

Sheep and cattle as ideological markers in Roman poetry*

by

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Abstract:

Ancient poets often dwelt on the question of ideal life and the best epoch of mankind. Some of them condemned civilization as a whole, judging the precultural age to have been morally superior; others regarded civilization, at least in its early phases, as progress. The former normally conceived of the precultural stage as a paradisiac life of miraculous abundance, the later usually placed the ideal epoch in the period of early agriculture. Sheep and cattle occur regularly as significant motifs in this kind of poetry. A positive view of cattle is coupled with a positive view of agriculture. The sheep can be made to conform to every ideal, but unlike cattle, it is never used as a negative symbol.

During Augustus' reign, several poets who had been looking back to a general paradisiac existence in the earliest days of mankind turned instead to praising a specifically Roman ideal epoch in the not quite so distant past. Logically enough, when describing this ideal landscape, they emphasize the presence of cows more than that of sheep, thus indirectly stressing that one of the sources of Rome's greatness was the healthy and harmonious farmers of old.

Sheep and goats, as we know, were of primary importance to ancient society. Tradition had it that the sheep were the first animals to be domesticated, "both because of their usefulness and because of their mild nature," as Varro says.¹ In fact, if we are to believe certain classical poets, their importance well antedated society. In an elegy written perhaps around 30 BC, Tibullus looks back with longing to a life in the early days of mankind when there was no sea-faring and no commerce, no private ownership, no agriculture – but sheep there were:

No roving sailor seeking profit from strange lands
had freighted ship with foreign merchandise.
No mighty bull in those days bore the yoke
or stallion tamely chawed the bit.

.....

There was honey from the oak, and heavy-uddered ewes
spontaneously offered milk on meeting carefree countryfolk.²

This nostalgic concept has its own strict logic. There are no domesticated cattle, because cattle are associated with agriculture. There are no domesticated horses, because horses are associated with war. But sheep there are – although these, of course, are no domesticated sheep. They are not tended and grazed by shepherds; they are not driven into a fold to be milked or shorn

– they come of their own accord to offer their milk to the human beings who live scattered and carefree in a world of abundance. The wool, of course, would not have been needed, since spring was everlasting. Apart from that, the sheep were as important to this precultural age as to later, fully developed society.

Thus, here, the sheep has connotations of security, harmony, and, above all, abundance. Its complacent and cooperative nature makes it fit in well with the concept of the miraculously abundant nature common in paradisiac traditions all over the world.

Another quality traditionally ascribed to sheep and goats also contributed to the idea of the sheep spontaneously offering their milk to early man. Vergil tells us in the *Georgics* that the goats "unherded remember to come home, they lead their young and hardly lift their heavy udders through the half-door".³ In Horace's escapist dream, in which he longs not for the first days of mankind but for some far distant imaginary islands, goats are substituted for sheep. Horace imagines his paradise in the following manner:

... where every year the land, unploughed, yields corn, and ever blooms the vine unpruned, and buds the shoot of the never-failing olive; the dark fig graces its native tree; honey flows from the hollow oak; from the lofty hill, with plashing foot, lightly leaps the fountain. There the goats come unbidden to the milking-pail, and the willing flock brings swelling udders home.⁴

As I have argued at length elsewhere,⁵ there can be no doubt that the topic carries ideological connotations, the dream of a paradise outside or before civilization expressing the author's critique and pessimistic view of society. The topic in itself is traditional, with several motifs known from Homer, Hesiod, Pindar and other classical Utopias, and also with links to 'the Land of Milk and Honey' of the Old Testament.⁶ Still, the sheep and the goats here take on a specific significance as the one class of domestic animals which, for reasons I have mentioned above, could be made to conform to a concept presupposing that degeneration started with the very beginning of civilization itself. Contrast the explicit

rejection of agricultural work in Tibullus line (40) ‘No mighty bull in those days bore the yoke’. On the other hand, the sheep’s and the goats’ own humble needs, as well as the manifold products they can yield, made them no less convenient to fit into idealizations of the peasant’s modesty and poverty, as contrasted with the luxury and frenzy of modern urban life, as we shall see below.

