

The Sacred Chianina

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One of the most evident traits of Chianina cattle is the white porcelain coat which, together with their harmonious conformation, causes admiration even by those who are not familiar with animal husbandry. It is possible that this somatic trait has to do with the very origin of the breed, that is, that it derives from a selection made by the Etruscans and the ancient Romans to obtain white animals destined for sacrifices, allowing to hypothesize a "sacred" productive purpose. This hypothesis finds confirmation in the testimonies of the Latin authors and in a careful examination of the ways in which the sacrifices were carried out in the Roman world.

Cattle breeding in Rome

Cattle breeding in Roman Italy was devoted to producing draught oxen used, often along with cows, in the fields and for transport on carts, and therefore essential for the supply of food and all other goods. Horses, on the other hand, were mainly used as saddle animals, due to the high maintenance cost, and the breeds reared in Roman age had little aptitude for traction (*Morley*).

Cattle breeding was based on suckler cows, often raised on public pastures, widely used by small owners (*Gabba*); the cow-calves were used for the restocking and the bull-calves were mostly castrated and trained to work. Even the oxen were wintered at pasture, during the periods of inactivity, which were however rather short, since the work, also due to the inefficient tools, had to be repeated several times on the same field (*Kolendo*).

With the increase of the population the public pastures became insufficient and at first a maximum load of one hundred head of cattle per breeder was imposed on them, with the Licinia Sextia laws of 367 BC. (*Grenier*), and then they were increasingly destined for crops, generating tensions between breeders and farmers. The first wars of expansion of the Romans started, against Albalonga and the Sabines, to take possession of new pastures. Transhumance to the mountains also began, taking advantage of the sheep tracks, called *calles* (*Grenier*). In Rome there were no dairy cattle breeds: milk production was intended for the weaning of calves, also given the low consumption of fresh milk, considered suitable for barbarians, while the most common cheeses were made of ewe or goat milk.

Even the breeding for meat production was not foreseen: the enormous importance of draught cattle for the Roman economy resulted in a sacredness that made them untouchable, so much so that their killing in the first centuries of Rome costed the penalty of death or exile, while sheep and goats, pigs and poultry could be raised for meat.

The slaughter of cattle was, however, permissible within sacrificial rites: the victim, transferred to the sacred sphere with the *immolatio* on the altar, was treated ritually, and with the *profanatio* returned to the profane sphere (*Santini*), thus its meat could be consumed by the offerors or sold. It is also probable that cows and oxen at the end of their career, which Cato (2, 5-7) recommended selling, didn't fall under the taboo that protected cattle. The use of sacrifice as the only possibility of derogation from the absolute respect for the draught ox is also found among other peoples of the Mediterranean basin, in the Syrian-Palestinian area (*Milan*) or the Greeks (*Lissarrague and Schmitt Pantel, Van Straten*), among which an invitation to a friend's house could be indifferently defined as "to dinner" or "to sacrifices" or "to a victim" (*Georgoudi*).

The sacrifices in Rome

The knowledge on the sacrifices made by the Romans is poor and often not so detailed, while about the Etruscans the information is even less. However, we know that for the Romans the

public religious rites (*sacra publica*), on the occasion of religious or civil holidays, were at the expense of the community, and often included sacrifices, performed to propitiate actions to be carried out (wars or the assignment of public offices), to celebrate victories in war (the triumphs) or to appease the gods for some act deemed offensive towards them. The sacrifices also took place within private rites (*sacra privata*), to celebrate happy events and anniversaries or to fulfill vows and citizens or families beared the related expenses.

The victims (*hostiae*) could be cultivated plants, inanimate objects such as cakes, sweets, flowers, incense and even coins, but they were often domestic animals, and the most valuable, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs, were called *victimae* (*Prescendi*). Both public and private sacrifices were followed by banquets or food distributions (*Scheid, 1988*); the great German historian Theodor Mommsen in 1843 defined the sacrificial rites of the Roman religion as "*a bewildering mixture of sacred things and banquets*". During them what had been sacrificed was consumed, symbolically sharing the meal with the divinity, who had the meal first (*Scheid, 1988*), by means of combustion on the fire.

In the sacrifices offered to hellish divinities, however, the victim was completely burned in the fire, with the so-called holocaust, in order not to share the meal with the infernal gods.

