

Donkey caravans in Pharaonic Egypt and beyond

The ethnographic study of modern donkey caravans, still existing in some arid or semi-arid regions in Africa (and elsewhere), offers valuable analogical insights into logistical and practical aspects of ancient long-distance desert travel and trade, when the domesticated donkey was the principal beast of burden, and the camel not yet introduced as the 'ship of the desert'. General pace, daily travel rates, carrying capacities, and the supply with water and food are among the basic factors that can be compared and used to interpret the organisation and efficiency of ancient desert traffic that left its traces, for instance, along the Pharaonic Abu Ballas Trail in the Libyan Desert (used from the late 3rd millennium onwards), or is, so far, only attested epigraphically as the old Assyrian trade caravans between Assur and cities in central Anatolia such as Kanesh. This methodological approach can, therefore, provide a profitable avenue of inquiry and analysis to contribute to the multifaceted field of research that might be termed 'desert road archaeology'.

However, as some case studies will demonstrate, various factors have an impact on daily travel rates, carrying capacities, etc. of ancient or more recent donkey caravans. To mention just some of the most important aspects: the individual donkey's physical state and condition; the weight of the load; the nature of the terrain crossed by the caravans; general climate and temperature; the overall distance to be covered and the duration of the journey; availability of water and food along the route; aimed travelling speed (including potential night marches); possibility of longer resting periods in order to recover, etc. Any serious investigation has to take these parameters and their interdependencies into account, and the data gained from studying a single modern donkey caravan cannot simply be adapted and transferred to judge similar enterprises in ancient times (the specific circumstances of which being usually not well known). For example, there is, of course, a fundamental difference between caravans transporting heavy trade goods and those which mainly consist of unloaded donkeys that are themselves to be sold on the markets (as, e.g., in present-day Sudan). The latter usually proceed considerably faster, whereas especially the daily routine of loading and unloading pack animals before and after each resting period certainly increases the journey time. Moreover, the availability of plenty of water and food along a given route (vegetation, wells, waterholes) as well as favourable resting places used for longer breaks may allow for transporting rather high amounts of freight (up to 100 kg or more) at a comparatively low daily travel rate (10–14 km), which would not be possible in barren desert regions. In a word, there are no 'standard' parameters, but many influencing factors and restrictions to be considered for each single case.

Nevertheless, by applying some relevant ethnographic data, it can be argued with reason that an ancient donkey caravan in arid or semi-arid regions, which aimed to cover several hundred kilometres and consisted of well-trained pack animals and experienced drivers, in broad terms exhibited an average daily travel rate of c. 25–40 km, with a load weight of about 50–80 kg per donkey. These figures may, however, vary according to specific regional circumstances, season, amount of daily marching hours, and so forth. Future ethnographic investigations, preferably augmented by accompanying a modern donkey trade caravan in Africa from its starting-point up to its final destination, may shed more light on this matter.

Relevant literature (to be provided to the workshop's participants):

Förster, F. (2013) Beyond Dakhla: The Abu Ballas Trail in the Libyan Desert (SW Egypt). In: F. Förster & H. Riemer (eds.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond*. Africa Praehistorica 27. Köln 2013: 297–337.

Förster, F., H. Riemer, M. Mahir & F. Darius (2013) Donkeys to El-Fasher or how the present informs the past. In: F. Förster & H. Riemer (eds.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond*. Africa Praehistorica 27. Köln 2013: 193–218.

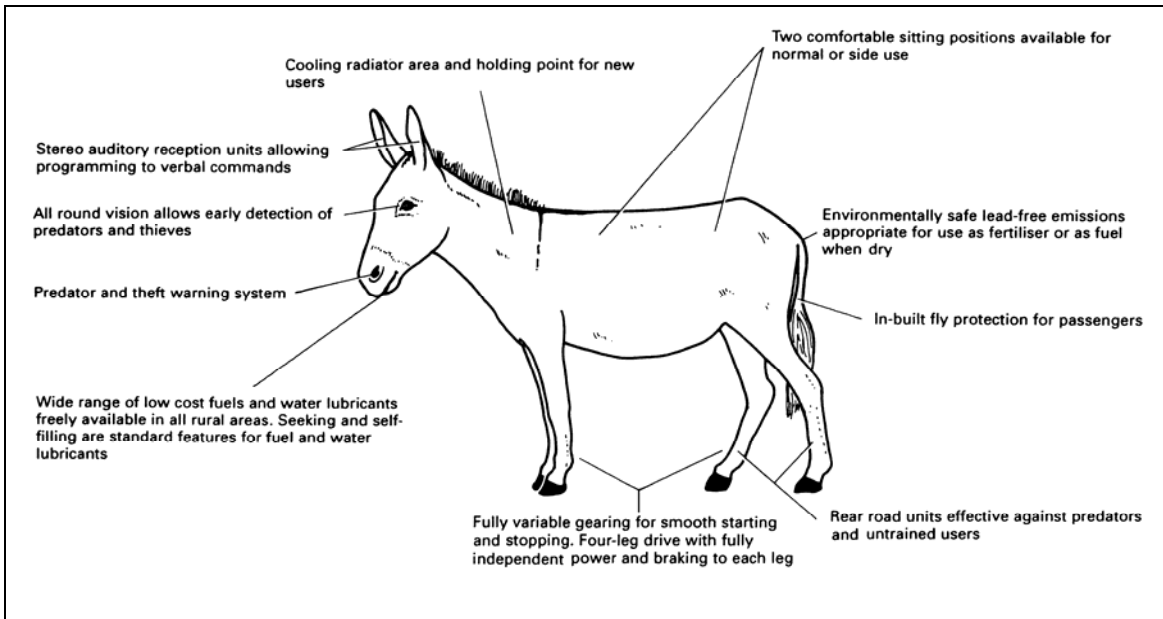


Fig. "Four-leg drive rural power source": The many advantages of the domesticated donkey as summarised by Fielding & Krause (1998: 109, fig. 7.1).

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