The repeated appearance of the motif of the paradisiac life in one or two generations of Roman poets in the last years of the Republic and the first decades of the Empire is to be seen against the background of the social, political and economic chaos following in the wake of the civil wars. People lost their homes, their fortunes, their relatives. They learnt not to trust anybody. Life and civilization had lost all sense. It was logical enough to take a pessimistic view of history and society, and it took a long time for optimism and security to return.

Vergil had been audacious enough to imagine his miraculous paradise coming back again in the near future. This is the famous *Fourth Eclogue*, arguably the world’s most discussed poem, as enigmatic to its first audience as it is to us. Desperately longing for lasting peace during what was to turn out to be only an occasional break in the wars, but sceptical in his heart to society’s fitness for survival, Vergil prophesies, among other things, that soon, “every land shall bear all fruits, the soil shall not feel the harrow, nor the vine the pruning-hook, and the sturdy ploughman, too, shall loose his oxen from the yoke”.⁷ Even sooner, “the goats, uncalled, shall bring home their udders swollen with milk, and the herds shall not fear huge lions”.⁸

In the course of the first decade of Augustus’ sole reign, things began to stabilize. Peace returned to Italy and with it, step by step, order and a normalized daily life. Civilization and society once again began to gain a positive significance. Accordingly, the Augustan poets, one after another, modify their critique of society. Scorn and repudiation of the fundamental characteristics of civilization become much more scarce. Instead, the basic inventions of civilization, such as agriculture, house-building, law-giving, take on a positive value and are even praised as the very essence of life, the blessings that saved man from his deplorable state in the pre-cultural era. The idea of a degeneration that began at some time in the past is not given up, only the point where the degeneration is said to have started has been postponed. Greed, envy, strife, war, luxury, and the like, which according to the former view were effects of civilization as such, now tend to be judged as excesses of a more advanced stage, and especially of modern urban life. These are certainly threats to the harmony and the happiness of mankind, but they are not inseparably attached to civilization as such, and, most important, there *are* possible ways of escaping them, here and now. If you search for harmony, you will find it principally in the unpretentious life of small people, preferably in the countryside, for with them, civilization in its earlier, innocent, unspoilt form is still alive. In fact, as Vergil *now* tells us, in the first book of the *Georgics*, laziness, miraculous abun-

dance, the *dolce far niente*, was not good for mankind, and therefore, Jupiter stopped it and caused man to invent civilization and to work hard in order to survive.⁹

The second book of the *Georgics* shows us the ideal existence as Vergil conceives it by now: the petty farmer’s life in the Italian countryside. Toil and hard work there certainly is, but the poet strongly emphasizes other aspects, too, above all the peacefulness, security and undisturbedness of this kind of life, in contrast with the useless luxury and the crowds of the city:

But calm security and a life that will not cheat you,
rich in its own rewards, are here: the broad ease of the farmlands,
caves, living lakes, and combs that are cool even at mid-summer,
lowing of cattle, and slumber mild in the trees’ shade.¹⁰

Vergil could, instead, have chosen the bleating of the sheep to sound in the background of this rural idyll, but note that he does not. For the lowing of the cattle, *mugitus boum*, is not just a background sound; it carries a significance of its own. The cattle, which in the former ideal – quite logically – had no function and were of no use, have now entered the scene as essential and appreciated actors. They are the partners of the farmer, joined with him in loyal companionship. “The farmer furrows the soil with his curving plough. This is his annual labour; thus he keeps his country, his little grandsons, his herds of cattle and faithful bullocks.”¹¹

The farmer’s unceasing striving – set against the unsteadiness and worry of urban life and politics castigated again in a more extensive passage immediately before these lines (495–512) – upholds the existence (*sustinet*) not just of his family and his own farm. In fact, he is working for society. And his constant work guarantees him full rewards – unlike the vain efforts of people ceaselessly striving for money, luxury and power. After the lines just quoted, Vergil goes on to describe, in a striking passage, the full-scale harmony and happy abundance resulting from the farmer’s toil. The poet here himself, as it were, comments upon his own words about a *nescia fallere vita*, a life that will never cheat. And we here find the animals to be like family members, themselves and even their young sharing the joy and hilarity felt by the farmer and his friends whenever the calendar and the work have room for a rustic holiday (*G.* 2.516–531):

