

# SEASONAL SETTLEMENT

IN THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY  
MODERN COUNTRYSIDE

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edited by PIERS DIXON & CLAUDIA THEUNE

RURALIA XIII



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**RURALIA XIII**

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# Markets and horse fighting sites in southern Norway – their socioeconomic significance, origin, and demise (AD 1300-1800)

*Marie Ødegaard\**

## **Abstract**

This study presents the first comprehensive mapping of a type of assembly site in South Norway for competitions, especially horse fights and races, called a *skeid* (ON *skeið*, English ‘race, run’). The number of place names indicates that these gatherings must have been of vital importance in prehistoric society. Skeids were in use in the Middle Ages and up to the 19th century in certain parts of the country. This study compares their locations to those of medieval markets, and it discusses their socioeconomic significance and differences in terms of the geological conditions for agriculture and animal husbandry between sites. Skeids and markets do not seem to be co-located, but evidence indicates that the sites were multifunctional, hosting competitions, trade, and barter as well as social activities, such as dancing. It is argued that the sale of horses from the fjord area and outfield resources, especially iron, from the Mountain Land was important for the long continuity of markets in the mountain area. The skeids were connected to different local communities’ organisation of common areas and to festivities connected with the end of the shieling season. The skeids and markets in the mountains escaped royal and ecclesiastical regulations and remained in use for a longer period of time than their counterparts in the rest of the country. In the coastal and fjord areas, the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation were more extensive, making shieling systems less attractive and important, which in the end contributed to the demise of the skeids.

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**Keywords:** *skeids, horse fights, horse trade, markets, shielings, Middle Ages.*

## Résumé

*Marchés et sites de combats de chevaux dans le sud de la Norvège – leur importance socio-économique, leur origine et leur disparition (AD 1300-1800)*

Cette étude présente la première cartographie complète d'un type de site de rassemblement dans le sud de la Norvège destinés aux compétitions, en particulier les combats de chevaux et les courses, appelé *skeid* (ON *skeið*). Le nombre de toponymes indique que ces rassemblements devaient avoir une importance vitale dans la société historique. Les *skeids* étaient utilisés au Moyen Âge et jusqu'au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans certaines parties du pays. Cette étude compare leurs emplacements à ceux des marchés médiévaux, et elle traite de leur significations socio-économiques et des différences entre les sites pour l'agriculture et l'élevage à partir des caractéristiques géologiques. *Skeids* et marchés ne semblent pas localisés au même endroit, mais les preuves indiquent que les sites étaient multifonctionnels, accueillant des compétitions, du commerce et du troc ainsi que des activités sociales, comme la danse. On fait valoir que la vente de chevaux de la région du fjord et celle des matières premières, en particulier le fer, de Mountain Land était importante pour la longévité des marchés dans la région montagneuse. Les *skeids* étaient liés à l'organisation des espaces communs des différentes communautés locales et aux festivités liées à la fin d'occupation des habitats saisonniers. Les *skeids* et les marchés dans les montagnes ont échappé aux réglementations royales et ecclésiastiques et sont restés en service plus longtemps que ceux du reste du pays. Dans les zones côtières et les fjords, les processus d'urbanisation et d'industrialisation étaient plus étendus, rendant les systèmes d'habitat saisonnier moins attrayants et importants, ce qui a finalement contribué à la disparition des *skeids*.

**Mots-clés :** *skeid, combats de chevaux, commerce de chevaux, marchés, habitat saisonnier, Moyen Âge.*

## Introduction

This paper presents evidence of an assembly site known as a *skeid* (ON *skeið*, n.). This was a seasonal meeting place that hosted competitions, such as horse fights and races, and was an arena for social interactions, wrestling, feasting, and exchanging commodities (Solheim 1956). Variations of *skeids* were used until the 18th and 19th centuries in certain parts of Norway, and they are well described in written sources. The evidence for *skeids* is particularly strong in the Viking Age and Middle Ages in Norway and Iceland (Solheim 1956), although similar sites have been discussed in parts of Sweden (Wessen 1921), the Hebrides (Solheim 1956) and

## Zusammenfassung

*Märkte und Pferdekampfstätten in Südnorwegen – ihre sozioökonomische Bedeutung, Herkunft und Niedergang (AD 1300-1800)*

Diese Studie präsentiert die erste umfassende Kartierung bestimmter Versammlungsorte in Südnorwegen für Wettbewerbe, insbesondere für Pferdekämpfe und Pferderennen, die als *Skeid* (ON *skeið*) bezeichnet werden. Die Vielzahl der entsprechenden Ortsnamen weist darauf hin, dass diese Versammlungen in der historischen Gesellschaft von entscheidender Bedeutung gewesen sein müssen. *Skeids* waren im Mittelalter und bis zum 19. Jahrhundert in bestimmten Teilen des Landes vorhanden. Diese Studie vergleicht die Standorte mit denen mittelalterlicher Märkte und erörtert die sozioökonomische Bedeutung sowie die Unterschiede in Bezug auf geologische Bedingungen für Landwirtschaft und Tierhaltung. *Skeids* und Märkte scheinen nicht am selben Ort gewesen zu sein, aber es gibt Hinweise darauf, dass die Plätze multifunktional waren und Wettbewerbe, Handel und Tauschhandel sowie soziale Aktivitäten wie Tanzen veranstaltet wurden. Es wird argumentiert, dass der Verkauf von Pferden aus dem Fjordgebiet und von Ressourcen, insbesondere Eisen, aus dem Gebirgsland für die lange Kontinuität der Märkte in den Bergen wichtig war. Die *Skeids* waren mit der Organisation der öffentlichen Bereiche durch verschiedene lokale Gemeinschaften und mit Feierlichkeiten verbunden, die mit dem Ende der Shieling-Saison verbunden waren. Die *Skeids* und Märkte in den Bergen entgingen den königlichen und kirchlichen Vorschriften und blieben länger in Gebrauch als entsprechende Anlagen im übrigen Land. In den Küsten- und Fjordgebieten waren die Prozesse der Urbanisierung und Industrialisierung umfangreicher, was Shieling-Systeme weniger attraktiv und wichtig machte, was letztendlich zum Niedergang der *Skeids* beitrug.

