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## Riding Camels in Arabia: Outline of a Revised Cultural History

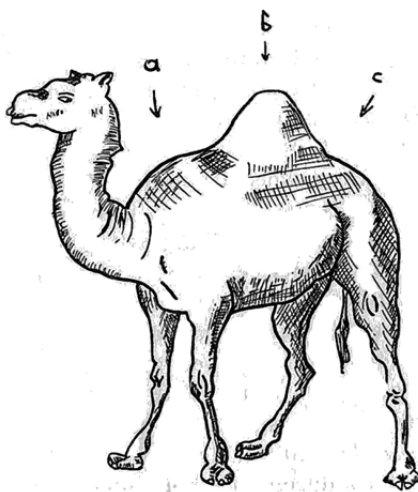
Cultural and historical analyses today are able to outline the various patterns of interactions between humans and domesticated animals that have evolved throughout history in Arabia. Among dromedaries, different forms of saddle construction and various forms of using and riding them are key criteria of those varying patterns of interaction. Elements of material culture and their practical association with camel herding thus provide important clues for the analysis of specific developmental periods. This is why, ever since the 1960s and 1970s, the question of camel-riding techniques and their roles in history have played an important role in the respective subfields of academic research.

The following article discusses various forms of camel riding techniques as indicators of developmental stages among the Arabian Bedouin, and it explores the interdependent role of the Bedouin within their wider social environments of pre-Islamic and Islamic societies on the Arab Peninsula.

### RIDING THE HUMP OR RIDING THE CRUPPER?

My contribution to this volume will reconsider my publications from the years 1959, 1967 and 1979, where I proposed some interpretations of my results on the development of the Bedouin. As the starting point I would like to express my deepest thanks to my Bedouin teachers in camel-riding of the Al Adjman and Al Mutayr tribes, both living in the territory of the Emirate al-Kuwait, where I started with my field research in Arabia in 1956 as a guest of Shaykh Abdullah B. Salim B. Al Subbah. These introductions into camel riding enabled me subsequently to analyze archeological artifacts. In turn, this led me on to examine the development of Bedouin groups and their interactions with the outside world.

Let me first raise three fundamental questions for these considerations: 1) Where can one sit on a camel? 2) Which of the possible seats offers the best riding position, and 3) which of these riding positions is the oldest in use?



A dromedary's back has three possible seats: the withers, the hump and the crupper (see graph 24). In the Arab Peninsula, camels' withers are used only for short stretches, e.g. generally inside the herd during grazing. We can therefore move straight to consideration of the crupper and the hump seating positions.<sup>1</sup>

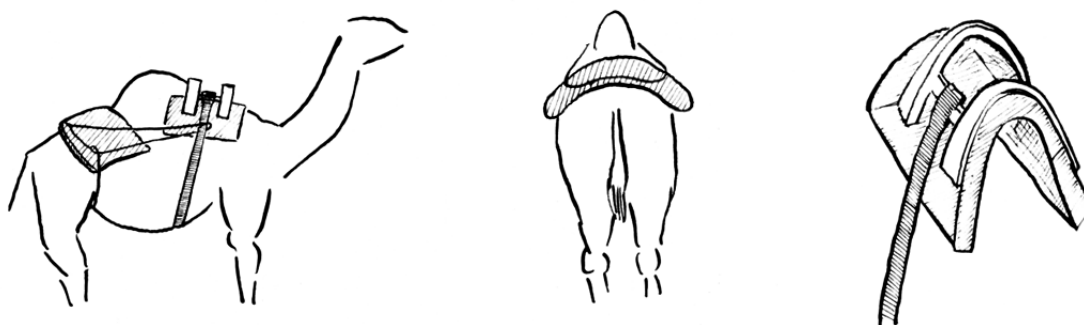
Graph 24: A dromedary's back has three possible seats or riding positions: a) the withers, b) the hump and c) the crupper (all drawings by W. Dostal).

<sup>1</sup> While Arab Bedouin prefer the hump and the crupper as riding positions, tribal nomads in northern Africa ride on the dromedary's withers. The rider thereby controls the animal by applying foot pressure on the camel's neck. Among Algeria's Touareg, a woman's sedan, called a Tachawit, is fixed directly on the camel's hump (for a more detailed discussion of north African Touareg see the articles by Ines Kohl and Anja Fischer in this volume).