Unresting the year teems with orchard fruit, or young
of cattle, or sheaves of corn,
brimming the furrows with plenty, overflowing the barns.
Winter comes, and olives are crushed in the press, and pigs
return elate (*laeti*) with acorns, and woods give arbutus berries:
Autumn drops her varied fruits at our feet, while far
above on sunny rocks the vintage baskets and mellows.
And all the time he has dear children who dote on kisses,
a house that preserves the tradition of chastity, cows that hang
their milky udders, and plump young goats on the happy green
(*in gramine laeto*)
romping and butting with their horns.
The farmer himself keeps holidays when, at ease in a meadow,
a fire in the midst and friends there to crown the flowing bowl,
he drinks the health of the Wine-god and arranges for his herdsmen
a darts-match, setting up the target upon an elm tree,
and the labourers bare their sinewy bodies for country wrestling.¹²

All this harmony is raised to historical importance in the succeeding lines, where we learn that such was the life lived in old Italic times, and, in fact, that such was the way of life that brought Rome to its greatness. The farmer's life even mirrors the conditions of a still more distant past, the days when king Saturn reigned on earth. Before pointing out that in those early times, there were neither wars nor swords, the poet, as if to stress again the fruitful and sympathetic relation between the farmer and his cattle, states that this was "before men slaughtered cattle to feast upon" (2.536f.). There are other ancient texts arguing for the priority and superiority of vegetarianism, and, of course, the concept of miraculously abundant nature in itself presupposes vegetarianism, but against the background of the passages I have quoted above, I think it is reasonable to believe that this is not just a mere praise of supposed early vegetarianism (and neither is it so with the Greek passage which has inspired Vergil here, Aratus *Phaenomena* 100ff.). The poet looks back to a time when man in general respected 'his faithful bullocks' as partners of work and family members.

Tibullus, too, turned from the ideal of miraculous abundance and freedom from work to a dream of rural simplicity. Common to both concepts is the longing for an existence without greed, war, and similar threats to the harmony of the soul. Common to both, too, is the topic of the sheep, but unobtrusively, the role of the sheep changes. Once upon a time, before the invention of swords, and of gold, when there were no fortresses and no palissades¹³, the shepherd slept safely and without fear among his scattered sheep, the elegy 1.10 tells us. This poem, the last of the first book, is characterized by a complicated pattern of references to earlier times, by means of which the distance between the peaceful era of the safely sleeping shepherd and the days of the speaker's own ancestors is blurred, the emblem of both epochs being the use of simple wooden materials where later times prefer precious metals (say, for a jug, or for the images of the gods). When the poet goes on to express his own personal dream – which he here contrasts with a soldier's life – it is nothing like a lazy existence in a paradise of abundance, as was the case in elegy 1.3. No, now it is a small farm – too small to include a slave – it is a wife, and children, and the joy of a hot bath after the day's hard work:

But let us rather praise the man whom old age's torpor overtakes
in his humble cottage with children round him!
He follows his sheep, and his son the lambs,
while the good wife heats the water for his weary limbs.
So let me live...¹⁴

With this handsome scene, the sheep have definitely stepped over to connotations which are nearly the opposite of those in elegy 1.3.

Not unexpectedly, given the changed perspective, cattle, too, play an important, positive role in the poem, although the small farm envisaged does not seem to have room for a cow. The major topic of the elegy is peace. Peace turns out to be a goddess, and this goddess does

not just provide peace, she gives crops and fruit; in fact, she has the credit of having invented and introduced agriculture to mankind:

Meanwhile let Peace attend the fields. White Peace in the beginning
led ploughing oxen under the curved yoke.
Peace fed the vines and stored the juices of the grapes.¹⁵

