

THE CAMEL CONFERENCE @ SOAS

School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS] University of London

Saturday 9 - Sunday 10 May 2015

The Representation of the Camel in Western Visual Arts over 2000 Years

H. J. Schwartz

Dipl.ing.agr., Dr.sc.agr., Prof. em.

Humboldt University of Berlin

Faculty of Life Sciences

schwartzhj@gmail.com

<http://amor.cms.hu-berlin.de/~h1981d0z/>

Introduction

The general public in Europe and in North America is not well informed about the old world camels, the Dromedary and the Bactrian. They are perceived only as riding and pack animals, and they have a reputation of being smelly, stupid, and obnoxious creatures. Little is known of their value for food security and their potential for income generation in arid areas. As camels are not present in the Western livestock populations, they were known until the early 20th century only through reports of travellers and traders who had visited the Orient and North Africa. There is not even a proper vocabulary for them; for instance in German the “horse” vocabulary is used, calling them “camel stallion” and “camel mare” whereas in English the cattle vocabulary is applied. In other European languages the prefixes “he” and “she” are used or they are just named male and female. Throughout history images of camels were rare in Europe; only the advent of photography, film and TV popularised them to a greater audience.

Artistic images of camels appeared in Europe in seven different contexts which had little or no temporal overlap. They showed up as (1) decorative elements in rich homes and public buildings during Imperial Roman and Byzantine times, as (2) illustrations of biblical stories in churches, monasteries, and religious texts from the 11th to the 16th century, as (3) allegorical figures representing peoples, countries or continents, as (4) drawings and etchings in medieval bestiaries and later, during the 16th and 17th centuries in science based natural histories, as (5) exotic elements in the romantic representations of oriental life during the second half of the 19th century, as (6) part of heroic war scenes between 1880 and the end of World War I, and (7) last but not least, in 20th century art and advertising cartoons.

(1) Camels in Antiquity

The earliest images of camels in the European context appeared in the early Roman Imperial period as occasional floor mosaics in Roman villas in Tunisia and Palestine, later as marble bas-reliefs or terracotta statuettes on memorials for soldiers who had served in North Africa or the Near East. They were either depicted as game animals next to deer, as beasts of burden, or carrying riders. Until the 6th century they were also found as decorations in form of mosaics or carved panels in Byzantine rich homes and palaces. Most of these early presentations were quite naturalistic and showed that the artists must have been familiar with the animals.

This first occurrence was triggered by Roman occupation of North Africa and the Near East by which camels became known to larger groups of European people. A few were also brought to Europe and there are claims that camels travelled with the Roman military as far North as to English Channel coast. After the collapse of the West Roman Empire camels disappeared from public memory until European acquaintance with these animals was renewed through the crusades and consequent frequent contacts towards the East.

The marble bas-relief in slide 1 is most likely a memorial tablet for a Roman soldier showing a pack camel led by a man in military dress on a guide rope tied around the lower jaw. Slides 2 and 3 are examples of floor mosaics. The former are coarsely executed with little detail, whereas the latter from Constantinople is finely drawn with good anatomical likeness. The ivory panel in slide 4 shows two riding camels in correct anatomical detail, two North Arabian saddles with the proper harnessing and a Bedouin rider in contemporary costume, all in very fine workmanship.

Early Imperial Rome, 1st Century AD, Bas Relief, Marble



Museo Capitolino, Rome, MC 225

Two Floor Mosaics Imperial Rome



© H. J. Schwartz 2011

Roman Temple, Gerasa, Jordan,
3rd Century



© H. J. Schwartz 2011

Christian Church, Petra, Jordan,
5th Century

Two boys on a camel led by a slave
Constantinople, early Byzantine Imperial Floor Mosaic, 5th Century



Source: <https://wordscene.wordpress.com/2012/07/>

Side panel of the throne of Maximianus of Ravenna,
manufactured in Constantinople (545-553)



Source: <http://www.atlantedellarteitaliana.it/> Throne of Maximianian, VI BCE

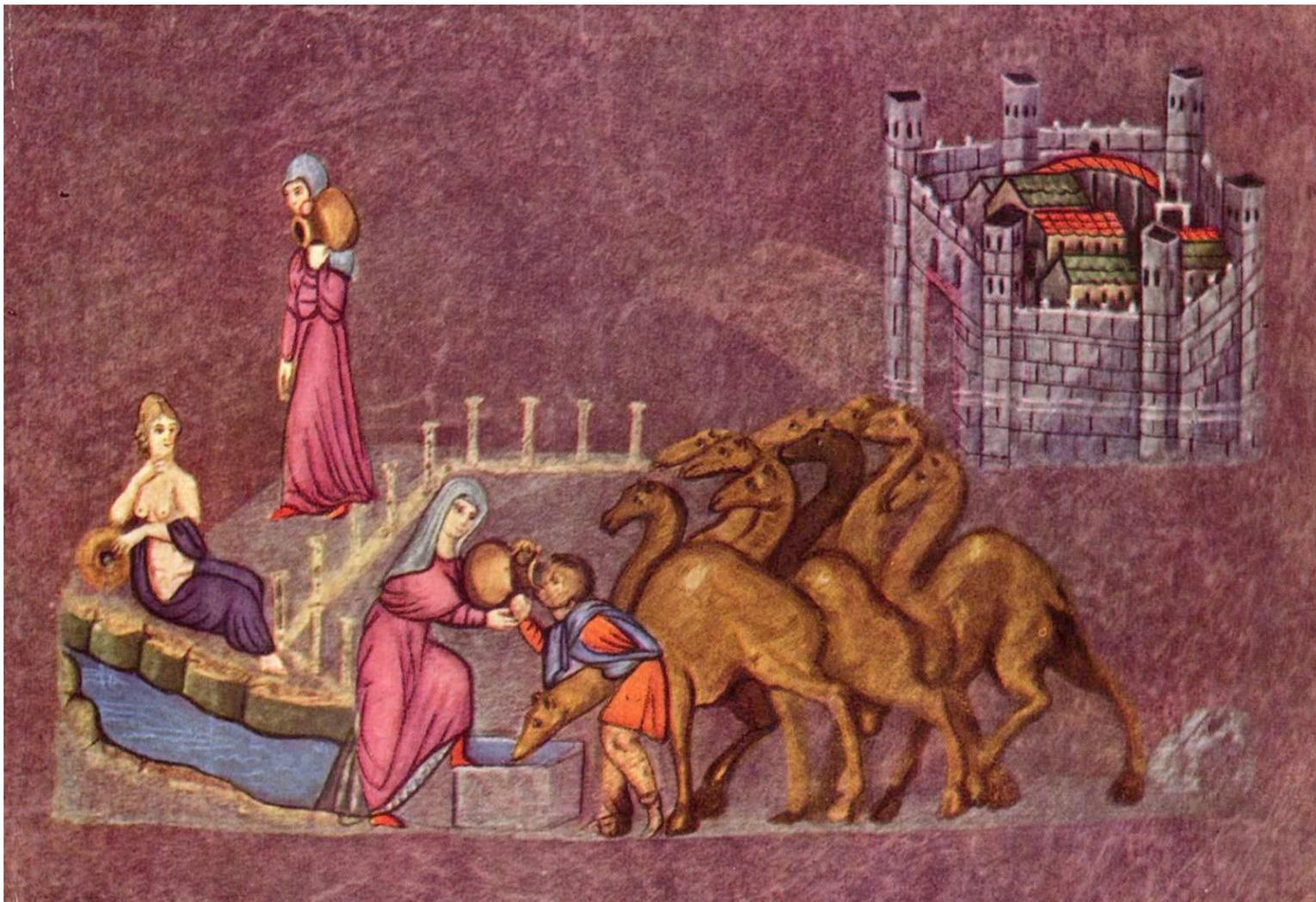
(2) The Camel in Biblical Context

From the 7th to the 12th century they were virtually absent from the visual arts. In the late 12th century they reappeared again as prominent elements in paintings, mosaics and bas-reliefs presenting scenes from the bible. Up into the 16th century the likeness of the images to the real animals was rather crude, giving the impression that they were modelled after verbal description rather than direct acquaintance.

