



DID ABRAHAM HAVE CAMELS?

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Did Abraham have camels? Skeptics are adamant that he did not, that camels were first domesticated 800 or so years after him. They contend that the biblical references to Abraham's camels were anachronisms¹ and are significant evidence of the Bible's lack of reliability. Are the skeptics right?

This article will review exactly what the Bible says about the camels of Abraham and the other patriarchs, examine the skeptics' statements, and evaluate the archaeological evidence. That evidence will show that the skeptics are decidedly wrong—that camels were domesticated thousands of years before Abraham.² Our evaluation of the archaeological evidence will start in the first millennium BC and look at each preceding millennium, region by region.

I. Biblical References to Camels

The Bible has relatively few references to camels in connection with the patriarchs. The first biblical mention of camels is in Genesis 12:16, where Pharaoh gave Abraham camels as well as other livestock and human servants. Then in Genesis 24, Abraham's servant took 10 camels on his journey in search of a wife for Isaac. Rebekah then journeyed on the camels to meet and marry Isaac.

In Genesis 28 Jacob returned to Mesopotamia to find a wife. While living there and working for Laban, Jacob grew prosperous and acquired camels and other indicia of wealth (Gn 30:43). Camels again played a role in Jacob's life when he departed from Laban and put his children and wives on camels (Gn 31:17) and Rachel hid her father's idols in the camel's saddlebags (31:34). Jacob later gave Esau livestock including 30 milking camels and their colts (Gn 32:13–15).

In Genesis 37:25–28 Joseph is sold by his brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelites with camels on their way to Egypt.

And finally, Egypt apparently had camels at the time of the Exodus. In Exodus 9:3 God instructed Moses to warn Pharaoh about the destruction of camels and other livestock.

In summary, the Bible never describes camels as being in widespread use by the patriarchs or in Canaan at the time of the patriarchs.

II. What Do the Skeptics Say?

The majority opinion of scholars today is that mentions of domesticated camels in the biblical patriarchal narratives are anachronisms. William F. Albright stated that the archaeological evidence suggests that the biblical references to camels are anachronisms.³ Donald Redford also described the patriarchs' camels as anachronisms, asserting that “camels do not appear in the Near East as domesticated beasts of burden until the ninth century B.C.”⁴ Finkelstein and Silberman stated authoritatively, “We now know through archaeological research that camels were not domesticated as beasts of burden earlier than the late Second Millennium and were not widely used in that capacity in the ancient Near East until well after 1000 BCE.”⁵

The popular press has joined in. The *New York Times* stated, “These anachronisms are telling evidence that the Bible was written or edited long after the events it narrates and is not always reliable as verifiable history.”⁶ *Time Magazine* questioned biblical accuracy, stating, “The phantom camel is just one of many historically jumbled references in the Bible.”⁷ CNN also asserted that Abraham's camels were a biblical anachronism and questioned the authorship and credibility of the Bible.⁸

III. The Archaeological Evidence

Despite the skeptics' authoritative statements, the archaeological evidence shows that they are wrong. Rather than camels being first domesticated only as late as 1200 or 900 BC, Bactrian camels were first domesticated as early as the fourth millennium BC and dromedaries no later than the last half of the second millennium BC and probably much earlier. Significantly, the Bactrian camel was in widespread use for long-distance transport in Mesopotamia, Abraham's homeland, for over 1,000 years before he departed for the Promised Land.

A. Evidence from the First Millennium BC

Our examination of the archaeological evidence of domesticated camels begins with the first millennium, which is relevant even though it occurred 800 years or more after



Abraham. The skeptics mistakenly look at camel remains from the first millennium as signaling the beginning of domestication but fail to consider that those remains were the result of a lengthy process. The process of camel domestication takes a long time, in large part because of the very slow growth rate of camel herds. Camels' annual herd growth is only 8 percent, compared to sheep at 18 percent and goats at 33 percent.⁹

The lengthy process of camel domestication included not only building the herds, but also learning how to domesticate and train camels, developing the equipment necessary for their use, and training the people that rode and used the camels. That process must have taken decades or even quite longer. Thus, the large numbers of domesticated camel remains found dating to 1200–900 BC are in fact evidence of domestication that began significantly earlier.

So what is the evidence of camel domestication from the first millennium? Does it show only the merest beginnings of domestication, or does it show widespread use of large numbers of camels? The archaeological evidence from the first millennium in fact shows that domesticated camels were already in widespread use throughout the Abrahamic regions, including Egypt, Canaan (or the Levant), Arabia, and Mesopotamia.

The widespread use of domesticated Bactrian camels in Egypt by at least the ninth century BC is demonstrated by the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (ca. 859–824), which records Bactrian camels received as tribute from Egypt.¹⁰



Woolley 1952: Plate B, 50a (see Spoede's bibliography on the ABR website)

Above: A relief from Carchemish of a rider on a dromedary, ca. 900–800 BC.

In the Arabian Peninsula, very large numbers of domesticated dromedaries existed by 853 BC. Shalmaneser III's record of the Battle of Qarqar, which occurred in that year, indicates that he captured 1,000 dromedaries from Gindubu the Arab.¹¹ This use of such large numbers of domesticated dromedaries "suggests that camels had been domesticated for a significant length of time prior to the conflict, as use of a camel in warfare indicates a tradition of reliability in addition to complex training."¹²

Figurines of dromedaries with saddles or harnesses in contexts dating to the first millennium appear throughout the Middle East.¹³

A relief of a rider (possibly a soldier) on a dromedary, dating to the ninth century BC, was found at Carchemish (close to the border between Syria and Turkey).¹⁴ Assuming that camels were first used as pack animals prior to their use for riding, this relief would imply that dromedaries had already been exploited as pack animals prior to the ninth century BC.¹⁵



Courtesy of the Penn Museum object #31-43-342 and #31-43-338

Above: Clay figurines from Ur, dated to 2000–1000 BC, including depictions of a saddle, pack, and harness, indicating that the camel was in use as a pack animal.

