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“TAX – XIBER” - THE INDIGENOUS RABBIT OF MALTA

J. Gauci-Maistre

Malta Rabbit Club, Fur & Feather Federation, Rabbit Selection Centre, 23,
Triq il-Hemel, Swieqi, Malta

SUMMARY - At present the breeds of rabbits which are used for meat production in Malta are very limited: New Zealand White, Californian, commercial hybrids and an assortment of first or second generation crossbreeds. The local rabbit Tax-Xiber, which enjoyed a monopoly for centuries until the advent of the commercial breeds has been sidelined and is losing in importance at such an alarming pace that it will surely soon be classified as an endangered breed on the verge of extinction. The consequence will be the loss of yet another local rabbit and a reduction in the genetic variability precisely when genetic variability could possibly be the key to future advances in production performance under hot climatic conditions. The author puts on record historical data passed on from generation to generation, some hitherto unpublished, concerning the origins of the Tax-Xiber rabbit. He also theorises on likely probabilities in its evolution. After a full and detailed phenotypic description he finally pleads for a new lease of life for the local Maltese rabbit.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, maybe 30 years ago or so, the indigenous rabbit of Malta, TAX-XIBER, pronounced “Tush- (as in ‘rush’) Shibber”, was the only important breed of rabbit used for meat production in Malta. Production then, though considerable, was almost exclusively on a “backyard” basis for auto-consumption. Most cattle, pig and poultry breeders generally also allowed some rabbits to run around in their stables and scavenge amongst the larger animals’ fodder and fend for themselves in general, merely reaping the harvest of young rabbits as these reached marketable weight. Some other farmers did specifically breed rabbits for the market as a sideline and reared them mainly in small low-walled enclosures feeding them vegetable leftovers and weeds collected from the fields.

The advent of the New Zealand White and Californian breeds in Malta, as well as (to a much lesser extent) that of the hybrid, broke the monopoly of the Tax-Xiber rabbit. The commercial breeds started gaining in popularity, gradually at first, but dramatically later on as the trend gained momentum, till they edged the Tax-Xiber to the sidelines. The local breed has now lost so much of its importance that it is on the verge of extinction.

HISTORY

3600 B.C.

Oryctolagus cuniculus first arrived in Malta about 3600 years ago on the ships of the Phoenicians as they sailed eastwards from Spain. This assumption is based on the knowledge that it was the Phoenicians who discovered the wild rabbit in Spain and that they made it a point to populate the islands along their routes with this self-replenishing supply of fresh meat so as to ensure regular provisions at strategic points in their travels.

And Malta was (and is) strategically placed in the centre of the Mediterranean and directly in a straight line eastwards. In fact it was one of the first islands the Phoenicians would encounter on their way home from Spain. It was of such importance to the Phoenicians that they occupied it from 1500 B.C. (well over a hundred years before their glory really began) till around 750 B.C..

After the Phoenicians came the Carthaginians, but these were an offshoot of the former and it would be unwise to assume that any changes occurred then. There is certainly nothing at all in the literature, and even during the Roman occupation, from 216 B.C. till around 396 A.D., we do not find a single

line recorded. Yet we do know that the Romans made the first very limited step towards domestication by breeding rabbits in *leporaria* and that they believed that by consuming rabbit meat their women would enhance their beauty, especially if the rabbit meat was in the form of *laurices* (newly born baby rabbits or embryos taken from the doe's uterus just before birth, cooked and served with honey). So it is reasonable to assume that these customs were practised in Malta as well.

1530 A.D.

The Dark Ages were dark also with respect to the history of the rabbit in Malta and it is not until just 4 months before the arrival of the Sovereign Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (later on renamed the Knights of Malta), that we get our first clue to developments. An edict was issued on the 22nd June 1530 forbidding the hunting of the wild rabbit (as well as hare and partridge) in Malta, Gozo and Comino (except by the privileged few). This edict, enacted before the Knights actually set foot on the land was strengthened first by Grandmaster Del Monte (1534-1535) and then by Grand Master La Vallette (the hero of the Great Siege of 1565), the latter putting special emphasis on Comino. Exaggeratedly harsh punishments were to be inflicted on anyone caught even merely helping himself to the same type of weeds on which the wild rabbits foraged on that islet.