The material culture of dromedary breeders in the Arab Peninsula reflected two different types of saddle construction in the 1950s:

First, the *shadād* construction, used for riding the hump, based upon the principle of the saddle bow (see pictures 31–34). In this case, both saddlebows (*zlāf*) have a corresponding knob elongation (*rās*) and are connected by two lateral crossbars (*mislābain*). These wooden parts of the saddle are connected by strips of gazelle leather, cut and applied in wet condition to ensure a certain elasticity (Dostal 1967:12). The stable forms of the *shadād* construction allowed the elaboration of special and particularly impressive women's saddles. With their widely protruding wing-shaped balancing bars that span up to 3.8 meters (Dostal 1967:48; see pictures 35 and 36) these women's saddles optically reinforce the dromedaries' typically swaying mode of walking. A camel with a female rider on this saddle is a breathtaking sight and becomes conspicuous from a long distance anywhere in the desert. Basically, all kinds of women's saddle indicate their special position in most Bedouin societies. The predominant part of Arab tribal camel pastoralists used this *shadād* saddle construction (ibid:12).

The second type of saddle construction used in the Arab Peninsula in the 1950s was the *hawlāni* type, used for riding on the crupper. This was done on a cushion or pad (*hawiya*) put in behind the hump (see graph 25 and 26). It was fastened by a rope to two saddle arches which were kept in place by a girth around the dromedaries' withers (see graph 27).



Graph 25, 26, 27: The *hawlāni* saddle construction makes use of the camel's crupper and is used in the southern parts of the Arab Peninsula: the saddle rests on a cushion behind the hump, is fastened by a rope to two saddle arches and kept in place by a girth around the dromedary's withers.

This *hawlāni* principle, which made use of the camel's crupper, was applied to the man's saddle, a pack saddle (*ketab*) and a corresponding woman's saddle called a *tōma* (see picture 37). The *tōma* is an uncovered female sedan. Contrary to the impressive women's saddle of the *shadād* construction as discussed previously, the *tōma* is merely assembled into a quadrangular shape by several wooden bars. It is decorated with a woven ribbon at the front (Dostal 1967:48). The *tōma* is positioned on the cushion without any specific supporting device and fastened by a girth around the camel's belly, which corresponds to the rather simple *hawlāni* principle. Historically, the *tōma* seems to correspond to the *taw'ama* women's saddle as mentioned in the *Lisan al'Arab*.<sup>2</sup> An archeological equivalent is represented by a class of dromedary statuettes from Syria (10th to 8th century BCE) with a similar superstructure (Dostal 1967:154–155).

It was only among the Al Rashid of eastern Arabia that I found certain parallels to women's saddle construction elements of the *shadād* tribes: here the *tōma* included bows of balancing

<sup>2</sup> The *Lisan al'Arab* is the most widely known, late medieval dictionary of Arabic terms and includes – to some limited extent – ethnographically valuable explanations. According to Al-Naqa'Id in the *Lisan al'Arab*, women's saddles are frequently mentioned in old Arab poetry, although not as often as terms for male saddles. Other terms for women's saddles are for example *qatab*, *kifl*, *kur* and *rahl*. The partial descriptions explain: the *kifl* was a cushioned saddle put around the hump (ibid:107–108); the *kur* was especially used for riding on mares.

bars – a typical element in the *shadād* women's saddle type called the *ghabiye* (see picture 35 and 36). The Al Rashid most probably took over these cultural elements in the course of their contacts with *shadād* tribes, resulting from their especially far reaching grazing range (Dostal 1967:49–50). These cultural contacts shall be discussed in the following.

Until about half a century ago the *hawlāni* type of saddle was mainly used among the south Arabian tribes (as an example, see picture 38), whereas the *shadād* construction was mostly used by the tribes living in central and northern Arabia. In short, southern Arabian Bedouin rode on the dromedary's crupper while their counterparts in the adjoining areas to the north were riding on the hump. These two different riding positions and their corresponding saddle types, *shadād* and *hawlāni*, point to a difference in the development of riding techniques among camel-breeding tribes.