There are a number of biblical stories which feature camels, amongst others the creation of domestic animals in the Genesis, the arrival of the three Magi, and the one of Rebecca at the well. The latter theme remained popular through centuries as shown in slides 5, 6 ,7 and 12, from the Byzantine period through the middle ages into Renaissance. Slide 8 shows an example of emerging Venetian Gothic style, Slide 9 a very fine example of a bas-relief in Tuscan Gothic style, early 14th Century, probably by Lorenzo Maitani from the front facade of the Cathedral in Orvieto.

All examples mentioned so far, with the exception of the Old English Hexateuch, had been images of dromedaries. Slides 10 and 11 show a Bactrian camel as part of the decorative frieze on a baptism font in the Cathedral of Brandenburg in Northern Germany. The style is German Gothic, dating most likely from the mid 14th century. However, both the location of origin and the significance of the animal in the particular context are unknown.

Rebecca at the well, Masters of the Vienna Genesis,
Ink on purple dyed parchment, approx 540 AD



Austrian National Library, Vienna, cod. theol. gr. 31

Rebecca arriving at Abraham's home, Old English Hexateuch, Anglo-Saxon, late 11th Century



The British Library MS Viewer

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_claudius_b_iv_fs001r

Rebecca at the well, wall mosaic, Arab-Norman Cathedral of Monreale,
Sicily, 12th Century



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monreale>

Ceiling mosaic, central front porch, Basilica di San Marco, Venice,
emerging Italian Gothic style, early 13th Century



Biblical scene, Book of Genesis, creation of the animals, bas relief, marble, Cathedral of Orvieto, section of the front facade



© H. J. Schwartz 2014

Baptismal Font, Cathedral of Brandenburg, sandstone, German Gothic style, origin unknown, early 15th Century



Detail from the Baptismal Font, Cathedral of Brandenburg,
Bactrian camel, significance unknown



Rebecca and Eliezar at the well, Lambert Doomer,
Amsterdam, 1696



Source: <http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/dp/web-large/DP800953.jpg>

(3) The Allegorical Camel

On the royal mantle of Roger II of Sicily (slide 13), which later became the coronation mantle of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, two camels are shown being subjugated by two proud lions. This is a celebration of the success of the first crusade in which the Christians (lions) captured Jerusalem from the Muslims (camels).

Images of camels have often been used as allegories for exotic countries or continents. In the Flemish tapestry (slide 14) a Bactrian camel symbolises Asia and, in context with the dragon at his feet, also China. The large silver vessel shown in slide 15, resting on the backs of three camels, is said to stand for Asia. The fact that the camels are dromedaries leaves some doubt, but that they are moulded with typical cows feet might indicate that the artist was not very familiar with the subject. Slide 16 shows the rather splendid allegory of Africa by William Theed which is part of the Prince Albert Memorial in London.

Camels are also frequently used in heraldry forming essential parts of coats of arms of noble houses, cities, societies or fraternities of various kind and all over Europe. As this is an extensive subject it will not be treated in this presentation.

Coronation mantle of Roger II of Sicily
Later the coronation mantle of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation



Early 12th Century

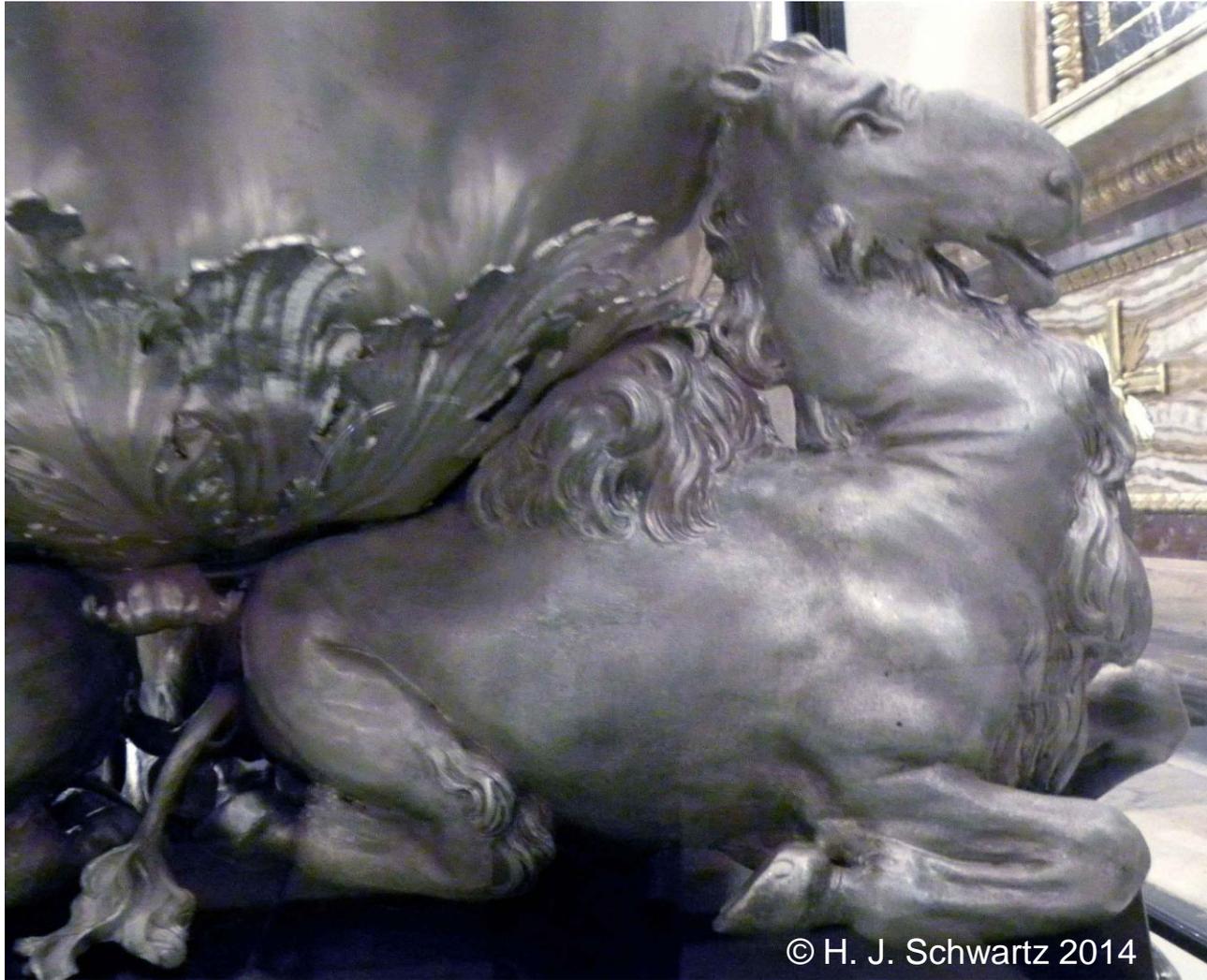
Conservation place : Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Schatzkammer

