

Building Roads and Identities in the Norwegian Fjord Landscape. Landscape and Identity in the Hardanger region.¹

The introduction of roads in the modern sense of the word was a main factor of landscape and identity change in the Norwegian Fjord Landscape. From the late 19th century, building roads and the development of new transportation systems combining sea and land travel changed settlement, work and the way people moved in, and thought of, this landscape. The Hardanger fjord together with the steep mountains rising from them, form the classic Norwegian Fjord Landscape. From the mid 19th century it was established as *the* National landscape of Norway. Making access to tourist attractions such as waterfalls and glaciers were important reasons for building roads from the end of the fjords and into the valleys leading up to Hardangervidda, the largest highland plateau in Northern Europe. The coming of the roads fruitfully set light on the tensions between the landscape seen as a scenery, and as a historically shaped landscape in politic-administrative terms. It will be argued that integrating new perspectives on landscapes are important in the discussions and writing of regional history and regional identities. This line of reasoning is followed through the exploration of two main questions:

1) Did the shift from sea to land transportation change the way the fjord landscape has been an element in the identity of the Hardanger region and as a national landscape? 2) What have been the characterizing elements of this region, the ones constituting its personality?

¹ Only important theoretical references are included in this short version of the paper produced for the conference. The empiric material refers to my book in progress which deals with the history of the municipality of Eidfjord in Inner Hardanger from 1891 to present (K. Grove: *Bygdebok for Eidfjord*. To be published 2010).

– a *polity landscape* (Kenneth Olwig). In this sense, it refers to the Nordic use of landscape (*landskap* in the Scandinavian countries), where landscapes are old judicial-administrative units. At the same time, the view on the landscape is not only from outside, but involves the actors in the landscape, connecting them to it.



Figure 2: The road over Hardangervidda from Eidfjord to Haugastøl, opened 1928. (Eidfjord Municipality, local photo collection)

Transport systems and landscape changes

Hardanger is an old political and administrative unity, bound together by the fjord as the “main road” for inhabitants, as well as the public servants travelling the district as part of their duty. The polity and administrative roots goes back to about 9th century and the laws connected to certain geographic areas or landscapes, as with *Gulatingssloven* for the Western Part of Norway. This principle was used for the making of administrative units further through history, as was the case for Hardanger. From the middle ages and onwards, Hardanger was seen and administered as a unity, first and foremost both military (*skipreide*), but also judicial and fiscal (*sysle, futedøme*). It was certainly a polity shaped region.

The image of Norway and Hardanger brought forward by the painters and other pictorial and theatric expressions was exported abroad, and became an important asset for the coming of tourists to the area. Hardanger was the cradle of imaginative nation-building and a tourist attraction. The mountains, the fjord, the boat, the national costumes and the farmers were important elements for both.

The high mountains in the inner part of the fjord leads up to the high mountain plateau Hardangervidda, were old paths connected the western and eastern part of Norway. Access to the sea and further communication to the rest of the Norwegian coast or to other countries followed the paths across the mountain plateau and down to the fjord. The administrative units in the area had the fjord as basic factor – what made the connections between the townships in the municipalities along and especially across the fjord possible.

Until late 19th century roads for horse-carriages were almost unknown in rural Norway. The first substantial road in the Western part of Norway came about 1870, mainly built as a road for the tourists which now were coming to the Norwegian fjord landscape. Access to this landscape were possible through technological breakthroughs as the steam engine and mining devices, which had major impact at transport both at sea and land. The latter was possible through the building of roads. Gun powder, and later dynamite made it possible to build roads through rocky landscapes, as road tunnels were coming into use from the 1890s. Roads were always leading to a quay at the fjord and a steam boat in regular traffic. A communication system incorporating land and fjord came about, useful both for the inhabitants and the tourists.

The development of roads and their connection to the fjord travel can be divided into four periods:

- 1) 1860-1920: Horses and tourists – from the steam boat quay to tourist attraction.
- 2) 1920-1960: Building roads for motor vehicles to the ferry quays.
- 3) 1960-1990: Roads and cars. The age of the ferries.
- 4) 1990-: Bridges and tunnels - over the fjords and through the mountains. Emancipated from the fjord?

The change from 1902 until present illustrated at map:

