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Betwixt and Between the Bactrian Camel and the Dromedary: The Semantic Evolution of the Lexeme *udru* during the 11th to 8th Centuries BCE^{*}

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Abstract

This paper strives to overturn the general consensus that has formed over the past three decades on the identification of the Akkadian lexeme *udru* as exclusively designating the Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*). This general opinion does not appreciate the semantic evolution of the lexeme *udru* during the Iron Age. By examining references to *udru* in Mesopotamian texts from a diachronic perspective, we can outline the semantic evolution of the lexeme. It will be demonstrated that the lexeme *udru* without any qualifications designated the camel in general and the dromedary in particular during the 11th to 9th centuries BCE. Only after the Assyrians defeated the Arabians in the 8th century BCE and became better acquainted with the dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*), did the lexeme *udru* start to designate the Bactrian camel in particular.

Keywords: Akkadian Assyria Camel Animal names Animal husbandry

1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been a trend to associate the Indo-Iranian loanword *udru*¹ solely with the Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*) in Akkadian (Heide 2010: 349; CAD U/W: 22). Ever since Wolfgang Heimpel's (1980: 331)

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¹Plu. *udru*, fem. *udrāti*, masc. *udrū*, *udurū*. Although we don't know from which Indo-Iranian language the Akkadian lexeme *udru* was borrowed, the word for camel in the Avesta and the Rig Veda is *ushtra/uštra* (उश्त्र). However, it is difficult to derive *udru* from *ushtra* (Bulliet 1975: 154–155, 304 n. 32). It is possible that *udru* was borrowed from an Indo-Iranian people that used a cognate of Sanskrit *voḍhr* (वोढ्र) 'drawing, bearing, carrying, bringing, or one who bears or carries; draught horse or bull', Avestan *važdra* 'pulling' to derive their word for camel (cf. Bulliet 1975).

identification of *udru* as *Trampeltier*, the ‘Bactrian camel’, many scholars have followed Heimpel’s lead, such as Wolfram von Soden (1965–1981 3: 1401), Daniel Potts (2004: 153, 161), who states that the translation of *udrate* as dromedaries “is surely wrong”, and Martin Heide (2010: 348–349), who went so far as to declare that *udru* “exclusively designated the Bactrian camel”.² Unlike the consensus that has evolved on the identification of the Sumerian terms AM.SI.KUR.RA ‘elephant of the mountain(-land)’³ and AM.SI.ĤAR.RA.AN ‘elephant of the road’⁴ as designations for the Bactrian camel,⁵ and ANŠE.A.AB.BA ‘donkey of the sea’ as the dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*) (Heide 2010: 348; Magee 2015: 267), the growing consensus on the identification of *udru* as exclusively designating the Bactrian camel in Akkadian, irrespective of the time period, is problematic because it does not appreciate the semantic evolution of the lexeme *udru* during the Iron Age.

2 11th to mid-9th Centuries BCE

The earliest attestation of the lexeme *udru* appears on the Broken Obelisk (11th century BCE), which states that Aššur-bēl-kala (1074/3–1057/6 BCE) dispatched merchants who acquired *ud-ra-a-te*^{MEŠ}. He bred herds of *ud-ra-a-te*^{MEŠ} and displayed them to the people of his land (Grayson 1991: 103–104). Later, Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884 BCE) received 30 *ud-ra-te* from Hindanu, a city on the Middle Euphrates river in Iraq (Grayson 1991: 175). Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) also received *ud-ra-a-te* from Hindanu (Grayson 1991: 200). Whether the camels of Aššur-bēl-kala and Hindanu were dromedaries or Bactrians depends on the identification of *udru*.

3 9th century BCE

The lexical evolutions during the reigns of Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE) and Šamši-Adad V (824–811 BCE) can facilitate the identification of *udru*. Assyrian scribes referred to Bactrian camels from Gilzānu, which was located west/southwest of Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran, in the following man-

²However, in a personal communication (October 9, 2016) Heide has since overturned his opinion: “I changed my opinion about the ‘*udru*.’ E.g., I do not think any more that ‘*udru*’ is a term for ‘Bactrian camel;’ I rather think it is a term for ‘camel’ generally, comprising both dromedaries and Bactrian camels” (cf. SAD, ‘*udru*’).

³This is a reference to the Zagros Mountains (Heide 2010: 348).

⁴Heide notes, “In am.si.ĥar.ra.an, the Akkadian word *ĥarrānum* ‘way; road’ or ‘journey; caravan’ seems to refer primarily to the use of the Bactrian camel in caravan trading” (Heide 2010: 348). With the exception of the appearance of AM.SI.ĤAR.RA.AN in the Sumerian love song Dumuzi-Inanna P, col. iii, lines 24–25, (restored in CAD I/J: 2), the terms AM.SI.ĤAR.RA.AN and AM.SI.KUR.RA seem to occur only in lexical texts, cf. the Sumerian term GÚ.GUR₅ (camel?) (see Steinkeller 2009; Yuhong 2010).

