

The role of draft cattle in (Archaeological) Open-Air Museums and Living History Farms – A personal Essay

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential role of draft cattle usage in both Open-Air Museums as well as Living History Farms. As draft cattle can be interpreted as direct links to our agricultural past, they can be of great importance for educational programs on-site. Training classes in ox-driving, as well as the preservation of skills (e.g. animal-powered tillage implements), are both additional reasons why draft cattle usage is highly valuable and can create value for the wider sustainability discussion. Furthermore, the paper highlights what kind of challenges and limitations can be involved when using draft cattle in museum contexts, especially regarding of animal welfare vs authentic historical harnessing.

Résumé

Cet article explore le rôle potentiel de l'utilisation du bétail de trait dans les musées en plein air et les fermes d'histoire vivante. Comme les bovins de trait peuvent être interprétés comme des liens directs avec notre passé agricole, ils peuvent être d'une grande importance pour les programmes éducatifs sur place. Les cours de formation à la conduite des bœufs, ainsi que la préservation des compétences (par exemple, les outils de travail du sol à traction animale) sont deux raisons supplémentaires pour lesquelles l'utilisation des bovins de trait est très précieuse et peut créer de la valeur pour le débat plus large sur la durabilité. En outre, l'article met en évidence les défis et les limites de l'utilisation du bétail de trait dans les musées, notamment en ce qui concerne le bien-être des animaux et l'exploitation historique authentique.

Kurzfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die potenzielle Bedeutung des Einsatzes von Zugrindern sowohl in Freilichtmuseen als auch Living History Farms beleuchtet. Da Zugtiere als direkte Verbindung zu unserer landwirtschaftlichen Vergangenheit interpretiert werden können, sind sie für Bildungsprogramme vor Ort von großer Bedeutung. Die Ausbildung im Umgang mit Zugtieren und die Bewahrung von Fertigkeiten (z.B. in Bezug auf Ackergeräte für den tierischen Zug) sind zwei weitere wichtige Gründe, warum die Nutzung von Zugtieren sehr wertvoll ist und einen Beitrag zur allgemeinen Nachhaltigkeitsdiskussion leisten kann. Darüber hinaus zeigt das Essay auf, welche Herausforderungen und Einschränkungen mit dem Einsatz von Zugrindern in musealen Kontexten verbunden sein können, insbesondere im Zusammenhang mit dem Tierschutz gegenüber einer authentischen historischen Nutzungsweise.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el papel potencial del uso del ganado de tiro tanto en los museos al aire libre como en las granjas de historia viva. Dado que el ganado de tiro puede formar un nexo directo con nuestro pasado agrícola, desempeñaría un papel de gran importancia en programas educativos in situ. Las clases de formación en la conducción de bueyes, así como la preservación de las habilidades, por ejemplo en el mantenimiento de aperos de labranza, son motivos adicionales por los que considerar el uso del ganado de tiro como una fuente inestimable de recursos educativos, creando así una base de debate más amplio sobre Ecologismo y Sostenibilidad. Sin embargo, una representación históricamente precisa del trato con los animales y respectivamente de su bienestar supone una clara limitación en la práctica museística. Estas barreras históricas y retos conceptuales serán más adelante desarrolladas.



Touching ground with draft cattle in museum contexts

My journey with draft cattle started in the year 2012 at an annual meeting of the German Ox Driver Working Group¹ in the Westerwald (Rhineland-Palatinate). I was overwhelmed back then with how much passion and persistence some people still use cattle for draft purposes. Although most of the people present there did so on a private basis, I also met quite a few which were using cattle in the context of Open-Air Museums. A very well example for that back then was – and still is – the so-called State Domain of Dahlem in Berlin, where Astrid Masson and her team are using draft cattle for various purposes – be it in front of the wagon, potato cultivation or vegetable growing². Even more important in that respect: they also teach draft cattle classes on-site in Dahlem.



Figure 1 – Training Class on Working Cattle at the “Domäne Dahlem”

- 1 German Ox Driver Working Group, URL: www.zugrinder.de [26-04-22].
- 2 Domäne Dahlem - Landgut und Museum, URL: www.domaene-dahlem.de [27-06-22].