Bactrian camel, fragment of Flemish Tapestry from the treasury of Basilica di San Marco, Venice, late 15th Century



© H. J. Schwartz 2008

Detail of the pedestal of an allegorical representation of Asia, silver, by Lorenzo Vaccaro, Cathedral of Toledo, Spain, late 17th Century



© H. J. Schwartz 2014

Allegorical representation of Africa,
Prince Albert Memorial, London, 1863



(4) The Camel in Natural History Literature

Images of camels appeared in the early “zoology literature”, the medieval bestiaries. These usually showed a mixture of rather bizarre pictures of existing animals, drawn or painted after hearsay descriptions, together with fantastic creatures like unicorns, gryphons, or centaurs. As a rule the pictures are accompanied by some natural history and some moral lesson. Slide 17 is a good example exhibiting a dromedary and a Bactrian camel labelled as Dromedari and Camelus.

Illustrated traveller’s reports like “The Book of John Mandeville” (slide 18) put camels into local context and demonstrate familiarity of the artists with the subject.

During the Renaissance, with the renewal of scientific approaches to many aspects of life, camels became subject to natural history and most pictures of the time were of a rather more prosaic than artistic style and intent. Slide 19 presents a time series of camel images with increasing detail and accuracy. By the second half of the 19th century such illustrations had become almost photorealistic (slide 20).

Dromedary and Bactrian Camel from the *Worksop Bestiary* (MS M.81) England, possibly in Lincoln or York, ca. 1185.



Dromedari genū ⁊ cameloz minoris q̄dem
 stature s; uelocioris. unde ⁊ nom̄ h̄t.
 Nam dromos gr̄e curs⁹ ⁊ uelocitas appellat.
 centū it ⁊ amplī milia unadie p̄ge solet.
 Q̄d aīal sicut ouis ⁊ boſe canel⁹ ruminat
 Ruminatio aū dicta aruma emnente gut
 curū p̄te p̄ q̄m dimiss⁹ ab; a cetis reuocat a
 numalib;

© Morgan Library, New York

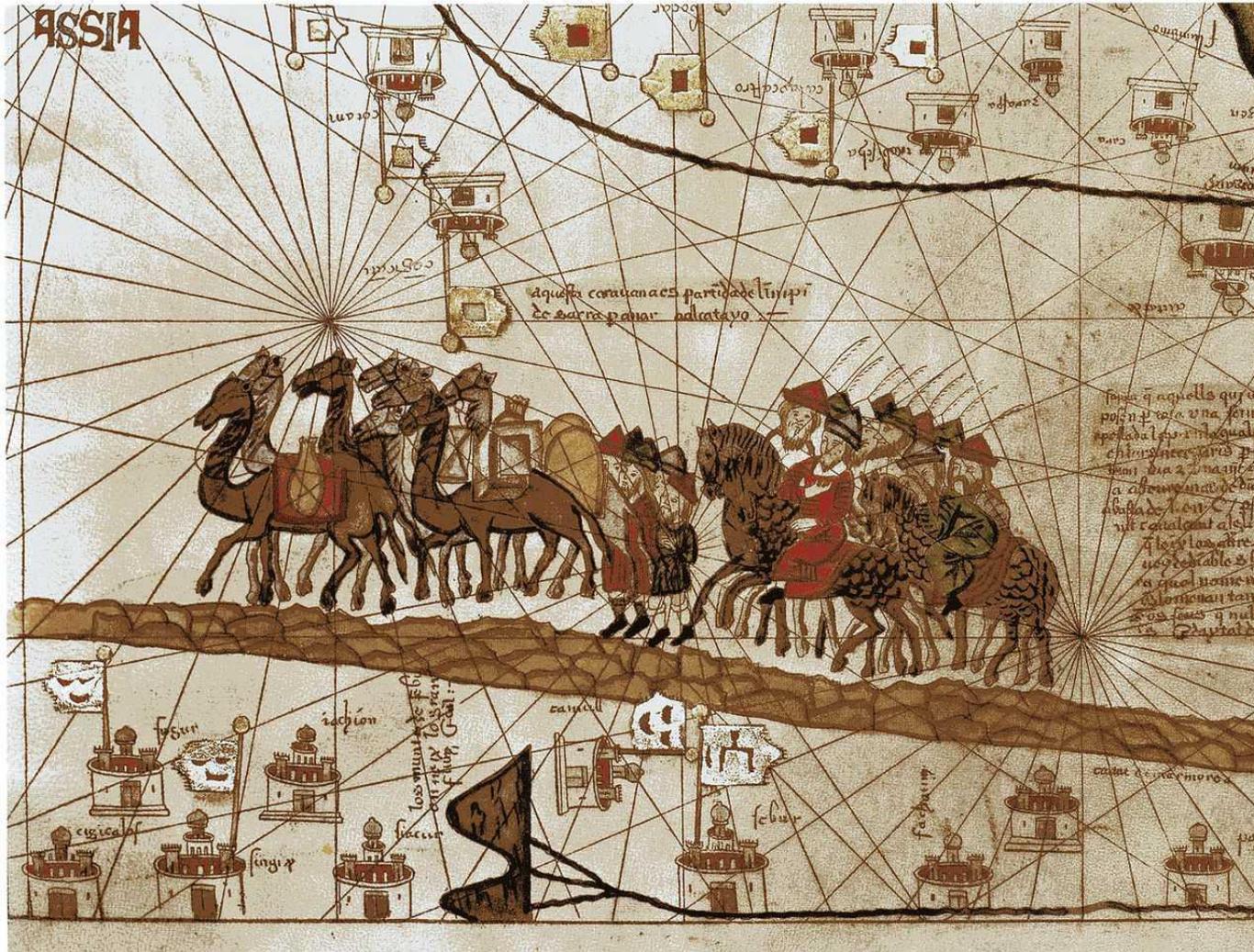
etate ex eis gerula potuū fiant. S̄t etiā in india
 boues unocornes. solidis unglis n̄ fissis. s; aduſsi
 mis. Bubali uocationem in̄thunt. q̄d s̄t similes bo
 um. adeo idonei ut p̄feritate iugū n̄ recipiant.
 Vacca dicta q̄si boacca. ē ⁊ ex q̄litate mobiliū nōnum.
 sic leo leena. Draco dracena. Vitul⁹ ⁊ uitula a uiri
 ditate uocati s̄t. i. etate uiridi. sic uirgo. Vitulā
 enī paruulā esse ⁊ n̄dū enyā. Nam enī q̄xa
 iuuenca est idest uacca.



