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نقش شتر در فرهنگ بشری

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## چکیده

شترها به خاطر فیزیولوژی ویژه خود که می توانند در برابر تشنگی و شرایط آب و هوایی نامطلوب مقاومت کنند و حیوانی مناسب برای بارکشی و سواری هستند، نظر انسان ها را به خود جلب کردند. از این رو آنها این حیوان را اهلی کردند. بعد از اهلی شدن، آنها در فرهنگ بشری به خصوص در حوزه پزشکی، ستاره شناسی، کتب مقدس مانند قرآن شریف و انجیل و ادبیات ظاهر شدند. این نوشتار سعی بر این دارد رد پای آنها در حوزه های یاد شده پیدا کند.

کلمات کلیدی: شتر، فرهنگ، ادبیات، ستاره شناسی، کتب مقدس و پزشکی

### The Role of Camel in human culture

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#### Abstract

Camels attracted humans from early times because of their remarkable physiology which can resist the horrible weather conditions and their ability to tolerate thirstiness, as well as of being suitable for ride and carrying loads. So the humans tamed them. From that time onward, appeared in their human culture; therefore, their presence is traceable in medicine, astronomy, Scriptures such as Koran and Bible, as well as literature. This article tries to track down their footprints in the above mentioned areas.

**Key Words:** Camel, Culture, Literature, Astronomy, Scriptures, and Medicine.



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Early times people particularly in desert regions were well aware that camels can endure intense thirst and heat, feed on thorns which other animals cannot eat, and carry heavy loads in deserts; therefore, they did their level best to domesticate them to fully utilize their capacities. When early humans tamed them, the camels became a part of their culture. This article attempts to show their role in human culture. To investigate their role in the human culture, one should not only study their customs and beliefs in which camels are participants, but also delve into Scriptures and literary works in which they are used figuratively.

One of the customs that clearly reflects camels' participation in human culture is their use as a medical solution to fight against plague by Arabian people in the past. Whenever the plague broke out in their cities, city dwellers set their camels free from different parts of city so that the plague could destroy just the camels not them and after that leave the affected areas and Frazer (2009) in his book: *Golden Borough* explains it,

*In Arabia, when the plague is raging, the people will sometimes lead a camel through all the quarters of the town in order that the animal may take the pestilence on itself. Then they strangle it in a sacred place and imagine that they have rid themselves of the camel and of the plague at one blow* (p.1264).

To give another clear example, camels' urine combined with their milk was used as cure for the swollen abdomen. This treatment was suggested by Prophet Mohammed when a group of Bedouin visited him and asked him to show them a way to cure, "some people came to Madina and fell ill with bloated abdomens. The Prophet told them to combine the milk and urine of a camel and drink that, after which they recovered" (Wadi)

Another clue to understand camels' presence in the culture of humans can be astronomy. In the past humans' knowledge about stars was very limited and their understanding of astronomy was based on either mythology or objects or creatures around them. Interestingly, camel is one of those animals which inspired Turkmen to explain the existence of the Milky Way. According to Aghipoor (2014),

*From early times Turkmen believed that when a she-camel lost her baby or a wolf robbed her from her, the anxious camel began to cry and look for her baby hither and thither while her milk sack was full of milk and from which milk was dripping leaving a milky path behind her. Then the drops of milk are transformed into a start and the star forms the Milky Way* (p.14)

The Holy Scriptures such as Koran and Bible which are the important aspect of Islamic and Christian cultures consequently are the gateways to conceive camels' figurative function in those cultures. In Koran God warns that those who deny His revelations, the gates of Paradise for them will be shut for and He likens the impossibility of their entering into Heaven to the impossibility of a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, "Lo! they who

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deny our revelations and scorn them, for them the gates of heaven will not be opened nor they enter the garden until the camel goeth through the needle's eye" (p.118). In this verse camel is metaphor of those unbelievers that disregards the sings of God and minimize them proudly. Their inability to pass through the eye of the needle indicates that their sin is too heinous to be forgiven. Similarly in New Testament, once a young rich man asked Jesus to teach me a way to earn eternal life, and Jesus told him "do not commit murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not accuse someone anyone falsely. Respect your father and your mother; and love your neighbor" (p.28). The man said to Jesus that I obeyed all of the commandments but gave a better one and Jesus told him to sell all his properties and distribute their money among the poor. The man got disappointed and departed. After that Jesus to his disciples said, "I assure you: it will be very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. I repeat it is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for camel to go through the eye of a needle" (ibid.). To appreciate the above verse, one has to get familiar context of the event. At the time of Jesus, it was believed that "all the wealth was a blessing from God [and] if one was poor, the people believed that he must be cursed by God" The main reason for Jesus to use the statement was to shatter this false belief and emphasize that worldly possessions are formidable berries to reaching God.

