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# Is hippophagy a taboo in constant evolution ?

Sylvain Leteux  
Comment-PhD student  
University of Lille 3, IRHIS, Lille (France)

s.leteux@yahoo.fr

## Abstract:

Food choice is strongly determined by religious and cultural elements specific to each civilization. Numerous food prescriptions concern meat, beginning with the total or partial ban on meat. Among the numerous animal species concerned by religious or cultural prohibitions, horse meat occupies an original place because the ban on its consumption varies a lot according to places and times. Widely consumed in Eurasia in the Prehistory, horse meat is still eaten by many in the big steppes of Central Asia while hippophagy has declined in Western Europe, for reasons which seem more connected to a new social status having more to do with medieval nobiliary values than religious prohibitions. Some non-horse-eating countries such as Japan from the end of the 19th Century became hippophagic for the sake of western modernity or after the introduction of horse by the Europeans as in Chile or Argentina. On the contrary, countries with English and Germanic culture, formerly hippophagic, gave up the consumption of horse meat massively in the 20th Century, except in times of food shortage (World War II in particular). The study of the French case shows the importance of the veterinary and positivist propaganda in the legalization of hippophagy in 1866, in the context of the industrial revolution and strong meat need for the emerging working class. The decline in labour values and the deindustrialization since the 1970s have come along rather logically with a steep decline in hippophagy.

**Keywords:** Horse, Meat, Hippophagy, Food taboo, Neophobia.

In 1992, anthropologist François Poplin wrote an article that was provocatively entitled "Horse, the shameful meat", in which he mentioned that in France horse meat was available as minced meat so that it could not be identified in order to be appropriate : "You can't see any bones or skin, it will not reveal its identity" (Poplin, 1992: 30). Humans will only consume horse meat after transforming it completely so as to forget the animal. According to François Poplin, "these bends, these dodgings, and the dissimulation behind the beef, don't allow horse meat to have a real status in meat culture" (Poplin, 1992: 31). Horse meat clearly seems to have a different status compared to other types of meat that are consumed by human beings. Speaking about a fear of horsemeat might be excessive because fear is a survival mechanism to something specific such as pain or danger. Nevertheless, there is a phobia, an absolute disgust for some food in many cultures.

Has there always been a horse taboo ? Is it present in all cultures ? Firstly, the issue of hippophagy shall be investigated by comparing historical and geographical elements and secondly. We would like to show that the phobia of horsemeat, which can be extremely violent when linked to a feeling of unacceptable stain, is first and foremost determined by social and cultural reasons. That's why we offer a non-exhaustive study of the status of horsemeat in different places at different periods of time. Finally, we will focus on the French situation in the 19th and 20th centuries and see that a food taboo can change not only in the long term but also in the short run. As France is to be found between countries of Mediterranean tradition and Anglo-Saxon countries, it is interesting to its situation. Indeed, the evolution of hippophagy there has been very different from that of its European neighbors. Studying the French situation might enable us to understand why some regions deeply marked by industrialization in the 19th century (England on the one hand, Belgium and Northern France on the other hand) have adopted poles apart behaviors as far as horsemeat is concerned.

## 1. Horse meat consumption around the world.

Hippophagy is not the same all around the world. Moreover areas where horse meat is produced are not necessarily those where the meat is consumed.

Country	Production in 2004 (metric tons)	Consumption in 2004 (metric tons) <sup>1</sup>
China	420 000	420 300
Mexico	78 880	83 200
Italy	45 000	65 950
Kazakhstan	56 300	56 210
France	6 860	25 380
Argentina	55 600	22 190
Mongolia	40 000	21 160
Australia	21 280	19 180
Kyrgyzstan	18 000	18 920
Brazil	21 200	680

Let's start with the countries where horsemeat is not only accepted but also appreciated. Russia (especially Iakoutia), Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Mongolia, China and Japan are regular horse meat-eating countries. Anthropologist Carole Ferret mentions that "in the very centre of Asia, turkish-speaking people, who were considered famous riders, see horse meat as the most prestigious meat — whether they be Muslims or not" (Ferret, 2010). There is no hippophagic taboo in Iakoutia: "Iakoute horses are widely used because of their strength for work but first of all they have become animals designed for meat consumption".

