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Through the Colonial Gaze:

THE ELEPHANTS OF CEYLON AND THE DOMINATION OF NATURE

An Animal Studies Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

What happens when we study colonial history not only through its effects on human societies, but also through its impact on nature and animals? This interdisciplinary teaching unit invites students to shift from an anthropocentric—human-centred—perspective and explore how animals, particularly elephants, were drawn into colonial structures of power and domination. Focusing on 19th-century British travel writing about Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), students will analyse how elephants were portrayed not just as exotic curiosities or labouring beasts, but as complex symbols within colonial worldviews. Using the lens of Animal Studies, the unit challenges students to rethink historical narratives, uncover human-animal entanglements, and reflect on how the colonial gaze still influences today's environmental and ethical debates.

Across two double lessons, learners engage with a wide range of sources—texts, images, and creative tasks—developing both historical thinking and critical empathy. They are encouraged to ask: What power structures are reflected in colonial descriptions of elephants? How does the story change when we shift the perspective—from coloniser to colonised, from human to animal?

Footnote: We are aware that choosing the elephant as an example follows a colonial cliché. However, our decision was based on didactic considerations: first, the elephant is highly accessible to students' imaginations; second, it allows us to highlight multiple aspects of colonial attitudes toward "exotic" animals in the colonies.

Grade Level: 11

Duration: 2 Double Lessons (80-90 minutes each)

Key Themes:

- Analysis of colonial perceptions of animals—particularly elephants—in British travel accounts of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka)
- Reflection on the 'colonial gaze' in relation to people, animals, and nature in Ceylon
- Understanding colonial travels in the 19th century as both a means of expanding knowledge and a tool for imperial exploration and exploitation
- Examining sources from colonial travel reports related to the colonial gaze to elephants
- Introduction to Anthropocentrism through the lens of Animal Studies



Learning Objectives

Students should be able to:

1. Investigate the links between humans, animals, and colonial rule, recognising how both animals and people were subjected to colonial hierarchies.
2. Recognize the dual nature of colonial travel, understanding how colonial travel accounts were both a means of exploring new territories and a tool for assessing economic and strategic interests.
3. Analyse the role of colonial hunting expeditions, examining how elephant hunting served as a display of power and colonial prestige.
4. Understand the relationship between anthropocentric and colonial thinking through the portrayal of Sri Lankan elephants.
5. Utilize the 'Animal Studies' approach to analyse historical sources and uncover anthropocentrism in the colonisers' worldview.

First Double Lesson: The Colonial Gaze on Elephants

Introduction (15 min) – Analysis and Discussion of images

Introduction:

What pictures tell us about Elephants in historic Ceylon and today's Sri Lanka?

1. The deportation of elephants from Ceylon to European zoos
2. Elephant hunting as part of colonial domination / Trophy hunting
3. Past and Present: the roles of Elephants in Religious Ceremonies in Sri Lanka
4. Today: The tourists' gaze on elephants—Continuity or change?

Discussion questions:

1. What do you observe? What roles do elephants play in these images?
2. What do you think: Who created the images? for whom? for what purposes?
3. How does the representation of elephants differ between locals and colonisers?
4. How might the locals of historic Ceylon have described the same scenes from their own perspective?
5. How might tourists/visitors' view of elephants in today's Sri Lanka differ from that of locals?

Phase I Source Analysis: Colonial Travel Accounts

- **Materials:** Excerpts from British travelogues (19th century) describing elephants in Sri Lanka and an [introductory text to Samuel White Baker and his travelogues](#).¹
- **Group Work – Each group focuses on a specific theme:**
 1. *The dual nature of colonial travel:*
 - How does the traveller describe his journey?
 - What attitudes toward locals, animals, and nature are reflected in the sources?
 - What does the report tell about contemporary Europe?
 - Are there indications of economic, military, or strategic interests?
 2. *The European gaze on elephants in Ceylon:*
 - What adjectives and metaphors are used to describe elephants?
 - In what ways are elephants portrayed as “exotic,” “noble,” or “otherworldly”?
 - Compare the texts to the images: Are there any commonalities and differences?
 3. *The role of colonial hunting expeditions:*
 - How is elephant hunting depicted? How does the author perceive elephant hunting and what values does he associate with it?
 - How is language used differently to portray the hunters and the elephants?
 - How does hunting reinforce colonial masculinity and authority?

¹ Alternatively, the section from 7:50–14:40 in the following video gives an account of Baker’s life in Ceylon (in Sinhala only): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSLr-fsG6OY>

Phase II (ca 30 min) – Presentation and Discussion

- **Groups present their findings using posters.**
- **Class discussion:**
 - » What patterns emerge across the different texts?
 - » How do these representations reflect colonial power structures?
 - » How might locals have perceived elephants differently from colonial travellers? ²

Conclusion (15 min) – Perspective Shift (choose either the writing task or the role play)

- **Writing task:** Students write a short passage from an alternative viewpoint.
 - » A Sri Lankan elephant handler ([mahout](#)) describing their daily work with elephants
 - » An elephant 'telling' its own story (about its work, captivity, or a hunt)
 - » A local villager's perspective on British hunting expeditions

Roleplay: Who Speaks About Elephants?