**Schlagwörter:** *Skeid, Pferdekämpfe, Pferdehandel, Märkte, Shielings, Mittelalter.*

Viking and medieval England (Baker 2014). In Ireland, similar competitions, known as *Tailteann*, were held from about the 7th to the 12th century (Nally 2008). Other historic and modern festivals have elements that resemble *skeids*, such as the Ancient Greek and Roman horse races, the modern Spanish festival *rapa das bestas* and Southeast Asian horse fights (Gogosz 2014; Arnett 2019; Mann – Scharff 2020). The origin of the *skeids* within the Nordic world is still uncertain, with different suggestions having been put forward. Some propose that they began as fertility cult and death rituals (Wessen 1921, 110; Gjessing 1943, 46; Stylegar 2006), while others argue that they began as harvest

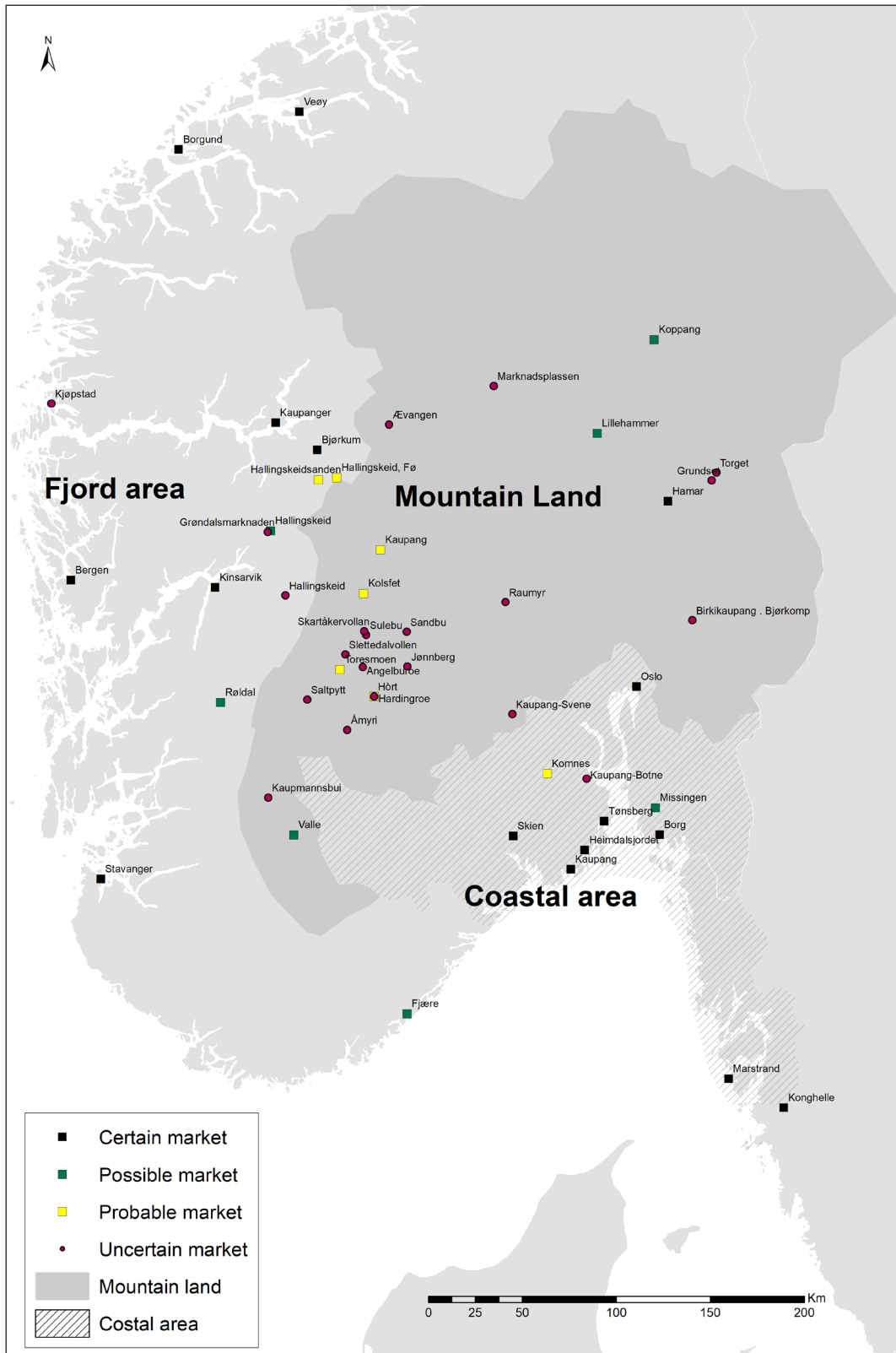


Fig. 1. Map showing the Mountain Land and Coastal Land (c. 1160-1175) as described in *Historia Norvegiae* (Ekrem – Mortensen 2003) with the distribution of possible markets in southern Norway (after Loftsgarden 2017). For the sake of simplicity, western Norway is referred to in the text as the 'fjord area' (© Marie Ødegaard).

celebrations (Solheim 1956) and as a way to choose the most compatible horses for one's herd (Arnett 2019).

The present paper is the first study to comprehensively map skeids in South Norway. It has been argued that skeids are centrally placed in rural areas (Vikstrand 2001, 360) and that there was one in each parish (Bugge 1920; see also Solheim 1956, 38). Previous studies have focused on the exotic elements associated with skeids, specifically their ritualistic and competitive aspects (Solheim 1956; Stylegar 2006). Recently, the skeids' social and economic elements have been emphasised, and it has been argued that the skeids played a vital part in the exchange of various products between eastern and western Norway over the mountain plateau (Lofsgarden et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the full distribution and importance of skeids remain unknown, and there has been no comparative, interdisciplinary study that has combined archaeology, historical documentary analysis, and place names to investigate the sites' locations. Furthermore, the locations have not been compared to the geological conditions for agriculture and animal husbandry. The current paper fills this gap.

Historically confirmed skeids were located in the mountainous regions of southern Norway in the Middle Ages and early historic period. This was known to be a conservative area bound by tradition, and it was later incorporated into the Norwegian kingdom. The area was part of the so-called 'Mountain Land' mentioned in the Latin text *Historia Norwegie*, which was written from 1160 to 1175 (Ekrem – Mortensen 2006) (Fig. 1). As indicated by Fig. 1, the Mountain Land featured several markets during the Viking Age and medieval period (Lofsgarden 2017). This area had extensive outfield resources, such as iron from bog ore and hunting and trapping products such as elk and reindeer, which became increasingly important from the Viking Age onwards. It led to regional specialisation and an increase in the transportation of goods over the mountain plateau (Lofsgarden 2017). However, the relationship between skeids and markets is unknown, and no regional comparisons have been performed. In addition, the socioeconomic significance of the skeids in the rest of South Norway, which we divide into the coastal and fjord areas (Fig. 1), is not well understood, because there are no historical written accounts of skeids in these areas.

