

The iconography of caravan trade in Palmyra and the Roman Near East

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From the early first millennium until the first decades of the twentieth century, camels were the state of the art technology for long-distance transport in the arid parts of the Near East. The animals also provided leather, wool, milk, fuel, and meat, and were near omnipresent in the premodern Levant. Nevertheless camels are conspicuously absent from the iconographic record. Palmyra is an exception in this respect, a number of reliefs representing camels being preserved from the city. This paper discusses if and how these depictions, as well as other examples from the region, can be used as evidence of the caravan trade that was an important economic activity of the city.

Almost 85 years ago, Mikhail Rostovtzeff provided Palmyra, along with Petra, and arguably with less justification, Dura Europos and Jerash, with the epithet of ‘Caravan City’.¹ Until today, scholarly agreement has prevailed that a large part of Palmyra’s wealth, which eventually enabled the construction of the monumental urban centre of the second and third centuries AD, and the unsuccessful, but nevertheless serious attempt at imperial power in the third quarter of the third century, derived from the role as mediators in the trade with textiles, spices, pearls and gems between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

Five decades after Rostovtzeff, Moses I. Finley published his seminal ‘Ancient Economy’, where he strongly downplayed the importance of commerce in ancient societies.² Finley’s model has since fallen on

hard times, but in danger of oversimplifying, one could argue that his emphasis on the agrarian basis of the ancient economy and the comparably low status of commercial activities has stood the test of time, while the insistence on the embeddedness of the ancient economy into the general sociopolitical matrix of the ancient world remains highly controversial.³ Nevertheless, most scholars of the ancient world would agree that long-distance trade was an important part of the Roman economy. Trade gave local and imperial elites access to luxury goods that served as status markers as well as political assets. Trade created large fortunes for individuals and considerable taxes to the state. In the Mediterranean, trade was primarily conducted by sea, in Western Europe along the rivers, but on the arid southern and eastern margins of the empire, goods coming from The Persian Gulf, The Red Sea, Arabia and sub-Saharan Africa were generally conveyed by the Ship of the desert: the camel.⁴

If trade enjoyed only low status this has the unfortunate side effect that data is lacking. In literary sources, trade is generally only addressed in passing, as when the poor slave Gripus, in Plautus’ comedy *Rudens*, dreams of one day owning lands, houses, and carrying on trade with large ships himself.⁵ The archaeological record reveals patterns of movement and distribution, but arguably less about mechanisms. Notwithstanding a rich record of marketplaces, ports,

1. Rostovtzeff 1932a; 1932b; 1932c.

2. Finley 1973. Even Finley, however, saw Palmyra as an exception to the general pattern (1973, 59).

3. Bang 2007; 2008; Temin 2001; Silver 2009; Osborne 2002.

4. Bulliet 1975.

5. Plautus, *Rud.* 930-931.



Fig. 1: Monumental base. Palmyra Museum A24/1226. (© Jørgen Christian Meyer).

ships, roads and road-stations, it is hard to determine the relative extent and importance of long-distance trade. Documentary evidence exists in the form of papyri from Egypt, and inscriptions, some of them from Palmyra, with merchants, trade or taxes as its subject. Where reliefs depicting ships have been employed in order to reconstruct ancient ships and ship-technology,⁶ no similar studies exist of camels or caravan trade. What can the iconographic record reveal? Perhaps not so much about the scale and importance of trade, but arguably something about status and practical matters.

Camels, much less camel caravans are no central motif in Roman or for that matter Palmyrene art. Some depictions, however, exist. Camels turn up in mosaics, graffiti and reliefs. Camel sculptures were made in life size as well as miniature. The one-humped camel, also known as the dromedary, was the more frequent in the Roman Empire, particularly in North Africa and the Near East. It is not well suited to wet climate and mountainous terrain, and was thus rarely used north of Syria.⁷ In Anatolia, the two-humped variety, often referred to as the Bactrian camel, enjoyed a certain importance. It copes well with rain, cold and mountains, but less so with the summer heat of Arabia and North Africa.⁸

The negative case

Reliefs from Palmyra are sometimes employed as illustration of ancient caravan trade, but rarely as evidence. Not all camels were caravan camels, however. In fact most camels in Palmyrene art have nothing to do with caravan trade. In order to tell the difference between a caravan camel and other camels, two aspects need to be considered: Form and context.

Starting with form, the relief shown in figure 1, until the Syrian civil war in the Palmyra museum, but found in the Justinian city wall, and originally belonging to a monument base of the Palmyrene period, shows a line of three camels lying down. As pointed out already by Harald Ingholt in the original publication, this is not a caravan.⁹ First, the camels carry harness suitable for riding rather than for leading by the hand. Second, all three camels are supplied with shields right of the saddle, as well as swords or lances on the back side. Third, what we see on top of the camels are not bales of trading goods, but rather riding saddles. Fourth, these camels carry elaborately embroidered saddlecloths, hardly something you would put on a pack animal.

