

## SOCIETY

*The Camel's Hour*

"The Eccentricity of Wheels, or Eurasian Transportation in Historical Perspective" by William H. McNeill, in *The American Historical Review* (Dec. 1987), 914 Atwater, Bloomington, Ind. 47405.

In the West, studies of early transportation focus on watercraft and wheels. To McNeill, emeritus professor at the University of Chicago, this is "cultural myopia." He gives a bow to a pack animal: the camel.

These beasts dominated transport in the Fertile Crescent between Egypt and Iraq for more than 1,000 years. Long before the time of Christ, camel caravans were shuttling textiles, metals, and other items among the cities of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. As late as 1869, when the Suez Canal opened, they remained the most effective means of moving goods between the Mediterranean's eastern shore and India.

Although wheeled vehicles won favor after 1800 B.C., when military chariots appeared in Mesopotamia, by 300 A.D. the camel caravan's superiority in long-haul work was established. A new "north Arabian saddle" raised the camel's peak load to 500 lbs., making the typical string of 12 animals, tended by one or two men, more efficient than any wagon. Figures in the Emperor Diocletian's Edict on Prices (301 A.D.) suggest that camels cost 20 percent less to maintain than horse- or donkey-drawn carts.

Whatever the terrain, the long-limbed animals could move 20 miles in a six-hour traveling day (the remaining 18 hours would be spent resting or foraging). Camels could go nine days without water, weeks without food.



*Caravanserais did not just serve traders. Muslim pilgrims often stopped at them to obtain free shelter, food, and fodder while traveling to Mecca.*

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They needed neither roads nor (at most rivers) bridges.

Islam accommodated the Fertile Crescent's "caravan world." In settled areas where grazing on land owned by others was considered theft, it was made an act of religious merit for people to subsidize "caravanserais" where camel drivers could tarry up to three days and get free shelter, food, and fodder. Asia Minor alone had 1,100 such "truck stops." One merchant's notes for a 79-day trip in 1581-82 showed his transport costs to be no more than three percent of the sale price of his goods; his expenses for customs and "protection" were higher.

Still vital even after 1300, when cargo transport by watercraft began to improve, caravans brought trade and Islam to remote areas—Arabia's "empty quarter," sub-Saharan Africa. Even so, the camel's limited capacity helped doom the Muslim heartland to slower economic growth than Europe or China enjoyed. Later, when the increased volume of trade between Europe and Asia required the movement of goods in bulk, the beast became obsolete as a mode of transport.

Since World War II, notes McNeill, aircraft and motor vehicles have "displace[d] camels even from their original homeland in Arabia."

### *Clouding Students' Minds*

"Television and the Schools—But Not What You Think" by Jacques Barzun, in *Basic Education Issues, Answers, and Facts* (Fall 1987), 725 15th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The conventional wisdom among teachers is that television, with its fast-paced, image-packed shows, erodes children's attention spans—their ability to concentrate or to follow arguments in the classroom. But Barzun, emeritus professor at Columbia, argues that the reverse is true: In effect, TV merely echoes the fragmented curriculum in U.S. schools. There, "nearly everything done" over the past 50 years "has tended toward the discontinuous, the incoherent, the jiggly."

Educators, Barzun says, forget that many current classroom subjects cannot be *taught*. Teachable disciplines (such as history or mathematics) have at their core a "scheme of facts and rules" for students to master. But teachers of social studies take "real" subjects like economics or anthropology and pick from each a few bits and pieces without continuity or direction, thus distracting students from concentrated learning.

Moreover, too many educators favor "problem-solving" over analysis; they burden the schedule with such "non-subjects" as driver education and "family living." These are courses that focus on the students themselves, not the world around them, again retarding learning.

Barzun endorses the post-1960s "Back to Basics" movement, which calls for the return of the three R's and other traditional curricula. At present, he laments, "the school world is taking up another fad," courses in critical thinking. Supposed to enhance analytical abilities, this is yet another nonteachable topic. "Thinking" *per se* cannot be learned; students grasp it only as a consequence of studying difficult ideas. "Thinking is like piano-playing," Barzun contends. "It is shown, not taught."