

One elephant, a museum specimen and two colonialisms: the history of M'Toto from German Tanganyika to Rome

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ABSTRACT

The symbolic value of animals is an ancient and well-known aspect of human societies. In the present paper the history of an African savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) that lived in the Giardino Zoologico in Rome during the first half of XX Century is offered. M'Toto life is exceptionally documented, from the day of capture in Tanzania to his death in Rome. This is a first attempt to discuss the 'unnatural' and symbolic history of a natural history museum specimen, preserved in a Italian museum, and offers additional points for the educational utilization of a scientific specimen.

Key words:

zoological garden, Tanzania, museum specimen, fascism, Carl Hagenbeck.

RIASSUNTO

Un elefante, un esemplare museale e due colonialismi: la storia di M'Toto dal Tanganica tedesco sino a Roma.

*Il valore simbolico degli animali è un aspetto ben conosciuto delle società umane. Il presente lavoro offre la storia completa di un elefante africano di savana (*Loxodonta africana*) vivente nel Giardino Zoologico di Roma nella prima metà del XX Secolo, le cui spoglie sono oggi conservate nel Museo Civico di Zoologia di Roma. Si tratta di un primo tentativo di raccontare la storia 'innaturale' e simbolica di un esemplare prettamente scientifico, conservato in uno dei musei naturalistici italiani, che può offrire interessanti spunti divulgativi.*

Parole chiave:

giardino zoologico, Tanzania, esemplare museale, fascismo, Carl Hagenbeck

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking specimens hosted by the Museo Civico di Zoologia in Rome is the mounted skeleton of an adult African elephant. It is catalogued scientifically as *Loxodonta africana* and, being of eastern Africa origin, it can be said it belongs to the subspecies *knochenbaeri*. A few 'aged' people and someone of the museum staff knows his name was Toto and that he lived for several years in the Giardino Zoologico. The below is the -unnatural- history of Toto but also an attempt to contribute towards a better knowledge of how Europeans perceived exotic animals in the first half of XX Century.

JUMBO, M'TOTO EARLY LIFE IN AFRICA

Whilst investigating the origin of modern zoos and the contribution of Carl Hagenbeck, Rothfels (2002) gave a detailed account of a baby elephant captured in German Tanganyika on April 21, 1908. Having shot the mother, Hans Schomburgk reared

the baby elephant by bottle-feeding, and after six months in what is now southern Tanzania, he began a walking trip back to Dar es Salaam, reaching Morogoro in mid-September, and from there he took a train to the coast. In Dar es Salaam the baby elephant, that has been named "Jumbo", gained local fame as a sandwich-sign carrier (Rothfels, 2002). Although Schomburgk was sure that the first live elephant captured in German East Africa should be made a sensation, the director of Berlin Zoo did not respond to the cables offering the animal for sale. When Christopher Schulz - one of Carl Hagenbeck's collaborators - saw the elephant, he bought it immediately sending it to Hagenbeck's Tierpark, near Hamburg. Here Schomburgk met Jumbo on April 5, 1910. Several decades later, Schomburgk would eventually publish a children's book based on Jumbo's story (Schomburgk, 1952).

M'TOTO IN ROME

In those years the Hagenbeck company had an exclusive contract with a private society whose aim was to develop a modern zoological garden in

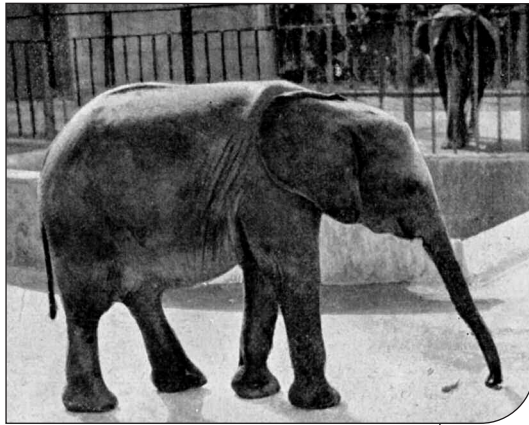


Fig. 1. M'Toto in Rome (1910).

