

LUCRETIIUS' ELEPHANT WALL

IN an article¹ entitled *Lucrèce et les Éléphants*, Professor Ernout has referred to recent archaeological evidence that in palaeolithic times the skeletons of mammoths were used in the construction of primitive habitations, and observes that the well-known lines of Lucretius 2. 532 ff. about India being so prolific in elephants that the whole land 'milibus e multis vallo munitur eburno' may refer not to anything legendary (as Bailey and others had supposed), nor to the military use of elephants in large numbers for frontier defence,² but to a recognition of the fact that even in later times 'les Indiens avaient pu conserver leur mode de vie et utiliser avec ses défenses d'éléphant le système de protection inventé par leurs ancêtres, ou simplement conserver ces gigantesques os de mammoths', etc. Like those editors of Lucretius who (unlike Munro who was apparently unaware of the passage in question) adduce any parallels at all from ancient literature, Ernout refers to the 'three authors' (i.e. Lucretius, Pliny, Polybius) who mention the use of elephant tusks in building, although in fact the two latter are writing not about India but Africa, where Pliny, quoting Polybius, says (*N.H.* 8. 31) that on the borders of Ethiopia tusks are used as door-posts or as props in the partitions of houses or out-buildings ('postium vicem in domiciliis praeberere, saepesque in his et pecorum stabulis pro palis elephantorum dentibus fieri Polybius tradidit auctore Gulusa regulo').

By a strange oversight however, no Lucretian commentator, so far as I know, has ever adduced a parallel from Dio Chrysostom's oration *περί πλούτου* (79. 4), where the incorporation of elephant tusks in the walls of ordinary Indian dwellings is mentioned. The comparison with Lucretius here is indeed heightened by a certain similarity of theme. Lucretius has just cited, in his argument about the finite number of different shapes of matter, the unsurpassed nature of the finest colours, smells, tastes, and sounds ('barbaricae vestes Meliboeaque fulgens / purpura Thessalico concharum tacta colore', etc.), arguing that otherwise the coloured fabrics and luxuries which we most prize would be rejected, and continues by commenting on the paradox that certain things of great rarity among one society are commonplace elsewhere, such as the snake-headed elephants of India:

quorum
milibus e multis vallo munitur eburno
ut penitus nequeat penetrari: tanta ferarum
vis est, quarum nos perpauca exempla videmus.

Dio on the other hand refers to the argument that a city's well-being can be measured by its metals and other material products (such as Syrian and Babylonian fabrics), and observes ironically that on such considerations the Indians are the most blessed of mankind: *εἰ δὲ ἐλέφας θαυμαστόν κτῆμα καὶ περιμάχητον Ἰνδοὶ πολὺ πάντων ἀλβιώτατοι καὶ ἄριστοι, παρ' οἷς ἔρριπται τὰ τῶν*

¹ *R.Ph.* xliv (1970), 203-5.

² See most recently P. H. Schrijvers, *Études sur la poésie de Lucrèce* (1970), 294-6, who envisages the tradition as going back to the invasions of Alexander,

quoting E. L. B. Meurig-Davies, *Elephant Tactics*, *C.Q.* xlv (1951), 153-5, who had referred to the wars against Pyrrhus and Carthage.

ἐλεφάντων ὅσα καὶ οὐδεὶς πρόσσειν, ὥσπερ ἐνθάδε τὰ τῶν βοῶν τε καὶ ὄνων. καὶ πολλὰ τοῖς τοίχοις ἐνοικοδομεῖσθαι τὰ κρανία τῶν ἐλεφάντων αὐτοῖς ὁδοῦσιν.

Dio's account has an air of casual reality about it, whereas Lucretius prefers to invest the story with the romantic grandeur so often associated with 'believe it or not' tales of the exotic orient.¹ I am reminded of the not dissimilar statements that the Indians or Singalese lived in houses roofed by gigantic tortoise-shells.² Aelian (*N.A.* 16. 18) mentions the number of elephants in Taprobane (Ceylon) which exceed in size even those of India, and were exported to the mainland, and in *Paradoxographus Vaticanus* 10 (p. 107 Keller) the Teubner editor suggests the substitution of *Ταπροβανίου* for the corrupt *πλήους* as the subject of *χρησθαι* in the fragment quoted of Agatharchides,³ which also mentions tortoise-roofing in this part of the world: *Πολύκλειτος χελώνας γίνεσθαι φησιν καὶ τῷ Γάγγη, ὃν τὸ χελώνιον μεδίμνους χωρεῖν πέντε. ὁ Ἀγαθαρχίδης δὲ τοῖς χελωνίοις χρησθαι ἢ πλήους ὡς ὀροφώμασι τῶν καλυβῶν.* Aelian himself (*ib.* 17. 3) out-trumps Polyclitus' figure of five medimni with a claim for six-medimnus shells on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea, doubles it for the ten-medimnus shells of the Indian river-turtle (16. 14), and approximately trebles it for the same Ganges turtles, whose shells are said (12. 41) to hold as much as twenty *amphorae* (about 180 gallons). Poets and prose writers alike may allow their fantasies to take wing when describing 'quae loca fabulosus lambit Hydaspes'.

University of Edinburgh

E. K. BORTHWICK

¹ Cf. D. A. West's comment on this passage in *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius*, 21.

² That the shells of the giant turtles of the Indian ocean are of exceptional dimensions and sturdiness is as true today as it was two thousand years ago, and doubtless they could be put to use as roof tiles, but I am unaware that any credible example is on record much more than a quarter as long as the fifteen-cubit shells described by Aelian (*N.A.* 16. 17) large enough for 'quite a few people to dwell underneath': *τίκτονται δὲ αἶρα ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ θαλάττῃ καὶ χελῶναι μέγιστα, ὥνπερ οὖν τὰ ἔλυστρα ὀροφοὶ γίνονται· καὶ γὰρ ἔστι καὶ πεντεκαίδεκα πήχεων ἐν χελώνιον, ὡς ὑποικεῖν οὐκ ὀλίγους.* Pliny (*N.H.* 9. 12. 35) also insists on the capacity of a *single* shell ('*tantae magnitudinis . . . uti singularum*

superficie habitabiles casas integant').

³ This fragment is overlooked in the fragments of Agatharchides printed in Müller, Jacoby, and *G.G.M.* For the reading of the manuscript (Keller gives *πλείους*), see Giannini's recent edition of the *Paradoxographorum Graecorum Reliquiae*, who tentatively proposes ὡς *πλύνθους* here. A comparison with parallel descriptions (abstracted from Agatharchides himself) in Phot. *Bibl.* 250 (*G.G.M.* i. p. 139) *τοῖς δὲ κύτεισι χρῶνται πρὸς τὰς σκηνώσεις, οἷον καλύβας ἐφ' ὑψηλοῖς τόποις πρηνεῖς καθιστῶντες* and Diod. Sic. 3. 21. 5. *καὶ πρὸς τὰς σκηνώσεις, τιθέντες πρηνεῖς ἐφ' ὑψηλῶν τόπων*, suggests as a possible reading in Agatharchides *χελωνίοις χρησθαι πρήνεσι* (i.e. with top of the shell uppermost, opp. *ὑπτιος*): for λ/ρ confusion, see Greg. Cor. p. 269.