Subsequent Grandmasters issued further edicts strengthening the law until the penalties stipulated for hunting rabbits reached incredibly atrocious proportions, up to 5 years rowing on the galleys for the men and flogging and exile for the women and youths. Ironically, the climax in this escalation of penalties was contrived by Grandmaster Francesco Ximenes de Texada, in 1773, in a misguided attempt to create a cheap alternative to the exaggeratedly expensive bread for the peasants of Malta. He had inherited a depleted Treasury and financial chaos after the recent death of his predecessor, Grandmaster Pinto, and was rushing reforms to remedy the situation and find new sources of revenue. His plan was to let the rabbits increase and multiply to such an extent that the resulting glut would cause the price of rabbit meat to tumble so low that common people would be able to afford it as a substitute for bread.

What the Grandmaster did not take into consideration was that for the wild rabbit to increase and multiply it had to devastate more and more of the farmers' crops. Consequently, there was an upsurge of discontent and unrest which eventually culminated in the famous "Rising of the Priests", following clashes also with the ecclesiastical authorities. It was only after this that the edict was removed by the proclamation of the 19th May 1776 which allowed the hunting of rabbits with all sort of arms or equipment in privately owned territory. And, ironically, although Grandmaster Ximenes did not pacify the people, his plan to lower the price of rabbit meat had succeeded dramatically. Rabbit meat again became available to the masses, but this time in such abundance that surely it must have triggered the tradition of the "Fenkata" as Malta's national dish. In his treatise on the "Fenkata – An Emblem of Peasant Resistance?" (1994) Carmel Cassar uses a question mark in the title, so as to let the readers come to their own conclusions. But whether it is an emblem of peasant resistance or not, Cassar's researches have certainly added strength to the thesis that although rabbit meat had always been very popular amongst the Maltese it was the removal of Ximenes's edict which put it on the path to becoming Malta's national dish.

DOMESTICATION

At what stage the rabbit started being bred on a domestic basis is not known. But with so many French knights plying between Malta and their home country, and with the Knights being a religious order, it is quite probable that they were familiar with the spectacular advances in domestication of the rabbit achieved by the French monks in their monasteries and that they taught these techniques, or at least some of them, to the Maltese farmers. They could also have imported some "highly" domesticated French rabbits from time to time.

But there is indirect evidence which indicates that the Maltese peasants were already breeding the wild rabbit under domestic conditions to counteract in some small measure the "meat famine" caused by the various bans on hunting, or maybe even before that. For a very old Maltese proverb in Maltese folklore, roughly translated, advises: "When a doe is mated you can start fuelling your stove". It was not a wild doe that was being referred to here.

It is also known that it was quite a common practice for Maltese farmers to keep domestic rabbits in low-walled yards or enclosures adjoining their fields. The walls were roughly 80 – 100 cm high and quite often only female rabbits were kept. These were well fed and fat and lazy, and could not, or were not, interested in scaling the walls to escape. The wild bucks, on the other hand, were small in build, strong, agile and very virile. They would leap over the walls, or clamber over them without any difficulty at nighttime, mate the does and leave. And the farmers always had a plentiful supply of baby rabbits.

These baby rabbits were the progenitors of the Maltese Tax-Xiber rabbit.

Selection was subjective and consequently absolute uniformity of the breed was never quite evident. But the Tax-Xiber rabbit became more and more adapted to the confined spaces of backyard breeding and eventually to the restrictions of rabbit hutches. On the other hand, because of the “wild” blood it remained rather wild in temperament and it was essential to leave the doe well alone at kindling time and not to examine the litter until several days later.

