

The Golden Sheep of Roman Andalusia

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Abstract

The classical evidence for this 'breed' of sheep are discussed, followed by an examination of the various modern explanations for the its existence. It is suggested that a genetic trait is the most probable solution to the problem.

THE WEALTH of the Roman province of Baetica (present-day Andalusia and southern Extremadura) lay predominantly in its production of high-class olive oil, as the Monte Testaccio in Rome, literally a hill composed almost entirely of olive oil amphorae from the region, graphically demonstrates. Nor was Rome the only recipient of the region's produce: an amphora containing Baetican olives has recently been found in Thames estuary in southern Britain.¹

Nevertheless we must not forget the contribution of Baetica's other agricultural sectors to the province's income. Among these, the rearing of livestock, and in particular that of sheep, was especially important.

I

Baetican sheep were raised primarily for their wool, which had a high reputation in the ancient world.² The Greek geographer Strabo (fl 20 BC) remarks on the high prices commanded by Turdetanian (Andalusian) sheep and the beauty of their wool,³ while a later Hispano-Roman poet, Martial (fl 80 AD), suggests that Baetican wool would be as equally suitable a gift for a lover as expensive perfume.⁴

It is interesting that Martial's potential

gift is Baetican wool rather than any specific garment made from it. This perhaps implies that the production of wool remained a primary industry in Baetica, and that no major textile industry developed in the province. Such a view finds support from Strabo, who comments that whereas previously Baetican garments, ἔσθητες, had been imported to Rome, in his day (i.e., in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius 31 BC–21 AD) only the fleeces, ἔρια, were brought there.⁵

Martial makes a single reference to a Baetican garment; in a short epigram to a *lacerna*, or cloak.⁶ However we cannot tell from the context of the passage whether the cloak was made inside the province itself or simply made from Baetican wool at Rome. The latter solution is perhaps suggested by a further poem, where the poet speculates on the origin of the wool of a toga given to him by Parthenius, and includes Baetican wool amongst the possibilities.⁷

The best reference we have to a garment made in the province is in a letter written by St Jerome to a wealthy admirer, Lucinius Baeticus.⁸ In it the saint refers to two short cloaks, *palliola*, and a woollen mantle, an *amphimallum*, sent to him by Lucinius as gifts. Although there is no explicit reference to the origin of the garments it is reasonable to assume that they were made in the province.

¹ P R Sealey and P A Tyers, 'Olives from Roman Spain: a unique amphora find in British waters', *Antiquaries' Journal*, 69, 1989, pp 53 ff.

² On the unimportance of rearing sheep for meat in general see Columella (fl 60–65 AD), *De Re Rustica* 7.3.13, 12.13.

³ Strabo, 3.2.6.

⁴ Martial 12.65.5.

⁵ Strabo, *op cit*, n 3.

⁶ Martial, 14.133.

⁷ Martial, 8.28.

⁸ Ep. 71.7, written in 397 AD.

Similarly there are virtually no attestations of textile workers found in the province. The epitaph of Caesia Celsa found at Martos, the ancient Tucci, describes her as an outstanding spinner, *lanifici praeclara*.⁹ This could be seen as implying that spinning was Caesia's profession. However the context of the phrase, found within a list of Caesia's virtues, suggests that this was not the case. Spinning was a stock virtue of the Roman woman as the well known trope, *lanam fecit, domum servavit*, 'she spun her wool and kept her house' shows.¹⁰

Another industry connected with clothing, dyeing, is better attested, though the number of inscriptions involved, a maximum of 4, is still not great. An *infector* is attested at Porcuna (the ancient Obulco),¹¹ and an *offector* at Alcorruen (the ancient Sacili).¹² Two further inscriptions, one from Córdoba, the other from Cádiz, may refer to refer to *purpurarii*, or purple dyers.¹³

Solinus (fl 200 AD) tells us that the Spaniards of his day dyed wool red using a dye manufactured from the *coccus* berry, which is in fact the scale insect *kermes vermilio* Planch.¹⁴ From the Elder Pliny (fl 70 AD) we know that this dye was manufactured in the province of Lusitania, near its provincial capital at Mérida.¹⁵ However, according to the arabic historian Al-Maqqarī, the dye was also produced near Seville in Andalusia, so

Solinus' note may well refer to Baetica as well as Lusitania.¹⁶

We can see therefore that some dyed cloth was produced in the province. Nevertheless the fame of the province's wool lay in its natural colour, which was held not to require dyeing. Our sources distinguish at least two, and probably three, differently coloured Baetican wools. A clear distinction is made between a dark and a golden wool; and the dark wool appears to have had two varieties, one being of a redder colour than the other.