If the victim was an animal, the vital parts, the *exta*, liver, heart, lungs, omentum and gall bladder were attributed to the divinity; the remaining offals (*viscera*) belonged to the offerors (*Santini*) and the most material part, the meat, was destined for the rest of the participants (*Scheid, 1984*). The division was based on hierarchical criteria, favoring senators, ministers of religion, magistrates, even if, unlike in ancient Greece, it is not clear who the single parts belonged to.

Ordinary citizens who attended the banquet enjoyed reduced portions and had to pay a fee, unless some benefactor offered the people a meal (*Scheid, 1988*).

Characteristics of the cattle for sacrifice

The bovine to be sacrificed had to be offered to a god, therefore it had to be completely free from defects, healthy and not injured and it had not been previously used for work (*Goette*); therefore, before the immolation, it had to undergo the *probatio*, a real morphological and functional examination that resulted in exclusion from the sacrifice, for example if the tail did not reach the hocks or if the animal limped (*Pliny, VIII, 183*). Castration was not considered impairment, but the creation of a third sexual gender, with its own value (*Capdeville*).

For some sacrifices, however, it was expected that the victim was a bull capable of procreating, and therefore the *probatio* consisted in the palpation of the testicles (*Goette*). After the slaughtering the *haruspex*, an assistant to the sacrificer, often of Etruscan origin, examined the bowels (*exta*) both raw and boiled (*Santini*), following the ancient Etruscan discipline of *haruspicina*, introduced in Rome during the hegemony of the Tarquins and assimilated by the Romans as other Etruscan uses and customs, but also practiced by the Babylonians and in Anatolia, Syria and Palestine.

Any possible anomaly made the rite null and void and required the sacrifice of a new victim to replace the discarded one (*Capdeville*) until one was found free of defects, which could obtain the *litatio*, that is, the approval of the gods. The victim had to consent to her slaughtering by lowering its head, when it was sprinkled with water (*Prescendi*), but it was often forced to do so with the rope with which it was tied.

The refusal or escape of the victim prevented the sacrifice and required the capture and killing of the rebellious animal. It should be emphasized that the Etruscans and Romans also sacrificed animals expressly for their auspices (*hostiae consultoriae; Bloch, 1987a*).

The failure to obtain the *litatio* was a sign of the bad disposition of the gods towards the sacrificer. We have received the text of curses imprecating: "*May he not be able to sacrifice*", that is, may not obtain the *litatio*, proof of divine wrath that could not be appeased by the target of the

curse due to the impossibility of performing the sacrifice (*Versnel*).

As for the quality of the meat of the animals to be sacrificed, the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry (2, 25) accused the Romans of taking care, in the choice of animals, more of their own pleasure than that of the gods, which seems normal since the final consumers of the meat were the humans. Therefore it can be hypothesized that there was also a selection based on the quality of the meat, limited, however, to animals sacrificed at a young age and not to oxen and cows at the end of their career, whose meat was cheap and was consumed only after prolonged boiling.

The Christian writer of the 2nd-3rd century AD. Tertullian (30, 6) mocked the pagans because, according to him, they offered their deities oxen so old that they only asked to die, but this could be a situation linked only to the last centuries of the Roman Empire and in any case it was evidently part of the controversy of the Christians against the pagans.

Usually victims of their own gender were usually sacrificed to the deities, depending on the case, bulls, oxen, cows and heifers pregnant or not. The age and size of the victims also varied according to the importance of divinity and sacrifice (*Cicero II, 29*): the bull, defined by Virgil (*II, 146-148*) the largest among the victims, was reserved for most important divinities, while calves and smaller species, such as sheep, goats, pigs and poultry, the "poorest" victims, were reserved for lesser divinities or for the private sacrifices of the less wealthy, since a common citizen could not afford to buy a bull or an ox too often (*Capdeville*).

Juvenal in the Satires (*XII, 11-14*), wanting to celebrate the return of a friend who escaped a shipwreck, complains that he can sacrifice only two lambs and a calf to the Capitoline Triad and that he's not rich enough to be able to offer a bull, which he would like so big that it was slowed down by its own size and so tall to require a tall officiant to be slaughtered.