In this study, I will map the distribution of skeids and markets in South Norway. The sites' locations will be compared to the natural geological and climatic conditions for agriculture and differences in transhumance. I will mainly discuss the situation in the Middle Ages and the early modern period (AD 1300-1800), but I draw upon earlier accounts when appropriate. I aim to answer the following questions: What were the differences between skeids and markets in these areas, and did they have the

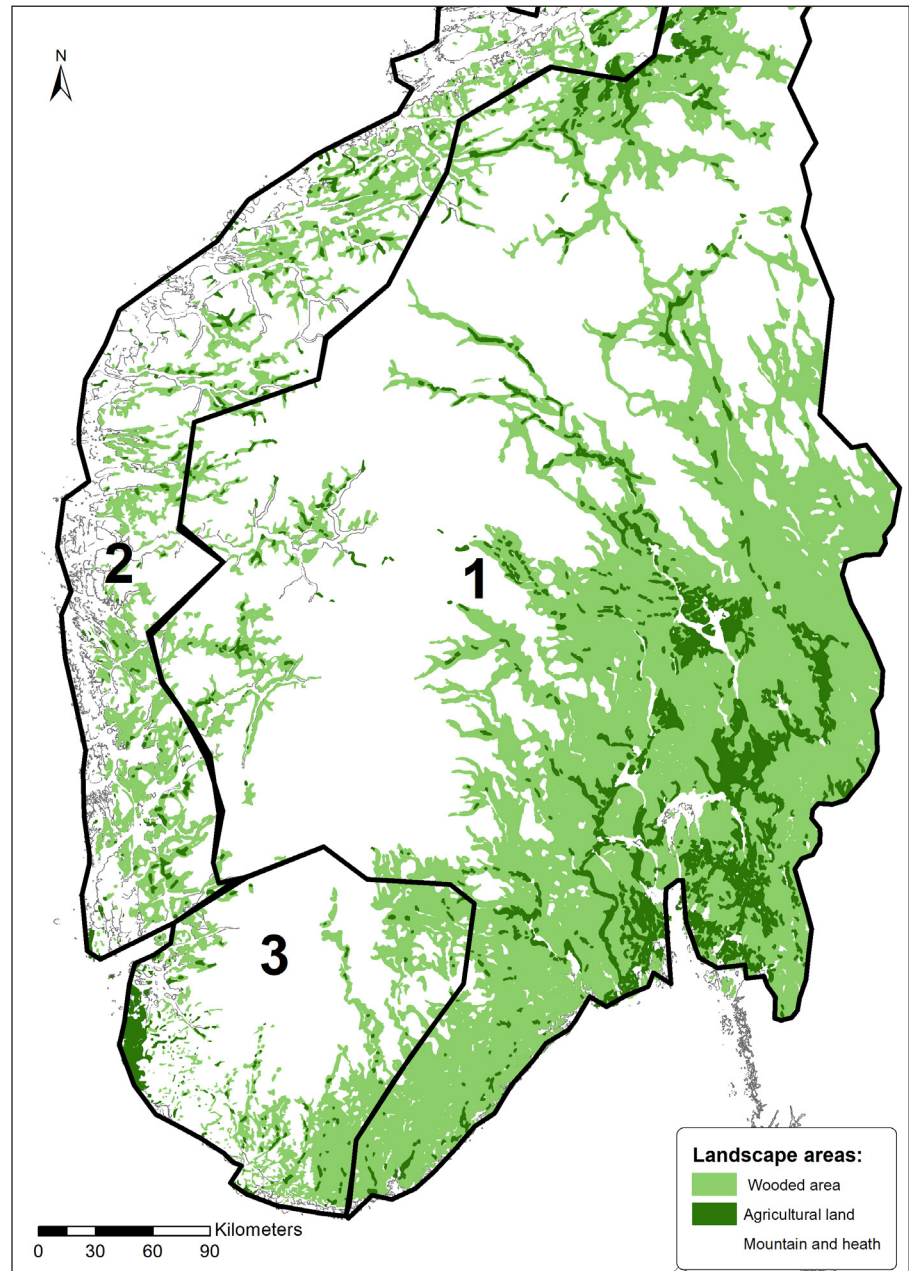
same socioeconomic significance? What is the origin of skeids, and what led to their demise? Can differences in the geological conditions for agriculture explain potential differences in the distribution of skeids and markets? First, I will briefly introduce the topographical conditions of Norway and then give a short account of activities at the skeids. The distribution of markets and skeids in the Mountain Land and coastal and fjord areas will be discussed and compared to agricultural systems and historically known medieval roads and settlements.

### **Geological conditions, animal husbandry, and transhumance in South Norway**

The conditions for agriculture and settlement vary between the different parts of Norway. Different social and ownership arrangements operated differently across regions and time periods. The best areas for arable farming are in the coastal area and along the fjords in the west (Fig. 2) (Øye 2002, 234). The Mountain Land has a dry and cool climate, and pastures are prevalent. In contrast, the fjord area has less and more-scattered arable land, and historically, was home to more animal husbandry (Lunden 2002, 214). Animal husbandry was most important in the northern part of the fjord area, while in the rest of South Norway, grain was more important (Øye 2002, 395). According to the Frostathing Law (IV, 44) from the 12th to 13th century, a normal farm should have 12 cattle and 2 horses. Horses were widespread in the Middle Ages (Lunden 2002, 223). However, at least from the 16th to 19th century, there was a difference in the distribution of horses between western and southern Norway; there was 1 horse per 10 cattle in the fjord area, but 1 horse per 3-5 cattle in the coastal area. Nevertheless, compared to the distribution of arable land, the number was equal (Lunden 2002, 223-224).

