

Transhumance in France

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Transhumance is one form of mobile pastoralism. As practised in Europe it is the seasonally recurring vertical travel of herds. Usually it involves the migration from lowlands where the animals spend the winter to mountains where pastures become available during the summer. But there are exceptions as will be shown. Transhumance still exists in many European countries, especially in Mediterranean regions. This paper discusses two transhumance systems in France, one from the lowlands of Languedoc to the Causses, Cévennes and Lozère mountains, the other from the Crau in Provence to the Alps.

Keywords: mobile pastoralism, transhumance, France, Europe

History of transhumance in France

Transhumance as it is practised in Europe is the seasonally recurring vertical travel of herds. Usually it concerns the migration from lowlands where the animals spend the winter to mountains where pastures become available during the summer. But there are exceptions as will be shown later.

Pastoralism in the Cévennes and Causses (Languedoc, southern France) goes back to the beginning of the Neolithic, some 6,000 years before present (Brisebarre 1996). At that time, humans were still mainly hunters and gatherers, but goats and sheep had already been domesticated. Some 4,000 years before present, the climate became much warmer and drier. Hunting became less successful and livestock breeding more important. Transhumance from the lowland of Languedoc to the uplands of the Causses and the upper Cévennes also became a necessity because of the lack of food in the plains during the dry summer.

The *drailles*

The routes taken by the sheep herds in France are called *drailles* (in Spain they are known as *cañadas*). They have been used since the Neolithic period. In some cases it is even believed that these routes were actually natural routes of wild animals also migrating between mountains and lowland (Brisebarre 1996; see also Manzano and Casas this volume).

Transhumance occurs in several regions of France – in the Pyrenees, between Languedoc-Roussillon and the Causses, Cévennes and Lozère, between the

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Crau and the Alps, in the Jura mountains and in the Vosges. This paper discusses the Languedoc-Roussillon and Crau systems.

The Languedoc-Roussillon transhumance system

The wintering areas in the lowlands are made chiefly of *garrigue*, a scrubland of mainly holm oak and juniper, adapted to dry summers. These stretch from the foot of the Cévennes and Causses south towards the Mediterranean Sea.

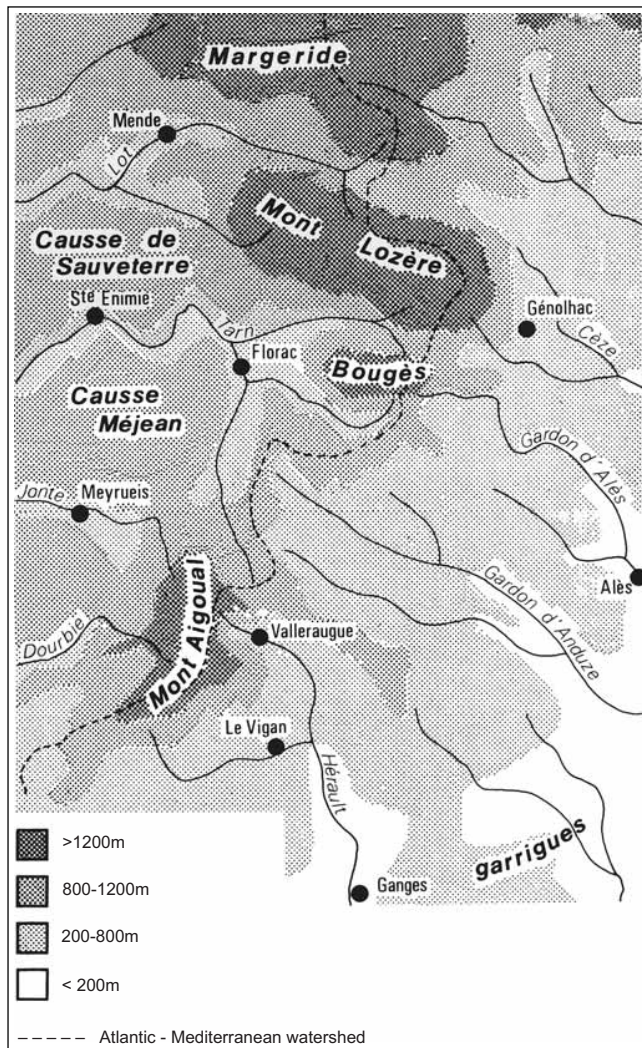


Figure 1. Map of case study areas: Garrigue, Causses, Cévennes and Lozère
 Source: Brisebarre 1968