The volte-face seems clear enough.¹⁶ But to complicate matters, Tibullus playfully juxtaposes this poem with an elegy showing quite another standpoint. The subject of elegy 1.9 is the beloved boy's greed, and here, we find cattle and ploughing on the other side again. Greed – the search for gifts, for wealth and profit – is not just this boy's quality; greed is a much more fundamental phenomenon, for instance, greed is what causes the farmer to cultivate the soil!¹⁷

Mugitus boum, the lowing of the cattle – this signature tune of the Italian countryside once echoed on the very spot where Rome was later to stand. It greeted Aeneas during his visit there. In the eighth book of the *Aeneid*, Vergil sends his hero to Euander, the Arcadian refugee who has settled with his small community on the Palatine hill. Although Euander himself, guiding his guest on the site of the Metropolis-to-be, characterizes his own time as a degenerate one in contrast with a still much earlier epoch when king Saturn had arrived and had gathered the unorganized primitive native population and taught them the basics of civilization (*Aen.* 8.319–339), Vergil quite clearly vests Euander's small village with idealized features. The atmosphere is one of rustic simplicity; in addition, the place is curiously imbued with a foreboding, awe-inspiring spirit – "my people believe they have seen Jupiter himself," Euander tells Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.351f.)¹⁸ – which is further enhanced by Vergil's method of commenting on the contrast between then and now:

Conversing thus together, they approached the unpretentious
dwelling of Evander: cattle were everywhere, lowing
in what is now the Forum of Rome and the elegant Ship-Place.¹⁹

The elegiac poets, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, obviously liked the contrast between proud and brilliant modern Rome and the rural simplicity of Euander's small settlement. In their later career, all of them made at least some attempt to cope with specifically Roman themes. For the present purpose, it is not important to speculate about how serious their interest was in this kind of matter. What is significant here is the fact that they tried to give *their* version of the early days of Rome, or the life on the site of Rome before it was founded. Ovid imagines, among other things, the senators of old, themselves going out to graze their sheep (*Fast.* 1.204). Tibullus' vision includes, e. g., a shepherd's pipe hanging in a tree as a dedication to a rustic god (2.5.29–32), or a young girl returning home with gifts she has received from her lover, "cheese and a snowy ewe's white lamb" (2.5.38). But a more significant characteristic of their view of early Rome is the cattle. They are the sight that catches the elegist's eye when

in his imagination he looks around the thinly settled hills and valleys that were to become Rome. Thus, Propertius guides an imagined visitor in Rome:

"All you see here, stranger, where mighty Rome now stands, was grass and hill before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas; and where stands the Palatine consecrated to Apollo of the Ships (i. e., of the victory at Actium), the cattle of exiled Evander there lay down".²⁰

And here is Tibullus' version:

Not yet had Romulus drawn up the Eternal City's walls,
where Remus as co-ruler was fated not to live;
but cows were grazing then a grassy Palatine,
and hovels raised low roofs on the hill of Jove (i.e., on the
Capitolium).²¹

Later on in the same elegy, a Sibyl prophesies to Aeneas his arrival and his fate in Latium. In the course of her speech, she even turns to address the herds grazing on the spot of the later Metropolis:

"Crop while you may, you bulls, the grass on the seven hills;
for here shall be the site of a mighty city."²²

Finally, Ovid's version, at the beginning of the *Fasti*. The poet is about to celebrate the origin of the New Year's festival dedicated to Janus, when the god himself appears to the poet and graciously declares himself ready to answer to any question about his own character and function and the traditions connected with his cult that may arise. And there are several, some of which cause the god to remember very early times, when he lived and reigned at the site of Rome and king Saturn came to join him:

"Here, where now is Rome, green forest stood unfelled,
and all this mighty region was but a pasture for a few cattle."²³

The happy scene of *Aeneid* 8, depicting Aeneas on a sightseeing walk on the site of Rome in the midst of lowing cattle, no doubt inspired the elegiac contrast between Rome the pasture for cows and Rome the modern centre of power and glory.²⁴ At the same time, the presence of cattle on the site of early Rome in the 'Roman' poems of the elegists conjures up the claim, made by Vergil in the *Georgics*, that Rome's greatness arose out of the life and work of early Italian farmers.

