



DONKEY II. DOMESTICATION IN IRAN

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ii. Domestication in Iran

The domestication of the African ass (*Equus africanus*) and the development of the donkey (*Equus asinus*) for transport and traction have been discussed in the scholarly literature for many years. Traditionally, North Africa, more specifically pre-Dynastic Egypt, has been considered the most likely locus of domestication (Clutton-Brock, p. 91; Burleigh; Groves; Gilbert et al.; Burleigh et al.; Rossell et al.). However, despite alleged DNA evidence in support of an African origin (Beja-Pereira et al.), there are good reasons to doubt this theory. To begin with, it is now known that the original range of *Equid africanus* extended well beyond North Africa, as osteological material from sites in Syria (Ducos; Vila, 2006), eastern Saudi Arabia, Oman, the Iraqi Jazirah, and the Zagros foothills (Uerpmann, p. 29) attest. The earliest Egyptian evidence of donkey, from El-Omari, dates to ca. 4600-4400 BC (Boessneck and von den Driesch, pp. 99-101) while in Iraq and Syria domesticated donkey appeared during the Late Uruk period (ca. 3600-3100 BCE) at Uruk (Boessneck et al., p. 166), Tell Rubeidheh (Payne, pp. 99-100), and Habuba Kabira (Strommenger and Bollweg, pp. 354-55).

Contemporary or even slightly older material has been excavated in Iran at



Godin Tepe (qv.; Gilbert, pp. 98-99) in central Zagros and Tepe Qabrestān (Ghabristan) south of Qazvin, where the relevant contexts have calibrated radiocarbon dates of ca. 3780-3050 (Mashkour et al., Table 2). In addition, a painted ceramic sherd (TNP 1331) from level A19 at Tol-e Nurābād in the Mamasani district of western Fars shows what appears to be a long-eared donkey with a saddle blanket or saddle bag on its back (Figure 1). The sherd is made of a fine, light brown ware, and is decorated with brown paint. It belongs broadly to the Bākun painted pottery tradition, named after the type site of Tal-e Bākun in the Marvdašt plain (Weeks et al.). The context in which it was found is well dated by radiocarbon dates from the levels immediately above and below it to about 4780-4490 BC (Potts, 2011, p. 169).

Potentially contemporary with or even earlier than the earliest evidence of donkey domestication in Egypt, the Tol-e Nurābād sherd raises many questions about the locus of donkey domestication in the Old World, particularly since the Zagros highlands, where it was discovered, have been considered well to the east of the original range of *Equid africanus*. The economic advantages of using donkeys, both for transport and traction, are clear, and the animal very probably played a role in the expansion of settlement on the Iranian Plateau during the 5th and 4th millennia BCE.

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