

AFRICA'S GREATEST TUSKERS

STORIES, HISTORY, AND LORE ON THE
LARGEST TUSKERS EVER TO COME
FROM THE DARK CONTINENT

BY
TONY SANCHEZ-ARIÑO



SAFARI PRESS INC.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF BIG TUSKERS



Up to the World War I, elephants were plentiful throughout Africa, from south of the Sahara to the Oliphant River in present South Africa. Without a doubt there were many big tuskers in those far-off days, but unfortunately, hunters, both black and white, were not concerned much about trophies. To them ivory was only ivory, and whether it was large or small was material only in the amount of money it would bring. This attitude resulted in the monster tusks of the day remaining unrecorded. The most important ivory market in the whole of East Africa was the Zanzibar market, and until 1905 tusks of up to 150 pounds were not uncommon, with quite a few over this weight.

Between World War I and World War II, many big tuskers were shot by professional and sporting hunters in Kenya and Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania) according to the records kept by the two game departments. The Belgian Congo also produced many big tuskers, but no one in that country kept a record of them.

The Belgian Congo represents a curious paradox. Despite the fact that it was a real “ivory mine” with elephants all over the place sporting big and very big ivory, a Belgian never became a famous elephant hunter. That honor went mostly to the British who operated there, and some very successfully, by the way. All the ivory from the Belgian Congo was sent to Belgium. Just to give you an idea about the huge amount of ivory exported from the Belgian Congo, look at the following official figures:

In 1919: 921,532 pounds (418,000 kilos)

In 1930: 410,060 pounds (186,800 kilos)

In 1932: 313,056 pounds (142,200 kilos)

In 1936: 279,987 pounds (127,400 kilos)

As a point of reference, during 1910 three countries—Middle Congo, Ubangi-Shari, and Chad—exported 125,000 kilos of ivory in total. The shipments went mostly to France, Belgium, and Germany, and from there the ivory was re-exported to the United Kingdom, the United States, India, and so on.

By the end of World War II, there were still a few very big tuskers of the 150-pound range shot in Tanganyika, Kenya, Sudan, the Belgian Congo, Ethiopia, Ubangi-Shari, and Mozambique. That is, of course, completely finished today.

THE LATE RUSH OF IVORY IN THE 1970s

As far as I know, no elephant with tusks over 130 pounds has been shot legally in Tanzania since 1970. The operative words here are legally shot. A mammoth elephant with tusks of 198 and 189 pounds was shot in the early 1970s in Tanzania, but this elephant was poached inside Iringa National Park. The story of this shameful event can be found in chapter 11 of this book. Up until 1980, quite a few elephants with tusks between 100 and 120 pounds were shot, especially in the Selous Reserve, by sporting hunters on safari there. Because of intense poaching, however, by 2016 the average weight of ivory has gone down dramatically. It is now actually VERY DIFFICULT to find an elephant with tusks that weigh 70 pounds—even if you are VERY lucky.

In Sudan three very big bulls were shot during the 1970s, but because of intense poaching from 1980 onward, the elephant population in that country has been reduced nearly to the point of extinction.

The same can be said of the Central African Republic. Elephants there have been poached nonstop, and what remains today is a mere 5 percent of the original population that existed before that country's independence. During the 1960s and early 1970s, several very big tuskers well over 130 pounds were shot, all of them in the eastern part of the country: Upper

M'Bomou; along the Chinko, Uarra, Kerré, and M'Boku Rivers; and in the areas of Rafai, Zemio, Djema and Obo, which are all along the border with the old Belgian Congo. Mostly these big tuskers migrated from the Belgian Congo to the C.A.R. during the mango fruit season, which is between April and June. They would cross the M'Bomou River when the water levels were low and return to the Congo at the beginning of the heavy rains in July.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, some few very big elephants with tusks well over 130 pounds were shot in Ethiopia by sporting hunters. The size of these tusks surprised professional hunters there because they had never seen elephants of this size before, and these were local professionals taking clients on safari, so they knew the areas and the animals well. The reason for the presence of these big tuskers in southwestern Ethiopia seems to be the following:

Ivory poachers in Sudan started slaughtering elephants all over the southern part of the country in the more easy-to-reach areas; these were the provinces of Equatoria, the Upper Nile, and Bahr-el-Ghazal. After slaughtering all the elephants in those regions, the poachers were forced to move to more remote areas off the beaten track. Little by little they finally reached the swamps between Bor and Pibor Post and those of the Kangan River down to Kasangor. All to the east of the Nile River toward the border with Ethiopia, these swampy areas were the home of old bull elephants who had found sanctuary there, but with the advent of the poachers, these bulls were forced to migrate toward Ethiopia.

