

***Mountain summer farming of Western Norway.
Land use history and development of cultural landscapes.
Evidence from palaeoecology and archaeology.***

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The total landscapes of Norway are dominated by mountains, forests, open heathlands and grasslands. Only about 3% of the land surface is suited for cultivation or arable farming. The land use patterns of uncultivated areas were therefore of great importance to traditional farming economy, and even today they have impact on present day cultural landscapes.

The practice of summer farming has been widespread over most of the country. It implied that the livestock was sent away to remote parts of the farm for most of the growing season. As a majority of the farmers had to keep their animals indoors half-the-year, it was necessary for them to collect as much as possible of the summer production close to their homesteads and secure it for winter fodder. In particular in the fjord districts of Western Norway this was important, as the habitable areas at the bottom of the steep mountainsides along the fjords are very limited. These areas had to be utilized for winter fodder production, and the livestock was sent into the mountains to take benefit of the production of the high altitudinal pastures. In general they were only accessible from mid-June to mid-September due to the snow cover.

The proper summer farms were normally situated so far away from the major settlement of the farm that people (mostly young women) had to stay there in small cabins to look after the livestock and take hand of the milk production, in order to make cheese and butter. These products were regularly transported back to the settlement at the farm or in the village. In most cases several farmers placed their cabins at the same summer farm for safety reasons and to facilitate the work. They also shared the pastures belonging to the different farms.

The summer farms also became arrowheads for the utilization of other resources of the mountain areas, as wood collecting, hunting, hay making at outlying meadows, iron production or fishing in mountain lakes. The value of these resources to the total farm economy could be as important as the production of cereals, meat, butter and cheese.



The activity at the summer farms created distinct cultural landscapes that still are visible, even though most of the traditional land use today has ceased. In addition to the cabins themselves, the impact of the livestock led to the development of gradients in the vegetation according to different intensity of grazing at different distances from the cabins. In the summer farming areas, the forest line became lowered compared to its natural climatical limit, and much of natural shrub vegetation was replaced by open grasslands. Many species were established at higher altitudes than expected due to this type of land use.

Summer farming is closely related to similar traditional types of land use found in high altitudinal parts of Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Northern-Italy, Eastern-France and in the Pyrenees. In German it is called “Alm-Wirtschaft”, in French “Estivage” and in Italian “Alpeggio”. These types of land use must not be mixed up with the “transhumance” traditions of Southern-Europe. Summer farming, “Alm-Wirtschaft” and similar land use practices are based on winter foddering of the livestock, whereas transhumance is based on all-year-round grazing in different regions.

The history of summer farming is difficult to trace. In most of the country it seems to origin earlier than the oldest written source materials. Archaeological excavations of prehistorical cabins and other settlement remains have given valuable information, but the interpretation of this kind of source material alone impose uncertainties as very few items or constructions can be specific related to summer farming.

Palaeoecological studies of the cultural landscape development can also contribute to solve the question, but there are many methodological problems related to e.g. low local pollen production, pollen transport and dispersal, and sediment disturbances. However, by combining the three types of source materials, it has been possible to improve the understanding of prehistorical land use in summer farming areas.

Most farmers in the fjord areas had intermediate spring pastures where livestock could graze during springtime before the snow had disappeared from the higher altitudes, and in the autumn before the animals had to be placed indoors for the winter. These pastures were used for different purpose during summer. From studies of the cultural landscape development at such sites, it has been possible to achieve new information about the land use history of the total farm resources. This also facilitates the interpretation of the source material from the summer farms at higher altitudes.

