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The Curved-Horn Oxen of Helios

By Evaggelos Vallianatos

This past April 19, I went to northern Greece where I traveled back in time when the Greeks herded Greek cattle and ate Greek food. Once in the neighborhood of Meteora, the suspended in mid air stone towers, in Thessaly, I met Demetrios Petarakis, a veterinarian of the Greek Department of Agriculture, who led me to a world unknown even to agricultural experts. This was the farm of Demetrios Demos in the countryside around Meteora.

For about 22 years, Demos, an economist and a family farmer, has been doing what the Greek state ought to be doing: protecting from extinction the country's agricultural patrimony, especially its autochthonous farm animals. In the case of Demos, these animals include goats, pigs, cattle and horses; the cattle are those curved-horn oxen that Homeros and Hesiodos, Greece's greatest epic poets, praised 2,800 years ago; and the horses are the military horses that led Alexander the Great to his world conquest.

Demos follows the bucolic practices of ancient Greeks, caring for his animals with plenty of fertile hill land and water. He feeds his animals nothing synthetic, keeping them always out in the woods and providing but the minimum cover for winter weather. In winter, Demos supplements their grass diet with corn, oats and barley. That way his animals, free of the stress of cement enclosures and forced feeding, thrive and multiply, giving Demos a chance to earn a good living.

Demos welcomed us to his farm near Trikala, in the westernmost region of the plain of Thessaly not far from the Pindos Mountains. He showed us his animals: about 40 black sows, 35 horses, and most of the surviving ancient Greek Steppe or Katerini oxen: 118 cows and 5 bulls. The remaining 62 Katerini cattle in all of Greece are with a few farmers like him. These are black or ash-colored animals, not large but modest in size. Demos' oxen give birth to about 85 to 90 calves per year.

He complained the Greek state, in one of the worse imitations of American farm policy, taxes him and other small family farmers in order to subsidize the large cattle ranchers "producing" calves weighing more than 700 pounds. The Italian "slow food" movement, but not the Greek government, has

honored Demos for his pioneering efforts to protect ancient Greek animals.

It is clearly vital for Greece to return to her agrarian culture, honoring and supporting farmers like Demos. The gentle farming practices of those Greek family farmers do for Greece -- and humanity -- what no scientists or labs could ever hope to accomplish. They protect the world's genetic diversity without which life would be extremely impoverished or inconceivable.

Yet Greece, a country with the most ancient agrarian tradition in Europe, cares less about its inestimable culture. Instead, like the one-eyed Polyphemus Cyclops is blaming No-Man for becoming a fast food nation, allowing foreign teachers, a flood of agribusiness schemes, and subsidized food imports to wreck its food and agriculture. The result of this neglect is the creation of monstrous Athens, where almost half of the Greeks live, and the depopulation of thousands of villages, converting the country to a hotel for foreigners.

Second, Greece, a country of goats, sheep, pigs, and cattle for millennia, has nearly abandoned its animal husbandry, growing no more than 8 percent of its calves. Like the soldiers of Odysseus who disobeyed him and ate the sacred cattle of Helios, Greek policy makers, deaf to reason, ignore the civilization of their ancestors at their great peril. Poseidon drowned the soldiers of Odysseus for their audacity and sacrilege. Could the price Greece is paying for doing away with the last alive vestiges of its Hellenic culture be just as severe?

In Greece, there is a drastic decline in both farm animals and family farmers, no more than 600,000 farmers in 2007. Walking and driving through the fertile land of Thessaly, home of Achilles, son of goddess Thetis and the greatest Greek hero in the Greeks' war against the Trojans, I thought I was in the huge valleys of California. The farms are large with no homesteads on sight.

It's about time Greece brought to an end its misguided policies against traditional farming. Peasants and family farmers are not backward. Greek peasants rather than philosophers invented the country's greatest contributions to civilization, the polis, science, the Olympics, theater, and democracy.

The dream of Demetrios Demos ought to become Greek national policy.

Supporting farmers like him will bring Greece back to the core values of its agrarian culture, strengthening what made Greece the light of the Western world. Stop subsidizing the imported model of factory farming and fast food. In fact, do away with it. Pay traditional Greek family farmers to cultivate not merely the matchless Greek crops and farm animals but the agrarian culture that sustained Greek civilization.

Evangelos Vallianatos is the author of “This Land is Their Land: How Corporate Farms Threaten the World” (Common Courage Press).