

Did the Ancient Egyptians Ride Donkeys? A Review of Textual and Iconographical Evidence

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Abstract

Donkey riding is even less represented and mentioned in Ancient Egypt than horse riding. The rare examples give the impression that this practice—now quite widespread in modern Egypt—was despised and seen as typical of foreigners and weak people. Consequently, it is often asserted that healthy Egyptians would not ride donkeys and that those rare images showing them in this situation are not to be considered as realistic. But does this not lead to a downward cycle? Why not consider these few occurrences showing fit Egyptians on donkeys as evidence of such a practice? After reviewing the Pharaonic documents evoking donkey riding, the author leads a reflection on the reasons why this practice is so little represented.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, animal, mobility, transportation, horse, riding, donkey, social status

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يُعد ركوب الحمير أقل تمثيلاً وذكرًا في مصر القديمة من ركوب الخيل. وتعطي الأمثلة النادرة الموجودة لهذا الأمر الانطباع بأن هذه الممارسة - التي أصبحت الآن منتشرة على نطاق واسع في مصر الحديثة - كانت محتقرة ويُنظر إليها على أنها تخص الأجانب والضعفاء. وبالتالي، غالبًا ما يتم التأكيد على أن المصريين الأصحاء لا يركبون الحمير، وأن تلك الصور النادرة التي تظهرهم في هذا الموقف لا يمكن اعتبارها واقعية. لكن ألا يؤدي هذا إلى حلقة مفرغة؟ لماذا لا نعتبر هذه الأحداث القليلة التي تُظهر مصريين راكبين على الحمير دليلًا على مثل هذه الممارسة؟ بعد مراجعة الوثائق الفرعونية التي تستحضر ركوب الحمير، يقود المقال إلى التفكير في أسباب قلة تمثيل هذه الممارسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مصر القديمة؛ حيوان؛ إمكانية التنقل؛ مواصلات؛ حصان؛ ركوب؛ حمار؛ الحالة الاجتماعية

Introduction

The domestic horse appeared in Ancient Egypt between the end of the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period, i.e., around the 17th century BCE (Meeks 2005, 51; Vernus 2005, 535). The vast majority of its representations show it pulling chariots, not only in military but also in ceremonial contexts (Köpp-Junk 2015, 188-209); known cases of horse riding are very rare (see below). The domestic donkey (*Equus asinus*) was introduced much earlier in the life of the Ancient Egyptians: faunal remains were discovered in the delta from the end of the 5th millennium or the beginning of the

4th millennium BCE and in the Valley from the 4th millennium BCE (Rossel et al. 2008, 3716; Lesur-Gebramariam 2010, 42; Vandenbeusch 2020, 39–62). When this animal is represented at work, it is mostly as a beast of burden: according to images and texts, it is used for carrying products as diverse as cereals, plants, water, wood, dung, or animal foals (Prévost unpublished). However, very few images show donkeys carrying people, so it was often stated that while donkey riding is very common in modern Egypt, it was not (or scarcely) practiced by Ancient Egyptians (Nibbi 1979, 154 and note 46; Griffiths 1980, 77; Houlihan 2002, 35; Vernus 2005, 462).

There are indeed some cases of donkey riding, but the best known of them represent foreigners and what we could call weak individuals, namely, children, exhausted soldiers, and dead people. This led some Egyptologists to consider that representations of grown-up Egyptian donkey riders had a humorous goal; for example, Houlihan, mentioning the ostrakon MM 14107 from the Medelhavsmuseet (Figure 1; website of the Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm), supposes that this depiction of a human figure on a donkey cannot be considered evidence for donkey riding (Houlihan 2002, 39–41). It is true that similar ostraca from the same site (Deir el-Medina) show humans riding other animals, such as a bull (e.g., ostrakon MM 14057; website of the Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm) or a horse (e.g., ostrakon Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin 21826; Brunner-Traut 1956, pl. VIII). However, while bovine riding was probably not common, horse riding is, even if not frequently, attested (Schulman 1957, 264–270; Turner 2021, 253–255). So why not give it, and the ostrakon with the donkey, the benefit of the doubt? Is the author not imprisoned in a loop, in which it becomes impossible to take seriously any potential evidence of donkey riding because supposedly this practice did not exist? It seems, on the contrary, important to examine all the clues with a fresh perspective, before establishing which ones are realistic or not.

In this study, I will review the Ancient Egyptian sources that mention or represent donkey riding, the identity and condition of the riders, and their attitude, before evaluating to what measure this practice could have been common in Pharaonic Egypt, and making some

assumptions as to why it would be so little attested in the sources.¹ I will focus on the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, without excluding documents from more recent periods when they display interesting parallels.



Figure 1: Ostrakon MM 14107 (Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm; CC-BY).