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* Thanks are due to Professor Sven-Johan Spånberg, Uppsala, for revising my English.

¹ Varro Rust. 2.1.4: et propter utilitatem et propter placiditatem.

² Tibullus 1.3.39–42; 45–46: nec vagus ignotis repetens compendia terris / presserat externa navita merce ratem. / Illo non validus subiit iuga tempore taurus, / non domito frenos ore momordit equus. / Non domus ulla fores habuit, non fixus in

agris / qui regeret certis finibus arva lapis; / Ipsae mella dabant quercus, ultroque ferebant / obvia securis ubera lactis oves.

³ Verg. G. 3.316f.: atque ipsae memores redeunt in tecta suosque / ducunt et gravido superant vix ubere limen.

⁴ Horatius Epod. 16.43–50: ... reddit ubi Cererem tellus inarata quotannis, / et inputata floret usque vinea, / germinat et numquam fallentis termes olivae, / suamque pulla ficus ornat arborem, / mella cava manant ex ilice, montibus altis / levis crepante lympha desilit pede. / Illic iniussae veniunt ad mulctra capellae, / refertque tenta grex amicus ubera.

⁵ Wifstrand Schiebe 1981.

⁶ Compare, e.g., Homer's Elysium, Od. 4.563–569; Hesiod Works and Days 112–120 (Golden Race) and 171–173 (Isles of the Blest); Pindar Ol. 2.75–85 (The Isle of the Blest); Eurip. Hippol. 742. Cf., also, Exodus 3.8 and 33.1–3.

⁷ Verg. Ecl. 4.39–41: ... omnis feret omnia tellus. / non rastros patietur humus, non vinea falcem; robustus quoque iam tauris iuga solvet arator. For concise information about the most vexed problems in Eclogue 4, with bibliography, I refer to Horsfall 1995, 60–62.

⁸ Verg. Ecl. 4.21–2: Ipsae lacte domum referent distenta capellae / ubera, nec magnos metuunt armenta leones. The relation between the Fourth Eclogue and Horace's Sixteenth Epode remains controversial. Personally, I am convinced that Vergil is prior to Horace, cf. Wifstrand Schiebe 1981, 138 (n. 2:18). The problem is not essential for my present discussion.

⁹ Verg. G. 1.121–146.

¹⁰ Verg. G. 2.467–471: At segura quies et nescia fallere vita, / dives opum variarum, at latis otia fundis, / speluncae vivique lacus et frigida tempe / mugitusque boum mollesque sub arbore somni.

¹¹ Verg. G. 2.513–516: Agricola incurvo terram dimovit aratro: / hinc anni labor, hinc patriam parvosque nepotes / sustinet, hinc armenta boum meritosque iuvenos.

¹² Verg. G. 2.516–531: Nec requies, quin aut pomis exuberet annus / aut fetu pecorum aut Cerealis mergite culmi, / provenitque oneret sulcos atque horrea vincat. / venit hiems; teritur Sicyonia baca trapetis, / (520) glande sues laeti redeunt, dant arbura silvae; / et varios ponit fetus autumnus, et alte / mitis in apricis coquitur vindemia saxis. / Interea dulces pendent circum oscula nati, / casta pudicitiam servat domus, ubera vaccae / (525) lactea demittunt, pinguesque in gramine laeto / inter se adversis luctantur cornibus haedi. / Ipse dies agitat festos fususque per herbam, / ignis ubi in medio et socii cratera coronant, / te libans, Lenaeae, vocat pecorisque magistris / velocis iaculi certamina ponit in ulmo, / corporaque agresti nudant praedura palaestrae.

¹³ The word used in the text is simply vallus (Tib. 1.10.9), 'pole', and thus skilfully leaves the interpretation open for a palissade (for a military camp etc.) or a fence (e.g. for a fold), or both. Cf. Wifstrand Schiebe 1981, 62.

¹⁴ Tibullus 1.10.39–42: Quam potius laudandus his est quem prole parata / occupat in parva pigra senecta casa? / Ipse suas sectatur oves, at filius agnos, / et calidam fesso comparat uxor aquam. / Sic ego sim...