DESCRIPTION

Type and conformation

“Tax-Xiber” translated into English means “of a span’s length”. But a span in Maltese is sometimes considered to be 12 inches, or 30.48 cm. And this is the typical length of the Tax-Xiber rabbit in theory. (In practice it is much longer as breeders keep selecting the larger specimens, especially so since the turn of the century.)

Some scholars maintain that the term “Xiber” is generally applied to anything small and that this is the real reason why the Maltese rabbit is known by this name.

The phenotype of the Tax-Xiber rabbit betrays the “wild” bloodlines which contributed towards its evolution. This is evident in the shape of the head, but more so in the eyes themselves. These are slightly bulging and alert and easily frightened. The colour of the fur is also identical to that of the Maltese wild rabbit, either normal agouti or red agouti.

But the resemblance stops there. Type and conformation give no indication of speed or agility although these qualities might not be lacking. Compared to the wild rabbit the Tax-Xiber rabbit looks large. In fact it is rather stocky, with firm and well-developed muscle which is spread with uniformity over a skeleton somewhat heavier than one would expect for the typical size of the breed.

The average weight is Kg 2.800, for both bucks and does, with minimum and maximum limits for the show rabbit of Kg 2.300 and Kg 3.300 respectively. The profile of the back starts comparatively low at the base of the neck and inclines slightly upwards till it reaches the shoulders. Here it forms a kink as it bends to ascend much more steeply, yet in a gentle arch which peaks over the rump. At this point it curves round nicely to the base of the tail.

The rump itself is wide and gives a rounded and full appearance even when viewed from the back. The shoulders, apart from being lower, are also narrower. But the difference is not exaggerated.

The head verges between medium and small in size but is biased towards the latter. It is rather long and narrow in proportion, with a profile that slopes from the base of the ears down to the nose in a line which is almost straight, being bent just a little on the forehead between the eyes. The head of the buck is bolder than that of the doe. The ears are relatively short at an ideal measurement of about 8 cm. They are also somewhat thin but well covered with fur. The eyes are large and protruding and alert. Their colour is dark brown.

The neck is short but visible. A dewlap is quite common in the doe, generally being small, neat and round. It is prohibited in the buck. The chest is wide and full but in proportion to the rib cage and to the shoulders. The shoulders, although somewhat narrow, are firm and quite sturdy. The legs are strong in bone, straight and of a medium length.

Coat and colour

The fur is not dense and despite first impressions is softer than it appears to be. Yet it is slightly coarse. It makes for a fast coat which resumes its position immediately when stroked in any direction. The ideal length of the fur is 2.5 cm. In the show rabbit two varieties of colour are recognised and they are identical to those of the Maltese wild rabbit, i.e. the normal grey wild agouti and the red wild agouti. The only genetic difference between the two varieties lies in the intensity of colour of the intermediate yellow band and in its width. For the red agouti the yellow band is redder and wider.

Otherwise both varieties have slate blue under-color starting from the roots and rising to about halfway up the fur shaft. The intermediate colour takes up about a quarter of the length (more in the red agouti). Then there is an even, well-defined black band about 3 mm wide whilst the guard hairs are also tipped in black. The overall result in topcoat appearance is grey/brown with the even or wavy black ticking of the wild agouti. In the red agouti the intermediate band increases to about one third of the length of the fur as it encroaches on the colours on either side of it, reducing the black band to about 2 mm. The overall topcoat appearance is a sandy red/brown with even or wavy dark grey ticking. In both cases the belly and underneath the tail are either white or, more commonly, the light grey or light reddish grey which respectively matches the lighter part of the topcoat of the two varieties. The nails are horn-coloured.

Faults

A list of common faults for the Tax-Xiber Rabbit includes: fur which is too long; uneven ticking; coat too soft in texture; light or dark colouration; intermediate band too narrow or too wide or not well defined; head too large; ears weak or too long; eyes not prominent enough; long and narrow conformation and obesity.

More serious shortcomings include: very long, dense or woolly coat; short, harsh or coarse fur; lopping ear or ears; dull eyes; a long neck; long limbs; crooked legs; body type too large; twisted tail and white spots on the coat.