1. A Ride for the Foreigners, the Weak, and the Dead?

It is not easy to determine what is the earliest known occurrence of donkey riding in Ancient Egypt. There are some potential images from rock art, but they are often very difficult to date; for example, a graffito of a human riding a donkey was discovered in the Wadi Rasras by the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project, but it is uncertain if the donkey is from Naqadan period or the Old Kingdom, nor if the rider was not

¹ Some of the arguments in favor of the existence of donkey-riding were tackled in other papers: Prévost 2021, 87–89; Prévost 2022, 94–96; Prévost, unpublished. This paper is both a development and an update of the reflection of the author on this topic.

added later (Vanhulle et al. forthcoming. For another rock art graffito, in North Etbai, but also a potential palimpsest: Červíček 1974, Fig. 183). Stadelmann identified as donkeys ridden quadrupeds on a sealing from the First Dynasty, discovered at Tura and wearing the *serekh* of King Aha (El-Sadeek & Murphy 1983; Stadelmann 2006, 301); but the Sethian-like heads and the tails—some of which are bushy and others feline-like—rather indicate that they are fantastic beasts. Let us note, however, that all the adult skeletons discovered in subsidiary graves around the funerary enclosure of the same king, although in good health and clearly of high status, had their proximal femurs showing deformations that could point to intensive riding (Adams 2021). Since, at that time, horses were not yet introduced in Egypt, could these members of the elite have been riding donkeys such as those discovered also in Abydos during the same period, maybe under the same reign (Rossel et al. 2008, Adams 2021)? This would need to be proven by more evidence, but it would echo the donkey riding by elites attested in 3rd-millennium Mesopotamia and Jordan (Mitchell 2018, 87). For Mitchell, donkey riding was then associated with high status because it supposed the specific ability to master and mount a recently domesticated animal (Mitchell 2018, 86-87); this remark is also relevant for Early Dynastic Egypt, the donkeys from Abydos still presenting some characteristics of the wild ass (Rossel et al. 2008, 3717-3718).

The first clear and dated evidence of donkeys transporting men comes from funerary scenes of the 5th Dynasty, where the deceased is represented sitting or kneeling in a carrying chair supported, not by men as is usually the case (Vandier

1964, 328–351; Köpp-Junk 2015, 173–188), but by two donkeys. Two such scenes are to be found in parallel walls in the chapel of Niankhkhnum and Knhumhotep at Saqqara (Moussa & Altenmüller 1977, 114-115, pl. 42-43); one is in the tomb of Urkhuu in Giza (Fig. 2; Lepsius ed. 1972, pl. 43a); a third scene is known through a fragment whose original context is lost (Martin 1979, pl. 33 [90]; Harpur 2016, 185–187, Fig. 3 p. 210).



Figure 2: Urkhuu on his chair carried by two donkeys (CAD, from Hassan 1944, Fig. 104 p. 245; © Mathilde Prévost).

The donkey chair is clearly used to highlight the status of the tomb owner, as much as the chair carried by men (Köpp-Junk 2015, 184-185)—in other words, the donkeys contribute here to reflect the high rank of their master. But its representations disappeared after the 5th Dynasty (unless the fragment was from a later period). In the biography of Sabni, this governor of Elephantine from the 6th Dynasty tells how he organized an expedition to Nubia in order to recover the body of his deceased father, who probably passed away during a mission: “It is on a donkey (*hr ʿ3*) that I found this sole companion. I ordered it to be car[r]ied by the troop of my funerary domain. I made for him a coffin [in Lebanese wood]. It is to bring him from these foreign lands that I brought i[t] (the coffin) along with [its lid].” (Sethe 1933,

136.3-137.3; Strudwick 2005, 336; Stauder-Porchet 2017, 275-276).

It seems that Sabni did not like the condition in which he discovered his father's body and hastened to change it, considering human carriers as a more dignified position. This sounds contradictory with the donkey-chair from the previous dynasty: was the donkey then considered as a worthy means of transportation, but no longer during the 6th Dynasty?

There are no other known sources about dead bodies carried by a donkey until the 26th Dynasty, during which the animal is shown or mentioned carrying the corpse of Osiris (Fakhry 1940, 866, Fig. 97; Fakhry 1942, 146, Fig. 115 p. 145; Meeks 2006, 12-13; Vandenbeusch 2020, 199-203, 382-383). Osiris is carried by Seth in the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts*, but it is not established if the murdering god has then the form of a donkey (Griffiths 1980, 74-76; Meeks 2006, 209). In the Dramatic Ramesseum Papyrus dated from the 12th Dynasty, donkeys are associated with a ritual in which cereals are identified to murdered Osiris (col. 29-33, scene 36), but their function is not explicit (Griffiths 1980, 163-164; Lorand 2009, 118-119). In other words, with the exception of the father of Sabni, there is no evidence of donkeys carrying bodies of mortals, which might be due to the avoidance of representations of Egyptian nonmummified corpses (Verhoeven 1986, col. 643-645).

However, it is in a wretched position that the soldier from the Ramesside miscellanies returns to Egypt after years spent abroad: "He is brought back on the donkey (*hr p3 3*), while his clothes were furtively taken, and his companion fled."

(P. Anastasi III, rto 6.1-6.2 = P. Anastasi IV, 9.12-10.1: Gardiner 1937, 26, 45; Caminos 1954, 92 and 169).

Until now, the examples discussed were not evidence of donkey riding strictly speaking: the carrying chairs and dead bodies are carried on the back of the equids like any other burden (*contra* Houlihan 2002, 37), and it is unclear if the soldier, hurt, exhausted, or even dying, is actually riding the donkey or is lying on its back, similar to a dead corpse.

