

# Draft cattle utilization in Germany – Perspectives, Potential and Limits

Claus Kropp

## Abstract

After an almost complete hiatus in draft cattle farming in Germany between 1950 and the early 2000s, working with draft cattle has regained importance over the last twenty years. Old triple-purpose breeds (milk, meat, and labor) play a special role in this, as do various initiatives (including the Center for Draft Cattle Research and Education). Ultimately, however, long-term re-establishment depends on whether the public understands draft cattle farming as something separate from any nostalgia and beyond mere hobbyism.

## Résumé

Après une interruption quasi totale de l'agriculture à traction bovine en Allemagne entre 1950 et le début des années 2000, le travail avec ces animaux a regagné en importance au cours des vingt dernières années. Les anciennes races à triple usage (lait, viande et travail) jouent un rôle particulier à cet égard, tout comme diverses initiatives (notamment le Centre de recherche et d'éducation sur les bovins de trait). En fin de compte, cependant, le rétablissement à long terme dépendra de la capacité du public à comprendre que l'agriculture à traction bovine de trait est une activité distincte de la nostalgie et qui va au-delà du simple hobby.

## Kurzfassung

Nach einem fast vollständigen Hiatus in der Zugrinderhaltung in Deutschland zwischen 1950 und den frühen 200er Jahren, gewinnt die Arbeit mit Zugrindern in den letzten zwanzig Jahren wieder verstärkt an Bedeutung. Alte Dreinutzungsrassen (Milch-Fleisch-Arbeit) spielen dabei eine besondere Rolle, genauso wie verschiedene Initiativen (u.a. Zentrum für Zugrinderforschung und Ausbildung). Eine langfristige Re-Etablierung hängt zuletzt aber davon ab, ob die Haltung von Zugrindern von der Öffentlichkeit auch losgelöst etwaiger Nostalgiebemühungen verstanden wird und jenseits reiner Liebhaberei.

## Resumen

Tras una pausa casi total en la cría de ganado de tiro en Alemania entre 1950 y principios de la década de 2000, el trabajo con ganado de tiro ha recuperado importancia en los últimos veinte años. Las antiguas razas de triple uso (leche, carne y trabajo) desempeñan un papel especial en este sentido, así como diversas iniciativas (entre otras, el Centro de Investigación y Educación sobre Ganado de Tiro). Sin embargo, en última instancia, su restablecimiento a largo plazo depende de que el público entienda la ganadería de tiro como algo ajeno a la nostalgia y más allá del mero hobby.



## Introduction

Germany is one of the countries in Central Europe that had a very lively draft cattle culture up until the 1950s<sup>1</sup>. However, due to the industrialization of agriculture, the decline in the number of small and micro farms, and a series of land consolidations, this practice almost completely died out and much traditional knowledge was lost. Over the last twenty years, however, a new dynamic has emerged, leading to a revival and restructuring. To discuss this development will be the focus of the following paper.



**Fig. 1** Draft Cattle at work on a field in the 1930s in Germany. The oxen are harnessed with a forehead yoke (Picture: Sammlung Hesse).

## Establishing a Status Quo

At the annual meeting of the Draft Cattle working group of Germany on March 18<sup>th</sup> 2022, the results of a draft cattle survey conducted by the author in 2021 was presented. This was the first time since 2011<sup>2</sup> that up-to-date data on the status of draft cattle in Germany had been systematically collected.

Looking first at the absolute figures, it is striking that the number of draft cattle kept in Germany has almost doubled compared to 2011. While only 23 draft cattle owners could be identified in 2011, the number had already risen to 41 in the survey year. The number of draft cattle kept has developed similarly. While there was a total of 51 draft cattle (26 cows, 24 oxen, and 1 bull) in 2011, a total of 91 were counted in 2021 (49 cows, 35 oxen, 2 heifers, and 5 bulls). In any case, it is clear that the centuries-old tradition of using draft cows in particular for the classic three-purpose-use (meat, milk, labor) is still practiced in Germany in the 21st century.

Looking at the distribution of draft cattle owners across the individual federal states, Rhineland-Palatinate (9), Hesse (7), and Bavaria (7) stand out in particular. In total, draft cattle farms were registered in ten of the 16 federal states; only for Saarland, Bremen, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and Thuringia did the survey yield no results.