Each student takes on a different role drawing on the provided materials and their own research

1. British traveller
2. Sri Lankan elephant handler ([mahout](#))
3. Colonial big-game hunter
4. An elephant

Task: Each character describes an elephant hunt or work-scenario from their perspective.

Reflection: How do descriptions change depending on the viewpoint?

² Note to teacher. Please consider the following: Elephants as sacred animals, elephants as a nuisance (destroying crops, invading villages, etc.), elephants as a commodity (ivory), elephants as a symbol of royalty

Second Double Lesson: The Colonial Gaze and Animal Studies

Introduction (10 min) – Reflecting on the roleplay (or writing task):

1. Who speaks about elephants?
2. How do descriptions change depending on their viewpoint?

Phase I – First approach to the idea of 'Animal Studies' – challenging anthropocentric thinking

- **Material:** Introductory text "[Anthropocentrism, Historical Thinking, and the History of Colonialism](#)"
 - **Short lecture/discussion:**
 - » What is 'Animal Studies'? What is anthropocentrism? How do the two concepts connect with each other and how do they relate to the colonial worldview?
 - » What do you think: Should we consider animals as historical agents in history?
 - » What do you think? Is there an opposition between the spheres of humans and animals in history?
 - **Group Task:**
 - » Students apply the 'Animal Studies' approach to the previously analysed colonial sources.
 - » How does the interpretation of these texts change when elephants are considered as historical actors?

Phase II (ca. 30 min) – Rewriting Colonial Texts

- **Task:** Students rewrite a colonial travelogue by removing the colonial perspective incorporating a more animal-centred or indigenous viewpoint.
- **Peer Exchange:** Students read and discuss each other's revised texts in small groups

Conclusion (15 min) – Discussion and Reflection

- **Final discussion:**
 - » Why does it matter how we talk about animals in history?
 - » How can decolonial history also include animals and nature?

ANTHROPOCENTRISM, HISTORICAL THINKING, AND THE HISTORY OF COLONIALISM

A Text for Students and Teachers

1. What is Anthropocentrism?

The first part of the word ‘Anthropocentrism’ derives from Ancient Greek *anthropos*, meaning “human”. Imagine if someone believed that humans were the most important beings of the world—so important that everything else, from animals to forests to oceans, existed just for humans to use. That is anthropocentrism which is the idea that:

- Humans are at the centre of everything.
- Nature is below humans, and can be controlled or exploited.
- Animals, plants, and landscapes exist to serve human needs, as if they were just tools or resources instead of living entities with their own value.

Where does Anthropocentrism come from?

Anthropocentrism has deep roots in Western traditions. Some of the major influences include:

- Judeo-Christian beliefs: The Bible’s Book of Genesis, for example, describes humans as having ‘dominion’ over nature, reinforcing the idea that nature exists for human use.
- The Enlightenment (1600s–1800s): European thinkers emphasized reason, progress, and control over nature, which they regarded as something to be conquered and tamed.

- Industrialization, capitalism, and technology: These forces encouraged a resource-driven view of nature, where animals, forests, rivers, and natural resources were seen as raw materials to be used for industrial production in factories and economic gain.

2. Anthropocentrism in historical thinking

Have you ever asked questions like:

- *What would history look like if told from the perspective of a forest?*
- *How have animals shaped human history?*

Anthropocentrism in historical thinking is like telling a story where humans are the only important characters, treating everything else—animals, landscapes, the climate, natural resources—as just a backdrop. However, human history has always been closely connected with nature and the environment; animals, forests, rivers, the climate and natural resources have always shaped human history.

3. Anthropocentrism and Colonialism

When European countries colonized lands in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, not only did they bring weapons and law but also anthropocentric thinking. This mindset, however, was not just applied to nature.

Colonizers viewed both land and people as resources:

- Just as anthropocentrism says nature exists for humans, colonial thinking made it seem as if colonized people, their lands, and animals existed for the benefit of European powers. Many Indigenous populations were forced into labour, ruled over, or even treated as property—just another ‘resource’ to be controlled.
- Colonizers believed their civilization was superior, just as they believed humans were superior to nature. They treated colonized people as part of the environment—something to be exploited like nature.

4. Animal History: challenging anthropocentric (= human-centred) world view and historical thinking

Animal history is a growing field of historical study that shifts focus from human-centred history to the lives and roles of animals throughout history. This approach challenges the traditional human-centred (anthropocentric) views of history by recognizing that animals are not just passive objects in the backdrop of human stories but active participants/subjects in shaping societies, cultures, and environments.

Animal history explores questions such as:

- How have animals influenced human economies, warfare, and exploration?
- How have human-animal relationships evolved over time?
- What roles have animals played in shaping cultures, religions, and even identities?

5. Colonial Travel Writing

During the age of European colonialism, explorers and travellers set out to explore new lands. Their travel accounts significantly shaped how Europeans perceived other parts of the world—yet these narratives were far from neutral.

While some travellers were genuinely curious about other cultures, their writings often revealed a mindset rooted in exploitation. They frequently portrayed lands, people, and animals as resources to be controlled, possessed, or exploited for profit.

By the 19th century, industrial capitalism and colonialism were deeply linked:

- Colonies were seen as endless sources of materials such as rubber, cotton, gold, and cheap labour.
- Exotic animals were not only observed, but also exoticized, captured, hunted, used for labour, or transported to Europe for purposes such as scientific research or public entertainment, including display in zoos.