The first Egyptian representations of actual donkey riding come from Middle Kingdom inscriptions in Serabit el-Khadim: on four stelae, commemorating royal extractive missions led to the Sinai under the reign of Amenemhat III, the leader of a small Asiatic contingent that joined the expedition is represented; in each case, he is riding a donkey (Gardiner & Peet 1952, pl. XXXVII, XXXIX, XLIV, LXXXV; Gardiner, Peet & Černý 1955, 114, 119, 108, 206; Tallet 2018, 39-40, 168-170, 183, 187). The fact that artists represented these chiefs in this way (Figure 3) shows that this position was considered characteristic of men from Retenu, or at least of their leaders (Schroer 2008, 38). Indeed, in the Near East, the donkey was perceived, along with the mule, as an elite, even royal, means of transportation (Stadelmann 2006, 303-304; Schroer 2008, 38, 57-58). Did the Ancient Egyptians from the 12th Dynastic find this practice strange and exotic? Or was it the fact that chiefs were observed in this situation that was found surprising? Was it considered degrading?

A scarab from the Second Intermediate Period (Berlin, ÄM 9517) also supports the image of a human riding a donkey. Some elements are reminiscent of the

Ancient Egyptian iconography (like the individual following the rider reminding of the servants following the 5th Dynasty carrying chairs or the Levantine chiefs on the 12th Dynasty Sinaitic stelae), but the rider's squared clothes and headband point to Near Eastern peoples (Schroer 2008, 74, figure p. 75 (nr. 266);

Vandenbeusch 2020, 69, 285). Furthermore, he rides the equid side-saddle, like the ones from the Serabit el-Khadim stelae nr. 103 and 405. It is probable that the scarab, although discovered in the Theban region, was produced for a person of Levantine origin, maybe a Hyksos (Staubli 2001, 100).

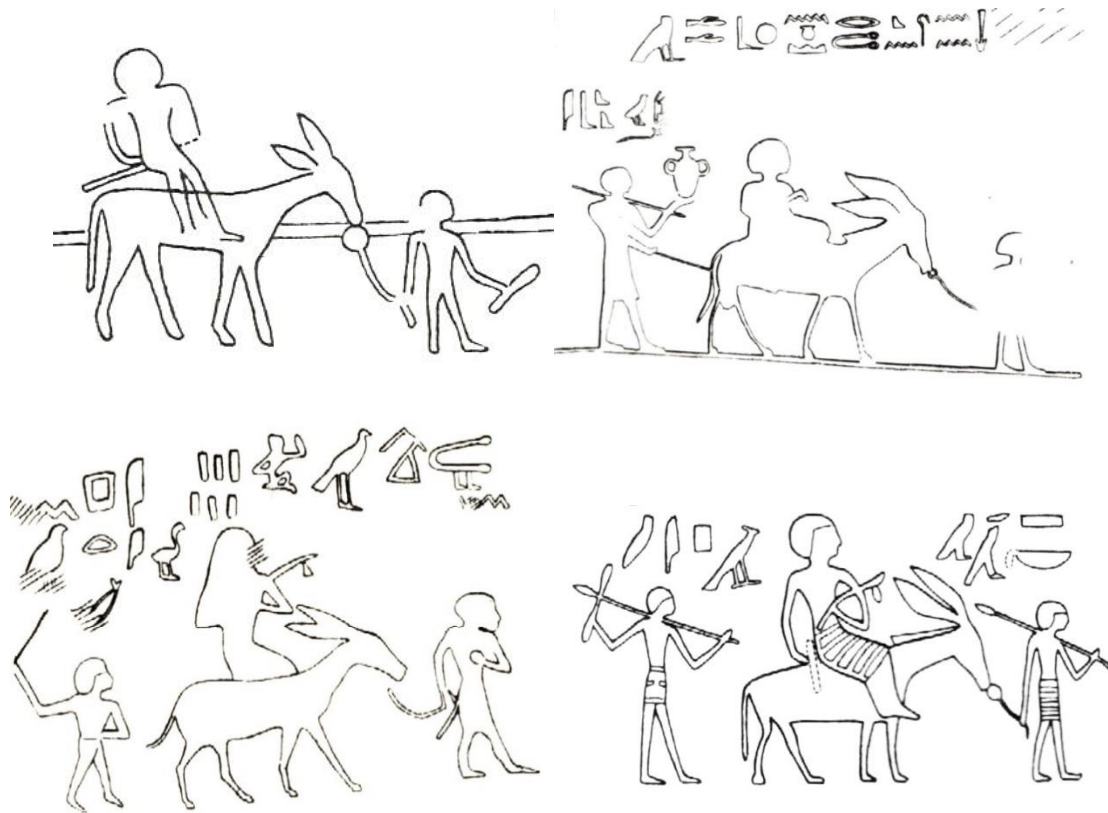


Figure 3: Asiatic leaders riding a donkey, from commemorative stelae 103, 112, 115, and 405 in Serabit el-Khadim (from Gardiner & Peet 1952, pl. LXXXV, XXXVII, XXXIX, XLIV).

In the New Kingdom, the Egyptians strangely seem to have forgotten this trait that was considered earlier typical of Asiatic leaders: when Thutmose III tells of his victory against the Levantine princes at Megiddo on a stela at the Gebel Barkal, he proudly specifies: “Then my Majesty ordered that they be granted passage to their cities; it is on donkeys (*hr ʿw*) that they scuttled off, after I seized their chariots” (Sethe 1906, 1236, 3–5;

Cumming 1984, fasc. 1, 4; Nederhof 2006).²

² A similar precision is given in the tale of the victory of Piankhy on Tefnakht, who is forced to flee (25th Dynasty): “It is riding (lit. sitting on, *hms hr*) a horse that he did, since he could not ask for a chariot; this is going northwards that he did, out of fear of his Majesty”: Vernus 2010, 38.

