elephant who left him there and went away must have belonged to one of the herds that roamed the

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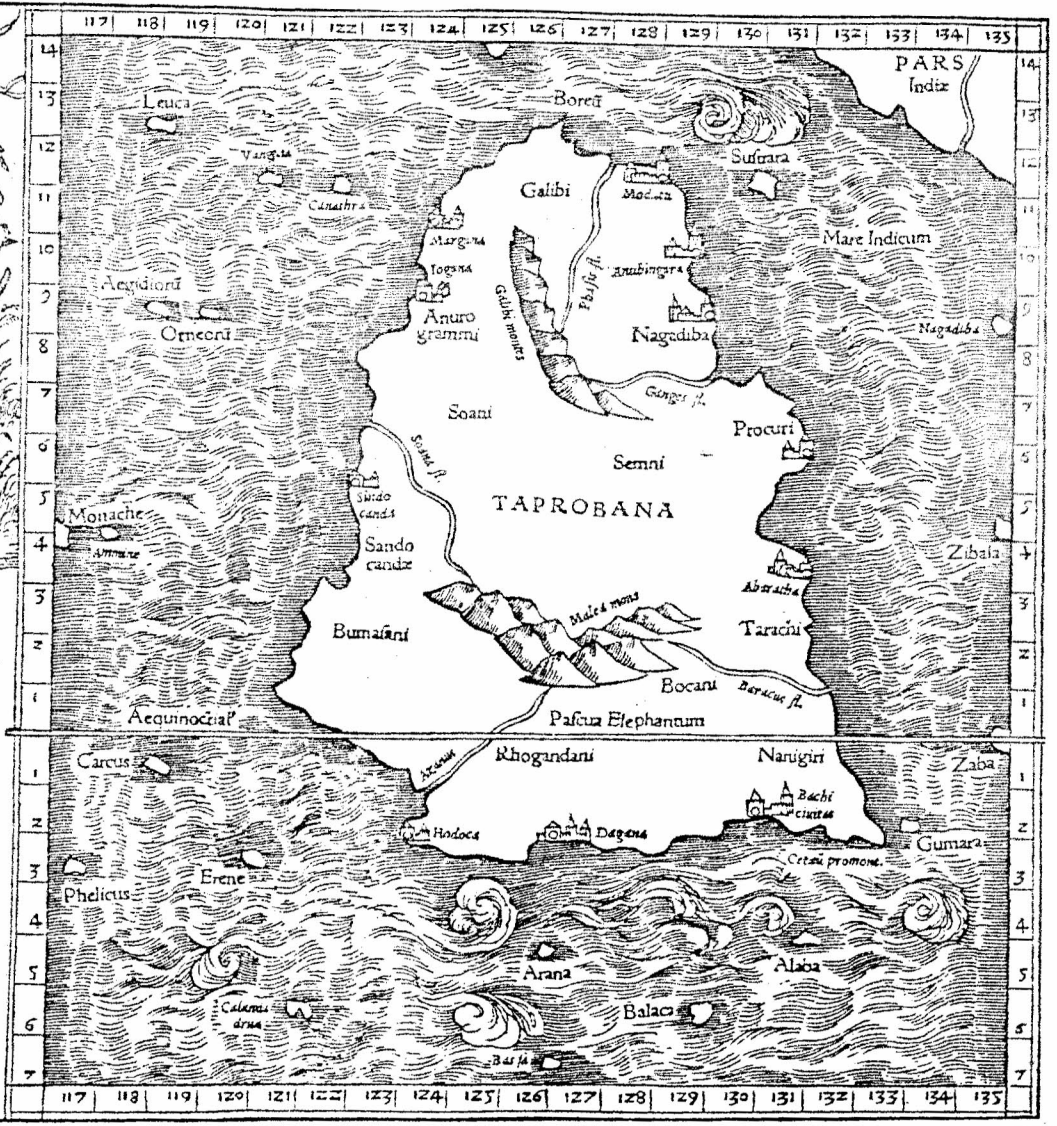
9. *Mhv.* xxiii. I.

10. See C.W. Nicholas "The Ceylon Elephant in the Portuguese and Dutch Periods" *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon* vol. xliv, no. 4. p. 159-160.

11. See his *Some Extinct Elephants, Their Relatives and the Two Living Species* Govt. Press, Ceylon (Aug.1955) 'The Giant Ceylon Swamp Elephant' p. 104-107.

VARTOMANNVS

Taprobanam insulã hodie uocãt Sumatram, moderanturq; ei quaterni diademate insignit reges. Mittit proceriores quã alibi inueniantur elephantes, meliores que. Est etiam ibi procerioris piperis uberior prouentus, miraq; copia. Lingua patria piper molaga dicitur, & est lõge procerius illo, quod huc aduehitur, multoq; candidius, sed minus ponderosum, uenit enim ibi piper nõ põdere sed mensura.



"feeding ground of the elephant" (νόμας ἐλεφάντων), which the geographer located there.[12]

Elephants of the Chaddanta caste may be tall, but (notwithstanding the expression *[illegible]* used in Sinhala of a large man) could also be a medium-sized animal, so that if Kandula was a big specimen, he may have owed his size as much to his heredity as to the rich fodder and attention he received in the royal stables (*hatthisala*) of Kavantassa as the state-elephant (*mangala-hatthi*) meant for his son. The consensus of medieval opinion gives the distinctive characteristics of the Chaddanta as including elongate trunk, tail and penis, all of which, together with the four legs, touch the ground, and (apart from lesser details) a body that is covered with hair like golden ringlets.[13] But the most valuable characteristic of the Chaddanta is a psychological one, and one that is required also of a good battle elephant - self-control under attack and molestation. This Kandula was to display, and eminently, in the

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12. In the geography of the island as described by Claudius Ptolemy (c. 121-150 A.D.) these are located south of the "Malea Mountains". According to Tennent, hunters agreed that the largest specimens are to be found in the Hambantota country. See J.E. Tennent, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Physical, Historical and Topographical.* vol. II, London (1860) Part VIII - 'The Elephant". p. 291.

13. Other qualities of the Chaddanta describe the forehead and its bump, the tusks, ears, nails and eyes. "An elephant with these perfections", says the *Hasti-silpa*, "will impart glory and magnificence to the kings", but adds that "he cannot be discovered amongst thousands, yea, there shall never be found an elephant clothed at once with all the excellences herein described."

seige of Vijithanagara.[14]

At the single combat between Dutugemunu and Elāra, which is the subject of discussion here, we are expressly told that Dutugemunu made his elephant pierce Elāra's elephant with his tusks (*vijjhapesi ca dantehi taṃ hatthiṃ sakahatthina*), which obviously evidences the fact that Kandula was not an *aliya*, or tush elephant, but a tusker (*ātha*), and surely one that, even in the infancy in which he was noticed and captured, showed promise of sprouting a goodly pair of tusks.