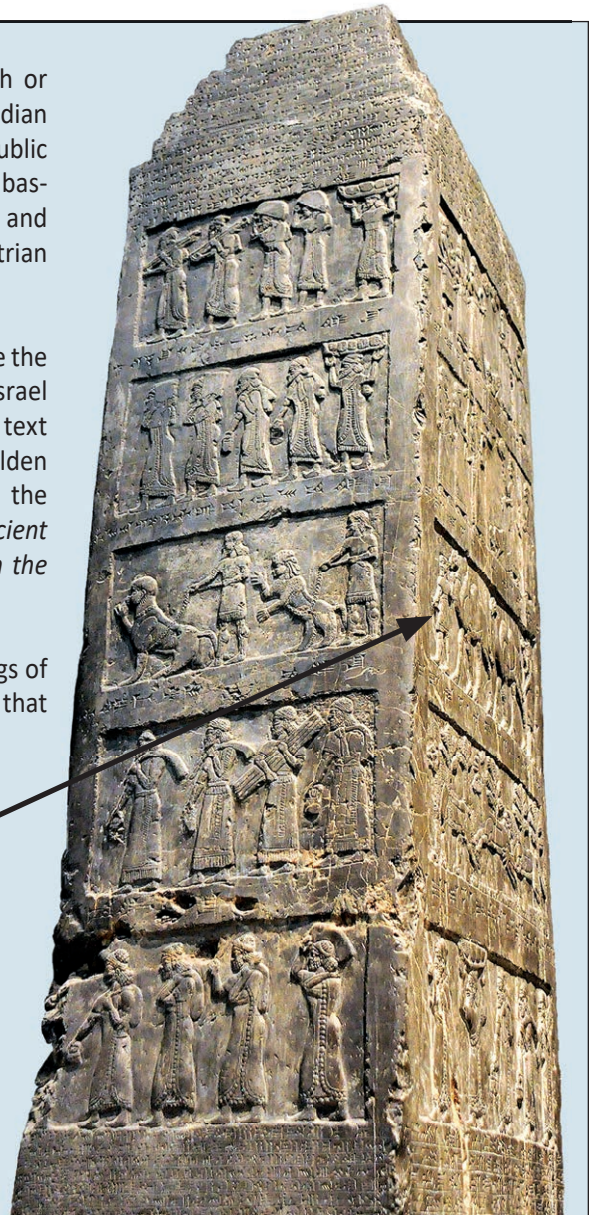
The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III discovered in Nimrud (biblical Calah or ancient Kalhu). This six-and-a-half-foot-tall black limestone pillar, with Akkadian cuneiform writing and a top shaped like a ziggurat, was erected as a public monument glorifying the achievements of Shalmaneser III ca. 825 BC. The bas-relief images depict scenes with five different kings who were conquered and subdued by Shalmaneser III. One scene shows tribute in the form of two Bactrian camels from the Assyrian vassal kingdom of Musri.

In the scene above the camels, the obelisk also includes what is believed to be the earliest depiction of a biblical figure. Jehu, king of the northern kingdom of Israel (841–815 BC), is shown prostrating himself and bringing tribute. The obelisk text translates, “Tribute of Iaua (Jehu), son of Omri (*mâr Humrî*). Silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, staves for the hand of the king, javelins, I received from him” (Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1, *Historical Records of Assyria from the Earliest Times to Sargon* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926], 211).

This inscription provides extra-biblical evidence for the existence of two kings of Israel and the existence of Israel as a kingdom during the same time frame that the Bible records.



Osama Shukir Muhammed Amir FRCP(Glasg) / Wikimedia Commons



Camel bones were found in the Levant and dated to the first half of the first millennium at Har Sa'ad, Qadesh Barnea, Tel Beersheba, Jericho, Tel Jemmeh, and Tel Michal.¹⁶ Large numbers of bones attributed to dromedaries were found at Tel Sheikh Hammad and dated starting from the ninth century BC.¹⁷ Since the Levant is not within the normal range of wild dromedaries, these bones must be considered as evidence of domestication.

Large numbers of dromedary bones¹⁸ dated from 1050 to 800 BC were found in southwestern Arabia,¹⁹ although it is not clear whether any evidence of domestication exists. Large quantities of camel bones were also found at Timna that were dated from the end of the tenth to the ninth century BC.²⁰ And at Tell Jemmeh, a site the skeptics rely heavily upon in their futile attempt to prove that biblical camels were anachronisms,²¹ over two hundred bones were found dating to the first millennium, with the greatest number from the middle of the millennium.²² However, camel bones were also found at Tell Jemmeh dating to the last third of the second millennium BC.²³

In summary, the archaeological evidence shows that very large numbers of camels were already domesticated and in use by the early first millennium, establishing that camels must have been first domesticated much earlier.

The skeptics, however, point to the paucity of dromedary bones in the southern Levant during the last centuries of the second millennium followed by a rapid increase in the number of dromedary bones in the first half of the first millennium. They argue that this shows that the “domesticated dromedary was not present in this region or the surrounding regions until after 1000 BC.”²⁴ As we shall see, the skeptics’ point is mistaken and ignores the overwhelming weight of the archaeological and historical evidence.