The same is the case with the relief shown in figure 2, found in the Diocletian camp, but also originally part of a monument base. This has sometimes been identified as a caravan leader with his servant.¹⁰ It is

6. Casson 1995.

7. Gauthier-Pilters and Dagg 1981, 102-103.

8. Bulliet 1975, 231-232.

9. Ingholt 1936, 116-117.

10. Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2008, 84; Schmidt-Colinet 1995, 81; Smith 2013, 74-75.



Fig. 2: Monumental Base.
Palmyra Museum 2093/7431.
(© Jørgen Christian Meyer).

not. In this case the saddle is more visible, and we can see that it is covered with the fleece of an animal, probably a sheep, as is also the case with those depicted in figure 1. This is an indication that we are looking at steeds rather than pack animals. The so-called servant (holding the camel) carries a lance in his left hand, and the other figure has a sword, both wear trousers suitable for riding. All these attributes suggest martial activities rather than mercantile. Both wear elaborate clothing in similar style, and there is no clear difference in status between the two individuals.

Besides the presence of weapons, riding equipment and the rich decorative details, there is also the element of standardisation. Most of these camels, including some not shown here,¹¹ simply look similar. Standardised weaponry and equipment is something normally connected with military organizations, and one possibility would be that these men had affiliation with the *Ala I Ulpia dromedarium Palmyrenorum*, the auxiliary camel corps known from the mid second century,¹² or some other military unit set up with camels. A second explanation for the standardised appearance of the animals is that it is simply the result of

the Palmyrenes having strong ideas about how riding camels should be depicted. If that is the case, however, the men in riding trousers, with weapons, and with riding camels, are likely to have been people who wanted to show their affiliation with a nomadic, aristocratic lifestyle, based on the camel as an animal of war. This is also the likely context of the mounted rider shown in figure 3, who following the work on the so called caravan - or steppe gods by Rostovtzeff, Schlumberger, Weber, and others, should probably be identified as a divinity.¹³

The negative argument also has a functional part. Elite monuments connected to trade are not unknown. Prominent examples include the tomb of the baker Eurysaces outside Porta Maggiore in Rome and the Igel Column in Trier, but arguably these are exceptional. The Palmyrene elite was clearly strongly involved with trade. This is well documented in the so-called caravan inscriptions, but elite members are always honoured there for their help, leadership and benevolence toward traders, never for acting as traders themselves.¹⁴ Most preserved art from Palmyra

11. E.g. Ploug 1995, no 47; Ingholt 1936, pl. 24.2.

12. PAT 1422; Edwell 2008, 51-52.

13. Rostovtzeff 1932b; Weber 1995; Schlumberger 1951, 124-128.

14. Cf. Yon 2002, 171 on the office of *Archemporos*, 'head merchant' employed in two inscriptions.

Fig. 3: Camel rider. Palmyra Museum. (© Jørgen Christian Meyer).



stems from funerary settings. Money from caravan trade was attractive, and members of the Palmyrene elite wanted it, but when deciding what kind of relief that should represent them and their families after they were dead, they did not necessarily want to be affiliated with commercial wealth or commercial activities. In this context it is not surprising that most camels depicted in Palmyra belong to the high-status spheres of war and pastoral wealth rather than to the low-status activity of trade.

The positive case

What then can we glimpse of caravan trade from iconographic evidence? By throwing the net wider and venturing outside Palmyra we get a number of camel depictions that clearly belong outside funerary set-

tings and that might not suffer from the same status bias as the Palmyrene examples.

Figure 4, a floor mosaic from the church of Deir al-Adas, between Damascus and Bosra, clearly represents a camel caravan. An inscription dates the mosaic to 722 that is in the Ummayyad period,¹⁵ but the significant point here is the technology, which was probably more or less unchanged since the Palmyrene period. Deir al-Adas was never an important place, but situated on the axis from the Red Sea and the earlier Nabataean kingdom to Damascus and Antioch, where we know from literary accounts that camel caravans were a regular sight.¹⁶ It is placed in the rich agricul-

15. Donceel-Voûte 1988, 53.

16. Galen, *de simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis*, ed. Kyhn 1821, 215. Strabo *Geo.* 16.2.20 (mentioning merchants from



Fig. 4: Mosaic from Deir al-Adas, Syria. Displayed in the theatre in Bosra until the start of the on-going civil war. (© Jørgen Christian Meyer).

tural area of the Hawran, but close to the Syrian Desert, occupied by camel nomads.

