

Mighty War Elephants

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad traces the history of ponderous and powerful pachyderms in warfare while providing a peek at some awe-inspiring AeroArt portrayals of the mammoth beasts in miniature

Text: James H. Hillestad **Photos:** Tor Johnson and James H. Hillestad

It is believed that the first military application of elephants dates from around 1100 B.C. in India.

From Asia, the use of war elephants migrated to the Persian Empire, where they were used in a number of campaigns. The Persians' Battle of Gaugamela (331 B.C.), fought against Greece's Alexander the Great, was



This ancient Greek war elephant was the first elephant made in Russia for AeroArt and was released in 1992. (Photo by Tor Johnson)

probably among the first confrontations Europeans ever had with war elephants.

As weapons of warfare, elephants were used mainly in charges. A charging elephant was formidable in combat, reaching speeds of up to 20 mph and, unlike horse cavalry, not easily stopped by an infantry line equipped with spears.

The elephant's power was based on pure brute force. It would crash into an enemy line, trampling men with feet 19 inches in diameter and swinging mighty tusks up to 10 feet long. Cavalry was not safe either because horses, unaccustomed to the smell of elephants, panicked easily.

TUSKS DECISIVE

The two types of elephants are the Asian (*Elephas Maximus*) and the African (*Loxodonta Africana*).

Asian elephants have smaller ears than African elephants. The latter's large ears are shaped like the continent of Africa.

The African elephant consists of two subspecies: the savannah (or bush) elephant and the forest elephant. Forest elephants are much smaller than their

savannah cousins, about the size of the Asian elephant. The African savannah elephant proved to be too difficult to tame for military purposes, so it was never widely used.

War elephants were exclusively male. Faster and more aggressive than females, they were also taller, heavier and stronger -- and most importantly, the long tusks of the males were decisive in battle. Further, it was found that female elephants do not have the temperament for fighting and so they were rarely used in battle.

KING'S ANKUS

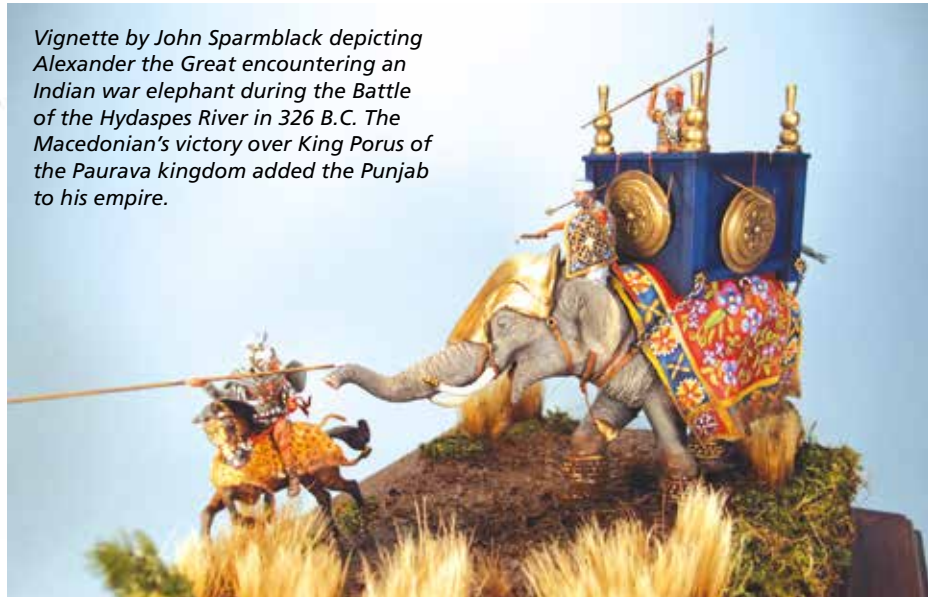
The critical element in creating a successful war elephant was not the strength of its legs or trunk, but the strength of its relationship with its handler: the mahout.

Even a fearless bull needed a rider who could control and direct it. The mahout was really the elephant's greatest protection. The mahout's assessment of danger and the decisions he made in battle benefited both the human and elephant.