If we read colonial travel reports carefully, we can clearly notice how this colonial gaze of exploitation shaped history—and how it continues to influence the way we view the world today.

6. Why Does This Matter Today?

The effects of anthropocentrism and colonial thinking are still visible and experienced in today's world:

- Many former colonies continue to have their resources extracted by large global industries.
- Profit is often prioritised over sustainability, leading to environmental destruction.
- Certain groups of people are still treated as sources of cheap labour, rather than as individuals with dignity and rights.
- Animals are still used for scientific research, public entertainment and as symbols of status and prestige.

We often criticize colonialism, but anthropocentric thinking is just beginning to be questioned. Recognizing these patterns in history will help us build a just, ethical and sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION TO SAMUEL WHITE BAKER AND HIS TRAVELOGUES

Samuel White Baker, author of *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon* (1853) and *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon* (1855), was a distinguished sportsman, explorer, and colonial official. Born in London in 1821, he later relocated to Mauritius and subsequently to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka)³. His extensive travels extended beyond Ceylon to the Middle East, Sudan, Egypt, and ultimately to the region of present-day northwestern Uganda. There, his contributions to the discovery of the sources of the Nile River earned him a knighthood in 1866.

Although both *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon* and *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon* offer insights into the socio-economic landscape and natural history of Ceylon through an ethnographic lens, their primary focus lies in Baker's hunting expeditions and his detailed observations of game. In particular, *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon* adopts a more mature narrative tone, recounting

³ After achieving independence from the British in 1948, the island was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972

how, despite his initial disappointment at the perceived “dullness” of Colombo, Baker—driven by his enduring passion for hunting—went on to establish a settlement with his family in Nuwara Eliya, a mountainous region in central Ceylon.

This impulse for hunting not only shaped his travels and settlement but also informed his vivid portrayals of animals throughout *Eight Years’ Wanderings in Ceylon*. The menagerie of animals in his travelogue, composed of both domesticated and wild species, steadily expands from his early observations of the “bullocks crawl[ing] along in the midday sun” in Colombo to numerous encounters with leopards, boars, elk, crocodiles, leeches, and a wide array of birds, insects, and terrestrial animals. Among them, elephants—central as objects of fascination, pursuit, and possession—receive a particularly significant share of Baker’s attention. While elephants are given special emphasis in both Baker’s narratives and this study guide, the broader colonial representations of animals as labourers, spectacles, trophies, and commodities are equally essential to tracing the long, often overlooked trajectory of animal histories in Sri Lanka.

SHORTENED EXTRACTS

Extract 01: Elephants as Beasts of Burden

After arriving at Nuwara Eliya, Baker begins to clear and cultivate the “Moon Plains.” Baker, for whom an elephant in a plough harness is an uncommon sight, narrates the meticulous process by which this domesticated elephant completes the labourious task assigned to it.

The “cultivator,” which was sufficiently large to anchor any twenty of the small native bullocks, looked a mere nothing behind the splendid elephant who worked it, and it cut through the wiry roots of the rank turf as a knife peels an apple. It was amusing, to see this same elephant doing the work of three separate teams when the seed was in the ground. She first drew a pair of heavy harrows; attached to these and following behind were a pair of light harrows, and behind these came a roller. Thus the land had its first and second harrowing at the same time with the rolling.

This elephant was particularly sagacious; and her farming work being completed, she was employed in making a dam across a stream. She was a very large animal, and it was beautiful to witness her wonderful sagacity in carrying and arranging the heavy timber required. The

rough trunks of trees from the lately felled forest were lying within fifty yards of the spot, and the trunks required for the dam were about fifteen feet long and fourteen to eighteen inches in diameter. These she carried in her mouth, shifting her hold along the log before she raised it until she had obtained the exact balance; then, steadying it with her trunk, she carried every log to the spot, and laid them across the stream in parallel rows. These she herself arranged, under the direction of her driver, with the reason apparently of a human being.

The most extraordinary part of her performance was the arranging of two immense logs of red keenar (one of the heaviest woods). These were about eighteen feet long and two feet in diameter, and they were intended to lie on either bank of the stream, parallel to the brook and close to the edge. These she placed greatest with the care in their exact positions, unassisted by anyone. She rolled them gently over with her head, then with one foot, and keeping her trunk on the opposite side of the log, she checked its way whenever its own momentum would have carried it into the stream. Although I thought the work admirably done, she did not seem quite satisfied, and she presently got into the stream, and gave one end of the log an extra push with her head, which completed her task, the two trees lying exactly parallel to each other, close to the edge of either bank.

Extract 02: Elephant hunt

After hearing from the natives of “Gollagangwelléwevé” (a small village about sixty miles south of Batticaloa) about the herds of elephants that “infested” the neighbouring tank during the forenoon, Baker and F.H. Palliser, his “brother-in-arms against the game of Ceylon,” approach this location with twenty-five villagers. Upon arriving at the location of the herd, the villagers raise a clamour to chase the elephants towards Baker and the gun-bearers who lay waiting to ambush the confused animals.