The size of Italian cattle was not negligible: for Varro (*II, 5*) their preference as sacrificial animals was due to their size. The Latin author Columella (*VI, I, 2*) describes cattle from Umbria as very large and white (*vastos et albos*), while for Arbogast *et al.* Roman cattle were larger than those of Gaul, as evidenced by the increase at withers height that occurred with the Roman occupation, measured on bovine remains from various eras found in France. This was due both to genetic factors and to the more effective selection made by the Romans, whose civilization was technologically more advanced than the Gallic one.

The clayish nature of many Italian soils also affected the choice: Columella explicitly recommended investing in sturdy oxen and heavy ploughs, to get more abundant harvests (*Morley*). Finally, Kron believes that southern Italy had larger animals than the rest of Italy, perhaps also thanks to Greek influence.

Colour of the bovine to be sacrificed

The colour of the victims' coats was different depending on the divinity to which they were sacrificed: white animals were sacrificed to many celestial deities, for those linked to fire the victim had to be red, while for the infernal gods or linked to the night a black-coated victim was sacrificed.

Sacrifices with white cattle were introduced in Italy by King Numa Pompilius, hailing from Umbrian-Sabine region (*Alderson*). Among the most important sacrifices, there were the solemn *Suovetaurilia*, mentioned by Livy (*I, 44*) already about the king Servius Tullius (VI century BC), and intended for Jupiter, Juno, Minerva or Mars, which included the sacrifice of three white animals, a boar (*sus*), a ram (*oves*) and a bull (*taurus*). The numerous sculptural representations of these rites show imposing bulls adorned with bands on the back (*dorsualia*) led to sacrifice. Even the triumphs after a victorious war included the sacrifice of a white bull on the Capitol and Ovid (*Fasti, I, 719-720*) speaks of a white victim immolated on the altar of peace. In the sacrifices to Jupiter, the priest's hat also had to be white, obtained from the skin of sacrificed animals (*Goette*).

A white bull was sacrificed during the *Feriae latinae*, established by the last king of Rome,

Tarquin the Proud, at the Temple of *Jupiter Latiaris* on *Mons Albanus*, today's Monte Cavo (*Livy, XLI, 16*); the victim's meat was then symbolically divided among the peoples of the 47 Latin cities (*Dionysius of Halicarnassus, IV, 49*). The Christian writer Arnobius (*II, 68, 1*) in the third century, in controversy with the pagans, accuses them of abandonment of the religious prescription of sacrificing a white bull in the *Feriae latinae*, taken by decision of the Senate, a secular authority, which had also admitted reddish bulls at the sacrifice.

The importance of the white-coated cattle is demonstrated by the fact that, in its absence, an animal with a different coat was whitened by smearing it with white clay (*Juvenal, X 65-66; Lucilius, H113*).

According to Johnston, the Romans exported white cattle even to England, where they gave rise to the present semi-wild cattle of Chillingham, Cadzow and other breeds.

It should be emphasized that the colour of the cattle to be sacrificed is often described by ancient authors as "candid" or "snowy", which seems to exclude that the cattle were creamy white or light gray, and suggests that they were rather pure white, such as current Chianinas.

A religious act with very strong symbolic implications was the foundation of a city, which took place according to the "Etruscan rite" tracing its perimeter with a plough pulled by a bull and a cow, the first outwards, to symbolize the protection of the male against external dangers, and the second towards the inside, to symbolize the female protection of the community and the home. The cattle, which were sacrificed once the furrow was completed, had to be both white (*Ovid, Fasti, IV, 825*).

Even in private sacrifices the victim often had a white coat: the inscription of the slave Felix Asinianus has reached us, who dissolved the vow made to the Bona Dea, offering her a white heifer for having given back to him, which had been abandoned by the doctors, the light of his eyes, with a very expensive sacrificial offering for a private rite (*Rüpke*).

As seen before, Columella describes Umbrian cattle as very large and white, while Virgil (*II, 146-148*), speaking of the Clitumnus river, in Umbria, describes the great white bull used for sacrifices for Roman military victories.

For the author Propertius from Assisi (*II, 19, 25-26*) the waters of Clitumnus were able to whiten the hair of the cattle that were immersed in it, taking up a belief already present in Aristotle (*V, 6 786a*) according to which the immersion in warm waters made the hair white, while cold ones darkened it; moreover, the white-haired animals would have had tastier meat than the others, again due to the greater heat.

