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AutorenJ. Henkner¹, T. Scholten¹, P. Kühn¹¹Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Forschungsbereich Geographie, Bodenkunde & Geomorphologie, Tübingen**Titel**

Land use dynamics in favorable and unfavorable areas of southwest Germany

Abstract

Since the "Neolithic Revolution" and the beginning of agriculture in central Europe about 7.500 a ago human influence on the environment is increasing. Human activities led to quasi-natural relief formation and created in many places a cultural landscape. Colluvial deposits are the correlate sediments of human induced soil erosion on slopes and depict an excellent archive for land use and landscape history. The present study combines pedological, archaeological and palynological analyses and knowledge with AMS ¹⁴C and luminescence datings to build up a stratigraphy of colluvial deposits, thereby allowing the reconstruction of past land use dynamics southwest Germany.

Compared with Black Forest and the Swabian Jura, the Baar is a favorable area for agricultural land use, where seven main phases of colluvial deposition could be detected. Increased colluviation, and thus land use intensity, took place during the younger Neolithic, the early to middle Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Roman Empire, and in three phases from the High Middle Ages onwards. The southeastern Black Forest low mountain range is an unfavorable area characterized by low temperatures, high precipitation and steep slopes. Nevertheless, human influence dates back to the Neolithic. Minor colluvial deposition phases were detected before the Middle Ages and increased formation of colluvial deposits during the High Middle Ages and the Modern Times. The colluvial stratigraphy shows an intense land use of the Black Forest area from the Middle Ages onwards. In the western Swabian Jura the pattern of colluvial deposition indicates land use from the Bronze Age onwards and for one site even since the Neolithic.

The different land use dynamics in the Baar area compared to the Black Forest and Swabian Jura will be discussed against the paleoenvironmental conditions reconstructed from different archives. It is to analyze whether climate was the main determining factor for the settlement pattern in time and space or if there were other factors responsible, such as: different human motivations to settle the land depending on natural or cultural resources, conflicts in neighboring areas or trading relations. Feedback mechanisms of the anthropogenically modified landscape might also interact and determine settlement and land use dynamics.