In the meantime, the roar of water caused by the rapid passage of so many large animals approached nearer and nearer. Palliser and I had taken splendid positions, so as to command either side of the herd on their arrival, with our gun-bearers squatted around us behind our respective trees, while the non-sporting village followers, who now began to think the matter rather serious and totally devoid of fun, scrambled up various large trees with ape-like activity.

A few minutes of glorious suspense, and the grand crash and roar of broken water approached close at hand, and we distinguished the mighty phalanx, headed by the largest elephants, bearing down exactly upon us, and not a hundred yards distant. Here was luck! There was a grim and very murderous smile of satisfaction on either countenance as we quietly cocked the rifles and

awaited the onset: it was our intention to let half the herd pass us before we opened upon them, as we should then be in the very centre of the mass, and be able to get good and rapid shooting.

On came the herd in gallant style, throwing the spray from the muddy water, and keeping a direct line for our concealed position. They were within twenty yards, and we were still undiscovered, when those rascally villagers, who had already taken to the trees, scrambled still higher in their fright at the close approach of the elephants, and by this movement they gave immediate alarm to the elders of the herd.

[...] I now heard a tremendous roaring of elephants behind me, as though another section was coming in from the tank; this I hoped to meet. I therefore reloaded the empty rifles as quickly as possible and ran toward the spot. The roaring still continued and was apparently almost stationary; and what was my disappointment, on arrival, to find, in place of the expected herd, a young elephant of about four feet high, who had missed the main body in the retreat and was now roaring for his departed friends! These young things are excessively foolhardy and wilful, and he charged me the moment I arrived. As I laid the rifle upon the ground instead of firing at him, the rascally gunbearers, with the exception of Carrasi, threw down the rifles and ran up the trees like so many monkeys, just as I had jumped on one side and caught the young elephant by the tail. He was far too strong for me to hold, and, although I dug my heels into the ground and held on with all my might, he fairly ran away with me through the forest. Carrasi now came to my assistance and likewise held on by his tail; but away we went like the tender to a steam-engine; wherever the elephant went there we were dragged in company.

Extract 03: Elephants as a commodity

While critiquing the economic policies of the colonial government, Baker details the ways in which the natives should be encouraged to transform the hunted carcasses of the animals into valuable export goods.

The hundreds of thousands of hides which are now thrown aside to rot uncared for would then be preserved and exported, which at the present rate of salt is impossible. The skins of buffaloes, oxen, deer, swine, all valuable in other parts of the world, in Ceylon are valueless. The wild buffalo is not even skinned when shot; he is simply opened for his marrow-bones, his tail is cut off for soup, his brains taken out for cotelettes, and his tongue salted. The beast himself, hide and all, is left as food for the jackal. The wandering native picks up his horns, which find their way to the English market; but the "hide," the only really valuable portion, is neglected.

Within a short distance of the salt lakes, buffaloes, boars, and in fact all kind of animals abound, and I have no doubt that if it were once proved to the natives that the hides could be made remunerative, they would soon learn the method of preparation.

[...] I have noticed a great change in the native habits along the southern coast which exemplifies this, since the steamers have touched regularly at Galle.

Some years ago, elephants, buffaloes, etc., when shot by sportsmen, remained untouched except by wild beast; but now within one hundred and fifty miles of Galle every buffalo horn is collected and even the elephant's grinders are extracted from the skulls, and brought into market.

An elephant's grinder averages seven pounds in weight, and is not worth more than from a penny to three half-pence a pound; nevertheless they are now brought to Galle in large quantities to be made into knife-handles and sundry ornaments, to tempt the passengers of the various steamers. If the native takes this trouble for so small a recompense, there is every reason to suppose that the hides now wasted would be brought into market and form a valuable export, were salt at such a rate as would admit of their preparation.

Extract 04: The Elephant as a monster

In the following extract from "Rifle and the Hound," Baker narrates "The Rhatamahatmaya's Tale" which is an exaggerated story about a notorious rogue elephant, often referred to as a "monster." Shocked by the news of his wife's brutal dismemberment and 'devouring' by this rogue elephant, the husband of the deceased woman assembles a hunting party of hundred Moormen, skilled elephant-hunters, to eliminate the threat posed by the elephant.

They marched towards the small jungle in which the rogue was known to be; but he anticipated their wishes, and before they were within a hundred paces of his lair, he charged furiously out. The conflict began in good earnest. The spearmen were in advance, and the axemen were divided into two parties, one on either flank, with an equal number of ropemen. The instant that he charged the whole body of men ran forward at full speed to meet him; still he continued his furious onset, undismayed by the yells of a hundred men. The spearmen halted when within twenty yards, then turned and fled; this had been agreed upon beforehand. The elephant passed the two flanks of axemen in pursuit of the flying enemy; the axemen immediately closed in behind him, led by the husband of the murdered girl. By a well-directed blow upon the hind leg, full of revenge, this active fellow divided the sinew in the first joint above the foot.* (*Since this was written I have seen the African elephant disabled by one blow of a sharp sword as

described in the “Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia.”) That instant the elephant fell upon his knees, but recovered himself directly, and endeavoured to turn upon his pursuers; a dozen axes flashed in the sunbeams, as the strokes were aimed at the other hind leg. It was the work of an instant: the massive limb bent powerless under him, and he fell in a sitting posture, utterly helpless, but roaring with mad and impotent fury. The ropemen now threw nooses over his trunk and head; his struggles, although tremendous, were in vain; fifty men, hanging their weight upon several ropes attached to his trunk, rendered that dreaded weapon powerless. The sharp lances were repeatedly driven into his side, and several of the boldest hunters climbing up the steep ascent of his back, an axe was seen to fall swiftly and repeatedly upon his spine, on the nape of his tough neck. The giant form suddenly sank; the spine was divided, and the avenging blow was dealt by the husband of his late victim. The destroyer was no more. The victory was gained without the loss of a man.