The use of shielings, mountain pasture, and seasonal movement of livestock increased in both the fjord and coastal areas from the end of the Viking Age to the 1300s. After the agrarian crisis in the mid-1300s, and throughout the late Middle Ages and early modern period, the use of shielings increased again (Øye 2002, 372-373; Stene 2015; Petterson 2018, 40). Farmers would move their husbandry up to the mountains or high fells in the summer to take advantage of the rich pasture. There were three types of shieling strategies (Fig. 2). In the 'milk shieling' area, there was a short distance between the farms and shielings, and the stay at the shieling was short. In the 'hay shieling' area in the southernmost region of Norway, fodder was especially important. The most widespread was the 'full shieling' system, in which animals and people permanently occupied an area throughout the summer. The strategy involved a combination of milk production and hay making (Øye 2002, 370). In particular, within the southern and valley

Fig. 2. Map showing the best agricultural land in South Norway and the three different types of shieling strategies: (1) full shieling area, in which animals and people permanently resided during the summer and milk production and hay making were combined; (2) milk shieling area, in which there was a short distance between the farm and shieling; and (3) hay shieling area, in which fodder was especially important. (© Shieling system after Daustad – Sæter 2001 in Øye 2002, 371. Map: Marie Ødegaard).



areas of the Mountain Land, transhumance was important. The coastal area also had shielings, but they were located closer to farms (Øye 2002, 275-276).

### Activities at the skeids and the times at which they took place

The earliest written sources describing skeids date from 1618, and the most recent is from 1820. Both are from the Mountain Land (Solheim 1956, 31, 40). The opposition to and demise of skeids in these areas was mainly caused by heavy drinking and disorder, and many fell out of use in the 18th century. The skeids in

the rest of southern Norway fell out of use much earlier and there is no written or oral tradition related to them. Thus, the reason for their demise is not known. The mountain skeids brought together people from different rural districts and regions. Activities involved all kinds of competitions, especially horse fights and races but also ball games and wrestling, and they were important for merrymaking and kinship alliances. They featured heavy drinking, dancing, and commerce, including horse sales (Solheim 1956, 9, 38, 40).

There are several similarities between the horse fights (*hestavig|hestaat*) mentioned in the Icelandic sagas and the documented skeids that took place in Norway from the

1600s to 1800s, such as the crowds of people surrounding the fights and men with wooden rods of 6-8 feet (*hestastaf* in the Icelandic sagas) that were used to incite and support horses in the ring (*Solheim 1956*, 34, 62; *Gogosz 2014*). Some researchers connect horse fights and death rituals, and they believe that the fights were how people chose which horses to sacrifice in the Iron Age (*Stylegar 2006*). Outside Scandinavia, horse sacrifice in relation to horse games is not unfamiliar; for example, after the Roman horse race *Equus Octobris*, one of the horses of the leading chariot was sacrificed (*Anderson 1999*, 385). Indeed, the horse had a special status as a sacrificial victim in the fertility cult and death rituals in the Iron Age. However, like the other heathen gods, horse rituals were demonised from the time of Conversion (c. AD 1000 in Norway) until the 19th century (*Lunden 2002*, 221). Others argue that the skeids were associated with harvest celebrations and the end of the summer pasture season (*Solheim 1956*, 8). In historic times, the skeids were held in the late summer/early autumn when the humans, cattle, and sheep returned home from the shielings (*Solheim 1956*, 19, 163).

Regarding the age of skeids, the Frostathing law (*FX*, 48) from the 12th to 13th century and the national law from 1274 (*L VII*, 36) contain provisions for regulating horse fights and races, indicating that these activities date far back in time (*Stylegar 2006*, 212-215). Some archaeological artefacts and depictions have been related to skeids, such as a runic inscription from Fyresdal, Telemark County, dated to the 11th to 12th century, and the Häggeby runestone from Uppland, Sweden (U 664, B-side), which dates to AD 500 and may depict a horse fight (cf. *Stylegar 2006*).

## Method

Skeids are mainly described in two types of sources: historical oral tradition from the southern Norwegian countryside and Icelandic sagas (*Viga-Glums saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, or *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhoggs*; see *Gogosz 2014*). In Scandinavian history and archaeology, there is a long tradition of using place names to identify certain types of sites, their location in the landscape, and their chronology (*Svensson 2007*). In this paper, I will use words containing the Old Norse elements *skeið*, *leikr* (competition) and *kaupangr* (marketplace). In Norwegian tradition, the Old Norse word *skeið* (n.) is mainly interpreted as a 'course for races or race riding' (*Rygh 1897*, 75), and it is usually linked to horse racing and fighting. It can also mean a 'farm road between fields' (*Rygh 1897*, 75). Etymologically, *skeid*, ON *skeið*, means 'division' or 'border' (*Törp 1992*, 592). Several people have argued that skeids have sacred and/or ritualistic connotations, especially when found in a sacred context, such as when the place name is connected to the

element *-vi/vé* or the name is close to the names of other sacred places (*Wessen 1921*; *Vikstrand 2001*, 361).

Names including *leikr* (m.) may imply that the sites hosted gatherings for games, such as wrestling and horse fighting (*Rygh 1897*, 64-65). It has been argued that place names containing *leikr* are older than place names containing *skeid* (*Bugge 1920*). However, there is no linguistic foundation to support this age difference (S.L. Albris, *personal communication*). Indeed, the names of the assemblies are difficult to date precisely. Generally, they are considered to date from the Viking Age (*Sandnes 1976*, 31). Several oral traditions state that there was first a horse fight at a skeid, and afterwards all the attendees went to a nearby *leikr* for physical competitions (cf. *Bugge 1920*, 208). It is thus possible that the names refer to nearby sites intended for different activities.

In this study, the words *leikr* and *skeið* were searched in a 19th-century farm name register (Norske Gaardsnavne; dokpro.uio.no) and Norway's official register of place names in public use, Sentralt stadnamnregister (*SSR*; kart.kystverket.no). The data contain not only references to registered farms (*matrikkelgård*) and smaller farms (*bruk*), but also minor names, such as those of fields. When searching in the databases, different spellings were used: Skei% (*Skeid*, *Skei(d)e*), Ski, and Ske(e), as well as Leik% (e.g. *Leikvin*), Løken, and Løy% (e.g. *Løyken*). If multiple place names are similar, they most likely refer to the same site. In such cases, I did not map more than one, especially if they are minor names. That several names are used to refer to the same assembly is a common feature of meeting sites (*Svensson 2007*). The list of place names is probably not complete, but it provides an impression of the extent and distribution of skeids. Medieval roads and historic farmyards are mapped in accordance with the Amtskartet maps from 1826 to 1917, made available by the Museum of Cultural History. These maps are dated before large agricultural changes in the last part of the 1800s, and are likely to reflect the situation at the time when skeids were common (*Jerpåsen et al. 1997*, 6).