Columella (fl 60 AD) speaks of the *pulli et fusi*, i.e. 'dark-coloured', sheep of Córdoba, whose wool fetched a good price.¹⁷ Martial applies the unique term *Baeticatus*, 'Baeticizer', to the hypocritical pervert Maternus precisely because he preferred dark clothing and praised natural, as opposed to dyed, colours.¹⁸ From Nonius Marcellus (fl 310 AD), we learn that *nativus*, 'native', was the name given to a dark Spanish wool, and it is probably this wool to which Martial is referring in his epigram.¹⁹ Strabo's Turdetanian wool, mentioned above, is described as raven-black.²⁰ Pliny may also be referring to this wool in the eighth book of the *Natural History* where he speaks of black Spanish wools.²¹

Pliny seems to mention a second, red-coloured variety of dark wool. Such a colour would be genetically brown as in the case of 'red' deer, or possibly dark tan. The two names he gives to it, *rutilus* and *Erythaeus*, certainly imply this colour.

⁹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (hereafter, *CIL*), 2.1699.

¹⁰ Cf. the emperor Augustus' wearing of homespun clothes. Suetonius, *Vit. Aug.* 73. See also J P V D Balsdon, *Roman Women*, 1962, p 270.

¹¹ *CIL*, 2.5519, *Liberalis infector* ..., 'Liberalis the dyer ...'.

¹² *Ephemeris Epigraphica*, 9.248, *Faustus, offector* ..., 'Faustus the dyer ...'.

¹³ *CIL*, 2.2235, (from Córdoba), *Diocles Purpurarius* ... 'Diocles? the purple dyer? ...'. The possibility that 'Purpurarius' is part of Diocles' name rather than his profession cannot be discarded entirely. *CIL*, 2.1743, (from Cádiz), *Bebia Veneria* [... *pur?* / *peraria* ...], 'Bebia Veneria? the purple dyer?'. Clearly here *Purperaria* is only one of several possible restorations.

¹⁴ Solinus, 23.4. For the use of the *coccus* see J and Ch Cotte, 'Le Kermès dans l'antiquité', *Revue Archeologique*, 6, 1918, pp 92 ff, and I C Beavis, *Insects and other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity*, 1988, pp 108 ff.

¹⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*, 9.141.

¹⁶ Al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥat-ṭīb min guṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb*, translated by P Gayangos as *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, 1840, bk 1, ch 3, p 57 & n 8.

¹⁷ Columella, *RR*, 7.2.4.

¹⁸ Martial, 1.96.

¹⁹ Nonius Marcellus, 349.30, *pullus color est quem nunc Spanum vel nativum dicimus*, "'pullus' is the colour which we now call Spanish or 'native'".

²⁰ Strabo, 3.2.6., ἔριτα ... τῶν κοραζῶν. 'Raven-black' appears to have been a relatively common term to describe dark wool in antiquity, see, for example, Vitruvius, 8.3.14, who refers to *Coracinus* flocks.

²¹ Pliny, *NH*, 8.191, *Hispania nigri velleris praecipuas habet*, 'Spain has outstanding sheep with black fleeces'.

He also mentions that it was similar to the wool of Asia.²²

There may be passing references to this type of wool in work of the poets Catullus (*fl* 60 BC) and Virgil (*fl* 25 BC) both of whom refer to garments which are described as *ferrugo Ibera*, 'rusty Iberian', in colour.²³ St Isidore (*fl* 600 AD), when referring to the relevant passage of Virgil's *Aeneid*, glosses the colour involved as a 'darkish purple', *purpura subnigra*.²⁴

Martial too may be thinking of this wool in his epigram on a Baetican cloak.²⁵ Most commentators have assumed that Martial here is referring to a third sort of Baetican wool, the golden variety.²⁶ However the epigram compares the Baetican *lacerna* favourably to one from Tyre, a city famous for its purple dyes. Martial underlines the natural colouring of the Spanish cloth, as opposed to the dyed garment from Tyre. Clearly the epigram would have more poetic force if the two cloaks were of the same colour, and so it seems likely that Martial is referring to the dark-red, rather than the golden, variety of Baetican wool here. A breed of sheep, known as *La Guirra*, with dark red wool, still exists today on the Mediterranean coast of the modern-day Spanish province of Valencia opposite the Balearic islands; perhaps these animals are descendants of the red sheep of Baetica.²⁷

II

The most famous of the Baetican wools, however, was the golden variety. Martial at the beginning of his epigram on a Cordoban house speaks of the Tartessian lands where 'yellow fleeces are pale in their native gold and living gilding covers

the flocks of Hesperia'.²⁸ In another poem he describes a girl whose hair is blonder than the wool of Baetica, the hair of the Germans, or the *nitellus*, i.e., the field-mouse.²⁹ Finally in a poem addressed to the river Guadalquivir (the Baetis), he speaks of the river's gleaming waters dyeing sheep's fleeces a golden colour.³⁰ It also seems likely that this is the wool Martial toyed with giving to his lover.

