

The mysterious origin of  
Goth. 𐌺𐌿𐌸𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌶𐌵 /ulbandus/

Insights into European camel history

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Indo-European Linguistics

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# How this story began

Russ. верблю́д / verbljúd ‘camel’



[https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%BA%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82#/media/File:%CE%91%E1%BC%B1\\_%CE%BA%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B9.jpg](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%BA%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82#/media/File:%CE%91%E1%BC%B1_%CE%BA%CE%AC%CE%BC%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B9.jpg)

Number of languages:	5
Number of animals:	2

Russian [edit]

Alternative forms [edit]

- верблюдъ (verbljúd) – *Pre-reform orthography (1918)*

Etymology [edit]

Inherited from Proto-Slavic *\*velьb(l)ǫdъ*, *\*vьльb(l)ǫdъ*, from Gothic 𐌱𐌿𐌸𐌹𐌺𐌹𐌸 (ulbandus). Probably further from **Latin elephantus**, from Ancient Greek ἐλέφας (eléphas).

Pronunciation [edit]

- IPA<sup>(key)</sup>: [vʲɪrˈblʲut]

- Audio  0:02

Noun [edit]

верблюд • (verbljúd) *m anim* (genitive **верблю́да**, nominative plural **верблю́ды**, genitive plural **верблю́дов**, related adjective **верблю́жий**)

1. camel

Declension [edit]

Declension of **верблю́д** (anim masc-form hard-stem accent-a)

[show ▼]

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B1%D0%BB%D1%8E%D0%B4#Russian>

Goth. *ulbandus*

*azitizo ist **ulbandau** þairh þairko neplos galeiþan, þau gabigamma in þiudangardja gudis galeiþan*

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

(Gothic Bible, Mk 10,25, ~ 400 CE)

Number of languages: 1

Number of animals: 1

Gr. ἐλέφας ‘ivory, elephant’

Lat. *elephantus* ‘elephant’

VLat. *el(e)pantus*

?

Goth. *ulbandus* ‘camel’

~ 400 CE

Number of languages: 3

Number of animals: 2

Gr. ἐλέφας ‘ivory, elephant’

Lat. *elephantus* ‘elephant’

VLat. *el(e)pantus*

Hitt. *huwalpant-* ‘crooked,  
hump-backed’

Luw. *huwalpa-* ‘hump’

?

?

Goth. *ulbandus* ‘camel’

~ 400 CE

Number of languages: 5

Number of animals: 2

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Number of languages: 6

Number of animals: 2

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VLat. *el(e)pantus*

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Goth. *ulbandus* ‘camel’

~ 400 CE

Skrt. *úlbam* ‘uterus, womb’ ?

Number of languages: 6

Number of animals: 2

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ON *ulfaldi*  
OEn. *olfend(a)*  
OHG *olbanta, olbenta*  
MHG *olbent, olbenttier*

‘camel’

Goth. *ulbandus* ‘camel’  
~ 400 CE

Skrt. *úlbam* ‘uterus, womb’ ?

?

?

?

Number of languages: 17  
Number of animals: 4



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PSl. *\*velьbодь* ‘camel’  
Russ., ORuth. *верблюд*  
Pol. *wielbłąd*  
OCz. *velblúd* ‘camel, elephant’

Number of languages: 17  
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OPr. *weloblundis* = MHG *muß* ‘mule’

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OPr. *weloblundis* = MHG *muß* ‘mule’

OLith. *vielbliūdas, verbliūdas* ‘camel, elephant, whale’

Number of languages: 17  
Number of animals: 4

# Strategy

- Hunting down the Lithuanian whale
- What's up with the mule?
- How to explain the origin of *ulbandus*
- Conclusion

# OLith. *velbliūdas*

- OLith. *verbliūdas*, *velbliūdas* (sometimes also *verbrugas*, *verbrudas*)
- Listed with three meanings in ALEW, LKŽ, LED and LEW
- Meaning ‘camel’ is by far the most common, well-attested (Skardžius 1931: 234–235)
- ‘whale’ attestation based on passage in Bible translation

Number of languages: 17  
Number of animals: 4

ALEW 2.0

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Impressum

## velbliūdas, velibliūdas (2)

sm.