Common clues to blatant crossbreeding include: type and conformation of the wild rabbit; flat and long body shape; dwarfism and gigantism. Mixing of colours in the show rabbit are detected by: eye-colour other than dark brown; gross shortcomings in the intermediate colour band; white tufts of fur and one or more white legs.

RANDOM / OFFICIAL CONTROL

Whilst the recognised colours in the official standard for show rabbits are limited to the two wild agoutis, in practice the Tax-Xiber rabbit is found in almost all the colours in the genetic scale. It is also found as in the early haphazard markings of today's patterned rabbits such as the Dutch, English, Harlequin and Rhinelander. This reflects the "weaknesses" of the breeders when confronted with the temptation to cross with exotic breeds to "see what emerges". But whilst some of the resulting colours might have been considered desirable enough to be retained in the individual herds, any offspring which did not conform to the type or performance of the Tax-Xiber were certainly not retained beyond the F2 level.

This dabbling with extraneous breeds did have a hidden advantage. It unwittingly introduced sufficient new blood, in small doses, to prevent excessive inbreeding over a considerable period of time. In fact, one can say that it filled the gap that was left when the domestic rabbit started being reared in hutches and the wild bucks could no longer inseminate the does during their nocturnal visits.

Because the rabbit farmers had a sound fixed idea of what constituted a good production doe and buck the typical Tax-Xiber composition was never seriously compromised although sizes did progressively become larger.

In 1985 the author wrote a standard of perfection which elevated the status of the Tax-Xiber by granting it official recognition as a show rabbit. This meant that classes at last were provided for the local rabbit in the various shows and that public awareness was aroused. The standard also put the

brakes on the tendency to keep increasing the sizes as it laid down the ideal as being that of the rabbit which had proved itself when it was one foot (30.48 cm.) long. It also limited the recognised colours to the two original agoutis.

However, due to the popularity of some of the other varieties which have now been raised for many decades, it is not excluded that other colours might eventually be embraced in the standard in the future, especially the rough butterfly markings of the ENen gene. These are considered to be so particularly attractive that they claim a name of their own just as though they constituted a different breed altogether and not merely a different variety. Rabbits with these markings are called "Tal-Farfet" which means "The Butterfly-marked Ones" just as the English Patterned rabbit was originally called "The Butterfly Smut" and the French version, "Papillon".

CONCLUSION

The Tax-Xiber rabbit, being indigenous and having evolved over a period of centuries is much better adapted to the hot Maltese summer than the imported commercial breeds such as the New Zealand White and the Californian. Because its head is rather narrow and somewhat elongated, besides being on the smallish side, the kindling process appears to be easier. The percentage of stillbirths is comparatively low and the doe encounters fewer complications. However, no serious attempt has ever been made to adapt the Tax-Xiber rabbit to a productive life on wire-mesh flooring or to converting pelleted feed efficiently. Breeders have chosen the easy alternative of adopting the highly developed commercial breeds originating in other countries without considering that their performance in the Maltese summer months leaves much to be desired. Nor have they considered the thesis that the Tax-Xiber rabbit could possibly hold the key to improvement because of its genetic potential under hot climatic conditions.

No serious scientific evaluation of the Tax-Xiber rabbit has ever been made, and with the breed now approaching the verge of extinction, just like its progenitor the Maltese wild rabbit, time is running out and a genetic reservoir is slipping away. The efforts of the Malta Rabbit Club to attract public awareness have not borne the desired results because there is no interest on the part of the Authorities and not sufficient incentive for the breeder or the exhibitor.

It is imperative that some kind of support, financial or otherwise, be directed towards the preservation of the Tax-Xiber rabbit at least until a full and valid assessment is made. Given at least a token incentive it is certain that a team of devoted breeders can be found to maintain a status quo whilst an equally devoted team of experts sets out to work on the vital experiments.

In the meantime surely a programme of embryo and semen preservation can be organised by international institutions as a practical safeguard.

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