AeroArt's armored Seleucid war elephant version with spiked balls for twirling was marched out in 2006. (Photo by Tor Johnson)

Vignette by John Sparmlack depicting Alexander the Great encountering an Indian war elephant during the Battle of the Hydaspes River in 326 B.C. The Macedonian's victory over King Porus of the Paurava kingdom added the Punjab to his empire.





AeroArt's ancient Carthaginian war elephant, first released in 1999, became its most popular type, according to Thor Johnson. (Photo by Tor Johnson)

Mahouts sat astride the elephant's neck. They were regarded as high-class warriors. Mahouts arrayed themselves accordingly in brightly colored clothing and vibrantly dyed beards.

A mahout's primary tool in guiding a war elephant was known as the "ankus," a hook-like device on a 22-inch pole. Rudyard Kipling featured this type of goad in "The Second Jungle Book" in a story titled "The King's Ankus."

ARMORED BEASTS

During the Punic Wars (264 to 146 B.C.), a typical Carthaginian war elephant was heavily armored and carried on its back a wicker or wooden box, the "howdah." The box accommodated three archers or javelin throwers who were protected by its walls. The howdah provided relative safety and a stable platform from which Roman targets could be seen and engaged.

In the heat of battle, leaders communicated with their army via signal flags, which could be seen more easily when waved from the tall back of an elephant. Soldiers were likely to be too preoccupied with combat to continuously be checking the flags -- so a "signal elephant" carried two large drums, which the signalman beat to attract attention.



Seleucid war elephant first released by AeroArt in 2005. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



The Carthaginian war elephant's howdah and caparison are wonderful examples of AeroArt's amazing artwork. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



Note the details of the caparison and howdah on the Seleucid war elephant unveiled by AeroArt in 2006. (Photo by Tor Johnson)

Belling the Beast

The use of bells on a war elephant's neck has been documented by historical coins and sculptures. It has been postulated that Indian elephants had to forage food for themselves each night. As a result, their mahouts needed ringing bells to find the beasts in the forest the following morning. Bells are used on elephants to this day, for the same reason. --**James H. Hillestad**



Mughal India's Shah Akbar with two musketeers and a mahout aboard a charging war elephant was released in late 2004. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



AeroArt's Egyptian armored war elephant first came on the scene in 2001. (Photo by Tor Johnson)

Protecting war elephants was critical, as they were by their very nature a prime threat to an opposing force. Plate metal, like the armor of medieval knights, was prohibitively expensive to cover the huge expanse of an elephant. Metal is also heavy, hinders normal movement and traps heat.

Thus, only the upper trunk commonly was protected with iron plates. However, by combining the sciences of textile manufacture and metallurgy, an excellent composite armor was invented, formed of heavy cloth with sewn-in pieces of metal. Quilted armor was lighter in weight,

yet offered substantial protection from human-powered spears.

Another important innovation was leg armor, consisting of circular bands that were segmented to allow the elephants freedom of movement.

Weaponry specific to elephants was devised to enhance their usefulness in battle. For example, heavy iron chains with steel balls at the end were tied to the war elephants' trunks. The animals were trained to swirl them menacingly, terrifying their foes.

