

Those Racka horns

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Abstract

The name Racka-sheep (in German Zackel-Schaf) is a collective term which refers to the breeds with nearly similar shape and co-existence in the Southern and Central regions of Europe. During the last centuries, its breeds have taken its own shape according to their territories: e.g. *Valaska* (Slovakia, Czech Republic), *Tschkel* (Ukraine), *Turcana* (Romania), *Rakca* (Hungary), *Vlasko Vitoroga* (Serbia), while their standards and relatedness failed to prove satisfactory in all concern. This study is restricted to a less investigated field, to the evaluation of the horn development as a supplemental characteristic to distinguish the autochthon Racka-sheep variants of the Carpathian basin.

Keywords: horns, breed

This large Racka-sheep group consists of two main types by altitude of spread, undoubtedly: the lowland Racka (as a Karakul relative) seems to have a Central Asian origin, while the mountain Rackas are supposed to have come from ancestors who lived in Asia Minor. According to the drafting of Hankó (1937) the horn, which should wind itself along its longitudinal axis is one of the common characteristics of the Rackas (strepisiceros). The horn is characterized by an edge.

The lowland type of Racka became mostly dispersed in the Great Hungarian Plain with different names during their history (like *Hungarian sheep*, *Hungarian peasant sheep*, *sheep of Debrecen*, *sheep of Hortobágy*, „*riskás*”, *zanka*, „*horned sheep of Hungary*”; this latest was kept separately from the white- and black/greyish Transylvanian Rackas in the Lordship of Gyálu in 1648; Makkai, 1957; Gaál, 1966). The word Racka (with the meaning bastard, hybrid) was registered firstly in Hungary in 1799 as the name of the crossbred progeny of local breeds and “silky sheep breed” (Merino; TESZ III, 1967-1976). Later on, this new denomination of Racka became the popular and official name of our previous Hungarian lowland sheep.

A satisfactory description of this breed was given already by Speer (1683) and by Brown (1686). The first drawing of this breed in Hungary was published by Marsigli (1726). Owing to this curious trait, early forms may be easily identified even in archaeozoological assemblages (Bartosiewicz, 1995).

This lowland type Racka is carrying horns of unique form (in both sexes, but sometimes it can fail in females; 2000), which are grown twisted along a straight axis. The corneous matter of the horn can be black (pigmented) or yellowish (non-pigmented) according to the colour of the face. The angle between the horn axes is 60-90° (more acute in females). The length of the horn is 60 centimeters (half as long in females; Hankó, 1937). There were known individuals with white-, brown- or black head, as well as with white-, brown-, black- or spotted fleeces, during the breed history; the today colourization is simpler: either entirely white or black.

„*The Hungarian sheep ... looking at its colour is mostly white; but, animals in black can be seen enough ...*” as it was written by Pethe (1814). „*However, there is a kind of blue fleece, or of white fleece with black integrated, which is called worldwide as “Muszkabárány” (Muska lamb, certain fur made after Russian mode); albeit, it came to Hungary from Transylvania, from the territory of Hátszeg (Hațeg, Hotzing or Wallenthal) and from environs of Torotzkó (Trascău or Rimetea, Eisenburg).*

Bölönyi (1906) mentioned the large sized *Racka of Csákova (csákovai nagy racka*, from Csák, Ciacova, Tschakowa, in Banat) breed in relation to his Friesian sheep evaluation in Kunszentmárton.

The mountain type of Racka is traditionally and generally of smaller size, and of shorter leg. Its more variants can be found

according to the breeding regions of Carpathians (Rácz, 1914).

Ferenczy (1903) discussed separately the Hungarian-Moldavian Racka (*magyar-moldvai racka*), which came out from Moldavia to the Great Plain a long time ago. This variant already didn't exist in Transylvania by the end of the 19th century. Its horns of approximately 40 centimetres had a broadly bent horizontal direction developing nearly around a straight axis. Wellmann (1939) characterised the Moldavian Račka with the similar, "corkscrew-like" horn conformation. The ewes were polled regularly, or rarely carried short, 10-15 centimetres long horns. Its fleece is of yellowish/dirty white, and consists of 25-35 centimetres long staples.

The other variants of the mountain type Racka resemble well each other, but existing under different names (roughly said, the difference being under the variants exists in the names only, at the same time, the overlapping names can cause misunderstanding). All these variants lived in their original and primitive spotted stage, regarding the hair-coat colour possibilities. The aim to breed them according to a standardized and uniformed colour is about a century old.

One of them is the Tsurkana Račka (*Turcana, curkan, havasalföldi racka, török juh*), which could have had the early breeding region merged from the Danubian Principalities (Moldavia and Muntenia), from Bukovina and from the Transylvanian mountains (Bohm, 1878; but he personally did not pass this breed for a Racka). A typical and regular coat colour speciality of the Tsurkana is the presence of the "glistening black guard hairs on the head and on the extremities, but reddish or brownish hair on these body parts are also imaginable; the fleece is light yellow" - as it was declared by Wellmann (1923). Its young black lambs too serve valuable fur as hat- and coat lining. The black fleece becomes lighter by aging. This double-coated Racka variant produces coarser fibres in larger amount for carpet-, rug-, frieze- and lap robe making (Rácz, 1914) and for baize making after a combing out process (Szentkirályi, 1923). However, Szentkirályi (1923) mentioned after his visitation in Nagysármás (Sărmașu, Sarmen) around the 1880's a unicoloured white flock of 500, and a unicoloured black flock of 700 Curkan ewes. Exemplars from here were sent into the Domestic Zoo (Haustiergarten) in Halle. „We

know well that Curkans ... carry horns. The large ram's horns grow in helix laterally, close to the head or more or less deviated from it, and are striated aslant. The ewe's horns are stunted, standing away and upwards. Polled – hornless mothers can be found many ... ” - as it was stated by him. On the Millennial Exhibition 1896 "there were passing fairly represented the Transylvanian Curkans of laterally standing volute horns" (Magyarország közgazdasági ..., 1897).

