

‘Sweeter Than Camel’s Milk’: The Camel in Sumerian, The Bactrian Camel in Genesis?

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Introduction

Much discussion in scholarly literature, and more recently of a popular nature on the internet, has focused on the issue of camel ownership by members of the Patriarchal family in the Book of Genesis. The context of this discussion is the chronological dating of the Genesis narrative where a number of passages depict the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel as camel owners and riders. For example, Genesis 24:64 places Rebecca on camel back when she first catches sight of her husband to be Isaac, while in the next generation in Genesis 31:34, Rachel sits on a camel on her own journey to Canaan with her husband Jacob. The chronological implications of such passages for the dating of the Patriarchal Narratives are obvious. Such passages assure that the Patriarch Narratives in their current form cannot be earlier than the date of full camel domestication in the Ancient Near East, when camels came to be used as a means of transport. Consensus continues to place this date no earlier than the late second millennium BCE, the end of the Late Bronze Age, making this a *terminus post quem* for the Patriarchal Narratives themselves. However, there is some sporadic archaeological and art historical evidence which would allow for a Middle Bronze Age date for domestication of the camel, and so an earlier date for the historical background of the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel.¹ The short discussion below will suggest an alternative way of looking at this problem, based on textual evidence to be found in Sumerian.

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1. An overview of the issues and problems at play here may be found in The Anchor Bible Dictionary I 823-26, ‘Camel,’ by J. Zarins, and in the camel section of the extensive Zoology entry by E. Firmage on *ibid* IV 1138-1140. An encyclopedia study of the cuneiform materials is to be found in Heimpel 1980, and Heide 2010 gives a long study of the camel in the Bible and Ancient Near East. While this article was in press, a new study of archaeological evidence for the domestication of the dromedary, Sapir-Hen – Ben-Yosef 2013, which dates this event to no earlier than the last third of the 10th century BCE, prompted another round of discussion. See for example the posting on the Agade list by M. Chavalas of March 2, 2014 (from the La Crosse Tribune) on early camel domestication in relation to the Patriarchal Narratives.

The Camel in Sumerian

The topic of camels in cuneiform is not new to me. In 2008, I published an article on camels in the Ancient Near East, ‘The Ship of The Desert, The Donkey of The Sea: The Camel in Early Mesopotamian Revisited,’ in the Festschrift of my friend and colleague Professor Shalom Paul of The Hebrew University (Horowitz 2008). There I presented anew cuneiform and archaeological evidence for the camel in the Ancient Near East before the Late Bronze Age, with a short review of some previous bibliography on the subject.²

The cuneiform evidence for the Sumerian camel can be summarized as follows: 1) lexical evidence for three names for the camel in Sumerian, and 2) a Sumerian love song in which a lover addresses his beloved who is for him, ‘sweeter than camel's milk.’

The Lexical Evidence: **am.si.harran**, **am.si.kur.ra**, and **e.a.ab.ba**

The earliest evidence for the camel in Sumerian dates to an Early Dynastic period, (mid-third millennium BCE) list of animals from the town of Shuruppak , the home of the Sumerian flood hero, and an important site for Sumerian literary and lexical works. At the start of the surviving portion of the list we find an entry **am.si.har.an**, a syllabic writing for **am.si.harran**: literally a quadruped (**am**) with a protrusion (**si**)³ of the road (**harran**). We understand this name for the camel as follows: Sumerian **si** refers to the camel's hump, with Sumerian **harran** being a loan-word from Akkadian *harrānu*, which has the extended meaning of that which goes by road, the caravan. Thus, we understand the camel **am.si.harran** to be ‘the quadruped with a hump that goes by road/in caravans.’ If so, this indicates that the camel was already in use in some way for overland transport by the middle of the third millennium by