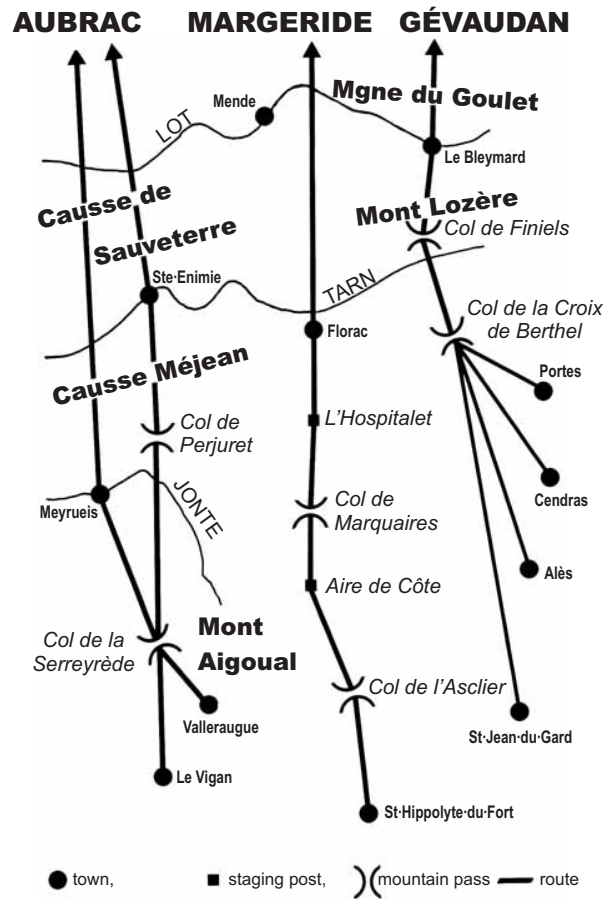


Figure 2. Four main drailles in Languedoc
Source: Brisebarre 1996

From this *garrigue*, the herds migrate to the Causses, Cévennes and Lozère in spring. The Causses are limestone high plateaux reaching from 400 m above sea level to 1,200 m. The more southern areas have a typically Mediterranean climate; towards the north, the climate becomes more continental. People already inhabited the Causses year-round in the Neolithic period. Although they were chiefly pastoralists, they were doing some basic agriculture (Costantini 1995). The Causses were originally mainly forested with oak trees, and have been deforested chiefly for the purpose of pastoralism. The Cévennes and Lozère are hills and mountains up to 1,600 m altitude bordering the Massif Central to the south.

There are three big pathways (*drailles*) leading from the southern lowlands to the more northern highlands.

The Crau transhumance system

The Crau is a dry, very stony steppe. Originally it was the delta of the Durance River that is now flowing into the Rhone River further north. This special type of very dry and stony steppe – called *coussouls* in the Crau – is unique and actually one of the last remaining in Europe. This land normally is good for nothing else but livestock keeping, except with huge technical, water and fertilizer inputs (Fabre 2000).

Until the mid 19th century, herds were big, normally between 2,000 and 3,000 animals, and sometimes up to 10,000. The sheep spent all the year on the pastures. The annual cycle was divided into three periods. During the winter, the animals were in the Crau on grasslands, on the *coussouls* and on stubbles. They spent the summer in the Alps. In spring before really starting their transhumance, they spent some time in the hills surrounding the Crau. Wool was then the main product, meat, milk and skins being quite secondary (Fabre 2000).

In the middle of the 19th century, many things started to change. In 1860, France signed a trade treaty with the United Kingdom allowing for the import of wool from the colonies of the British Empire. As a consequence, the prices for local wool dropped rapidly. Many big farmers abandoned their herds; others transformed them into herds of meat sheep (Fabre 2000).

The abandonment of big sheep herds by the farmers gave the shepherds of these herds a chance to acquire them relatively cheaply. They continued their activities as before: grazing on the large properties of the Crau in winter, and proceeding in the transhumance to the Alps during summer. They had no land of their own. These new types of landless sheep breeders were called *herbassiers* (Fabre 2000).

