

Camels in the front line

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a short comment on the historical perception of camels in Europe with special regard to Ottoman Turkish occupation in the Carpathian Basin. Regardless of their varied functions ranging from tokens of royal self-representation to mundane beasts of burden or war machinery, these animals always stood out as exotica without ever having been integrated into the local domestic fauna. The documentary and iconographic data cited complement known osteological evidence of camels in the study area.

KEY WORDS

Dromedary,
Bactrian camel,
Ottoman Empire,
Carpathian Basin,
artillery.

RÉSUMÉ

Chameaux sur la ligne de front.

Cet article est une note sur la perception historique du chameau en Europe avec un regard particulier sur l'occupation turque ottoman dans le bassin des Carpates. Indépendamment de leurs diverses fonctions allant du symbole d'auto-représentation royale à la simple bête de somme ou à la "machine" de guerre, ces animaux ont toujours été considérés comme exotiques sans jamais avoir été intégrés à la faune domestique locale. La documentation et l'iconographie complètent les données archéozoologiques connues sur les chameaux dans la région d'étude.

MOTS CLÉS

Dromadaire,
chameau bactrien,
Empire Ottoman,
bassin des Carpates,
artillerie.

INTRODUCTION

Undemanding, strong and fast, camels can cover unusually long distances hauling quantities of goods far more efficiently than any other beast of burden. These qualities made camels highly appreciated in warfare and long distance trade within their original areas of distribution and beyond. As the 14th c. late Latin name of ancient Greek origin *dromedarius* used for one-humped Arabian camels clearly expresses, these leggy animals were made for 'running'.

As a result of military expansion by the Roman Empire, the first Holocene camel remains in Central Europe are known from areas once occupied by Romans. Some of these animals may have arrived with merchants' caravans or were imported for circus games (Bartosiewicz & Dirjec 2001). However, the second, better documented wave of camels reaching Europe with the medieval/post-medieval Ottoman Turkish occupation seems indicative of military use. Contemporaneous documentary sources describe thousands of camels used in the terrestrial transport of bulk artillery supplies hauled from sea ports to a redistribution post in Beograd on the Danube, where weaponry and gunpowder were packed on boats moving upstream toward the northernmost tip of the Ottoman Empire (Ágoston 1985: 177) wedged into Central Europe during the 16th-17th century (Fig. 1 top). Compared to these records the osteological evidence of camels remains scarce in Hungary in spite of the increasing number of camel bone finds recovered (Daróczy *et al.* in this volume).

WHERE HAVE ALL THE CAMELS GONE?

Camels seem underrepresented in the osteological record. They were the largest-ever domesticates in Europe, therefore their robust bones would not be missed even by hand-collection. It is rather the chances than techniques of recovery that work against finding greater numbers of camel remains. Camels reproduce slowly and take a lot of skill and time to train. As high value transport animals and mounts they are seldom exploited as a primary source of meat. Consequently, the carcasses of dead camels must have been disposed off at peripheral areas including roadsides and bat-

tlefields. Such marginal locations are investigated at best during rescue excavations, but rarely targeted by planned archaeological projects in Hungary. Camel finds thus usually represent coincidental overlaps between relatively high frequencies of camel deaths and areas of intensive archaeological rescue work such as the vicinity of the Buda Castle. In planned excavations, most Ottoman Period camel remains originate from sites associated with military activity both within and alongside the boundary of the Ottoman Empire (Fig. 1, bottom). To date, no Ottoman Period camel remains have been reported from Serbia south of modern-day Hungary where the archaeological study of this relatively late period is rare (Sonja Vuković, personal communication).

