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DIMANOPOULOU A. Military Veterinarian
STARRAS A. Military Veterinarian
DIAKOU A. Laboratory of Parasitology and Parasitic Diseases, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
LEFKADITIS M. Laboratory of Microbiology and Parasitology, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Thessaly
GIADINIS N. Clinic of Farm Animals, School of Veterinary Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

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Prevalence of tick species in sheep and goat flocks in areas of southern Greece

Anastasia P. Dimanopoulou¹, Alexandros G. Starras¹, Anastasia Diakou², Menelaos Lefkaditis³, Nektarios D. Giadinis⁴

¹Military Veterinarian, Chania, Greece
²Laboratory of Parasitology and Parasitic Diseases, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
³Laboratory of Microbiology and Parasitology, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Thessaly, Greece
⁴Clinic of Farm Animals, School of Veterinary Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Συχνότητα παρασιτισμού από κρότωνες σε κοπάδια προβάτων και αιγών περιοχών της νότιας Ελλάδας

Α.Π. Δημανοπούλου¹, Α.Γ. Σταρράς¹, Α. Διάκου², Μ. Λευκαδίτης³, Ν.Δ. Γιαδίνης⁴

¹Στρατιωτικός Κτηνίατρος, Χανιά, Ελλάδα
²Φοιτητής Κτηνιατρικής ΣΣΑΣ, Τμήμα Κτηνιατρικής Α.Π.Θ., Θεσσαλονίκη, Ελλάδα
³Εργαστήριο Παρασιτολογίας, Τμήμα Κτηνιατρικής Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλίας, Καρδίτσα, Ελλάδα
⁴Κλινική Παραγωγικών Ζώων, Τμήμα Κτηνιατρικής Α.Π.Θ., Θεσσαλονίκη, Ελλάδα

Corresponding author:
St. Voutyra 11, 546 27,
Thessaloniki, Greece,
Tel.: +30 231 0 994509
Fax: +30 231 0 99
E-mail address: ngiadinis@vet.auth.gr

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to investigate the tick prevalence and to identify the species of ticks that parasitise the small ruminant flocks in the prefectures of Achaia (in the geographic region of Peloponnesse) and Chania (in the island of Crete). Thirty flocks of goats and sheep were examined for tick parasitism during the period from December 2012 until August 2013. Sixteen of them were in Achaia and the rest 14 in Chania. In total, 84 goats and 148 sheep were examined; from them, 50 goats and 70 sheep in Achaia, and 34 goats and 78 sheep in Chania. The species Dermacentor marginatus was identified in Achaia in 15% of the animals. In Chania the species identified were Haemaphysalis punctata (13%), Hyalomma anatolicum (4.47%), Rhipicephalus sanguineus (4.47%) and Ixodes ricinus (3.58%). This is the first study on tick infestation in sheep and goats in Peloponnesse and Crete, two areas with large number of small ruminant population and important tradition in small ruminant farming.

Keywords: sheep, goats, ticks, Peloponnesse, Crete

INTRODUCTION

Ticks are hematophagous ectoparasites that attach mainly to mammals and birds (Wall and Shearer, 2001). Usually, they parasitise particular body areas such as the head, ears, neck, the inside part of limbs, the abdominal and the perineal region (Haralabidis, 2003). Ticks are separated in two main families: the Argasidae family or soft ticks and the Ixodidae known also as hard ticks (Urquhart et al., 1996; Bowman, 1999; Wall and Shearer, 2001; Zajac and Conboy, 2006). However, some researchers support the existence of a third tick family, the Nuttalliellidae which includes only a single species, found in swallow nest in North Africa (Wall and Shearer, 2001). Ticks and especially those of the Ixodidae family are of veterinary importance not only because they cause direct harm to the skin and the tissues of the host, but also because they transmit various pathogens (Urquhart et al., 1996; Hendrix, 1998; Wall and Shearer, 2001).

The studies on ticks of mammals in Greece have been mainly conducted in areas of the Northern country (Papazahariadou et al., 1995; Papadopoulos et al., 1996; Pavlidou et al., 2008; Kachrimanidou et al., 2010; Kachrimanidou et al., 2011) and in a less extend in central and islands of Greece (Psaroulaki et al., 2003; Psaroulaki et al., 2006).