What was the reason for this variety in colours? Our sources are insistent that all three colours were natural to the wools concerned, and not produced by dyeing. Although there are many breeds of sheep which naturally produce dark and reddish wools (e.g., the *La Guirra* cited above), the production of a yellow or 'golden' fleece it seems much more difficult to account for. It appears unlikely that this was merely a reference to the quality of the wool rather than its appearance, as our ancient sources make a firm point of comparing it with other light-coloured objects.

Martial, as we have seen, attributed the colour to the properties of the river Guadalquivir, and in this seems to be echoing a commonly-held view.³¹ These comments tell us in passing that the sheep concerned must have been pastured not in the highlands of the province, but along the banks of the Guadalquivir itself, and so provide us with evidence that many

²² Martial, 9.61.1-4.

*In Tartessiacis domus est notissima terris,
qua dives placidum Corduba Baetis amat,
vellera nativo pallent ubi flava metallo
et linit Hesperium brattea viva pecus.*

'There is a famous house in the Tartessian lands
Where wealthy Corduba loves her gentle Baetis
where yellow fleeces are pale in their native gold
and living gilding covers the flocks of Hesperia'

²³ Martial 5.37.7-8.

*quae crine vicit Baetici gregis vellus
Rhenique nodos aureamque nitellum*

'whose hair surpassed the fleeces of Baetican flocks, the topknots of the Germans, and the golden field-mouse'.

²⁴ Martial, 12.98.1-2, *Baetis ... aurea qui nitidis vellera tinguis aquis*, 'Baetis you who dye the golden fleeces with your gleaming waters'.

²⁵ See, for example, Juvenal, *Satire* 12.41-2; cf. Virgil's red sheep produced by eating *Sandyx*, [Madder?], Virgil, *Ecloues*, 4.42-5.

²² Pliny, *NH*, 8.191. For the application of these terms to Asian wool see Columella, *RR*, 7.2.4.

²³ Catullus, 64.227; Virgil, *Aeneid* 9.581.

²⁴ Isidore, *Etym*, 19.28.6.

²⁵ Martial, 14.133.

²⁶ e.g. M. Dolç, *Hispania y Marcial*, Barcelona, 1953, p. 41.

²⁷ M L Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, 1983, pp. 437-8, fig. 8.36.

Roman estates here must have practised mixed farming, rather than solely the cultivation of the olive.

III

The nineteenth-century historian Costa believed that the golden wool was a product of cross-breeding,³² a view which has been unanimously followed by modern scholars.³³ This science was certainly practised in antiquity in general,³⁴ and, more specifically, we have an example from Baetica itself. Columella tells us how his uncle, Marcus Columella, a native of Cádiz, bought some wild rams with fleeces of wondrous colour, 'mirus color', imported from Mauretania, to cross with Tarentine ewes.³⁵ The wool of resulting offspring retained the colours of their sires, while being of the same high quality of that of their mothers.³⁶

Varro (*fl* 40, BC) perhaps lends some support to this argument, when he argues that the Golden Apples of the Hesperides were, in reality, sheep and goats brought from northern Africa. The misunderstanding arose, according to Varro, through a confusion of the Greek *μήλον*, or sheep, with the Latin *malum* or apple.³⁷

Nevertheless Columella does not specify the fabulous colour of his uncle's rams, which is strange if it was the golden hue for which the wool of the province was famous. In addition, Marcus Columella's remark that the offspring of such cross-breeding retained 'whatever appearance' (*qualiscunque species*) the African rams had tends to suggest that more than one colour was involved.

Moreover, the insistence of our ancient sources that the golden fleeces were produced by the climate of the province and river Guadalquivir in particular seems to imply that the colour was not a product of human intervention. Selective breeding therefore cannot be said to be the definitive solution to this problem.