⁵However, in a personal communication (October 10, 2016) Heide now views these terms as “possible designations,” and notes, “Both terms, similarly as *udru*, are never explicitly identified as Bactrian camels by the Assyrian scribes.”

ner: *ta-ma-ra-te*⁶ *ša šu-un-na še-ri-ši-na*; 2 *tam(a)-ra-te*⁷ *ša 2 gu-un-gu-li-pi*; *ú-du-ri*^{MEŠ} *ša šu-un-na gu-ga-li-pe-ši-na*; and ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA^{MEŠ} *ša šu-na-a-a še-ri-ši-na* (Grayson 1996: 9, 15, 103, 149–150), all of which express the Bactrian as a camel (dromedary) with two humps or a two-humped camel (dromedary). Based on the fact that the dromedary was never referred to in any text as an ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA, AM.SI.KUR.RA, AM.SI.ĤAR.RA.AN, *udru*, *ibilu*⁸ or *gammalu*⁹ with ‘one hump’, Heide (2010; 2011: 348–50, 360) rightly concludes that the dromedary was seen as the usual form of the camel, whilst the Bactrian camel was seen as a special form of the camel.

This notion that the Assyrian scribes saw the dromedary as the usual form of the camel is supported by inscriptions on the Black Obelisk (9th century BCE), where the Bactrian is referred to as an ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA (dromedary) with two humps, as well as an inscription from Calah (Nimrud) (9th century BCE), which states that Šamši-Adad V brought ^{ANŠE}*ud-ra-a-ti ša 2.TA.ÀM iš-qu-bi-ti* ‘camels with two humps’ from the mountain fortifications of Mēsu, a mountain city in northwestern Iran (Grayson 1996: 149–150, 185). The inscription from Calah displays the full semantic value of *udru*: first, it employs the word *ud-ra-a-ti* with the qualification ‘with two humps’ for the Bactrian, and second, it adds ANŠE (donkey) to *ud-ra-a-ti* as in the case of ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA. The term ANŠE ‘donkey’ was used for the domesticated dromedary, which was controlled by a strap around the muzzle like a donkey (ANŠE), hence ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA ‘donkey of the sea’, whereas the Bactrian, which was controlled by a nose peg, was referred to as an elephant (AM.SI) as in AM.SI.KUR.RA ‘elephant of the mountain(-land)’ and AM.SI.ĤAR.RA.AN ‘elephant of the road’.¹⁰

⁶Streck notes that the alleged spelling *ta-ma-ra-te* is conspicuous and should be read clearly as *ú-du-ri* (SAD, ‘udru’).

⁷Streck argues that this was probably a scribal error in which the scribe did not understand the foreign word *udru* in a *vorlage* and misread *ú-du-* as *ta-ma-* = *tam(a)-* (SAD, ‘udru’; ‘tamru’). In a personal communication (October 10, 2016) Heide supports this theory in lieu of his previous suggestion that it was possibly a typo for *tam-ra(-a)-te*, which in turn should be read as *ud-ra(-a)-te* because *tam* is the same sign as *ud* (Heide 2010: 349). Heide’s previous interpretation seems more plausible given that *ú-du-* and *ta-ma-* are completely different signs.

⁸The term *ibilu* (*i-bi-lu*) was common in Semitic languages except for the Canaanite subfamily. The root of *ibilu* is non-Semitic in origin. In Sabaeen, *’bl* exclusively designated the domesticated dromedary (Heide 2010: 346, 348).

⁹The earliest use of the West Semitic loanword *gammalu/gamlu* ^{ANŠE}GAM.MAL for the camel appears on the Kurkh Stele of Shalmaneser III in reference to the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE to which Gindibu the Arab brought 1 LIM ^{ANŠE}*gam-ma-lu* (1,000 camels) (Grayson 1996: 23). Of note is a ration list (tablet 269) discovered at Alalakh (level VII) and dated to the 18th century BCE. According to Wiseman, line 59 𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶 reads 1 ŠÀ.GAL ^{ANŠE}GAM*.MAL* (𐎶𐎶𐎶), ‘one (measure) as fodder for the camel’. However, Lambert challenged this reading, stating that GAM.MAL is not attested until later Assyrian texts, and 𐎶𐎶𐎶𐎶 should be read DĀRA.MAŠ ‘stag’. Alternatively, Wolfram von Soden has suggested ANŠE.GÚR.NUN[.NA] (= *kūdanu(m)*) ‘mule’. In a personal communication (October 10, 2016) Heide noted that von Soden’s suggestion “not only respects the actual cuneiform signs that were collated by Wiseman in 1959, but also proposes an animal that fits better into the general context” (Wiseman 1953: plate XXXII; Wiseman 1959: 29, 33; Bulliet 1975: 64; Lambert 1960: 42; Von Soden 1965–1981: 498–499).

¹⁰Akin to the Sumerian term for the horse, ^{ANŠE}KUR.RA ‘donkey of the mountain(-land)’, for the scribes to employ ANŠE ‘donkey’ to describe the dromedary reveals their understanding of the animal: the dromedary’s condition in the Mesopotamian context was similar to that of the donkey.