B. Evidence from the Second Millennium BC

The second millennium is key since it was Abraham’s millennium. Abundant evidence exists for domesticated camels throughout the second millennium in Central Asia, Mesopotamia (Abraham’s homeland), Egypt, and the Levant.



Istanbul Archaeology Museum

Above: A Sumerian clay tablet discovered in Shuruppak describes “the quadruped with a hump that goes by road/ in caravans.”* This inscription indicates that by 2600–2500 BC camels were recognized as animals in caravans. They were possibly introduced by nomads traveling the merchant routes.



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Above: The “Broken Obelisk” from the central palace at Nineveh depicts Assyrian king Ashur-bel-kala (1074/3–1056 BC) with prisoners on a rope. The inscription records that the king acquired and bred herds of dromedaries.



University of Pennsylvania

Left: This Sumerian tablet (1300–1100 BC) found in Nippur refers to the camel as the “donkey of the Sea[land].”**

* Wayne Horowitz, “Sweeter than Camel’s Milk’: The Camel in Sumerian, the Bactrian Camel in Genesis?,” *Bible Lands e-Review* (Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem) (2014/S3): 2, <https://biblelandsreview.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/horowitz-bler-2014-s3.pdf>.

** Martin Heide and Joris Peters, “Camels in the Biblical World of the Ancient Near East,” *Ancient Near East Today* (American Society of Overseas Research) 10, no. 9 (September 2022), <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2022/09/camels-biblical-world/>. Brackets in the original.

Central Asia

In a grave at North Gonur in Turkmenistan, the remains of two complete camels were found.²⁵ Fragments of zoomorphic vessels shaped like camels were also found at North Gonur,²⁶ as was a ceramic drainage pipe with a skillfully scratched design of a two-humped camel.²⁷

Mesopotamia

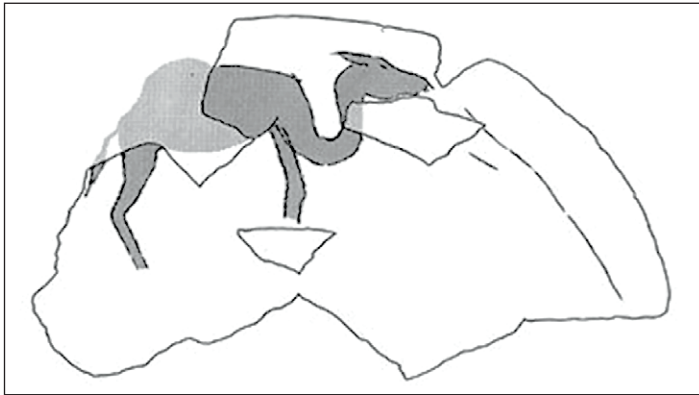
Significant inscripational and artifactual evidence exists for domesticated camels in Mesopotamia in the second millennium, leaving little doubt that Abraham could have departed Mesopotamia with camels. A Sumerian love song, dated to the 18th century BC (from an old copy of a third-millennium-BC original), states, “O Dumuzi, make the milk of the camel [am.si.ħar.ra.an] yellow for me – the camel [am.si.ħar.ra.an], its milk is sweet ... Its butter-milk, which is sweet, make yellow for me ...”²⁸ The poem’s familiarity with the milk of the camel is evidence not only of the domestication of the camel, but also of its domestication for a considerable time.²⁹

Additional linguistic evidence supports both domesticated Bactrian and dromedary camels in Sumer in the second millennium. Old Babylonian (ca. 1894–1595) texts differentiate between the Bactrian camel and the dromedary. The Old Babylonian words for the Bactrian camel were *am.si.kur.ra* and *am.si.ħar.ra.an*, whereas the word for the dromedary was *anše a.ab.ba.*,³⁰ literally, “donkey of the sealand,”³¹ implying that it was domesticated like the donkey.³²

Peter Magee describes two Middle Assyrian (13th century BC) texts that contain the term *anse.a.ab.ba*, one from Ugarit and the other from Nippur. “On the basis of this evidence,” Magee writes, “it might be concluded that domesticated dromedaries are known during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC.”³³

The “Broken Obelisk,” from the reign of Ashur-bel-kala (1074–1056) or of Tiglath-pileser I (1115–1077),³⁴ states that the king acquired dromedaries and bred and developed herds of them.³⁵





Pusch 1996: 114 (see bibliography)

Above: Sketch of the bowl fragment from Qantir in Egypt, which is thought to be the location of ancient Piramesse, or Pi-Ramesses, the capital of Pharaoh Ramesses II.

Heide summarizes “the inscriptional evidence from Mesopotamia” by stating that it “requires [the dromedary’s] domestication around the middle of the 2nd millennium *or before*.”³⁶

Domesticated camels in second-millennium Mesopotamia are attested by numerous figurines of domesticated Bactrian camels and dromedaries found at Ur in contexts dating to the second millennium.³⁷

Figurines of both dromedaries and Bactrian camels were found at Nippur from the Kassite period (ca. 1595–1155 BC).³⁸

The remains of at least three Bactrian camels from 13th-century-BC contexts are reported to have been found at Tell Sheikh Hama on the Khabur River, a major tributary of the Euphrates.³⁹ These camels were almost certainly domesticated since wild camels were not native to Mesopotamia.

In summary, convincing evidence exists that domesticated Bactrian and dromedary camels existed in Mesopotamia in the second millennium during the time of Abraham. Since neither species was native to Mesopotamia, their domestication must have occurred in their native regions some significant time earlier.

Egypt

Second-millennium evidence of camels also exists in Egypt, contradicting those who deny that Pharaoh could have given camels to Abraham because camels were supposedly unknown in Egypt at that time.