What alternatives does this leave? One is to go along with the ancient view that the colour was a product of dietary factors. This would have the advantage of making the phenomenon appear much more 'natural', than if the golden colour of the wool had been produced by cross-breeding. A recent theory about the nature of the legend of the Golden Fleece suggests that this effect was brought about by a discolouration of the fleece caused by liver damage caused by over consumption of oleanolic acid present in olive leaves.³⁸

As we have seen, the golden sheep of Baetica were raised alongside the Guadalquivir river, an area of intensive olive production. The sheep would have been left to graze amongst the olive groves. Here they would have fed mainly on olive leaves, though they would have also helped to keep the groves clear of unwanted vegetation, and provided a ready source of fertilizing manure. This sparse pasturing might also have increased the quality of their wool.³⁹ In winter they were probably stall-fed; the most ready

³² J Costa, *Estudios Ibéricos*, 1891, XV.

³³ e.g. J M Blázquez, *Ciclos y temas de la Historia de España, La Romanización* **, 1975, pp 128, 208; A Cabo, *La Historia de España Alfaguara*, 1, 1973, p 330.

³⁴ See, for example, Virgil, *Georgics*, 3.387 ff, although this is to produce white wool.

³⁵ Columella, *RR*, 7.2.4, *ex vicino Africae*, 'from the neighbouring part of Africa', in this context clearly Mauretania. Ryder's assertion (*Sheep and Man*, p 169) that Columella meant Carthage is based on a category error, confusing political 'Africa', i.e. the Roman province of this name, with the general geographical term 'Africa', which then as now referred to the entire continent, see Pliny, *NH*, 5.1.1-2. The breed of these rams remains a mystery, but they must have been impressive animals as Columella tells us they were not brought to Cádiz for agricultural reasons, but to fight in the arena.

³⁶ Columella, *RR*, 7.2.4-5.

³⁷ Varro, *RR*, 2.1.6. *ut in Libyam ad Hesperidas unde aurea mala, id est secundum antiquam consuetudinem capras et oves [quas] Hercules ex Africa in Graeciam exportavit. Eas enim [a] sua voce Graeci appellunt mela*, '... as in Libya by the Hesperides whence come the golden apples: that is to say according to the ancient usage the goats and sheep which Heracles brought from Africa to Greece, for these are called "mela" by the Greeks in their own language'.

³⁸ G J Smith, 'Jason's Golden Fleece explained', *Nature*, 327, 1987, p 561.

³⁹ Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, p 165.

fodder to hand would have been once more olive leaves.

Given the circumstances in which the Baetican sheep were raised, it is easy to see how the process sketched out above may have occurred in the province producing the golden fleeces for which it was famous. The golden wool of Baetica could therefore have been an accidental, albeit happy, by-product of olive cultivation.

However such a solution brings its own problems. The possibility of such poisoning has been challenged on purely physiological grounds.⁴⁰ Moreover, as Ryder has pointed out, there is a pragmatic objection: sheep are frequently raised under olives in the Mediterranean. If the liver poisoning theory were correct, we should expect a far wider spread of yellow fleeces than we actually have, which would in turn negate this characteristic as an identifying mark of the sheep of the Guadalquivir valley.⁴¹

Is there any other more satisfactory solution to this problem? One further possibility might perhaps meet the objections raised against both the solutions posited above. The golden sheep could have been flocks of sheep having the genetic colour 'light tan'. This solution would

allow us to posit that there existed in the Guadalquivir valley healthy, naturally 'golden' sheep, which would not have had to have been the product of selective breeding. Some support to this hypothesis of a golden race of sheep is given by a breed of goat mentioned by Ryder which, is genetically light tan in colour and interestingly called the 'Golden Guernsey'.⁴² It is understandable that antiquity when confronted with this phenomenon sought an explanation for it and came up, erroneously, with the properties of the Guadalquivir's water as a solution.

IV

What happened to the golden sheep of Andalusia remains a mystery. There are no references to them, to the present author's knowledge, beyond the Roman period. Perhaps they survived the collapse of Roman Spain, but did not affect the Visigothic and Arabic aesthetic sensibilities in the same way as they had the classical mind, and hence this simile was no longer used. On the other hand the breed may have perished entirely in the upheavals of the post-Roman world. In all events Spain had to wait for the arrival of the Merino in the Middle Ages to regain her reputation for fine wool, which this time was firmly white in colour.

⁴⁰ P Moyna and H Heinzen, 'Why was the fleece golden?', *Nature*, 330, 1987, p 28.

⁴¹ M L Ryder, 'The last word on the Golden Fleece Legend?', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 10.1, 1991, p 57 ff.

⁴² *op cit* n 41.

INDEX TO THE AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW

VOLUMES I-XXXV, 1953-87

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