1. **Kamel**

- MŽG<sub>II</sub> 433<sub>11</sub> n.pl. *Buwa Iobui kaituwa atymta / Iautei / awis / Affilai / Welbludai*
- BrB<sub>II</sub> [39]v7 (Ri 8,21) g.pl. *ateme Pagraikščezes [Gl alebantus Spange bullas apikakles], kuros ant kaklo iu Welbludų buwa* ‘(nam die Spangen die an jrer Kamelen helse waren)’

1. **velbrūdas** sm. Kamel

2. **verbliūdas** (2), **verbliūgas** (2) sf. Kamel

- BrB<sub>VII</sub> [8]v2 (Mt 3,4) g.sg. *Ianas tureio Ruba ifch Werbludo gaurų [fchirių]* ‘(Johannes hatte ein Kleid von Kameelharen)’
- DaP 574<sub>39</sub> *nukėle werblūdas anás kuprás* ‘(žložyl wielbląd one gárby)’

3. **velblūdaitis** sm. Kamelfüllen

2. **Elefant**

3. **Walfisch**

ZITIEREN DRUCKEN XML



# *Bau ne esmi eš velbliūdas*

Bible translation by Jonas Bretkūnas (Germ. Johannes Bretke, 1590), Job 7,12 (153r):

*Bau ne esmi eš marios alba velbliūdas, jog tu mane teipo apsaugoji?*

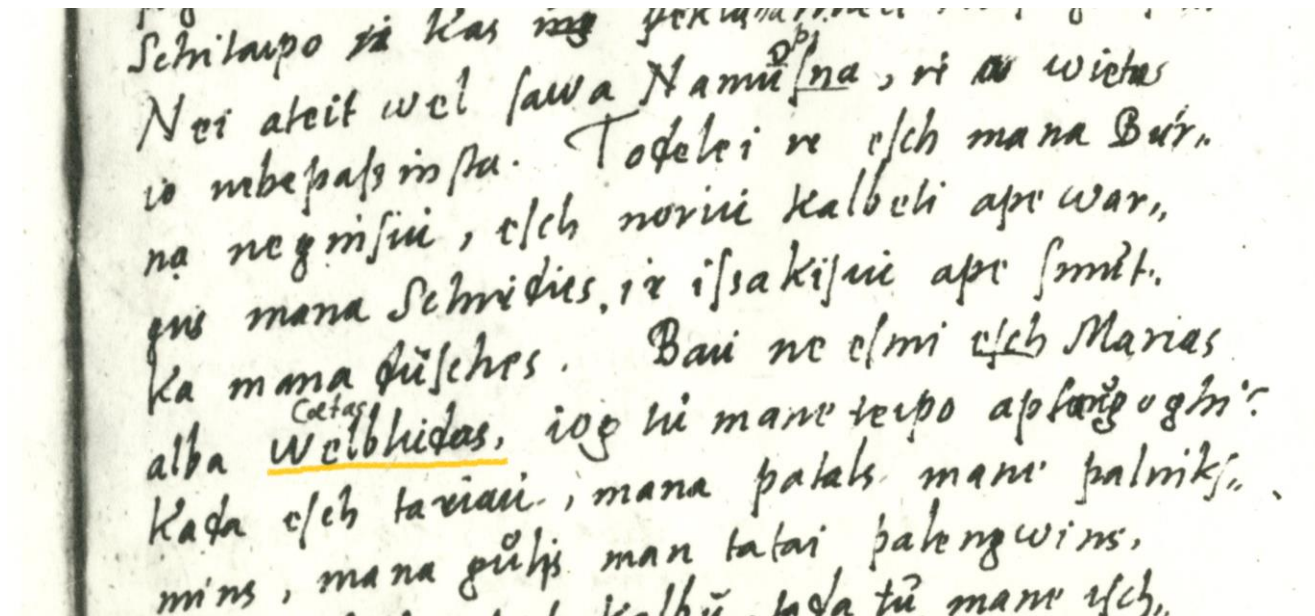
‘Am I the sea or a *velbliūdas* that you are guarding me in this way?’

