

THE CAMEL, THE WAGON, AND THE DONKEY
IN LATER ROMAN EGYPT

1. The Problem

It is a central thesis of Richard Bulliet's well-known book *The Camel and the Wheel*¹ that the camel supplanted wheeled transportation over a wide area of the Near East and North Africa during the Roman period, before the Arab conquest. Much of the book is devoted to explaining and describing this spread of camel use (and wagon disuse) through the various countries concerned. The present article attempts (in fulfillment of Bulliet's urgings on p. 6) to investigate the relationship to one another of these (and other) forms of transportation in Egypt in the period from the fourth century to the eighth, with a certain amount of necessary consideration of earlier periods.

Egypt does not occupy a particularly central point in Bulliet's discussion. Beginning with a general premise (p. 14) that the disappearance of the wheel antedated the Islamic conquests, he asks when this phenomenon can be dated in each area. For Egypt, he writes as follows:

Roman Egypt (30 B.C. onwards) had both wagon transport and camel transport, the latter being a relatively recent and growing phenomenon. A specialist on the economy of this Roman province [A. C. Johnson] has written: "Transportation by land was usually by camel or donkey. Wagons were seldom used, although a tax found in Upper Egypt on wagons was paid by a private company engaged in transport, and some of the large estates had wagons for farm work of various kinds." In addition, figures have been preserved from the first century A.D. detailing the specific cost of carrying sheaves of grain by wagon, rents for wagons, and the price for which a wagon was sold. Therefore, the disappearance of the wheel in Egypt must have been subsequent to the first century A.D. even though the process would appear to have begun before that time.

The range in which Bulliet considers the change to have occurred is indicated (p. 27) as the fourth to sixth centuries. As for the other chronological *terminus*, he suggests (p. 118) that "the practice of camel breeding began in Egypt in the desert east of

1 Cambridge, Mass. 1975. I am grateful to Bulliet for reading a draft of this article.