By investigating the saddle types shown in archeological findings from the Ancient Near East I have tried to give some idea of this development (cf. Dostal 1967). In an anthropological perspective these findings represent important evidence from different periods of Mesopotamia's civilizational centers and their immediate surroundings – evidence of contacts between their populations and the camel herders of the Arab Peninsula. From the point of view of source criticism, however, I have to remark that the available material was not produced by the dromedary herders themselves. Thus, the material only speaks for those dromedary herders who came into contact with the centers of complex sedentary civilizations.

I have shown that these archeological artifacts suggest that dromedary herders rode on the crupper in the northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. This riding position also became evident in findings from the Sabaean-Himyaritic Empire<sup>3</sup> in the south during the 1st millennium BCE (Dostal 1967:15). We have to note that the Arabization of the southern parts of the Arab Peninsula began during the history of these empires, as the Himyaritic rulers hired Arabs as mercenaries.<sup>4</sup> Using the crupper as a riding position was obviously the older riding technique in the northern parts, which was later substituted by a technique that was new to the region.

#### ON THE SEQUENCES OF RIDING TECHNIQUES

The older crupper riding technique is testified for northern Arabia by two important findings. This concerns a limestone relief from Tell Asmar (in today's Iraq) from the 3rd millennium BCE and likewise the statue of a man riding a dromedary from Tell Ta'anakh (in today's Israel) around the 2nd millennium BCE (see Dostal 1967; Abb. 4 and 5). The regionally new forms of riding, making use of the dromedaries' hump, resulted from the transformation of riding techniques from the crupper to the hump. This enabled the rider to get the maximum speed out of his camel. From then on, camel riders in the north of the Arab Peninsula could cover larger distances much faster. In turn, this opened up new pastures for them much more easily. In addition, they could keep and watch over larger herds than before. In this context, a report dated 854 BCE may be recalled, about the help given by a certain Arab called Gindibu to a ruling prince of one of the Syrian towns, putting 1,000 dromedaries at his disposal (Petraček 1959).

The next archeological evidence to be considered is a chalk stone relief from Tell Halaf (in today's Syria; see Dostal 1967; Abb. 6) from the 9th century BCE. This shows a cushion saddle as previously discussed, with a girth around the dromedary's belly. An Assyrian relief from about the same time, however, includes a number of new elements: these are the saddle cloth

<sup>3</sup> The Sabaean-Himyaritic empires characterized the late phase of the pre-Islamic history in ancient southwest Arabia and collapsed at the end of the 6th century CE.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the chapter on Qaryat al-Faw by Abdulrahman Muhammad Al-Tayeb al-Ansari in the catalogue of the exposition *Routes d'Arabie: Archéologie et histoire du royaume d'Arabie Saudite* (al-Ghabban et al. 2010:310–364).

and the functionally connected straps around the breast and tail of the dromedary (see *ibid.*; Abb. 7). These additions probably reached camel breeders through their contacts with equestrians from complex sedentary civilizations. By pursuing the topic of horsemen's equipment and their influence we are thus also able to demonstrate the camel herders' version of the chariot principle.

This is the crupper rider, who sat behind the rider proper and fired arrows at the enemy (see Dostal 1967; Abb. 8). In Ancient Arab poetry this crupper rider is called the *radif* or *zamil*. The *radif* had undergone a change of function. At an unknown date, riders began to use dromedaries only to reach the scene of battle, where they then mounted horses they had brought with them to use in combat (*ibid.*:15). This historical fact points at an earlier and still hypothetical transition, when camel herders had also begun to keep horses.

The next important event in the sequence of riding techniques in Arabia is the emergence of the *shadād* saddle in the north, where so far the *hawlāni* type of riding the crupper was common. As mentioned in the first part of this article, the *shadād* construction is based on the principle of the saddle bow (see graph 27), which allows riding on the dromedary's hump. It is documented from the Palmyra area in today's Syria since the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, and by way of other findings from contemporary markets there.

