

The Camel in Ancient Egypt

A. S. Saber

Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Assiut University, Assiut,
Egypt

ABSTRACT

The proposed time of camel entry into Egypt after its domestication in Arabia was found between 2500 and 1400 B.C. Evidences from excavation findings, archaeological records and rock engravings beginning from prehistoric time till Roman time, in which camels were certainly known, were reported in this study. Representative photos, diagrams and tables were used to support the findings of this study.

Key words: Archaeological records, Rock engravings, Camel, Egypt.

INTRODUCTION

There are about 17 million camels in the world, of which 12 million are found in Africa. Of this estimated world population, 15.1 million are believed to be one-humped camels and 1.9 million two-humped. In Egypt, the number of camels reaches about 95,000. The number is declining, since the camel is being replaced by other domestic species and its importance as a means of transport as well as a source of animal protein is fading away.

The proposed time of camel domestication is before 2000 B.C. (Free, 1944; Zeuner, 1963; Bulliet, 1978 and Ripinsky, 1985). Epstein (1971), taking into consideration the earliest Egyptian and Mesopotamian archaeological evidence, dates domestication as early as 4000 B.C. Walz (1956). However, it believes that camels were domesticated perhaps during the 13-12 century B.C. but not before 2000 B.C. (camels are mentioned in the Bible, Genesis, chap. 12, as being used by man in Abraham's time, about the 18th Century B.C.).

Domesticated camels probably entered Egypt during the early increased trade, but the first historical references to camels in Egypt

is in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. in connection with the Assyrian and Persian invasions of Egypt. Lefebure (1906) mentioned that camels appeared in the delta about 700 B.C. with Palestinians, and about 670 B.C. camels are said to have come into Egypt under Asarhaddon. Since it is known that the Assyrians did not normally use camels in their armies, allied Arab troops may have imported them.

In 331 B.C. Alexander used camels on his journey to Sowa Oasis to consult the oracle of Zeus Ammon (Epstein, 1971). In 46 B.C. King Juba of Namibia used camels in his fight against Julius Caesar. Caesar, who won the battle, captured 22 of them.

In the Ptolemaic period, and under the Philadelphus, (285-247 B.C.) trade routes were established across the Eastern Desert, linking Coptus on the Nile with the Red Sea harbors of Berenice and Myus Hormus by a road and a chain of cisterns for the benefit of “camel-merchants” (Strabo 17, 4.45). The same road continued as a camel route for Arabian aromatics in the time of Augustus (Gallus’s expedition to Arabia, Strabo, 16, 4.24, cited by Zeuner, 1963).

Camels have existed in Egypt for a very long time and this work tries to shed light on camel remains and evidence as well as rock engravings in Egypt.

Archaeological findings

There was no Egyptian word for the camel. Since the ancient records of the Nile Valley are singularly complete from the zoological point of view. All larger species of mammals, most of the conspicuous birds and the common fish having been faithfully depicted, the absence of the camel must have some reason. Tribute is usually missing after the pre dynastic period. Hence it is evident that wild camels did not occur in the Nile district, and if domesticated ones were known, they must have been unclean or “taboo”.

Early predynastic age (3600-4000 B.C)

On one pot related to the Amratian culture (in upper Egypt at El-Amra, there appears a drawing of what may be intended as a dromedary (Childe, 1952).

First dynasty (3200-2900 B.C.)

In the Necropolis of Ezbet-el-Walda near Helwan, Zaki Saad has found what appears to be a part of a camel, possibly to be interpreted as the burial of an animal servant with its master (Zeuner, 1963).

