



Philip Armstrong
SHEEP
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Wetherlam, the Lake District © Martin Smith/Alamy

Sheep-shaped

BARBARA J. KING

Sheep altered the course of history in many regions of the world from ancient Mesopotamia to industrial-age Britain, transforming whole economies as the commodification of their wool and their meat took hold. When sheep are loosed from this role as farm commodity, as well as from their symbolic significance in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as emblems of innocence or passivity, their real lives may astonish us.

In *Sheep*, a superb volume that more than meets the high bar set in the Reaktion Books Animal Series, the animal-studies scholar Philip Armstrong notes that “no other domestic animal fades from view, even as we use it, quite as

completely as the sheep” – before setting this situation to rights. In six chapters with titles such as “Sheepishness” and “A Sheep-shaped World”, each graced with gorgeous illustrations in natural and cultural history ranging from “The exuberantly polycerate Jacob Sheep” that can have up to six horns to “Don Quixote’s ovine delusion”, Armstrong produces a sheep manifesto that’s both delightful and disturbing.

In their profound long-term relationships and their rules for communicative signalling, free-ranging sheep exhibit levels of social and emotional intelligence that rival that of monkeys and apes. It’s the oldest and most experienced ewe who leads mixed flocks, and she does so by care for others and keen decision-making rather than through aggression. Describing this female-centred social structure, Armstrong is able, throughout the volume, to link sheep facts to broader issues: “Such a realization perhaps invites us not only to rethink our assumptions about sheep, but indeed about social authority itself; about what it means to lead, to follow, to be an individual, to be part of a society”.

Early sheep-rearing cultures were centred in

Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Greece and Cyprus. Wool, made up of three layers with lanolin in the topmost one, is uniquely valuable for insulation against temperature extremes and water, a feature that benefits human as well as ovine lives. Spinning and weaving wool into cloth had been invented as early as the fourth millennium BC. Two thousand years later, distinct breeds of sheep designed by farmers to produce different varieties of wool or meat made their way into the archaeological record in Mesopotamia, and textile production there, as well as in Egypt and the Mediterranean, became extremely significant. In England, the Domesday Book in 1086 counted more sheep than all other livestock combined. Wool became a source of wealth for the aristocracy. The twelfth-century establishment of Cistercian monasteries across England, where sheep were raised for milk, parchment and wool, set in motion a cascade of important transformations. One Cistercian achievement was perhaps of singular impact: these monks left behind the traditional system of small land parcels on which peasants farmed for feudal estate owners, and “opened up huge pastures for running flocks that numbered in the thousands”, a choice that “was a pivotal point in the transition of feudalism into capitalism”.

Animal agriculture hasn't been kind to sheep. When urban hunger for meat skyrocketed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain, "sheep were reinvented", Armstrong writes, "as meat-producing machines: fat, heavy, and solid; blocks of flesh on legs". Armstrong contrasts two illustrations of sheep from Thomas Bewick's *General History of Quadrupeds*, 1790 (both reproduced in the book). Whereas the "unimproved" sheep shows "vitality and grace", the "improved" version, all contours buried in the fleshy body and the face vacant of expression, resembles "a spigot through which grass can be fed for processing into mutton".

Unlike untold numbers of cows, pigs and chickens confined to factory farms, sheep today are mainly raised in open pastures. Armstrong demolishes any fantasy that pasture life is comfortable for sheep, however. In a practice called mulesing carried out on millions of sheep annually, farmers flay the skin, "most often without anaesthetic, from a wide area surrounding the anus", in order to try and prevent a disease called fly-strike, an infection caused by the eggs and maggots of blow-flies. Fly-strike is in fact preventable by a combination of vaccination, dosing with chemicals, and keeping

the anal region clean, but mulesing is more cost-effective – and painful for the animals. Export of sheep to slaughter is common; 2 million sheep a year are sent by sea to other countries from Australia alone. The death of thousands of exported sheep at once owing to ship-board fire, heatstroke or ventilation failures is not infrequent, and suffering due to crowded conditions is essentially guaranteed. This hellish picture is all the harder to contemplate once we are equipped, thanks to Armstrong, to “think about sheep in terms of their experience of sheepliness”.