Through a world of sheep

Hans-Peter Uerpmann

Sheep and Man.

By M. L. Ryder.

Duckworth: 1983. Pp.846. £55.

THE sheep — symbolic creature of docility, sacrifice and stupidity. But our psychological assessment of this animal pays scant respect to its enormous economic importance. Not only were sheep among the first animals to be domesticated, they still sustain millions of people with their products of milk, wool and meat.

In *Sheep and Man*, Michael Ryder has produced a truly comprehensive book which covers every aspect of the historical

The first part of the book deals with prehistoric and early historic times, the second part with the period from the Middle Ages to recent times. After dealing with nomadism, transhumance and other types of husbandry systems, Ryder gives a geographical overview, starting with the countries of the Middle East, then passing through Asia, Europe and Africa to the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. Types of sheep, their products and the many different ways to obtain and handle these products are illustrated and described with all the knowledge of a scientist who has devoted most of his work to the history of this animal, and who is able to offer the reader an incredible amount of detail.

The third and final part concentrates the information under more generalized headings: husbandry and sheep products are summarized and the text concludes with a chapter on "The Sheep Legacy", including Ryder's assessment of the future direction of the sheep-man relationship. An appendix with a chronological list of illustrations covering the time between about 5000 BC and the last century is as useful as the vast bibliography, which contains more than a thousand references. An exhaustive index makes the encyclopaedic character of the book complete.

As usual with works such as this, the specialist will cavil at certain points — he will not agree with some generalizations, he may find some details superfluous and others missing. No full account of my own disagreements can be given here, but it would not seriously diminish the value of *Sheep and Man*. Even the fact that the ideas on the beginnings of sheep domestication have moved on since the pertinent chapters of the book were written, is mitigated by Ryder's complete description of the earlier views. Sometimes, however, confusion is caused when reference to new publications is made in one instance, but not in others referring to the same topic. For example, it is noted on page 14 that the mouflon is now regarded as an early escapee, as a feral animal brought to the Mediterranean islands by Neolithic man as an already domesticated animal. Later, though, the possibility is discussed that the European mouflon might be among the wild ancestors of sheep. In my view most claims of the existence of an indigenous wild sheep in Europe are highly questionable, both with regard to the stratification of the respective finds and to their identification.

It will always be the fate of books with some 800 densely printed pages that their early parts will be somewhat dated when the last word is written. Most of Ryder's book cannot become outdated, however. In its painstaking compilation of facts, *Sheep and Man* is a feat of scholarship which will itself become a major historical source. □

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Long, long trail awinding — the traditional rotation of pastures in Switzerland, sheep returning to the valleys after spending summer grazing on the mountains.

development of this particular relationship between man and beast. For archaeologists, for historians and sociologists dealing with rural societies, for ethnologists, for farmers with an interest in history, for veterinarians and to a certain extent also for biologists, this book will be a seemingly inexhaustible mine of information about sheep and their exploitation during prehistoric and historic times. The who, what, when, where, why and how of domestication are dealt with, and the changes after domestication are covered. There is an account of the spread of sheep-husbandry from its original centre in south-west Asia towards the Mediterranean and into Europe, and also a long chapter on the sheep of the ancient civilizations.

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