The victorious king seems to ignore the fact that riding a donkey is not a humiliation for these princes (Stadelmann 2006, note 19 p. 303); had the Ancient Egyptians of the New Kingdom forgotten the Asiatic chiefs riding to the Sinai mines with their men during the Middle Kingdom? Another reason for this insistence on the donkeys may be formulated: it must be highlighted that, between the 12th and the 18th Dynasty, the horse-pulled chariot was introduced in Egypt and became a strong status mark for royalty and elite (Vernus 2010, 36-37; Köpp-Junk 2015, 196-199). We can assume that, in comparison to this noble means of transportation *par excellence*, riding a donkey like the common people would simply look ridiculous to the Egyptian king and elite, who, contrary to the Asiatic princes, would not consider it as an alternative to the chariot or carrying chair (Prévost 2022, 94-95).

Besides the Levantines, other peoples were represented in association with ridden donkeys: in the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, the heavy queen of Punt is followed by her donkey (Figure 4). Besides the saddle on its back, the caption confirms its mounting function: “the donkey carrying (*f3(.w)*) his (the king of Punt’s) wife” (Neville 1898, pl. LXIX; Bongioanni et al. 2001, 156-157). Houlihan supposes that the idea of a donkey carrying a royal person, and of such a weight, would be doubly amusing to the Egyptians (Houlihan 2002, 39), but this interpretation is more difficult to check. As for Kushites, the earliest evidence of them riding donkeys is, to my knowledge, from the 25th Dynasty (Griffith 1922, 94, 98-100, pl. XXIV,

XXXI(3), XXXIII; Köpp-Junk 2015, 144-145, 148-149, Fig. 60, p. 400).

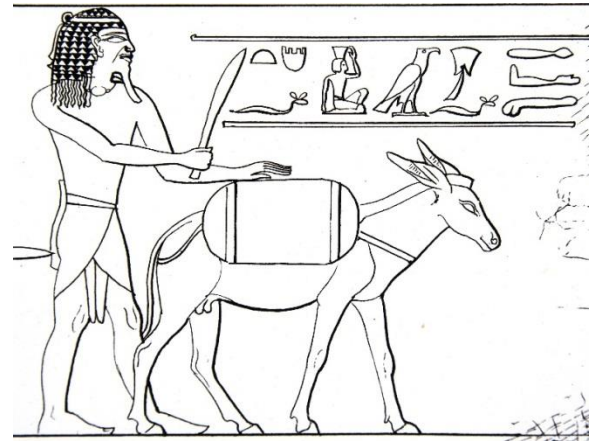


Figure 4: Saddled donkey of the queen of Punt (from Dümichen 1869, pl. VIII).

Besides foreign adults, Ancient Egyptians represented children transported by donkeys, at least a part of them being apparently also foreigners, more precisely from the East. One of the most famous images is that of the young children carried by an equid, in an Aamu caravan depicted in the tomb of Khnumhotep II in Beni Hassan (12th Dynasty): two little heads emerge from a cloth, which is strapped together with a bag tied to the side of the animal (Figure 5). It is unclear what the actual position of the two children is, who must be very young to be thus transported, since another child, probably older, is represented walking with the adults: are they sitting on the back of the donkey? Or is the cloth in which they are enveloped in reality tied to the left (invisible) side of the equid, symmetrically to the bag visible on its right side? In other words, here also, it is difficult to say if the children are riding the donkey or are carried by it like any burden.

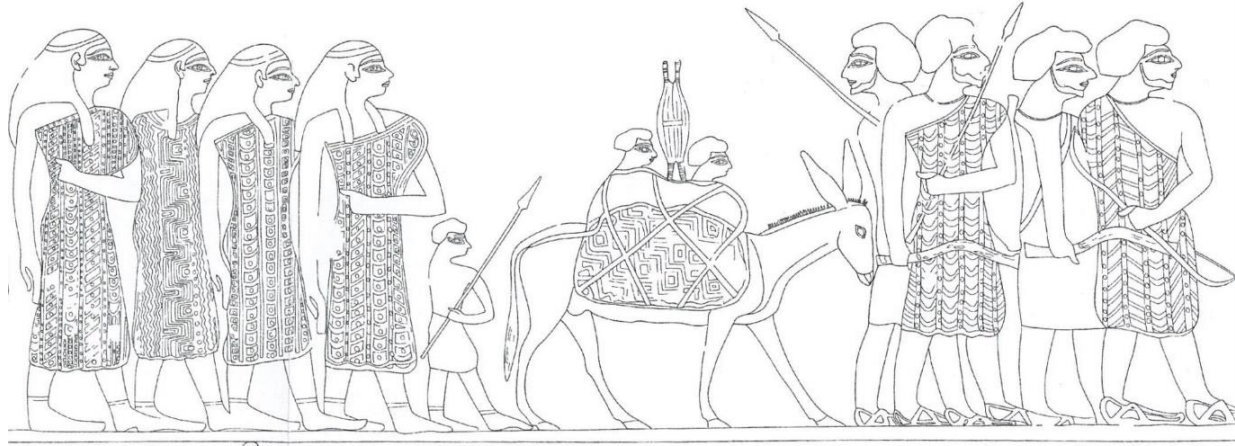


Figure 5: Part of the Aamu caravan, with a donkey carrying two children, in the tomb of Khnumhotep II (from Kanawati & Evans 2014, pl. 124, © Kanawati and Evans).

