

Working cattle in France: jumping the hurdles of invisibility

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Abstract

Working with cattle in real life in France and Europe may look quite visible to the Lorsch colloquium attendees, but there are hurdles to making it visible to other actors. We can contribute to improving this situation by highlighting the recent historical context of cattle draft, present-day experts, the active networking to promote working with cattle and one of its major initiators. Finally, we can examine the issue of invisibility and the communication gap between oxdrivers, researchers and decision-makers.

Résumé

Le travail avec les bovins dans la vie réelle quotidienne en France et en Europe peut sembler tout à fait visible pour les participants au colloque de Lorsch, mais il existe des obstacles qui les rendent invisibles pour d'autres acteurs. Nous pouvons contribuer à améliorer cette situation en mettant en avant le contexte historique récent du travail avec les bovins, les experts actuels, le travail de réseau actif pour promouvoir l'attelage bovin et l'un de ses principaux initiateurs. Enfin, nous pouvons examiner la question de l'invisibilité et du fossé communicationnel entre les meneurs de bœufs, les chercheurs et les décideurs.

Kurzfassung

Die Arbeit mit Rindern im Alltag in Frankreich und Europa mag für die Teilnehmer des Lorsch-Kolloquiums gut sichtbar sein, doch gibt es Hindernisse, die sie für andere Akteure unsichtbar machen. Wir können zur Verbesserung dieser Situation beitragen, indem wir den jüngsten historischen Kontext der Rinderzucht, heutige Experten, die aktive Vernetzung zur Förderung der Arbeit mit Rindern und einen ihrer wichtigsten Initiatoren hervorheben. Schließlich können wir uns mit dem Problem der Unsichtbarkeit und der Kommunikationslücke zwischen Ochsenführern, Forschern und Entscheidungsträgern befassen.

Resumen

El trabajo con ganado en la vida diaria en Francia y Europa puede ser claramente visible para los participantes del coloquio de Lorsch, pero existen obstáculos que lo hacen invisible para otros actores. Podemos contribuir a mejorar esta situación destacando el contexto histórico reciente del tiro de ganado, los expertos actuales, la red activa para promover el trabajo con ganado y uno de sus principales impulsores. Por último, podemos examinar la cuestión de la invisibilidad y la falta de comunicación entre los conductores de ganado, los investigadores y los decisores.



Introduction

The title here is meant to be provocative. The question is: “invisible to whom”? People who are active in some historical or agriculture-related museums and sites, in regional or national parks, in go-slow tourism and festival events, are often well aware of working animals, perhaps specifically of working cattle, and may call on them as part of their professional or hobby activities. Some small farmers or market gardeners in France certainly use cattle as co-workers, at times well-coordinated with mechanized, or even motorized, equipment.

Yet, this source of energy too often remains invisible to many people logically concerned with alternate energy resources: citizens in search of information, planning officials at every level, and researchers who wish to inform them. With agriculture and stockbreeding often depicted as major and negative players in the climate crisis, there is no lack of public interest in innovative potentials for food production utilizing animals in circular economies.

Documenting present-day skills and a historical trade

A two-pronged documentation project to make skills and history visible through film, photographs and interviews was carried out in 2011 in collaboration with a working mule-trainer, oxdriver and author, Olivier Courthiade, in the Ariège region in southwestern France¹. In a first session in April, he brought together elder experts and their friends to talk about the horse- and cattle-dealing trade and training of cattle over an ‘Oldtimers Dinner’ in his home and took them to visit his own collection of yokes and harness in the eco-museum located in the nearby village of Alzen².



Fig. 1 Elders in the courtyard of Méras farm (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).



Fig. 2 Part of the Courthiade yoke collection at the Alzen Ecomuseum (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

The Ariège project involved filming and photographing Olivier’s regular work, first in April and then in August, 2011, on his own farm and upland pastures: handling stud duties for horses, logging in the upland section of the farm with his mules, field-manuring with one experienced ox team, breaking in young oxen, and relating domestic tasks such as the regular upkeep of harness. He also hosted an adult education group that provided the opportunity for in-depth analysis of the challenges to his brand of small-farming in very hilly country and complemented this with extensive comments on historical illustrations of ox teams, on his own collection of documents and models, and on his equipment. This collaboration resulted in 28 DVDs of an average 40 minutes each (over 18 hours total) plus accompanying photographs.