Camelis causa nom̄ dedit. siue q̄d q̄ndo
 honerant⁹ ⁊ breuioreſ ⁊ humilioreſ fiant
 accubant. q̄ gr̄e camī humile ⁊ breue d̄r
 siue q̄ curū ē dorſo. camur gr̄o ūbo curuum

© Morgan Library, New York

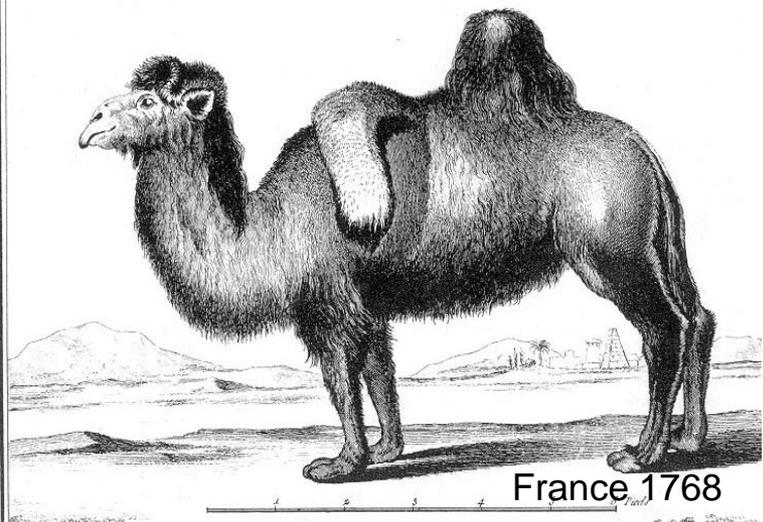
Marco Polo's caravan, illustration from
The Book of John Mandeville (c. 1370),



Illustrations from various Natural History Books



Germany 1551-58



France 1768

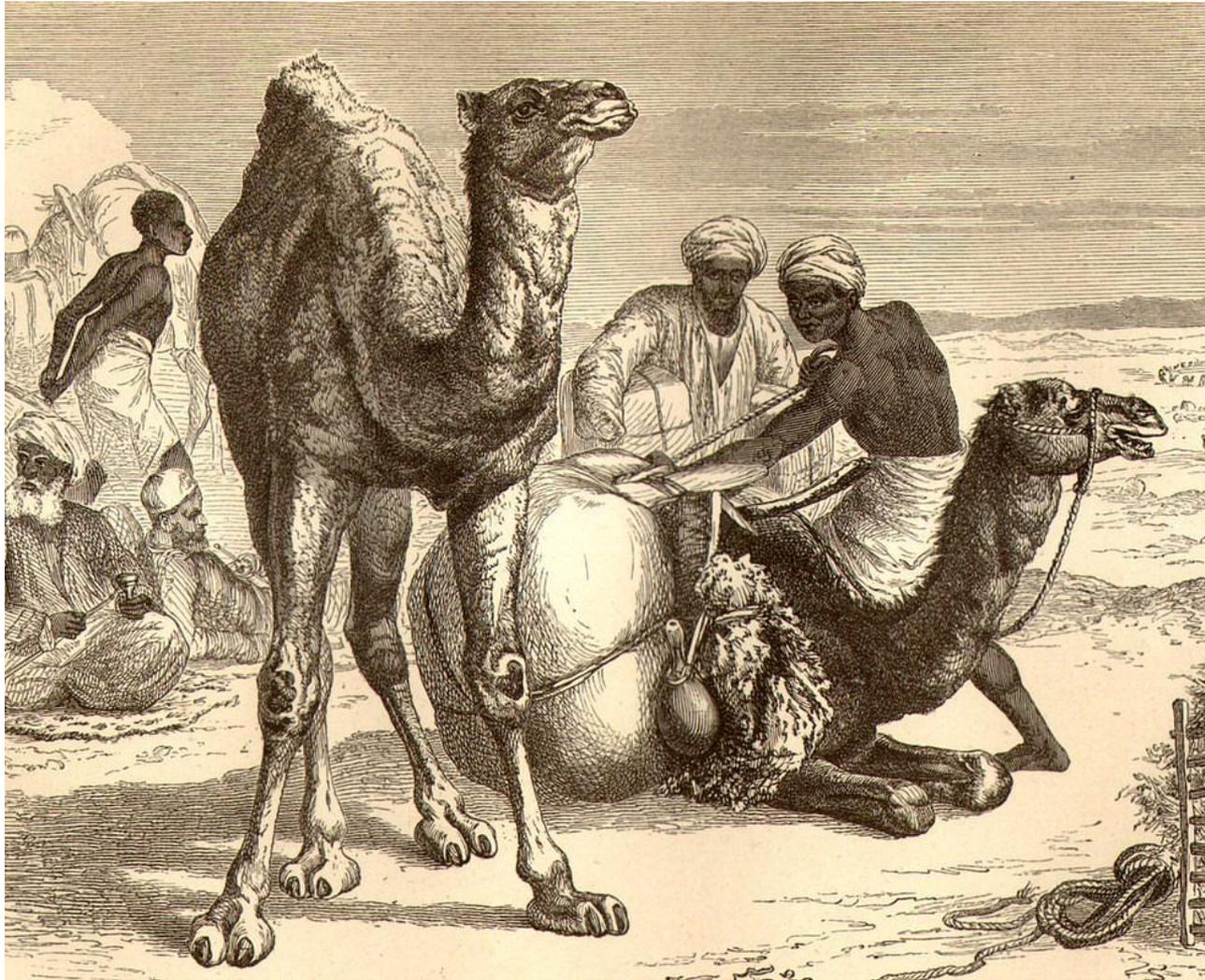


Germany 1827



France 1849

A.E. Brehm, Illustriertes Thierleben 1865,
Bibliographisches Institut Hildburghausen,



(5) The Orientalists of the 19th Century

By the end of the 18th century, and especially with the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon, the Orient, i.e. the Near East and North Africa, became a widespread and fashionable interest in Europe. Frequent ship connections and later also railways allowed artists to travel and study this exotic world by themselves and in great detail. So the 19th century, especially its second half, became the “Orientalist Period”. Initially dominated by British and French artists the movement was quickly joined by many other European nationalities and a good number of Americans too.

The bulk of the paintings, drawings and etchings were depicting daily life, street scenes and landscapes where the camel found a prominent place as well. Although different in style and technique most of the Orientalist pictures had a near photorealistic quality and for the first time the general European public saw true-to-nature images of camels in greater numbers. One of the most valuable off-shoots was the publication of the first ever anatomy book on the dromedary by Elijah Walton, an English artist, in 1865. During the 1880s more than 20000 artists were exhibiting orientalist pictures in London, Paris and other European capitals with corresponding numbers of camel pictures shown, usually as riding or load bearing animals.