Tuskers are rare in Sri Lanka, only about one in ten males having tusks, and even rarer in females. The so-called *vilaliya* is notoriously a tush elephant,[15] whereas tuskers, rare as they are, are more frequent in the herds of the south, to which Kandula's parent belonged. It must have been this scarcity of good tuskers which impelled the Sinhalese kings to import elephants from India and Burma (and even go to war with the latter country when the supply was interrupted),[16]

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14. See *Mhv*. 25. 29-31. When Kandula attacked the gates of the city, the Damilas not only assailed him with weapons of every kind, but with balls of red hot iron and molten pitch, which tormented him with pain. All he did was find relief in a pool of water.

15. Deraniyagala *op.cit*. p. 104. He says "It is relatively more tuskless than the 'forma typica', usually even the tushes being completely hidden underneath the upper lip.

16. Indian elephants formed part of the dowry of the royal bride of King Vijaya in the 5th cent. B.C. (*Mhv*. 7. 55-57). In the 6th century Cosmas says the king of Sri Lanka was buying elephants by the cubit, at 50 or 100 nomisma per cubit (height being measured from fore-foot to withers). In 1165 A.D. Parakramabahu I invaded Burma when her king (contd.)

whereas, from as far back as the first century A.D. down to Portuguese and Dutch times there is good and steady evidence of the export of elephants in large numbers from the island to the mainland.[17] Indeed, the rarity of tuskers in the island had led Lydekker to suspect that even the few there were were the result of early importations from India - a theory which however Deraniyagala has discounted on palaeonotological

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raised the price of elephants fantastically and also obstructed the export (*Cal.* 76. 17-20, see also 33-34.) After the defeat, the Burmese king announced: "Year by year must we from now onwards send elephants to any amount as tribute from our property ..." (*Cal.* 76.70) and early sent a number of elephants and renewed the pact of friendship with the Lanka Ruler. (*Cul.* 76.75).

17. Megasthenes (3rd cent. B.C.), as reported by Aelian (c. 170-235 A.D.), says, "The islanders export them to the mainland opposite in boats which they construct for this traffic from wood supplied by the thickets in the Island, and they dispose of their cargoes to the king of Kalinga" (J.W. McCrindle *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian* London. (1877) p. 173-175. Ptolemy notes Modoutou (Mahatittha) as the chief outlet. Vasco da Gama, in his pioneer voyage in 1497, notes in his journal that "The king of Ceylon has many elephants for war and for sale." Arab traders invariably paid a high price for a Ceylon elephant, sometimes twice or thrice what they paid for an Indian or Burman (Ribeiro 1658); de Barros noted in the 15th century that Ceylon elephants were "those with the best instinct in the whole of India, and because they are notably the most tameable and handsomest, they are worth much more". Andrea Corsali (1515) says "Ceylon has a great quantity of elephants, which are sold to divers merchants of India when they are small in order (contd.)

Plate II. Two African elephants push trunk to trunk in a test of strength. Observe the elevation of the tusks when the head is lifted.

evidence.[18]

Elāra's own Mahapabbata could however have been an Indian tusker, and as his name 'Mighty Mountain' suggests, a big animal himself. But his defeat by Kandula must not be allowed to imply the truthfulness of the popular belief, coming down from its first mention by Onesicritus in the third century B.C., that the elephants of Sri Lanka (Taprobane) were "larger and more warlike" (*maiores bellicosioresque*) than those

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to be domesticated. In Duarte Barbosa's description of Sri Lanka he says, "There are in this island many wild elephants, which the king orders to be caught and tamed, and they sell them to merchants of Coromandel, Narsynga and Malabar, and those of the kingdoms of Deccan and Cambay go to those places to buy them." Next to cinnamon, elephants were the major attraction which impelled the Portuguese to establish themselves in Sri Lanka. See Nicholas *op.cit.* p. 155-156. See also B.J. Perera 'Ancient Ceylon's Exports and Imports' *The Ceylon Journal of Hist.* vol. II. nos. 1 and 2 (1952) p. 18-19 and B.W.M. Gooneratne 'The Ceylon Elephant: Elephas Maximus Zeylanicus: Its Decimation and Fight for Survival. *The Ceylon Journal of Hist. and Social Studies* vol. X. nos. 1 and 2 (June-Dec. 1967) p. 149-150 etc.

18. *op.cit.* p. 47. He says fossils of the extinct Pleistocene race of this elephant that occur in Ceylon frequently possess tusks. At the same time he dismisses de Blainville's theory, put forward in 1845, that theCeylon elephant's tusks were thin, attributing this to the youth of those that had such tusks (*loc. cit*).

of India,[19] or that they were, as Aelian reported,[20] "stronger, bigger and more intelligent" (ἀλκιμώτερόι τε την ῥώμην και μείζους ἰδεῖν εἰσί καὶ θυμοσοφώτεροι). The likelihood is that, while Kandula and Mahāpabbata were large for Asiatic elephants (not however more than eight, or at most nine feet),[21] The former may have been the younger animal, as his master was the younger rider.

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19. Preserved by Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 81 = fr. 13 Jacoby). Onesicritus, seaman, Cynic and Alexander-historian; he was with Alexander and steered his ship down the Jhelum as Nearchus' lieutenant. This opinion of the superiority of the Sri Lankan elephant in war (*plus courageux a la guerre*) was affirmed by Tavernier (*Les Six Voyages* J.B. Tavernier, bk. III. ch. 20). So much so, he says, that elephants from other lands instinctively worshipped them, laying their trunks on the ground and then raising them.

20. *De. Nat. Animal.* xiii. 8.

21. The largest elephant killed stood 13 feet at the shoulders and weighed 12 tons - but this was an African; and largest pair of tusks on record, again African, weighed 440½ pounds (see *Elephants and Other Land Giants* Time-Life Films publ. USA (1976, 1977) p. 16 and 25. In Asiatic elephants size diminishes towards the east, the largest being the animals of Ceylon, India and Assam; those of Malaya are smaller, and of Borneo the smallest (Deraniyagala *op.cit.* p. 40). But even those of Hambantota, according to Tennent (see ft. note 12 above) are no taller than 9 feet. Above this, he thinks, the estimates are extravagant and the result of imagination. The ancient Sinhalese belief that the height of a beast was roughly twice the circumference of his fore-foot has now been established as sufficiently accurate for practical purposes; (contd.)

