

The Old Irish Goat – A Primitive Breed in Need of Recognition and Preservation

Raymond Werner, March 2004

Description

English descriptions of the Old Irish goat, based on the annual importations of Irish goats into England and Scotland during the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, almost universally described the Old Irish goat as being leggy, gaunt and flat-sided, with a head that was long and ugly. These descriptions are inaccurate and biased, however, the comparison being made between the Old Irish goat and the pedigree, so-called English goats, of the day. This improved English goat was in reality a cross between the Old English goat and imported stock of mainly Mediterranean and Middle Eastern type; so the comparison was between a unimproved utility goat and an improved dairy-goat ideal. In similar vein, the Exmoor pony has a unique style and beauty of its own, particularly when viewed in the context of its origin and “native” pony qualities. It would be possible, even so, to write an uncomplimentary report of its appearance if this were done by enthusiasts of the Arab breed, which has a very gracile head and conformation by comparison.

It is a popularly held belief, still quoted in the literature, that the Old Irish goat always had scimitar shaped horns, described as rising in parallel from the head and not turning outwards at the tips. This idea arose with an original description found in *The Book of The Goat* by Holmes Pegler (1875), and was reinforced by the fact that Irish imports into England and Scotland were made up of nannies whose horns did not generally reflect the variation found in that of the males. In actuality, the horns of the Old Irish goat were quite variable, ranging from scimitar, through moderately twisted and curling, to a dorcas twist. Polled goats were known, but rare. So much so, in fact, that the polled condition in feral herds of old type is more likely to have originated from introgression with stock of Swiss type than a continuation of an original characteristic.

The earliest English descriptions of the Old Irish goat confirm that the breed was almost exactly like the Old Welsh goat, Old Scotch goat and Old English goat in both its general appearance and its essential breed characteristics.

The Old Irish goat, along with the other old varieties of the British Isles just mentioned, was in reality a small animal with a deep body that stood firmly on short legs. The coat was of medium length to long and shaggy; the ears small and pricked; the head long and dished. All the four basic colours found in the goat (tan, black, grey and brown) were represented. Tan varied between white (the extreme dilute of tan), through yellow, fawn, golden and red to chestnut/mahogany. Colour patterns included Bezoar or wild patterning, which may have been quite common; through lightbelly, darkbelly, mahogany (the pattern not the colour), no-pattern tan and no-pattern black. The descriptions of rusty or reddish black probably refer to the mahogany pattern, which is basically a black-tan roan, or else chocolate in which the longer hair may fade or bleach to a lighter shade. The colour pattern lateral stripes may have occurred, but confirmation is at present lacking. “And white”, rarely “pied”, refers to white

patching, which seems to have been typical of the Old Irish goat. Swiss patterning did not occur in the Old Irish breed, and its presence was, and is, a sure indication of introgression with stock of Modern Swiss derivation.

The type of the Old Irish goat, along with the other old varieties, conformed to a standard that might best be described as a “cold weather goat”. Thus, in its conformation, and especially in relation to both Bergmann’s and Allen’s rules, it has the characteristics of a frost-proof breed that needs to cope with extreme cold whilst fuelling itself on large quantities of rough herbage. Goats of very similar type, and almost certainly of the very same origin in time and space, have traditionally been found all around the periphery of Europe. These goats comprise a distinct group that has been designated The Northern Breed Group.

Origin and history

If we accept the standard interpretation of the origin and worldwide dispersal of the Neolithic, which brought agriculture and animal husbandry in its train, the goat was introduced into Ireland by one of the sea-faring peoples that settled there. Ireland’s earliest Neolithic colonizers, the Megalithic people, are generally cited; although The People Of The Leather Vessels, who brought metallurgy into Ireland, are also considered to have brought their stock. Incumbent on this interpretation of events is that these early colonizers came by sea from the eastern Mediterranean, it now being believed that the Cretan Wild Goat, with its short and close coat, gracile conformation, scimitar horn-shape and Bezoar colour and patterning, represents this earliest domesticant gone feral. If this were the case, then the earliest goat introductions had little in common with the breed type of the later Old Irish goat.

It is possible to make some form of argument in favour of the Neolithic goat developing into a cold-weather type after its arrival in Europe. The obvious place would be Scandinavia, the obvious people those associated with the Germanic migrations. Timing and a consideration of the movements of the Teutonic people, however, along with an understanding of the climatic conditions of the period, would tend to mitigate against such a theory.

There is some evidence to support the view that the domestic goat occurred in Europe during the Late Pleistocene; and considerable evidence that relates to its occurrence in Europe during the early Holocene. This is associated with the theory that a pre-Neolithic proper phase of livestock pastoralism, centred on cattle, sheep and goats- was associated with the Mesolithic of northern Europe, or even earlier. If this were indeed the case, the boreal climatic conditions following the last deglaciation, coupled with a right understanding of conditions during the last glaciation, would lead inexorably to the conclusion that the generalized northern pastoralist goat developed rapidly into the All-weather type of the Northern Breed Group during the extremely cold phase associated with ice melt during the late Pleistocene. This would mean that the more gracile goats brought into Europe in general, and Ireland in particular, during the standard Neolithic would have been absorbed into what had rapidly become this distinct landrace type. It would also mean that the Old Irish goat was a “native” in the same sense that the oldest Red Deer population is.

