

WED June 3rd

16.00 CET

Alongside
Captive
Elephants:
History and
Science
between
Species



Bodleian library, MS Ind Inst Sansk 2 folio 11

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Popular beliefs and misunderstandings about elephants persist in media ranging from natural histories of antiquity to contemporary comics. This is in spite of the robust corpus of classical South Asian texts belonging to the millennia-long knowledge system known as *gajaśāstra* or elephant science. This *śāstra's* cohesive, comprehensive understanding of the animal is informed by empirical study, observation, and measured speculation. This same knowledge system aided and perpetuated the captive elephant tradition in South Asia and beyond as it instructs on capturing, training, and trading in elephants to work for humans. This phenomenon of captive elephants cared for and maintained by many humans per animal persists to the present day as a vestige of historical forms of this exceptional human-animal relationship and accounts for the large proportion of captive to wild elephants in current populations of this endangered species.

This talk's research forms part of a book project that writes a history of captive elephants as animal history, utilizing various archives including epigraphy, coinage, material culture, and literary sources to expand upon details of elephants' intimate relationships with humans over the *longue durée*. This talk focuses on three misunderstood or neglected aspects of historical captive elephant life: 1) the trope of the flighty, panicky (thus "dangerous to his own side") war elephant, re-interpreted using understandings from within *gajaśāstra*, 2) evidence of elephant trade in early South Asia, and 3) the topic of elephant fever in *materia medica*, both as a feature of captivity and in relation to human fever, past and present. Altogether, utilizing *gajaśāstra* alongside other sources allows for a more complete picture of elephant history than other accounts can provide.