Before I started my job at the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory, I already had the opportunity to take several training classes and courses, some of them in Dahlem, others at the farm of a fellow member of the Ox Driver working group, Gerhard Döring. We then started off on-site with a trained team of Raetian Grey cattle in 2013. In retrospect, I have to state that it probably took us at least five years, until we could consider ourselves as – at least to some extent – skilled ox drivers. In 2022, almost 10 years after my first encounter with draft cattle, I can with some pride state that we not only increased the number of animals to seven but also that we use them for all agricultural tasks on-site, for pulling the wagons as well as for haymaking and logging outside the museum limits. Every year, we train a group of four young adults to handle and train draft cattle as part of their Voluntary Ecological Year (FÖJ) on site.

My Ph.D. thesis on the use of draft cattle in Early Medieval agriculture³, the fact that I am an active ox driver myself and my ongoing engagement within the ox driver communities and networks like AIMA⁴, ALHFAM⁵ or EXARC⁶ finally brought me to a point at which I wanted to evaluate the current situation of draft cattle usage within Open-Air Museums, Living History Farms as well as Archaeological Open-Air Museums. Furthermore, I wanted to develop an international framework for the exchange of experience in that field. Finally, and most importantly, I wanted to promote the usage of draft cattle as part of a solution for a more sustainable, more local and eco-friendly future. Please understand this essay therefore as a conversation starter and as starting point for a larger project that I am pursuing.

- 3 Kropp (PhD-thesis, in preparation).
- 4 International Association of Agricultural Museums, URL: www.agriculturalmuseums.org [27-06-2022].
- 5 Association for Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums, URL: www.alhfam.org [27-06-2022].
- 6 EXARC, URL: www.exarc.net [27.06.2022].



Figure 2 – Field Day in spring 2022 as part of the Annual Meeting of the German Working Cattle Group

Asking the right questions

So let's first ask a set of questions that help us understand why draft cattle can be of a pivotal role in the context of Open-Air Museums and Living History Farms:

1) Why do we even keep draft cattle in Archaeological Open-Air Museums?

Most importantly, the presentation of draft cattle can, besides the agricultural implements themselves like ploughs or harrows, pose as one of the most direct links to our agricultural past. The use and even most of the techniques remained unchanged throughout the millennia and therefore draft cattle usage can open us windows into various periods, starting from the Neolithic up until the presentation of farm life in the first half of the 20th century. The use of draft cattle within museum contexts is also a good idea as it may function as a valuable and powerful way for the transmission of intangible heritage. To some extent, it is the museums, living history farms or organizations like Tillers International that find themselves in the role of preserving and teaching these fundamental techniques. Have a look at Howell's Living History Farm⁷ in Mercer County (New Jersey, USA) for example, which provided training sessions for US Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries and others working in both international and local agricultural extensions. As another valuable example in that respect, the Ecomusée d'Alsace in Ungersheim (France) with its by-annual draft cattle classes can be named.

7 Howell Living History Farm, URL: www.howellfarm.org/ [26-07-22].



Figure 3 – Using Draft Cattle in an Iron Age context at Butser Ancient Farm (England)

Using the cattle for agricultural purposes can in this context also be seen as a sort of an in vivo-conservation of old cultural techniques. Only by using these agricultural implements, be it authentic and restored originals or (re)constructions, we will be able to preserve the knowledge involved or to develop it further. When a fellow colleague and draft animal enthusiast Ed Schultz from Colonial Williamsburg⁸ (Virginia, USA) states, that “the skills of working draft animals have been declining throughout the developed world for many years. What took thousands of years to refine is very close to being lost⁹”, then we understand the true value of training and teaching draft cattle in museums contexts.