The mosaic shows a man dressed in a plain *chiton*, carrying a staff in his right hand. An inscription identifies him as *Mouchasos kamilaris* – ‘the camel driver’. In his left hand he holds a rein, leading a caravan consisting of four animals through a landscape with threes or bushes crowned with flowers. The camels are supplied with bells, connected from saddle to bridle, and carrying two containers each in a packsaddle. Real animals of course would need to balance this by a similar load on the other side.

The containers depicted by the artist are not readily identifiable. Those carried by the two first animals have an oblong shape with pointed ends, resembling amphorae, but the characteristic handles are missing. Animal number three carries smaller jars, with clearly visible spout and handle. The more vaguely defined containers on animal four might be leather sacks. Amphorae were standardised, waterproof and manageable packaging for liquid as well as dry goods. They must have been well suited for long-distance transport, as they left repacking unnecessary when changing between different means of transport, such as ships, riverboats, wagons and caravans. The problem, on the other hand, was that they had a relatively high net weight.¹⁷ This needs to be taken into consideration with an animal like the camel, which can carry around

180 kilograms over longer distances, a lot more of course, for short stretches. Nevertheless, judging from our limited evidence, amphorae seem to have been a normal way of loading camels. We know from the archaeological record that Parthian-Sassanian so-called torpedo jars, made of clay from the middle Euphrates, ended up in large numbers in South Asia,¹⁸ and some of these might have carried goods from Palmyra. The use of skins for transport of liquid goods is attested in the tariff inscription from Palmyra,¹⁹ there was a guild of leatherworkers and floating skin makers in the city,²⁰ and the practice is also well attested in ethnographic records.

The mosaic offers a good impression of what a Palmyrene caravan might have looked like. Mouchasos’ caravan was a small one, but the large ones going between Palmyra and the Persian Gulf will have consisted of lots of such small trails of handlers and animals. This was the manageable and easy way of handling a large number of loaded animals.²¹ Also the mosaic reminds us that different kinds of people were involved in caravan trade, and they had different positions in Palmyrene society. Camel drivers were probably relatively humble people, but you would also need military men, with a more aristocratic self-perception, like

Arabia Felix, who can hardly have arrived by means other than camel).

17. Will 1992, 262.

18. Tomber 2007.

19. *PAT* 0259.

20. Seyrig 1963, 161-166.

21. Cf. Kloner 1996, 134-135, who reports caravans with one driver per animal in ethnographic accounts from present day Israel and Jordan.

Fig. 5: Mosaic from the Byzantine Church in Petra, Jordan. (© Eivind Heldaas Seland).



the ones with the beautiful riding camels in figs. 1-3, and certainly also elite investors and protectors to whom we shall return below.

Figure 5 is also a mosaic, from the Byzantine church in Petra. Here an animal in unmistakable agony is pulled by one camel driver and whipped by another. Apart from the depiction of animal abuse, the image is different from the others also because the load here seems to be a tree-trunk. Wood, necessary for house construction, as well as shipbuilding and reparation had to be conveyed over large distances in the arid parts of the Near East. In the same manner as the camels showed in the mosaic with Mouchasos, it reminds us that transport costs connected with caravan trade must have been extremely high.

A second depiction from Petra (fig. 6), which almost certainly has to do with caravan trade, is the life size relief hewn into the living rock near the city-side entrance to the *Siq* in Petra, the 1,2 kilometre gorge that served as one of the main entrances to the Nabataean capital. Unfortunately the relief is heavily eroded, but we can clearly discern a male figure, who leads a string of four camels. The setting at a main entrance

to the city, and very close to the royal tombs, has been an evocative reminder to the Nabataeans and their guests of their nomadic past and the importance of caravan trade for their kingdom.

Both the mosaic from Deir al Adas and the relief from Petra are clearly planned and very elaborate depictions of caravan trade. Examples of more spontaneous depictions, however, also exist, such as the one shown in figure 7, which is from Dura Europos, and thus necessarily contemporary with the Palmyrene caravan trade, as the city was destroyed in AD 256. As in the Deir al-Adas mosaic, we have a line of four animals, connected from bridle to saddle. No saddle is depicted, but it can safely be supposed, as it would be the only possible way of fastening the animals near the humps. Also it seems that the cameleer is riding the first animal, although this is hard to say for sure. These animals are clearly of the two-humped, Bactrian type that one would expect to find in Iran and central Asia, but not in the Syrian Desert and on the Euphrates. Possibly the drawing was made by someone, for instance a Parthian soldier, with experience from areas further east, where these animals were common.



Fig. 6: Relief from Petra, Jordan. (© Eivind Heldaas Seland).