A camel skull dating to 2000–1400 BC was found in the Fayum.⁴⁰ Near a rocky plateau known as Gebel Silsileh, Flinders Petrie found rock carvings dating to the 18th Dynasty (ca. 1575–1292 BC) that depicted wild animals including camels.⁴¹

One of the most spectacular finds of recent decades is a bowl fragment from Piramesse (modern Qantir) with an incised sketch of a dromedary, dated to the late 18th or early 19th Dynasty (14th–13th centuries BC).



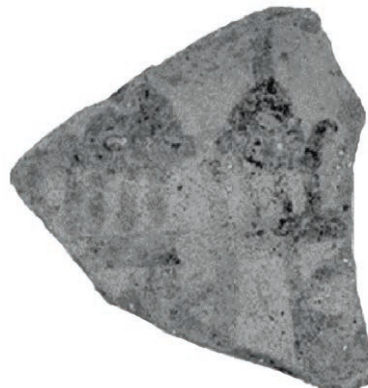
Manchester Museum, University of Manchester

Above: This figurine of a camel carrying a water jug was discovered in a Deir Rifeh tomb dating to the 19th Dynasty (1292–1190 BC), which was founded by Ramesses I. The rock-cut tombs near the village of Rifeh were for the local governors, priests, and officials.



Montet 1929: Pl. LII (see bibliography)

Above: Figurine from Byblos, dated between 2000 and 1500 BC, with a depiction of a double strap around the muzzle (a characteristic way of haltering camels) and scalloped edges on the side that look like a blanket. The hole on the top may explain the lack of a hump.



Left: A Pottery sherd dated between 1550 and 1000 BC and discovered at Tell Deir ‘Alla in western Jordan, depicting a camel caravan.

Deir Alla archive, University of Leiden; Heide and Peters 2021: KL 4436 (see bibliography)



Courtesy of the Walters Art Museum

Above: Stone relief from Tell Halaf. The cuneiform inscription above the camel rider translates as “Palace of Kapara, son of Hadianu” (The Walters Art Museum, “Relief with Dromedary Rider,” Online Collection, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/37529>).



The Walters Art Museum (see bibliography)

Above: A cylinder seal from Syria dated to 1800–1650 BC and depicting a couple riding on a two-humped camel.

Petrie discovered a statuette of a dromedary carrying two water jars in a tomb dating to the 19th Dynasty (1292–1190 BC) located in the northern cemetery at Rifeh.⁴² Scholars consider this item “to be sufficient proof for the presence of camels in Ramesside Egypt.”⁴³ Another figure of a camel with water jars was excavated at Benha and also dated to the 19th Dynasty.⁴⁴

Petroglyphs in the Wadi Nasib, dated to the 16th century BC, depict camels walking caravan-style, with a dromedary being led by a man, perhaps indicating that camels were used as pack animals in transporting the copper and turquoise from the mines at nearby Serabit el-Khadem.⁴⁵ The petroglyphs are next to proto-Sinaitic inscriptions on a rock face.

All these finds are strong evidence for the presence of domesticated dromedaries in Egypt in the second millennium BC because of the complete absence of wild camels in Egypt at that time.⁴⁶

Levant

A spectacular 18th-century-BC seal from Syria shows a couple, possibly divinities, sitting on the two humps of a Bactrian camel.⁴⁷ On the basis of the seal and other evidence, Porada concluded that both Bactrian and Dromedary camels were known in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian period (2000–1600 BC)⁴⁸ and, with Collon, concluded that the Bactrian camel was used as “a pack animal on international routes at an earlier date than is generally assumed.”⁴⁹

Another spectacular find, from Tell Halaf in northern Syria, is a relief of a rider on a dromedary. Although the relief is typically dated to around the tenth century BC, the Walters Art Museum, which possesses the relief, states that it is part of “a temple-palace built in the 10th century BCE by a local ruler” who “reused the blocks from one or more pre-existing structures.”⁵⁰ Thus, the relief’s date is *no later* than the tenth century BC and could be much earlier.

“A statue of a man riding a dromedary from Tell Ta’anakh (in today’s Israel) [was dated to] around the second millennium BCE.”⁵¹ A camel skull dated to 2200–1550 BC was also discovered at Tell Ta’anakh.⁵²

Pierre Montet excavated a possible camel figurine at Byblos (in today’s Lebanon) that he dated to sometime between 2000 and 1500 BC,⁵³ although others have dated it to before 2182 BC.⁵⁴ Some question whether the figurine represents a camel or a ram.⁵⁵ Richard Bulliet argues that it was meant to depict a camel because of the four lines around the muzzle, indicating a double strap, which is the characteristic way of haltering camels, and because of the scalloped edges on the side of the figurine, which he believes represent a saddle blanket. He believes that the hole on the back of the figurine explains the lack of a hump.⁵⁶

“From Transjordanian Tell Deir ‘Alla, a sherd was unearthed that depicts two or three one-humped camels” and that was dated to the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) or Iron I (1200–1000 BC) despite its retrieval from an Iron II deposit. It has been interpreted as evidence for camel caravans as early as the Late Bronze Age.⁵⁷

Camel figurines were excavated in Hama, on the Orontes River in Syria, and dated to 2200–1600 BC.⁵⁸

