

An Litir Bheag le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 259 (which corresponds to Litir 563). Ruairidh can be contacted at rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

What's the Gaelic for "elephant"? Ailbhean, isn't it? Ailbhean. But in the old dictionaries there are many words. Here are examples: ailp, boir, oileabhan, oilleabhaint and albhan dubh. It's amazing, isn't it?

The English word elephant comes from the Latin elephantus. That came from the Greek elephas. But some of the words connected to elephants in English come from Hindi. For example mahout – a man who controls an elephant. And howdah – a large seat on the back of an elephant.

A few months ago I was myself in a howdah on the back of an elephant. I was in it for two and a half hours. That was long enough! It wasn't very comfortable. But it was good for seeing wildlife. I was in a national park in Nepal.

How familiar were the old Celts with elephants? Well, recently I was reading an old paper in French called The Celts and the Elephants. The author, Prof. Gaidoz, was saying that the first time many Celts saw elephants was when Hannibal was

Dè a' Ghàidhlig a tha air elephant? Ailbhean, nach e? Ailbhean. Ach anns na seann fhaclairan tha mòran fhaclan ann. Seo eisimpleirean: ailp, boir, oileabhan, oilleabhaint agus albhan dubh. Tha e iongantach, nach eil?

Tha am facal Beurla elephant a' tighinn bhon Laidinn elephantus. Thàinig sin bhon Ghreugais elephas. Ach tha cuid de na faclan co-cheangailte ri ailbheanan ann am Beurla a' tighinn bho Hindi. Mar eisimpleir mahout – fear a bhios a' stiùireadh ailbhean. Agus howdah – suidheachan mòr air muin ailbhein.

O chionn beagan mhìosan bha mi fhìn ann an howdah air muin ailbhein. Bha mi ann airson dà uair a thìde gu leth. Bha sin fada gu leòr! Cha robh e uabhasach cofhurtail. Ach bha e math airson fiadh-bheatha fhaicinn. Bha mi ann am pàirc nàiseanta ann an Neapal.

Dè cho eòlach 's a bha na seann Cheiltich air ailbheanan? Uill, o chionn ghoirid bha mi a' leughadh seann phàipear ann am Fraingis air an robh Les Celtes et Les Éléphants. Bha an t-ùghdar, am Proif. Gaidoz, ag ràdh gur e a' chiad turas a chunnaic mòran Cheilteach ailbheanan nuair a bha

crossing the mountains. That was in the year 218 BC. I'm sure you'll know the story of Hannibal – the Carthaginian leader.

The Celts tried to stop Hannibal. That was at the River Rhône. But Hannibal defeated them. He had fifty thousand soldiers. And he also had nearly forty war elephants. Hannibal involved the elephants against the Celts. The Celts were frightened of the elephants. It's hardly surprising!

Other Celtic tribes were living in the Roman territory. Some of the tribes were living where the north of Italy is today. They saw Hannibal's elephants as well.

And the Romans learned from Hannibal. A hundred years after Hannibal the Romans involved elephants against Celtic tribes. We'll look at that next week.

Hannibal a' dol tarsainn nam beann. Bha sin anns a' bhliadhna dà cheud is ochd-deug (218) RC. Bidh sibh eòlach air eachdraidh Hannibal – an ceannard Carthaginianach – tha mi cinnteach.

Dh'fheuch na Ceiltich ri stad a chur air Hannibal. Bha sin aig Abhainn Rhône. Ach rinn Hannibal a' chùis orra. Bha leth-cheud mìle saighdear aige. Bha, agus faisg air ceathrad ailbhean-cogaidh. Chuir Hannibal na h-ailbheanan an sàs an aghaidh nan Ceilteach. Bha eagal air na Ceiltich ro na h-ailbheanan. Is beag an t-iongnadh!

Bha treubhan Ceilteach eile a' fuireach ann an tìr nan Ròmanach. Bha feadhainn de na treubhan a' fuireach far a bheil ceann a tuath na h-Eadailt an-diugh. Chunnaic iadsan ailbheanan Hannibal cuideachd.

Agus dh'ionnsaich na Ròmanaich bho Hannibal. Ceud bliadhna às dèidh Hannibal chuir na Ròmanaich ailbheanan an sàs an aghaidh threubhan Ceilteach. Bheir sinn sùil air sin an ath-sheachdain.