

Draft cattle culture in Romania

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural history and economic significance of draft cattle in Romania, focusing on their central role in traditional peasant life from Antiquity until the mid-20th century. Drawing on ethnographic, historical, folkloric, and visual sources, the paper examines how oxen, in particular, were indispensable to Romanian agriculture, providing both labor and symbolic value. The use of cattle for ploughing and transport shaped the organization of rural households, agricultural productivity, and seasonal rituals. Romanian ethnographers emphasized the deep interdependence between animal husbandry and crop production. The ox, revered for its strength, calmness, and obedience, became a mythologized figure in Romanian folklore, customs, and religious beliefs. Rituals marking the agricultural calendar underscore the ox's sacred and practical importance. The decline in draft cattle usage during the 19th and 20th centuries, due to economic changes and mechanization, marked a significant shift in rural livelihoods. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how draft cattle were not only agricultural assets but also cultural touchstones, embodying the values, resilience, and cosmology of Romanian peasant society.

Résumé

Cette étude explore l'histoire culturelle et l'importance économique des bovins de trait en Roumanie, en mettant l'accent sur leur rôle central dans la vie paysanne traditionnelle depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'au milieu du XXe siècle. S'appuyant sur des sources ethnographiques, historiques, folkloriques et visuelles, cet article examine comment les bœufs, en particulier, étaient indispensables à l'agriculture roumaine, fournissant à la fois une main-d'œuvre et incarnant une valeur symbolique. L'utilisation des bovins pour le labour et le transport a façonné l'organisation des ménages ruraux, la productivité agricole et les rituels saisonniers. Les ethnographes roumains ont souligné la profonde interdépendance entre l'élevage et la production végétale. Le bœuf, vénéré pour sa force, son calme et son obéissance, est devenu une figure mythifiée dans le folklore, les coutumes et les croyances religieuses roumaines. Les rituels marquant le calendrier agricole soulignent l'importance sacrée et pratique du bœuf. Le déclin de l'utilisation des bœufs de trait au cours des XIXe et XXe siècles, dû aux changements économiques et à la mécanisation, a marqué un changement important dans les moyens de subsistance ruraux. En fin de compte, cet article démontre que les bœufs de trait n'étaient pas seulement un atout agricole, mais aussi une référence culturelle, incarnant les valeurs, la résilience et la cosmologie de la société paysanne roumaine.

Kurzfassung

Diese Studie untersucht die Kulturgeschichte und wirtschaftliche Bedeutung von Zugrindern in Rumänien und konzentriert sich dabei auf ihre zentrale Rolle im traditionellen bäuerlichen Leben von der Antike bis zur Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Anhand ethnografischer, historischer, folkloristischer und visueller Quellen untersucht die Arbeit, wie insbesondere Ochsen für die rumänische Landwirtschaft unverzichtbar waren und sowohl Arbeitskraft als auch symbolischen Wert hatten. Der Einsatz von Rindern zum Pflügen und Transport prägte die Organisation der ländlichen Haushalte, die landwirtschaftliche Produktivität und die saisonalen Rituale. Rumänische Ethnografen betonten die tiefe gegenseitige Abhängigkeit zwischen Tierhaltung und Pflanzenproduktion. Der Ochse, der für seine Kraft, Ruhe und Gehorsamkeit verehrt wurde, wurde zu einer mythologisierten Figur in der rumänischen Folklore, den Bräuchen und religiösen Überzeugungen. Rituale, die den landwirtschaftlichen Kalender markieren, unterstreichen die sakrale und praktische Bedeutung des Ochsen. Der Rückgang der Nutzung von Zugtieren im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert aufgrund wirtschaftlicher Veränderungen und der Mechanisierung markierte einen bedeutenden Wandel in der ländlichen Lebensweise. Letztendlich zeigt dieser Artikel, dass Zugtiere nicht nur landwirtschaftliche Vermögenswerte waren, sondern auch kulturelle Bezugspunkte, die die Werte, die Widerstandsfähigkeit und die Kosmologie der rumänischen Bauernschaft verkörperten.