Camel remains dated to the second millennium have been found at Shiloh, Be'er Resisim, Abu en-Ni'aj, Tell el-Hayyat, Kvish Okef Yahud, Megiddo Tomb I, el Jisr, Tel Jemmeh, Izbet Sartah, Tel Qasileh, and Tel Hesban, and in Syria at Tell Nebi Mend and Tell Sheikh Hamad.⁵⁹ Camel bones alone may not seem like evidence of domestication. However, given that camels were not eaten in Israel due to their unclean status,⁶⁰ and that they were typically managed outside of urban areas, even “single bone finds should ... not be treated as negligible evidence for camel husbandry.”⁶¹ Additionally, because these locations were distant from the range of wild camels, it is highly likely that these remains are from domesticates.⁶²

Cuneiform texts from Alalakh, near the Syria/Turkey border, dating to the 15th century BC list various animals for which fodder was provided. Several scholars translated a word for one of the animals on the lists as meaning “camels,”⁶³ which obviously would indicate their domesticated status. Other scholars, however, are not convinced that translation is correct.⁶⁴

C. Evidence from the Third Millennium BC

Contrary to the claims that the camel was not domesticated until the late second or early first millennium, the evidence is clear that the camel was, in fact, domesticated no later than the third millennium, if not earlier, and had even become the main transport animal in Central Asia by that time.⁶⁵

Central Asia

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has exhibited a small statue of a Bactrian camel from Bactria-Margiana dating to the late third or early second millennium BC.⁶⁶

Stamp seals and stone amulets with images of camels being led by humans (including a baby!) were also found in Bactria-Margiana and dated to the third–second millennia BC.⁶⁷

Camel bones, dung, and fibers from the early third millennium were discovered in a clay jar at Shahr-i Sokhta in eastern Iran.⁶⁸ Since these objects were found in close association with a dwelling place, they imply a domestic status for the camels.⁶⁹

Three Bactrian camel bones dating from the same time period were found at Tepe Qabrestan in northern Iran.⁷⁰

Camel remains were found at Shor-depe, Chong-depe, and Hapuz-depe and dated to the first half of the third millennium. And “faunal remains of probable Bactrian camel [*sic*] dating to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC...have been found at Ulug-depe, Altyn-depe and Namazga-depe in southern Turkmenistan (Peters and von den Driesch 1997: 659)...and at Shah Tepe in northeastern Iran (Compagnoni and Tosi 1978: Table 3; Amschler 1939: 77-80; but queried by Peters and von den Driesch 1997: 660).⁷¹ These camel bones “point to the appearance and exploitation of the domestic two-humped camel in the Third Millennium BC.”⁷²



Sellin 1904: 46, fig. 48 (see bibliography)

Above: A figurine of a person riding a camel, from Tell Ta’anakh (south of the Jezreel Valley) dated between 2000 and 1000 BC. Joshua 17 records the allotment of land made to the descendants of Manasseh, Joseph’s son, after the Israelites conquered Canaan. This allotment included the inhabitants of the Canaanite royal city of Taanach and its villages (Jos 17:11).



Met Museum (see bibliography)

Above: A copper-alloy figurine of a Bactrian camel, from the Bactria-Margiana region, dated ca. 2000 BC.

Models and figurines of camels pulling carts, dating to the third millennium, have been found at Altyn-depe in Turkmenistan.⁷³ “This is important evidence that camels in this period were used as draught animals,”⁷⁴ perhaps even the principal draft animal of western Central Asia, in the second half of the third millennium.⁷⁵

At Gonur Depe in the Margiana region, camel remains were found interred in various royal tombs from the Oxus Civilization (2400–1700 BC), along with wagons, dogs, and horses,⁷⁶ clearly suggesting the ancient domestication of the camel. Gold and silver vessels that “bear fine, carefully crafted representations of Bactrian camels” were also found at Gonur Depe and were dated to the late third millennium.⁷⁷

Sumer, Iraq, and Babylonia

Linguistic evidence points to the camel's domestication in the area of Sumer, Iraq, and Babylonia by the third millennium. The Sumerian word for the Bactrian camel, *am.si.har.ra.an* (which, literally translated, means "elephant of the caravan"), was first used by 2500 BC⁷⁸ and implies that the Bactrian camel had been domesticated for use as a beast of burden in caravans.⁷⁹

Two tablets found at Puzriš-Dagan (modern Drehem in Iraq) and dated to Ur III (ca. 2100–2000 BC) record delivery of animals referred to as *GÚ.URU×GU*, which were most likely Bactrian camels.⁸⁰ The tablets are "additional evidence for the domesticated Bactrian camel in Mesopotamia towards the end of the 3rd millennium."⁸¹

A bronze axe head with a model of a kneeling camel on its blunt end was found in southeast Iran and dated to 2600–2400 BC.⁸²

Egypt

Rock carvings showing a man holding a dromedary with a rope were discovered near Aswan and Gezireh in Upper Egypt and dated to the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2345–2181). The dating was based on hieratic characters in the panel containing the dromedary depiction, on the style of the carving, and on the varnish or patina of the carving.⁸³

Caton-Thompson found a three-foot-long cord of hair in the Fayum in Egypt. She dated the cord to the Third or Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2686–2494 BC). She had it examined by Martin A. C. Hinton of the Natural History Museum, who concluded



Zeuner 1963: 352 (see bibliography)

Above: Sketch of a petroglyph that was found near Aswan, Egypt, showing a man leading a camel. The petroglyph and accompanying characters in hieratic script (a type of ancient Egyptian writing) date from 2345 to 2181 BC.