Fig. 3 Olivier logging with his mules in their Landais yoke (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

To take just one example of challenges to hill farming with animal draft, it suffices to watch Olivier logging with his mules in a Landais yoke in the upland section of the farm. This quickly revealed the literal obstacles to continuing the practice. The mechanical tree-felling was done in ‘modern’ style, assuming the subsequent hauling would be done by machine, so that the felled trees were left helter-skelter, not at all easy for the mules to reach, and considerably increasing the amount of work required. This highlights the reality that animal draft is nestled in broader comprehensive processes, in which each step

¹ Under the auspices of, at that time, the CNRS CEPAM, Sophia Antipolis at the University of Antibes; cameraperson Carolina Carpinski, inquiry Cozette Griffin-Kremer, host Olivier Courthiade, see references in Thanks below.

² Ecomusée d’Alzen, Vidallac, 09240 Alzen, presently closed (10/02/2025).

needs to be thought through in advance to make the whole run smoothly. A correlate to this 'unsmoothness' is that it affects the safety factor considerably, even more because working alone is already borderline.

Work like this in a real-life situation makes it difficult to coordinate with the photographer and, when time is so short, impossible to break down the processes into easily handled units. This is precisely what can be done in the more protected atmosphere of open-air museums or historical sites and part of their usual educational duties. In contrast, working alone on a tight schedule, often overloaded, and without the matrix of a multi-generational household can also mean working on the edge of financial precarity. Fortunately, the safety issue was at times mitigated by help from experienced friends or trainees.

The August session was dedicated to extending the April Oldtimers' Dinner by visiting five households to interview people who once worked as *maquignons* (live-stock dealers) and their wives³. *Nota bene*, cattle and horse dealers could be highly regarded for their reputation of reliability, but also admired for their wiles. Generally, stockbreeders and farmers knew who was who. Olivier prepared a standard protocol for the interviews, all while leaving the room for a quite natural conversation (that is, a semi-directed inquiry enabling subsequent comparison). All of these households had their own collections of yokes, harness and other accessories such as bells or yoke spires (*suberjous* or *béjouets*), as well as photograph albums to comment on.



Fig. 4 André Sidoin Pauly, Carolina Carpinski, Olivier Courthiade (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

Needless to say, there was much laughter, often over close calls or something unpleasant – one of the questions in Olivier's protocol was: 'what was the worst thing that ever happened?'. In the close-call category, a cart ended up directly over the lady, oxen and all, and her husband just barely managed to pull her out, safe and sound. In all of these sessions, there was only one note of tragedy. The *maquignon* trade involved carrying astounding amounts of cash, so... there was also one tale of unpunished murder. This contrasted to lively sessions with much mirth, the invigorating glow of nostalgia and some impressive dusting-off of splendid yokes with their lines totally intact. There was much conversation around these long lines (called *juilles*) that were cut from one ani-

mal hide in a continuous spiral and sewn with cat gut. No one can make these lines today, although it is not hard to recover ox cues at antique sales and, luckily, there are still farriers who can shoe oxen as well as people making yokes and cow collars of various complexity.



Fig. 5 Olivier harnessing a team, note the *juilles* used to secure the yokes (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).



Fig. 6 Olivier explaining harness and accessories (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

What clearly emerges from the videos of Olivier at work and the in-depth interviews with the *maquignons* and their families is what is missing today: The ecosystem they were once embedded in no longer exists with its recognition of their prestige know-how, the multi-generational helping hands, a plethora of trades supplying equipment, and the societal attitudes that could make small-farming like Olivier's viable. All the *maquignons* likewise agreed that there is no longer the pool of triple-purpose animals, with suitable morphology and character, for trainers like him to pick and choose from to create a true fit among handlers, animals, their equipment, the terrain and the tasks to be done.