According to the *Mahāvamsa* the two kings fought it out with spears (*tomara*) which they hurled at each other from elephant-back. These were, like the *visu kadu* (or "throwing swords"), not very long, but perhaps, for their length, heavier than the stabbing spear or *sarissa* with which the men on the elephants fought each other in the battle of Raphia (217 A.D.), which Polybius describes for us.[22] In the combat with Bhalluka the weapons used were the bow and arrow,[23] again projectiles, but this time for attack from a greater distance.

There may have been advantage in the use of such weapons against infantry from the eminence provided by the elephant, when one could hit targets that would otherwise be obstructed at ground level - though the same must be true *vice-versa*, with the riders themselves providing sitting targets to all the enemy around them. There is good reason why the lance may not have been of much use upon elephant back. One of these may be that, being bulky and lumbering, the elephant was not as agile and lithe as the horse to make the swift passes which would allow for jousting with the lance, using the

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see T.A. Bongso *et al.* 'Estimation of Shoulder Height from Fore-Foot Circumference in the Asian Elephant' *Ceylon Journal of Science* Bio.Sci.) vol. 14, nos. 1 and 2 (April 1981) p. 79-82. Mitchell, Secretary of the Regents Part Zoo in 1851, had already established this, but by measurement of one animal. See Tennent *op.cit.* p. 336, n.1.

22. v. 79-86. The vividness of the description may reflect an eye-witness account. Ptolemy had 73 elephants to Antiochus' 102. While the men lunged at each other with their long *sarissas*, their animals fought it out with each other beneath them

23. *Mhv.* xxx. 88-93.

momentum. But the more significant reason is that, unlike horses, the elephants were not mere mounts but confronted each other and themselves did battle when they met. Otherwise as mounts their bulk and comparative sluggishness in manoeuvre, as against the horse, was a disadvantage. Interesting in the light of this are the silver decadrachms minted during the last period of Alexander at Babylon (Fig.1) which depict the king upon his horse, Bucephalus, taking the Indian rajah, Porus, from the rear as he sits helplessly upon his elephant, stabbing him with his long *sarissa*. In front of Porus, his mahout has turned around in alarm and is hurling a spear of the sort Dutugemunu and Elāra may have used, at the intrepid horseman, while he holds two others in his left hand. The prancing horse is a study in contrast with the resigned immobility of the huge elephant.[24] It is this same contrast of equine agility and elephantine cumbersomeness that is underscored in the single combat between Dutugemunu and his brother, Tissa, at Mahagama, when Dutugemunu, riding the mare, Dighathunikā, is said to have had her vault clean over the elephant, Kandula.[25]

Notwithstanding Kandula's attempt to treat this humiliation then as of having been overleaped by a

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24. See B.V. Head *A Guide to the Principal Coins of the Greeks* London (1959) plate 27, no. 4; C. Seltman *Greek Coins* 2nd ed. London (1955) p. 36, plate 186. The obverse type commemorates the victory of Alexander over Porus - though obviously not with realism, since there was no personal encounter such as this. On both obverse and reverse types Alexander wears the plumes he wore at the battle of Granicus. Two coins are at the British Museum and one in New York.

25. *Mhv.* 24. 34-35.

female rather than a horse, and to shift the blame for that too on to the weakness of his rider, Tissa, there is no doubt that, even if elephants may have been grand animals to ride in ceremonial, they were hardly the best of mounts in the field of battle, and even otherwise, with an enemy experienced in them, likely to prove "a double-edged weapon" (*genus anceps:* Livy)[26] best left out, as by Alexander and the Romans after him.[27]

Be that as it may, they were ridden to battle throughout much of history by Sinhalese and Indian kings and nobles, very often with disastrous consequences to themselves in defeat.[28]

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26. xxvii. 14; Appian *Hisp.* 46 refers to them as "common enemies" (κοίνοι πολέμιοι)

27. Curtius (ix. 2.15 f) suggests Alexander did not deploy elephants against Porus because, the more numerous they were, the more confusion they would create. Though he never used them, they played a considerable part in the wars of his Successors. The Macedonians used them primarily as a screen against cavalry, though a Raphia they led Antiochus' attack. After the initial experience of fighting elephants and the defeat of Hasdrubal and his squadrons of elephants, the Romans preferred to concentrate on devising and perfecting their anti-elephant defences to using elephants themselves. Once they learnt how to tackle them, the Romans lost their terror for elephants. For a collection of references to elephants in ancient warfare, see P. Armandi *Histoire Militaire des Elephants depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu' a introduction des armes a feu* Paris. (1848).

28. Consider the suicides of Kassapa I (Cūl. 39.27), Kassapa, son of Upatissa III (Cūl. 41.24), Dāthapabhuti (Cūl. 41. 52-53), Jetthatissa III (Cūl. 44. 112-113) and Mahinda, brother of Sena I (Cūl. 50.23). The elephant was hardly the mount for escape, as Elāra himself must have realized.

The chief reason why fighting on elephant-back was different from fighting from horseback is the fact that, as observed before, the elephant himself took part in the onslaught on the enemy, both against the soldiery as well as (where the enemy too had deployed elephants) the enemy's elephants, and was thus (to adapt a phrase from Aristotle) a living engine (ἔμψυχον ὄργανον) of war.

We are not here concerned with the manner in which elephants went about attacking soldiery, but with the nature of combat of elephant with elephant. Dutugemunu, it would be recalled, got Kandula to attack Mahāpabbata at the same time that he threw his own weapon at Elara. This instruction to kill he may have conveyed by 'elephant language' or by prodding one of the many nerve centres (*nila*) which would have made the elephant go for his adversary.[29] What would however be a mistake is if it was thought that the manner in which Kandula launched his attack i.e. with his tusks and lethally, was quite the natural and immediate way in which a tusker would do so and that there was nothing unexpected about the result. This may also lead to the supposition that it is for this reason that tuskers were naturally more valued for war, and conversely that the *aliya*, or tuskless elephant, however dreadful he may be against infantry, both physically and psychologically, was at a grave disadvantage against one armed with tusks. Those experienced in elephants are however not without reservations about both these notions.

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29. Many of those which drive an elephant to kill are located in the head between ear and ear, in front of the eyes and in the lower neck and underbelly. Touching, prodding or pricking *nila* are said to make the elephant do a number of things without verbal orders. However, I am not aware of any scientific study which has gone into the efficacy of this claim.