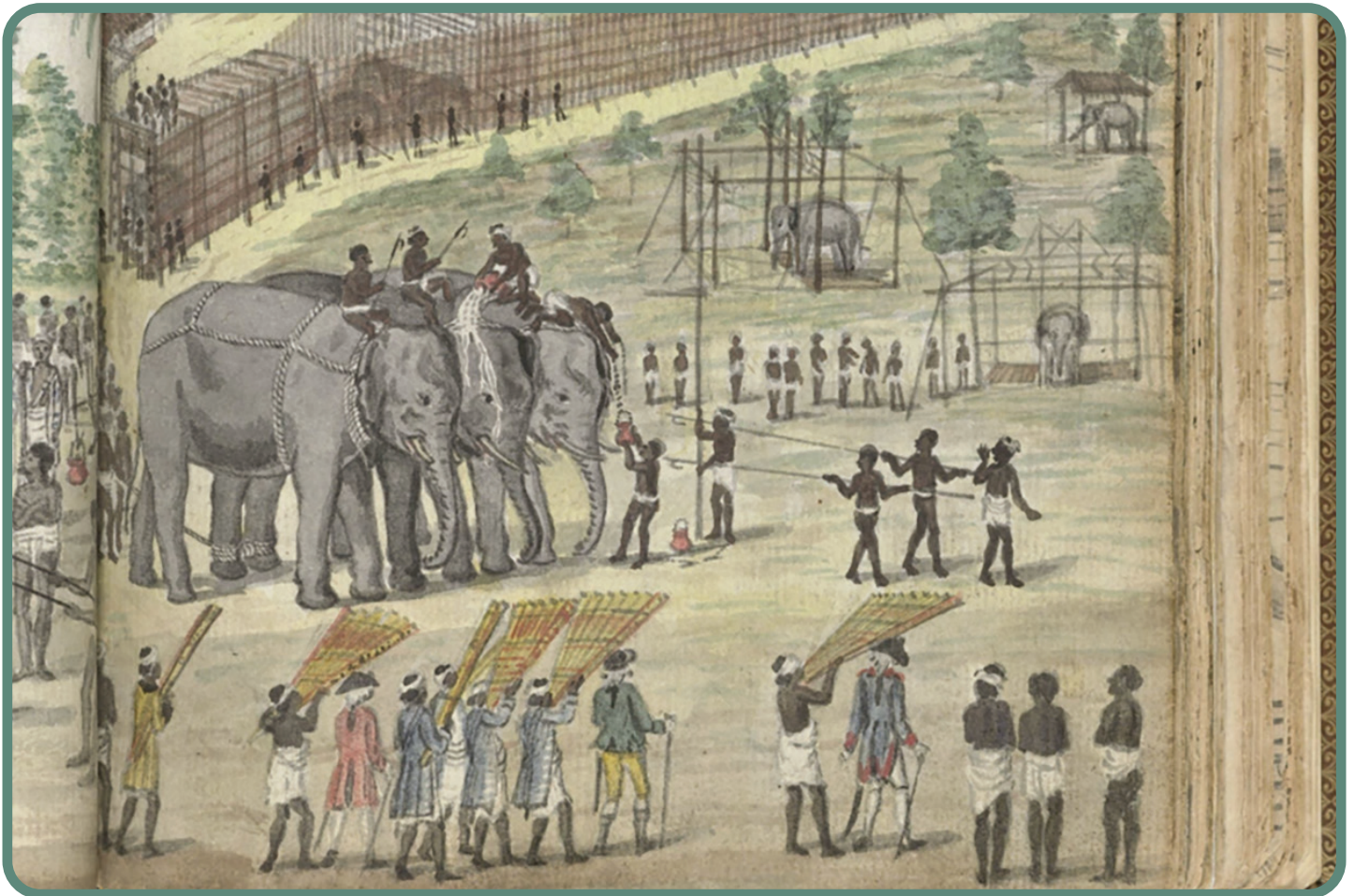
The natives said that this elephant was mad; if so it may account in some measure for the unheard-of occurrence of an elephant devouring flesh. Both elephants and buffaloes attack man from malice alone, without the slightest idea of making a meal of him. This portion of the headman’s story I cannot possibly believe, although he swears to it. The elephant may, perhaps, have cracked her head and torn his victim to pieces in the manner described, but the actual ‘eating’ is incredible.

