

Camels and dromedaries



Few animals are more useful to mankind than the camel and the dromedary. They have an unrivaled capacity to endure long periods without water (up to four or five days), and can carry very heavy loads. They also produce milk, wool, and meat; they can be used to plow. Their dung is not only used as fertilizer, but also to make fire. In this article, the camels and dromedaries of Antiquity will be discussed.



Before we start, it is necessary to remind the reader of the differences between the two animals, because there is always some confusion (take, for instance, the dromedary on a box of Camel cigarettes):



Christian representation of the Magi. Museo nazionale della civiltà romana, Rome (©**)

- A dromedary has one hump, long limbs and short hair. This animal originally comes from the hot deserts and the steppes of [Arabia](#). (Today, it also lives in northern Africa.) Its short hair protects the animal from the heat. A dromedary is about 300 cm long; its height is about 190-230 cm; its weight is between 600 and 700 kilo.
- A camel has short limbs. It used to live in [Bactria](#), Sogdia, and the Gobi desert only, which have a land climate. The two humps insulate the back from heat loss during the cold Central-Asian winters. Its long hair has the same quality. Although the camel is about as large and heavy as the dromedary, it is stronger and can carry heavier weights.



A dromedary on a relief from the [Bani Walid](#) museum (Libya)

The confusion is easy to explain. The [Babylonians](#) and [Assyrians](#) were, as far as we know, the first to describe an animal known as *gammalu*. (A similar word, *gâmâl*, is used in the Bible.) This refers to the dromedary, which was originally called *dromas*, 'swift runner', by the Greeks. They saw the first representatives of this species in the sixth century, when the Persian king [Cyrus the Great](#) conquered [Lydia](#) (western Turkey). However, the Greeks also accepted the loan word *kamêlos*. So, they had two words to describe the same animal.

This would not have led to confusion if they had not used the same pair of words to describe the camel, which they first encountered during the reign of [Alexander the Great](#) (336-323). Following the Greek example, the Romans ignored the difference as well: they called the animals *dromedarius* and *camelus*. The sharp distinction between the two animals is modern, but the official names are still a bit confusing: *Camelus dromedarius* and *Camelus bactrianus*.



A dromedary and its child, two hours old.

Dromedaries live in herds, consisting of one male and several female animals. Sometimes, the males fight for control of the females.

The dromedary is easy to domesticate and the first evidence for tame dromedaries dates back to the late third millennium BCE. The domestication first happened on the Arabian peninsula, and it seems to have been connected to the exploitation of distant copper mines. However, it was only much later, in the tenth or ninth century BCE, that the dromedary became a really popular animal in the Near East.

From now on, long distance trade and desert nomadism became possible. On a long trip, the animal can walk some 120 kilometers on the first and second days, but this diminishes later. The animals like to eat acacia, but if, during a long trip, they won't have this food, a kilo of dates a day will be fine. It needs about 16 liters of water for a week in the desert. One of

the dromedary's benefits is that it can smell water at some distance.

The use of dromedaries in the second millennium BCE by nomadic tribes, as implied in the Biblical book *Genesis*, is almost certainly unhistorical and shows that *Genesis* was composed at a later age. It is possible that the modern distinction between "slave dromedaries" (i.e., carriers) and race dromedaries was already made in Antiquity. Nowadays, a race dromedary costs about four times as much as a carrier.



A camel on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser (British Museum)

The domestication of the Bactrian camel can be dated to about the same time, the first quarter of the first millennium. Again, there are some indications that it happened at an earlier stage, but unfortunately, these clues are not unambiguous. After all, one does not need tame camels to use their dung, bones, or wool. The famous Black obelisk of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858-824), now in the British Museum, is thought to contain the oldest representation of domesticated camels, but it may still be a wild one. At least one camel was presented by the Assyrians to [pharaoh](#) Takelot II (850-825). The first solid evidence of domestication is from Qasr Ibrim, a town in Lower Nubia: it is a radiocarbon dating of camel dung radiocarbon from c. 740 BCE.