4 8th century BCE

During the mid-8th century BCE there was another lexical evolution. In the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE) there was an expansion in the Assyrian lexicon on camel typology. In reference to Bactrian camels brought from the mountains and lands east of Assyria, the scribes employed ^{ANŠE}*ud-ra-a-te* like the Calah Stele of Šamši-Adad V but dropped the qualification ‘with two humps’ (Tadmor 1994: 108). When the Assyrians received tribute from cities, peoples and tribes in Arabia, such as the Sabaeans, Tayma, and Qedar, the scribes referred to the male dromedary as ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA or *ibilē*, the she-camel as ^{SAL/MUNUS.ANŠE}*a-na-qa-a-te*, and their young as ^{ANŠE}*ba-ak-ka-ri* (Tadmor 1994: 88, 108). It appears that these terms are Arabian loanwords appropriated by Assyrian scribes after Tiglath-Pileser III defeated the Arabians (Livingstone 1997: 260). It is clear that as the Mesopotamians became more familiar with the camel their terminology was refined to the point of technical precision.

5 Conclusion

The technical terminology found in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III is a mid-late 8th century BCE phenomenon. To transpose mid-late 8th century BCE semantics to 11th to 9th centuries BCE usage is anachronistic given that the camel was an animal with two distinct species, at times interbred (Potts 2004: 160–161), and was foreign to the Mesopotamians. The dromedary did not become commonplace until the 8th century BCE. This anachronistic reading is responsible for leading Heide to declare that *udru* exclusively designated the Bactrian even though he noticed that “even when the Assyrian scribe employed the term *udru* for the Bactrian camel, he pointed sometimes in a tautological fashion to the fact that it was two-humped” (2010: 349). The qualification ‘two-humped’ would only seem tautological if one assumed the 8th century BCE semantics for *udru*. Had the qualification appeared in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, it may be regarded as tautological given the precise terminology used therein. However, the qualification does not appear in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III. Therefore, it stands to reason that from the 11th to 9th centuries BCE, *udru* had a similar meaning to our contemporary understanding of the word ‘camel’, i.e. it may refer to either the dromedary or the Bactrian, or camels in general but it is most often culturally associated with the dromedary. Therefore, when explicitly expressing the Bactrian, the scribes employed the qualification ‘with two humps’, a point which can be demonstrated by mining through the Sumerian-Akkadian *urra* (= *hubullu*) and

First, a muzzle strap was used for the dromedary like the donkey rather than the nose peg for the Bactrian (Bulliet 1975: 149–150). Second, the dromedary was seen as a mount and beast of burden in a role akin to that of the donkey. Both characteristics demonstrate a domesticated animal. Either or both of these features may have inspired the scribes to refer to the dromedary as ^{ANŠE}A.AB.BA in a domesticated context in 14th to 13th century BCE texts see Heide (2010: 346–348, 351–354, 359–360).

urgud lexical series and other lists containing fauna.¹¹ This also explains why *udru* was never assigned to AM.SI.KUR.RA ‘elephant of the mountain(-land)’ and AM.SI.ĦAR.RA.AN ‘elephant of the road’ in the *urra* and *urgud* lexical series (cf. Heide 2010: 349).¹² However, ^{ANŠE}*ud-ra-a-ti* is equated with *ga-ma-[la]-ti* ‘female dromedaries’ in a 7th century BCE Sultantepe tablet (Landsberger & Gurney 1957–1958: 332; Gurney 1981–1982: 98; Horowitz 2008: 599).

In conclusion, it is no longer tenable to identify *udru* as exclusively designating the Bactrian camel. It is my contention that the usage of *udru* in the 11th to 9th centuries BCE without the qualification ‘with two humps’ referred to the camel in general and the dromedary in particular, and it was not until the mid-late 8th century BCE that *udru* without the qualification ‘with two humps’ would start to designate the Bactrian camel in particular. However, even as late as the 7th century BCE, *udru* without the qualification ‘with two humps’ was still equated with the dromedary.

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¹¹Heide (2010: 350) concludes, “The dromedary was not regarded as a novelty which had to be defined by its relative, the Bactrian camel, which had been domesticated already in the 3rd millennium, but vice versa: the Bactrian camel was in the lexical lists and sometimes also in campaign reports and in contract-letters defined by going back to the common terms used for the dromedary in the 2nd millennium.”

¹²In a personal communication (October 10, 2016), Heide said, “I think now that the reason why *udru* was never assigned to am.si.kur.ra and am.si.ĥar.ra.an has to do with the fact that both am-si-kur-ra and am-si-ĥar-ran came out of use in the 1st millennium, they were only copied in lexical lists, whereas *udru* is not known from any text before the 11th century BCE. In short, these terms were not contemporary in practical use.”

Sigla

CAD	Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (Roth et al. 1956–2010)
SAD	<i>Supplement to the Akkadian Dictionaries</i> . http://altorient.gko.uni-leipzig.de/etymd.html (accessed 9 October 2016).

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