## Results: Distribution of skeids and markets in southern Norway

In this section, I will present the results of mapping skeids and markets. The topography of Norway, which features steep mountains and deep valleys, naturally restricts movement and creates transport corridors for passage between regions (Figs. 2 and 3). Almost all towns were situated on the coast in the Middle Ages, and sites in the mountains hosted smaller markets. Most markets are located in the middle zone between the mountain plateau and valley districts, next to large roads and often at important junctions (Fig. 3). Before 1350, only 14 Norwegian towns are mentioned in written

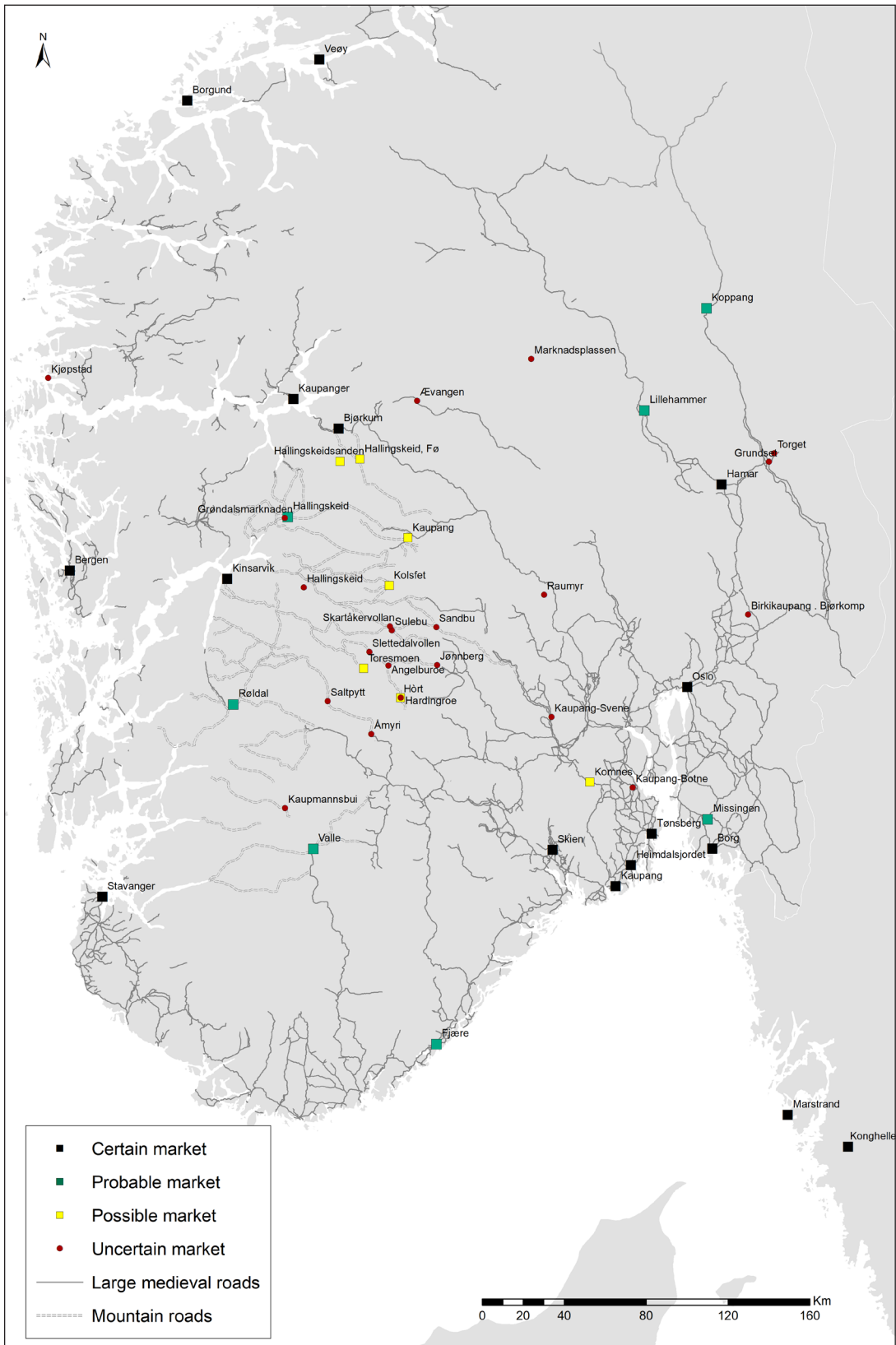


Fig. 3. Distribution of markets in South Norway in relation to medieval roads on the Amtskartet map from the 19th century (© Markets after Loftsgarden 2017; map: Marie Ødegaard).