A tusker,if there be one in a herd, is generally observed to be in command of it, though a female of great energy draws as much obedience as a male. In the kraal of 1847, of which he was a spectator, Tennent[30] observed that in instances where the intervention of other decoys had no effect in reducing a wild one to order, the mere approach or presence of the tusker belong to Dehigame Rate-mahatmaya was enough to ensure submission without more active intervention.

Yet, despite this respect among elephants for a tusker and a tusker's own psychological diminution at the loss of his tusks, his tusks were neither given to the elephant as weapons of offence, nor does he in his natural state wield them as the deer and the buffalo, or the rhinoceros use their horns. Had this

Fig. 1.

30. *op.cit.* p. 367.

been the case, says Tennent,[31] the vast majority of elephants in Sri Lanka, males as well as females, would be left helpless in the presence of an assailant. In fact, however, tuskless males are at no disadvantage in a fight, although to outward appearance they are, as Lt. Col. J.H. Williams[32] calls them, "the eunuchs of the herd." For, he explains,[33] from the age of three all that the animal gains by not having tusks goes into additional bodily strength, particularly in the girth and strength of the trunk. As a result, the trunk becomes so strong that it will smash of an opponent's tusk as though, instead of being solid ivory, it were the dry branch of a tree".

"The *aliya* generally avoids taking on a tusker," adds Deraniyagala," but when such a fight is in progress the former is generally found to be more powerful than the latter, which possesses the great advantage of its long tusks. The *aliya* checks the tusks of its foe with its trunk, and instances are known where the former evened up matters early in the contest by breaking off a large section of the rival's tusks."[34] Tennent refers to this occasion when some Sinhalese villagers were witness to a fight between a tusker and one without tusks, and saw the latter with his trunk seize one of the tusks of his antagonist and snap off from it a portion about two feet in length, which a civil officer of Government, Mr. Mercer, later sent to him.[35] According to Deraniyagala's information, the *aliya* does this by striking upwards with the base of his trunk against the

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31. *op.cit.* p. 275.

32. *Elephant Bill*, London (1950) p. 5.

33. *loc.cit.*

34. *op.cit.* p. 66.

35. *op.cit.* p. 280.

lower or convex surface of the tusks, which give way, as they are only built to sustain weight from above against their concave curvature.[36]

Here the trunk is shown to be the more powerful weapon of the two, though, as Tennent adds - and with other authorities agreeing with him, "the chief reliance of the elephant for defence is his ponderous weight, the pressure of his foot being sufficient to crush any minor assailant after being prostrated by means of his trunk."[37]

This is not to say that the tusks are not used in combat when an elephant has them. They are - by action which Tennent describes as "pushing and goring" - and result in wounds and lacerations by which the contenders are much bloodied; but they are not used with lethal effect, except when one of them is tripped or otherwise falls over, or in the alternative, accepts defeat and turns round to flee. Deraniyagala, describing the fighting of elephants in their natural state, writes,[38]

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36. *loc.cit.*

37. *loc.cit.* The irresistible impetus and havoc caused by a charging elephant have given the *Cūlavaṃsa* chroniclers an apt simile for describing an army that has burst through the enemy formation - (*Cūl.* 72. 248; 76. 224. See n. 6 *ad loc* in the Geiger transl. *Culavamsa* Pt. II, Colombo (1953) p. 85. For a vivid description of the elephant's charge and the horrifying effect of it, see Aelien *De Nat. Animal.* viii. 10.

38. *op.cit.* p. 65-66.

"The animals either circle round each other, slashing at trees and termite hillocks with their tusks until one suddenly charges the other, which meets the charge with his head, or they both meet at an ambling rush. *Aliyas* thereafter use the basal third of the raised trunk in pushing and in attempting to dig downwards with their tushes on to the skull of the opponent. Frequently both animals will strive for such an opening by placing the basal undersurfaces of their trunks together and pushing with the whole weight. An elephant will also butt with its head and employ its trunk in tripping up its opponent's forelegs. When one combatant falls down its rival endeavours to rip open its flanks with its tushes and stave in its ribs by butting. Tuskers with straight tusks employ them for stabbing, but if the tusks are very curved the animal is forced to rely on butting as do the tuskless ones. In a fight between tuskers, the one about to be beaten summons all its energies and jolts back his rival, and then turns round and bolts before the other can recover himself and stab him in the flank or between the hind legs as he turns his head to flee. The vanquished is hotly pursued by the victor, which attempts to stab it in the anus or genital protuberance and not infrequently have the end of its tail bitten off, especially if the pursuer is a tuskless *aliya.*"

"Elephant bulls fight head to head," writes Williams,[39] "and seldom fight to the death, without one trying to break away. The one that breaks away frequently receives a wound which proves mortal. Directly one of the contestants tries to break off and turn, he exposes the most vulnerable part of the body. The deadly blow is a thrust of one of the tusks between the hind legs into the loins and intestines where the testicles are carried inside the body. It is a common wound to have a treat after a wild

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39. *loc.cit.*

tusker has attacked a domesticated one." This same pushing with the foreheads until the weaker, fagged and bleeding from tusk wounds, yielded ground, followed by the victor jabbing his tusks (but in front, forcing the vanquished elephants' head up) is described by the great hunter, Alosyius Horn,[40] who had witnessed a fight between two African elephants on a sandbank (see Plate II). When an elephant fell after being rushed or tripped by the forelegs by his opponent during a fight, he would be even more greatly at the mercy of his assailant than if he fled. Bodies of elephants are sometimes found with their heads battered in and abdomens ripped open, and great holes torn out of their sides, bearing witness to the fierce battle that had ensued.[41]

Aristotle,[42] who appears to have known a great deal about elephants, whether from personal observation or the reports of others who had been out east, records that "Elephants fight fiercely with one another and stab one another with their tusks; of the two combatants the beaten gets completely cowed, and dreads the sound of the conqueror's voice." Polybius,[43] who gives us a vivid description of the fighting of elephants at the battle of Raphia, which may reflect an eye-witness account of it, says that they used all their strength to push each other with their foreheads, their tusks firmly interlocked, until one of them gave ground. Then the winner pushed aside the other's trunk, and when once he had made him turn, he gored him with his tusks as a bull does with his horns."

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40. E. Lewis *The Life and Works of Alfred Alosyius Horn*, London (1927-1929) p. 109.

41. R. Carrington *Elephants* Penguin Books (1962) p. 71.

42. *Hist. Animal.* iv. 1. 610a15.