ANNEX 1: VISUAL SOURCES

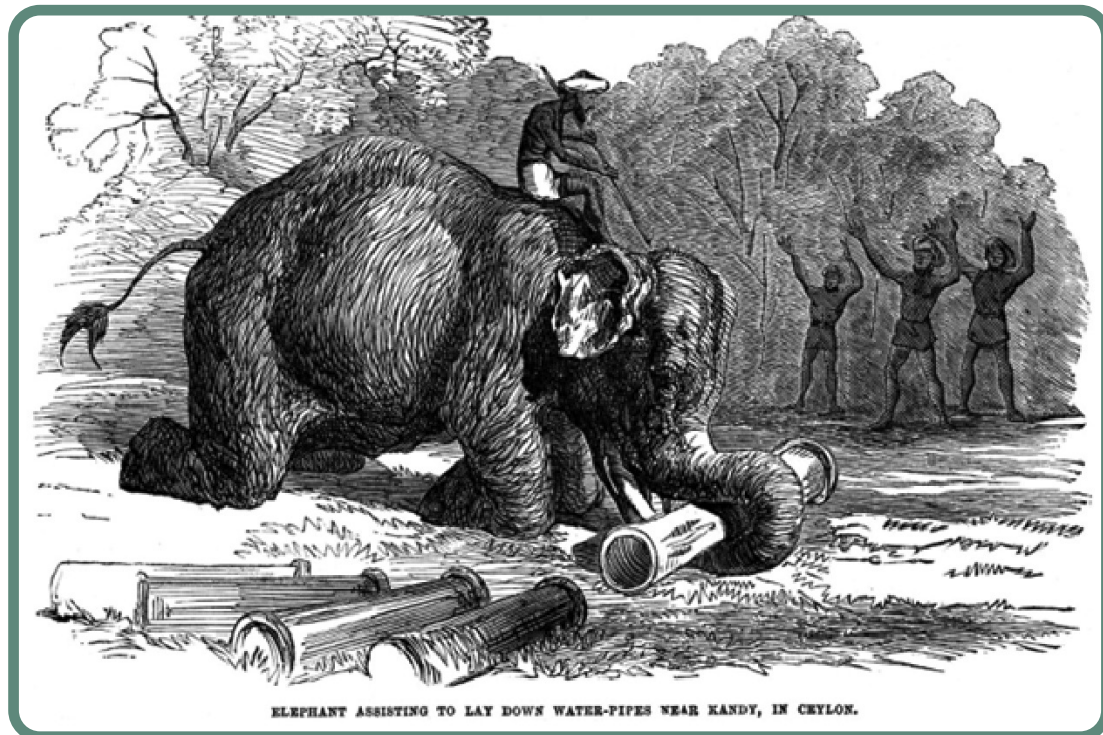
Sketches/ visual sources of elephants:

1. Jan Brandes - Paintings - <https://rijkscollection.net/year/1785/263/NG-1985-7-2-92> - [reclining elephant with chopping Sinhalese](#), [elephant baptising](#), [the elephant drive](#)

To access the various Elephant paintings of Brandes, use the search function from the Rijksmuseum online collection, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection>, with the above keywords.

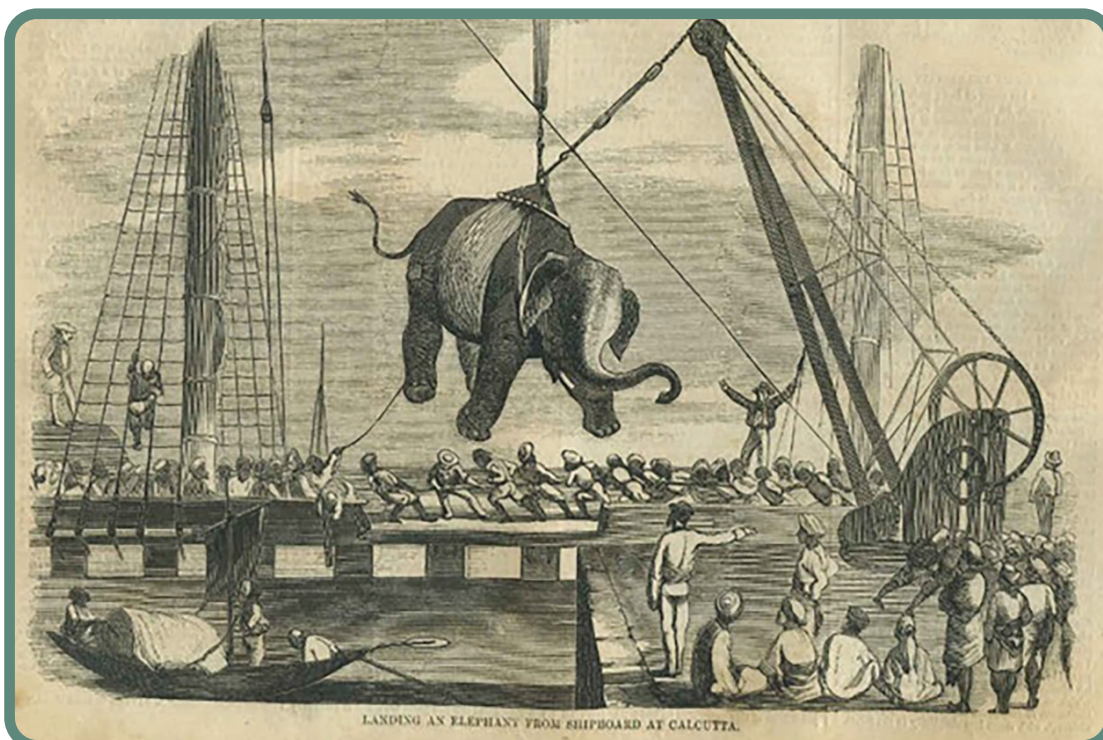


2. An elephant assisting with laying down water pipes near Kandy, Sri Lanka. The Illustrated London News (1856). Last retrieved 15 April from Mary Evans Picture Library, <https://www.maryevans.com/search.php?prv=preview&job=5948470&itm=15&pic=11100619&row=4> (corresponds with extract 1)