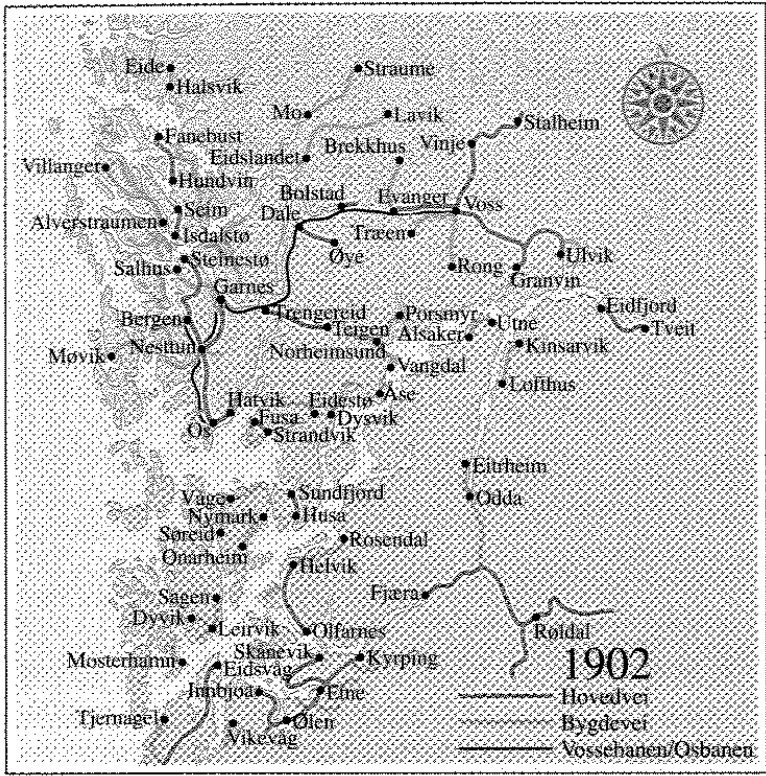


Figure 3: The roads in Hordaland county, 1902. (Kulturhistorisk vegbok Hordaland. Bergen 1993))



Figure 7: Emancipated from the fjord? The roads of Hardanger today.

From fjord to road

The features of regional identity indicate a sense of belonging and attachment for those who live there. In Hardanger several characteristics can be applied to the region; historically as a way of life connected to the fjord and the mountain, though in different mixtures in the region. Common traditions are seen in the folk costume, who were up-heaved to a national costume, showing the near relationship between features of the image of this region and the nation's. Some elements are more long-lasting than others, but are always being changed, as always concerning traditions. What is seen as of ages, as almost eternal, might often not be that old, as the concept of invented traditions reminds us. This is also so, when stressing the physical environment, seeing landscape as an integral and important part of the regional identity.

While discussing identity in the last decade, the weight have been put on the flowing, floating and changeable. This has also been the case concerning regional identities in regional history writing. The stable, but not static elements have either been left out or have been discussed separately in the regional works, leaving behind discussions about the questions of breaks with history or/and historical continuity. But regions are not only created and changed, but shows an surprisingly great amount of stability. This also seems to be the case in the Nordic countries. When asking why, an important part of the answer seems to have to with the way landscapes have been experienced and administered as regions, with the communications as a connecting element. The last decade's popular academic game of looking for essencealism have left the search for more stable elements in culture and identity behind. When looking for stable elements in regions and their identity, is it here suggested to integrate perspectives from the recent debate of landscapes, where studying the physical environment in connection to identity is now being set in front.

To look at how people have moved in the landscapes and tried to shape it for transportation purposes, might be one way to study the relationship between landscape and regional identity. Here, it was asked if the shift from sea to land transportation changed the way the fjord landscape has been an element in the identity of the Hardanger region and as a national landscape. It was also searched for the characterizing elements of this region, the ones constituting its personality.

The polity landscape was the landscape of the user, in Hardanger originally a small farmer, though also being a part-time hunter, salesman, craftsman or worker to earn his and his family's living. When being placed in a scenery landscape, the small farmer and later the inhabitants as a whole got a double role. On one hand, they accepted their role in the scenery, being something of a national symbol. On the other hand, their opinion of using the landscape, was another: nor the old small farmer or his successors have primarily been defending old ways of farming, but welcomed most innovations and tried to find new ways themselves. It has been claimed that many farmers at the beginning of the 20th century saw their way of being in the world like engineers – they were modernizers, not defenders of a old way of life.

This have been reflected in a tension in Hardanger between “scenery” for tourists, where the landscape are seen as the national landscape of Norway and “the polity” landscape of being a historically shaped and changing landscape and region. Regionally, this national landscape and its features were welcomed and became the base for the tourist industry in the area. At the same time it creates problems when coming to the use of resources such as water, fish and animals, and especially in the case of planning and rising industry. Balancing these different attitudes has been a permanent problem in the regional polity making since the beginning of the 20th century. The struggles between the different parts and interests in the area are tried balanced in the Hardanger Council, an advisory board for the six Hardanger municipalities. On the other hand, the more culturally motivated tensions between the inner and outer part of Hardanger is still there, as well as permanent local struggles.

The shift from transportation from fjord to land has been described and proclaimed as an “emancipation from the fjord”. This emancipation has meant huge changes of the fjord landscape, with tunnels through the hard rocks both at land and many places also beneath the fjord, as well as ferry quays and bridges connecting the roads at the fjord sides.

The roads can be said to show the new power structures in the society, as a car-based, individual-oriented society, being a sign or mirror of a liberalist politics and way of life in the western world. New landscapes shows new power structures, also in Hardanger. In this perspective, the Hardanger bridge will be the benchmark of a new time.³ Another feature in

³ A.L.Christensen (2002) *Det norske landskapet*, Pax.

this perspective is a less place-connected identity, where the mentality is lifted out of their local context and instead connected to global networks.⁴ On the other hand, the fjord has always been such a connection to in the world in Hardanger, a fact hardly changed by the roads, but strengthened by other social and economic processes.

Hardanger is still a national landscape, but where the tensions of how the landscape are being changed, still prevail. The shift from fjord or sea based travel to road based travel has been an important feature in a process where the dominant perspective of this regional landscape seems to have changed from a scenery position to a more polity oriented landscape perspective. The fjord is rejected as a requisite in the scenery perspective. But, if asked about this region's personality, the answer would be that Hardanger's, is still a divided one.

⁴ Cf A. Giddens (1990): *The Consequenses of Modernity* Cambridge : Polity Press.