

Pastoralism, rural economy and landscape evolution in the western Alps

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The study of pastoralism in the Alps during the Roman period is a complex topic involving, among other things, the evolution of stock-raising and changes in land-use. The subject also concerns the scale and integration of the rural economy within the context of the development of large estates, and the speculative economy geared toward supplying a growing urban market.

Animal husbandry witnessed a spectacular intensification in the Roman period. The great movements of livestock in central Italy, including sheep, domesticated asses, and probably pigs and cattle, documented by Varro and a number of inscriptions, testify to the existence of huge flocks and herds belonging to the most prominent figures in Italy. These men exploited the advantages of their rank and wealth in order to monopolize the large territories of *ager publicus*.¹ In Provence, the numerous Roman sheepfolds of La Crau plain, undoubtedly the result of entrepreneurial investment by the Roman veteran community of nearby Arles, show that an extensive pastoral economy, favorable to mass breeding, was not unique to Italy.² Local and regional markets in the province were probably an incentive to the development of wool production and may account for the introduction of Italian breeds.³

Despite the historical association of alpine environments with pastoralism, archaeological, textual, epigraphical, palaeoenvironmental and ethnographic evidence for such a connection is not extensive. Tracing stock-raising activity in the Roman period requires gathering data widely dispersed in space and time, indeed from the Republican period to late antiquity, and from the Mediterranean coast to the Vauais uplands. Moreover, the evidence such as it is extends well beyond summer flock movements.⁴ As J.-P. Morel has observed for central Italy, more modest forms of pastoralism, alluded to by the Latin agronomists and sometimes observed in archaeological fieldwork, may be largely hidden by the evidence of large-scale, regulated stock-raising.⁵

It is thus no surprise that literary sources provide scant information on pastoralism in the western Alps (fig. 1). Latin authors rarely mention the Alps, and their descriptions consist of a few brief passages mentioning reputed products and the existence of particular types of livestock, but these texts are seldom precise and concern the Alps as a whole. Pliny the Elder reports that, despite their small size, alpine cows produced much milk, while the HA relates that Antoninus Pius may have died after gorging himself on Alpine cheese.⁶ Of particular in-

1 M. Corbier, "La transhumance. Aperçus historiographiques et acquis récents," in E. Hermon (dir.), *La question agraire à Rome: droit romain et société. Perceptions historiques et historiographiques* (Côme 1999) 37-57.

2 O. Badan, J.-P. Brun and G. Congès, "Les bergeries romaines de la Crau d'Arles. Les origines de la transhumance en Provence," *Gallia* 52 (1995) 263-310; B. Hitchner, "More Italy than province? Archaeology, texts and culture change in Roman Provence," *JALPA* 129 (1999) 375-79; P. Lecoq and M. Segard, "Le pastoralisme en Gaule du sud entre plaine et montagne: de la Crau aux Alpes du Sud," *Palis* 64 (2004) 99-113.

3 M. Leguilloux, "Les bergeries de la Crau: production et commerce de la laine," in S. Lepetz and V. Matherne, *Cultivateurs, éleveurs et artisans dans les campagnes de Gaule romaine. Matières premières et produits transformés - RAPIcarde* 1/2 (2003) 339-46.

4 P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The corrupting sea. A study of Mediterranean history* (London 2000) 67-87.

5 J.-P. Morel, "Arusanat, importations et romanisation dans le Samnium: aux II^e et I^{er} siècles av. J.-C.," in *La romanisation du Samnium aux II^e et I^{er} siècles avant J.-C.* (Naples 1991) 201. J. E. Skydsgaard, "Transhumance in ancient Italy," *AnnRom* 7 (1974) 7-36; G. Barker and A. Grand, "Ancient and modern pastoralism in central Italy: an interdisciplinary study in the Cicolano mountains," *PBSR* 59 (1991) 15-88; J. Lloyd, N. Christie and G. Lock, "From the mountain to the plain: landscape evolution in the Abruzzo. An interim report on the Sangro Valley Project (1994-95)," *PBSR* 65 (1997) 1-57.

6 *NH* 8.79; *HA*, *Ant.P.* 12.4.