Even outside Rome, and in different eras, white cattle were considered excellent victims of sacrifices: for example, the druidic priests sacrificed white cattle (*Alderson*); the myth of the Minotaur of Crete tells that the mythological creature was born from the love of Pasiphae with a white bull destined to be sacrificed to Poseidon, as sung, among others by Ovid in *Ars amatoria (I, 290)*. The sixth-century Persian king Yazdgard II, faithful to Mazdeism, celebrated his victories over various peoples with the sacrifice of white oxen (*Duchesne-Guillemain*).

How many cattle were needed for the sacrifices in Rome?

We do not have data on the need for cattle for sacrifices in Rome, but it must have been quite high in the city, which in the imperial era exceeded one million and two hundred thousand inhabitants (*Calza and Lugli*), and in which the private needs of such a large population were added to the public ones of a state with an enormous territorial extension and a dense calendar of religious and civil celebrations. For Scheid (*2011*), the cattle slaughtered during the sacrifices could even be enough to cover the beef needs of Rome, at least in the months with many public solemnities. In fact, the meat coming from the sacrifices was not always consumed at banquets and for Scheid (*1985*) it could be sold by butchers, since the hides of the victims were traded. Isenberg is of the same opinion, citing the passage from the Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians

(X: 28) which invites the Christians to refrain from eating meat from animals sacrificed by pagans on the altars.

From the news of the ancient authors we can see that in the public sacrifices on the occasion of great events the number of cattle killed was truly remarkable. Livy (22, 10, 2-6) tells that in the third century BC, while the Punic and Gallic wars were underway, Jupiter was promised the sacrifice of 300 oxen, as well as an unspecified number of white oxen for numerous others. divinity. In 168 BC Paulus Aemilius for his own triumph had offered 120 breeding oxen (*Diodorus, XXXI, 8, 12; Plutarch, XXXIII 2*), while for Caesar's triumph in 46 BC. the guests at the banquet were 200,000 (*Scheid, 2011*).

The historian Flavius Josephus narrates that in Jerusalem, to celebrate the victory of the future emperor Titus in the Jewish war of 70 AD, an immense quantity of cattle was sacrificed, whose meat was then distributed to the soldiers with a banquet that lasted three days (*VII, 16-171*). 132 cattle were sacrificed for the triumph of emperor Trajan over the Dacians (*Scheid, 2011*). Ammianus Marcellinus cites a sacrifice ordered by the emperor Julian in which a hundred cattle and many other animals of smaller species were killed, used for a banquet that challenged the soldiers' resistance to food and wine (*XXII, 12, 6*). According to the same Ammianus (*XXV, 4*), emperor Marcus Aurelius used to offer many cattle to the gods, so much so that he had been the subject of a short satirical poem, in which the white oxen complained and predicted that in case of new victories in war of the emperor they would be doomed. To the needs of the capital of the empire also that of other cities must be added, in which official rites were held on a smaller scale than in Rome, and private rites, which required, in the most important cases, the sacrifice of cattle. Finally, it should be considered that the need for sacrificial cattle in the city of Rome was increased by the fact that they were considered the optimal victims not only by the traditional Roman religion, but also by several of the numerous new religions introduced in Rome from the East in the imperial age, such as the cult of Cybele, which included the *taurobolium*, killing a bull, and that of Mithras, represented while killing a bull (*tauroctonia*), which appears in white in many pictorial representations (such as those of the *mithraea* of Marino, Santa Maria Capua Vetere and Santa Prisca in Rome). Some scholars, however, express doubts as to whether the bulls were actually sacrificed during the Mithraic rites, assuming that the *tauroctonia* was only a symbolic representation (*Turcan*).

Where the sacrificed cattle did come from?

We do not have much information on the origin of the animals to be sacrificed: the city was a large center of consumption of goods, but it did not produce them, and the surroundings were not enough to provide the numerous victims necessary for the sacrifices. On the other hand, the rest of Italy was sparsely populated and the areas too far from the Roman market to be worth the effort or expense of cultivating them were dedicated to grazing (*Morley*). At the time, the transport of goods was very slow, uncertain and expensive, and took place preferably by sea or by river, but live cattle could walk, albeit slowly, for long distances, while they could not easily bear transport by boat. As previously seen, in Roman times transhumance, of cattle, sheep and goats, was already practiced, even over large distances. Therefore the production area of the cattle sacrificed in Rome was very large and could also involve regions relatively far from Rome.