A pot for ointment with the shape of a sitting camel was found by Moller (1906) at Abusir-el-Melek, about 20 miles south of Cairo. It is made of limestone, is 6 cm high, comes from a cemetery of over 1000 crouched burials (now in Berlin Museum) (Fig. 1)

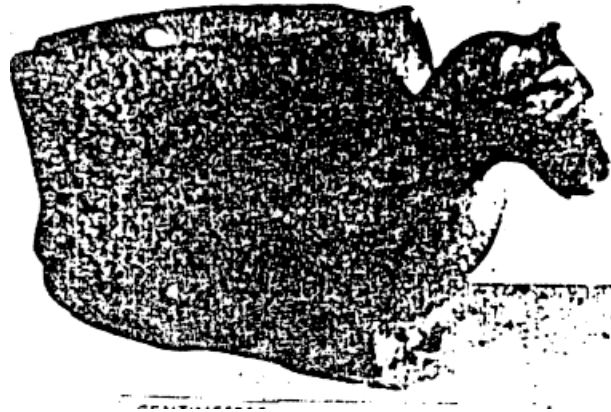


Fig. 1: Ointment jar in the shape of a sitting dromedary, Abusir-El-Melek, 2820-2650 B.C.

At Abydos, about 275 miles south of Cairo, Petreie (1903) found a pottery head (5x4 inches) which seems certainly to be that of a camel (Fig. 2a). At Hieraconpolis, some 250 miles south of Cairo, a fragment originally regarded as a donkey, and also of early dynastic date, has in recent years been interpreted as a camel's head (excavated by Green and Quibell in 1899 and cited by Ripinsky, 1985) (Fig. 2b).

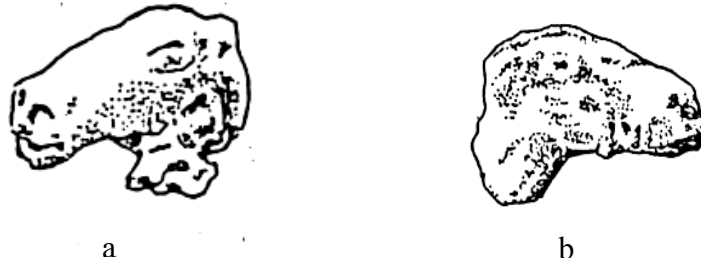


Fig. 2: Camels Figurine

Third dynasty (2700-2615 B.C.) or late fourth dynasty (2616-2500 B.C.)

Caton-Thompson (1934) found a cord of camel hair, about 3 ft. long in the gypsum works of Um-es-Sawan in Fayum. Was it the girdle of a laborer, or perhaps of an immigrant or slave who had come from Arabia? Or does it indicate that camels were used in the gypsum mines? A re-examination of the cord has, however, revealed that the fibers came from sheep (Mindant-Reynes and Braunstein-Silvester, 1977).

Sixth dynasty (2350-2180 B.C.)

Schweinfurth (1912) described an engraving from Gezireh near Aswan, which is combined with a heretic inscription, both being heavily painted. If the date is correct or not, is a matter of question (Fig. 3a).

Nineteenth dynasty (1170-1090 B.C.)

There is a gap until the 19th dynasty. From this period a pottery dromedary statuette burdened with two jars was found in a northern tomb at Deir Rifeh near Assiut, about 200 miles south of Cairo (Fig. 4). Another finding was mentioned by Lefebure (1906), a glazed dromedary figure on painted water jars was found at Benha. Its black painting on blue glaze is regarded as suggestive of an age prior to the

26th dynasty, and Von Borsing assigns to it a Ramesside age. The figure was excavated by Freiherr Von Bissig in 1900