43. *loc.cit.*

For a country that has trained and put elephants into the field of battle and seige operations for nearly two thousand years as a regular contingent of the traditional fourfold army, the information about their use in these is suprisingly niggardly; nor does India have much to say on this, notwithstanding Kautilya. There is mention of the exercise of making one elephant charge another, travelling at top speed over a distance of a furlong, and the recipient trained to patiently endure the pain until ordered to attack in turn.[44] It is likely also that they were trained to attack men by making them charge dummies with tusks, or with trunk armed with club, sword, or other weapon. A painted cloth at the Aluth Nuvara Maha Devale at Hanguranketa depicts two elephants with their tusks shortened and with their mahouts up, fighting over a low parapet - quite evidently a training programme for fighting one another. A stone inscription belonging to the 1st century B.C. at Navalar Kulam in the Panama Pattu mentions that a prince was Äth Achariya, or master of the elephant establishment or *äth pantiya*, and it may be this post of great dignity and importance that was subsequently placed under the Gaja Nayaka Nilame, the chief officer of the royal household.[45]

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44. See Appendix - Gaja Sastra p. 159, sec. (d) in Deraniyagala 'Some Aspects of the Asiatic Elephant in Zoology and Ethnography' *JRAS* (Ceylon) vol. XXXIV no. 91 (1938). Kandula (*Mhv.* 25.84) is said to have yielded ground quite slowly to weaken the expected onslaught (*taṃvegamandībhavatthaṃ paccosakki saṇiṃ saṇiṃ*) of Bhalluka's elephant, on the other hand.

45. For the flag of the Gaja Nayake Nilame (*hastiya maha kodiya*) of Huduhumpola, Kandy - a rampant elephant holding a lotus sprig in his trunk (Fig.2) see Memoirs of the Colombo Museum, Series A, No. 2 - *Sinhalese Banners and Standards* ed. E.W. Perera, Colombo (1916) plate VIII, fig. 15.

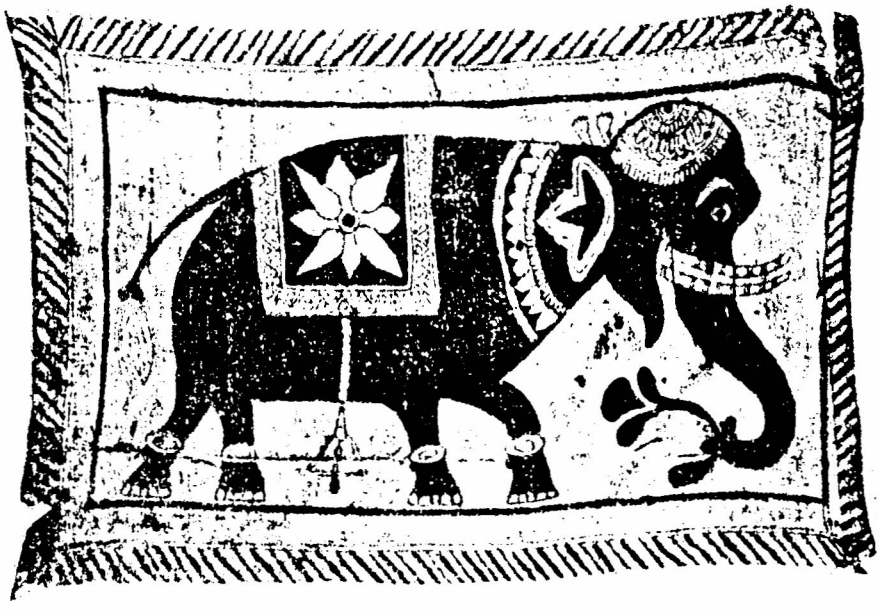

Fig. 2.

It is also known that an entire sub-caste of the Govi vamsa, the Kuruve people of Kengalle, were in Kandyan times specialized in the training of war elephants.

A whole curriculum of the training of war-elephants must then be presumed to lie behind the simple statement in the *Mahavamsa* that Dutugemunu ordered his elephant to direct his attack at Mahapabbata with his tusks (*dantehi*), since this was neither the first nor the most instinctive way in which an untrained elephant would have gone for his opponent. Elephants usually formed the van of an army, so that battle may have been engaged with the charge of the elephants, but on two occasions at least the spotlight of the *Culavamsa* falls on a single combat between king and king or king and noble, like that

between Dutugemunu and Elara. But in neither of these, though the tusks of the elephants are used and their bodies bloodied by the encounter, are the beasts seen to fall dead. For instance, many centuries after the Dutugemunu episode, when Moggallana II fought his brother, King Dathapabbhuti (537 A.D), the huge elephants are said to have rammed each other; "a crash was heard at their onslaught like the roar of thunder, and sparks like lightening flew at the striking of their tusks. The blood-stained elephants were as evening clouds. Wounded by Moggallana's elephant the King's elephant began to give way."[46] Again, we hear that at the Battle of Mahaummara (towards the end of the reign of Mahinda II: 772-779), when Dappula met the senapati Udaya face to face, he grew furious and spurred his elephant to kill him. But, says the *Cūlavamsa*,[47] the other rammed him with his own elephant (a huge beast, "terrible as the elephant of Māra") and put him to flight. (From the afore-mentioned evidence of elephant-fighting there is no doubt that, had Udaya's elephant been quick enough after turning Dappula's beast, he would have driven his tusk into his rear end!).

According to Tennent,[48] although an elephant with tusks may push or gore with them (and he thinks the French word *défences* has been given to them too hastily)," their almost vertical position, added to the elephant's difficulty of raising his head above the level of his shoulders, is inconsistent with the idea of their being designed for attack", and if an elephant

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46. *Cūl.* 41. 49-53.

47. *Cūl.* 48. 156-157.

48. *op.cit.* p. 276. Even the trunk he thinks is too delicate an organ to be rudely employed in a conflict with other animals. A charging elephant usually curls his trunk up into one and a half coils to protect it, though when he sees no danger to it, he may swing it outward and upwards to strike the object of his hate.