Considering the limited or non-existent information about ticks of small ruminants in many parts of Greece, this study aimed to investigate the prevalence of tick infestation and the species of ticks involved in small ruminant flocks in two areas of southern Greece.
In the prefecture of Chania fourteen flocks were examined in total, i.e. nine sheep flocks, four goat flocks and one mixed flock. Nine of them were receiving treatment once or twice a year against ectoparasites, while the remaining five were not under any treatment against ectoparasites. All the information regarding the flocks in the prefecture of Chania is found in Table 1.

In the prefecture of Achaia sixteen units were examined, i.e. four sheep flocks, eight goat flocks and four mixed flocks. Twelve of these flocks were under antiparasitic treatment against ectoparasites, while four were not under any anti-ectoparasitic treatment. All the information for the flocks in the prefecture of Achaia is found in Table 2.

In both prefectures the samples were collected in the same way. Six randomly selected animals were examined in each flock. In the case that at least one of these animals was infected by at least one tick, the whole flock was considered to be positive. Otherwise, four more animals were examined for the presence of ticks. In the case that ticks were not found in ten samples, the flock was considered to be negative.

The tick collection from each animal followed a standard procedure. The examination started from the head and more precisely the horns (in the case of horned animals) and continued with the ears (external and internal surface), cheeks, the area around the eyes, neck, inside and outside parts of the front limbs, breasts, perineal area and finally, the tail. Ticks from each animal were collected in a vial with alcohol 70%. Ticks were removed by forceps and the collector was wearing latex gloves.

**RESULTS**

All the examined animals in both prefectures were clinically healthy, while according to the owners and the local veterinarians there had not been detected signs of tick-borne diseases.

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**Tick identification**

Tick identification and gender determination was based on the external morphological characteristics of the collected specimens (Baker, 1999; Estrada-Pena et al., 2004). The study of the morphology of the ticks was performed under an optical stereoscope.

**RESULTS**

All the examined animals in both prefectures were clinically healthy, while according to the owners and the local veterinarians there had not been detected signs of tick-borne diseases.

In the prefecture of Chania, tick infestation was
found in 5 sheep and 3 goat flocks out of the 14 examined in total. Four of the positive flocks were under antiparasitic treatment and the rest were not, while all the untreated flocks were infested (Table 1). Furthermore, 20 (25.64%) out of the 78 examined sheep and 9 (26.47%) out of the 34 goats were infested by ticks. In total, 59 ticks were collected. All the ticks were adults, 40 males and 19 females. In total, out of the 59 collected ticks, 30 (50.85%) were identified as *Haemaphysalis punctata*, 10 (16.95%) as *Rhipicephalus sanguineus*, 10 (16.95%) as *Ixodes ricinus* and 9 (15.25%) as *Hyalomma anatolicum* (Table 3). *Haemaphysalis punctata* and *R. sanguineus* were found only in sheep, while *H. anatolicum* and *I. ricinus* were found only in goats. All collected *H. punctata* and *R. sanguineus* were males, while all *H. anatolicum* and *I. ricinus* were females (Table 3).

In the prefecture of Achaia, tick infestation was found in 6 goat and 4 mixed flocks out of the 16 examined in total. All the 4 pure sheep flocks were found free of ticks. Seven out of the 10 positive flocks were under antiparasitic treatment, whilst the rest 3 positive flocks did not receive any antiparasitic treatment for ticks and other ectoparasites in the last 6 months. Also, 5 out of the 6 negative flocks were under antiparasitic treatment (Table 2). Two out of 70 examined sheep (4%) and 16 out of 50 examined goats (22.85%) were parasitized by ticks (Table 4). The only tick species that was found during this study in the prefecture of Achaia was *Dermacentor marginatus* (relative abundance 100%) and its prevalence in the flocks level was 15%. Moreover, 37 ticks were counted, out of which the 26 were female and the rest 11 were male (Table 4).

**DISCUSSION**

Taking into account the very few studies upon small ruminant parasitism by ticks in Greece, this preliminary study aimed to give some information on the tick status in 2 prefectures of southern Greece.

