

Camel: The Symbol of Honor, Pride and Love of Arab Bedouins

Majeed Khan

Antiquities Sector, Ministry of Culture, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Email address:

majeedkhan1942@yahoo.com

To cite this article:

Majeed Khan. Camel: The Symbol of Honor, Pride and Love of Arab Bedouins. *International Journal of Archaeology*.

Vol. 11, No. 1, 2022, pp. 20-23. doi: 10.11648/j.ija.20221001.13

Received: January 8, 2022; **Accepted:** February 24, 2022; **Published:** March 9, 2022

Abstract: Hundreds of papers are written on camel, its importance and love for the Bedouins, but this author has documented 14000 camelperolyphs from all over Saudi Arabia and rejected the claim that camel was present in Saudi Arabian in the Neolithic. The paper contains information about camel, its presence in Arabia and art of nature as compared to art of people. Camel was not present in Arabia during the Neolithic period. It appeared most likely in the bronze age when the climate of Saudi Arabia changed from cool and humid to hot and dry conditions. It is yet not known from where the camel was brought to Arabia, but it is certain that it did not originate in the Arabian Peninsula. Dating of camel by Guillaume Charloux attributing it to 7000 years is debatable. Although camels are not used these days for transportation due to introduction of modern jeeps and other vehicles these are still kept by the Bedouins and Tribal Sheiks as a symbol of honor and prestige. Similarly young Saudis settled in towns and cities have completely no knowledge of their tribal symbols. This old tradition is now dying as camel is no more important for them, but such symbols are preserved on the mountains, hills and caves where in the past their ancestors lived. This author has collected 4000 such symbols from all over Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Arabian Camel, Bronze Age, One Humped Dromedary, Never Worshiped, Bedouins Most Loving Animal, Natural and Manmade Petroglyphs, Camel Brand, Tribal Symbols

1. Camel

Camel, the symbol of hardship, strength and love for the Arab Bedouins is the animal of desolate and inhospitable deserts that is as important to them in the present days with all modern transport facilities as it was in the past when there was nothing but camel for their transportation. If horse was the symbol of status, honor and dignity, camel was the necessity for the desert dwellers and they treat them both with love, respect and as a member of their family.

The Arabian camel is one humped called Dromedary, it is found in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East [3]. They can survive in very harsh, hot and dry climate and can go on without food and water for three to four days due to their large hump that preserved fat (no water) that helped them to live many days in the desert without food. Their wide padded feet helped them to walk easily on the sand, also they have leathery pads on their chest and knees that make them comfortable to sit on the hot sands. Their nostrils are moveable and can open and close, also large eye lashes and

bushy eyebrows protect them from the blowing sand. Their mouth, lips and jaws are external hard and tough and allow them to eat anything from thorny plants to dry desert bushes, bones, salty or sweet hard or soft, its stomach has no limitations and it can digest anything that he eats [16].



Figure 1. Camel figures depicted in a row with tribal symbols and ancient inscriptions, near Tayma western region.

The value, importance and love for the camel can be judged by hundreds and thousands of petroglyphs located in almost all parts

of the Arabian Peninsula (Figure 1). Although rock art practice was almost abandoned with the invention of writing in Arabia, camel and horse figures were still depicted in association with ancient Arabian writings such as Musnad al Janubi, Thamudic, Lihyanaite, Nabataean (figure 2). In many cases name of the owner was written besides the camel figure that survive for long and a record of the names of ancient Bedouins and their tribes are preserved on the rocks and hills providing insight of Bedouin nomenclature and their tribal affinity [7, 11, 15].



Figure 2. Camel figures associated with the names of their owners written in pre-Islamic Thamudic script.

2. Wasum - The Tribal Symbols

Domesticated camels are also marked with animal brands or locally called as Wasum. A Wasm is not only a camel brand but is a tribal symbol used also as territorial mark, land ownership sign, camping areas on swords, knives and tents. A Wasm or tribal sign is restricted to a specific tribe and cannot be used by others. It is depicted on a specific part of the body and all members of the tribe, clan or families adopted the same method (figure 3) By following the Wasum depicted on the rocks tribal movement and their camping sites could be traced [12]. Sometimes several tribal symbols are densely located on a rock (figure 4) that indicated the tribes of each depicted symbol either camped or lived in that area.



Figure 3. Tribal symbol marked on the hind leg.

It is interesting that camel and horse figures are sometime located side by side with the names of their masters inscribed besides them indicating equal importance given to the two animals. However, in many cases horse riders are shown hunting camels with long lances. It means that the camels

were found in wild state as well as domesticated specie. This is puzzling, how horse riders are shown hunting camels in the desert while there is no evidence of their presence in the wild state in Arabia. In the old days, if the camel was lost in the desert and moved far away it would not have been possible to find them. Such camels lived deep in the desert at inaccessible places, grow wild and increased in number. Thus, in the rock art horse riders are shown hunting such wild camels (figure 5).