S. Redford and D. B. Redford 1989: 27 (see bibliography)

Above: This rock carving in the eastern desert of Egypt depicting a Bactrian camel was dated to a much later time than the surrounding rock carvings, which were dated to around 4000–3000 BC, because of the assumption that Bactrian camels would not have been in Egypt during that time period.

that it was made of camel hair. Hinton provided significant details to support his conclusion, specifically excluding the possibility that the hairs were from sheep or other mammals.⁸⁴

However, in 1977 other scholars published an article in which they claimed that they had the same rope examined by R. A. Innes, Director of the Halifax Museum, who concluded that the rope hairs were from sheep, not camels.⁸⁵ The authors provided no details whatsoever in support of Innes's differing conclusion, making their rebuttal unpersuasive.

Additional evidence of domesticated camels in third-millennium Egypt comes from early-twentieth-century scholars who wrote of seeing depictions of camels from contexts dating to that period. "Budge reported in 1906 that he had seen models of camels excavated at Abydos from the Fourth Dynasty [ca. 2613–2494 BC]. In discussing Egyptian influence on Phoenicia in the Old Kingdom period [about 2700–2200 BC], Olmstead says that 'statuettes imply that already the camel was a beast of burden.'"⁸⁶

Arabian Peninsula

Despite the belief of the majority of scholars that the dromedary was not domesticated in Arabia until very late in the second millennium, some scholars have concluded that the dromedary was domesticated there sometime in the third millennium.⁸⁷

Some 200 camel bones and teeth were discovered in a third-millennium context at Umm an-Nar, a small island off the coast of the UAE in the Persian Gulf. Although most scholars believe that this was a kill site of wild dromedaries,⁸⁸ many scholars disagree and believe that these camels were domesticated.⁸⁹ These bones "suggest that the dromedary may have been domesticated in the eastern part of the [Arabian] peninsula during the Third Millennium B.C.E., perhaps as early as 2700 B.C.E."⁹⁰ The fact that an excessive percentage of the bones belonged to juveniles further suggests incipient domestication,⁹¹ as opposed to hunting or slaughtering for meat. The possibility that the location had been a port, with the camels used in trade, supports the argument that they were domesticated.⁹²

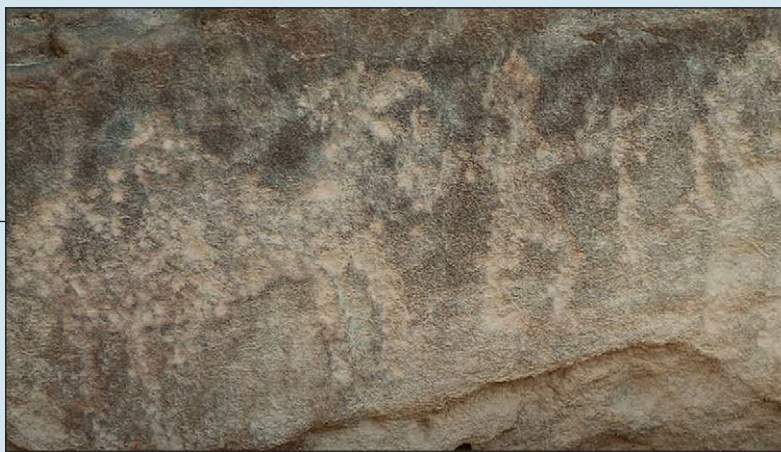
Hoch makes two arguments for the domestic status of the dromedaries whose remains were found at Umm an-Nar. First, she argues that if these remains are of dromedaries hunted and killed elsewhere, that is evidence of domesticated dromedaries,



Right: A petroglyph in the Wadi Nasib (below close-up shows contrast enhanced) of a man leading a dromedary by rope.



Petroglyphs are nearly impossible to date, but examining the patina and the amount of erosion against datable inscriptions can help determine whether the petroglyphs were created in the same time period. This particular carving is located on the same rock face as an Egyptian inscription of Pharaoh Ammenemes III (or Amenemhet III), who reigned from 1859 to 1813 BC. Nearby there are also proto-alphabetic Sinai inscriptions dated to the 1800s BC.



Courtesy of Randall Younker, Institute of Archaeology at Andrews University

“Wadi” means a valley, ravine, or gully, and Wadi Nasib was the water source and slag heap for Egyptian turquoise mining operations at nearby Serabit el-Khadem (also spelled el-Kadim). It would not be surprising if camels were preferred over donkeys for traversing the stretches of sandy terrain.

For more, see Titus Kennedy, “The Date of Camel Domestication in the Ancient Near East,” and Randall Younker, “Bronze Age Camel Petroglyphs in the Wadi Nasib, Sinai,” on the ABR website.

at least for hunting purposes, “since no hunter could possibly follow the animals [camels] in their natural environment unless mounted on a dromedary.”⁹³ Second, the camels must have been brought to the site as domesticated animals since it is unlikely that hunters of wild dromedaries would have returned to the town with “such useless and weighty parts as their distal limb bones.”⁹⁴

Al-Safouh, just outside the modern city of Dubai, has produced over 18,000 camel bones. Some scholars have interpreted this as a “mass kill site” of wild dromedaries.⁹⁵ No evidence is adduced, however, to support that conclusion. These animals may have been domesticated for multiple purposes, including as a source of meat.⁹⁶

A large collection of camel remains dating to the late third millennium was discovered at Ras Ghanada in Abu Dhabi.⁹⁷ A few camel bones, apparently from a single individual, were found at Ra’s al-Hadd in Oman and carbon-dated to 2890–2580 BC.⁹⁸

Rock drawings of camels are found across Arabia, with some dating to the third millennium.⁹⁹

Levant

Camel figurines were excavated at Hama, on the bank of the Orontes River in Syria, and dated to the Bronze Age (ca. 2200–1600 BC).¹⁰⁰ Camel teeth that may have been part of a necklace or amulet were found with human skeletons, scarabs, jewelry, bowls, plates, flasks, and storage vessels at Megiddo in a Middle Bronze Age burial chamber dated to the 20th century BC.¹⁰¹

Camel remains from the third millennium have been found at Arad, Gezer Tomb 42, Jericho, Be’er Resisim, Abu en-Ni’aj, and Tel el-Hayyat.¹⁰² Although these remains generally consist of only one or two bones or a single tooth per site, single bone sites are evidence of camel domestication, as discussed above.¹⁰³

D. Evidence from the Fourth Millennium BC

Evidence of domesticated camels from as early as the fourth millennium is abundant in Central Asia and Iran, and also in more southerly areas including Mesopotamia and even the Levant.