Ovid (*Fasti, I, 83-84*) told of sacrificed cattle fed by Faliscan grass, that is, from the area of Civita Castellana (today in the province of Viterbo).

The passage from Juvenal already cited (*XII, 11-14*) describes the bull that the poet dreams of sacrificing, without being able to afford it, and cites as a quality index the fact that it didn't grow up near Rome, but came from the Umbrian pastures of the Clitumnus river, also mentioned by Virgil.

Pasquinelli cites a passage from the 4th century Roman historian Julius Obsequens which mentions the transfer by the Latins of animals to Rome for slaughter.

Scheid (2011) believes that there were no separate farms for animals *in altaria* (to be sacrificed) and *ad cultrum* (to be slaughtered for the market) but that only the animals with the suitable characteristics were slaughtered. This is confirmed by Virgil in the *Georgics* (III, 159-160), who speaks of choosing among the calves of those to be destined for reproduction, draught or sacrifices on the altars.

Then the farmer raised his draught oxen from home-born calves, and sold calves, heifers or young bulls for sacrifices, selecting to obtain white cattle, suitable for both sacrifices and work in the fields, thanks to the combination of a white coat, which repels the sun's rays, and black skin, which protects against damages caused by the exposure to the sun.

In Roman Italy there was no shortage of landowners able to supply a large number of cattle; Pliny (XXIII, 135) tells that a certain Claudius Isidorus, despite having lost many of his wealth in the civil wars, had passed on to his heirs, among other wealth, also 3,600 pairs of oxen.

The cattle for the sacrifices were therefore raised by private individuals and purchased by offerors, private or public. For Frayn it is likely that there were mediators between breeders and clients of a sacrifice, perhaps the *victimarii negotiatores* cited by Pliny (VII, 12.54), involved not only in the execution of the sacrifice, but also in the procurement of the animals and their withdrawal from the farm, when the animals were not delivered by the same owners (Morley).

The meat coming from the public sacrifices, if not consumed in the banquet, was sold by the *quaestores* to the butchers (*Corbier*); again Frayn summarizes the various figures, sacred and profane, involved in the slaughtering starting from the *lanii* who killed the animals, to go to the *macellarii*, who sold the meat in the stores, ending with the *victimarii* who were the technicians of the sacrifices, usually slaves or freedmen, also in charge of lighting the fires for cooking the *exta*, *viscerae*, and meats.

Chastagnol mentions the guild of *boarii*, beef mongers in the *Forum Boarium*, a special market near the Tiber, separate from those dedicated to pork and sheep. Guarducci (1989) comments on the sepulchral stone of a *bublarius* of the *Via Sacra*, one of the most elegant streets of ancient Rome, where the most luxurious goods shops were located, thus excluding that the *bublarius* was a livestock merchant (usually called *mercator bovarius*), but rather a trader of beef from animals for sacrifices, a valuable and expensive commodity.

Conclusions

We know that the city of Rome required a large amount of cattle to be sacrificed, that the animals were often required to be white, large, with good quality meat and that they came from a rather large area gravitating to Rome. This cannot lead us with certainty to affirm that these animals were the ancestors of the Chianina breed, a hypothesis already supported by Tito Manlio Bettini in 1962, but it provides us with a lot of clues to consider it at least plausible.

The breed would therefore be the result of a joint selection for draught attitude and sacrifices, centered on the colour of the coat and on the somatic characteristics.

The concept of breed in the zootechnical sense is very recent, having been established in the eighteenth century and better defined in the nineteenth century (*Pellegrini*) and doesn't belong to the Latin culture. However, we know from Virgil (III, 158), that the calves were branded by fire with the *nota*, perhaps the name of the owner, and with the *nomen gentis*, which probably indicated a bloodline, a sign of an interest in the selection of animals. and for the fixation of certain morphological and productive characters.

The practice of sacrifices in the Roman world ended in the last centuries of the Empire, due to repeated prohibitions by the Christian emperors.

It therefore remains to be explained how the descendants of the animals sacrificed on the altars have been able to overcome the numerous centuries from the end of the Roman Empire to

the end of the nineteenth century, when we find news of the Chianina breed, but knowing the excellent performance of the Chianinas as working animals and the appreciation of breeders also for their beauty, their survival is also easily explained.

The modern techniques of genetic analysis of animal remains found in archaeological excavations would however be very useful for experimentally confirming the bibliographic data.

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