The Arab warrior Mushayqat Hamayat ibn Yusuf on a dromedary. Funerary stele from Saba (second century CE?) ([Louvre](#), Paris)

Dromedaries were used for warfare in the mid-seventh century: not only were they used to carry archers, but also to transport heavy loads. The conquests of the [Achaemenid](#) king Cyrus the Great (559-530) would have been impossible without logistical support of dromedaries. In [c.547](#), he fought against king [Croesus](#) of Lydia (in western Turkey) and employed these animals in what was to become one of the most famous stratagems of Antiquity:

He gathered all the dromedaries from his army train, took off their burdens and set cavalry men upon them. Having thus furnished them, he ordered them to go in front of the rest of the army towards the horsemen of Croesus [...]. He did this because horses are afraid of dromedaries and can not endure to see or smell them.

[[Herodotus of Halicarnassus](#), *Histories* 1.80]



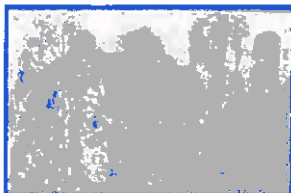
Statuette of a dromedary, from Azerbaijan, eighth century BCE. (Glass museum, Tehran)

A century after the events, when Herodotus wrote this story, the dromedary was already well-known to the Greeks. At least, that was what they thought. Herodotus remarks that he feels no need to give a description of it. Ironically, he continues with a story full of biological errors.

Female camels are superior to horses in speed and have a greater capability to carry weights. I will not here describe the form of the camel, because the Greeks for whom I write are already acquainted with it. Yet I shall tell something that is not commonly known: the camel has two thighs in the hind legs and two knees, and its organs of generation are between the hind legs, turned towards the tail.

[Herodotus, *Histories* 3.102-103]

The first European to recognize that dromedaries and camels were not the same species, was the well-known [Macedonian](#) philosopher [Aristotle of Stagira](#), who in his *Animal history* correctly defined them as one- and two-humped.



A Bactrian camel on the [Eastern Stairs of the Apadana in Persepolis](#).

The Persian armies, the soldiers of Alexander the Great, those of the [Seleucid empire](#), the [Parthians](#) and the [Sasanians](#): they all employed dromedaries. The Roman [legions](#) also used them, especially in the eastern provinces of Egypt, [Arabia](#), [Judaea](#), Syria, [Cappadocia](#), and [Mesopotamia](#). Statuettes of elegant dromedaries are known from all over the Roman empire, including the [provinces](#) of the far west like [Germania Inferior](#).



Statuette of a dromedary (Römisch-Germanisches Museum, [Cologne](#))

In the Seleucid empire, we have the first unequivocal evidence for very long-distance trade along the [Silk road](#), which connected the Mediterranean world and the Chinese kingdoms. On many places, caravanserais were built to accommodate caravans of dromedaries and camels with valuable products like ostrich eggs and silk. (An overview of road stations can be found in the [Mansiones Parthicae](#) by Isidore of [Charax](#).)

One of the results of this trade was that camels started to come to the west. (The museum of Worms (in Germany) owns a rare oil lamp with a picture of a camel.) At the same time, dromedaries started to spread to the east, and after the rise of Islam, which created a political unity along the western part of the Silk road, many more dromedaries and camels traded places. Today, dromedaries are used as far to the east as Pakistan, and camels can be seen in Turkey.

That two-humped animals were not well-known in the west before the rise of Islam, means that the famous Jewish proverb that "It is easier for a *kamêlos* to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (quoted in Mark 10.25; cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 55b and *Baba Mezi'a*, 38b) refers to a dromedary, a biological fact that appears to have escaped almost every translator of the Bible.



A camel on an oil lamp from Worms

The association between dromedaries/camels and caravan trade made them the symbols of wealth. Two Roman emperors, [Nero](#) and [Heliogabalus](#), had their chariots drawn by rare Bactrian camels. At the same time, camels and dromedaries symbolized the far east. In Christian iconography, the three [Magi](#) who visited the baby Christ are almost always depicted with dromedaries.

Finally, a word about beauty. Today, dromedaries are considered to be beautiful when their hair is shiny, their legs are straight, the neck is long and rests on strong shoulders. The head must be big, the ears firm, and the cheeks broad. The winner of a modern beauty contest can win millions of dollars for its owner. There is no reason why this was different in Antiquity.

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