Later, children can be seen on the back of donkeys in military scenes from the end of the 18th Dynasty and the 19th Dynasty. On a block from the Memphite tomb of Urkhya, an official of Seti I and Ramesses II, two children are visible on donkeys, in a scene where an Egyptian military contingent enters or leaves a fortress (probably Tjaru) (El-Aguizy 2018; El-Aguizy 2021). The second child is naked and kneeling on a blanket stretched out on the spine of the animal; the body of the first and taller one is damaged, so that its position cannot be ascertained (Figure 6). One can wonder why children are included in these military contexts—they could be captives (El-Aguizy 2018, 6) or assistants who would take care of luggage and animals for the soldiers, such as those depicted in the representations of the military camp of Ramesses II in front of Qadesh (Wreszinski 1923, vol. II(1), pl. 81-82, 92–94; vol. II(2), pl. 169–172; Christophe et al. 1960, pl. V, VIII, X, XI, XXIX). It is not even clear if they are Egyptian or not; on the one hand, the attitude of the two young riders tends to corroborate the hypothesis of hostages: the first child

turns back to face a soldier who is holding a stick—is he threatening the youngling?³ As for the second and smaller child, he crouches on its mount, the back of its hand supporting its chin, which could reflect sadness and prostration (though I could not find any parallel for this position). On the other hand, I could not find any strict parallel for the hairstyle of this child (bold head with plaits at the back) that could link it to a specific culture (*cf.* Anthony 2017, *passim*); the closest I could find is the case of two young assistants in the military camp from the Memphite tomb of Horemheb (but with a lock on the side in addition to the hair at the back of the head; Martin 1989, pl. 94-95; Marshall 2013, Fig. 64), who are apparently Egyptians. The presence of the adults does not help as the hairstyle of some of them looks Egyptian, while that of others evokes another population (El-Aguizy 2021).

³ For a similar interaction between a foreign child and an Egyptian guard, see the end of the line of Nubian war prisoners in the tomb of Ineni (18th Dynasty): Dziobek 1992, pl. 1a.



Figure 6: Children riding donkeys in the Egyptian army in front of Tjaru (tomb of Urkhya; El-Aguizy 2018, 3, Fig. 1a; courtesy of Prof. El-Aguizy).

On another fragment from the tomb of Horemheb, one can discern a little foot on the crupper of a donkey (Wreszinski 1923, pl. 386b; Martin 1989, 36–38, pl. 28–29) but it is impossible to determine the identity of this young character, who seems to ride backward (Figure 7).

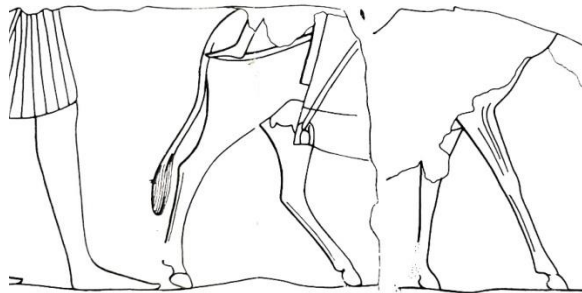


Figure 7: Donkey in the Egyptian army, with a child's foot visible on the crupper (tomb of Horemheb, block Bologna 1888; Martin 1989, pl. 29; Courtesy of The Egypt Exploration Society).

Thus, most of the evidence of donkeys carrying people is associated with foreigners and weak or weakened people, even dead bodies. Nevertheless, some documents, although not often mentioned in the reflections about donkey riding, do feature fit Egyptians.

2. Evidence for Egyptian Donkey Riding

As mentioned earlier, evidence for Egyptians riding donkeys is very thin for the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods, and, for the Old Kingdom, the only known Egyptians transported by (but not strictly speaking riding) donkeys were the elite members in carrying chairs.⁴ During the Middle Kingdom, only foreigners are shown traveling on the back of donkeys.

The scarab with the Levantine rider is from the Second Intermediate Period, but also a clay figurine discovered in Balat: it represents a donkey with, riding on its back, a short-haired man bending over a bundle (Figure 8). Nothing prevents us from supposing that this rider is Egyptian.

