



The 'utmark' in a Central European perspective

How can we historically and archaeologically grasp the terms 'outland', 'periphery', 'marginal zones', and hostile natural environment? What do the various contradicting terms like central or core region, favoured zone ('Gunstzone'), or cluster area really mean? What is the relationship between the periphery and the centre? How do the inhabitants of the centre perceive the 'outland' (Meier 2003:10-13)?

I will approach these questions by using the mountainous Swiss canton of Graubünden as a point of departure. Graubünden stretches from the northern to the southern edges of the Alps, and comprises cities, castles, and monasteries with central functions. There are poor, high level valleys traversed by heavily travelled trade passes, and also valleys so secluded and isolated that the recessively inherited haemophilia could spread.

Around 1740, the astutely observant Graubünden pastor, Nicolin Sererhard, attempted to describe the differences between the 'outland' and the 'core region'



Figure 1.

The ruins of the castle of Jörgenberg, in the Middle Ages ecclesiastical and manorial centre in the "Bündner Rheintal" (canton of Grisons).

(Sererhard 1944:182-84). In his comparison between wild (wild outland) and tame (civilized Kernland) landscapes, Sererhard appears to fight against the commonly held prejudice, that the people in the Alpine outland were forced to lead a pitiful existence. In other places in this text, however, he clearly stresses the poverty present, for instance in the secluded valley of Calanca, a poverty so severe that many Calancers were forced to work throughout the land as peddlers, or to act as scavengers who gained their nourishment from the carcasses of cattle.

Here, Sererhard comes close to articulating a variety of stereotypes, commonly used to stigmatise the inhabitants of the peripheral zones (and often members of the social periphery as well). Indeed, he went so far as to claim that the early settlers of a valley in Prättigau were magical, dwarf-like, wild, cave-dwelling people with hair covering their entire bodies.

Repeatedly, Sererhard mentions the coarseness, xenophobia, and barbaric cruelty of the people of the Alpine outland. In doing so, he is following a topos that was carried over from the late Middle Ages. For example, in Schedel's World Chronicle, printed in Nürnberg in 1499, in the last part about the peoples of the Occident, it was only reported that the people of the Swiss lands lived in mountains and that they inflicted horrible cruelties on the conquered enemies, including drinking the blood of the fallen and devouring their hearts (Schedel 1493:283-84). Is cannibalism a

characteristic of barbaric peoples living on the periphery of civilization? Here, the inhabitants of the Alpine outland (along with the Lithuanians) became the literary followers of the Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey*.



Sererhard's intellectual connection between primitive people of the remote regions and cave dwellings does in absolutely no way correspond to a literary topos which reaches as far back as Homer's *Polyfem*, but rather to an archaeological and ethnographic reality of the Alpine Region. Under the terms of 'Balm', 'Balöi', 'Spelunca', 'Splüi/Sprügh', 'Grotto/Grotta'

Figure 2. "Balmenstafel". Medieval settlement at an altitude of 2000 metres (canton Uri).

and 'Tana', one finds, in many Alpine regions, natural or manmade caves that served as homes, workspaces, livestock pens, or storage cellars. Occasionally, these remains were in use, particularly in the Maggia and Bavona valleys (Meyer *et al.* 1998:294-296).

As excavations have demonstrated, some date as far back as prehistory and the Middle Ages. Strikingly, the type of cave dwellings which in the eighteenth century were described by Sererhard as somewhat antiquated, were perceived as typical for the inhabitants of the remote Alpine outland.

Sererhard's appraisal is substantiated for the first time by emerging scientific written statements about the high altitude remains; found more than 2000 metres above sea level. These were remains of one-time settlements, which were shown to be 'Heidenhäuslein' (pagans' huts) or 'Heidenstäfeli'. In Johann Jakob Scheuchzer's 1707 book, 'Description of the Natural History of Swiss Lands,' Scheuchzer reports (Geiser 1973:52-53):

