

SESSION 1 : MILK AND ORIGINS: MILK OF MAN, MILK OF THE GODS

Presided by Jean-Denis Vigne

The Origins of Animal Domestication, Breeding of Hoofed Mammals and Milk Consumption in the Neolithic Era in the Middle East and Europe

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Milk is an essential foodstuff for humans, as infants and at all ages, as a symbolic mediator between mother and child. It predates Man, as it already played this role at least in part among our ancestral primates and well before, for the mammals of the Tertiary and Secondary Periods from which they themselves were descended. Man has obviously always known milk. What people have discovered over the course of history are the many ways to live off it in the literal as well as figurative sense.

In the literal sense, that means taking milk from other mammals, which is no easy task when they are wild. The history of milk as a foodstuff for the adult human is thus closely related to that of the domestication of mammals that can be milked: cows, sheep, goats, camels, donkeys and horses, water buffalos and yaks, lamas and alpacas... To explore the relations between man and milk, it is therefore impossible not to take into account all aspects of domestication, not only its socio-cultural and technical-economic facets, but its history, especially the history of its origins. This is the first point that will be discussed, by looking at the domestication of hoofed mammals from different angles.

Consuming milk in the figurative sense means integrating images linked to it to the symbolic system and the beliefs of a human group or society. Although prehistoric hunter-gatherers may occasionally have tasted the milk of other mammals, there is hardly any doubt that nursing and milk already had a strong symbolic value in their imagination. Moreover, among both hunters and breeders, milk, as nourishment for infants, was bound to acquire either a symbolic value of purity and hope or on the contrary be rejected as the attribute of this "socially unfinished" being that is a baby. As a mediator between mother and child, it is tempting to assimilate milk to a means of transmitting the lineage. The ideals of ancient Greece that Janick Auberger will describe in this session perfectly illustrate the symbolic richness of milk and the apotropaic uses that are made of it. These are still expressed today in our societal debates between the advocates and opponents of milk consumption.

François Poplin recently revealed to us that "becoming familiar" with animals inevitably produced a profound change in how the slaying of animals was perceived. Animal slaughter came to resemble murder, the guilt for which could only be shed by turning "to a higher power to whom the victim will be dedicated." This would explain "the invention of sacrifice and God." Arriving at a similar conclusion by a very different process, some dozen years ago J. Cauvin suggested that the birth of animal husbandry in the Middle East could be seen as a corollary to the invention of deities. The advent of herding societies went together with a new symbolic system in which, because milk is itself closely bound up with breeding, its symbolic use (as well as the products derived from it) increased in scope and diversity with respect to hunting societies. No longer the milk of origins, it became "the milk of the gods and the milk of man." This is beautifully illustrated by Ysé Tardan-Masquelieren's paper in this session on the role of the cow, milk and dairy products at the roots of Hinduism.

Just as we cannot understand domestication without exploring its origins, we cannot rely solely on modern social behaviors or the classical Greek or Aryan writings to analyze the complex relations man has with milk. We must also, and perhaps above all, turn our gaze toward more ancient societies, those that invented our new symbolic system but that did not yet have a writing system. This is the second aim of this presentation, to contribute to such research, however



modestly, because it is more a matter of indicating what technical paths might enable us to access this knowledge than to expound knowledge that is still in its infancy.

The early stages of animal husbandry, particularly that of hoofed animals raised for their milk, like the emergence of a dairy economy in many areas of the world 8-10,000 years ago, occurred in societies that academic science typically qualifies as “prehistoric.” This adjective lumps together very different periods and situations. **The questions that interest us here pertain to the last 10,000 years of the history of *Homo sapiens*. They have nothing to do with more ancient hominids, or even the Neanderthal, which became extinct 200 centuries earlier.** We will show in our presentation that we are dealing with people who had the same cognitive capacities as we do today and technical knowledge which individually, while it may be different, is no less extensive than our own. **The societies they formed were involved in an intense and rapid process of social complexification, to the extent that it would really be preferable to speak of “early protohistory” in their regard. It is from this perspective that we should interpret the ancient history of the milk of men and their gods.**

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