Literature is one of the main branches of human culture and it is an appropriate area to discover their figurative part in the human culture. They have served both as positive and negative symbols in literature. Regarding the good representation of the camels, Sadi, 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, offers their good image in one of his anecdotes in his Gulistan, Rose Garden. The anecdote tells the story of a strict Muslim and a group of young men riding their camels to Hejaz. During the trip, the young sing spiritual songs which infuriate the religious man. When they reach a palm-tree garden, they stop to rest meanwhile a young Arab boy comes out of the trees and begins to sing such a beautiful and animating song that the camel of morally serious man gets too intoxicated and excited to be stopped by pulling its rein; the camel flings the man and runs toward desert. Sadi himself is a traveller in the same journey tells to the man,

*Oh Sheik, those strains delighted the brutes but made no impression on you... what kind of man art thou who are ignorant of love? The camel is thrown into ecstasy by Arabic verses for which if thou has no relish, thou art a cross-grained brute (p.194).*

In this anecdote, the camel is compared to a religious-narrow-minded man who cannot appreciate and respond to the beauty of song so he is classified with wild animals because of that. Unlike the clergyman, the camel is stimulated to dance and feel pure ecstasy by hearing the song, so it can represent those people whose hearts get warm, their psychological loads lighten, and romantic feelings are inspired when they hear good songs,

<sup>1</sup> ([www.eyeftheneedle.net](http://www.eyeftheneedle.net)).



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and their reaction to music in turn lends support to their humanity and difference with brutes. The camel also can symbolize the tolerant religiosity that does not repudiate good songs and music as an impediment to spirituality and or the powerful factor in corrupting the purity of soul. On the contrary, camels can embody negative ideas in literature as well. For instance, in the fourth book of Rumi's *Spiritual Couplets* there is an allegory in which camels symbolize Human desires, belonging to Satanic domain, are trying to precluding Reason, related to the world of Angels, to meet God, the Ultimate Beloved. The literal level of the story tells the story of Majnun, a passionate lover, likes to visit Leili, his dearly beloved, living far from him. The best transport medium for him to pass a desert to join her is camel. To reach his eventual destination faster, Majnun keeps his camel's foal at home thinking that her foal will prolong his trip. In the middle of desert while riding his camel, he becomes utterly absorbed in the sweet thought of Leili; he gets oblivious of the fact that where his camel is taking him. Majnun's daydreaming is as an ideal opportunity for the camel that heads towards her foal back at home. When Majnun comes out from his trance like states, he realizes that he is at home once more, and this even is repeated many times. At the end, Majnun resolves never to ride his camel, and leave it at home near to her foal. Instead of camel, he undertakes his journey on foot. Regarding the deep level, this allegory depicts humans' journey to meet God and Majnun is an Everyman. Reaching God is rife with difficulties which impede the spiritual progress although Reason or angelic side aspires to achieve the divine purpose. Human desires function like those obstacles and impose blockade on humans' mind so that it cannot approach God. One way to block Reason's divine progress by human desires is through developing attachments to familial relationships; for example, in the allegory under discussion the she-camel which stands for human desires, strongly is attached to her foal; therefore Reason is hampered by this attachment and fails to move toward the divine visitation.

### Conclusion

Being aware of the multi-functionality of camels, early humans domesticated and used them for performing the variety of tasks. From that time onward they became participants in the human culture and their images were woven into intricate web human culture which is comprised of many parts such as medicine, astronomy, religion, and literature to name a few. Thus the camels naturally can be traceable in above- mentioned aspects. In the past, they employed for medical purposes like combatting with plague and swollen stomach, as well as providing an explanation for the formation of Milky Way. They were used figuratively in Koran and Bible to symbolize the impossibility of getting into heaven for those who deny the God's signs and those who consider wealth as a gift from God and poverty a cures. In literature, they represent both good and negative concepts. When they embody the religious tolerance and acceptance of decent songs and music, symbolically they are positive but when they stand for the obstacles to humans' spiritual pilgrimage they symbolize the negative ideas.



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