³ See full list of interviewees at end of article.

This highly colourful past of the *maquignons*, with their tales of remarkable expertise and intimate knowledge of horses and especially cattle, is in fact a welcome complement to the thriving scene – if at an expectedly small scale – of using working cattle in France today. Although the major print gateway to oxdriving (and other animal draft), *Sabots* magazine, is no longer in existence, communication has been taken up by the blog site *Attelages bovins d'aujourd'hui* (Working Cattle Teams Today)⁴, piloted by Michel Nioulou, now seconded by Léonnie Biteau in the younger generation of cattle draft enthusiasts. Michel continued pioneer Laurent Avon's census: presently some 130 people or groups with working oxen (121 pairs and 60 solo animals, with a dozen projects in development)⁵.

Some oxdrivers like Laurent Martin are moving from sharing experiences to professionalizing training in regular sessions. His project includes working with handicapped people of all ages, a delicate as well as promising aspect of human/cattle contact⁶. In addition, transmission of ecosystem skills is fairly well assured, as indicated by the yoke-makers like Michel Nioulou, Gilles Pequignot and Lionel Rouanet, among others, while Véronique Nioulou has revived the art of making traditional fly masks to protect cattle at work and saddlers like Jean-Claude Mann in Alsace, among others, can provide cow collars. On a broader front, work has progressed on setting up two groups: a "Fédération National des Animaux de Travail" (a National Working Animal Federation) and an "Association française des meneurs de bovins" (French Association of Cattle Handlers)⁷.

The tradition of oxdrivers' meetings was effectively upheld with two meetings in 2024, although no longer centralized as in the past at the Alsace Ecomuseum⁸. Two 2025 meetings are already scheduled, one in May and a second in November. If there is for the moment no educational institution providing training in this kind of animal-handling, that is no longer seen as an insurmountable issue, and every oxdrivers' meeting has proven that all kinds of technical innovations are under way. There is also a consensus on the role of positive image-building necessary for cattle draft to be seen as a technology for the future.



Fig. 7 Lionel Rouanet's miniature yoke with juelles and goad, made for Olivier Courthiade (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).



Fig. 8 Joël Blanc with red and black Vosges breed at the Ecomusée d'Alsace Alsace (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

In the *maquignons'* reminiscences about their work, they emphasized the high inexhaustible availability of various breeds of cattle suitable for work, their "fit" with local geography, farming and harness. Most oxdrivers in France are familiar with the Vosges cattle breeder, Philippe Kuhlmann, who still aims at triple use – meat, milk and draft power – and is among the rare cattlemen left who do so⁹. However, there are some other breeders who are on the watch for animals with the right "profile" for work. As a heartening example from across the Rhine, we saw in the March 2024 Lorsch meeting that the Rhaetian Grey Cattle (*Rätisches Grauvieh*) are being actively promoted for their aptitude as draft animals and the 'Use' (*Nutzung*) section of the breed's Swiss website actually mentions six fields of activity¹⁰.

During the 2022 oxdrivers' meeting at Philippe Kuhlmann's farm, all the attendees stopped for a moment of silent homage to the passing of a man who was a vital link to present interest in working cattle, as well as a

4 Blog site *Attelages bovins d'aujourd'hui* <http://attelagesbovinsdaujourdhui.unblog.fr/> [10-02-2025].

5 L. Biteau, pers. comm. [12-04-2025].

6 L. Martin, 2 Mains 4 Cornes <https://2mains4cornes.fr/> [12-04-2025].

7 Fédération National des Animaux de Travail <https://www.reseaufairecheval.fr/actualites/creation-dune-federation-nationale-federation-nationale-des-animaux-de-travail> and Association française des meneurs de bovins <https://www.helloasso.com/associations/association-francaise-des-meneurs-de-bovin> [04-05-2025].