In trying to find another safe place in which to live, these old bulls with marvelous tusks stumbled into a complete disaster. Suddenly the

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provinces of Illubabor and Kaffa became the target for sporting elephant hunters, with the result that after having shot seven or eight really big tuskers, the huge ivory “dried up” completely and it became very difficult to find even a 90-pounder. It wasn’t long before the weight of the tusks began to drop very fast, with tusks of even 60 pounds becoming rare. As of 2016, all elephant hunting in Ethiopia was banned in order to protect the few hundred individuals remaining in the country. The dastardly poachers had once

again decimated an entire population of elephants with their reprehensible deeds.

GHOST TUSKS AND SUPER TUSKS

For some time I have heard a lot of talk about a big elephant with tusks of a little over 130 pounds that had been shot in southeast Angola. Till now I have never seen a picture of this elephant, taken with or without his hunter, so I must question whether the story is true. I, for one, am a little doubtful.



Between 1890 and 1905 lots of ivory went through the Zanzibar ivory market, the biggest in the whole of East Africa. For sure there were some very big tusks that were never recorded, as can be seen in this picture from 1895.

I lived in that part of Angola for three years—1962, 1963, and 1964—in the Cuando Cubango province in the extreme southeastern part of the country. That was a time when the region was still nearly unexplored; in fact, on a map of Angola it was referred to as “The Land at the End of the World.” My duty was to open the country for sporting safaris, so I saw lots of elephants and shot some of them during my time there. My largest was a single tusker of 105 pounds, and during the three years I spent exploring the area hard I never saw anything bigger. I saw plenty of bulls with tusks between 60 and 80 pounds, but never any larger than that. Actually, I doubt if there are now any elephants left with tusks over 60 pounds due to the poaching.

Over the years I have heard references to super tusks, and I have tried to follow up on these reports. Unfortunately, I was rarely able to find proof of their existence. In 1872 the famous explorer Richard Burton mentioned that a huge pair of tusks had been sent from Mozambique to Luis I, the king of Portugal. These monster tusks were purported to have a total weight of 560 pounds (252 kilos), or 278 pounds (126 kilos) per side. Just with this reference I went to Portugal, and after I lost a lot of time and money investigating everywhere and searching in old archives, I was unable to find any proof of this event. Only God knows where Mr. Burton got his information.

In another reference to fantastic ivory, Lieutenant von Hohnel states in his memoirs that a well-known ivory trader called Jumbe Kinemeta told him about a super tusk weighing 264 pounds (119 kilos). Von Hohnel was exploring the north of present-day Kenya when he discovered Lake Rudolf (now Turkana), and it was his native guide who led the expeditions who told him about the

tusk. Von Hohnel never saw the tusk or found out if such a big tusk had arrived at any of the coastal ivory markets. There seem to be references galore but few verifications.

During the Great Exhibition of Paris in 1900, some accounts of the period state that a mammoth tusk from Dahomey (present Benin) in West Africa was shown at the exhibition. Supposedly this tusk weighed 260 pounds (117 kilos). As usual I tried to find something concrete, but I never came across more than simple and vague references, which is suspicious, because a tusk of that size cannot pass unnoticed and disappear like smoke.

Apart from these ghost tusks, which remain only in the “dreams department,” there were two pairs of super tusks that I know existed at one time. These never had the chance to be officially recorded because, unfortunately, they were destroyed in a senseless way.