Japanese people eat more than 5500 tons of horse meat (called basashi) every year. Raw horse meat is a traditional dish in the Nagano area : it is called sakura-niku because the red colour of the horse meat reminds one of cherry blossoms (called sakura). This behaviour started during the Meiji Era, at the end of the 19th Century, under the influence of the Western culture (Cobbi, 1989: 41).

On the contrary, many other cultures consider horsemeat an abomination, very often on religious grounds. There is a persistent rejection of horsemeat amongst gypsies. As for Israel the reason is religious and divine: horsemeat being forbidden by Jewish law because the horse is not a ruminant, nor does it have cloven hooves. In Islamic law, horses are generally

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<sup>1</sup> <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippophagie> (accessed June 3rd, 2011).

considered *makruh*, i.e. the meat is not *haram* (forbidden) but eating it is strongly discouraged. In Sunni Islam, Al-Bukhari reports that Muhammad forbade the eating of a donkey, but the general applicability of this *hadith* is unclear. Buddhism and Hinduism prohibit hippophagy (Farb and Armelagos, 1985: 194).

Horse eating is still taboo in English-speaking countries like the UK, Ireland, the USA, Australia or Canada but also in Africa, India, etc... In the United States, selling and consuming horse meat is illegal in California and Illinois while horse slaughtering is legal if it is to make animal food. However, horse meat was sold in the United States during World War II, since beef was expensive, rationed and destined for the troops. In Canada, horsemeat is legal, but the only market — which is not very broad — is the French-speaking province of Quebec, where the taboo is not so strong, and a few (mostly French) restaurants in Canada. Canada exports some 14 500 tons of horsemeat every year, mainly to France and Japan.

In Europe there is a discrepancy between Latin countries, where people are more or less hippophagic, and Anglo-Saxon countries (Great-Britain and Ireland) where people dislike horsemeat. All the Anglo-Saxon countries export horse meat to foreign markets. In the United Kingdom, this strong taboo includes banning horsemeat from commercial pet food and DNA testing of some types of salami suspected of containing donkey meat. Nevertheless, horses and donkeys were eaten in Great Britain, particularly in Yorkshire, till 1930s<sup>2</sup>.

Consumption in Italy is twice as large as in France. *The Daily Mail* considers an account of around 100 000 living horses or carcasses being yearly transported in the European Union to be eaten in France, Belgium or other (Scandinavia in particular)<sup>3</sup>. In France hippophagic consumption (2% of the whole meat) is concentrated around Paris and the Nord-Pas de Calais.

Germany has long been well known in feeling a dislike for horsemeat. Nevertheless horse butcher's shops took off sooner than in France, in traditional horse-riding areas, such as eastern Prussia. Switzerland is another interesting example of mix, at the fringe of Latin and Germanic countries. Romanic French-speaking people feel quite the same attraction to

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Fort, *Eating Up Italy: Voyages on a Vespa*, 2005, p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> Rawstone, "The English horses being sent to France to be eaten", *Daily Mail*, May 19th 2007.

hippophagy as in France or Italy. German-speaking people are more cautious in the doing, but it is opening out.

Scandinavian countries are traditionally hippophagic. In Denmark, hippophagy has strongly declined. Horsemeat was considered a food for prisoners and poor persons. The slaughter of the horse was considered impure: it was confided to a caste of knackers, considered as "untouchables", the *Rakkerne* (Delavigne, 2002: 31).