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2. This article in *Bible Lands E-Review* revisits a number of the issues examined in Horowitz 2008. Since then the writer has become aware of Potts 2004 which provides a detailed overview of important archaeological, sociological, anthropological, and philological issues relating to the history of the camel, with specific attention to domesticated two-humped camels in the first millennium Ancient Near East. Potts, however, does not make specific use of the Sumerian materials for earlier periods.
 3. A standard meaning of Sumerian **si** = Akkadian *qarnu* (the cognate of Hebrew קרן) = 'horn'. This word is used for the horns of animals, but often refers to other protruding objects as well. No dedicated Sumerian or early Akkadian term for the camel's hump can be identified. In the first millennium, *asqubbītu/asqubbītu*, and *gungulīpu* appear in Akkadian.

nomadic or semi-nomadic groups who introduced the camel to the Sumerians. Based on this entry alone it is not yet possible to determine if the **am.si.har.an** camel is of the two-humped Bactrian variety or a one-humped Arabian dromedary, or both! This same lexeme, in the form **am.si.har.ra.an**, is also attested ca. the 18-17th century BCE in a unilingual Sumerian list of animals in the tradition of the lexical series *Urra = hubullu*.⁴

Centuries later, in the canonical 24 tablet edition of the series, from the late second or early first millennium, we find all three names for the camel in Sumerian, our **am.si.har.ra.an**, and now also **am.si.kur.ra** and **anše.a.ab.ba**, all translated by the standard Akkadian word for camel *ibilu*. The first two, with **am.si**, occur in Tablet 14 of the series, the tablet which lists almost all fauna that the ancient editors presumed to be land-based, from the elephant (*pīlu*) to the flea (*pirša'u*). These include wild animals, for example the bear and the lion, but also some domesticated animals, for example the pig. In fact, the only animals not included in *Urra = hubullu* 14 are the most common of the domesticated animals, those belonging to the sheep-family (**udu**), bovines (**gu₄/áb**, bull/cow), and equids (**anše**); a category consisting mainly of donkeys and horses. These *barnyard* animals are listed in the preceding tablet, *Urra = hubullu* 13, thus providing a lexical home for the name for the camel, **anše.a.ab.ba**, ‘the donkey of the sea,’ included here as a presumptive member of the equid family **anše**. Thus, the camel in Ancient Sumer, lexicographically at least, resides somewhere between the realm of the wild animals and the common domesticated animals. They cannot be considered *a priori* to be wild animals, but their status is of a different order than that of the cattle, sheep, and donkeys. This is also true to an extent in the modern Middle East where camels are much less a part of everyday town and country life than donkeys, sheep, and goats.

The Bactrian Camel and Arabian Dromedary in Sumerian: Which is Which?

Although Modern English offers two distinct words for the two different animals, camel and dromedary, popular parlance does not fully differentiate between the two. True, dromedary always refers to the one-humped variety, but camel can be for either the one or two-humped

4. In an unpublished forerunner to *Urra*. This information courtesy of N. Veldhuis of The University of California, Berkeley.

beast.⁵ Sumerian does not seem to have this problem. We may presume that the **am.si.harran**, 'the road-camel,' is the eastern Bactrian two-humped camel, which must have reached Mesopotamia overland by road (**harran**) from the east via Iran, even though we cannot offer a perfect philological proof for this assumption based on the cuneiform evidence alone. We can likewise make a near certain identification of the **am.si.kur.ra** as the Bactrian camel. Sumerian **kur** has the most basic meaning 'mountain,' making this the standard term for 'east' in Sumerian lexicography; the reference being to the Zagros Mountains to the east of the Sumerian homeland.