8 Oxdrivers' meeting at Gentioux-Pigerolles in May 2024: <http://attelagesbovinsdaujourdhui.unblog.fr/2023/05/15/premier-rassemblement-autour-de-la-traction-bovine-du-22-au-24-septembre-2023-gentioux-pigerolles-23/>; Courgenard meeting in September 2024: <http://attelagesbovinsdaujourdhui.unblog.fr/2024/10/07/assemblement-autour-de-lattelage-bovin-organise-par-lassociation-francaise-des-meneurs-de-bovins-afmb-20-21-22-septembre-2024-courgenard-72/>; 2019 meeting at Ecomusée d'Alsace: <http://attelagesbovinsdaujourdhui.unblog.fr/2019/06/30/quatorzieme-rencontre-de-bouviers-en-alsace-ungersheim-68/> [10-02-2025].

9 P. Kuhlmann, Ferme le Mail, 23270 Châtelus-Malvaleix.

10 Rhaetian Grey Cattle <https://www.raetischesgrauvieh.ch/rassenportrait/nutzung> [10-02-2025].

scientist specialized in cattle breeding, Laurent Avon¹¹. Laurent was the “inventor” of census-taking of working ox teams in France, a pioneering challenge, which he did alongside his assignments to assess cattle herds for the Institut de l’Élevage (Stockbreeding Institute, presently called the IDELE)¹².



Fig. 9 (left to right) Nicole Bochet (†2024), Véronique and Michel Nioulou, Joël Blanc, Laurent Avon (†2022) at the Fête de la Vache Nantaise 2018 (Photo C. Griffin-Kremer).

One easy way to present the stakes involved in Laurent’s dedication to safeguarding and promoting local breeds is to look at the Wikipedia site (in French and English) for just one of the breeds he was concerned with, the Villard-de-Lans¹³. It has the usual detailed section on morphology, but also an especially well-developed passage on “triple aptitude”, breeding for meat-milk-work, and emphasizes that local practice was to sell males to the plains areas and use cows exclusively for ploughing and logging. The females were prepared for this diversity of work early and used carefully, so that their milking and reproductive qualities were not negatively affected. The article also mentions details that show the pride in deep commitment to the special “fit” of local breeds to local conditions, and the Villard has been hailed in postage stamps and through the erection of a commemorative statue¹⁴.

On to invisibility and the communication gap

Among his many professional affiliations and commitments, Laurent Avon was an active member of a learned society, the Société d’Ethnozootechnie or SEZ which brings out the semi-annual journal *Ethnozootechnie*. Over the years of its publication, the journal has brought out four issues dedicated to cattle, one of them even entitled ‘Les boeufs au travail’ (Working Cattle)¹⁵. Laurent’s 2009 census of working cattle showed 170 ox teams in France plus one in Belgium and laid the foundation for

the present-day oxdrivers’ network. As testimony to his many contributions to working cattle, he was a guest of honour at the 2018 edition of the Fête de la Vache Nantaise in Le Dresny, of which he was also an ardent promoter¹⁶. Laurent’s work has been continued by Michel Nioulou’s own inquiry to extend the list of contacts that today makes up the information hub for oxdrivers’ meetings and other activities. Yet in the *Ethnozootechnie* journal’s 15-page homage to Laurent¹⁷, there is *not one word* on the census of ox teams that was among his proudest achievements and well known to so many breeders, as well as to all the French people attending the Draft Cattle meeting in Laresham. As a note on the many threads that converge over time in today’s network, Laurent was also among the attendees of the 2004 Rencontre d’Alzen organized by Olivier Courthiade and the author, which included both French and international guests, such as the German Working Group’s Rolf Minhorst, Jörg Bremond and Gerd Linden, Belgian Nathalie Bozet, as well as the English transport specialist Paul Starkey and museum director Richard Harris from the Weald & Downland Open-Air Museum¹⁸.

The second example attesting to some unexpected invisibility is an article published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* in September 2023 by French academics which links working animals and an agro-ecological transition under way in the present¹⁹. The article itself is quite positive about the renewal of connections between small farming and the potential use of working animals. However, the search for direct information from reports on actual users of working animals seems to have produced only one, quite old result²⁰, because the authors were hunting either in academic journals or in what they termed the “grey literature” of the popular press, and not actively seeking out people. The people, many of whom were attending the Draft Cattle Colloquium, are nonetheless very easy to find: They pop up in any online machine search in bundles on the first page, as does the oxdrivers’ online blog, *Attelages bovins d’aujourd’hui*.

