

Deer and sheep are words that cover all ages and sexes of groups of animals comprising several different genera. Domestic animals may be known collectively under the term used for the entire male, such as horses and dogs. Pigs are pigs and cats are cats, but what are cattle? I am no etymologist, but it is well known that this word was widely used in the Middle Ages to have a meaning wider than it does today, implying any of the domestic ungulates: 'all cattle¹ is a term which occurs several times in the Bible. Different species received their own adjective, bovine cattle being referred to as neat or black. But the term was always plural, and if there were a singular word it appears to have been 'beast'.

There is a problem as to how to refer to the animal in bone reports. Before the Second World War the word used was usually oxen, the exact definition of which by the Smithfield Club is a castrate male over four years old, so the archaeological usage is permissible, perhaps, if the livestock were thought to be dominated by plough beasts. Nowadays the word is cow; that is, a female which has borne a calf. This I find irritating, as do several of my colleagues. It implies to me that the user lacks historical insight and imagines that the black and white dairy cattle of the 20th century filled the pastures listed in Domesday Book. There really is no excuse for a table headed

The veterinary profession has had the same problem, and the word 'bovine¹ came to be used as a noun. The editors of journals soon put a stop to this (And quite rightly! -Eds.), and it was substituted by the pedantic 'bovine animal¹. However, this includes yak and bison as well as Bos taurus. There was even an occasional resort to 'bovid', but this was even worse, as it includes a multiplicity of antelopes.

Would resort to Latin names solve the problem? Bos taurus, Ovis aries, and so on would be correct and would cross language barriers, but it does get rather tedious and pedantic. Can anything be done with the word "taurus"? "Taurids" is a bit close to turds -"taurines" perhaps? But this seems to be getting amongst the signs of the zodiac in trendy horoscopes. So cattle persist in being a collective herd. But no cows please, we are historians of a sort.

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[As an editorial afterthought, having been brought up in an area where domesticated caprines of the genus Ovis were categorised as wethers or sheep (i.e. sheep were nearly all ewes), I was utterly bewildered when first discussing sheep with an Orcadian to be told 'No, there's no yowes in the flock - they're all sheep'. Work that one out!

Would Latin names really be the answer? The use of full binomials such as Bos taurus is really to be discouraged for domestic animals which are domesticated forms of one or more wild species with which the domesticated forms are strictly speaking conspecific. If domestic sheep are interfertile with wild species of sheep, why are they Ovis aries and not O. ammon? In any case, how often are our identifications of bone fragments really accurate enough to say that specimens are, for example, to be attributed to Bos taurus or B. grunniens rather than the more honest Bos sp(p)? This one could run and run....

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