The professional elephant hunter William A. “Billy” Pickering, a well-known ivory poacher in the Lado Enclave in those far away days when it was under the control of King Leopold II of Belgium, has the great distinction of having bagged the biggest pair of tusks obtained in the Lado Enclave. He shot this elephant in 1909, and the tusks weighed 191 and 193 pounds each (86 and 87 kilos)! He sold the ivory to a company by the name of Alladina Vierman, which had commercial establishments in many places in East Africa: from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean coast as far inland as Uganda in the heart of the continent and in places like Koba that bordered the Lado Enclave, north of Lake Albert. Unfortunately these magnificent tusks had “a very sad end” because they were cut into smaller pieces in order to be sent to the ivory markets in Europe, India, and so on.

This means the loss of the most remarkable pair of tusks a European had ever obtained.

Poor “Billy” Pickering was killed by a wounded elephant in southern Sudan in 1913 when his “express” rifle in caliber .577 Nitro failed to stop the charge of the bull. His death was a terrible one. The elephant knocked him down, put one foot on his chest, and winding its trunk around his head, jerked upward. The motion took Billy Pickering’s head clean off, like pulling a cork out of a bottle. The elephant tossed the head into the scrub, where his team of natives found it later. The elephant then stamped on Pickering’s body until it was an unrecognizable pulp, a horrible mixture of human remains, earth, leaves, and grass. He was thirty-one years old.

The second set of super tusks that I know about was also destroyed through the stupidity of man. In Juba, the capital of southern Sudan, lived a Greek named Costi Yiamanis who was a great trader and very good friend of mine, now dead for a very long time. He had emigrated from Greece in 1912, and I met him in southern Sudan because I spent twenty-five years of my life as a hunter there. He spoke to me often of some gigantic tusks that were owned by another Greek businessman by the name of Matexas.

This Greek had an establishment in Rejaf, the capital of southern Sudan until 1930 when the administration was transferred to Juba. By a curious coincidence, there is a reference to these tusks in a book published in 1932 entitled *On the Trail of the Wild Animals*. This book was written by two Spanish sporting hunters, Juncadella and Pallejá, who had gone on safari to southern Sudan in 1929. The authors say that on their

arrival in Rejaf they saw a huge and impressive pair of tusks weighing 95 kilos each (around 199 pounds) in the store of a trader by the name of Matexas. This was confirmation of the story Costi Yiamanis told me. Matexas apparently had bought tusks in the Belgian Congo and when he left Sudan and went back to the Belgian Congo, the evidence suggests that he sold these superb tusks before his departure to one of the ivory traders in Omdurman in northern Sudan. Without a doubt the ivory trader would have cut them into small pieces for carvings or whatnot. What a great shame!

Many years ago there was a lot of talk in hunting circles about an elephant shot in the old Belgian Congo by a European post office employee, a novice hunter. This person, armed with a rifle, a 9.3x62 Mauser, in one of his first sorties, shot a bull elephant with tusks of 250 pounds each (113 kilos each one). I was in the country at the time and made a great effort to locate him, but I searched in vain. I spoke to several people who claimed to have seen the tusks, but the fact remains that despite my great efforts I never managed to see them myself. I am sure that the whole thing was just a fantasy spread by ignorant people because it seems incredible that all-time record tusks would simply vanish into thin air.

From time to time one hears rumors that a fantastic trophy has been taken by some hunter or another in such-and-such country, and as I have shown these rumors normally are just that, a rumor. Maybe someday, one of these rumors just might come true. I, for one, would love to have an investigation end in the sighting of a super tusker!





*Here are large consignments of tusks displayed for sale in the early part of the twentieth century in London. This room is what was known as the Ivory Floor of the London Docks. Tusks of a certain size—called scrivelloes—and suitable for making into billiard balls are usually cut into two or three pieces, as the solid “points” fetch a better price than the “butts.” (Photo taken from *An African Eldorado* by T. Alexander Barns, London, 1926)*

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<i>This is the ultimate class of elephant, only eight tuskers are known to have had at least one tusk this heavy and only two are known to have had both tusks at 180 pounds or above. Discounting the 1961 date for the Gates tusks, the circumstances of which are unclear, the last such and clearly documented elephant of this class was shot by Edmund Sunde in Tanzania in 1955.</i>		
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