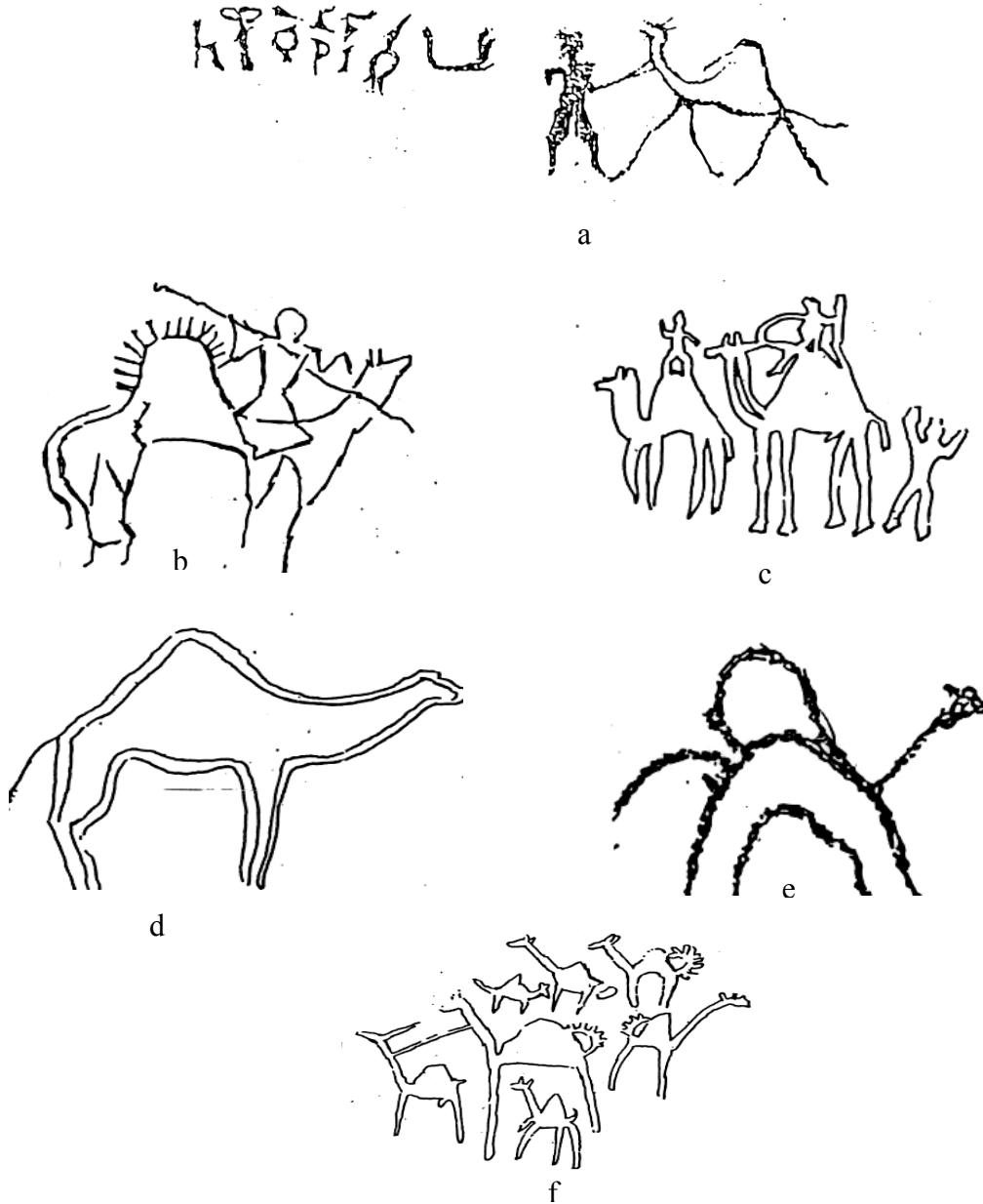


Fig. 3: Rock engravings of camels



Fig. 4: Camel Laden with water jars from Rifeh, (Assiut).

Roman period

By the beginning of the Roman period the dromedary had acquired the place it holds in Egyptian trade today. Many figurines showing it as a beast of burden were found (Fig. 5).

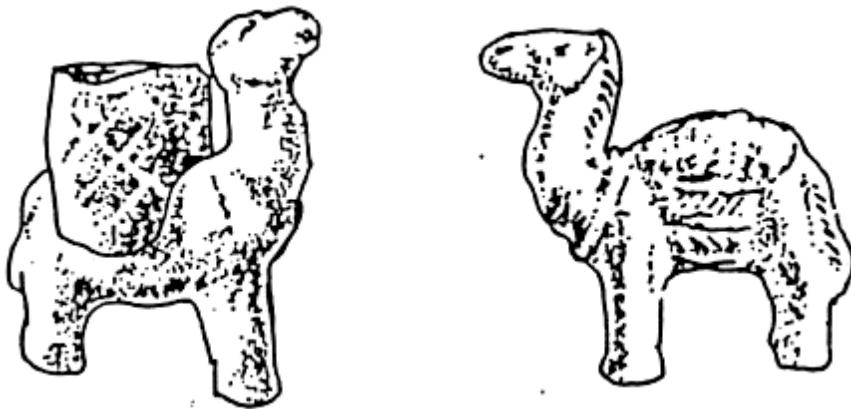


Fig. 5: Camel as a beast of burden (Roman Period)