The Gyimes Racka (*gyimesi racka, székely, erdélyi juh, háromszéki juh*) is another specific variant of the mountain Rackas, which has developed in Transylvania and bred by Siculs (székely) and Csangos (Csángó). The rams carry large helical horns with 1.5-2.5 turns. The ewes can be polled or they could have a short, sickle-shaped horn or a longer, male-like horn too. The white individuals of this variant are almost spotted. These can frequently be characterized by dark regular spots around their muzzle, ears, and eyes, as well as by irregular speckles on the fleece and extremities. Populations became famous are known from the Székás river land (Secaş; *székásmenti juh*) and from Korpona (Krupina, Karpfen; *korponai juh*). Such kind of sheep was called *voțys* and *oțtis* by the Rumanian and Slovakian shepherds, respectively (Rácz, 1914).

The Wallachian Racka (*walaské, valaska, sztián, vlach-, oláh-, felvidéki juh*) is the third variant, which became dispersed in the Northern Carpathians up to the Beskids by Wallachian shepherds, mostly (Rodiczky 1904; Kovácsy, 1926). The spectacular horn of the rams starts side-wards; it is spiral around a longer axis, so the tip of the horn stands away from the head, typically. The ewes can be polled, or they can have a bent, shorter or longer horn of partial torsion. Regarding their basically unicoloured hair coat, it can be of white, of black or of brownish/greyish. Irregularly spotted individuals or animals with freckled face or legs can occur, sometimes.

Rácz (1914) wrote about the *Horodenka* (*horodenkai racka*) polled breed, which is the product of a Racka-Hampshire crossing created for the further breeding in Bukovina and in Spis (Szepesség, Zips). The white and polled *sheep of Rimaszombat* is the result of a Transylvanian Tsurcana and a baron Romaszkan-like Racka from Horodenka (Galicia; Magyarország közgazdasági és ..., 1897).

As additional mountain variants can be seen as the Polish Mountain Sheep (a northern Valaska representative), and the Zacarpethian Tŕckel (*kárpátaljai racka*, a possible northern Tsurkana representative) in Ukraine (Rare breeds ..., 1999). These animals are polled in both sexes, showing the relatedness to the former Horodenka Racka.

The mountain type Racka of the Balkans got the name Pramenka. The individuals of the so-called *Podveleška* (*podvelesi*), *Vlašić* (*Vlasicka* or *Dubška*, *vlasicsi*), *Privor* (*Privorska*, *privori*) and *Kupres* (*Kupreska*, *kupresi*; all in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) *sheep* selected expertly for the Millennial Exhibition 1896 resembled markedly to the Transylvanian Tsurkana (Magyarország közgazdasági és ..., 1897). Pramenka ewes are hornless, rams are horned. The most spread one is the *Vlasicka* with the largest horns of at least two turns (Brka et al., 2008). This breed is called *Vlasko Vitoroga* in the neighbouring Serbia. Other Pramenka breeds from this region are *Stolačka*, *Pirotska*, *Licka* (*likai*), *Lipska* and *Scutari* from Montenegro.

The *Balusha* (*Baljusa*) sheep occurs in the Dukagjini plane in Southwest Kososvo and in Southwest Serbia. This breed has a dark head and neck, while the other parts of the animal are lighter in colour. The males are provided with a short upstanding horn of dense helix, which differentiates it from the other Pramenkas. The females are polled, usually (Transboundary ... 2005).

Also in Bulgaria exists a primitive breed of the mountain Racka type: the *Karavlaska* (*Karakachan*, *Crna Vlaska*). In good concordance with its name, the colour of the animals is black or dark brown, sometimes with coloured spots on the face and legs. White varieties also occur. The rams carry heavy spiral or semi-circular horns, while the ewes are usually polled. The tail is short. The *Karavlaska* is bred and called as *Sarakatsan* in Greece (Transboundary 2005).

Summarizing the above descriptions it can probably be stated that the mountain type of Rackas belong to the same breed group, practically. Like enough that the blood of the lowland type Rackas runs in all the mountain type Racka variants and is responsible for their horn arch and for their horn torsion at different extent.

In accordance with the Draganescu's (2007) opinion it can be said that now it is

difficult to establish the relatedness under the Racka variants, and to make a proper taxonomical classification. Under the reasons for this, for example, the fluently altering name can be found; the breed description is not always clear and comparable. To the possible reasons let me add the incomplete breed history. Regarding the breed history, I would like to call the attention to the *in libro* concept of conservation (Gáspárdy et al., 2008). The meaning of the *entered* (in a book; *booked*) conservation in broader sense is the preservation of all the remained knowledge, keepsake, documents and material inheritance of a still living rare breed too. The keeping in life of an extinct characteristic does not crop up but the "keeping alive", its one-time presence in the common knowledge is an important role.

Regarding the breed description of the Hungarian Racka the first and serious scientific mistake was made by Buffon (1776) when he identified the horn conformation of the Cretan Sheep with the horn conformation of the Hungarian Racka. Later on, its name were used consequently wrong in the literature. Its most common mistaken name was the Wallachian one (Bohm, 1878; A guide ..., 1908). The individuals under the name of Horehronské Valaske (*felsőgarami valaska*) seem to bear a remarkable resemblance to the Hungarian Racka.

Sometimes, very interesting facts (like multiple horns; Speer, 1683; Kleiner, 1731-1740; Gáspárdy, 2009) were documented in the history of this breed group.

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