Fortunately, in the meantime, the lead author has located the French network, is delighted to be connected and is refining his perspectives on working animals, including cattle. Needless to say, the article serves as eloquent testimony to a communication gap. At the time of writing the article, the *Rural Studies* authors were unaware that there were two successful magazines, *Sabots* (Hooves) and *Attelages* (Teams), both dedicated to working horses, cattle, mules, donkeys, even an occasional goat. *Sabots* regularly featured an ‘Oxdrivers’ Corner’ section that included articles on and by experts in France such as Olivier Courthiade, Philippe Kuhlmann and others, as well as reports on every one of the yearly Alsace Ecomuseum oxdrivers’ meetings since 2005 and on the annual meetings of the German Cattle Harnessing Working Group (Arbeitsgruppe Rinderanspannung), until 2022 when *Sabots* and *Attelages* “retired” with their editor, François Durand.

11 Homages to L. Avon <https://association-ferme.org/2023/06/hommage-laurent-avon.html> or <https://www.associationlaferrandaie.com/actualites/hommage-a-laurent-avon/> or <https://association-ferme.org/2023/06/hommage-laurent-avon.html> [10-02-2025].

12 IDELE <https://idele.fr/detail-article/races-francaises-a-faibles-effectifs-24-fiches-races-statistiques-2009> [10-02-2025].

13 Cattle breed Villard-de-Lans [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villard-de-Lans_\(race_bovine\)#cite_ref-EdLAvon_13-0](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villard-de-Lans_(race_bovine)#cite_ref-EdLAvon_13-0) and English [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villard-de-Lans_\(cattle_breed\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villard-de-Lans_(cattle_breed)) [10-02-2025].

14 See Footnote 10.

15 See *Ethnozootechnie* articles on cattle in Bibliography.

16 Fête de la Vache Nantaise <https://www.ouest-france.fr/pays-de-la-loire/nantes-44000/a-plesse-la-fete-de-la-vache-nantaise-portee-a-lecran-d6b6dc8d4-11ee-8656-3015bc260248> [10-02-2025].

17 Gastinel et al 2022.

18 Griffin-Kremer 2004.

19 Miara et al 2023.

20 Griffin-Kremer 2009.





Fig. 10 Michel Schwartzentruber and André Kammerer at the Ecomusée d'Alsace (Photo Jean-Léo Dugast).

Evidently, *Sabots* and *Attelages* hovered in the “grey literature” that is not adequately flagged up by the researchers’ tools to access the popular press. Even a more learned publication such as *Ethnozootecnie* is not easily brought up online through a simple search of, say, “traction bovine en France”, although it is accessible through the French National Library at GALLICA and has internal indexing, for example under ‘bovin’ ‘boeuf’ or ‘traction bovine’. This forms a total contrast with the blog *Attelages bovins d’aujourd’hui*, which is now gatewayed by active participation on Facebook²¹ and Instagram²², bridging the gap between oxdrivers and the people trying to find them. Perhaps among the most pertinent questions for future development is whether or not visibility via social media will be massive but atomized, attracting people only when there are events and not sustaining an effective action community.

What conclusion might we draw from the two examples of a communication gap between the Ethnozootecnie Society, the French academics’ article and the lively world of the oxdrivers? Perhaps there are more questions than answers. In spite of effective networking among cattle draft users, do working animals receive recognition as a potential factor in future transitions in agriculture? There are so many examples of proposals for the transformative potentials of various agricultures – sustainable, agro-ecological, regenerative, and so on – but working animals seem rarely to figure among the perspectives discussed²³.