In southern Egypt, and especially in the Eastern Desert and perhaps in Nubia and farther south also, the dromedary quite possibly appeared with invaders from Arabia across the Red Sea. There were many occasions of this sort, for several centuries in the pre-Christian

era. In the 3rd century A.D., the Blemians entered the field of Egyptian history. They were a warlike people of camel-breeders and were associated with the hour-glass-shaped human figures on rocks as shown by Winkler (1939) (Fig. 3b).

Walz (1951 and 1956) supposed that the dromedary reached East Africa from South Arabia about the middle of the first millennium B.C. and that it reached Egypt not only via Suez, but from the south also. Rock engravings of dromedaries which have been found in Uweinat (Upper Egypt) may prove the south route of camel entry to Egypt (Fig. 3c), and in Jordan, the eastern route of camel entry to Egypt (Figs. 3d,e,f).

Rowley-Gonway (1988) used the Radiocarbon Accelerator to investigate camel remains from the Napatan period found in Qasr Ibrim 140 Km south of Aswan. The remains were one fragment of a mandible without teeth and a number of pellets of desiccated camel dung. He suggested that the date of the introduction of the camel be moved back several centuries, to the early part of the first millennium B.C.

REFERENCES

- Bulliet, R.W. 1978. *The camel and the wheel*. Cambridge (Mass.) Harvard University Press, 327 pp.
- Caton-Thompson, G. 1934. The camel in Dynastic Egypt *Man*, 34-21
- Childe, V.G. 1952. *New light on the most ancient east*. 255pp., 39pls., London (Cited by Zeuner, 1963).
- Epstein, H. 1971. *The origin of the domestic animals of Africa*. Vol. 2, London, African Publishing corporation, 719 pp.
- Free, J.P. 1944. Abraham's camels. *J. Near East Stud.*, 188-189.
- Lefebure, E. 1906. *Le Chameau en Egypte*. Act. XIV Congr. int. orientalistes Alger, 1905. 2(sec. 7): 24-62.
- Mindant-Reynes, B. and F. Braunstein-Silvester. 1977. *Orientalia*, 46: 337-362. (cited by Rowley-Gonwy, P., 1988).

- Moller, G. 1906. Ausgrabung der Deutsch Orient-Gesellschaft auf dem vorgeschichtlichen Friedhofe bei Abusir-el-Meleqim Sommer, 1905. Mitt. Deutsch. Orient. Ges. Berlin, 30: 17 (22 pp.).
- Petrie, W. M. F. 1903. Memories of the Egypt Exploration fund 24, Abydos, 11, 27, pl.10 and 11, 27, pl. 10 (cited by Ripinsky, M. 1985).
- Ripinsky, M. 1985. The camel in dynastic Egypt. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 17: 131-141.
- Rowley-Gonwy, P. 1988. The camel in the Nile Valley. New Radiocarbon Accelerator (AMS) dates from Qasr Ibrim . *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 74: 245-248.
- Schweinfurth, G. 1912. Tierbilder und Felsinschriften bei Assuan. *Z. Ethnol.*, 44: 627-658.
- Walz, R. 1951. Zum Problem des Zeitpunktes der domestikation der altweltlichen Cameliden. *Zeit. Deitsch. Morgenland. Ges.*, Wiesbaden, 101: 29-51.
- Walz, R. 1956. Beitrage zur altesten Geschichte der altweltl. Cameliden unter besonderer Berucksicht. des Problems des Domestikationzeitpunktes. *Act. IV Congr. intern. Sci. Anthropol. Ethn.*, Vienne, 3: 190-204.
- Winkler, H. A. 1939. Rock-drawing of Southern Upper Egypt I, II *Egypt Explor. Soc. London* (cited by Zeuner, F.E., 1963).
- Zeuner, F. E. 1963. *A history of domesticated animals*. Hutchinson of London.