¹⁵ Tib. 1.10.45–47: Interea Pax arva colat. Pax candida primum / duxit araturos sub iuga curva boves. / Pax aluit vites et sucos condidit uvae.

¹⁶ Cf. Wifstrand Schiebe 1981, 61f.; 74–79.

¹⁷ Tib. 1.9.8f.: For profit, peasants yoke their bulls to the wieldy plough / and press their hard work forward on the land. (Lucra petens habili tauros adiungit aratro / et durum terrae rusticus urget opus.) Cf. Wifstrand Schiebe 1981, 78f.

¹⁸ Verg. Aen. 8.351f.: "Arcades ipsum / credunt se vidisse Iovem."

¹⁹ Verg. Aen. 8.359–361: Talibus inter se dictis ad tecta

subibant / pauperis Euandri, passimque armenta videbant / Romanoque foro et lautis mugire Carinis.

²⁰ Propertius 4.1.1–4: "Hoc quodcumque vides, hospes, qua maxima Roma, / ante Phrygam Aenean collis et herba fuit. / Et qua Navali stant sacra Palatia Phoebos, / Euandri profugae concubere boves."

²¹ Tibullus 2.5.23–26: Romulus aeternae nondum formaverat urbis / moenia, consorti non habitanda Remo, / sed tunc pasebant herbosa palatia vaccae, / et stabant humiles in Iovis arce casae.

²² Tib. 2.5.55f.: "Carpite nunc, tauri, de septem montibus herbas, / dum licet; hic magnae iam locus urbis erit."

²³ Ovidius Fasti 1.243f. "Hic, ubi nunc Roma est, incaedua silva virebat, / tantaque res paucis pascua bubus erat."

²⁴ That very substantial parts of the Aeneid were known, at least in literary circles, already before Vergil's death and the subsequent publication, is hardly controversial. Cf. Wifstrand Schiebe 1981, 56, and Wimmel 1961.

Bibliography

The following English translations have been used (with a few slight changes to avoid unrealistically archaizing words):

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B. Gatz, *Weltalter; goldene Zeit und sinnverwandte Vorstellungen* (Spudasmata, 16), Hildesheim 1967.

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Wifstrand Schiebe 1981

M. Wifstrand Schiebe, *Das ideale Dasein bei Tibull und die Goldzeitkonzeption Vergils* (Studia latina Upsaliensia, 13), Uppsala 1981.

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W. Wimmel, 'Tibull II 5 und das elegische Rombild', in *Gedenkschrift für Georg Rohde* (Aparchai. Untersuchungen zur klassischen Philologie und Geschichte des Altertums, 4), ed. G. Radke, Tübingen 1961, 227–266.

In scholarly literature, hardly anything is to be found that deals specifically with the ideological significance of sheep and cattle. The reader who is willing – or able – to go through Bodo Gatz's masterly but compact study (Gatz 1967) will find much relevant material throughout the book, and especially in the third part, ch. 8 (144ff.). To profit from Gatz, a good grasp of Greek and Latin and a fairly complete library are necessary.

Contributions discussing the general philosophical and political ideology of the Augustan poets abound. I list a few recent publications below, where further bibliography also can be found:

A. Barchiesi, *The poet and the prince. Ovid and Augustan discourse*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1997, esp. 229–237 (First edition in Italian: *Il poeta e il principe: Ovidio e il discorso augusteo*, Rome 1994). Greek and Latin quotations are translated.

R. Cramer, *Vergils Weltansicht. Optimismus und Pessimismus in Vergils Georgica* (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte, 51), Berlin & New York 1998, with extensive discussion of controversies I have had to leave aside in this article. Greek and Latin quotations are not translated.

Ph. Hardie, *Virgil* (Greece & Rome, New surveys in the Classics, 28), Oxford 1998.

J. K. Newman, *Augustan Propertius. The recapitulation of a genre* (Spudasmata, 63), Hildesheim, Zürich & New York 1997, esp. 265–275. Greek and Latin quotations are translated.