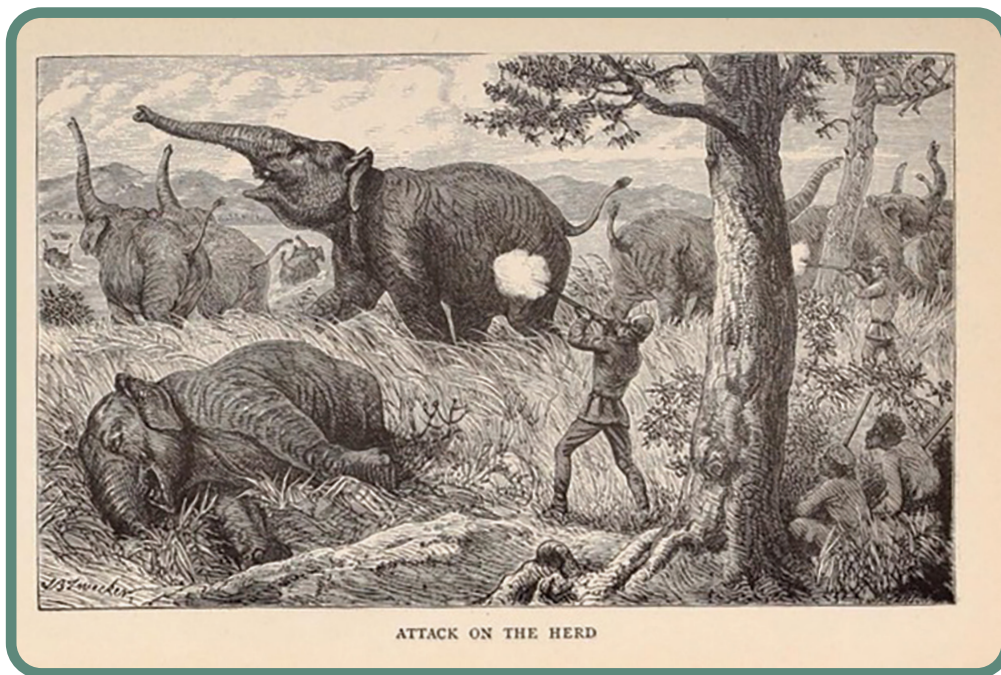


3. "Landing an elephant from shipboard at Calcutta," from Harpers Weekly, 1858

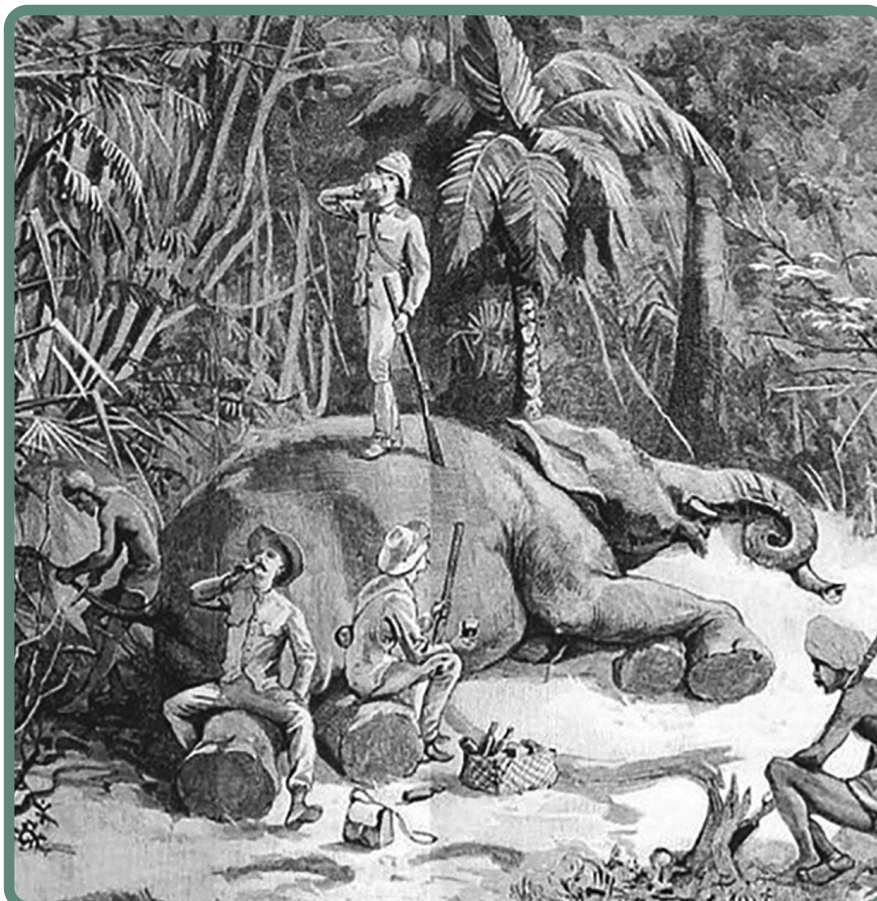
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Landing_an_elephant_from_shipboard_at_Calcutta,%22_from_Harpers_Weekly,_1858.jpg (last retrieved 15 April 2025)