The survey also looked more closely at the distribution of cattle breeds, revealing that several breeds listed in the Red List of Endangered Livestock are among the top five. According to the survey, the breeds used for draft

purposes in Germany are primarily Red Highland Cattle/Rotes Höhenvieh (20), Rhaetian Grey Cattle/Rätisches Grauvieh (20), Fleckvieh (13), Black Pied Lowland Cattle/Schwarzbuntes Niederungsrand (7), and Hinterwälder (5). It can therefore be concluded that the use of these breeds as draft animals can also be important for their preservation. It is often the still widespread selection based on character that makes these breeds so essential for draft animal work.



**Fig. 2** A team of Raetian Grey cattle oxen plowing a field in 2023 (Picture: Gerhard Döring).

Although it should be noted at this point that most draft cattle farms in Germany (30) were classified as private by the respondents, it can be observed that an increasing number of animals are also being used in part-time and full-time agricultural and forestry activities. This makes it all the more important for developers and manufacturers to focus their attention on machines and equipment designed specifically for draft cattle in the future.



**Fig. 3** Cultivating with a cow of the Red Highland Cattle (Rotes Höhenvieh) breed in Brandenburg (Picture A. Masson).

Finally, the survey also asked about the type of harness used. It is striking that the overwhelming majority in Germany use a three-pad-collar harness (35), with only very few using other types of harness such as a forehead yoke (2), bow yoke (2) or head yoke (1). The withers yoke,

1 Steinmetz 1935.

2 Neumann 2011.



**Fig. 4** Participants of the World Draft Cattle Symposium during a pre-conference tour in March 2024 (Picture: Lauren Muney).

which is widely used in other countries, was not registered at all. When asked about the reasons for this clear preference for the collar, this may be an expression of regional traditions in addition to the equally widespread use of single harnesses. In addition, the adjustable three-pad collar is still widely considered one of the most effective and animal-friendly forms of harness. However, it is also clear that, depending on the area of work and terrain, the yoke harness can offer clear advantages.

## (Inter)national Center for Draft Cattle Research and Education

From March 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> 2024, more than 125 cattle experts, farmers, scientists, historians, archaeologists, museum specialists, and engineers from 21 countries gathered in Lorsch, southern Hesse, for the first World Draft Cattle Symposium. The symposium was initiated by the Lauresham Open-Air Laboratory, a museum institution that has been intensively engaged with the topic of draft cattle for over ten years, both historically and practically, as well as in a modern context, through various third-party funded projects. In 2021, the institution had already hosted a world congress called “Draft Animals in the Past, Present and Future<sup>3</sup>” which was held digitally due to the pandemic and attended by over 500 people. During the comparative examination of various draft animals that took place at that time, it became very clear that – even though the importance of draft cattle is still very high in a global context – they receive little attention in public discussion compared to other draft animals. Like no other draft animal, it is understood by political decision-makers, agricultural lobbies, and even many laypeople as part of a narrative of a primitive past that needs to be overcome with “more modern” working methods. Accordingly, cattle drivers in many countries face the problem of being publicly denounced as backward – even though there are so many positive examples, including from the so-called Western world, where draft cattle

can be used as part of ecological operations in agriculture, viticulture, and even forestry<sup>4</sup>. Addressing this problem and bringing together different stakeholders and disciplines for the first time was the main intention of the symposium from the outset. It was recognized that each country has its own specific problems and challenges to overcome and that the discussion about the importance of draft cattle in the 21st century can only be advanced if as much knowledge as possible is accumulated and contextualized. One of the key outcomes of the event was therefore the establishment of an International Center for Draft Cattle Research and Education<sup>5</sup>, which aims to bring together joint efforts and create an international platform for professional exchange. At the same time, the center provides important research impetus to help strengthen the potential role of draft cattle in discussions about sustainability and innovative, resource-saving working methods. It is important to break new ground and provide political decision-makers with comprehensive, factual, and expert information about the potential and limitations of draft cattle.

The founding of the Draft Cattle Center ultimately also boosted the positive dynamic for draft cattle use in Germany. As it provides access to various teaching and experimental fields, meadows, a forest for training purposes, as well as to agricultural and forestry machinery and a large collection of farming implements, it serves as a hub function on a national level. Due to fellowships from craft cattle experts from Scotland, USA or Lithuania, several workshops were organized in 2025 for members of the ox-drivers community and therefore additional skill-training opportunities created.