The *herbassiers* still exist today. So does the transhumance; but much of it is done with lorries now, rather than by foot as it used to be. Numbers of sheep have dropped a lot though. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were an estimated 200,000 sheep in the Crau and Camargue. In 1963, there were still some 180,000. The mean size of the herds dropped from 2,000-3,000 up to the mid 19th century to 700 by 1996.

Inverse transhumance

In some European areas there is also an inverse transhumance, where the herds are moving downwards in the summer. For example, this is the case in the Burren, County Clare, Ireland. In winter the animals are taken to the higher plateau that retains the heat captured during the summer, and they spend the summer in the lowland below.

Another form of inverse transhumance occurs in Languedoc where herds living much of the year in the mountains are taken to the lowland in winter (Brisebarre 1996) because there is not enough grass in the mountains during

that season and because there are possibilities for grazing in the lowlands (stubbles and unused grasslands in the *garrigue*).

As in the Languedoc, there is an inverse transhumance in the Crau by sheep holders who live in the Alps and come to the Crau during winter because there is not enough fodder in the Alps for the whole winter. Some of these sheep owners bought grazing land in the Crau, and have partly even settled down in the Crau. Most of them however kept some meadows and pastures in the Alps and became 'normal' transhumants.

Land ownership

In previous ages, much of the land in these areas under consideration belonged to landlords. Herders were allowed to use grasslands in the lowland (*garrigue*) for free. In the Middle Ages, land ownership and land use locally became very different. In some areas, this custom of free grazing was then abolished. After that, those livestock keepers who did not have enough pastures themselves had to rent more from neighbours. In a particular region (Ganges, département Hérault) the landlords who let grasslands to the owner of a herd had to provide the sheep sheds and the entire infrastructure that goes with them and housing for the shepherd. The owner of the herd nourished the shepherd and his dog (Brisebarre 1996). Conditions in the present day are presented below.

Ownership on the lowland grasslands of the garrigue in Languedoc

Agricultural land in the *garrigue* is now mostly privately owned. The pastoral land is mainly very poor; thus it takes a lot of land to keep a herd of sheep (up to 2 ha per sheep). If most sheep holders do have land on their own, they usually do not own enough for their herd and need to rent more from other landowners. When, in the 1950s, agriculture became less and less viable, many farmers sold their properties to people from outside the region and who had no interest in agriculture. The outsiders used the houses as holiday houses and let the land, for which they had no utility, to sheep holders. Very often the arrangements between landowners and sheep holder were verbal and not written down.

This was a win-win situation – the sheep holders had land for free, and the land belonging to the owners was managed. This worked well until the second generation of landowners took over. The new owners often do not have the same relation to the region and to the land they have inherited; they are not prepared to continue the arrangements of their parents. In some cases, the arrangements continue, but even then, knowing what had happened elsewhere, the sheep holders do not have any certainty about what is going to happen in the near future. The lack of legal security with these verbal arrangements prevents lots of young sheep holders from continuing their business. The land that is no longer available to sheep holders is partly being

forested or built up with houses, for which there is a huge demand. Hunting societies also buy a lot of land. This leads to a mosaic of small parcels where sheep could still be kept, but under such conditions that it is often not worth it (Verdier 2005).

Ownership on the lowland grasslands in the Crau

In the 18th century, land was principally in the hands of big landowners in the north of the Crau. This land could partially be irrigated and thus was worth more than in the southern part of the Crau. Sheep breeders depended partially on these landowners; but they also provided them with manure, which led to a mutually beneficial situation (Fabre 2000).

The *coussouls* – the typical very stony and dry steppe-like habitat of the Crau – belongs partly to the state, and partly to private landowners (livestock breeders and other landowners) (Fabre 2008). Land use is governed by contracts between sheep breeders and landowners. Sometimes these are verbal contracts that have been renewed for more than 60 years with the same sheep holders or their descendants. Written contracts include precise information on price, dates for grazing, provision of litter for the sheep by the landowner in return for manure from the sheep (Fabre 2000).