DIVERSE PERCEPTIONS

During the Middle Ages camels were regarded high status *exotica* in Europe, important in the self-representation of royalty. When crusaders led by Frederic Barbarossa passed through Hungary in 1189, King Béla III presumably presented them – among others – three camels (Bökönyi 1974: 228). Bökönyi (1969) also discovered the heads of two camels in the late 14th c. Vienna Illustrated Chronicle where these animals are shown as mounts for conquering 'Hunnic'/Hungarian warriors wearing caftans. Camels have always had a fearsome reputation in combat. Cyrus the Great of Persia rearranged pack camels from his baggage train into the first recorded camel corps in history. According to Herodotus (*Historiae* I: 80) when deployed by Cyrus in the 546 BC battle of Sardis, camels scared enemy horses sealing the fate of the forces of Croesus. It is the smell of the camel that is believed to alarm horses. The first visual impression must have been likewise shocking on enemy soldiers who had not encountered 'camelry' before. Even without the surprise effect, however, warriors mounted on camels must have been formidable adversaries to infantry in all periods. After the decisive 1571 defeat of the Ottoman fleet by the Holy League in the naval engagement at Lepanto along the western coast of Greece the public in the victorious West began looking toward the Ottoman Empire with more

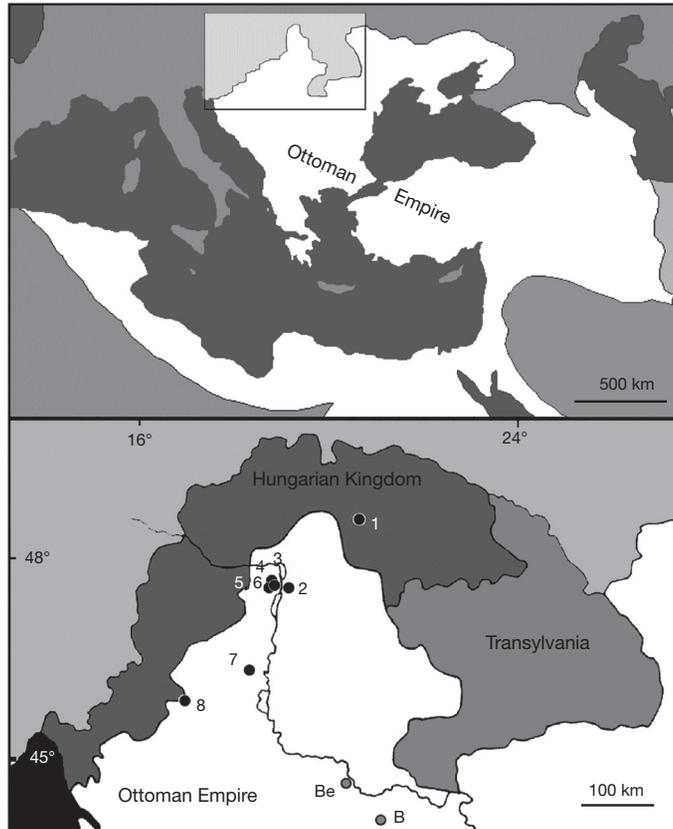


FIG. 1. — Top: Areas of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean Basin around the end of the 16th century. The Carpathian Basin shown in the bottom map is marked by framing. Bottom: Camel bone finds in Hungary (black dots) in relation to places in Serbia (gray dots) mentioned in the text. Abbreviations: **1**, Diósgyőr-Castle; **2**, Budapest-Pesti Barnabás str.; **3**, Budapest-Kacska str.; **4**, Budapest-Lovas str.; **5**, Buda-Castle; **6**, Buda Castle-Teleki Palace; **7**, Szekszárd-Palánk; **8**, Bajcsa-vár; **Be**, Beograd, **B**, Batočina.

curiosity than fearful awe. The Venetian edition of Nicolo de' Nicolay's illustrated journal from Turkey (Nicolay 1580) inspired a number of artists such as Jacopo Ligozzi who took the idea of genre pictures from the book and added characteristic animals as attributes to the people in 'Turkish' costumes in order to accentuate their ethnic identities. Thus in one of Ligozzi's magnificent tempera paintings from around the turn of the 16th-17th c. an Ottoman soldier is depicted in the company of a graceful, unharnessed dromedary. Dromedaries, widely distributed in the Eastern Mediterranean region, seem to have occurred with greater probability in the Carpathian Basin than two-humped Bactrian camels. The ancient country of Bactria (Balkh province in Northern Afghanistan)

was spread between the Hindu Kush Mountains and the Oxus River way beyond the eastern borders of the Ottoman Empire. It was not, however the sole area of origin of two-humped wild camels native to arid regions of continental climate toward the northeast in China.