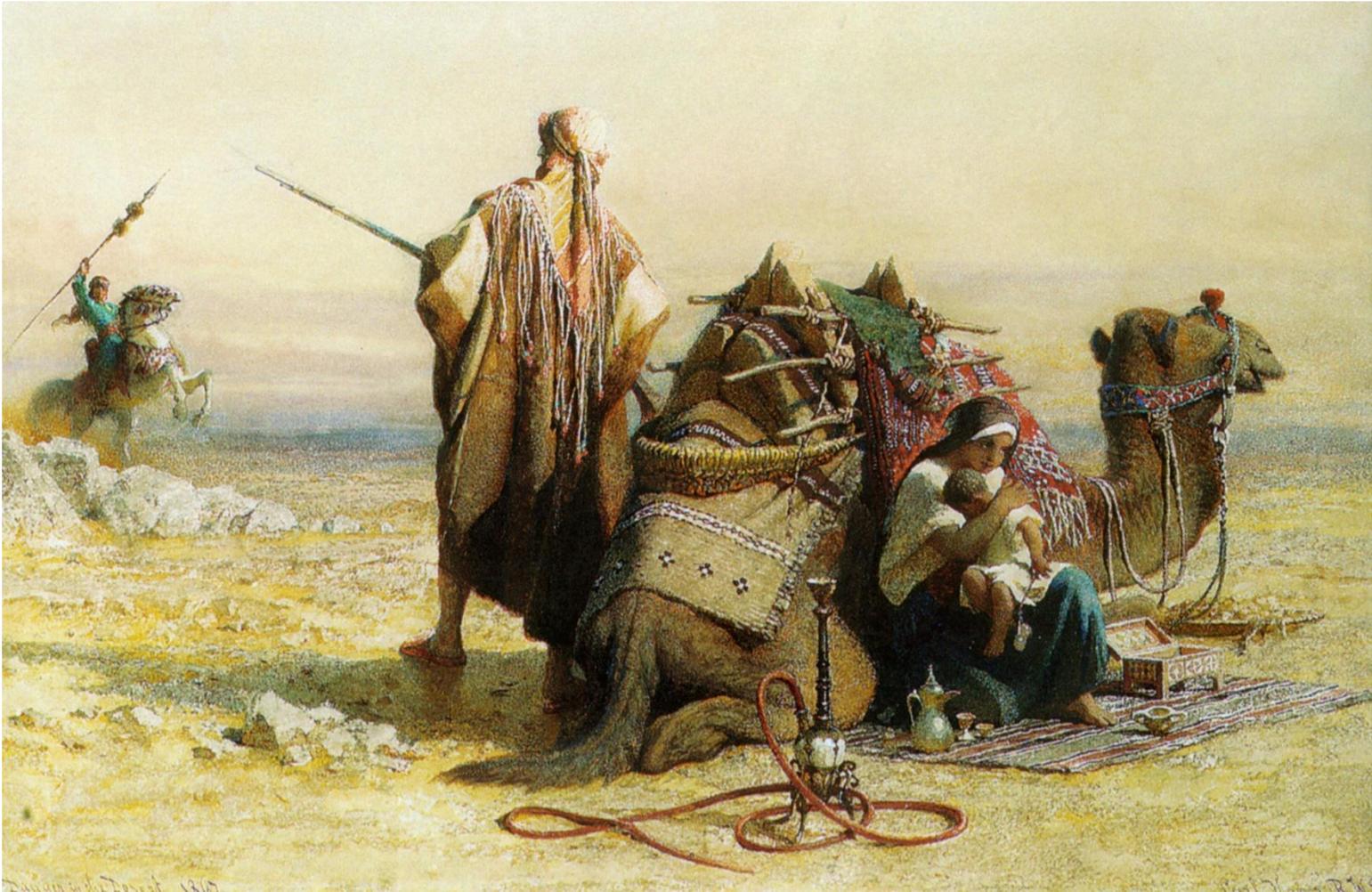
The prominence of camels in 19th century art was incidental to the fact that all things oriental held great fascination for educated Europeans and the lonely camel rider with flowing robes in the desert became the romantic epitome of a foreign culture. Many hundreds if not thousands of paintings of this subject bear witness to that.

Jean-Léon Gerome, *"Napoleon and his Staff on the Way to Cairo"*
Oil on Canvas, 1851