In the New Kingdom, Thutmose III laughs at the defeated Asiatic princes who ride home on donkey back, and the depictions of the soldier's life conclude with the latter going home to Egypt on a donkey, visibly due to his exhaustion and incapacity to walk (see above). However, two texts mention donkey riding in a matter-of-fact, or even positive, way. Firstly, the ostracon Berlin P. 12398, dated from the reign of Ramesses II,

⁴ I do not believe that the scene in the tomb of Senedjemib Mehi represents a boy climbing on the back of a donkey, as it was sometimes assumed: Lepsius ed. 1972, 73; Griffiths 1980, 77 and note 171; it is actually an example of the motif of the rebalancing of the burden during the transportation of the harvest: cf. Vandier 1978, 218; Delvaux 2023, 115, 160–162. E.g. Wild 1966, pl. CLIV. As for the bundles that Köpp-Junk identifies as saddles in other Old Kingdom tombs (Köpp-Junk 2015, 165–166, 172), they are actually empty bags that the donkeys are bringing back to the harvest: Delvaux 2023, 117.

probably alludes to transportation on donkey back in a daily context: in this letter, the sender, Khabekhnet, accuses his brother An-nakhtu of ill-treating a she-donkey and, despite her bad condition, of giving her excess charges (l. 10-11): “look, you brought her loaded <with?> all your people (*ꜣtp(w) <m? hr?> nꜣy.k rmtꜣ mꜣ-qd.w*)!” (Allam 1981, 10–12; Deir el-Medine online). A preposition is here missing after the verb *ꜣtp* (Allam 1981, note 16 p. 12), probably *hr* or *m* (Allam 1981, 12-13), which would mean that the servants of An-nakhtu did not hesitate to ride the poor creature together, despite its condition!⁵



Figure 8: Clay figurine of a donkey carrying a man and its bundle (Balat, nr.1781; Marchand & Soukiassian 2010, Fig. 512 p.334; © French Institute for Oriental Archaeology).

Secondly, the Papyrus Harris I, which sums up the exploits accomplished under the reign of Ramesses III, explicitly mentions donkeys as one of the means of transportation used by Egyptians during

⁵ Allam obviously did not doubt the Ancient Egyptians would ride donkeys: “A en croire les textes à notre disposition, l’âne constituait le moyen de transport le plus important sur terre” (Allam 1981, 13). But he does not specify what the texts in question are.

an expedition to the copper mines of Timna (78.2-3): “I sent my agents (*wꜣwty.w*) to the Gebel Atak, to the great copper mines that are there, the ones being transported by their boats-*mnš*, the others traveling by land on their donkeys (*ktꜥ.w m hrty hr nꜣy=w ꜣ.w*)” (Grandet 1994, vol. I, 338-339; vol. II, note 943 p. 261–263, pl. 79).

The preposition “on (their donkeys)” (*hr*) indicates that these travelers are riding on the back of these animals. It is true that they could use carrying chairs transported by equids, and not actually ride them (the plural *ꜣ.w* allows the ambiguity), but this type of seat has not been observed since the 5th Dynasty, so it is highly improbable that they are still in use at this time.

During the New Kingdom, the expression *wꜣwty.w nsw.t* can refer either to couriers (Valloggia 1976, 256–260) or to high officials representing the king in a mission (Valloggia 1976, 244-245, 261–263). While the first assumption is acceptable (*cf.* Valloggia 1976, 263-264), the expeditionary context leads me to prefer the second hypothesis. It is indeed very doubtful that the leaders of the expedition would walk like the rest of the members and they could have employed donkeys if the ground did not allow the use of chariots (*cf.* Stadelmann 2006, 302; Vernus 2010, 35-36; Köpp-Junk 2015, 159-160, 165). Both maritime and terrestrial means of transportation (boats and donkeys) are mentioned as equally reflecting the efficient organization of the mission; there is no degrading connotation showing through this official text.

Besides those texts, two iconographical documents could refer to the Egyptians’

habit of riding donkeys, but the lack of context prevents them from asserting that the depicted scenes take place in daily life. On the one hand, the figured ostrakon MM 14107 from Ramesside Deir el-Medina, mentioned in the introduction, is not well preserved, but one can distinguish a human figure, with a bold head or a skull cap, seated on a donkey wearing a sun-like accessory on its head. Houlihan (2002, 41) proposes seeing it just as “a product of a joke”, but the sun-shaped hat on the head of the donkey could evoke a specific kind of situation, like a game or a ritual. That being said, it is true that, because of this hat, this document cannot, on its own, be used as evidence of donkey riding as a daily life action.

On the other hand, a faience figurine from a private collection, dated from the end of the New Kingdom, features a donkey ridden by a child: naked, it has a large head wearing one hair-lock on each side (I could not find any parallel for this hairstyle; cf. Marshall 2013, 87–96). On this artifact—which is probably an amulet—the boy sits astride on the equid, very close to its head, squeezing its neck between his arms (Desroches-Noblecourt 1997, 169–178). It was interpreted by Desroches-Noblecourt (1997, 173–174) and Houlihan (2002, 41) as a representation of the child Horus vanquishing Seth. Both authors rejected the idea of considering the amulet as evidence for donkey riding (Desroches-Noblecourt 1997, 171; Houlihan 2002, 41). Yet, one could argue that the mythological interpretation does not exclude the possibility that Egyptian mortals could be in a similar situation; after all, the goddess Astarte is often represented by horse riding, but that

position is also known for Egyptians (Leclant 1960; Turner 2021, 253–255).

If the child of the amulet is Horus, it would be one of the very rare occurrences of an Egyptian god riding a donkey. Indeed, there are several known cases of donkeys used as means of transportation by deities, but generally, the latter do not travel riding them. In the *Coffin Texts*, two donkeys carry Shu and play a role in the moving of the barks of Ra (Buck & Gardiner 1935, VI, 287p-u; Vandenbeusch 2020, 75, 290), but this number excludes the possibility of riding (could Shu be on a carrying chair?). According to Daressy, on the coffin of the priest Nesamon (end of 21st Dynasty), the bark of Ra is dragged by three jackals and three donkey-headed Sethian animals (CG 6290–6294; Porter & Moss 1964, 635; Daressy 1920, 165–166). During the 26th Dynasty, Osiris is transported by a donkey to the tomb of Bahariya and in a mythological papyrus (see above), but as a dead body.