Questions:

Which word is Bretkūnas translating?

How does he translate it in other passages?

Is the meaning ‘whale’ attested anywhere else?



- Latin *cetus* in Vulgata (< Gr. *ketos*): ‘tuna; large fish, whale, sea creature’
- Hebrew Bible: תַּנִּינִךְ/Tanniyn/ (name of a sea monster)
- In other passages (Ez 29,3 + 32,2) Bretkūnas translates *smakas*



<https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcSOssc-R8ivDUsu3oB6PTG4XEEF1G9YywqClw&usqp=CAU>

Number of languages: 18  
Number of animals: 6



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- Hebrew Bible: תַּנִּינִךְ/Tanniyn/ (name of a sea monster)
- In other passages (Ez 29,3 + 32,2) Bretkūnas translates *smakas*
- Fun fact: Modern Hebrew meaning is ‘crocodile’



<https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcSOssc-R8ivDUsu3oB6PTG4XEEF1G9YywqCIw&usqp=CAU>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crocodile#/media/File:Mecistops\\_leptorhynchus\\_2009.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crocodile#/media/File:Mecistops_leptorhynchus_2009.jpg)

Number of languages: 19  
Number of animals: 7



- Meaning ‘whale’ for *velbliūdas* otherwise not attested (instead, *didė žuvis* ‘big fish’)
- *velbliūdas* as ‘monster’ (tannin/whale) only attested once
- *velbliūdas* ‘camel’ = ‘monster’?
- ivory = ‘camel bone’?
- camels unknown in Lithuania, Bible passages inconclusive

# Conclusion: no whale, but a lot of confusion

- *velbliudas* used as ‘ivory giving monster (?)’ only by Bretkūnas
- camel = big, scary, foreign animal, used to carry goods and providing ivory?
- *velbliudas* does not commonly mean ‘whale’ in OLith.

# What's up with the mule?

- Old Prussian *weloblundis*
- Elbing Vocabulary (MHG/OPr)
- EV 437 *mūl* = *weloblundis*
- Euler 2013 et al.: OPr. *weloblundis* < Pol. *wielbłąd* ‘camel’
- Puhvel (1993: 187), Nehring (RiA<sub>2</sub> I: 553): ‘misrendered’, ‘mistake’
- Arguments for a meaning ‘mule’:
  - EV almost exclusively features main concepts of daily life (Euler 2013: 406)
  - EV 436 = ‘donkey’
  - Euler: meaning transfer possible as both camels and mules are used to carry goods
- The meaning ‘mule’ for *weloblundis* seems to be authentic



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Mule#/media/File:Juancito.jpg>

Juancito (officially called Remonta Inesperado), which the photographer calls the best mule of Argentina, on an excursion on the [Mitre Peninsula](#), in [Tierra del Fuego, Argentina](#). In the background is the remains of the [SV Duchess of Albany](#), shipwrecked in 1893. Photograph taken in February 2006.

# Perspectives on the etymology of *ulbandus*

Pronk-Tiethoff 2013, GED, GW et al.

- Source: (V)Lat. *elep(h)antus*
- Borrowing 1st-4th centuries CE, when Goths dwelled at the Black Sea / Lower Danube

Puhvel 1993 following Nehring (RiA<sup>2</sup>)

- somehow related to Hitt. *huwalpant*, Luw. *huwalpa*
- Either inherited or borrowed during Gothic raids in Anatolia (3rd century CE)

Three main etymologies:

