The study of the interaction between pastoral groups and mountain environments is a growing and significant archaeological research. The investigation of ancient pastoral contexts though, is biased by two main factors: the poor visibility of pastoral sites, related to the mobility of pastoral groups, and the problematic discrimination of pastoral sites and non-pastoral sites. Ethnoarchaeology enables archaeologists to overcome these limitations, by analysing modern and contemporary pastoral sites and landscapes using an archaeological approach. The purpose is to create analogical models for interpreting ancient pastoral contexts.

The first ethnoarchaeological projects that focused on pastoralism were carried out in Africa and the Near East, while Mediterranean transhumance (in Greece, in the Balkans, in Italy and in Spain) was investigated in a second phase. The abundance of historical sources in the latter areas enabled ethnoarchaeologists to develop a diachronic perspective on traditional pastoralism. In recent decades, ethnoarchaeology has also evolved as an independent discipline, beyond archaeological analogy and toward an anthropological interpretation of human interaction with material culture (not only objects but also structures and landscapes).

Ethnoarchaeological projects focused on pastoral activities are rare in the Alps, and traditional pastoralism is disappearing. In the meantime, archaeological activities in the alpine uplands have dramatically increased in recent decades. The success of this research encouraged us to establish an ethnoarchaeological research aimed at understanding how pastoral groups shape upland landscapes. The EthWAL project (Ethnoarchaeology of Western Alpine upland Landscapes) started in 2013, coordinated by Francesco Carrer and Kevin Walsh, with the collaboration of Florence Mocci. It seeks to provide significant analogical models for alpine archaeology, as well as to be a point of reference for the study of modern and contemporary human activities in the alpine uplands. This project has two important characteristics: it is multi-disciplinary, namely it associates archaeological methods (such as survey and excavation) to ethnography, historiography, spatial analysis and soil analysis; it is multi-scalar, being focused on the spatial patterns of pastoral features in the landscape, as well as on the intra-site organization of pastoral sites.

The two study areas selected for this ethnoarchaeological research are in the western Alps: Val Maudagna (Cuneo province, Italy) and Vallée de Freissinières (Dept. des Hautes-Alpes, France). Here pastoral features have been positioned using handheld GPS and their main characteristics have been described: shape, size, preservation, etc. Local herders and farmers have been interviewed and historical documents and maps have been acquired to study the evolution of the mountain landscapes. Specific attention has been given to traditional dry-stone huts. In the Val Maudagna, some of these huts are still used by local herders as summer refuges and dairies; in the Vallée de Freissinières, instead, they are completely abandoned. One structure per study area has been selected for archaeological excavation. The analysis of the data collected in the field is still ongoing, but nonetheless the first results enable some preliminary inferences.

Firstly, the current pastoral landscapes in the two study areas seem to be the product of complex historical processes, affecting pastoral strategies and consequently the interaction between pastoral groups and mountain environment. The awareness of the historical complexity of pastoral landscapes provides theoretical and methodological means for their management. Pastoral landscapes can be promoted as touristic attractions. Also, current environmental policies could benefit from the historical reconstruction of the interaction between pastoral groups and mountain environments. This project will also have an impact on theory and methods of ethnoarchaeology and landscape archaeology. On the one level, it shows the importance of integrating different disciplines and approaches that have the potential to disentangle complex landscape formation processes. On the other level, it suggests that good analogical models for archaeology have to be based on historical reconstructions. Furthermore, it demonstrates the potential of spatial analysis in ethnoarchaeology.