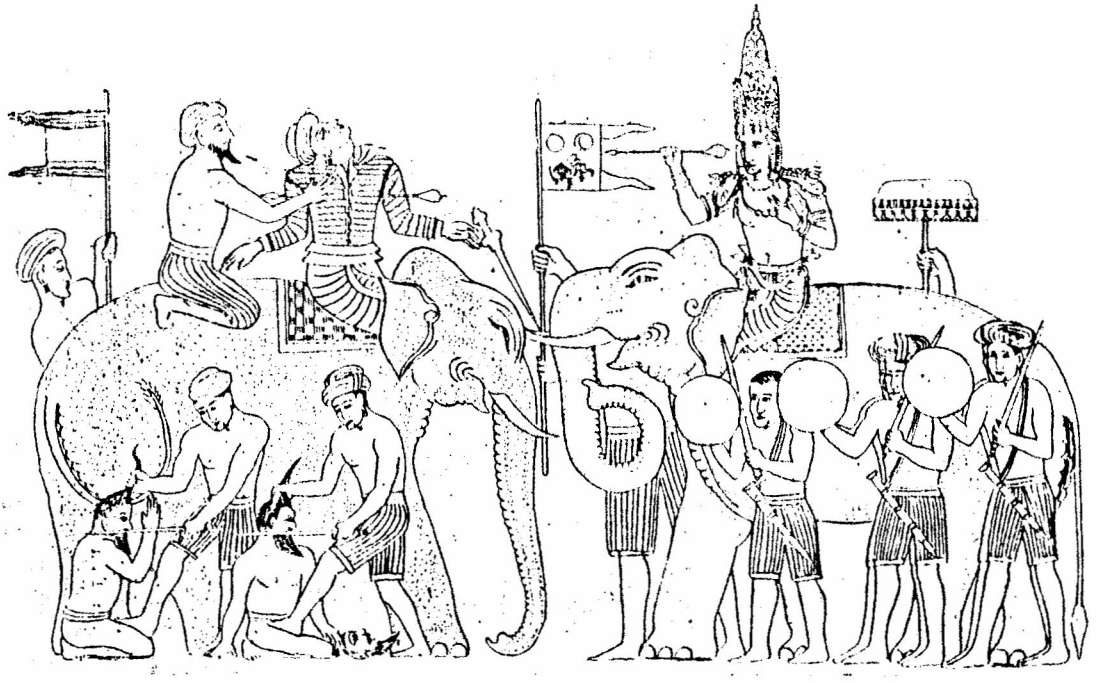

Fig. 3

does severely wound his opponent with his tusks, it is when he prostrated him and attacked him by the downward pressure of these, *"which in any other position, it would be almost impossible to use offensively"* (italics mine).[49] Tusks are elongations of an elephant's incisors of the upper jaw, and when the head is held in normal position, tend to slant downwards before they curve upward - if they do. For this reason he can use them effectively groundwards, (sometimes kneeling for effect) in attacking a prostrate man, as at the sort of execution which has received undue publicity by the account of it in Knox.[50]

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49. Tennent *op.cit.* p. 79-80. See also Plate III.

50. *An Historical Relation of Ceylon* (1681) p. 22. (contd.)

On the other hand, when an elephant raises his head, the tusks tend to rise to the level of his elephant antagonist's head, as is seen in the rather absurd, if stylized, depiction of the Dutugemunu - Elara single combat in the 16th century fresco from Dambulla (Fig.3) - and it is hardly likely that an elephant will run at his antagonist in this attitude.

To kill an elephant adversary by frontal attack, an elephant needs to possess very long tusks, and even with these it is doubtful whether he can reach the location of the heart beyond its possessor's head and trunk. Often his tusks themselves are an obstruction, if they are two and curved inwards, even if they do not actually cross. Most elephants use one tusk more than the other - the right or the left, as a right-hander or left-hander uses his hands.[51] And it may be for this reason that having the right tusk higher than the left was considered a desirable feature in an elephant.[52] For this reason too an *ek-danteya*, or elephant with one tusk, could prove a more dangerous foe than one with a two-pronged attacking system. This may have had something to do with the reputation that that formidable Carthagenian elephant, surus, seems to have won for himself even among the ranks of the Romans, even though he

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The elephant is said to run his tusks through the body of the victim and tear it to pieces, limb after limb. H.C. Sirr (*Ceylon and the Cingalese* London (1850) vol. I. p. 185-186) says the animal was trained to crush the criminal's limbs. But these may be refinements in the art of execution rather than the regular mode and excited the interest of the Englishmen because of the novelty of the use of elephants.

51. Pliny *Nat. Hist.* viii.7; see Aelian *De.Nat.Animal.* vi. 56.

52. *Some Extinct Elephants* etc. p. 66.

was not a natural, but had had one of his tusks broken off (*altero dente mutilato*).[53] On the other hand, a two-tusked elephant,whose tusked crossed, not only could not use them effectively in attack, but had the free use of his trunk obstructed as well. (For this reason tamed elephants had such intersecting tusks docked).[54]

Tusks apparently came into good use in seige operations, when they were used against the walls and gates of a city. "An elephant, by pushing with its big tusks, can batter down a wall", says Aristotle,[55] and Photius[56] records that Ctesias wrote "concerning elephants, demolishers of walls" (Περὶ τῶν τειχο-καταλύτων ἐλεφάντων). We hear of Kandula at Vijithanagara using his tusks to effect against the panels of the gate, roaring like thunder as he did so, until with a great noise the gate came crashing down to the ground, together with the arches.[57]

To return to combat, however, an elephant's opportunity for inflicting the most serious damage with his tusks to his antagonist would have been in the initial charge, if instead of going at him with his forehead ,

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53. Pliny *Nat.Hist.* vii.11. A pun on his name, found in a verse of Ennius (*Ann.* v. 516) *"unus surum surus ferre, tamen defendere possent"* alludes to this single tusk.

54. Tusks were cut for other reasons as well, which we need not go into here.

55. *Hist.Animal.* ix. 1. 610a 15.

56. *Indica* 3 = Jacoby p. 491..

57. *Mhv.* 25. 37-38.