The *shadād* construction seems to be influenced by the fundamental construction principle of the arch saddle invented by horsemen in Central Asia. Judging from the available material and its respective interpretations, it was probably the Parthians<sup>5</sup> who introduced the arched saddle into the borderlands of Arabia. The *shadād* saddle in Arabia can thus be seen as the result of cultural contacts between representatives of the two largest linguistic groups in the region, Iranians and Semitic speakers. Moreover, it is remarkable that the first archeological appearance of the *shadād* saddle coincides with the same period for which the earliest representations of the Near Eastern horsemen with arched saddles are available (Dostal 1967:18–19).

#### THE BEDOUIN ROLE IN WARFARE AND TRADE

It is important to say something here about the significance of dromedary nomads within the various Semitic-speaking groups of nomads and semi-nomads. In his book “*Über Lebensraum und Lebensformen der Frühsemiten*” [*The habitat and way of life of the early Semites*] (1968) the German social anthropologist Joseph Henninger brushed aside older assumptions about the mythical Semites' material subsistence as being exclusively nomadic. In addition to certain varieties within nomadism itself, he made it abundantly clear that agriculture also must be taken into account as a main source of livelihood for early Semites.

Indeed, nomadic life covers a wide spectrum of different forms. Some of them are based on the breeding of a) cattle and sheep, b) donkeys and sheep, c) dromedaries, sheep and goats and d) cattle and goats. These four formulas in fact more or less follow a chronological order in a wider sense, but without being significant in any specific sense as a timetable of regional evolution. In the latter sense, the situation has to be understood in terms of multiple sequences instead, with various ways of adapting to different ecological conditions in the peninsula.

As a main result of our critical scholarly assessment, we distinguished two cultural types among dromedary herders: the “progressive” and the “conservative” type. The ‘progressive’ type developed through certain decisive impulses received by these camel herders from multiple contacts with the zones of complex sedentary civilizations. In the course of my interpretations of the progressive type (Dostal 1959, 1979), however, I originally made a great mistake: while

<sup>5</sup> The Parthians were located in the northeast of today's Iran and founded the Parthian Empire (also known as Arsacid Empire; 247 BCE to 224 CE from today's southeastern Turkey, to eastern Iran). This empire was a center of trade, since it was located on the Silk Road and thus on the trade route between the Roman Empire and China.

trying to give a clear definition of what I understood by using the term Bedouin,<sup>6</sup> I over-emphasized their factual dimension of being rider-warriors. This conclusion was completely wrong and I have to revoke it. In the scholarly discussions of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s the riding warriors played a great role for the emergence of complex civilizations. They were considered to have represented a remarkable causal factor in those processes (I refer here to the works of Caskel 1953, Clénova 1956, Henninger 1943, Ingholt/Seyrig/Stayrcky 1955, Jettmar 1966, Johansen 1956, Kupper 1957, Moshinskaja 1953, and Rudenko 1953). These works by German and Russian scholars created a mode and determined a certain *Zeitgeist* of academic reasoning about the topics in question.

Meanwhile, however, I have had the chance to analyze a number of reports from antiquity, and their interpretations. These sources allow the outline of a completely different picture. Camel breeders needed their dromedaries primarily for transportation to the battleground, as already indicated. Either they then used the horses they had brought with them, or they were prepared to fight on foot. Fighting as warrior riders on camels thus played no decisive role during the formative and early phases of nomadic camel herding in Arabia. It is only from Neo-Assyrian times that we do have clear evidence of the crupper-rider, the *radif* or *zamil*, fighting while mounted.

These facts lead me back into my own biography. In the final analysis, what has been said requires a new definition of the term 'Bedouin' that is not restricted to camel-riding warriors. The usage of camel riding for violent purposes gained its own decisive momentum and influence only in the process of relatively late cultural contacts with complex sedentary civilizations, and accordingly with the development of the *shadād* saddle construction.

The Bedouins were not only warriors, they also controlled the transportation of goods and provided security for goods but also for convoys. These agreements between complex sedentary societies and Bedouin were often set down in the form of legal contracts, i.e. the *ilaf*.<sup>7</sup>

References to their material culture demonstrate that they themselves did not practice iron forging, pottery work, stone-masonry and complicated woodworking. Instead, they relied on exchanging these products of sophisticated craftsmanship with sedentary populations or merchants. *Ilaf* contracts helped reciprocally to ensure the mutual exchange of pastoral goods against these and other products and to provide rights of residence if needed.