Elephants as Symbols

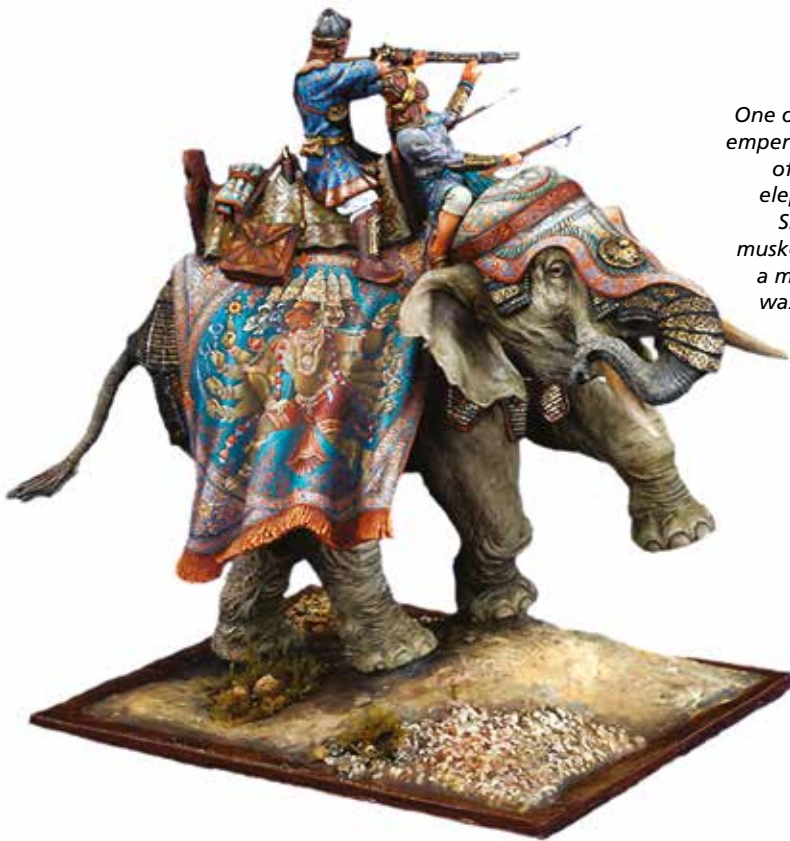
Many traditional wargames incorporate elephants. Chaturanga, the ancient Indian board game from which modern chess evolved, calls its rook the "gaja," the Sanskrit word for elephants. In Chinese chess, the rook is still known as the elephant. In Central London, the area known as Elephant and Castle is a major road intersection and a station of the Underground. A symbolic reference to the area is an elephant bearing a castle -- possibly meant to be a howdah -- which is featured on the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers. --James H. Hillestad



Chinese war elephant with a general, aide and mahout released in 2000. This is regarded as one of the more complex and detailed pachyderm portrayals produced for The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



Roman war elephant added to the AeroArt collection in 2004. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



One of India's Mughal emperors is the subject of an AeroArt war elephant conveying Shah Akbar and a musketeer along with a mahout. This item was released in late 2004. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



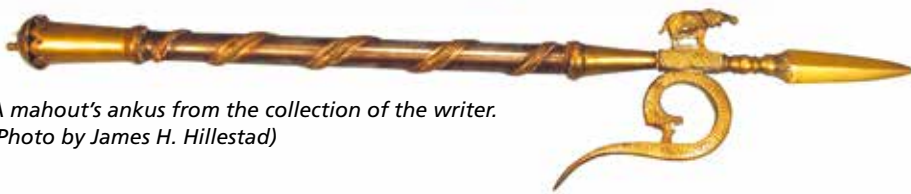
Heyde figures were the basis for this Potsdammer Zinnsoldaten group depicting Carthage's Hannibal crossing the Alp in 218 B.C.

AEROART EXAMPLES

Producing a war elephant offers a formidable challenge to toy soldier and model figure makers. The sheer size of a model, the sculpting and intricate embellishments are daunting. So, hats off to Thor Johnson of The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection for producing marvelous examples of 54-mm war elephants.

Other military miniatures illustrating this article were crafted by Alymer, Potsdammer Zinnsoldaten and John Sparmblack. ■

A mahout's ankus from the collection of the writer. (Photo by James H. Hillestad)



In the eye of the beholder, AeroArt achieves a high degree of realism right down to an elephant's eyes. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



Note the intricate painting of the caparison on the Seleucid war elephant unveiled by AeroArt in 2005. (Photo by Tor Johnson)



Carthaginian war elephant made in Spain as pictured in an Alymer catalog. (From the collection of James H. Hillestad).

A Zoological Note

While preparing for their upcoming performance, a group of skilled violinists were invited by staff members at Belgium's Pairi Daiza zoo and botanical garden to rehearse in front of its elephants. The animals really seemed to appreciate the music, as they swayed in time with the performance. Sadly, not all the animals were as appreciative. The lions were annoyed and one monkey climbed on the instruments to stop the musicians' playing. --James H. Hillestad

ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.