Resumen

Este estudio explora la historia cultural y la importancia económica del ganado de tiro en Rumanía, centrándose en su papel fundamental en la vida campesina tradicional desde la antigüedad hasta mediados del siglo XX. Basándose en fuentes etnográficas, históricas, folclóricas y visuales, el trabajo examina cómo los bueyes, en particular, eran indispensables para la agricultura rumana, ya que proporcionaban tanto mano de obra como valor simbólico. El uso del ganado para arar y transportar determinó la organización de los hogares rurales, la productividad agrícola y los rituales estacionales. Los etnógrafos rumanos destacaron la profunda interdependencia entre la ganadería y la producción agrícola. El buey, venerado por su fuerza, tranquilidad y obediencia, se convirtió en una figura mitificada en el folclore, las costumbres y las creencias religiosas rumanas. Los rituales que marcan el calendario agrícola subrayan la importancia sagrada y práctica del buey. El descenso en el uso del ganado de tiro durante los siglos XIX y XX, debido a los cambios económicos y la mecanización marcó un cambio importante en el estilo de vida rural. En última instancia, este artículo demuestra cómo el ganado de tiro no solo era un activo agrícola, sino también un referente cultural que encarnaba los valores, la resiliencia y la cosmología de la sociedad campesina rumana.



As in other parts of traditional agrarian Europe, draft cattle played a crucial role in supporting rural livelihoods in Romania. Historical ethnographers have noted that, over the past two centuries, Romanians have raised more large bovines (cows and oxen) than small ruminants (sheep and goats), emphasizing the deep interdependence between crop cultivation and animal husbandry¹. Draft cattle held a central place in the Romanian traditional economy², providing essential resources such as milk, meat, leather, and most importantly, labor. Before the introduction of draft animals, peasants were forced to carry out heavy agricultural tasks manually³. Thus, the introduction of cattle significantly reduced the physical burden of farming and became a foundation of peasant subsistence for generations.

Ethnographer Valer Butură identified three distinct phases in the history of animal husbandry in Romania. The first, lasting until 1829, involved the extensive raising of local breeds. The second phase, continuing until the formation of the Romanian nation-state in 1918, focused heavily on draft cattle. The third phase saw attempts to improve local breeds and import new ones⁴.

Among various draft animals, the ox became the most favored by Romanian peasants. Castrated bulls, or oxen, were especially suited for arduous tasks like ploughing due to their calm temperament and steady pace. Horses were introduced later but were often viewed by peasants as overly energetic and less obedient. In Romanian agrarian mythology, the ox and horse are frequently cast with contrasting symbolic attributes⁵. Oxen were also recognized for their superior strength; they could pull heavier loads both in fields and on roads. Experts confirmed this popular opinion: “Draft cattle can pull more weight than horses—up to two times their bodyweight for fully trained mature males. Cattle are calmer than horses, but, overall, slower”⁶. Indigenous Romanian cow breeds were also valued for draft use⁷.

Poorer households often had to use milking cows for draft work. While dairy breeds are generally less suited for labor due to body structure, mixed-use or meat breeds could be effective. The choice of breed was vital to ensure compatibility with the regional environment and to minimize injury during workload. Proper harnessing and yoking were equally essential to protect the animals⁸. Until the mid-20th century, when collectivization and mechanization took hold under the communist regime, oxen remained integral to Romanian peasant life. Their importance is well-documented through agronomic texts, ethnographic research, folklore, and visual representations.

Romanian agricultural historians have often emphasized the vital role of cattle: “For the peasant household, cattle are as important as land. They are both tools and sources of nourishment and clothing. They provide income directly and indirectly, by enabling the peasant’s

labor”⁹. Folk literature echoes this sentiment, highlighting how the death or sale of cattle could plunge a family into poverty. Farming tasks were typically organized within families, but if a household had only one draft animal, neighbors would cooperate by pairing their animals¹⁰. For particularly demanding jobs, multiple pairs of oxen from different households were yoked together. Ethnographers have detailed the variety of tools used with oxen, i.e. ploughs, seeders, harrows, harvesters, and carts¹¹.

The high value placed on cattle extended into the religious and magical sphere. They were regarded almost as family members, and their loss was both an economic and emotional tragedy. Numerous rituals aimed to safeguard their health and ensure productive farming seasons. Cattle welfare remained a cornerstone of rural subsistence into the 20th century in rural Romania.