Rome. The agreement included the delivery (once the zoo has been realised) of about one thousand individuals of mammals, birds and reptiles to Rome. Among the animals that reached Rome in November 1910 there were three elephants; two Asian females and our young African male (fig. 1). Theodor Knottnerus-Meyer, a zoologist at Stellingen, became the first director of the Giardino Zoologico in Rome. In several publications he refers to the African elephant with the proper name of "M'Toto" (Swahili for children) or Toto. It is likely, therefore, that the change of name occurred in Germany but the whole story was evidently known because several years later, in 1935, there is the only mention to the old name of Toto. In a commemorative volume for the first 25 years of the zoo, there is in fact a caption for three photos showing Toto at arrival and fully adult that says "Allora Jumbo...oggi Toto" (Then Jumbo...now Toto) (Anonymous, 1935). For the Roman elephants, Hagenbeck realised what seems to be his first 'Pachyderm House', essentially an industrial building with stalls for the night on one side and a pathway for visitors on the opposite side. Five outdoor enclosures were connected with the stalls through metallic doors. The side of the building that faced the animal enclosures resembled an ancient wall with oriental sculptures, whilst some vegetation also partially obscured it. By the second half of 1930's, the whole sector would be considered obsolete and the project for a new building was developed by the architect Raffaele de Vico after visiting the zoos in Munich and Leipzig in 1938. On the side of Hagenbeck, it should be recognised that whilst there were significant financial constrains, the small exhibit did at least provide outdoor access to all its inhabitants but differently from what was then the case in other zoos such as London, but in agreement with Hagenbeck's philosophy about the benefits of outdoor living. For elephants, in particular, daily exercises and walking around the zoo (fig. 2) was

commonly utilised in those years as an environment-enriching technique ante litteram. In Rome, Toto was first taken charge of by the head keeper Angelo Pozzi, a former worker at a circus, and probably the only one amongst the keepers with previous experience with wild animals.

Most of what we know about Toto's life in Rome is from Knottnerus-Meyer's book (1925). According to him, the relationship between Toto and Angelo Pozzi broke down and a young keeper, Ivo Calavalle, became Toto's handler. The young elephants in Rome never performed regular riding trips with children, an experiment aborted "for the safety of children". The three elephants, however, did make regular walks around the zoo (reaching the restaurant near the birds of prey aviaries to be rewarded by a croissant) and participated in films and in theatrical performances. Toto's inclusion in a 1921 production of *Aida* became his last performance as it eventually became too dangerous to move him outside for such performances. In fact in 1922 Toto fatally injured the veterinarian Dr Canezza whilst he performed a procedure on an abscess on his shoulder. Curiously, Knottnerus-Meyer (1925) does not mention this incident. No responsibility of the incident was ever officially given to the elephant, or to the management, because the head movement that killed the vet was simply attributed to the pain caused by the medication. In the meantime "Greti" had died during World War I whilst "Minnie" died in 1924, also as the result of Toto's aggressive behaviour. By that year, the zoo had received two adult male Asian elephants, the Sumatran "Pluto" from Circus Krone and the Indian "Romeo" from Circus Bisini. It is not clear how the three males were accommodated in the available two-elephant enclosures. We find no photos showing more than one of these elephants at any one time, but Knottnerus-Meyer affirms that Toto and "Pluto" sometimes shared the same outdoor

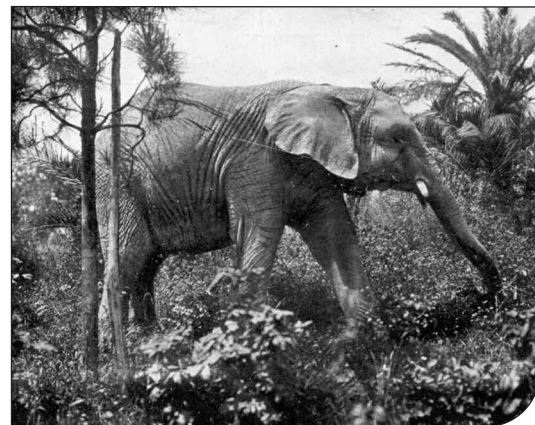


Fig. 2. M'Toto foraging in the gardens of the Giardino Zoologico (circa 1920).

enclosure and were particularly interesting when playing together in the pool. In 1927 a tragedy of mammoth dimensions occurred in the Pachyderm House. Both Asian elephant males died between 5 and 27 July, leaving Toto as the only surviving elephant in the zoo. Autopsies excluded that the two elephants had been poisoned, yet the shock was enormous both in the zoo and amongst Romans, and calls and even a poem urgently asking for a female for Toto appeared in the press. A female (of unknown species) was therefore acquired in London but it died during the sea voyage. A malediction seemed to surround the elephant house in Rome!