## 2. Historical trend of this taboo in Europe.

During Prehistory horse flesh was somehow a staple. Archaeozoologist Marylène Patou-Mathis wrote:

"Wild horses were present in the Northern Hemisphere since the beginning of Paleolithic till the end of the 19th Century (...). In Europe, during cold and dry climatic phases, they were even part of the favorite game of Neanderthal and the first modern men. On multiple occasions herds of wild horses were hunted by beating and ambush as in the narrow valley below the famous Roche de Solutré (Saône-et-Loire). This extensive hunting continued until the beginning of the Neolithic period. Horse was domesticated around 3500 BD, not for its flesh (meat was supplied by other wild and domesticated animals), but for traction and carriage (a horse can carry four times more than a man). Very soon, horses became animals to be ridden, then hunting and war assistants. Not everybody ate horse flesh. For example, it was eaten by the Franks, only if it didn't result from a mangy horse, but it was not eaten by Goths who considered horse as a noble animal" (Patou-Mathis, 2009: 95).

Even if there might have been some competition between the alimentary use and the utilitarian use of horses, hippophagy was nonetheless present in numerous Pre-historic civilizations. Numerous tribes in the ancient times ate horsemeat, as Frederick Simoons stresses:

"Horse sacrifice and eating go back to the very roots of the Indo-European experience. This is consistent with abundant evidence from Copper, Bronze, and Iron Age burials and art of peoples believed to be Indo-European, as well as from written records of early Indo-Europeans from Western Europe to Scythia, which bear rich testimony to the sacrifice of horses to deceased persons and to gods, to the special association the horse enjoyed with

various deities, and to the eating of horsemeat. In Europe, horse eating and/or sacrifice were found among early Indo-Europeans in the Ukraine, Russia, Scandinavia, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere. At some times and places, horseflesh was a sacrificial food. At others, it seems to have been an ordinary food. In either case, crushed or fragmented bones and skulls of horses are found in various Bronze Age sites in Central and Eastern Europe, most animals apparently eaten after they were no longer useful for riding, packing, and traction" (Simoons, 1994: 180).

It is interesting to note that the current hippophagic culture of some countries have very old roots, as in Russia. There are some areas in the world which have always been hippophagic, long before the industrial revolution and the birth of a working class. "In northern Europe, horse killing and eating are well documented for the early Slavs, and for the initial period of Slavic civilization, in Russia and elsewhere, horsemeat is described as a typical food" (Simoons, 1994: 183).

One of the problems concerning the measure of how widespread hippophagy used to be is due to the link between hippophagy and religion. Among early Germanic peoples, "horse flesh was eaten in sacrificial dinners. There is also abundant evidence of horse burial in Scandinavia and elsewhere among Germanic peoples. (...) In various prehistoric sites in Ireland, horse bones have been found along with bones of other animals, to confirm the eating of horseflesh there. Some horseflesh may have become available when horses were killed for eating, whereas other horseflesh became available on ritual occasions" (Simoons, 1994: 185).

Simoons hints at a link between reluctance for hippophagy among Romans and Christian prohibition published in 732 AD. "Though horse sacrifice did occur in Greece and Rome, people there seem to have ignored completely the horse as food, apart from using its products as medicine. Indeed, the Romans were disgusted with the idea of eating horses, and did so only when there was no alternative but starvation. These attitudes seem to have been taken over the Catholic church, and with the introduction of Christianity to northern Europe, pressure was exerted to eliminate horse eating along with other pagan customs. In some cases, the pressure was subtle: the Penitential of Archbishop Ecbert ruled that horseflesh was not prohibited, but added, in what like a hint, that many families would not buy it. In time, however, the strict view prevailed, and the Catholic church made a serious attempt to stamp out the practice. In Ireland in the ninth Century, for example, a handbook for use by

confessors required that horse eaters do penance for three and half years. (...) Pope Gregory III ordered Boniface, apostle of the Germans, to forbid the eating of horseflesh, which he had tolerated until that time (732). Boniface did not succeed at once, for he later wrote to Pope Zachary I, who succeeded Gregory, that horse eating remained a barrier to conversion. In any case, all groups that were subsequently converted were also pressured to give up the practice" (Simoons, 1994: 187).

In 732, Pope Gregory III instructed Saint Boniface to suppress the pagan practice of eating horses, calling it a "filthy and abominable custom"<sup>4</sup>. His edicts are based on the same scripture as the Jewish prohibitions and this ban remained until the 18th Century. The christianization of Iceland in 1000 AD was achieved only when the Church promised that Icelanders could continue to eat horsemeat; once the Church had consolidated its power, the allowance was discontinued. Horsemeat is still popular in Iceland and is sold and consumed in the same way as beef, lamb and pork.