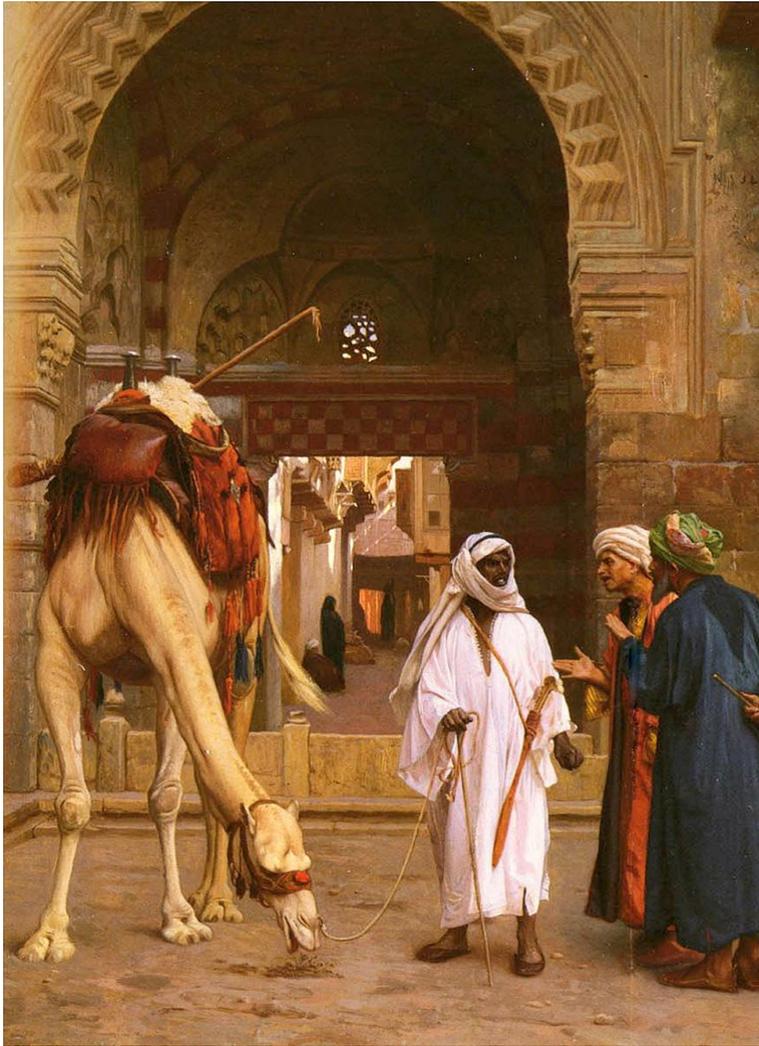
<http://www.jeanleongerome.org/>

Carl Haag, "*Danger in the desert*",
Water Colour on Paper, Syria, 1867



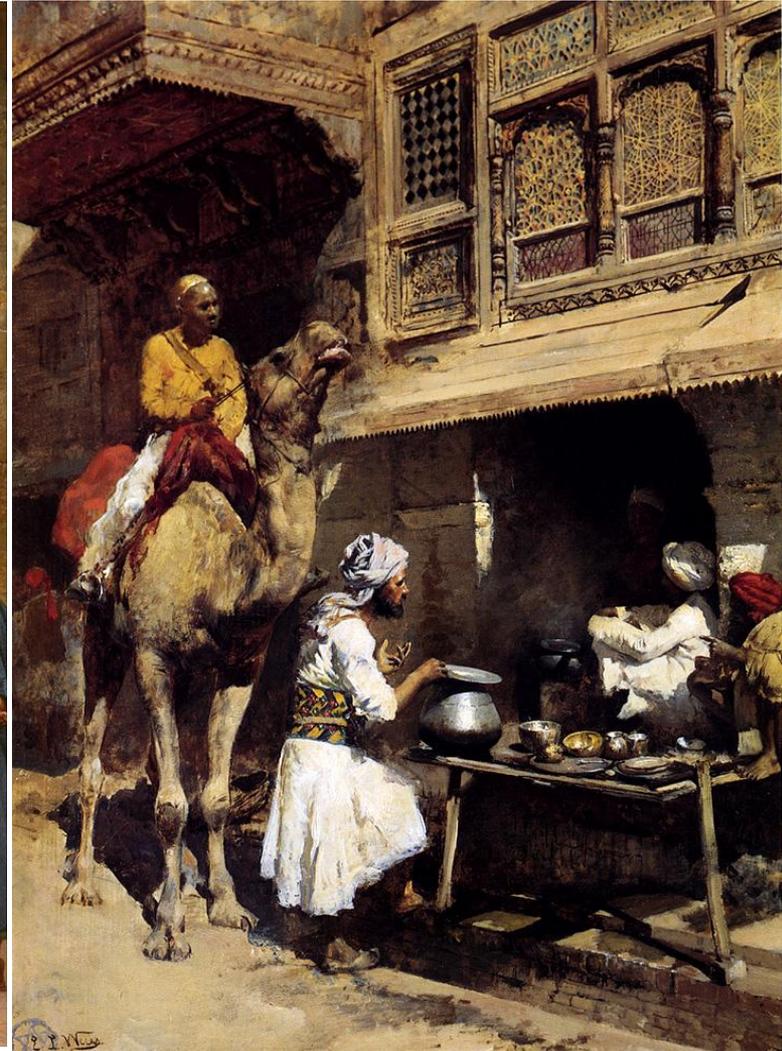
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Haag#mediaviewer/File:Haag_Carl_Danger_in_the_Desert_1867_Watercolour_on_Paper.jpg

Jean-Léon Gérôme,
“Street Scene”, Egypt, 1869



<http://www.jeanleongerome.org/>

Edwin Lord Weeks,
“At the Metal Shop”, Lahore, 1883-88



www.edwinlordweeks.org

Phillipe Pavy, *"The Arrival of the Bride"* Oil on Panel, Algeria, 1899



Frederick Goodall, Female Riding Camel, Watercolour, 1893



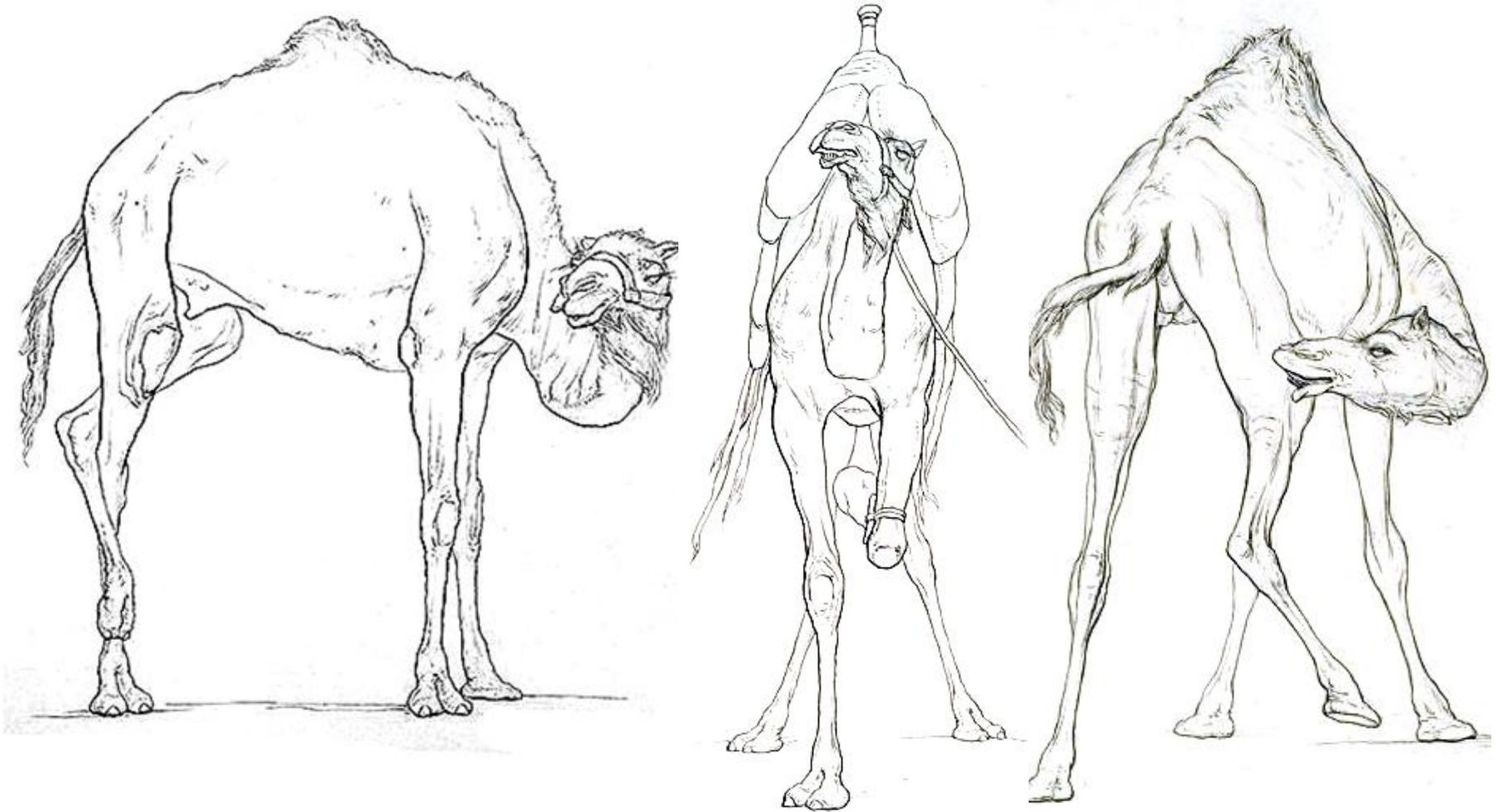
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O143928/female-riding-camel-watercolour-goodall-frederick/>

Frederick Goodall, Baggage Camel, Watercolour, 1893



<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O143929/baggage-camel-watercolour-goodall-frederick/>