Central Asia

Substantial evidence exists “that either the steppe or mountain regions of central Asia or the northern portions of the Indo-Iranian plateau” witnessed early camel domestication no later than the fourth millennium BC.¹⁰⁴ At Altyn-depe in Turkmenistan, camel head figurines were found together with figurines of bulls. “The traces of bridling (applied painted stripes or holes in the withers) on figurines of bulls (oxen?) and the representations of camel heads in the Early Bronze Age [ca. 3200–2400 BC]...suggest that bulls and camels were used as draught animals.”¹⁰⁵

At Anau in southern Turkmenistan, “a few Bactrian camel remains were encountered in levels dated as far back as the early fourth millennium BCE. Remains of **domestic** Bactrian camels were also present in the nearby site of Chong-depe during the late fourth millennium BCE.”¹⁰⁶

Camels, possibly domesticated, also appeared in Iran in the fourth millennium. Dromedary remains dating to the fourth millennium may have been found in southern Iran at Zagheh and Tepe Ghabristan.¹⁰⁷ Those findings are confusing to many scholars since dromedaries, wild or domesticated, were supposedly confined to the Arabian Peninsula until late in the second millennium. A Bactrian camel shown on a sherd dating to the late fourth millennium was found at Sialk (modern Kasan) in western Iran.¹⁰⁸ It “has been interpreted as evidence of *C. bactrianus* on the Iranian Plateau in the late 4th millennium BC (Compagnoni and Tosi 1978: Table 3).”¹⁰⁹



Staatliche Museen zu Berlin— Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrus-sammlung, Inv.-Nr. ÄM 18593. Photograph by Sandra Steiß. (From Heide and Peters 2021: KL 3851 [see bibliography].)

Above: A limestone figurine shaped like a recumbent camel with a container on its back discovered in a First Dynasty (3150–2890 BC) Egyptian tomb at Abusir el-Meleq near Faiyum.



Left: A Wadi Rum (Jordan) petroglyph of a man herding dromedary camels, etched sometime in the Middle to Late Bronze Age.

Egypt

Contrary to all expectations, there are several depictions of domesticated camels from fourth-millennium Egypt. The famous limestone container shaped like a recumbent dromedary with a container on its back was discovered in a First Dynasty (3150–2890 BC) tomb at Abusir el-Meleq.¹¹⁰

The legendary Petrie found “a camel head in pottery found with objects of the 1st Dynasty” and speculated that the camel had been present in Egypt, had gone extinct, and then was reintroduced later.¹¹¹ Another pottery camel head from the First Dynasty was found at Hierakonpolis.¹¹²

Joseph Free asserted in 1944 that two First Dynasty camel heads were found at Abydos and that one of them was being displayed (at that time) at the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute Museum with a placard that read, “The red pottery camel’s head suggests the early use of that desert beast in Egypt.”¹¹³

Susan Redford and Donald Redford located a petroglyph in the eastern desert of Egypt that clearly showed a Bactrian camel. Despite the fact that they dated all the petroglyphs surrounding the camel image to the Late Predynastic Period, they dated the camel image itself to the Persian period or later solely on the basis that it was “obviously drawn by someone

who had been to Persia or further east as only the one-humped Arabian camels are known in Egypt.”¹¹⁴ Apparently, the thought never crossed their minds that the image itself was evidence that Bactrian camels may also have been known in Egypt.

Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, a renowned scholar whose title was “Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities” at the British Museum, stated that the camel “was known to the pre-dynastic Egyptians, and earthenware figures of the animal were found at Nakâdah.”¹¹⁵ As Free reports, domesticated camels in early Egypt are “indicated by the vessel in the form of a pack camel from Abusir el-Meleq, which is dated in the First Dynasty, and by the terra cotta tablet from Gurna reported by Schiaparelli which showed a camel with a man astride.”¹¹⁶

E. Evidence from the Fifth Millennium BC

Remains of 40 different camels were discovered at Baynunah in Abu Dhabi and dated to “the second half of the 5th millennium BC.”¹¹⁷ These were likely domesticated camels since “the osteological dromedary elements are not associated with stone tools and the absence of cut-marks on them do not allow to interpret this site as a kill-off site.”¹¹⁸

IV. Summary

The evidence outlined above shows, without question, that camels were domesticated no later than the fourth millennium, at least 2,000 years earlier than the skeptics claim. However, one question remains: If camels were domesticated that early, why do we not find more evidence of them? The primary answer to that question lies in a difference in locations: the locations where camels primarily were used and died versus the locations where archaeologists excavate. Camels were primarily used in long-distance caravans outside of urban centers.¹¹⁹ But because archaeologists primarily excavate urban centers, it is to be expected that the occurrence of camel bones at archaeological sites would be rare.¹²⁰

That answer is supported by hard data. In regions where we know from written records that domesticated camels existed, archaeologists have been unable to find any camel bones or other archaeological evidence of camels.¹²¹ In Bronze Age Turkmenistan, it is an accepted fact that domesticated camels played an important role in its economy. However, among the 2,000 bones found at Bronze Age sites in that country, only one camel skeleton was found.¹²² In other words, a lack of camel bones is not a good indicator of a lack of camel domestication.