Does this disconnect between innovation perspectives and on-the-ground practice occur because people who write do not harness horses or yoke oxen? A good many people who write *and* yoke attended the Draft Cattle Colloquium. Will the two colloquia in Lorsch help raise awareness and invigorate scientific research to, literally, cast its net wider, connect with cattle breeders and oxdrivers? The German G.E.H. (Society for the Conservation of Old and Endangered Livestock Breeds)²⁴ has regularly arranged presentations of working cattle breeds in the yearly Berlin “Green Week”. If the annual French SIA (International Agricultural Fair) in Paris certainly shows off horses working in sports like coach-driving and draft contests, it has also featured both horses and cattle working in farming in past years. Is the problem a glass ceiling, some sort of cultural bias, that prevents the oxdrivers from reaching researchers and decision-makers?

We might recall that the 1997 congress and *Ethnozootecnie* issue dedicated to working cattle received so many proposals to present papers that a follow-up meeting of the same title, ‘Les boeufs au travail’, was held at the Bergerie Nationale (National Breeding Research Station) in 1998²⁵. At that time, Gérard Larcher²⁶, a leading French parliamentarian and presently President of the French Senate, deeply concerned then as now with agriculture and especially stockbreeding, made bold proposals to the oxdrivers on new paths. He first suggested they organize representation of themselves and the stakes in-

21 Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/AttelagesBovins/> [12-04-2025]

22 Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/attelagesbovinsdaujourdhui/> [12-04-2025]

23 Smaje 2020, Dufumier/Le Naire 2019, L’Atelier Paysan 2021.

24 G.E.H. Gesellschaft zur Erhaltung alter und gefährdeter Haustierrassen e.V. <https://www.g-e-h.de/> [10-02-2025].

25 FAIR 1999.

26 G. Larcher https://www.senat.fr/senateur/larcher_gerard86034e.html [12-04-2025].

volved in their work in the promotion and safeguard of local breeds and, second, that they undertake to set up a convention with the French State. He likewise made the sort of ground-breaking proposal we see in discussions of regenerative or alternative agriculture and agroecology, noting that France could get along quite well for large-scale food production with *only* the North, the Brie and the Beauce regions! In that case, the rest of the country's land could be a platform of invention to provide an entirely different relationship with local animal breeds, most specifically referring to cattle and other working animals²⁷.

Colloquia and now a new Center for Cattle Draft Research and Education in Lorsch should help propel visibility of the potentials of working cattle to the public and serve as a resource for future small farming, but then, what is the next step or steps? Might it be possible to envision and implement a deeper, more radical reorganization of some aspects of agricultural production? In that case, is only a diffuse, informal trickle-up effect plausible, without support from local or regional governments? Is it possible to flag up the ensemble of barriers to upscaling that include a lack of visibility as well as many other factors such as legal issues of inheritance, land-use classifications and authorizations, and small-investment financing²⁸. Perhaps using draft animals, including working cattle, leads us to more fundamental questions about the nature of land itself, of how we perceive and regulate it.

Thanks to

Olivier Courthiade (organizer-host) La Ferme de Méras, Nescus, 09240 La Bastide de Sérou

Carolina Carpinschi (camerawoman), First Prize for a Thesis in Science and Technology, France <https://sfhst.hypotheses.org/prix-de-these-de-la-sfhst/archives> [10-02-2025]; at that time (2011-12) attached to CDHTE/CNAM Axes Techniques et Vie Quotidienne, Paris

The Interviewees (in order of appearance)

Aimé and Denise MASSAT, Sabarat (09253)

André Sidoin and Jeannine PAULY, Laveret, Lézat sur Lèze (09167)

André and Madame ESTAQUE, Montesquieu Avantès (09200)

Roger and Madame BONZOM, Campagne-sur-Arize (09075)

Joseph CASTET, La Carille, Soueich (31550)

Gérard and Maïté RESPAUD and their family, Le Gay near Le Mas d'Azil (09290)

Further Research

The original *maquignons* DVDs have been deposited at the Archives Départementales de l'Ariège (Contact: archives@ariège.fr)

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²⁷ FAIR 1999, 10-12.

²⁸ FEVE (Fermes En ViE) <https://www.feve.co/installation/ressources-installation/autorisation-exploiter-agriculture> ; Perino 2016 https://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_liste_generique/C_36765_F [10-02-2025] ; Vanuxem 2022.





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