Historian François Sigaut questions the vulgate on the so-called ban on hippophagy by pope Grégoire III in 732. To him, this prohibition was a made-up story (Sigaut, 1992). Medievalist Alain Dierkens states that the condemning horse consumption should not be linked to religious standards but rather to the development of the nobiliary and military values, which gradually bring respect for the horse (Dierkens, 2008). The papal letters of 732 and 751 are not normative documents and they come from bishops of Greek origin (Gregory III and Zachary I). In the Oriental Church and for some rigorous clerks, certain dietary restrictions of the Old Testament were maintained during the High Middle Ages. "We kept a sufficient number of explicit texts to be able to assert that horse meat consumption did not raise major doctrinal problems in the Carolingian Empire" Alain Dierkens concludes.

If hippophagy was "officially" prohibited in 732 AD by the Roman Catholic Church, the thing was recurrent during the whole Middle-Age<sup>5</sup>: "Horse eating persists nevertheless, and horse flesh was still appreciated in European pasture areas. In Switzerland, Christian monks still ate horse during the 11th Century, in spite of the papal ban, promulgated four centuries before. Irish people too infringed this prohibition. Feasts of equine meat were still organized in Denmark during the 16th Century. In Spain, it is under the name of "red deer" that foals were eaten, whereas horsemeat was regularly used to feed crews in the Navy" (Farb and

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<sup>4</sup> For more details about the place of the horse in the Germanic paganism, see Marc-André Wagner (2005).



Armelagos, 1985: 195). Ghislaine Bouchet adds that the horse flesh trade was forbidden during the 18th Century, but illicit trading came to light now and then, and numerous decrees were issued (19 mars 1762; 31 mars 1790).

Nowadays a great part of the European people loathe horsemeat, but it is considered as edible food : "The horse appears as such in the books which list edible and uneatable foodstuffs, together with the donkey, the mule or, in a more exotic way, the reindeer, the bear and the rat. (...) The English encyclopaedists who consider the consumption of frogs' legs or snails as a heresy and a moral scandal, do not need to call upon the pope or upon the law to justify their abstention" (Ferrières, 2007: 445). A witness says how delicious the taste of horsemeat is: "In the 18th Century, an antique dealer of Thurnaw (Bamberg), member of the royal Science Society of London, Jean-George Keyser (1689-1743) protested strongly against this prejudice, which was deprived of any foundation, and wondered that a meat so delicious was not appreciated and was always prohibited" (Bouchet, 1993: 219).

3. Acceptance of horse eating in France: To what extent is the notion of pleasure present in the promotion of horsemeat consumption in France?

After this brief study of the phobia of horsemeat in different cultures throughout centuries, I suggest we focus on the French situation in the 19th and 20th centuries to see how a food taboo can wear off and come back very quickly in a hundred years only. We will also study the French contemporary situation since it is interesting to notice that the taste of horsemeat - very often obscured in the books dealing with hippophagy – can finally be tackled.

In France, horsemeat was eaten from time to time during breaking events: the French Revolution, Napoleonic campaigns, the Siege of Paris (1870-1871), but it was not a choice for food. The Cambacérès case in 1839 marks an evolution in the minds. The setting up of a horse slaughtering place in the St-Denis plain put an end to the illicit cutting up of carcasses in Montfaucon. A statement from the Conseil d'Etat in 1841 concluded in favor of a slaughtering installation, allowing the selling of cooked horsemeat to feed pigs. The sanitary council in Paris approved<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For more details, see Madeleine Ferrières (2007: 444-445).

<sup>6</sup> Rapport du Conseil d'Etat d'avril 1841. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Ms CP 4819.