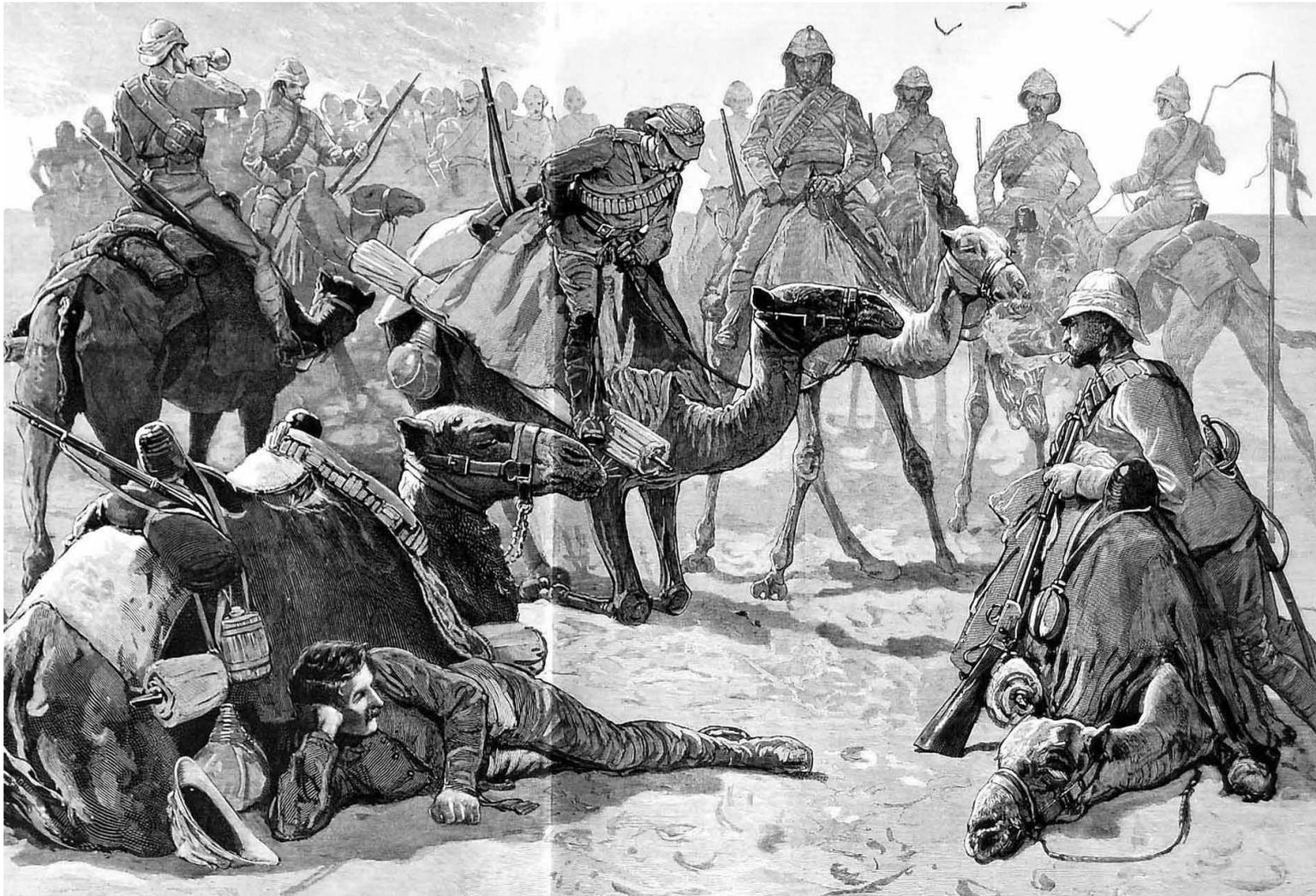
Elijah Walton, 3 anatomical studies of camels, lithography from:
The Camel, its Anatomy, Proportions and Paces. London: Day and Son, 1865



(6) The Camel and the Military

The brief episode of “camelry” in European colonial forces from the 1880s to the 1920s brought another focus into images of camels. There was the newspaper or magazine style reporting of military campaigns, and there was the heroic or memorial type of representation, often expressing nationalistic sentiments in drawings, paintings, posters, or series of patriotic postcards. Another off-shoot are a number of sculptures memorising the respective national forces.

The British Camel Corps of the Gordon Relief Expedition,
Newspaper Illustration, Dry Point Etching, 1885 (?)



The 7th Camel Mounted Company of the South West African Schutztruppe charging, postcard by Fritz Grotemeyer (1922)



Source: <http://www.didacticlic.be/index.php?page=german-camel-corps>

The Imperial Camel Corps at Magdhaba 1916,
oil on canvas, Harold Septimus Power, 1925



http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/Camel_corps_at_Magdhaba.jpg

The Imperial Camel Corps Memorial, London, Victoria Embankment Gardens,
sculpted by Major Cecil Brown, unveiled June 1921



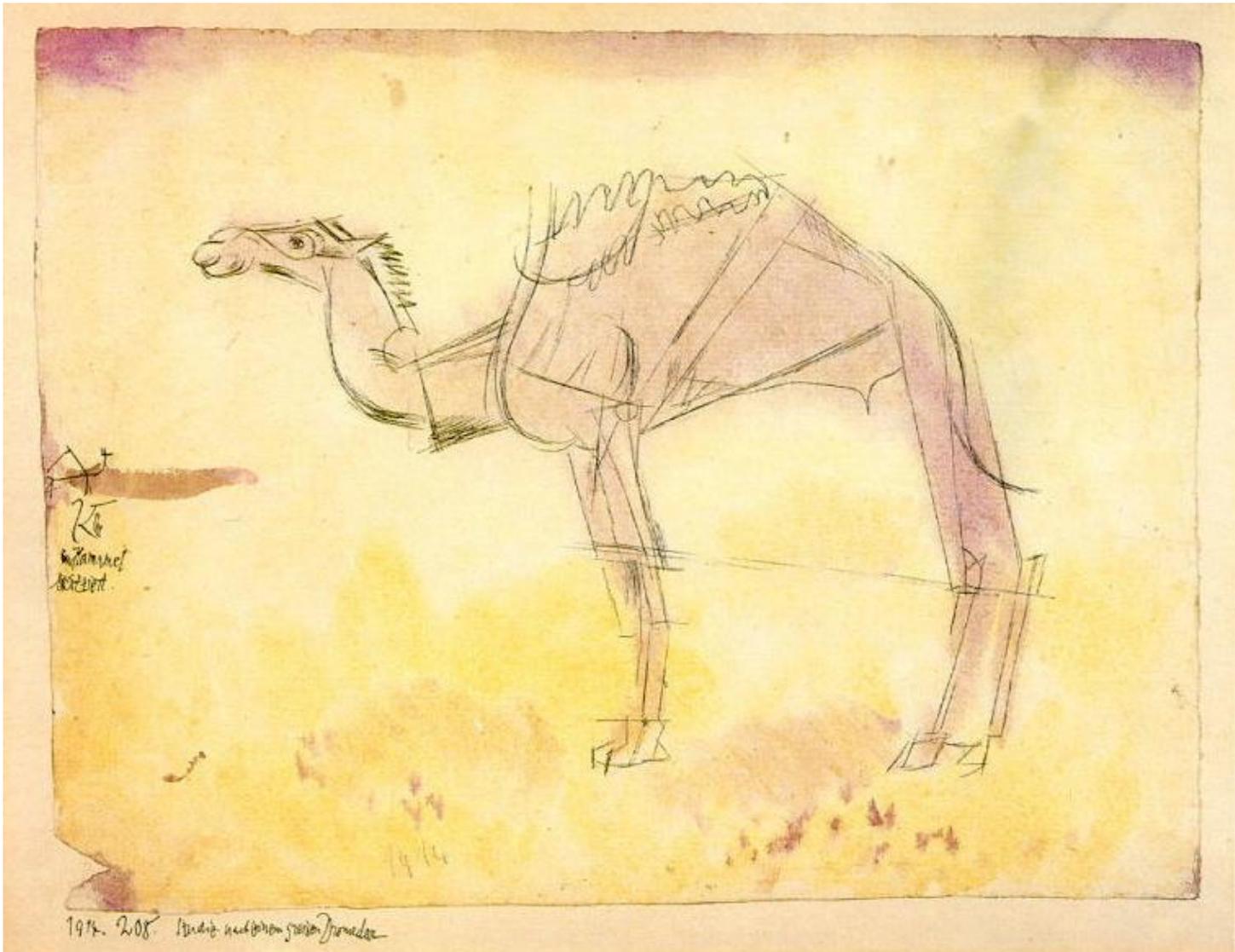
(7) The 20th Century

The academic style of orientalist painting fell out of public favour with the rise of Impressionism and camels were no longer a subject in art by the first decade of the 20th century. In the 20th century the camel has made only a few marginal appearances in visual arts.

