

The Use and Understanding of Animals of Domestic Animals in Medieval Northern China

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Given the predominance of grain agriculture, scholars have paid scant attention to animal-husbandry in premodern China. Early Medieval China (220-589) furnishes two useful sources that shed light on this aspect of Chinese farming. One source is the painted bricks excavated from tombs in the Hexi corridor that depict animals; the other is the six fascicle of Jia Sixie's 賈思勰 (fl. ca. 530-544) *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 (The Essential Techniques for Common People), which is devoted to animal husbandry. What can we learn from these two sources about early medieval animal husbandry? The Hexi pictorial bricks indicate that stockbreeding was an important component of agriculture in northwest China. The animals raised there included horses, donkeys, cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, camels, and deer. The *Qimin yaoshu* chapter is substantial in length (8700 characters) and rich in contents. Its sections on raising sheep, chickens, pigs, ducks, and geese are filled with practical advice on how to pen, feed, and protect these animals. In contrast, the longest section on horses primarily focuses on the physiognomy of horses and treatments for illnesses that befall them. By closely scrutinizing a particular horse's physical characteristics, Jie Sixie thought one could determine its endurance, temperament, lifespan, auspiciousness, and even the health of its internal organs. This is similar to the early medieval period's prevalent belief that, through examining a man's face, one could determine his capabilities and nature. Interestingly, the chapter says much about raising domestic animals, but little about selective breeding.