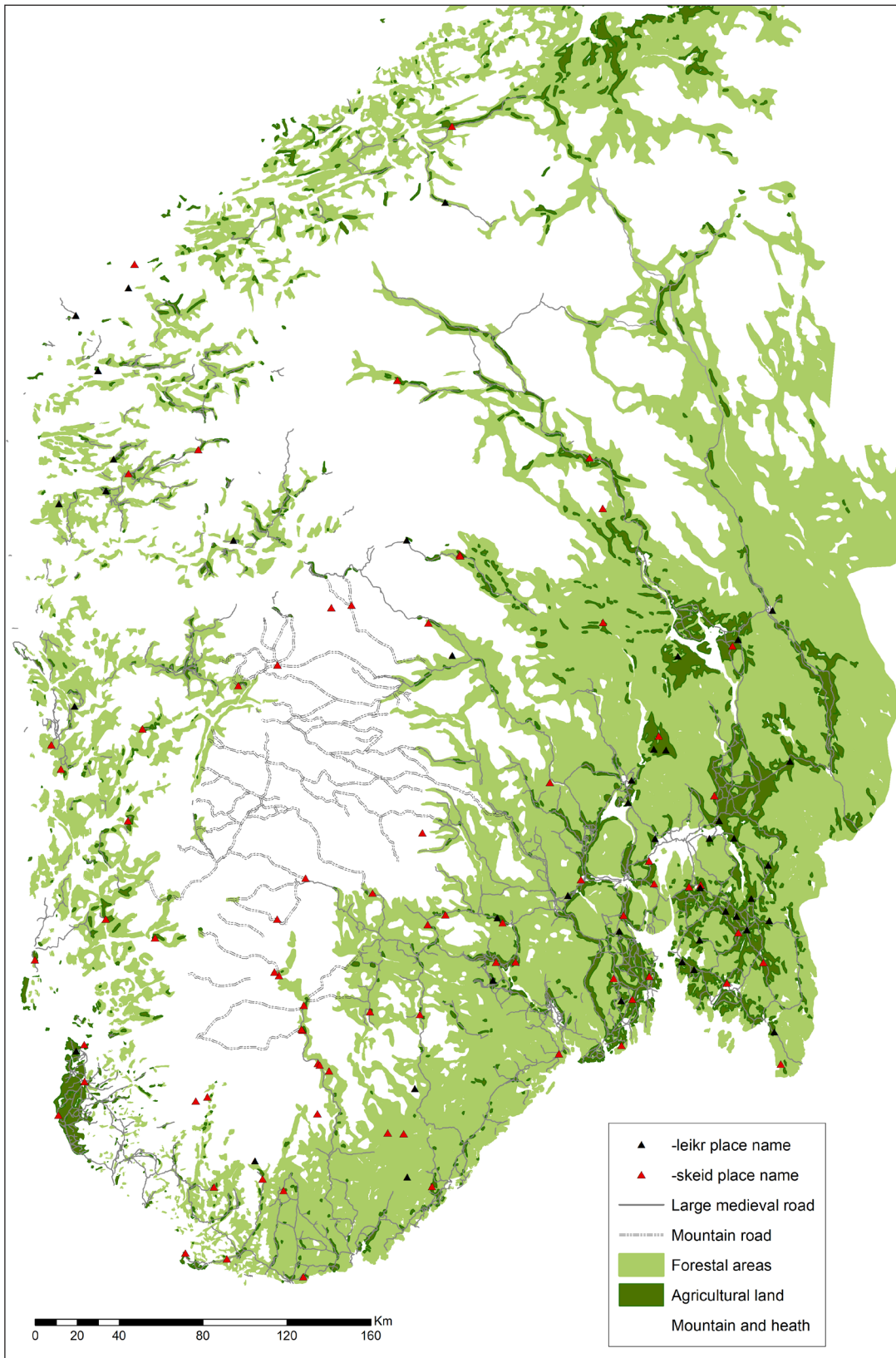


Fig. 4. Distribution of skeids in South Norway (skeid place names marked in red and leikr place names marked in black) and their relation to medieval roads and different agricultural conditions (© Marie Ødegaard).



sources (Helle et al. 2013, 65). Most towns (Fig. 3, black squares) were founded in the 10th-11th century, and they were in use for most of the medieval period, except for Bjørkum, Heimdalsjordet, and Kaupang, which fell out of use at the end of the Viking Age (Skre 2007; Bill – Rodsrud 2013; Loftsgarden et al. 2017). Entering the historical period (c. 1650), several old markets/towns, including Veøy, Borgund, Kaupanger, and Kinsarvik, were no longer in use (Eliassen 2006, 148). The age of possible markets is unknown; nevertheless, it is likely that most were in use through the Middle Ages and until the end of the 19th century, when many markets were closed down. At these markets, farmers could exchange products and trade horses and cattle. In the medieval period, they served as regional gatherings and involved music, dance, and circus performances in addition to food and drink (Andersen 2013, 22). The difference between markets and skeids is that the latter had a strong connection to horses and horse games (see Solheim 1956). Most towns and markets, at least in the Mountain Land, were in use in the Middle Ages and thus likely to be contemporaneous with medieval skeids.

According to my map, 120 skeids in South Norway were located in places with names containing *skeið* or *leikr* and regarding historical oral tradition (Fig. 4). The highest densities of such place names can be found in the coastal and central agricultural areas; in the valleys leading up to the mountain plateau; and near rivers, lakes, and the sea. There are more such places in eastern Norway compared to western and inner Norway (see Bugge 1920). Almost all skeids were located next to important medieval roads, and in the fjord areas of western Norway, most sites were probably easily accessible by sea. Some sites are located at or close to hubs where land- and water-based communications meet (Figs. 4 and 6; Ødegaard 2018).

Regarding the distribution of place names, the 43 places with names containing *leikr* are distributed differently than those with names containing *skeið*. Most names containing *leikr* are located in the coastal and northern fjord areas (Fig. 4). With only one exception, no such names can be found in the mountain plateau, and only a few are located in the valleys leading up to the mountains. If we compare the distribution of place names to the natural conditions for agriculture, a majority of the names containing *leikr* seem to be located within the best agrarian land (Fig. 4). These may have been suitable areas for races. The place names containing *skeið* have a wider distribution, and they could be found within all three landscape areas, as mentioned in Fig. 2, especially the forested area (Fig. 4). The total number of place names related to skeid activities indicates that they must have been important in agrarian society. Indeed, in the coastal area, there seems to be one skeid in every administrative rural district (Ødegaard 2018).

Fig. 5 shows the distribution of skeids and markets in South Norway in relation to the historical farmyards of the early 19th century. In general, skeids and markets do not co-exist at the same sites. The oldest towns in Norway are mostly distributed along the coast, while the smaller markets are distributed at junctions between mountain and valley areas. Six markets have been identified in the coastal area, but only two are located next to skeids (Ødegaard 2018).

### The socioeconomic significance of markets, skeids, and horses

What were the differences between skeids and markets in these areas, and did they have the same socioeconomic significance? It has been argued that skeids in the Mountain Land were of particular historical importance and were in use for longer than skeids in the coastal and fjord areas, because of their connection to trade and barter (Loftsgarden 2017). Transport of goods over the mountain plateau probably became increasingly important during the Viking Age and early medieval period until c. 1300, when there was an increase in the utilisation of outfield resources, such as iron from bog ore and hunting and trapping products (Øye 2002; Larsen 2009; Tveiten 2012). The extent of iron production, which is especially well documented, clearly exceeded local demand in the relatively sparsely populated Mountain Land in which it was produced (Loftsgarden 2017, 69). Thus, the products were exported to the non-iron-producing fjord area, most likely over the mountain plateau. However, this extensive use of outfield resources ended around the 1300s, after which they were mainly exploited as part of normal farming activities rather than via a large-scale, organised effort (Øye 2002, 394). Nevertheless, written accounts testify to the continued importance of the transport of goods and mobile trade in the historic period (Solheim 1951, 559-560). At the mountain markets, farmers from the valley and mountain regions moved their goods over the mountain plateau with pack horses or by foot in order to trade and barter with people from the fjord areas of western Norway. As indicated in Fig. 5, there does not seem to be a connection or co-localisation of markets and skeids in South Norway. This may indicate a distinction between their functions.