Figure 4. Several tribes marked their symbols on Camping sites. A process of several centuries.



Figure 5. Hunting wild camel.



Figure 6. Camels of various period and Wasum.

There is no clear evidence about the domestication of camel in Africa or Arabia. The archaeological record on camel is sparse and incomplete. Camel bones have been recovered in excavations of a tumulus at Himma, southern Arabia; also its

bones are found with human skeleton in the tomb field of Dahran al Janub [4, 2], al-Hasa [1] and al-Fao in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia. The dates from 2nd millennium BC (Dahran tombs and al-Hasa) to 1st millennium B. C. However, camel figures are depicted on the rocks almost all over Saudi Arabia and as far as Yemen in the south and Jordan in the north [14].

The petroglyph record does not reveal any evidence of the existence of camel in Arabia before the Bronze Age (c. 4,500 years before present). There are absolutely no camel figures in the Neolithic rock art at Jubbah or Shuwaymis in northern Saudi Arabia. Although, hundreds and scores of camel figures are carved on the mountains, hills and rocks in northern, central, western and southern regions of Saudi Arabia, but almost all of them could be attributed to a period between 4,500- 4000 years before present until the recent past (figure 6).

The total absence of camel in the rock art of Arabia attributed to the Neolithic and early Chalcolithic period and its sudden appearance in the subsequent Bronze Age poses a problem of its dating as a domesticated animal. The vanishing of cattle figures and appearance of camel in the rock art may be subject to change in the fauna and flora of Arabia due to change in climate and environment from cool and humid conditions in the Neolithic to hot and dry in the Bronze Age [8]. Earliest camel figures are rarely associated with human representations, but later they are shown with riders. Sometime the camel is shown in the art as a wild animal hunted by horse riders with long lances [9, 12-14].

It is not yet known when camel was brought to Arabia, the petroglyphs of camel however, appeared in the Bronze Age 4,500 years before present [5]. Mikesel (1955) and Buliet (1975) suggested that the camel was first domesticated in Yemen, though they do not provide any evidence in support of their views. On the contrary, camel bones are found in the eastern and central Arabia dating from 3rd millennium BC. Camel figures in the rock art of northern and southern Arabia are more overwhelmingly represented than in Yemen. Thus, based on the rock art evidence, it may be suggested that the camel first appeared and was domesticated, most likely in the north of present Saudi Arabia (figure 6).

The most acceptable evidence of the presence and domestication of camel can be retrieved from hundreds and thousands of petroglyphs of camel found all over the Arabian Peninsula often associated with Ancient Arabian inscriptions (figure 3) such as Thamudic, Nabataean and Lihyanite and even Arabic [8-10, 12].

Also there are several scenes of horse riders hunting camels with long lances (figure 5), does not mean that camel originated in the Arabian Peninsula and was wild in their early period, but it means that some camels went off the Bedouin tents deep in the desert where with the time they become wild and were later hunted by the Bedouins. It happened in present Australia where abandoned camels became wild and are found in large number, but they were originally not wild.

3. Human Art or Art of Nature

During my 35 years of survey and explorations in the deserts of Arabia I have documented over 14000 camel petroglyphs, record of which is present in the archive of the Department of Antiquities and Museums (present Ministry of Culture). But, did not find a single camel figure similar to that located at al-Jawf in northern Saudi Arabia. I visited that site In February 2011 and submitted a report to our Department that this large camel figure is the work of nature and not made by any person. As a rock art specialist who visited and documented over 14000 came figures from all over Saudi Arabia besides 2000 rock art sites I never found a single camel figure like that not in Saudi Arabia but also in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Yemen, Negev and Sinai desert.

The individual camel figure is huge located up high on a small hill not easily accessible without a ladder or any support. There are no signs of cutting, chiseling, carving, engraving or pecking. Charloux et al (2008) did not publish the full picture of the out crop that can be seen in my picture (figure 7). To associate the camel figure with the goddess AL-Lat is also erroneous as Charloux claim, not a single figure of AL-Lat found anywhere near al Jawf or area around it. Charloux later attributed the site to Neolithic but he did not contradict about AL-Lat statement.



Figure 7. So called Al-Jawf camel sculpture with three legs; one of the front leg, hump, neck, face missing. They say these parts are eroded.