The view held by the present writer is that the Old Irish goat is a typical representative of The Northern Breed Group, an unimproved or primitive type that originated during a Late Pleistocene phase of pre-agricultural nomadic hunter-pastoralism in Northern Europe. It

is therefore representative also of Europe's earliest landrace type, a breed that can be called "native" in the same way that we refer to "native" pony breeds, and namely for the reason that it is ideally suited to the climate, topography and style of husbandry that has traditionally been imposed upon it.

Status of the Northern Breed Group

Breeds belonging to the Northern Breed Group are generally in decline throughout its traditional region of distribution. The Breed Group was formerly the only breed type of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. It was possibly also the landrace type of the Baltic and Belgium, although more research is required to confirm this.

In Wales, the total population, all feral, was around 300 in the middle of the last century. Although the overall number has increased since then, associated to some extent with an expansion of feral goat hefts onto abandoned low-lying sheep rearing areas, there has been an equal increase in introgression with stock of Modern origin. It is possible, therefore, that feral goats of the Old Welsh type are in decline.

The surviving population of England, nearly all feral in two populations with some brought into smallholdings, a zoo and grazing schemes, is between 200 and 250.

The total population of Scotland is generally cited as being around 4000. This information is outdated however, relating to figures published in 1993 that were, in some instances, quotes from figures relating to 1969. There may, therefore, be as few as 3000 or less; and a recent survey, carried-out by the British Feral Goat Research Group on selected populations, would suggest that the total number of purebred feral stock might be 1500 or less.

Iceland has a purebred, and inbred, population of the old type numbering around 300.

In the Netherlands, the Old Dutch goat came close to extinction, with only 4 purebred animals left. A breeding programme that introduced goats of the 'right type', some having obvious Swiss breeding, has brought numbers up to around 2000.

There is one feral population representing the Old Norwegian type in Norway. Norway dabbled with goats of improved Swiss type for a while, but ultimately rejected this as unsuitable for the climate and style of husbandry. Since then, the Old Norwegian breed has been retained, but improved to a dairy standard by focussing on the, and limiting the number of, sires used. The Norwegian goat of today is therefore an 'improved primitive' breed with a decreasing gene base in relation to its genetically variable origins.

Sweden, too, has its own primitive version of landrace goat of the Northern Breed Group. Swedish goat breeders are following in the wake of Norwegian goat improvement, however, importing Norwegian sires in increasing numbers. There is a rare relic of the Old Swedish landrace type in Germany. This is the Jamtland variety that was formerly kept in the Thuringer zoo park, Erfurt.

The Old Danish goat is now extinct.

Preservation of the type of the Northern Breed Group

Ultimately, the best gene bank for goats of the relic Northern Breed Group may be considered to be feral populations where there is no pressure for improvement, populations are still large enough to retain genetic variability within the original type, and they are living in conditions best suited to their origins and former style of husbandry. Having stated this as the ideal, it needs to be pointed out that the world population of purebred goats belonging to the relic Northern Breed group still existing in a feral state may be as few as between 2000 and 2,500, added to which will be an as yet unknown number surviving in Ireland generally (both Eire and Northern Ireland).

Nearly all, say 95%, of all surviving feral goats of the type are located in the British Isles. The status of feral goats in the United Kingdom at least is ambiguous in the extreme, as they are classified as neither wild nor domesticated, and therefore are afforded no protection in law. Theoretically, they are the property of the landowner on which their heft is located or onto whose land they wander, although such ownership needs to be proven. All too often, however, they are shot before the niceties of such legal considerations can be established.

Legislation is urgently needed to afford recognition and protection to the remaining feral populations of the old type, along with legislation that protects feral goat populations in general.

A strategy for preserving the Irish Feral Goat.

In the first instance, an urgent initial study of the breed type of all the surviving feral goat populations in Eire needs to be carried-out.

This, initially, would concentrate on categorizing each population in relation to whether or not they are (1) purebred of the Old Irish type (2) basically of the Old Irish type phenotypically, but with some documented history of introgression with goat stock of Modern type (3) manifestly an admixture of the Old and Modern types (4) wholly of Modern goat stock origin.

A determination not to move stock from one population to another whilst the origin of individual 'herds' remains unclear. This is vitally important, and recongized as a basic principle in Scottish feral goat conservation as long ago as 1969.

The setting up of local support groups/preservation societies for each surviving population. Their initial objective would be to change perceived opinion locally, publicise the value of the breed, and work towards protection and recognition at a local level. These local support groups could then be affiliated into an all-Eire preservation society that could work at a national level for the recognition and preservation of the Irish feral goat as a whole.

An initial population dynamics study of each population that will give some idea of total numbers, sex and age ratios and fertility rates.

Work to ascertain the 'place' of each feral goat population with regard to future management. This should take into account the style of management; perceived nuisance and how this can be negated; optimum and minimum numbers in relation to genetic diversity, inbreeding, group structure, carrying capacity; special interests, including woodland, vegetation type etc.; and ecological and tourism value.

A specific plan to ensure that management in the future will be based upon the preservation and promotion of the Old Irish type of goat. This is not to advocate culling or removal for culling or removals sake, but to recognised two tiers of feral goat in which the Old Irish goat plays a part: the purebred and otherwise. When, and only when, reductions in numbers are necessary for any sound reason, the strategy for promoting the Old Irish goat would come into play.

A DNA study of selected Irish feral goat populations, linked into the work of the British feral Goat Research Group on English and Scottish populations.