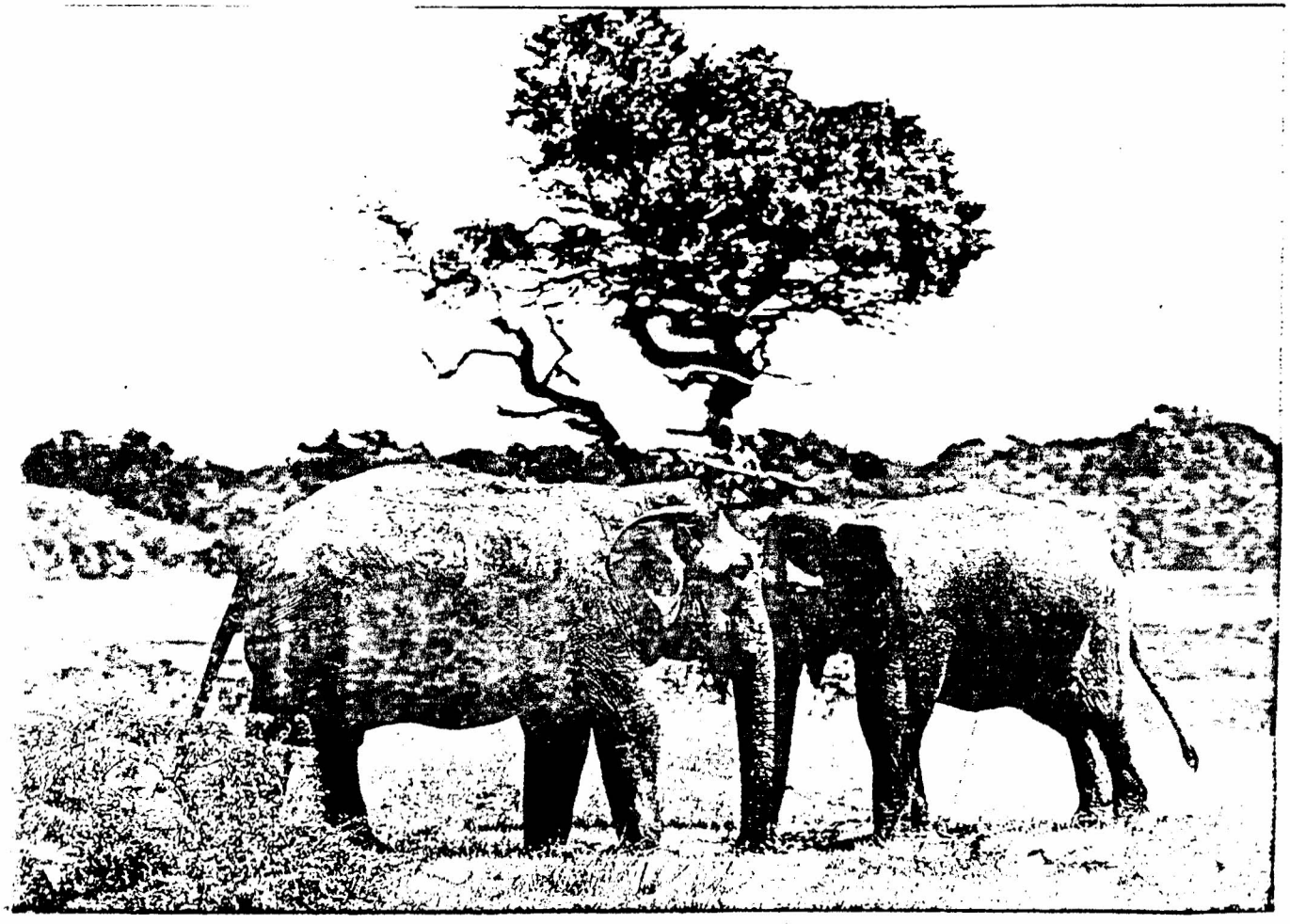

Plate III. Two Ceylon elephants confront each other, head to head, in friendship or a test of strength. Observe the inclination the tusks would take, if the animals had been tuskers.

as elephants naturally did, he did so with his tusks. With a good pair of tusks four to four and a half feet long, backed by a body weight of five tons or so, he could have jabbed them a foot or so deep before the other's body took the impact on his own. Thereafter it was pushing and goring that the tusks could do - unless the elephants separated and came in again in short rushes.

Reconstructed in the light of this, and giving credit to the fact that Kandula's attack brought down Mahapabbata, it would seem that Elāra threw his spear at Dutugemunu when they were still some distance apart, with their elephants running at each other. The precipitateness on Elāra's part must account for his missing as well as the fact that the elephants had not met in their initial impact. On the other hand, Dutugemunu hurled his spear when they were at closer quarters and the elephants about to ram each other with the impetus of their run. And if at this moment, on the command of Dutugemunu, Kandula, instead of lowering his head to meet Mahapabbata forehead to forehead, kept his tusks up, there is no doubt he would have inflicted some very heavy injury on the latter with his tusks. It has been suggested to me that perhaps a tusk might then have pierced through the rostronasal aperture in the skull, damaging the brain and causing immediate death. The vulnerability of an elephant in this region of the head was known to the ancients. In his *Natural History* (VIII.70) Pliny refers to the death of an elephant in an elephant combat in the amphitheatre of Rome by a single blow when *pilum sub oculo adactum, in vitalia capitis venerat.* If so, the *Mahāvamsa's* allusion to this rare and remarkable event is, to say the least, absolutely casual and matter of fact.

My difficulty in accepting even this exceptional and chance happening as the cause of Mahapabbata's sudden demise is that here too a problem arises. And this has to do with armour.

We are told that Dutugemunu, after proclaiming that none but he should take on Elāra, armed himself as well as his elephant (*saṃnaddho sayaṃ āruyha saṃnaddhaṃ Kaṇḍulam*

kariṃ...)[58] Earlier we were told that Elāra himself was in full armour (*Eḷārarāja saṃnaddho*)[59] mounted on Mahā-pabbata - who no doubt was also armed like Kandula.

No armour of elephants survive to give an idea of what they constituted. However, the caparisoning of an elephant for ceremonial should give some idea of the maximum coverage a beast could have had, provided it also covered the chest - and was of material capable of protecting him from the numerous arrows and spears that would have been rained on him in his trundling passage through the ranks of the enemy. Livy[60] refers to head pieces (*frontalia*) used on elephants at the battle of Magnesia, which may have protected the front of the head without interfering with the movement of the trunk, while Juba's elephants are described as having worn breastplates (*lorica:* θώραξ)[61] Head and part of the forepart of a bronze elephant wearing protective armour on the face and body (reproduced in the *Dictionnaire des antiquites:* Darenberg and Saglio: fig. 2625) may give some idea of the way elephants were armed in Sri Lanka as well in antiquity. Kautilya in his *Arthasastra*[62] mentions mail armour (*varma*), and it may be some such coat that is to be see on the bronze sculpture just mentioned. Polyaenus talks of a huge

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58. *Mhv.* 25.68. See also 25.36. Note that for the second assault on the gate of Vijithanagara also Kandula was "armed (*sawammitaṃ*) before he was draped with the sevenfold buffalo-hide covering and hide steeped in oil.

59. *Mhv.* 25.57.

60. xxxvii. 40.4.

61. *Bellum Africum* 72; *ornatusque ac loricatus;* see also 86.1: *ornatos armatosque.* Cf. Dio Cassius lxiii. 3-4.

