“Elephants and Ivory in China and Spain”

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Elements Video Abstract Script.

Walruses, narwhals, and Asian elephants supply global ivory markets in the 13th century. The most sought after ivory, however, came from African elephants from central and west sub saharan Africa. I am John Beusterien, professor of Spanish at Texas Tech University. I have co-authored an Element for the series Global Middle Ages with Cambridge University Press, with Doctor Stephen West, emeritus professor of Chinese from California Berkeley and Arizona State University. The title of our Element is, "Elephants and Ivory in China and Spain." The sections on China include the first translations of texts about the cultural importance of elephants and ivory in the Song Dynasty. We examine an ivory stave from the late 13th century. Staves were carried by officials in court and in other formal rituals. A relatively few number of live elephants were transported to Europe with respect to China during the same period. Nonetheless, China competed with Europe for ivory from the same region of Africa during what has been called Europe's Golden Age of Ivory. The sections on Spain focus on ivory production during the reign of King Alfonso the 10th of Castile. We examine the Virxe Abrideira, an ivory Virgin and Child statuette owned by the king's wife, Queen Violante of Aragon, crafted from an African elephant tusk. The Element poses the following questions about the governmental tool that the Chinese stave and also the religious statuette of the Virgin and Child: What life did the elephants live and through which trade routes did their tusks arrive? Who were the individual elephants that provided the ivory to make each object? The element provides a global history of ivory and elephants, and examines Africa, the most important source for 13th century global ivory markets. It asks these questions so to trace the lives and suffering of the elephants that provided the ivory. We point to, for instance, the empty hole that is found in many ivory artifacts which is the empty space of the tusks nerve center. In studying the trajectory of the ivory artifact back to the life of a sentient elephant, we acknowledge the individual individuality and dignity of elephants.