CAMELS AT WAR

During the 160 years of Ottoman Turkish military presence in the Carpathian Basin the sight of camels must have become commonplace for western soldiers who regularly engaged the army of the Sublime Porte on several fronts. This is clearly articulated in



FIG. 2. — Marsigli's illustration of a war camel: **A**, one of the cannons symmetrically mounted on the animal, **B**, iron fork upon which the cannon was hung; **C**, iron frame to which the forks were fastened, **D**, Turkish artilleryman; **E**, Strapping by which the soldier could lift or lower the butt ends of the barrels (Marsigli 1932).

an illustrated account describing how a fearsome war machine was ridiculed in combat. The 1688 battle of Batočina south of Beograd (Serbia, fig. 1, bottom) took place shortly after the 1686 re-capturing of Buda in Hungary. Ottoman forces faced the army of the Holy Roman Empire. According to count Luigi Fernando Marsigli, a polymath and military engineer himself, during the battle Ottoman artillerymen came up with an innovation, in what seems like the first ever attempt to create mobile light artillery. The solution Marsigli described could have become possible only using large and steadfast camels. The Turks mounted a cannon on either side of the animal, each calibrated

to fire 3 pound (1.36 kg) cannonballs. The cannons were operated by a soldier sitting behind the hump (Fig. 2). However, when this solution had proven impossible in practice the new artillery units had to be hastily withdrawn from the frontline. As one of the camels was too slow to retreat its leg was cut. The fleeing Turkish artillerymen could not even retrieve the cannons which ended up in the hands of the Christian forces. According to Marsigli, this 'insane idea' of the Ottoman military had looked ridiculous already at the onset, long before the concept of mounted artillery failed. It remains a question how gunpowder and the three pound cannon balls could have been supplied



FIG. 3. — Dromedaries in the 1st Camel Regiment of the Ottoman army at Beersheba during World War I (Source: American Colony Jerusalem/Wikimedia Commons).

efficiently enough in combat to keep these rapid artillery units operational, as their chief strength would have been speed in comparison with ordinary cannons that had to be towed. It is also noteworthy that the drawing in Marsigli's book published posthumously again shows a dromedary.

In addition to this episode, the general unpopularity of camels may also be surmised among the local, non-Turkish peoples in conquered areas. Bulgaria was invaded by the Ottoman Empire as early as 1365 and was reunified as the independent Kingdom of Bulgaria only in 1908. In spite of over five centuries of Ottoman Turkish rule, however, a single camel was listed in the royal zoo in the early 20th century. Even that individual did not descend from local stock: it was acquired as war booty during the 1913 Balkan Wars in which the joint armies of the Balkan states overcame the numerically inferior and strategically weakened Ottoman army (Szilády 1930: 356). This incident illustrates the important role camels played in warfare until quite recently. Moreover the abrupt disappearance of camels also shows that in spite of their half-millennium presence in the Balkans they symbolized 'otherness' if not suppression in

the eyes of locals and were thus doomed to perish along with the dwindling Ottoman Empire.

CONCLUSIONS

Camels in the former area of the Ottoman Empire in the Carpathian Basin are typically represented by chance finds usually recovered from military contexts. While no contemporaneous camel remains are known from modern-day Serbia, written sources refer to the common military use of camels in that region as well. In spite of their advantages as powerful beasts of burden, however, camels have not been permanently adopted into the domestic fauna of Europe. Part of the resentment may have stemmed from the negative connotation these animals attained representing oppressive forces for over a century. Camels retained more prestige and strategic importance in military operations in their natural habitat, the arid regions outside Europe. For example Ottoman camel corps were deployed during the First Suez Offensive of World War I aimed at taking or destroying the Suez Canal defended by the British in 1915 (Fig. 3).

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