During the Restoration (1815-1830) hippophagy supporters struggled over moral intentions<sup>7</sup>. Three public health specialists were heading the movement: the physician Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet (1790-1836), zoologist Isidore Geoffroy St-Hilaire (1805-1861) and the military veterinary Emile Decroix (1821-1901). Their arguments were laid down as follows:

\* Sanitary arguments: Horse meat does not raise more sanity risks than any other meat. It is rich in iron (near of 4 mg for 100 g of meat), and even recommended in certain cases. Heme iron is more suitable and easily absorbed than others from different origins: vegetables, eggs, and dairy products. During the 19th Century, physicians recommended eating horsemeat in case of melancholy or persisting weariness. When raw beef was found dangerous because of the taenia, before the Great War they said raw horsemeat came safe: "The Assistance Publique (Welfare services) gave the example and the hospitals generally, and sanatoriums in particular, became important consumers of horsemeat, while it also became fashionable to give it to the children considered delicate, and in times of tuberculosis danger they all were, some raw meat bought, if possible, directly from the slaughterhouse" (Guillaume, 1994: 313).

\* Social argument: Horse meat was cheap and suitable to feed the poor and the working classes.

\* Ethical argument: If the horse was valuable and useful after its working life (ploughing, riding, and carrying) its owner would not ill-treat it, to preserve the animal value before it was slaughtered. So the SPA (Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, created in 1845) backed up the hippophagic cause.

What about the taste of the food?

In 1861, Isidore Geoffroy St-Hilaire recalled the antiquated notions: "For a long time horsemeat was considered as sweetish, unpleasant to the taste, very hard and, as a matter of fact, difficult to eat. Even today, most people think and say it is such" (Geoffroy St-Hilaire, 1861: 132). He stated that horsemeat "is acknowledged as good by the most different peoples in their ways of living and the most diverse races: Negro, Mongolian, Malay, American, Caucasian". Sometimes deceitfully presented as deer, "it was also declared as such by all

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<sup>7</sup> For more details, see Sylvain Leteux (2005).

those who subjected it to quality tests, by all those who have tasted it in adequate conditions, that is stale enough and issued from healthy and rested horses. It is then excellent roasted, and if it is not so good boiled, it is precisely because it makes one of the best stock, the best maybe, which we know. And it was even found good when it came (...) from animals that had not been fattened and aged sixteen, nineteen, twenty or even twenty three years old". He however acknowledged that the horsemeat is "undeniably tasty, without being however as good as that of beef or fattened lamb" (Geoffroy St-Hilaire, 1861: 134).

According to Alexandre Dumas, "horse meat is not exactly bad, but needs to be strongly flavored; and especially to be eaten without prejudices<sup>8</sup>". The article entitled "Horse" in his *Dictionnaire de cuisine* (1873) is instructive:

"Eating horse meat is a proverbial expression which means eating an indeed very hard meat: horse meat is more tightened than beef. It is red, oily. Although it is very nitrogenous and consequently very nourishing, it is very doubtful that it could ever be part of daily food consumption. M. de Saint-Hilaire tried in vain with his horse meat feasts to establish definitively this animal in the Parisian butcher's shops; it is likely that the noble animal which man associates with his military glory will be used for food only in special circumstances like blockade and famine. As long as the horse will not be raised, fed or manured like the ox, in order to be eaten, it will have to be served on the table only in difficult times. Only then, you can say that horse meat and beef are similar, and then you can prepare it as you want or as you can".

Nowadays savour and taste is put forward by the horsemeat industry: "Horse meat possesses a unique sweet flavour due to the presence of glycogen in the muscle that is more important than in other meats. All the amateurs will say it, what characterizes it best is its extreme tenderness due to the process of unique maturation that softens its muscular fibers. Its texture, always delicious and tender, is appreciated as much by small amateurs as big meat connoisseurs. The gourmets and the purists agree to say that the Tartar is only equine, but horsemeat also cooks according to numerous recipes. It is then preferable to prepare it rare. It must be seized, whatever the type of cooking is wished (roasted, grilled, braised)<sup>9</sup>".

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<sup>8</sup> Alexandre Dumas (1873), "Boucher", *Dictionnaire de cuisine*.

<sup>9</sup> Dossier de presse du CIV (Centre d'information des viandes) sur la viande chevaline.

