



THE ORIGINS OF THE ANGORA GOAT



Goats as a species were probably the first animals to be domesticated by man, according to recent research presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's conference in San Francisco in February 2001. Very ancient remains of herded goats have been found in the mountainous regions of both Iran and Iraq. Goats would have been easy to domesticate because of the social structure within a herd, which always follows the dominant leader, a role that could readily be and still is co-opted by humans. Goats, unlike their cousins, sheep, do not have a strong flight instinct, and they will happily breed under many diverse conditions. Their placid and tractable nature could be enhanced by careful breeding and, being a small animal, they could be easily managed for meat, milk and / or fleece depending on the kind of goat bred.

Artifacts from Ur of the Chaldees, in the same region as the remains reported above, show goats with fleeces of long wavy ringlets. We are told in the Bible's Old Testament that Abraham, father of the Hebrew and Arab nations, moved away from Ur with his flocks and herds and later the Hebrews made a very large covering for their tabernacle or temple in the wilderness from woven goats' hair.

Cuniform records from Turkestan, also in the same region, in the 14th, 12th and 11th centuries BC refer to "goats, kids and white wool for clothing". The next record we have is that during the 13th century AD animals were trekked thousands of miles, a little each day, from Turkestan to the areas of Ankara and Kayseri in the province of Angora, Turkey, by Suleyman Shah, who had been driven out of the land of the Turkomans by Ghengis Khan. The goats settled well into their new home and were highly prized for their beautiful fleeces, which were woven into the silk-like cloth worn by the Sultan. The name "mohair" was given to the fleece, being derived from the Arabic word "mukhaya" meaning "cloth of bright and lustrous goats' hair".

The next we hear of the goats is in 1550, when a visiting Dutchman discovered them and generated a demand for their beautiful fleece. Four years later in 1554 a pair of "Angora goats" was presented as a royal gift to the then Pope in Rome. Soon the supply of mohair could not satisfy demand and the Sultan of Turkey placed an embargo on the export of raw fleece. Spun mohair continued to supply the market, finally reaching Britain around 1600 when the superior quality of European yarns quelled demand for Turkish yarns where looms began to disappear.

Britain's Queen Victoria finally put pressure on the Sultan of Turkey and the ban on raw mohair was lifted, creating soaring demand and leading to the unfortunate practice in Turkey of cross-breeding the angora goat with the indigenous Kurd goat, nearly wiping out the pure-bred animals and resulting in inferior fleece.

Fortunately Turkey was by then not the only source of pure-bred stock, as South Africa had imported its first angoras in 1838. A group of 12 bucks and a doe was shipped from Turkey, but the Turks had rendered all the males infertile in an attempt to thwart the deal. Luckily the doe was pregnant and her male kid was used to grade up with the local goats. In 1856 a further consignment of pure-bred angoras was imported with more success. In 1849 a group of 9 angoras was imported into Texas in the USA. Both countries continued to import pure breeding stock over a number of years, and on these small beginnings the South African and Texan mohair industries have been based, which with careful breeding and selection have improved the original angora goat to the impressive quality we see today.

While dairy goats arrived in Australia in 1788, angora and cashmere goats did not arrive until the middle of the 19th century. Mohair production enjoyed some popularity in the late 1890s and early 1900s but depressions, droughts and fashion changes resulted in the abandonment of most flocks. Since 1970 renewed interest in farming goats for mohair has prompted many investigations into their characteristics and needs and the industry has expanded enormously.

Similarly, angora goats were introduced into New Zealand during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the hope of developing a prosperous mohair industry there, and several good-sized pedigree herds were built up. However, when mohair became unfashionable in the 1920s many of these animals were released into the wild and inter-breeding with feral goats was very common.

Today there are small pockets of angora goats being bred for their mohair in numerous locations throughout the world, but the biggest producers of the best mohair remain South Africa, Texas and Australia. Over the years the climate and geography of these very different areas, together with the breeding programmes adopted in each country, have led to quite different characteristic bloodlines.

Texan-type fleeces tend to be dense and more greasy with long staples, leading to high fleece-weights, and the most wonderful lustre. South African fleeces are noted for the style and character of the staples which grow very evenly over the whole body. Australasian mohair is generally the finest, but also suffers from the greatest tendency towards kempiness.

The mohair properties of durability, warmth, crease-resistance and superb dye-acceptance were much appreciated by the worsted spinning industry in Bradford, England, which imported and processed a large percentage of the world clip during the major part of the 20th century. The presence of the Bradford mills as a market for the produce prompted breeders to consider importing angora goats into Britain in 1980 when the farming community needed good alternative forms of diversification.

The first imports came from New Zealand, but as these were mainly cross-bred goats of inferior fleece weights and quality, forward-looking

breeders sourced a pool of Texan-genetic goats in Canada. British breeders were unable to import directly from Texas or South Africa because of animal health regulations, but imports could come from Canada as this was considered by MAFF to be a "clean country" as far as animal diseases were concerned. The first Texan angoras arrived in 1987 and since those early days South African bloodlines have also arrived via Spain and France. With sound breeding expertise aimed at optimising the characteristics of these different genetic sources a British angora goat has been evolving over the past 20 years that now compares favourably with its Texan, South African or Australian counterpart.

There are now approximately 5,000 registered angora goats in Britain, with up to 3,000 more unregistered animals. Most of these are kept in small flocks by enthusiastic breeders, but some larger commercial flocks are starting to emerge. The animals have settled well into a completely different environment, showing the adaptability for which the goat is noted.

Up-dated May 2005