The third entry, **anše.a.ab.ba** = *ibilu* enters the cuneiform corpus much later than the **am.si.harran**; first appearing in the late second millennium in parallels to Urra = *hubullu* from the Syrian towns of Emar and Ugarit (Horowitz 2008: 601). This Sumerian name, literally 'the donkey of the sea,' precludes a connection with the land mass to the east of Mesopotamia, and so must be for the one-humped Arabian dromedary, which must have reached Syria and Mesopotamia from the southern Arabian peninsula, apparently by way of sea trade along the Persian Gulf, the same way that the dromedary reached islands in the Persian Gulf and the horn of Africa (Horowitz 2008: 606-607). In the Urra = *hubullu* tradition, this form of the camel is not listed with the **am.si.har.ra.an** and **am.si.kur.ra** on Urra = *hubullu* 14. Instead the **anše.ab.ba** is included among the equids (**anše**) in Urra = *hubullu* 13, indicating that it entered the Mesopotamia lexicon already in domesticated form. If so, we may be safe pushing Mesopotamian knowledge of the domestication of the **anše.ab.ba** = dromedary back at least a little while before the Emar and Ugarit lists, into the middle second millennium, i.e. the end of the Middle Bronze Age or start of the Late Bronze Age. Further, the fact that the one-humped **anše.ab.ba** belongs to the **anše**-category might offer indirect confirmation that both camels of the **am.si**-type, the 'mountain camel' (**am.si.kur.ra**) and 'road camel' (**am.si.harran**), are of the Bactrian variety.

Thus, to summarize, if we accept that the **am.si.harran** is the Bactrian camel, then the lexical evidence indicates that the two-humped camel reached Mesopotamia by land already in the third millennium, by then already in use for road travel in some way. In contrast, the

5. Both English "camel" and Hebrew can refer to either variety of what most modern English and Hebrew speakers think of as one animal. This ambiguity extends to children's toys as well where one-humped and two-humped camels are available for sale in the old city of Jerusalem. Invariably, the one-humped camels are made in Israel where one often sees Arabian camels, but those with two humps are imported from China where Bactrian camels predominate.

one-humped dromedary enters the cuneiform corpus by sea, no later than the middle to late second millennium BCE when it first appears in lexical lists.

The Camel in a Sumerian Love Song

The earliest piece of non-lexical textual evidence for the domestication of the camel (**am.si.harran**), what we have identified above as the Bactrian camel, is found in a passage from the Sumerian love song, ‘Inanna The Watered Field, Who Will Plow Her?,’ that was published in Sefati 1998: 218-235. The relevant passage, known from the Nippur tablet, Ni. 9602 dating to the Old Babylonian period, is part of an address from Inanna to her lover Dumuzi and can be translated as follows:⁶

18. Make the milk yellow for me, my bridegroom, make the milk yellow [for me.]
19. O my bridegroom, may I d[rink⁷] milk with you.
20. O wild-bull Dumuzi, make the milk yellow for me.
21. O my bridegroom, may I [drink] milk wi[th you].
22. With goat milk, [from⁷] the sheepfold [. . .]
23. O *Ninšarra*,⁷ fill the holy butter churn [for me]
24. O Dumuzi, [make] the milk of the (two-humped) camel (**am.si.har.ra.an**)
[yellow for me]
25. The (two-humped) camel, its milk [is sweet]
26. Its butter-milk, which is sweet, [make yellow for me]
27. O Lord Dumuzi [. . .] / may I [drink⁷] milk wi[th you].

Here, we find Dumuzi in his role as a god of domesticated herd animals. Inanna requests milk from two of Dumuzi's animals: goat milk and then camel milk. His camel milk, and combination of butter and milk which is churned from it, are then described as sweet. This is indisputable evidence for the domestication of the what we have identified as the two-humped camel in Mesopotamia, at least for dairy purposes, by the Old Babylonian period date of the tablet Ni.

6. Ni. 9602 iii 18-27, edited in Sefati 1998: 221-222. Translation from Horowitz 2008: 604.

7. Context demands that this is another name for Dumuzi.

9602, and probably earlier into the Sumerian third millennium when the love song was most likely first composed. This, however, does not prove that Bactrian camels were used as beasts of burden or ridden at this relatively early date. For these uses of the Bactrian camel in the early Ancient Near East we have to turn to iconographic materials, more specifically a cylinder seal from Alalakh on the Euphrates in Turkey just north of the Syrian border.