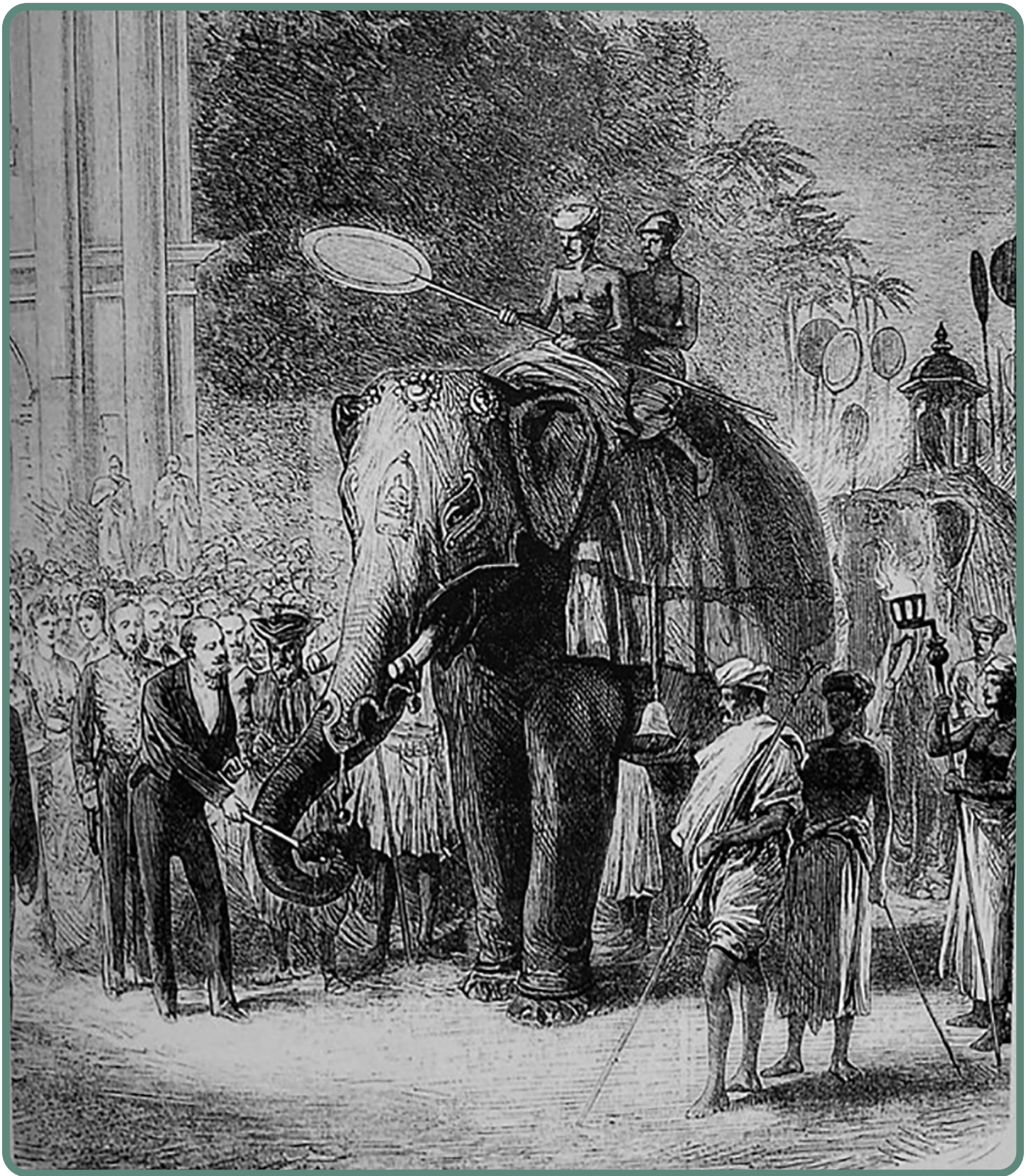
4. a. Illustration titled "Attack on the herd" (p.239) in Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon corresponds with the extract 02. Last retrieved 15 April 2025, https://archive.org/details/eightyearsinceyl00bake_0/page/n265/mode/2up?view=theater



b. "Elephant Hunting In Ceylon". Unknown source, last retrieved 15 April 2025: <https://www.shakariconnection.com/ceylon-hunting-books.html>



5. The Prince giving sugar cane to the elephants at the rehearsal of the Perahera, Kandy, Ceylon (INL, Special Supplement, January 8, 1876)



6. Advertisement for Elephant Safari. Screenshot from <https://www.midnightblueelephant.com/sri-lanka-safari-see-elephants-wild/> (last retrieved 15 April 2025)



7. Elephants at the Kandy Esala Perahera festival, 2014. Last retrieved 15 April 2025: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kandy_Esala_Perahera#/media/File:Perahera1.jpg



8. Watching elephants bathing at Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage (2019), last retrieved 15 April 2025: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elephant_Bathing_in_Sri_Lanka.jpg