1. Lat. *elephantus* → Goth. *ulbandus*

2. Hitt. *huwalpant-* → Goth. *ulbandus*

3. Hitt. *huwalpant-*, Goth. *ulbandus*, ... < PIE \*?

→ borrowing

< inheritance

Review based on plausibility

in terms of

a) Phonology and morphology

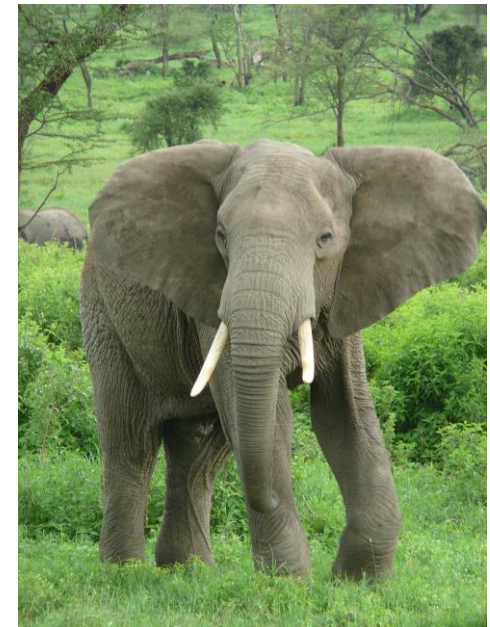
b) Historical context

c) Typological plausibility

# 1. Lat. *elephantus* -> Goth. *ulbandus*

## Phonology

- *ph* > *b* also attested in Lat. *amphora* > OE *ambor*; *ph* pronounced as *p*
- syncope of *-e-* in unstressed position (*élephantus* > \**élpantus*)
- Initial *u* in Goth. *ulbandus*, ON *ulfalde* remains unexplained
- Would explain rather rare Gothic *u*-stem



## Semantics

- Change of meaning ‘elephant’ > ‘camel’ has to be assumed
- OPr. *weloblundis* (‘camel’ > ‘mule’) may be a similar example
- Potentially PSlav. *slonъ* ‘elephant’ < Turk. *arslan* ‘lion’ (REW I: 184)

Number of languages: 20  
Number of animals: 7

## Evidence from Old Germanic

- Old Germanic (OE, OHG) clearly differentiates elephants and camels:

OE *elpend*, *ylpend* – *olfend*, OHG *(h)el(a)fant* – *olbento/a*

- Two separate borrowings from same source?

1) Lat. *elephantus* > Goth. *ulbandus* > OE *olfend* et al.

2) Lat. *elephantus* > OE *elpend* et al.



## Elephants and camels in the late Roman Empire (cf. Benecke 1994: 328; 449)

- Camels present at Danube, Black Sea since 1st c. CE
- Running competitions between camels and horses (~200 CE)
- Elephants known since Punic wars
- However, less known later
- Ivory imports from Northern Africa

Camels might have been better known than elephants; confusion of meaning possible.



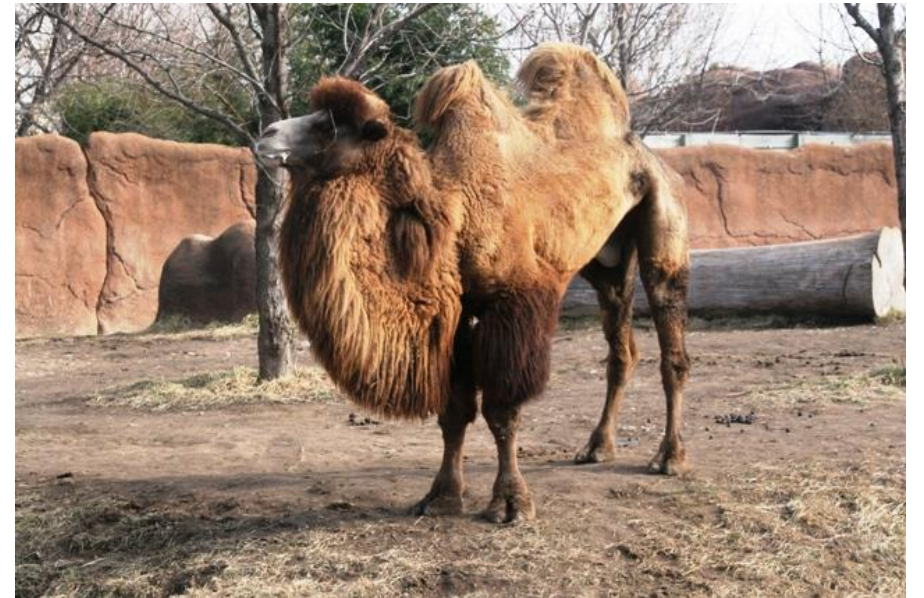
## 2. *huwalpant-* -> *ulbandus* (Puhvel 1993)