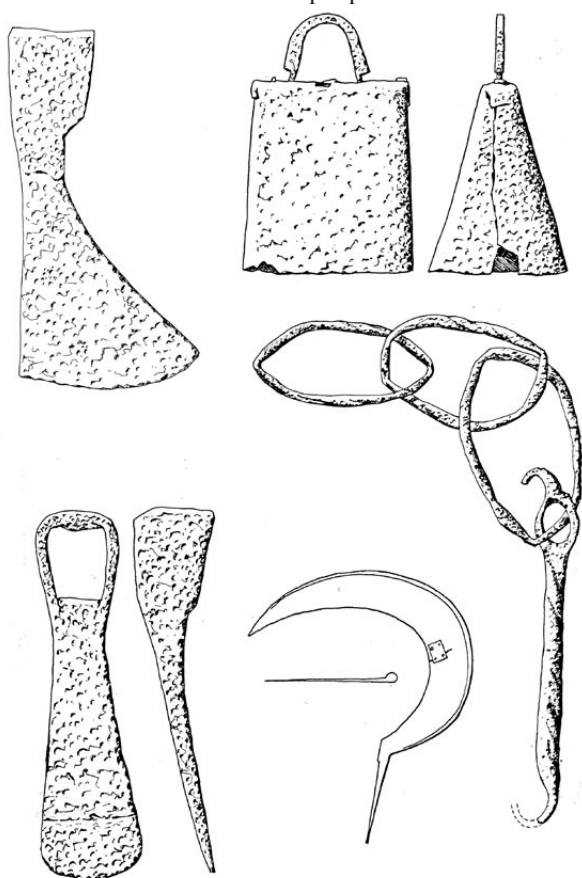
There is no lack of examples of stonework ruins in the Mountains. In the Alpine regions of Mülibach in the Glarus lands, one can still see ancient huts, specially walled and which lean adjacent to rocks. They are called "Heidenhäuslein", which are possibly the oldest ruins in our country. However, it is also possible that these structures were used by valley inhabitants as safe havens, which served as protection from the attacks of the Goths as they moved through our land.



Figure 3. Ruins of an Alpine farmhouse after excavations, sixteenth century, Melchsee-Frutt (canton Obwalden).

As we know from a long series of excavations, the ‘Heidenhüttchen’ were used as farmer-settlements in the Middle Ages. Built between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and abandoned between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries (‘Wüstungsplätze’), they belong to a period of the medieval land expansion. They attest a population pressure that took place in the early and high Middle Ages throughout the entire West, also manifested by emigration and expansion of urban settlements, and, as typical in the Alpine regions, through the occupation of hostile marginal land. Here, the question arises as to whether the forces at work in the Alpine valley settlements were caused by the same demographic pressure that led to the expansion of the Vikings in the North and Baltic Sea regions, and in the North Atlantic towards Iceland and Greenland (Andersson *et al.* 1998:5-8).

Until now, the archaeological studies of the high Alpine settlements have produced a picture of a people surviving on an insufficient agricultural land, which until about 1400 supported only subsistence agriculture and provided surplus only for the acquisition of necessary goods, such as iron tools and salt. Iron tools, which were used for two or three purposes or which were used to the limits (for example,



the overuse of blades), found in Alpine settlements resemble certain findings from Greenland (Meyer *et al.* 1998:396-390).

Through archaeological evidence and the sparse written sources, we find that agriculture was practised, and the land was used for either farming or cattle raising, including dairy farming. Although not so clearly evidenced in the written sources, the artefacts testify to activities like hunting (mainly for chamois) and the collecting of resin and raw minerals (like mountain crystals and soapstone).

Figure 4. Several characteristic items of the Alpine everyday life: axe, cow bell ('Treichel'), sickle with repaired edge, fireplace chain ('Häli'). Pickaxe ('Reuthaue') from various settlements.

The settlements can be divided into year-round permanent settlements, at altitudes up to 1600 metres above sea level, occasionally up to 2000 metres, and temporary settlements, occupied only in the summer months, found at altitudes between 1600 and 2700 metres above sea level.

Until about 1300, building methods differed very little between permanent and temporary settlements. For small households, it normally consisted of a one-room residence with a living area encompassing between six to fifteen square metres, with a multiple-use fireplace and one sleeping place, for a small household. Not until around 1300, were the residences of the permanent settlements influenced by urban and noble abodes, consisting of multiple-room complexes, with kitchens, living rooms, and sleeping chambers. The summer settlements continued, however, to keep the tradition of one room homes until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. By then, small dome-shaped buildings ('Kragkuppelbauten', ital. 'trulli') and caves were only used as living quarters in remote valleys (*ibid.*:369-70).

Archaeological findings and discoveries provide evidence for a flexible adaptation in a nature which was often hostile to settlement. For the protection from avalanches and rock fall, the houses were built on the lowest side of landslide slopes or in the shadows of huge boulders. In cases where such protection was unavailable, houses were, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, built on the mountainside at the feet of previous avalanches (*ibid.*:178-79). Large fires were burned at night to ward off bears and wolves from the settlements. Buildings were primarily composed of the



Figure 5. Wolf's trap ('Lüera') near Bignasco, late medieval, Valle Maggia (canton Ticino).

materials found in the immediate vicinity of the settlement. When wood or kindling was in short supply because of the high altitude, turf or dried sheep dung was used.