From the 1920s visual arts embraced more and more abstract forms of expression and images of camels turned, if and when they could be identified, into decorative elements. Slides 32, 33, and 34 demonstrate this in a short time series. A one-line drawing by Pablo Picasso in slide 36 combines maximum abstraction with immediate recognisability.

In the last two or three decades camel reappeared manifold, probably because of their extraordinary looks, as cartoons in advertising campaigns.

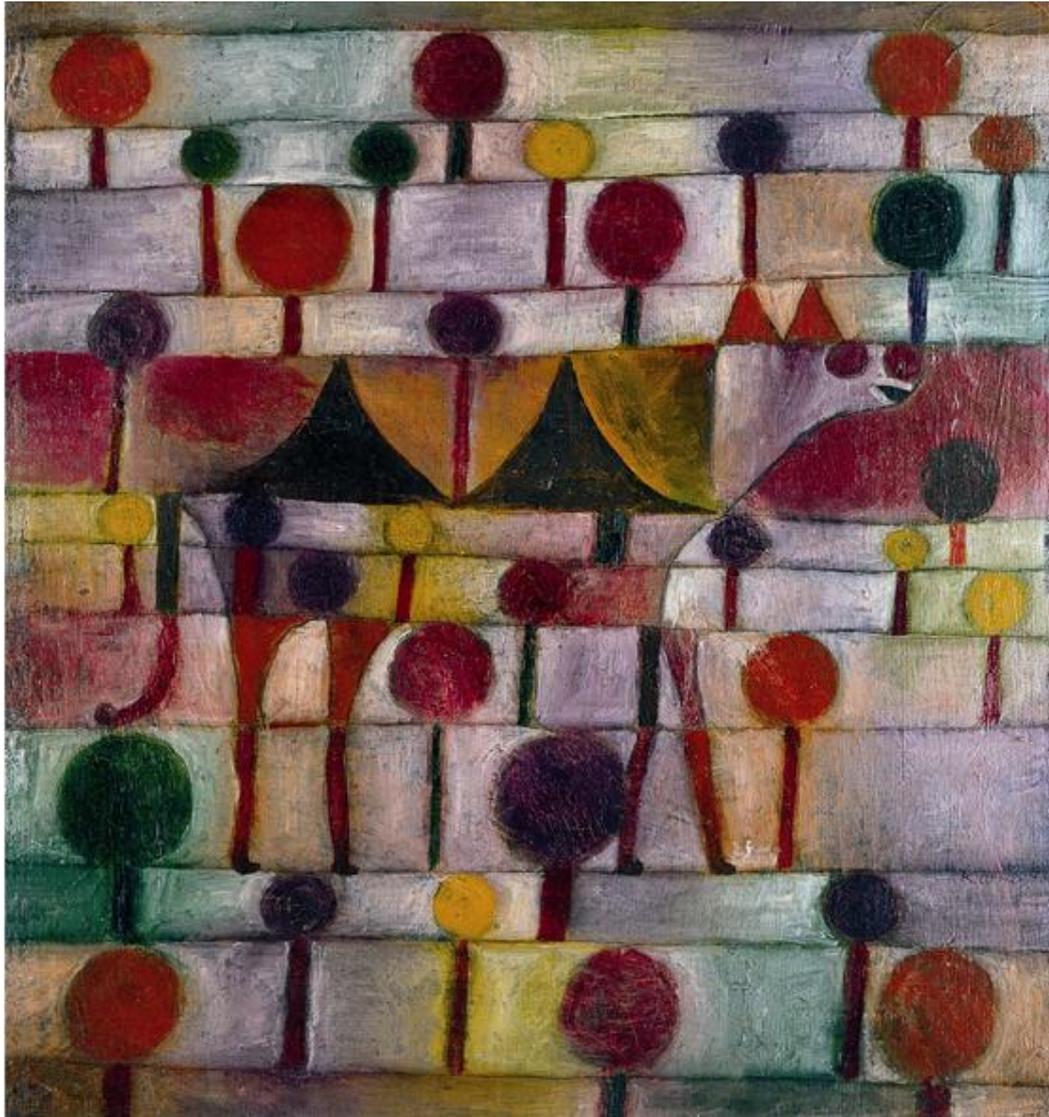
Paul Klee, postcard, pencil and water colour, 1914



Paul Klee, Two Camels and a donkey, oil on canvas, 1919



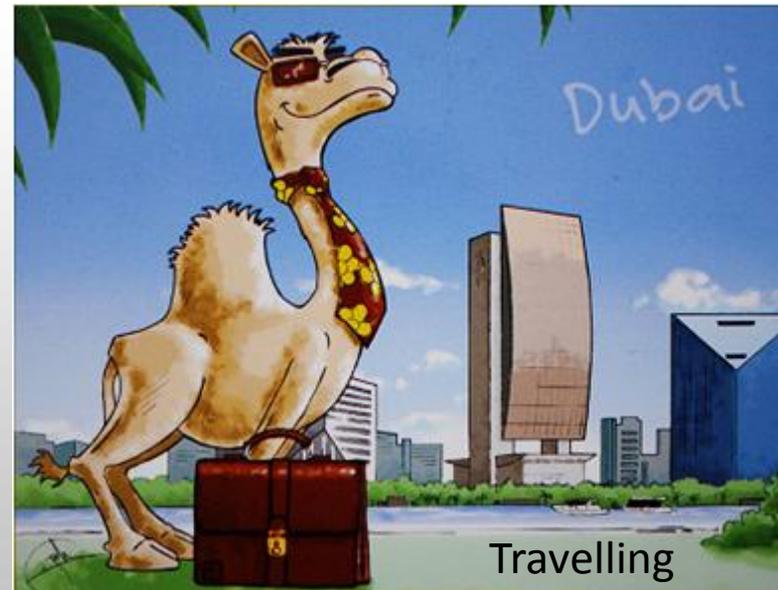
Paul Klee, Camel in Rhythmic Landscape, oil on canvas, 1920



Pablo Picasso, drawing, ink, 1920-1930 (?)



Camel cartoons in advertising





CITROËN 2CV

Thank you for your attention

Materials

The author has, for many years, collected images of camels, which are accessible in churches, museums, or public buildings, but also as printed materials. More recently this collection was supplemented through material available on various websites. A small selection out of all this has been used to illustrate this presentation.

References

1. Elijah Walton: The Camel, its Anatomy, Proportions and Paces. London: Day and Son, 1865
2. Lynne Thornton: The Orientalists – Painter Travellers. Paris: ACR Edition Poche Couleur, 1994
ISBN2-86770-083-3
3. Numerous Internet Sources are available from the Author on request