Finally on 26 September 1927 a female Asian named "Giulietta" arrived at the zoo. We know from a newspaper report that because Calavalle was not present that day, the formal introduction of "Giulietta" to Toto through the bars of the two outside enclosures was postponed.

There is an exceptional document in the archive of the Istituto Luce. A photo taken on 26 June 1928 shows (beneath a group of Tyrolese people in traditional dress) Toto and Ivo peacefully sharing the elephant's outdoor yard (see also fig. 3). It is possible that Toto's bad temperament forced this measure for the safety of visitors. Whatever the reason, on 2 July 1928 at about 11 am, shrieks of terror from the

pachyderm house captured the attention of the zoo director Lamberto Crudi and some of the keepers. Ivo was laying down inside Toto's stall, motionless but still live. The head keeper promptly took Ivo out of the stall and he was transported to the University Policlinico where he died half an hour later. The few visitors present in the house said Toto pushed Ivo to the bars with his head (fig. 4).

There is another photograph in the Istituto Luce archive of Toto after the tragedy, taken on 26 October 1929. It shows that Toto's tusks have become shorter, probably as result of abrasion with the walls or bars. Furthermore, metal spikes have been added to the vertical bars to reduce the dangers to the visitors.

One of the last photographs depicting Toto can possibly be dated from 1937-38 due to the presence of soldiers wearing the typical helmets of the Abyssinian war (1935-36). The tusks of the huge bull are practically gone (a large fragment is conserved in the Museum of Zoology, MCZR 294). On 12 July 1939, Toto was found dead. A Newspaper reported his death, showing a photograph with the elephant's unusual position. Other news recalled a tragedy approaching the whole planet...

Toto was ca. 32 years, the same age as Ivo at his death.