- Hitt. *huwalpant-* ‚humpy, crooked‘
- Luwian *huwalpa-* ‚hump‘
- Phonological obstacle for borrowing: missing reflex of *h* in Gothic
- Furthermore, Hittite not attested after 1250 BCE, Luwian only attested until around 800 BCE
- Gothic raids in Anatolia only in 3rd c. CE
- Necessary assumption: substrate influence in Greek
- Borrowing very unlikely

### 3. *huwalpant, ulbandus, ...* < \* ...?

Common PIE origin?

- Reconstruction of a stem *\*h<sub>2/3</sub>u<sub>l̥</sub>b<sup>h</sup>-ont-* ‘humpy, crooked (?)’
- *h<sub>2/3</sub>* lost in Gothic, retained in Hittite/Luwian; *o* > *a*
- ‘camel’ in Gothic = ‘humpy/crooked one’?  
(cf. Germ. Buckelwal; ‘Krüppeltier’?)
- one phonological obstacle:  
PIE *\*u<sub>l̥</sub>ku<sub>̂</sub>-os* yields Goth. *wulfs* ‘wolf’  
(*u<sub>l̥</sub>* > *wul* | *\_C*)
- *\*h<sub>2/3</sub>u<sub>l̥</sub>b<sup>h</sup>-ont-* > *\*\*wulband-?*
- Necessary assumption: *h<sub>2/3</sub>u<sub>̂</sub>-* > *u<sub>̂</sub>-*



Further possible cognates:

- Skrt. *úlbam* ‘womb’ (Puhvel HED H: 426): rejected by Opfermann/Sasseville 2022 (Skrt. *-bh-* expected)
- Lat. *†volba* ‘womb, uterus’ (Puhvel HED H: 426): rejected by Opfermann/Sasseville (form not old)
- Skrt. *ibhaḥ* ‘elephant’: rejected on phonological and historical grounds (e.g. KEWAi I: 90); PIE *\*h<sub>2/3</sub>ulb<sup>h</sup>-ont-* > Skrt. *\*\*vr̥bhant-*

=> Etymology possible, however, no convincing cognates can be found.

# Conclusion: various unsatisfying hypotheses

1. Lat. *elephantus* → Goth. *ulbandus*

*u* unexplained, change of meaning must be assumed.

2. Hitt. *huwalpant-* → Goth. *ulbandus*

highly unlikely due to missing *h* in Gothic, historical context.

3. Hitt. *huwalpant*, Goth. *ulbandus*, ... < PIE  $*h_{2/3}ulb^h-ont-$

possible, but no other cognates can be found.

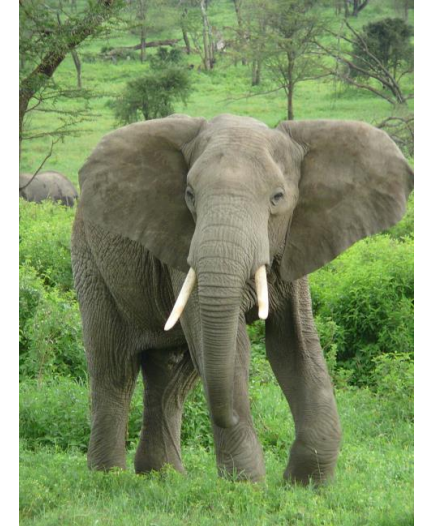


# Final conclusion

- etymology of Goth. *ulbandus* remains unclear
- unsatisfactory etymologies
- *velbliūdas* likely only means ‘camel’ in OLith.
- *weloblundis* might actually be ‘mule’ in OPr.
- mysterious backstories left open



!



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!?

# Literature

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