The literature on skeids has emphasised their exotic and carnivalesque elements (e.g. Stylegar 2014). However, oral traditions mention other elements of skeids that are less discussed, including their connection to horse fairs and the shieling system (cf. Solheim 1956, 29, 38, 40). Horses were valuable in this culture; in the 1600s, a horse was worth three cattle, and a warhorse was worth up to several farms (Pettersen 2013, 12). Regarding the distribution of horses, as mentioned previously, there seems to have been more horses in the coastal area of Norway. At that time, there

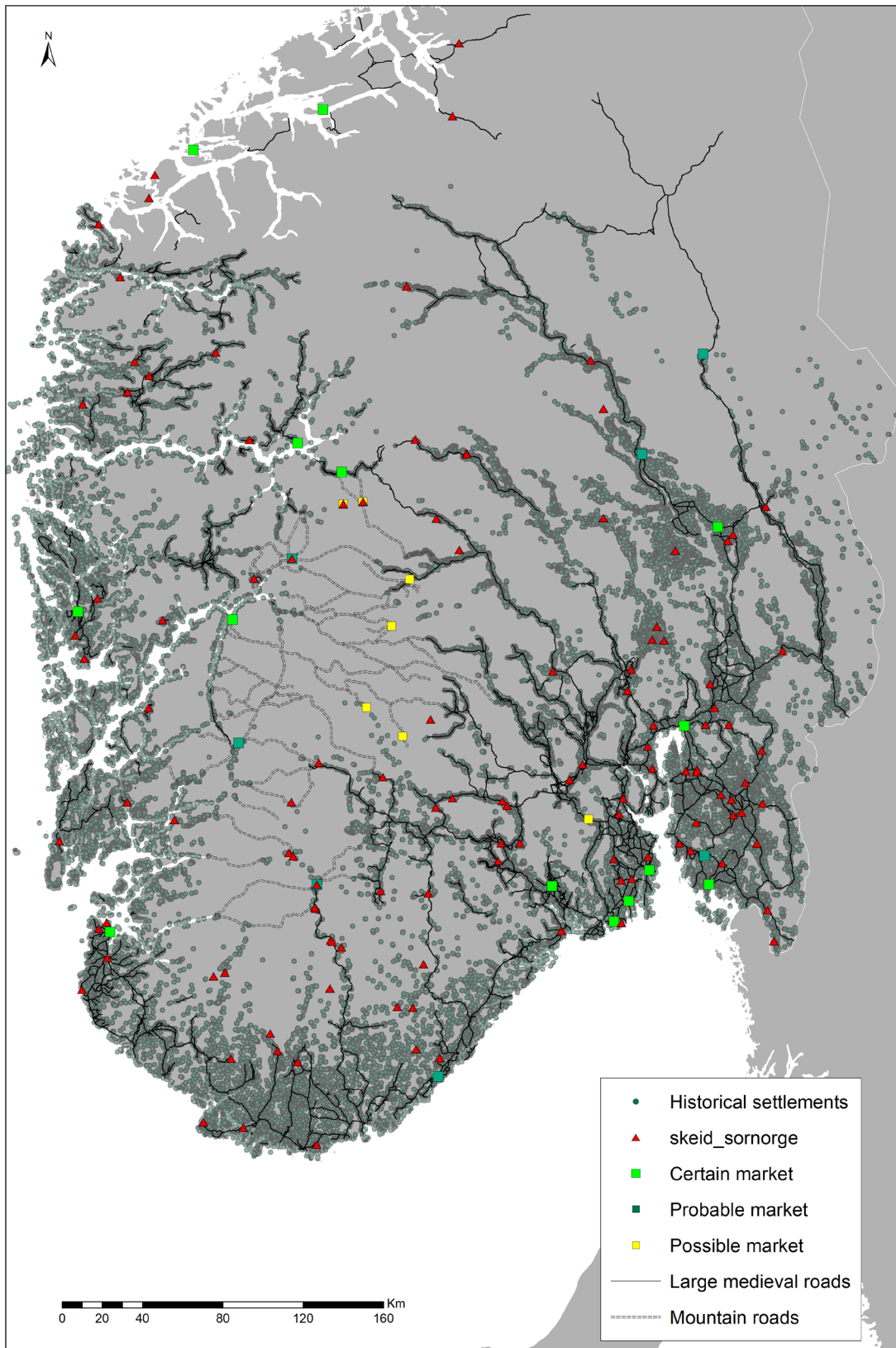


Fig. 5. Map showing the distribution of skeids and confirmed, probable, and possible markets in relation to historical settlements and roads. The settlements and roads are obtained from the Amtskartet map from the 19th century (© Marie Ødegaard).

were equal amounts of stallions and mares in South Norway, while nowadays there are many fewer stallions. The reason for this, as was argued for the period between the 13th and 18th century, was that stallions protected mares and foals from bears and wolves (Lunden 2002, 226). Interestingly, there was a difference in the geographical distribution of horses by gender; almost all horses were stallions in the valleys and coastal area of southeast Norway, while the rest of the country had more mares and foals (Lunden 2002, 226). Mares foaled during winter, and thus they could not be used for heavy transports during this time. This limitation was especially important in eastern Norway with its colder climate, and extensively from the 1600s, when stallions were used in the mining and timber industries (Lunden 2002, 225-226). The fjord area had less use for horses during the winter due to its milder climate, which led to different subsistence strategies that involved more sheep and goats. In the fjord area, the farmers could also keep the horses out during winter and keep them protected from predators (Lunden 2002, 226-228). This led to a difference in the distribution of horse breeding, which took place in the fjord area, from the southern tip of Norway and up to mid-Norway. In the fjord areas, horse breeding was thus an important part of outfield resource strategies. Overall, the distribution of horses more or less corresponded to the distribution of different types of shielings (Fig. 2).

The meeting point for horse breeders and purchasers from eastern Norway was the mountain plateau. From the fjord areas of western Norway, traders came with horses and other merchandise that they exchanged or sold. Then they would bring skins and other outfield resources, such as iron, back home. The skeids and markets could have been a way for these traders to show off their strongest horses, perhaps for breeding purposes. However, commerce at skeids is only mentioned in a few oral historical traditions from South Norway, and not in written sources from the Viking Age and Middle Ages. Thus, while markets in the Mountain Land were characterised by economic activities and trade between western and eastern Norway, this may have been a less important part of skeids. In historical times, the king and the Church seemed to have little regulatory control over skeids, which took the form of folk gatherings (Ødegaard 2018). Markets and skeids may also have been distinguished by the number of people they served. Skeids were used by local communities, and hence were widely distributed, while markets were more regional and served people from larger areas (Fig. 5).