In these remote mountain regions of the Alpine outland, we can thus, through archaeological methods, confirm the existence of a survivor culture, demonstrating both a material modesty and the closest of relations to nature, which when observed from the outside, have often been understood to be signs of antique and barbarity.

Very early, in pre-Christian times, a particular religiosity grew out of the harsh environment and the survivor nature of people living close to the many dangers and hostilities in the mountains. This religiousness was aimed at the protection of men,



animals and homesteads from identified natural threats, such as wild animals, but also spirits and demons. A characteristic example of this religious stance is the 'Betruf' (praying-call) or 'Alpsegen' (alp-blessing), a type of incantation which was called out every night as a plea to the saints and spirits to protect the settlement, the people, and the cattle from bears, wolves, lynx, dragons, and falling rocks. Written records of such 'Betrufe', which were performed like a litany, appear first in the sixteenth century (Tobler 1882:197-199). However, the use may have been much older, like the carving of apotropaic signs like crosses, pentagrams, bear paws, etc. on buildings and tools. It is likely that the bells 'Treichel', worn by the animals grazing in the Alps, were originally thought to provide magical protection.

These mountain world related magical and religious rites may be difficult to understand from an outsider's point-of-view, and may have contributed to the stereotype picture of the inhabitants of the outland as

Figure 6. Relief of a masked demon dancer (about 1300), found in the castle of Kropfenstein (canton of Grisons).

superstitious and uncivilized. These impressions were strengthened even more by the fact that it, in the mountains, was a superstition of the other world which reigned, oriented towards the Christian church's teachings of hell and purgatory but reinforced with the terrors of the mountain landscape. The Alpine inhabitants saw glaciers, the frozen mountain ridges, and the impassable mountain gorges as places of penance and damnation.

In the Middle Ages, the paucity of the land complicated the education of an economically sustainable noble class and the development of a central, chivalric culture. In connection with the land expansion of the high Middle Ages, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, castles were built by free and chivalric colonising nobles (Clavadetscher and Meyer 1984:15-42). The change towards a noble lifestyle, starting in the beginning of the fourteenth century, was more and more accompanied by a costly status expenditure (excepting the citizens, participation on courtly parties, etc.). This, eventually, brought down the economic system based on the products-of-nature-duty of the feudal structure in the Alps. The castles were quietly abandoned. Their owners moved away or went into the rural upper classes. They secured themselves positions of political power on regional or local levels, where the economic basis since the fifteenth century was built upon export. On the one side, the export of large livestock, such as cows and horses, as well as cheese and butter in regions with large cities, such as the Lombardy; and on the other, on the export of men as soldiers, which were needed on the battlefields of Europe (Meyer 1985:371-384).

This development of an export economy and soldier service in the late Middle Ages did not encompass all of the Alpine regions. In some valleys, the life style of agricultural self subsistence on poor lands lasted into the Modern Age. When there were no more available land reserves in the fifteenth century, because all the forests had been used, the danger of starvation due to overpopulation had to be addressed and led to emigration. The remote alpine regions became a land of emigration, a development that was exaggerated in the late sixteenth century through the outbreak of a small ice age (Furrer 2003:206-211). This time, it was not the surplus that disappeared, but rather the inhabitants themselves, from entire valleys and villages. The remote regions now became uncultivated land. Thus, the settlement history in the Alpine region in the Middle Ages came to an end.

Summary

Settlements in the mountainous zones of the Alps differed from settlements in other hostile natural environments around the edges of the occidental-Mediterranean zones, primarily through their location in central Europe, and their small territorial organisation. In this area, prolific valleys with mild climates bordered heavily-travelled trade routes spanning barren fields, areas with little plant life, and perpetual snow.

The harshness of the natural environment in this area hindered development, economic expansion, and the creation of political leadership structures within the settlements. From the central regions outward, the poorer mountainous zones were often ignored or only begrudgingly paid attention to. These areas developed a reputation for backwardness because of the impossibility of utilising various medieval technical innovations.

In contrast to the central regions, the rare and often rather late written tradition means that archaeology exercises an important role in researching the history of the Alpine zones. The archaeological record and artefacts, which reach further back than the documents, offer a picture of a nature-oriented, mobile people who lived in material simplicity and survived by means of animal husbandry, hunting, and dairy farming. Archaeological research demonstrates the comprehensible heritage and distinct outlines of an Alpine mountain culture.

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