

A Note on the History of Black-eared White Cattle

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A RECENT assessment of the economic value of a South American breed of black-eared white cattle, the Blanco Orejinegro, prompted an investigation of their history.¹ Their resemblance to British White and Wild White cattle has been observed by various authors,² but their appearance has not been described in the English literature in any detail. As the history of the British breeds is disputed, it is proposed here to clarify the extent of the similarity and to examine some evidence which may have bearing on the origin of both groups.

In South America, the black-eared white colour pattern is confined to the Blanco Orejinegro (BON) which inhabit the Andean region of Colombia and were estimated to number 2½ million in 1955.³ The coat is white but black flecks occur in some individuals, especially on the lower neck and flanks. The skin is considerably pigmented, but the effect increases and then decreases with age. Apart from black ears, the breed has black mucosae, feet, and horn tips. A recessive variant exists called the Blanco Orejimonono which is identical except that black is replaced by a reddish colour. In body shape and markings, the BON most closely resembles the oldest Wild

White herds in Britain, especially those at Cadzow and the older stock at Chartley which have been illustrated by Whitehead.⁴ The BON resembles the oldest and purest of the British herds, that at Chillingham, and differs from all others in that its calves are born white, never black or coloured. Although the Chillingham cattle now all have reddish ears, Bewick⁵ and Pennant⁶ described black-eared animals among them in the eighteenth century which seem to have been purposely destroyed. The present stock differ from the red-eared variant of the BON because they have black muzzles, feet, and tips to their horns.

Velasquez⁷ considered that Spaniards among the Roman legionaries left white stock in Britain and that descendants of similar cattle were later taken to South America. The advent of black-eared white cattle to the New World is apparently not documented, but a general account of the movement of plants and animals is given by Robertson.⁸ Whitehead⁹ reviewed a great deal of evidence and thought it most probable that the British white cattle were introduced by the Romans. However, although the Romans may have crossed existing types more frequently than had been the practice before, there appears

¹ Lucia Pearson, R. K. Waugh, B. Salazar, F. Botero, and O. Acosta, 'Milking performance of Blanco Orejinegro and Jersey cross-bred cattle', *Jnl Agric. Sci.*, Lxx, 1968, pp. 65-72. I wish to thank Miss J. M. C. Toynbee, Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge, Mr I. L. Mason of the Institute of Animal Genetics, Edinburgh, and Dr J. G. Hall, A.R.C., Animal Breeding Research Organization, Edinburgh, and his co-workers for help with this article.

² G. K. Whitehead, *The Ancient White Cattle of Britain and their Descendants*, 1953; E. Pinzon, *et alii*, *Bovinos criollos Colombianos*, Ministerio de Agricultura de Colombia, Bogotá, 1959.

³ E. Camacho-Leyra (ed.), *Guía agropecuaria de Colombia*, Entrega I, I.C.O.P., Bogotá, 1955.

⁴ G. K. Whitehead, *op. cit.* ⁵ T. Bewick, *A General History of Quadrupeds*, 1790.

⁶ T. Pennant, *British Zoology*, 4th edn, London, 4 vols, 1776-7.

⁷ J. Velasquez-Q., *Ganado Blanco Orejinegro*, Publicación del Banco Cafetero, Bogotá, 1954.

⁸ J. A. Robertson, 'Some Notes on the Transfer of Plants and Animals by Spain to its Colonies Overseas', in *Studies in Hispanic-American History*, ed. W. W. Pierson, James Sprunt Historical Studies, University of North Carolina Press, 1927. ⁹ G. K. Whitehead, *op. cit.*

to be no positive evidence that they introduced cattle of a new type to Britain.¹ In fact, a certain amount of evidence exists to the contrary. There is no need to attribute the introduction of cattle larger than the Celtic Shorthorn to the invasion, since pre-conquest remains have been found.² Caesar's expeditions may have been carried out without wagons at all,³ and it seems most unlikely that cattle should have been imported otherwise when, according to Strabo,⁴ the island was quickly to become noted as a source of supply to the continent. If black-eared white cattle did accompany the Romans, they were probably not of Italian origin as certain writers have suggested. The existence of white cattle in Roman Italy is well documented. Columella⁵ referred to a small white breed in Campania and to a very large one in Umbria. Varro⁶ mentioned that although white cattle were common round the Black Sea, they were comparatively rare in Italy. They were not considered hardy and were usually reserved for sacrifice. The black-eared white colour pattern is not, however, described by Columella, Varro, Palladius, or Virgil,⁷ all of whom make specific reference to coat colour and to ears. The pattern is so distinct that it seems unlikely that it should have escaped remark if it had in fact been common. In addition, the appearance of present-day Mediterranean "white" breeds does not, as has been thought, support the view. Their black points give them a superficial resemblance to the true black-eared white, but they do not have black ears, are grey rather than white, and sometimes produce coloured calves.⁸

Zeuner⁹ has discussed the possibility that black-eared white cattle existed in Western

Europe much earlier and suggested a similarity to the Palaeolithic animals painted at Lascaux. The evidence is not clear, but Pliny¹⁰ mentioned the sacrifice of white cattle by the Druids of Gaul. The close connection between the Celts and the Iberians could explain a resemblance between cattle in Britain and Spain.

Whatever the connection, the present distribution of the colour pattern among cattle of *Bos taurus* and *Bos indicus* types which cannot be closely related suggests that, by itself, the similarity of coat colour need only imply the most distant relationship. Mason¹¹ has given a list of the breeds and types of cattle in which the pattern may be found: British White and Wild White, Colombian Blanco Orejinegro, East African Boran (often), Mauritius Creole, Nigerian White Fulani, North Finnish, Polish Marsh, and Swedish Mountain. The colour of the Norwegian Black-sided Trondheim and Nordland and the South African Nguni is often reduced to white with black points including the ears. Thus the correct explanation may be that the cattle were selected out independently in various regions, perhaps initially for religious purposes. A study of blood characteristics may offer the most promising direction for future research. This has been done for the cattle at Chillingham¹² whose blood gives an apparently unique electrophoretic pattern and whose "B" blood group combination has been reported previously only in Damascene cattle. An extension of this work to other types of red- and black-eared cattle might help to elucidate their connection and have an interesting bearing on the history of human migrations.

¹ Sheppard Frere, *History of the Provinces of the Roman Empire: Britannia*, London, 1967, p. 279; Louis C. West, *Roman Britain: Objects of Trade*, Oxford, 1931, pp. 22, 106.

² S. Frere, *loc. cit.*; T. E. R. Holmes, *Ancient Britain and the Invasions of Julius Caesar*, Oxford, 1907, p. 151; T. Grahame, quoted in G. K. Whitehead, *loc. cit.*, p. 26.

³ J. F. C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier and Tyrant*, London, 1965, p. 82.

⁴ Strabo, *Geography*, 4:5.

⁵ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 6:1.

⁶ Varro, *De Re Rustica*, 2:5.

⁷ Palladius, *De Re Rustica*, 4:11; Virgil, *Georgics*, 3:51.

⁸ I. L. Mason, The Institute of Animal Genetics, Edinburgh, 1966, personal communication.

⁹ F. E. Zeuner, *A History of Domesticated Animals*, London, 1963.

¹⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, 16:95.

¹¹ I. L. Mason, *loc. cit.*

¹² J. G. Hall, Animal Breeding Research Organization, Edinburgh, 1966, personal communication.