To date, the relative existing studies in Greece have focused on the selection and identification of ticks from several animal species, including small ruminants. All these studies had been conducted mainly in central and northern Greece (Papazahariadou et al., 1995; Papadopoulos et al., 1996; Psaroulaki et al., 2003; Psaroulaki et al., 2006; Pavlidou et al., 2008; Kahrimanidou et al., 2010; Kahrimanidou et al., 2011). According to the aforementioned studies, for small ruminants the species *D. marginatus* and *H. punctata* do not represent a high percentage in northern Greece compared to their percentage in the prefectures of Achaia and Chania. On the contrary, in these regions the species with the highest prevalence was *I. ricinus* (Pavlidou et al., 2008), *I. gibbosus* (Papazahariadou et al., 1995) and *R. bursa* (Papadopoulos et al., 1996). *Rhipicephalus sanguineus* was mainly found in central Greece and *R. turanicus* and *R. bursa* in Fokida and the island of Cephalonia (Psaroulaki et al., 2003; Psaroulaki et al., 2006). Moreover, in the island of Cephalonia more *Hyalomma*, *Dermacentor* and *Haemaphysalis* species were identified in sheep and goat flocks (Psaroulaki et al., 2006).

In southern-east Europe, that has similar climatic conditions with Greece, several studies have also been carried out that offer useful information on the prevailing tick species. For example, in the south regions of the Appenin Mountains in Italy the *Dermacentor marginatus* species is the most frequent with a percentage of 37.6% (Rinaldi et al., 2004), exactly like in the prefecture of Achaia. In Basilicata region (southern Italy) the parasitism of sheep is dominated by *Rhipicephalus* species, but also *D. marginatus*, *I. ricinus* and *Hyalomma* species were found (Rinaldi et al., 2014). Similarly, *Rhipicephalus* species prevailed in sheep in study in Sicily, with the only other species being *H. marginatum* (Torina et al., 2006). In the region of Belgrade the species of *I. ricinus* is the most often appearing tick species in goats and sheep (41.91%), while less prevalent are other species of ticks that were found in the prefectures of Achaia and Chania, like *D. marginatus*, *R. sanguineus* and *H. punctata* (Pavlovic et al., 2012). In Bulgaria a seasonal variation in the tick species that parasitize sheep and goats was demonstrated. The most common was *R. bursa*, while also *R. sanguineus*, *I. ricinus*, *D. marginatus*, *H. sulcata*, *H. punctata* and *Hyalomma plumbeum* were identified (Arnaudov et al., 2014). *Rhipicephalus* species dominated also in a study in Turkey that was conducted in various domestic animals, included sheep and goats (Koc et al., 2015).

Regarding the pathogens that can be transmitted by the tick species found in this study, *D. marginatus*, that was the only species found in Achaia, can transmit to sheep *Babesia ovis*, *Theileria ovis*, *Anaplasma ovis* and *Coxiella burnetti*, while it is also the vector of Russian spring-summer encephalitis virus and the Siberian tick...
typhus (Wall and Shearer, 2001). In Chania, the most common tick species was *H. punctata*, that has been found to transmit babesiosis and theileriosis in small ruminants and to cause also tick paralysis; it can also transmit tick borne encephalitis virus, Tribec virus, Bhanja virus, Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever virus, *C. burnetii* and *Francisella tularensis* (Urquhart et al., 1996; Wall and Shearer, 2001).

*Rhipicephalus sanguineus*, that was found in sheep of Chania, can transmit Nairobi sheep disease in East Africa (Wall and Shearer, 2001), as well as various pathogens in other animal species and humans (Bowman, 1999). *Ixodes ricinus* can cause tick pyaemia, babesiosis and anaplasmosis in sheep (Wall and Shearer, 2001; Giadinis et al., 2011). *Hyalomma* spp. can survive exceptionally cold and dry conditions and have been incriminated as vectors of several babesial, theilerial and rickettsial infections (Urquhart et al., 1996).

In conclusion, this preliminary study showed the tick species that parasitize the small ruminant flocks of southern Greece. Taking into account the small sample size, a larger study in wider geographical areas and possibly with concurrent identification of pathogens transmitted by ticks seems to be necessary.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
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