Ownership on the drailles

The *drailles* in Languedoc have a special ownership status: most of them belong to the neighbouring landowners. But there is a historical precedent on them that allows the herders to use them for free. Some compare these *drailles* with the high sea that nobody may appropriate (Clément 2003). Old *drailles* do not belong to the jurisdiction of municipalities: the Roman *jus gentium* (the right of the people) or *jus naturalis* (natural right) is still being applied to them; and this traditional right is a safeguard for the passage of the transhumants on the *drailles* (Clément 2003). This of course does not always happen without problems. Some landowners neighbouring the *drailles* try to impinge on the *drailles*, to annex some of the width to their fields (with sometimes only two metre of width remaining). Then they start complaining about the sheep encroaching on their fields. This sometimes ends in court. In other cases, the *drailles* have simply been afforested by the government forest department after having not been used for a few years (Clément 2003).

At the time of Napoleon, the *drailles* were drawn on the cadastre maps, and their width was given: between 80 m in open land and 20 m on cultivated land (<http://www.loupic.com/L-elevage-du-mouton.html>).

In the Département Gard, the *drailles* are being maintained by a syndicate of livestock keepers (Clément 2003). In some places, the individual livestock keepers maintain them before starting the transhumance. Often, nothing is done now, and it becomes more and more difficult to use them.

The *drailles* have a second important function as fire breaks. The communes through which the *drailles* passed used to be responsible for their management. This has not been done for a long time, and now the shepherds have to make sure that they are being 'cleaned' before transhumance; this work is usually done by the farmers who host the sheep on their stops during transhumance. In the Parc National des Cévennes, employees of the Parc usually do this work.

The *drailles* between the Crau and the Alps used to be public land in the 15th century. The herders using them, and also the landowners, had to pay taxes to the communes; this money was then used to maintain the *drailles*. Today, most *drailles* have disappeared between the Crau and the Alps (unlike those in Languedoc), and roads have been built on their tracks. The small rests, as well as some wells and even village places (that were used by the herds for resting) still belong to the city of Arles. Transhumance is done mainly by lorry.

The resting places, water points and feeding areas on the transhumance routes belonged to the communes or to private landowners. Their use was free in previous times. Now, if herders need forage for their sheep, they have to buy it from local landowners.

Ownership in the mountains – renting summer pastures

Sheep owners from the lowland usually do not own the land used in their summer quarters. They rent the pastures from local landowners, who are usually private individuals. The ONF (Office National des Forêts, the French forestry department) owns quite a lot of land, but mainly forested land, some of which is grazed during the summer. It is then rented to the sheep holders.

Often one sheep holder takes the sheep of several others along; he then receives a per head payment from the other sheep holders for the summering and for the spring and autumn transhumance (Clément 2003).

Most of the summering pastures in the Alps belong to the communes. Some belong to private owners, others to the state (Fabre 2000). The shepherds or livestock owners make contracts with the owners to rent the pastures and the infrastructure that goes with them (housing, sheep sheds, etc.). In some places these contracts have to be renewed every year, in others there are long-term contracts. Many mountain communes rely on the income from their pastures for their annual budget. In many cases however the amount of money they receive is less important than the quality of the management.

Some sheep breeders have their own meadows and pastures in the Alps; most pastures were actually originally meadows that became abandoned and then were turned into pastures. These are mainly those who started with an inverse transhumance (normally living in the Alps and going down to the Crau for wintering) and finally settled down in the Crau. Some sheep owners from the Crau also managed to buy some meadows and pastures in their summering areas of the Alps (Fabre 2000).

Sheep owners have become organized in pastoral associations in certain summer pastures. These associations have helped the transhumants to secure summer pastures for a longer term, to have some control on the prices of the rent and also to have some rules for technical and sanitary coordination.

The EFNCP

The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) is a non-profit organization founded in 1988. Its members are pastoralists, ecologists and nature conservationists. Its main aims are: (1) To promote the nature conservation value of low-intensity farming systems and the biodiversity they support (2) To encourage the development of policies that ensure the survival of these valuable cultural landscapes.

To achieve this, the Forum aims to:

- Increase understanding that certain European farming systems are of high natural and cultural value;
- Ensure availability, dissemination and exchange of supporting information, combining research and practical expertise;
- Bring together ecologists, conservation managers, farmers and policy-makers to consider problems faced by these systems and potential solutions;
- Develop and promote policy options that ensure the ecological maintenance and development of these farming systems and cultural landscapes.

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