In the Romanian lands, the number of draft cattle began to decline in the 19th and 20th century. In his detailed economic analysis of Romanian rural life, P.S. Aurelian noted the drop in oxen populations, especially in the late 1800s, which threatened the subsistence of peasant families¹². In 1940, agricultural economist Virgil Madgearu observed that one-third of Romanian peasant households did not own an ox, and the majority had only one pair. This shortage contributed significantly to low productivity and poor living conditions¹³, as the analyst explained while offering a detailed presentation.

Despite regional differences, Moldavia (Eastern Romania) maintained larger ox populations than Wallachia (Southern Romania) in the 19th century. Plain areas, especially in southern Moldavia and southern Bukovina (Northeastern Romania), had the largest and strongest oxen, attributed to superior pasturelands. Most draft cattle were raised in hills and plains, where cultivated land was more extensive. Sale records often show oxen being sold in pairs, confirming their primary role as draft animals¹⁴. Buffalo, particularly prevalent in Wallachia, were also used for both draft work and milk production¹⁵.

Due to the scarcity of early written records, Romanian historians and ethnographers have relied on visual sources for documenting early agricultural history¹⁶. The earliest depiction of oxen pulling a plough in present-day Romania dates from a 2nd-century Roman grave in Constanța County¹⁷, a former Greek colony on the Black Sea. In the Middle Ages, church frescoes often depicted peasants using ox-drawn ploughs¹⁸. Religious icons of Saint Elijah sometimes show him with a plough pulled by white oxen¹⁹, which is consistent with his folk hagiography and popular beliefs about his role in protecting agricultural labor.

Given the critical role of oxen in agriculture, a rich ritual system developed around them. April 25th, known as “Marcu boiler” (Saint Mark of the Oxen), was a holiday on

1 Popescu 1986, 175.

2 Vlăduțiu 1973, 20.

3 Ibid., 208.

4 Butură 1978, p. 205.

5 Coman 1996, 30.

6 Rutland 2021, 249.

7 Madgearu 1940, 40.

8 Rutland 2021, 249.

9 Madgearu 1940, 61.

10 Marian 1994, 25.

11 Șerban 1914.

12 Aurelian 1882, 82.

13 Madgearu 1940, 47f.

14 Aurelian 1882, 85.

15 Ibid., 86.

16 Neamțu 1975, 149.

17 Ibid., 149.

18 Edroiu 2017, 148f.

19 Ciubotaru 2017, 120.

which it was forbidden to put oxen to work²⁰. Romanian cosmological legends depict the Earth as resting on an ox's horns²¹.

Romanian folklore reinforces the sacred status of oxen, a recognition rooted in their vital domestic and economic contributions²². Christmas carols praise them as bringers of abundance: "Nothing is better than the good ox/ For he turns the black soil/ And brings white bread"²³. Such texts affirm the belief that owning oxen ensured agricultural success, wealth, and social standing. The agricultural calendar was punctuated by ceremonies that acknowledged the ox's role and invoked divine protection for crops and laborers.

Rituals marked the beginning of the ploughing season in early spring. Oxen, ploughs, and ploughmen were blessed with holy water or symbolic protective elements such as basil, garlic, and red ribbons²⁴: "The plough and the oxen were sprinkled with holy water so that they would have luck and bring abundant crops"²⁵. The ceremonial first furrow was drawn in the ploughman's yard. A key fertility ritual held during Pentecost in Transylvania, known as "Înstruțarea boului" (The Adorning of the Ox) involved decorating the village's strongest ox with flowers, bells, and ribbons and parading it through the village²⁶.