### **Geographical conditions and the shieling system**

Differences in the geological conditions for agriculture may be able to explain differences in the distribution of skeids and markets. Natural resources created different

distributions of labour and management systems, and they affected community processes of allocating and moving livestock (Aldred 2006, 355). In shieling areas, pasture was common land (Øye 2002, 370) and livestock could graze freely. It was important to get the cattle out in the pastureland as soon as possible in the spring (Øye 2002, 368). Enclosures and pens were used in this common land and in the outfields to gather animals for milking and protect them from predators (Øye 2002, 368). Skeids might be associated with the sorting of large herds of stray animals that were gathered in the commons and returning them to their owners. This type of activity is present in other types of traditions, such as the Icelandic *réttr*, which involved the roundup and sorting of sheep and horses within a pen. In the Víga-Glums saga (Norland 1973, 44) and some historical oral stories from Norway, it is stated that skeid horses were loose and not tame (Solheim 1956). In the Spanish province of Galicia, there still exists an ancient sport that included the trade of goods and presentation of a man's character. Called the *rapa das bestas*, it involves wrestling wild horses to a standstill without any tools, and it ends with cutting the horse's mane and tail in enclosures (*curros*). These horses live free on common lands in the mountains and have several owners (Craig 2002, 100). After the cutting of their mane and tail, they are set free again.

Comparison of the distribution of skeids to geographical conditions indicates that skeids were more important in the best agricultural areas, especially the coastal area (Figs. 2 and 5). There were fewer skeids in the areas characterised by milk shielings, where the distance between the farm and shieling was short and people stayed at shielings for a shorter amount of time. In contrast, there are more skeids in the northern part of the hay shieling area of southern Norway, where fodder was especially important. The greatest distribution of skeids is found in areas with full shieling systems, in which people and animals permanently occupied the shielings during the summer and the activities involved a combination of milk production and hay making (Øye 2002, 370). This suggests that skeids were most widespread in areas where people would stay for longer periods and the shieling system probably was more important.

The shieling sites were focal points for communal memories and identity (cf. Aldred 2006; Costello – Svensson 2018, 8-9). People cooperated to maintain and operate shielings and to make hay. There was a complex combination of joint ownership and collective management, monitoring, sanctioning, and regulation at the shieling sites (Svensson 2018, 21). Returns from shielings were surrounded by festivities (Solheim 1956, 110-135). In modern times, the shieling maid went to specific church services, and it was important that she rode to them on a horse (Solheim 1956, 113). The

farmers would eat some of the new harvest for the first time, including grain made into 'skeid-Sunday porridge' (Solheim 1956, 132). The skeids might have been important for the use and arrangement of common areas by, for example, serving as a way to resolve disagreements over common land and relieve social tension. The skeids involved contests to determine which areas had the fastest and strongest horses and strongest fighters (Solheim 1956, 66, 172). These contests symbolised the fruitfulness and abundance of the new harvest (Solheim 1956, 172-173).

### The demise of markets and skeids

From the 12th to 13th century, towns and larger markets in Norway were increasingly controlled by towns' law and lawmen. In contrast, mountain markets were small, informal, and seasonal and thus were less regulated and controlled by the king and his laws. In 1299, the king tried to ban all trade outside of towns (Keyser – Munch 1846, 41-42). From at least the 14th century, written sources testify that towns in Norway had a monopoly on the purchase of goods from adjacent areas (Lofsgarden 2017, 242). These regulations affected the coastal and fjord areas to a larger degree than the more sparsely populated mountain regions, where markets continued to be important for trading outfield resources, especially horses. This may explain why so few small markets were present in eastern Norway.

In Iceland, skeids were often connected to judicial assemblies (Solheim 1956, 67-68), but this does not seem to be the case in Norway. It is likely that the skeids were not regulated by the king and Church in the same way as towns and, to a smaller degree, markets (Ødegaard 2018). By the 1600s, when oral traditions concerning skeids in the Mountain Land flourished, the skeids in the coastal land and along the coast of western Norway must have come to an end. As mentioned, this could be related to the Mountain Lands' weaker incorporation into the Norwegian state and status as a conservative area bound by tradition (Lofsgarden et al. 2017). The area was also less urbanised and industrialised. Even if shielings were in use in parts of Scandinavia until the mid-20th century, they were considered old-fashioned and part of the pre-industrial agrarian system. Thus, many fell out of use (Pettersson 2018, 29). Shielings could not compete with modern, improved farming and industrial jobs that offered social benefits and summer holidays (Svensson 2018, 25). The last skeids in the 18th and 19th centuries were banned not because of horse fights, but because of the heavy drinking and commotion they involved (Solheim 1956). This was also a problem at judicial assemblies in the Middle Ages (e.g. Hagland – Sandnes 1994, xxvii). Many old markets underwent changes in the 18th century for the same reasons and continued as horse fairs (Andersen 2013).

### Summary

This paper maps all 120 skeid sites in eastern Norway, which were identified from place names and historical sources. Most skeid sites are located in the valleys leading up to the mountain plateau, while market sites are distributed on the edges of the mountain area and along the coast. Skeids and markets do not seem to be co-located; evidence indicates that the sites were multifunctional, hosting competitions, trade and barter, and social activities, such as dancing. The sale of horses from the fjord area and outfield resources, especially iron, from the Mountain Land seems to have been especially important for the continuity of markets on the mountain plateau. Skeids, on the other hand, seem to have been connected to a local community's organisation of common areas and marked the end of the shieling season. It is likely that skeids remained exempt from royal control for a longer period of time than markets and remained more communal. In the coastal and fjord areas, towns had a monopoly of trade from the 12th-13th centuries onwards, and especially in the coastal area, urbanisation and industrialisation processes were more extensive, making shieling systems less attractive and important, which led to their earlier demise than in the mountain and valley region. The shorter distance from the farm to shielings in the fjord area and the central coastal land also caused shieling sites and thus skeids to decrease in importance earlier than in the Mountain Land. Originally, however, the number of place names indicating skeids testifies that they must have been of vital importance in prehistoric society, similar to traditions such as the Icelandic *réttir*.

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