Above: Wall-panel relief dated to 728 BC from the central palace of Tiglath-pileser III in Nimrud, depicting a captive female and dromedaries as the spoils of war against Arab enemies.



Top right: In a relief recovered from Nimrud and dated to 728 BC, an Assyrian soldier is shown riding a dromedary during battle.



Middle right: Wall-panel relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh depicting two warriors on a dromedary during battle. It is dated to 645–635 BC.

Lower right: A close-up from the Lachish reliefs (701–681 BC) depicts war refugees being forcibly relocated. In 701 BC Assyrian king Sennacherib led his forces to destroy the Judean outpost of Lachish and then marched on to Jerusalem only to be thwarted there by King Hezekiah and “the angel of the LORD” (2 Kings 19:35). The elaborate panels detailing the siege and brutality at Lachish once decorated the walls of Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh.



Below left: A pottery figurine of a camel rider, 664–332 BC, from Thebes, along the Nile River in Egypt.

Below: A dromedary statue, dated between 900 and 600 BC, with a stand or seat attached to its back, from the archaeological site of Muweilah along the Persian Gulf.



Met Museum



Sharjah Archaeology Museum, UAE



Wall-panel reliefs © The Trustees of the British Museum

Significantly, the Bible’s description of the patriarchs’ use of camels precisely matches the historical and archaeological data. Abraham and Jacob’s use of camels was relatively rare and always in conjunction with long-distance travel. There is no mention of Isaac using camels, but, of course, the Bible only mentions one long journey that he undertook, his trip to Egypt late in his life. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings cover a period of 700 years but never mention Israelites as the original owners of camels (although 1 Samuel 27:9 does describe David as taking the camels of the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites).¹²³

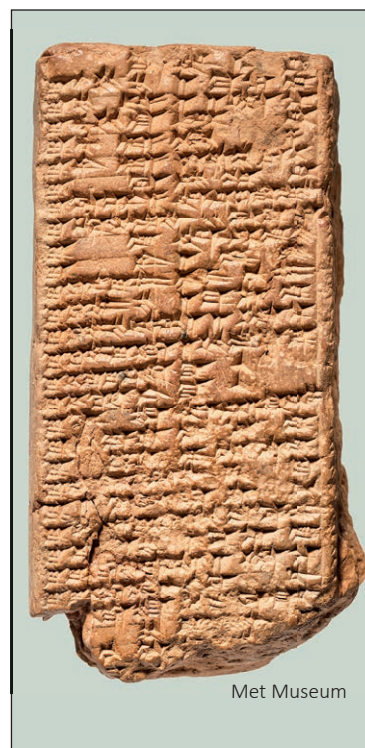
To return, then, to a key point of the skeptics, why was there a rapid increase in camel remains in Canaan during the first millennium? Why isn’t that evidence of the camel’s domestication in the first millennium? There are at least two answers. First, the Levant was not completely devoid of camel bones during the second millennium. And as we have seen, the Levant has yielded as many camel bones dating to the third and fourth millennia as other locations that are known with certainty to have used camels widely.



Masson and Sarianidi 1972: Plate 36 (see bibliography)



Kircho 2019: 18 (see bibliography)



Left: Tablet 13 of Urra=hubullu, a Babylonian bilingual glossary/vocabulary list that is believed to have helped scribes and students translate between Akkadian and Sumerian. The tablets were compiled between 1950 and 1600 BC, but precursors to some of them have been dated to as early as the third millennium BC. Together the tablets contain nearly 10,000 word pairs between the two languages, listing terms for the stars and different foods, drinks, birds, fish, and objects made of stone and wood. The camel is in the list of domesticated creatures.

Met Museum

Second, the rapid increase in the number of camel bones in Israel beginning in the first millennium is more likely evidence of rapid economic growth and burgeoning long-distance trade than of the beginning of camel domestication.¹²⁴ For example, the appearance of camel bones at the copper mines of Timna during the first millennium is evidence of camels’ introduction for use in the large-scale copper mining and trade.¹²⁵ As Israel’s economy and trade routes grew, the nation likely imported large numbers of camels and focused on growing its camel herds. Rather than being evidence of the beginning of domestication, the increase in camel bones in Israel in the first millennium more likely is evidence of Israel’s increase in wealth and trade.

V. Conclusion

Significant evidence exists for domesticated Bactrian camels and dromedaries as far back as the fourth millennium and perhaps the fifth, two to three thousand years before Abraham. That evidence exists in multiple locations, including Abraham’s homeland of Mesopotamia, Abraham’s new home in Canaan, and Egypt, where Pharaoh gave camels to Abraham. The skeptics are simply wrong—the biblical references to Abraham’s camels are not anachronisms but are yet another example of the Bible’s trustworthiness.

Left: These third-century-BC camel figurines from Altyn-depe depicted as carts demonstrate that camels of this period were considered a main draught animal. Altyn-depe, or Altyn Tepe, meaning “Golden Hill,” is an archaeological site located in what is now Turkmenistan. It was first inhabited as early as 3200 BC, with evidence of an advanced civilization including masterful potters, artists, and builders. The pictured models, which may have been toys or decorative objects, are also very early evidence of the wheel being used for transport.



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intense interest in biblical archaeology while teaching a class on Christian apologetics and wanting to be better able to answer skeptics’ archaeological criticisms of biblical trustworthiness.