According to Bogdan Neagotă²⁷, The Adorning of the Ox ritual centers around selecting the most beautiful and robust ox in the village, which is then decorated with flowers, ribbons, bells, green branches, and occasionally traditional textiles. This heavily adorned ox becomes the focal point of a festive procession led by young men dressed in traditional attire, who parade the animal through the village, stopping at each household. At each stop, the ox is greeted with water sprinkling, food offerings, and blessings -- acts believed to bring prosperity and abundant crops to the household in the coming year. Neagotă interprets this ritual action as a rite of passage for youth, especially for adolescent boys transitioning into adulthood, as participation in the ritual was traditionally a marker of social integration and masculine identity. The public performance also reinforced community cohesion and reaffirmed the symbolic link between humans and the natural world. Importantly, this ritual reflects the sacralization of agricultural labor and the ritual elevation of the ox as not just a working animal but as a divine gift and a bearer of fertility, success, and communal well-being. Thus, as described by Neagotă and others, the ritual is more than folklore; it is a layered ceremonial practice where myth, economy, and social structure intersect through the veneration of the ox.

The New Year's ritual "Plugușorul" (The Little Plough) symbolically began the ploughing season during the beginning of the agricultural season. Traditionally, decorated oxen and ploughmen visited households, drawing a furrow to bless the land. Some folkloric texts describe a mythical team of six pairs of oxen, highlighting the magi-

cal and symbolic weight of the ritual²⁸. In the latter half of the 20th century, real oxen were often replaced by symbolic wooden ploughs, with their sounds mimicked by instruments like the "Buhai."

In Romanian winter carnival traditions, particularly those associated with the New Year, cattle, especially oxen and bulls, feature prominently as ritual masks in masquerade performances. These zoomorphic masks, often elaborately crafted from wood, fabric, and animal hide, symbolize strength, fertility, and the agricultural cycle. The "bull mask", commonly seen in Moldavian and northern Romanian villages, is animated by performers who mimic the animal's movements and sounds in a theatrical procession accompanied by music, drumming, and rhythmic chanting. This performance, often integrated into broader winter customs like the "Ursul" (Bear Dance) or "Capra" (Goat Dance), enacts themes of death and rebirth, aligning with agrarian hopes for renewal and abundance in the coming year. The inclusion of cattle in these rituals reflects their profound symbolic and economic significance in Romanian rural life, transforming them into sacred figures that bridge the human and natural worlds during the liminal time of the year-end festivities.

Oxen are recurring figures in Romanian folktales, where they are credited with superhuman features like ploughing entire fields overnight or pulling celestial bodies across the sky²⁹. Legends tell of God, Adam, or even Jesus as the first ploughman, always accompanied by white oxen³⁰.

Proverbs and folk poetry reflect the esteem in which oxen were held: "The ox is so good and kind/ When a lad yokes him/ He ploughs all day and night/ Without asking food or water"³¹. Proverbs emphasize respect and gratitude: "Don't burden the ox—it's not a mule," "Don't upset the ox—it's God's creature," "A man without oxen is like a slave with bound hands"³².

The central role of draft cattle, especially oxen, in Romanian traditional life reveals a deep, multifaceted interdependence between agricultural labor, economic subsistence, social organization, and ritual practice. From practical tools of cultivation to sacred beings enshrined in folklore, proverbs, and ceremonial rites, oxen have been both literal and symbolic pillars of rural existence. Their strength and reliability ensured not only the viability of peasant farming but also served as markers of status, sources of communal identity, and subjects of veneration. Despite their decline with the advent of modernization and mechanization, the enduring presence of oxen in myth, ritual, and memory highlights their lasting cultural and historical significance. Romanian ethnographic and folkloric traditions preserve this legacy, attesting to how vital animal-human relationships shaped the rhythms, values, and cosmologies of agrarian life for centuries.

20 Popescu 1986, 188.

21 Brill 1981, 226.

22 Coman 1996, 29.

23 Maria 1898, 19.

24 Ghinoiu 2001, Oltenia, 2001, 273.

25 Ghinoiu 2009, Dobrogea, Muntenia, 2009, 316.

26 Mușlea 1972, 157.

27 Neagotă 2009.

28 Ciubotaru 2017, 119; Stahl 1965, 156.

29 Niculiță-Voronca 1903, 9, 197–198.

30 Pop 1998, 83.

31 Herseni 1997, 583

32 Cuceu 2006, 67–68.





Fig. 1 New Year Plough (Ruginoasa – Iași County, Romania, © Folklore Archive of Moldavia and Bucovina, 1978).



Fig. 2 Carrying the dead on a sled, during summer (Șipote – Iași County, Romania © Folklore Archive of Moldavia and Bucovina, 1975).

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