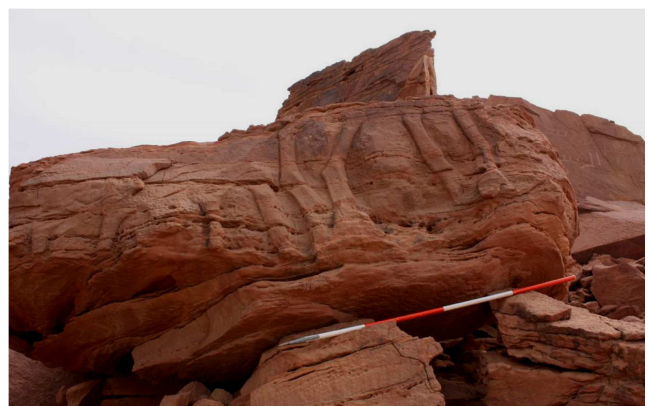


Figure 8. Same rock outcrop with camel's 7 legs (at the left) Charloux did not include in his paper. I say it is art of nature not man.

The other four legs at the left do not show any presence of upper body. Also it is not possible for any artist to draw or carve legs first and body later. All legs left or right without upper body is the act of nature and not man-made sculptures.

Guillaume Charloux [6] and the Saudi French Team did not provide any evidence of the presence of camel in Arabia

in the Neolithic period. At the Neolithic sites of Jubbah and Shuwaymis (world heritage sites), Hanakiya and Kilwa hundreds of long honed cattle figures are located but not a single camel figure that could be attributed to the Neolithic period.

In several countries we can witness the art of nature although they look absolutely man made.



Figure 9. Example of art of nature located at Mosses Beautiful standing lady at Tayma, northwest of the country.

In Sinai at the base of Jabal al Musa, this art of nature is taken by the people as a cow of Moses, local Bedouin girl took us to the site and said it is the cow of Moses. Sometime people come here and worship her. This is certainly not man-made cow but is the art of nature just like al-Jawf camels created by nature. The standing graceful lady located southeast of Tayma, northwest of the country is an excellent example of art of nature.

4. Conclusion

The camel was and is still loved by every Bedouin and is considered as the most valuable commodity. There are hundreds of legends, stories and poems written on camel and is considered as a gift of God. Although, the poems, songs, mystical and mythical stories written about camel, it was not a totemic animal and never worshipped or considered as a scared animal even in pre-Islamic period. However it was sacrificed as offering to the deities and gods. Bones of camel are found buried in the temples at al-Fao in Saudi Arabia. It was so precious and valuable commodity that was slaughtered only in certain most important religious ceremonies.

References

- [1] Ali S. al-Moghannam and John Warwick (1989) Excavations of the Dhahran Burial Mounds, 3rd season. *Atlat* vol. 10 pp 27-28.
- [2] Ansari, A. R. (1981) *Qaryat al-Fao*. A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilization in Saudi Arabia. King Saud University, Riyadh.
- [3] Arthur Leonard (1984) *The Camel* London and New York 1894 page 2.
- [4] Bruno, F and Ali S. al-Mughannum (1984) Excavations of the Dhahran burial Mounds. *Atlat* 9.
- [5] Bulliet, R. W (1975) *The Camel and the Wheel*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.
- [6] Charloux, G., H. Al-Khalifah, T. Al-Maliki, R. Menon and R. Schwerdtner (2018) *Antiquity* 92 (361); 165-182.
- [7] Khan, M. (1985). Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of northwestern Saudi Arabia, *Atlat*, vol. 9.
- [8] Khan, M. (1991) Recent Rock Art and Epigraphic Investigations in Saudi Arabia, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, University of London.
- [9] Khan, M. (1993) *Prehistoric Rock Art of Northern Saudi Arabia*. Ph. D Thesis, University of Southampton, U.K., published by the Ministry of Education.
- [10] Khan, M. (1996) Rock Art Research in the Arabian Peninsula, Levant and Anatolia. *News of the World* 1, pp. 95-103. Edited by Paul Bahn and Angelo Fassati. Oxbow Publications 72.
- [11] Khan, M. (1998). A Critical Review of Rock Art Studies in Saudi Arabia, *East and West* vol. 48, no. 3. Italy.
- [12] Khan, M. (2000). *Wusum - the tribal symbols of Saudi Arabia*. Bilingual (Eng./Arabic) published by the Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the occasion of "Riyadh, the Capital of Arabian Culture 2000".
- [13] Khan, M. (2007). *Rock Art of Saudi Arabia Across Twelve Thousands Years*. Published by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, Riyadh.
- [14] Khan, M. (2012). *Arabian Horse – Origin, Development and History*. Published by the Layan Cultural Foundation, Riyadh.
- [15] Khan, M. (2020) Camel in the Ancient Art, History and culture of Saudi Arabia. King Abdul Aziz Library, Riyadh.
- [16] Ripinsky, M. (1975). The Camel in Ancient Arabia. *Antiquity*, *XLIX* 295-8.