8 Colonial Williamsburg, URL: www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/ [26-07-22].

9 Schultz 2013, 86.



Figure 4 – Course on Working Cattle at the Ecomusée d'Alsace in Ungersheim (France)





Figure 5 – Plowing demonstration at Colonial Williamsburg (USA)

There are also other quite clear advantages of keeping draft cattle: usually, they are easily becoming the stars of each museum, functioning as true “role models”. Looking at the Open-Air Laboratory Lauresham for example, where our draft oxen David and Darius are by now available as stuffed miniature versions or at Archeon¹⁰ (Netherlands) where the oxen Isaac and James even have their own Facebook page and fans of their own. The advantages of using these impressive animals as an integral part of the daily presentation in the museums become imminent. Starting from getting them yoked and harnessed as well as putting them to work can draw hours of visitors’ attention.

Lastly there are clearly some functional and ecological benefits of keeping the draft animals in a museum context. When it comes to soil compression in the context of (re)constructing past agriculture for example, tractor-drawn implements can be of a clear disadvantage. The same can be said about specific field types like the so-called “ridge and furrows¹¹”, which can’t properly be worked with modern equipment. Additionally, museum fields are often rather small and draft animals are increasingly effective the smaller the plots get. Therefore, the choice to keep draft cattle can also be valuable for economic reasons.

2) What are the problems and limitations when using draft cattle in museum contexts?

In that respect, the historical setting respectively period in which cattle are to be implemented in the museum can cause massive challenges. Let’s take animal welfare issues as an example: we (taking German law as a baseline) are not allowed to replicate animal-keeping traditions or practices which are not in line with veterinary rules or laws. To some extent, this can also be said for some harnessing systems as not all known types of yokes can necessarily be considered very animal friendly. As a museum worker, you therefore always have to consider if it is necessary to break with the authentic setting for animal welfare reasons or if a compromise is possible. That very honest approach is usually then also a well-valued discussion starter with the visitors.

¹⁰ Archeon, URL: www.archeon.nl/en/home.html [26-07-22].

¹¹ Kropp 2022.

There is one more important thing that I want to talk about in that respect: skills – and I am not talking about the skills of the animals here but the skills of the handler. You can’t just get a team of oxen or cows and start working with them; there is so much stuff that can go wrong, be it causing pathological problems for the animals due to overloading or getting into dangerous situations for the handler – and the public. I can only strongly advise everybody who is thinking about getting some draft cattle for their museums or archaeological opening museum to have skilled staff available or to get them properly educated. A museum site can over time develop into a training site itself. Nevertheless, a nationally or internationally used certification system is not developed yet.

Perspectives for the future

Let me in this last part of my essay come back to what I said in my introduction: I am in the process of evaluating who and where in museum contexts cattle are worked or trained. I want to find out for what purposes they are kept, be it just for show or actually working with them. I also want to gather information on how one copes with challenges that they experience and how to solve them. This could be a foundation of the deeper networking platform in which we as museum and draft animal professionals could combine forces in order to promote the topic on a larger scale. A first step in that direction was a survey I conducted with archaeological open-air museums and living history farms in Europe and North America. It was interesting to see that draft cattle are regularly seen as a key or prominent element of interpretation in the respective museums. Let me quote Ben Baumgartner, the leading agricultural interpreter from Barrington Plantation¹² (Texas, USA) here as he put it quite straight saying “*they [meaning the draft cattle] are in my opinion our best non-verbal interpretation we have. When visitors walk up and see the oxen work they are instantly transported to another time*”¹³.

Another interesting comment came once more from Ed Schultz who referred to the fact that “*people today are in many respects far removed from agriculture*”¹⁴. He also stated and I quote again “*working cattle do not get the credit they deserve and one way we can resolve that problem is to show them in our museum and teach our visitors about their importance in farming, commerce, moving of goods from ships to stores, logging, query work and construction*”¹⁵.

Let me conclude with a call to action on a global scale: let’s use the public attention open-air museums generate not only to reconnect people of the 21st century with draft animals and their use in historic context but also to serve as lighthouses for the training of draft cattle, to encourage their importance and relevance today and to play an active role for a more sustainable future!

¹² Barrington Plantation, URL: www.thc.texas.gov/historic-sites/barrington-plantation-state-historic-site [26-07-22].

¹³ Kropp 2020.

¹⁴ Ibd.

¹⁵ Ibd.



Figure 6 – Ben Baumgartner (on the right) with a colleague and a team of oxen at Barrington Plantation (USA)

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