We have seen that Bedouin and sedentary Arabs were mutually dependent on each other in economic terms. In addition it is useful to distinguish semi-nomads, who lived partly sedentary lives while engaging more or less intensively with pastoralism, from full nomads. If we look at the socio-economic units of full nomads, we have to acknowledge a number of distinctive social features. First, at least in Arabia's southern regions, patrilinearity and cognatic features are the constitutive kinship elements of their societies.<sup>8</sup> The structure of their production units was determined by nuclear, fraternal joint and extended family forms. The founder of a patrilineal production unit and its local society had the claim of property on the central means of production (i.e., on herds, pastures and wells). In predominantly cognatic organizations this claim was divided up between the sexes. Even in patrilineal contexts, however, women also owned private property such as wool (see picture 39), which was generally respected by men. Tribal social

<sup>6</sup> In my 1967 publication I did take into account the local classification of *badw* as people who live outside of sedentary settlements. Yet I suggested narrowing down this concept and confining the definition of Bedouin to Arab warrior pastoralists (1967:11).

<sup>7</sup> Well known among the *ilaf* is one that was concluded by Hashim b. 'Abd Manaf (5th century CE), the great-grandfather of the prophet Muhammad, for the caravans of the merchants of Mecca. As the progenitor of the Banu Hashim clan of Mecca's noble Quraish family, he is attributed with the initiation and establishment of the two great trade caravan journeys of Quraish from Mecca to the Yemen in the south and to north-west Arabia and further on to Palestine and Syria (Armstrong 1991:66).

<sup>8</sup> In cognatic or bilateral kinship systems, descent relations are traced through both the mother's and father's side.

organization represented the foundation of society. In their ideology, two patterns characterized these full nomads – the conception of pure blood (*'asil*) and the conception of honor (*sharaf*). The conception of pure blood elaborated the idea of the necessity of demonstrating descent equality among descendants of a common ancestor.

#### CONCLUSIONS: THE BEDOUIN IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

Up to this point our discussion was focused on the pre-Islamic development of the Bedouin and its reconstruction through the sequence of riding techniques. At the end of this contribution, let us also consider the more recent phases of Bedouin development in the Islamic era.

Scholarly discussions about the role of the Bedouin in Islam are inspired by two conceptions: one is represented by Muhammad Asad's book "The Message of the Quran" (2009), the other by Sara Binay's study on "The Bedouin Figure in Arab Literature", 9th – 12th century (2006).

Muhammad Asad's starting point is the linguistic fact that to understand the Qur'an, a very detailed knowledge of Arabic is necessary in order to understand the ideas of the Prophet's messages. In his arguments he refers to the central and eastern Bedouin of the Arab Peninsula, who considered themselves as linguistic representatives of old Arabic. In Asad's perspective, eastern Arabia's Bedouin language therefore provided especially good access to understanding the Qur'an. Yet in view of processes of transformation and modernization during the 20th century, many aspects of this linguistic legacy were lost or damaged (Asad 2009; footnote 3).

By contrast, in her analysis of relevant Arabic literature Binay discovered an ecological factor that may have influenced scholars of the early Islamic periods. According to Binay, the peripheral remoteness of the Bedouin from the centers of scholarly learning led to several forms of stereotyping and bias in early Arab literature of the Muslim era: the Bedouin were said to mostly ignore the unity of Allah and to be full of hypocrisy. Their emotional empathy was seen as limited, and they allegedly ignored the commandments of Allah. In Binay's analysis these statements were an expression of the social discrimination against the Bedouin by the urban centers of Islamic society.

One of these contrasting views therefore sees the Bedouin as especially close to the language of Islam, whereas the other view sees them as marginalized from Islam. My own suggestions to understand Bedouin evolution during the earlier history of Islam is closer to that of Asad, but builds on what I have already outlined in the preceding sections of this article.

The Bedouin of the Arab Peninsula basically continued their established positions as acquired in pre-Islamic times under the new conditions of Islam. In spite of and partly also because of their separate and remote ways of life, they were important for long-distance trade, for providing the sedentary population with particular goods. The Bedouin were also important innovators, providing contact with the outside world, as argued in the case of adopting new saddles and riding techniques.

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