Returning to Palmyra, is there any direct iconographic evidence of Palmyrene caravan trade at all? Arguably, among the substantial number of camel images that we have from the city, there is only a single depiction that does not show military camels or other riding animals. Figure 8 shows a relief from the grave of Julius Aurelius Marona (Qasr al-Hayye), dedicated in AD 236, being one of the house tombs outside the Justinian city wall, and now completely empty. Until the civil war, the relief was displayed in the Palmyra Museum. The most conspicuous motives are a ship, to the right, and a male figure in Palmyrene dress, including trousers fit for riding, in the middle. Arguably the ship should be connected with Palmyrene trade in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, or for that matter in the Mediterranean. What has rarely been pointed out, however, is that on the left side of the relief, there are the legs and reins of an animal.²² When compared to other reliefs, e.g. fig. 2, it is clear that we are speaking here of a camel and not a horse. While we will never know if the animal depicted was a riding camel or a

pack animal, the composition, with one arm on a ship and one arm on a camel, is a very evocative image of the two arenas, the desert and the sea, that Palmyrene merchants operated in. The interesting aspect with this depiction is not that members of the Palmyrene elite involved themselves in trade, that is well documented in the epigraphic record, even if it emphasises protection of trade rather than direct involvement,²³ but that at least one member of this elite actively referred to caravan trade in a funerary setting, where he himself, alternatively his heirs, had the opportunity to directly influence how he should be remembered, and how the family should be represented to succeeding generations. Even though the fortune was built on trade, the owner could have chosen to use military, pastoral, and religious motifs in the grave decoration. Nevertheless, he chose a ship and a camel, signifying that investment in trade did not carry a social stigma in third century Palmyra. This, however, remains an isolated example, showing how ideologically biased the iconographic record will inevitably be.

22. Schmidt-Colinet 1995, 81.

23. Will 1957; Yon 2002, 100-106.

Fig. 7: Drawing of graffito from Dura Europos. (© Rostovtzeff 1932, 212).

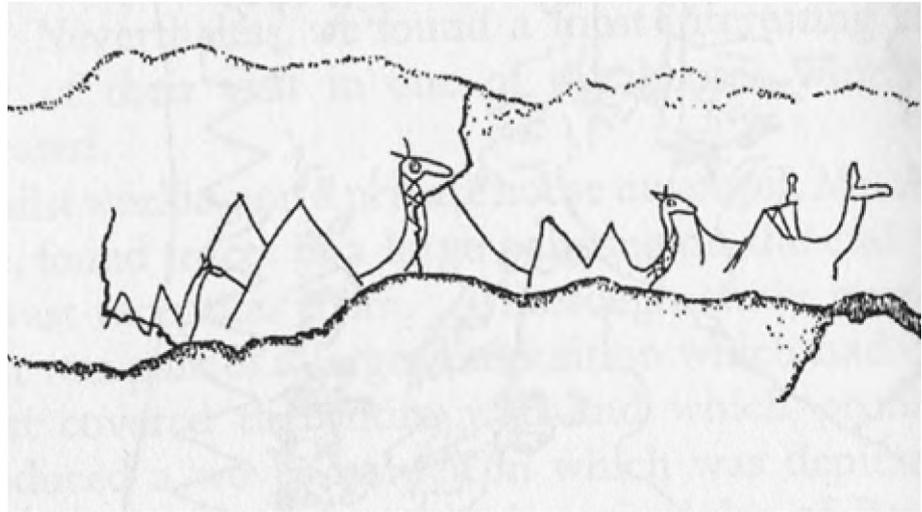


Fig. 8: Relief from Qasr Hayye, Palmyra Museum 1046/2249. (© Jørgen Christian Meyer).



In conclusion, the iconographic material highlights three interrelated points with regard to camels and caravan trade.

First, not all camel depictions are connected with caravan trade. In fact most are not. The camel carries association with nomadic and martial values, as well as with divinities of the desert and steppe, that are far more important in the iconographic record than pack animals.

Second, we do have a few depictions of camel caravans and pack animals. They appear in mosaics showing everyday, pastoral and rural life, and in low profile, low status depictions like the graffito from Dura Europos. This underlines that trade is not simply a question of merchants. There were also animal handlers, soldiers, aristocrats protecting trade, as well as elites organising and investing in trade.

What remains are the spectacular and monumen-

tal exceptions of the sculptures from Petra and the ship-cum-camel relief from the Marona grave. These are few, but nevertheless so evocative, that they do arguably signify that these places, Petra and Palmyra, were indeed something a bit different in terms of ideology and identity than most other in the Hellenistic-Roman world, thus justifying Rostovtzeff's caravan city epithet.

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