



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

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Multi-Horned Icelandic Sheep

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In the summer issue of the newsletter (Vol. 4, No. 3, p 8, 9) Shawn Carlson wrote an interesting article on multi-horned Icelandic sheep. There are speculations on their origin and their possible effect on piebald Jacob sheep in the United Kingdom.

It is well established that multiple horned sheep are found in some other breeds too, normally 4-horned, but 6-horned in exceptional cases. According to M.L. Ryder, the author of the very comprehensive book "Sheep and Man" (Duckworth, U.K. 1983, ISBN 07156 16552) such sheep are found in India and Cyprus and either of them may have influence the Jacob breed which is believed to have been transported from Spain into the UK. On the British Isles, the Jacob breed has possibly been influenced by crossing with Manx Loghtan, 4-horned, brown or piebald sheep from the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, and/or black, 4-horned, short-tailed Hebridean sheep originating from an ancient Hebridean breed which according to Ryder was extinct by 1900.

I think it is very unlikely that there is any relationship between Icelandic sheep and Jacob sheep. I have not come across any evidence of exports of breeding sheep from Iceland to the British Isles before 1979. Icelandic sheep exported to Scotland and North of England in the late 19th century were wethers for slaughter. A relationship between the Jacob breed and the Manx Loghtan and the Hebridean breeds is much more likely as indicated by Ryder. These two breeds have the same ancient origin as the Icelandic breed, belonging to the North European short-tailed group of sheep breeds and I wonder if it is certain that the brown, multi-horned ram depicted on page 9 in the article by Shawn Carlson is Icelandic. Could it possibly be Manx Loghtan which I have noted to have great resemblance with brown, 4-horned Icelandic rams? Is it certain that the French naturalist quoted in the article painted this picture in Iceland, or was it possibly painted on the Isle of Man, in the Hebrides or elsewhere on the British Isles?

I may add that from my point of view, we have the duty to preserve rare genetic characteristics such as 4-hornedness in sheep. Fortunately, quite a few are still found in Iceland. A few individuals, mainly colored, are found in some flocks, and I know one farmer who has been concentrating on the breeding of 4-horned sheep for nearly 50 years. Most of them are brown-piebald. There was a 4-horned ram in the AI services several years ago and it may be timely to offer such possibilities in the near future. Thus semen could be made available to breeders of Icelandic sheep in North America.