Bruyère, on the other hand, assumed that a donkey-headed deity was to be ridden by the *ba* of a deceased: in the funerary papyrus of Nespeher'an (P. Skrine 2, Third Intermediate Period), it is asked to this divinity: *d=k pr b3 n Wsir (...) Nsy-p3-ħr-ṣn r p.t* (Blackman 1918, 32, pl. V; Bruyère 1926, 148–149; Vandenbeusch 2020, 321). But I believe that this prayer is a call to the benevolence of the demon, the guardians of the underworld being feared as potential obstacles to access to the afterlife (Vandenbeusch 2020, 140–141), and that it should be translated: “let the *ba* of the Osiris (...) Nespeher'an get out to the sky”.

It is much later, on a Greek papyrus from the 4th–5th century C.E., that we have a clear mention of a goddess (in this case,

probably Nephthys) riding a donkey (P. British Library 125: Bergman 1984; Desroches-Noblecourt 1997, 173; Vandenberg 2020, 172, 365 (doc. 9.103)).

In other words, some gods move with the help of donkeys, being either carried or dragged by them, but do not strictly speaking ride them; the exceptions would be Nephthys in a late papyrus and maybe the child Horus on an amulet from the end of the New Kingdom.


That being said, we do have around ten occurrences of Egyptian humans carried by donkeys, a part of them riding these animals, without being associated with weakness and humiliation—in comparison, more than twenty representations or mentions of horse-riding Egyptians are known, without counting around twenty images of Astarte on horseback (Schulman 1957; Rommelaere 1991, 129–134; Turner 2021, 253–255). They are found on various media—walls of tombs, papyrus written by the royal power, letter on ostrakon, amulets, and clay figures—and concern diverse categories of the population—Memphite high officials on carrying-chairs, royal agents in an expedition, servants or workmen from Deir el-Medina, a man and his bundle, and a (god-)child. This leads us to think that donkey riding was more frequent in Ancient Egypt than the small number of these documents first suggests. It was done by common people as well as elite members, even sometimes by gods.

Another element that we can explore to evaluate if the representations of donkey riding represent reality is the attitude of the riders: are the seats and postures

depicted realistic? was there a way of riding that was common to all Egyptians?

3. How Were Donkeys Ridden?

While some Asiatic riders are represented riding side-saddle (IS 405 and 103, Berlin scarab) or cross-legged (IS 112, 115), the Egyptians from the clay figurine and the faience amulet both ride astride (the legs of the Stockholm ostrakon are no longer visible).

If the donkey of the Puntite queen is shown with a saddle, there is no such equipment for representations of donkeys ridden by Egyptians. The ridden donkeys from the tomb of Urkhya might be covered by a blanket (Figure 6). As for textual evidence, Hoch noted that the word *kr* , which is known through at least six lists of goods from the New Kingdom, is very similar to Semitic words referring to (camel-)saddles, pillows or mattresses, and that it might be, in one text, associated with the word “donkey”; he, therefore, supposed that it would refer to donkey-saddles (Hoch 1994, 326–327 (nr. 472)). But the determinative suggests that the *kr* was made of wood, and there is no sign of wooden equipment on the back of donkeys in iconography (Prévost, in preparation).

The faience donkey, according to Desroches-Noblecourt, wears dark traces around its neck, as an imitation of a bridle that the rider would hold in his hands (Desroches-Noblecourt 1997, 170), although it is not visible in the photos.

A donkey can be mounted with the rider either close to the head and the withers or on the crupper (Réveleau 1986, 36).

Both positions can be observed in the representations of Levantine riders (IS 405 for the first, IS 103 for the second). On the Egyptian side, the creator of the Balat figurine chose to represent the rider at the back, with the bundle set on the withers. The human figure on the Stockholm ostrakon is also seated close to the crupper. The child of the faience amulet is, on the other hand, pressed against the neck of the donkey, but it could be explained, firstly, by the symbolism of domination on the Sethian animal and, secondly, by the techniques of fabrication and the necessity to limit the empty parts (the space between the donkey's legs is also filled) (Nicholson & Pelteburg 2000, 187–189). But the fact remains that there is no clear pattern emerging from the few representations of Egyptian donkey riders.

However, very interestingly, the images showing Egyptians riding horses represent them sitting on the crupper; however, while it can be a comfortable and stable position on donkeys, it would not have been the case on horses (Rommelaere 1991, 125–126; Spalinger 2005, 10). It implies that either the Egyptians started mounting horses the same way they used to mount donkeys or the Egyptian artists represented them in this familiar position. Either way, it means that Egyptians were more accustomed to donkey riding than to horse riding, even though the second situation is more attested in iconography than the first. In other words, this position of Egyptian horse riders is, in a way, new evidence in favor of the common character of donkey riding.

4. Why So Little Evidence?

But if donkey riding was more common than what the sources suggest at first sight, how can we explain this small amount of evidence?