Riders on a Bactrian Camel: The Early Second Millennium BCE

The cylinder seal from Alalakh, now Walters Art Gallery 42.804, is described in detail in Porada (1977),⁸ and is dated by consensus to the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1800-1600 BCE). On the seal, we see two figures sitting across from one another on the two humps of what appears to be a single Bactrian camel:



Thus, by the early second millennium we have evidence for the for the two-humped Bactrian camels being milked in Mesopotamia, with evidence for riding two-humped camels in Syria soon after.

Possible Early Evidence for Dromedary Domestication

Some scholars have seen definitive evidence for dromedary domestication on a few

8. Originally published as Gordon (1939) 21 no. 55 with a photograph on pl. VII. For this seal and further bibliography see Potts 2004: 150, Horowitz 1998: 605, and Collon 1987: 158-161, no. 738 who confirms Porada's dating of the seal and sees it as evidence for the domestication of the camel by the beginning of the second millennium BCE.

objects from as early as the third millennium while others (including myself) have not.⁹ Given the inconclusive nature of this evidence, we are still unable to offer proof for the domestication of the one-humped dromedary any earlier than the Late-Bronze Age.

Summary and A Proposal for Genesis

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the two-humped camel was fully domesticated for riding and other purposes, for example milking, by the Middle Bronze Age, while the textual evidence for the one-humped Arabian camel before the Late-Bronze Age is less conclusive. Thus, for now, one may place the Patriarchal Narratives in a Middle Bronze Age historical context as long as one assumes that the Genesis narrative originally referred to the Bactrian camel rather than the Arabian dromedary.¹⁰ This is as far as the cuneiform evidence elucidated above actually allows us to proceed. The cuneiform evidence does not, however, offer proof that the authors of Genesis were writing about Bactrian rather than Arabian camels, or vice-versa, nor does the evidence necessarily exclude the possibility of domesticated Arabian one-humped camels in the Middle Bronze Age. In fact, the sparsity of textual evidence for the camel in second millennium cuneiform, Bactrian and Arabian alike, indicates that the camel albeit known, was still relatively rare in Mesopotamia and Syria before the first millennium BCE. If so, we suppose that a second millennium camel would have been a prestige item for its owners, not unlike a sports car or Cadillac in our world. Could the Genesis narrative somehow have remembered this, even if the narrative evolved into the form that we know it today much later on? Perhaps, but perhaps not. If yes, though, might not one of the messages of patriarchal camel ownership be that Abraham and his family had done very very well in Canaan, and could afford to use camels instead of the typical mode of transport in those days, the donkey? From the perspective of the story of Genesis 24, the fact that Abraham's servant came from Canaan by camel caravan would have assured Rebecca and her family that Abraham would be well equipped to pay a large dowry for her hand in marriage, a concern that should not have escaped the attention of Rebecca's brother Laban, whose miserliness is a big part of the story of the courtship

9. See e.g. summaries in Horowitz 2008: 605-606 and Firmage's discussion of the camel in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI 1139.

10. This in fact would fit the findings of Sapir-Hen–Ben-Yosef 2013.

of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah in the next generation. In any case, by the time that Ancient Israel emerges on to the pages of written history in the Iron Age, the dromedary was well on its way to becoming **THE CAMEL** in the Middle East, leading readers of Genesis to suppose that this is what the author(s) of the text meant by 'camel' - regardless of when the text was written, or a possible earlier historical background. Hence, the camel of Genesis has come to be for us moderns without doubt the Arabian camel, the dromedary, prompting the concern of scholars that dromedaries would be anachronisms if one dated the Patriarchal Narratives much earlier than the very end of the Late Bronze Age. We now see that the camel of the Patriarchal Narratives could have originally been the two-humped Bactrian camel. In any case, the concern that camels in Genesis are anachronisms can now be removed, and the question of the (or any) historical background to the Patriarchal Narratives can proceed apace without this proverbial 'straw that breaks the camel's back.'

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