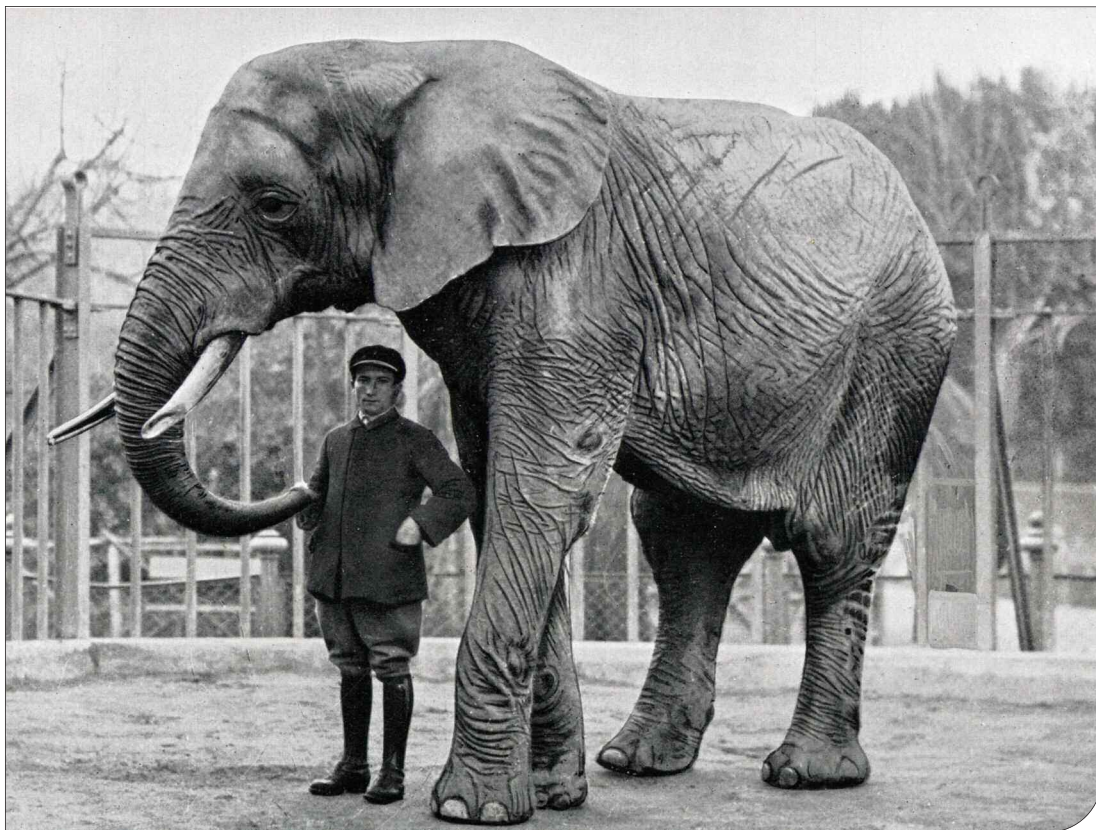


Fig. 3. M'Toto with Ivo Calavalle (circa 1924).

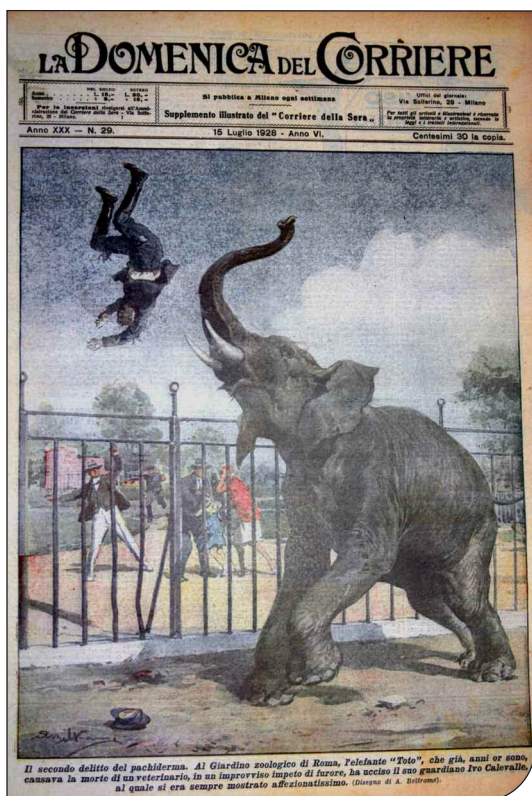


Fig. 4. The death of Ivo Calavalle as A. Beltrame figured in *La Domenica del Corriere* (15 July 1928).

THE GIARDINO ZOOLOGICO AND ITALIAN COLONIALISM

Fascism, with its rhetoric link to Imperial Rome, was closely engaged in the territorial expansion of the nation. To fuel social interest for the colonies, Mussolini immediately recognised the role of the Giardino Zoologico in Rome, that was by de facto the national zoo. The donations of several animals from "Il Duce" to the zoo - beginning from his lioness "Italia" - serve as examples for other functions of the Regime and especially the governors of the colonies. In 1930 The zoologist Marquis Giuseppe Lepri presented a lecture on the animals from Italian colonies living at the zoo at the first Colonial Congress in Florence and several articles touch the same issues in those years. But the truly masterly move by fascism was not only to install the Zoological Museum, but also to move the Colonial Museum inside the Giardino Zoologico to create, in the words of Giuseppe Crudi "a center of zoological, colonial and geographic culture that is rightly envied us". Both museums were inaugurated by Mussolini himself on November 6, 1932 (Gippoliti, 2010).

The articulated skeleton of M'Toto is now in the Zoological Museum. Its height was measured some

years ago and found to be 3.08 m high, only 10 cm shorter than those of "Jambo", the legendary elephant of London Zoo and tallest of all known captive elephants (Florio, 1997).

But what does M'Toto have to do with the history of fascism? Firstly, it may be supposed that the decision to maintain him alive after the second incident was also a question of prestige. The national zoo of fascist Italy had to demonstrate the ability to manage such a dangerous and majestic creature as "Toto the killer", as he was popularly known.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that in all the papers dealing with the animals of Italian colonies, even the individuals originating from other African regions, such as Tanganyika (i.e. the hippopotamus "Greco" and Toto himself) became a product of Italian colonies such as Somalia, rightly considered the richest in wildlife among overseas Italian colonies. So, ironically, whilst Germany failed to assume Toto as a icon of its colonialism, in Rome he became a flag for fascist expansionism. With his death in 1939, Toto denied himself the knowledge of the tragic falling of this ideology.

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