Houlihan supposed that donkeys were too despised to be considered as a ride for the elites (2002, 35). Recent studies, such as those of Vandenbeusch (e.g., 2020) or of the author of this paper (e.g., Prévost 2023; Prévost, unpublished), endeavored to demonstrate that Ancient Egyptians' perception of donkeys is complex and cannot be reduced to contempt, but it is true that the donkey is commonly associated with transportation and therefore with labor and workforce; it is represented wearing itself out for the masters on the same level than human workers (Vernus 2005, 462–464; Bohms 2013, 50–57, 71; Vandenbeusch 2020, 18–20; Prévost 2023). It could be a reason why the elite members did not wish to be depicted on the back of a beast of burden and would prefer the carrying chair or the chariot, which were strongly associated with social power.⁶

But if the donkey was considered by Ancient Egyptians as a ride for “social and ethnical inferiors” (Vernus 2010, 36), why are commoners not more often shown on its back? My assumption is as follows. In

⁶ Similarly, in some African traditional societies, the donkey is considered as a mount fit for women, youths, or social categories considered inferior (Baroin 1999, 277, 281, 284–286). In Mamlūk Egypt, only the military was allowed to travel on horseback; in case of forfeiture, the fallen *fāris* would have to move on a donkey or on foot (Carayon 2012, 448–450), both means of traveling being degrading for him, because they were accessible to the largest number (Garcin et al. 1982, note 139 p. 91–142).

his ethnographical work on an Upper Egypt village from the 1970s, Henein reports that, in older times (the custom is linked to the Ottoman period), the Christian inhabitants of Mārī Girgis were supposed to dismount from their donkey each time they would meet an inhabitant of the Muslim village of ʿĪsāwiyya (Henein 2018, 6-7). He also says that, in contemporaneous times, if a married couple travels with a donkey, the husband is supposed to be the one traveling on the animal's back and the wife on foot; the reverse would be shameful (Henein 2018, 237). In other words, the spatial distribution of individuals is supposed to reflect the social hierarchy. When a person rides an animal, it places him/her in a spatially higher position than the person who is traveling on foot, therefore suggesting a social discrepancy in favor of the rider. If the footwalker is actually the superior one, it creates an embarrassing situation. One can wonder if the same logic was at work in the Ancient Egyptian representations of elite members and commoners: was it inconceivable to show a worker on a donkey's back in front of a tomb owner walking on foot because it would put him in a *spatially* superior position that is contrary to his *social* position (even though the master is usually represented with a much larger size)? Stadelmann seems to have a similar conception when he supposes that the chief of the Aamu caravan from the tomb of Khnumhotep II and the king and queen of Punt in the temple of Hatshepsut are not riding one of their donkeys as "an indication of humble courtesy" (Stadelmann 2006, 302).

Conclusion

Among all the possible means of transportation, it is certain that there was, at least on the side of the elites, some contempt toward donkey riding, which is often associated in texts and images with foreigners, children, or adults in desperate situations. In spite of this, we observed that there are some cases where the riders are healthy and grown-up Egyptians. Mentions are often elusive, like in Papyrus Harris I, and images are sometimes cut from any context, like on the ostrakon MM 14107, all this making the interpretation difficult. Nonetheless, this means of traveling is clearly not confined to one kind of situation nor to one category of population, the riders being commoners (figurine of Balat, ostrakon Berlin P. 12398) but also sometimes members of the elite (P. Harris I).⁷

As to the reason why the artists would avoid representing Egyptians on a donkey's back, elite members would have preferred being represented with a means of transportation that would reflect their status; the donkey being used also by commoners, it was put aside in favor of the carrying chair or the chariot. As for the rest of the population, the artists decorating the royal and private monuments would have hesitated putting

⁷ This social diversity is also visible in the occurrences of horse-riding Egyptians: it is not clear if some of them are royal figures (e.g., limestone block from Luxor: Schulman 1957, 268-269), but the occasional association with a royal name (e.g., plaque MMA 05.3.263: Schulman 1957, 264) or with a precious material (e.g., bronze objects BM EA 36314 and 36766: Schulman 1957, 266) indicates that the interest for this motive was not restrained to the lowest strata of the Egyptian society.

workers in a position that would raise them. In other words, perhaps the donkey was a mount neither noble enough to be associated with elite members nor debasing enough to be conceded to commoners.

That being said, we could notice, while reviewing the evidence for donkey riding, a variety of other ways of using donkeys as a means of transportation for people: carrying chairs, dragging or towing, etc. Often humans are transported just like any burden when they are dead corpses, exhausted bodies, children wrapped in cloth, or even men being transported with other loads—the man of the figurine of Balat leans over his bundle, fitting its form and becoming almost a second bundle. It leads us to wonder if the border we tend to draw between the transportation of goods and the transportation of persons is that relevant.

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Webography

Deir el-Medine online:

- ostracon Berlin P. 12398: <https://dem-online.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/fragment.php?id=294> (Accessed on 31 May 2024).

Website of the Medelhavsmuseet (Stockholm):

- ostracon MM 14107: <https://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-mhm/web/object/3005224> (Accessed on 23 February 2024).

- ostracon MM 14057: <https://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-mhm/web/object/3918611> (Accessed on 23 February 2024).

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The abbreviations used are those listed in Mathieu, B. (2023). *Abréviations des périodiques et collections en usage à l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*. 8e édition. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

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