62. 138.

elephant protected with iron scales (μέγιστος ἔλεφας --- τοῦτον φολίσιν ὀχυρώσας);[63] armour fitted with mail also covered the elephants of Heliodorus.[64] The refulgence of such armour created a formidable spectacle (*elefantorum fulgentium formidandum spaciem*[65] which was designed to strike terror(ἐς τὸ φοβερώτατον ἐσκευασμένοι)[66]

A painting from Degaldoruwa (Fig. 4) is evidence that *frontalia* constituted part of the armour[67] when elephants in Sri Lanka were said to be "well-armed" (*suvamitta gaja*)[68] which, since they were designed for withstanding the concussion of butting heads, must have been of strong metal plate, and would thus have provided protection for the weak spot in the elephant's skull against even the sort of lucky thrust we envisaged might have killed Mahapabbata.

Otherwise, and which is the greater likelihood, the death of Elara's elephant at the same instant as his master is no more than epic fantasy, which seeks to establish a parallel between the elephants, of exactly what transpired between the two kings - and thus also win for Kandula in the sphere of battle

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63. viii.23.3.

64. vi.18.8.

65. Ammianus Marcellinus xxv. 1.14; see also Florus 1.24.16; Aulus Gellius v.5.3.

66. Appian viii.7.43 of the elephants at the Battle of Zama. Am.Marcel. *loc.cit: formidandum speciem.*

67. Line reproduction after Deraniyagala 'Sinhala Weapons and Armour' *JRAS (Ceylon Branch)* vol.xxxv no. 95. p. 112.

68. *Cūl.* 70.229. Sometimes this armour was guilded (*Cūl.* 72.314) - if indeed this is no exaggeration.

elephants the same *kudos* as his master won in the human sphere in their joint battles against the Damilas. What it certainly does is round off the single combat without residue, as the single combat rounded off the battle of Anuradhapura - and the battle of Anuradhapura rounded off the series of twenty eight battles which Dutugemunu fought upon Kandula to liberate the island from Damila rule.

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I should like to conclude this discussion with a question that bothers me about the kings themselves who fought upon the elephants. The combat account, as would be noticed, seems to imply that both kings were by themselves on their respective mounts. No other people are mentioned. When Dutugemunu is required to make his elephant charge Elāra's elephant, it is the king himself who appears to have given the command. And when Mahāpabbata falls, he falls along with the dead Elāra and no one else.

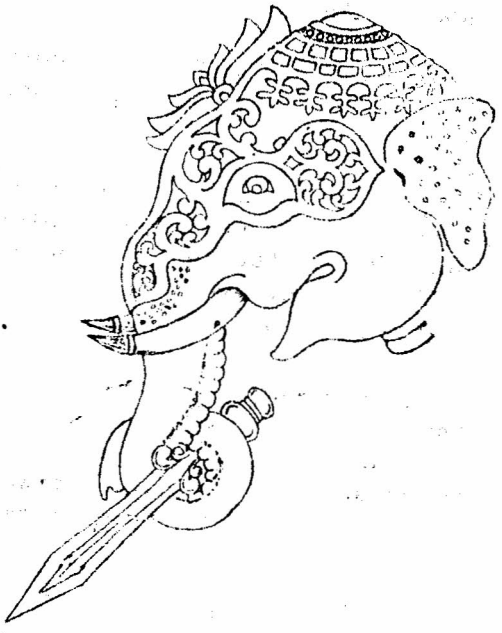

Fig. 4

Several kings in the *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Cūlavaṃsa* are spoken of as being on their elephants in battle as if by themselves. On the other hand, in the combat with Bhalluka, we know that at least Phussadeva was seated on Kandula with the king. The Dambulla painting (Fig.3) shows Dutugemunu by himself, but a man sits behind Elāra, who supports the king when he is striken and

falls back. Dutugemunu, we are told, was "skilled in (guiding) elephants and horses" in addition to "(bearing) the sword and versed in archery."[69] And we may well believe this, not only because they would have formed part of a prince's education and training in those days, but because he had proved the truth of this in his numerous battles with the Damilas.

But in war the elephant itself is the essential weapon, and his appropriate rider, the mahout (*hatthi-paka*), who directs him. If kings and nobles fought from elephant-back, they were supernumerary and could well, and with less risk, have done so from horseback or chariot, where they would be less of sitting targets. On the other hand, if they continued to choose to ride to war on elephants, it may have been because they could, from the elevation so provided, better "oversee" the battle, if it were not also from the rather dubious and certainly (in war) stupid idea that the mount had to be worthy of the rider.

In any event, it is hardly likely that the king would ride his elephant without at least a mahout to handle the animal, if not one other warrior as well, the former seated in front of him and on the neck of the elephant, his toes tucked under the animal's ears, the latter behind him, like Phussadeva in the Dutugemunu-Bhalluka combat, or the man who supports Elāra in the Dambulla painting. It is difficult to think that a king would be able to handle both the fighting and directing he himself had to do on elephant-back and at the same time direct the elephant itself as a weapon against the enemy. If indeed kings were represented as riding by themselves, it may have been out of pure epic considerations, which blacked out the other riders in deference to the king, and at the same time presented the rival monarchs or commanders as facing each other in combat by themselves in keeping with the heroic tradition.

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69. *Mhv.* xxiv. I.

In the light of this, a second look at the decadrachm of Alexander might be worthwhile, since the scene there, even if symbolic (as the rider on horseback is none other than Alexander himself),[70] is yet more realistic as far as the action goes. For here the rajah, Porus, is not the driver of the elephant, but there sits a mahout in front of him, toes tucked behind the elephant's ears, who has turned completely round to defend the helpless Porus, who is being attacked from the rear, (from which quarter the king perhaps thought he was safe,) by the horseman, who had either broken through the ranks of the Indians to take him that way or found the king in advance of his men, if not indeed deserted by them!

In the circumstances, I find it difficult to think that Dutugemunu would have gone in pursuit of Elāra, (restraining all others from doing so by proclamation,) all by himself deep into enemy area, or that the Damila king would have been caught up by him and turned round on him, riding an elephant all by himself. But they had to be so, facing each other, as in the Dutugemunu-Bhalluka combat, if they were to perform or suffer the heroics that the *Mahāvaṃsa* tells us of, unless, that is, the fight lasted longer than it says there, and there were sundry other details and deaths that had been obliterated so as not to detract from the battle royal.

The only other construction that I can give the account of the Dutugemunu-Elāra combat that will fit the facts - or lack of them - in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, is that this encounter, which brought an end to the battle of Anuradhapura, was an arranged one between the kings in the style of the single combat between Menelaus and Paris in the *Iliad*, which was to decide the issue one way or the other for the contenders - and that it was fought between the two kings alone and their elephants, by arrangement.

MERLIN PERIS

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70. See Fig. I, also p. 84 and n. 24 *ad. loc.*