3.2. New Studies in Alpiculture: Moments of Change

Panel organiser: Mathieu, Jon, University of Lucerne, Switzerland

Among the different branches of mountain agriculture, alpiculture or “Alpwirtschaft” is rather prominent in the scholarly literature. It is sometimes identified in historical overviews as the primary source of agricultural income of mountain regions and is often alluded to in local and regional monographs. General studies, such as “Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action” (1990) by Elinor Ostrom, are especially interested in the complex rules of property and management. An easy definition of alpiculture is hard to come by, since the examples are so varied. Among its most important and diffuse characteristics are summer-time pasturing, the elevation of the pasture areas, and the mode of exploitation – carried out at a distance from settlements, but juridically and economically dependent on them. The prominent position of alpiculture within the scholarly tradition is less obvious than one might assume. To be sure, it has a long history, and it covers vast territories: in the Swiss Alps, for instance, alpine summer pastures, up to the present day, stretch over more than 5’000 sqkm, that is one eighth of the total surface of the country. On the other hand, alpiculture was, and still is, a discontinuous and extensive form of land use thus limiting its output. Other branches of mountain agriculture often absorbed much more labor and contributed considerably more to total production. In our panel we would like to focus on moments of change in alpicultural development, seen in the very long run: when, and under which conditions, did alpiculture really begin according to the latest archeological research? How did it change during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period? What happened to it in Modernity, up to the present time, when its economic, political, and environmental context underwent such dramatic transformation?

Chair: Mathieu, Jon, University of Lucerne, Switzerland

Panel Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 0800 – 1000 // Session 3 – Room A-119
3.2.1. Prehistoric alpine animal husbandry – recent discoveries in the Silvretta range (Switzerland/Austria)

Reitmaier, Thomas, Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons, Switzerland

Few regions in Europe are so strongly associated with alpine animal husbandry and agriculture as the mountain regions of Switzerland and Austria. The seasonal use of high alpine pastures by sheep, goat and cattle herds and the immediate and local utilization of animal products seems perfectly adapted to the alpine landscape. However, the origins and development of Alpwirtschaft in the central Alps are still badly understood. An interdisciplinary research project was initiated in 2007 by the University of Zürich to study the early history of alpine animal husbandry in the Silvretta range on the Swiss-Austrian border. Starting points of the surveys were a number of settlements on the valley floor dating to the Bronze Age and Iron Age. During four campaigns a large number of high alpine (over 2000 masl) sites dating between the earliest deglaciation and the modern age could be discovered. These are chronologically similar to and functionally complement the valley sites. The results of the project show that the extensive alpine pastures were being used from at least the 3rd millennium BC for summer grazing. These archaeological results are supported by e.g. achaebotany/palynology, archaeozoology, toponymy and dendrochronology. The presentation provides insight into current research results and discusses still open research questions and future research potential.

3.2.2. The intensification of alpiculture in the early modern period: the case of harvesting „wild hay“ in the high mountains

Blatter, Michael, Stadtarchiv Sursee, Switzerland

In the Middle Ages, a subsistence economy based on grain, sheep and goat was predominant in the Alpine area. By the eighteenth century, however, in certain Alpine regions, the economy was driven by raising cattle and providing dairy products for export. In my presentation, this transformation between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries is re-evaluated by focusing on one aspect of mountain pastoralism: haymaking on remote mountain precipices even beyond the reach of livestock – the so called Wildheuen or harvesting wild hay. Its development coincided with the recovery of the economy of the cities in the plains of northern Italy in the 1660s, illustrating how strongly intertwined both the alpine husbandry and the Italian urban industries were on their path to modernity.

3.2.3. Swiss alpine pasture farming since 1880 – a landscape assessment

Bürgi, Matthias, Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research, Birmensdorf, Switzerland

Alpine pasture farming shapes the landscape in the Swiss Alps on more than 5’000km², i.e. one eighth of the total surface of Switzerland. Alpine pastures are high in cultural, ecological and economic values, but they are undergoing rapid changes, mainly due to the integration of alpine agriculture in a global market for agricultural products. However, various other so-called driving forces of change and persistence, acting at various temporal and spatial scales have an impact. In the study presented, I will discuss various approaches of how to evaluate the ecological and socio-economic changes in Swiss Alpiculture in the late 19th and 20th century. Combining approaches and sources used in landscape ecology, ecological history and environmental history some trajectories of change are outlined and interpreted in their political and economic context.

3.2.4. Adapting the management of alpine pastures to changes in the 20th century: the case of Ursern Corporation

Wunderli Götschi, Rahel, University of Basel, Switzerland

Ursern Corporation is a local institution in the central Alps of Switzerland. For many centuries it has set the rules for the use of a majority of the agricultural area in Urser Valley and thus has long been and still is an important factor in local alpiculture. This paper investigates how the corporation adapted the management of the alpine pastures to changes in 20th century agriculture, taking into account old and new techniques of cultivation, the effects of economic forces, and the impacts of various political decisions made at both regional and national levels. Furthermore, it considers the management of the alpine pastures in Ursern Valley in terms of collective action, as the corporation consists of those families that have been settled there for more than 100 years. How were decisions made under these institutional and social conditions? And how do farmers and representatives of the corporation evaluate the effects of those decisions today?