<sup>4</sup> See Kropp in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://kloster-lorsch.de/en/freilichtlabor-lauresham-laboratory-for-experimental-archaeology/center-for-draft-cattle-research-and-education/> (last accessed 12-09-2025).

<sup>3</sup> See Kropp / Zoll 2022.





**Fig. 5** Health Check and body-weight estimation prior to the start of the draft cattle performance tests (Picture: Ina Pöhlmann).

## Reintroducing Draft Performance tests for cattle

As one of the first big initiatives of the Draft Cattle Center on a national level, a group consisting of cattle experts and specialists took over the development of a new edition of so called draft cattle performance tests. Draft performance tests for working cattle originally had a long tradition in Germany. Similar to the performance tests for horses that are still carried out today, the relevant testing system experienced a particular boom between 1918 and 1939. In his dissertation published in 1933, Heinrich Bohley describes the intention of the performance tests for cattle at the time very clearly: *“The evaluation of this performance concept boils down to determining the respective performance of the farm animal in question through precisely planned tests in order to primarily utilize the animals with above-average dispositions as far as possible in terms of breeding and to obtain descendants with better dispositions in terms of performance from them”*<sup>6</sup>. After the end of the Second World War and in the course of the motorization and industrialization of agriculture, the importance of draft cattle as beforementioned and thus also the will to systematically test their working performance rapidly declined and the testing system in Germany died out completely. The three-purpose use (milk, meat, work), which is so central to draft cows, also became less and less important in the breeding system and, in this context, the selection of individual breeds according to character and suitability.

<sup>6</sup> Bohley 1932, 17.

The main purpose for the group of experts in re-launching a systematic draft performance test therefore was to provide a further structural framework for the growing draft cattle culture and, above all, to establish common quality standards. It was important to both the test committee and the active members of the draft cattle community in Germany that the trials should not be a competition, but rather a joint review of best-practices. It should also explicitly not be about demanding maximum performance from the animals (in terms of maximum pulling power), but rather the average pulling power that the animals should be able to deliver over a period of several hours. Finally, it was also clear that these regulations could only pose as the first step on a long road towards returning to well established testing systems.

On November 16, 2024, after more than 75 years, the time had finally come. A total of 15 working cattle plus teamsters from four federal states were participating in the premiere of the new draft cattle trials<sup>7</sup>. They were carried out on the grounds of Center for Draft Cattle Research and Education. About 200 spectators came to witness this extraordinary opportunity to see some of the best trained working cattle in Germany. It is also important to note that from the 15 participating draft cattle, 6 breeds from the national list of endangered livestock were represented. This continues the development that was already immanent through the survey results from 2011 and 2021: old heritage breeds are a key aspect for the whole question of revitalizing draft cattle use in Germany. Another noteworthy circumstance was the fact that not only oxen but also several cows took part in the trials.

<sup>7</sup> For a full report on the Trials see Kropp 2025.



**Fig. 6** Draft Performance Trial (35% of body-weight pull) with an ox of the Raetian Grey Breed (Picture: Ina Pöhlmann).



**Fig. 7** Draft Suitability Trial (Obedience, Human-Animal relationship) with a heifer of the Hinterwälder breed (Picture: Ina Pöhlmann).

Eventually, all of the six animals participating in the draft suitability test as well as the nine animals participating in the draft performance test successfully passed the different elements of the trials.

## Summary

There is no doubt that working with draft cattle seems to be gaining ground again in Germany. At the same time, the establishment of new organizational and structural elements such as the Draft Cattle Center and draft performance tests also indicates a trend toward professionalization. These are certainly important steps toward a new draft cattle culture at a national level, which is necessary for the long-term re-establishment of draft cattle in agriculture, forestry, and transport, as well as for therapeutic purposes. Only if we are successful in separating the work with draft cattle from the widespread image of "being a thing of the past", real change can be achieved.

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### Author info

Claus Kropp

Manager Lauresham Laboratory of Experimental Archaeology  
Center for Draft Cattle Research and Education  
UNESCO World Heritage Site Lorsch Abbey  
Nibelungenstr. 32 – 64653 Lorsch – Germany  
E-Mail: [c.kropp@kloster-lorsch.de](mailto:c.kropp@kloster-lorsch.de)