Hippophagic banquets were set up in Germany in 1842 and in France in 1855. Hippophagy was made legal in France in 1866. "France was then late on the other European countries, where the sale was authorized: Austria, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland. In Berlin, the first horse butcher's shop appeared in 1847" (Bouchet, 1993: 220).

Between 1870 and 1960 in France hippophagy took off, following the increasing of urban working classes, but it declined in the years 1960-70. Horses were not used in ploughing or carrying, and cars, lorries, traction-engines were put in the place of them. It was necessary to import carcasses from abroad to meet the demand. Ethnologist Jean-Pierre Digard, specialist of the taming of the horse, indeed summarizes the situation:

"At the beginning of the 1970s, with the aim of saving the draught races of the agricultural collapse, the French administration of Stud farms wanted to go further into the way of the horse eating and led a campaign, active but debated, to set up a complete "horsemeat sector" and try a reconversion of these races in races with meat. An equine breeding directed to the butcher's shop existed already more or less in countries like Belgium, Holland, French-speaking Switzerland or Northern Italy, where horse eating had settled down in the food customs (...). One and a half century after the horse campaigns of the mid-19th Century and in front of the rise of new popular sensibilities opposed to hippophagy, horse butchery shows evident signs of a long-lasting, maybe irreversible crisis today which could indeed be fatal. And so in France, in spite of an active policy of support, the consumption of horsemeat has fallen in a continuous way from 90 000 tons in 1970 to 60 000 tons in 1990 then to 30 000 tons in 2000, entailing a collapse from the 45 000 ton production in 1970 to 11 000 tons in 1990 and 13 000 tons in 2000 (a revival due to the crisis of the ESB on the bovine meat), the deficit being filled by imports of live horses from Poland and in the form of carcasses mainly from Argentina and the USA. As a result horsemeat suffers from an additional handicap: it has become an expensive meat. Western hippophagy could thus be limited to a short interlude - one and a half century-, from which draught races may come out still a little more weakened" (Digard, 2004: 183).

The sanitary quality of horsemeat has dimmed since the 1960s : " If the horse meat benefits from a healthy image connected to its deep red color, this image was tarnished by the epidemics of trichinose in particular in Paris (in 1976, 1985, 1993). Actually, horses are sensitive to this parasitosis which can be transmitted to Man through the ingestion of minced or under-cooked meat, which is its common mode of consumption. Considering this possible

sanitary risk, and by virtue of the precautionary principle, not yet considered as such, the Conseil supérieur de l'hygiène forbade in 1967 horsemeat in schools and university canteens. Children and young people do not get used to eating it. Besides, a decree of September 1989 forbade the sale of pre-cooked horsemeat. All these elements entailed a fall of the consumption, aggravated still by the changes in tastes, horsemeat being judged too flat or too bitter" (Hubscher, 2004: 149).

Since 1866 horsemeat trading has played a subordinate part in France for the meat has to be sold in specific horse-butcher shops and not in the same place as other meat (beef, veal, pork). Caterers in France, obviously, do not provide horsemeat in the restaurants, whereas they do in Italy and Switzerland. On the other hand horsemeat is authorized in local communities in France. The selling of horsemeat has been authorized in supermarkets for some years. But in 2008, January, the French SPA sent a memorandum to the supermarkets to invite them to take away horsemeat from their departments because of the « brutality of transport and the state in which horses arrive at the slaughterhouse". They added: « At first loved and cared for, whatever its merits, the good horse won't know a peaceful retreat: from the first failure, it becomes fresh meat and will be driven to the slaughterhouse overnight ». After what Champion and Casino pledged they will no more offer to buy such a meat.

Fighter for the cause, the interference of animal protecting associations can explain the bias against hippophagy. People are prone to consider horse as a pet. Horse transport and slaughtering are insufferable in the minds of many. The Brigitte Bardot Foundation (since 1986) has led striking operations to this aim (spots on French television in 1994 and 2007, placards in the underground and the RER). So the moral taboo against which health specialists struggled hard in the 19th Century is being revived<sup>10</sup>.

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