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Déborah Kessler-Bilthauer

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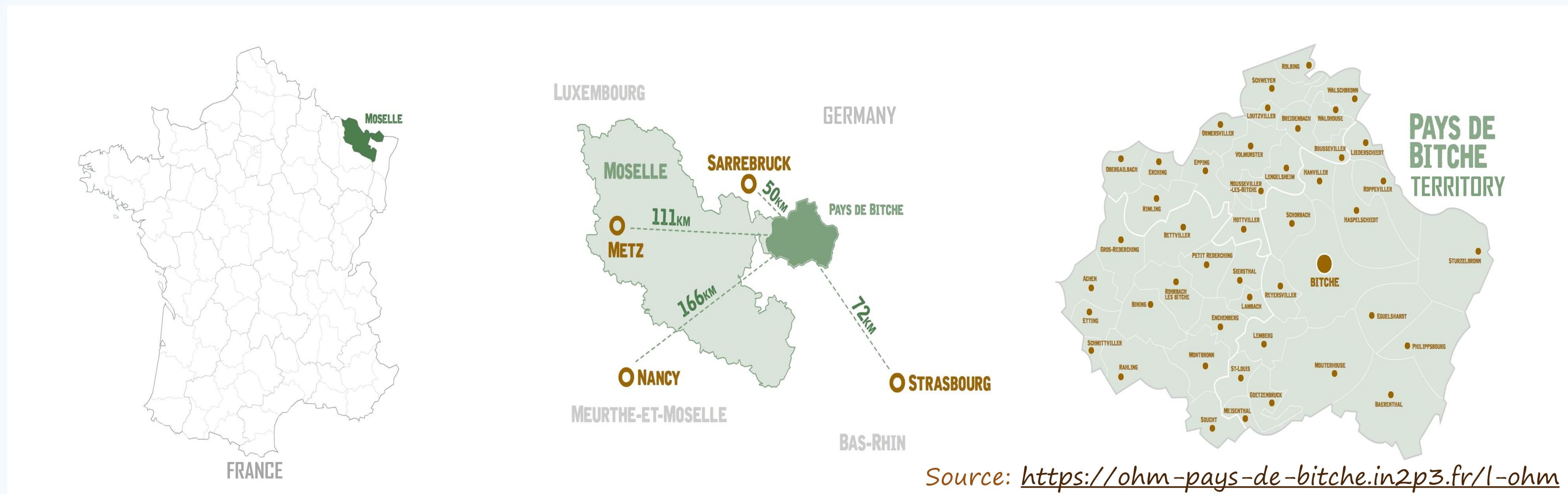
# Perceptions and representations of the Pays de Bitche territory: A mind map approach

Déborah Kessler-Bilthauer  
OHM Pays de Bitche, University of Lorraine, Metz, France.



**The research:** In 2016, an ethnographic survey based on 26 recorded, long and in-depth interviews was conducted in the **Pays de Bitche territory with workers in the agricultural sector and local actors**. This research was also based on the analysis of **mind maps** produced by the informants. Mind maps are meaningful tools that allow the interpretation of spatial representations. On a voluntary basis, about fifteen respondents agreed to take part in this exercise. They were asked, without further instructions, to express on a sheet of paper their territory, the way they perceived it, what seemed to them characteristic or typical.

**Objective:** The idea was to identify their subjective representations of the environment of this territory called *Bitcherland* and their relationship to space in the ways in which it is **conceived, perceived and experienced**. With a narrative description, some informants preferred a drawing, a plan, a cartography or a list of evocative words and symbols.



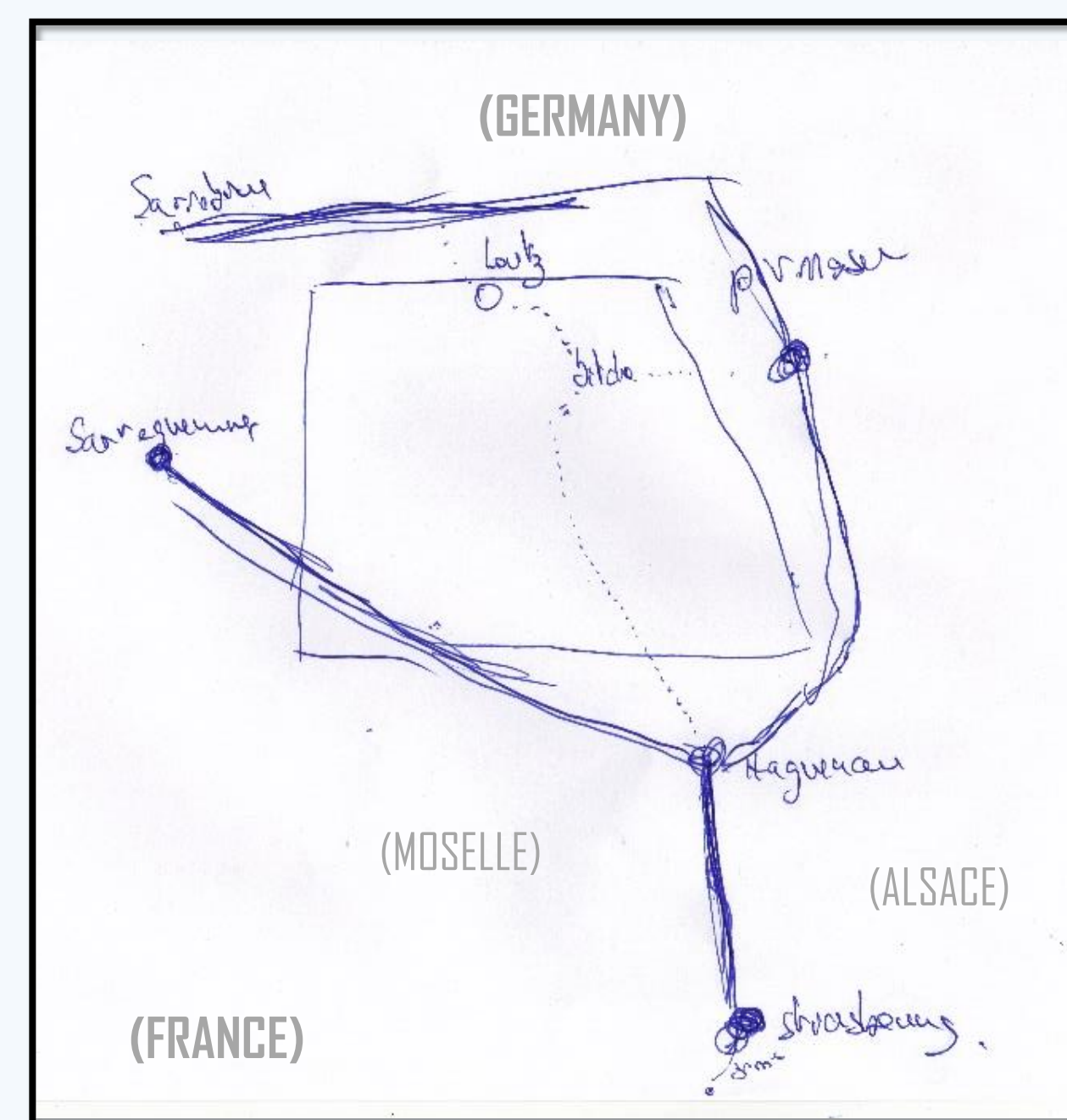
Source: <https://ohm-pays-de-bitche.in2p3.fr/l-ohm>

The analysis of these mind maps reveals salient dimensions.

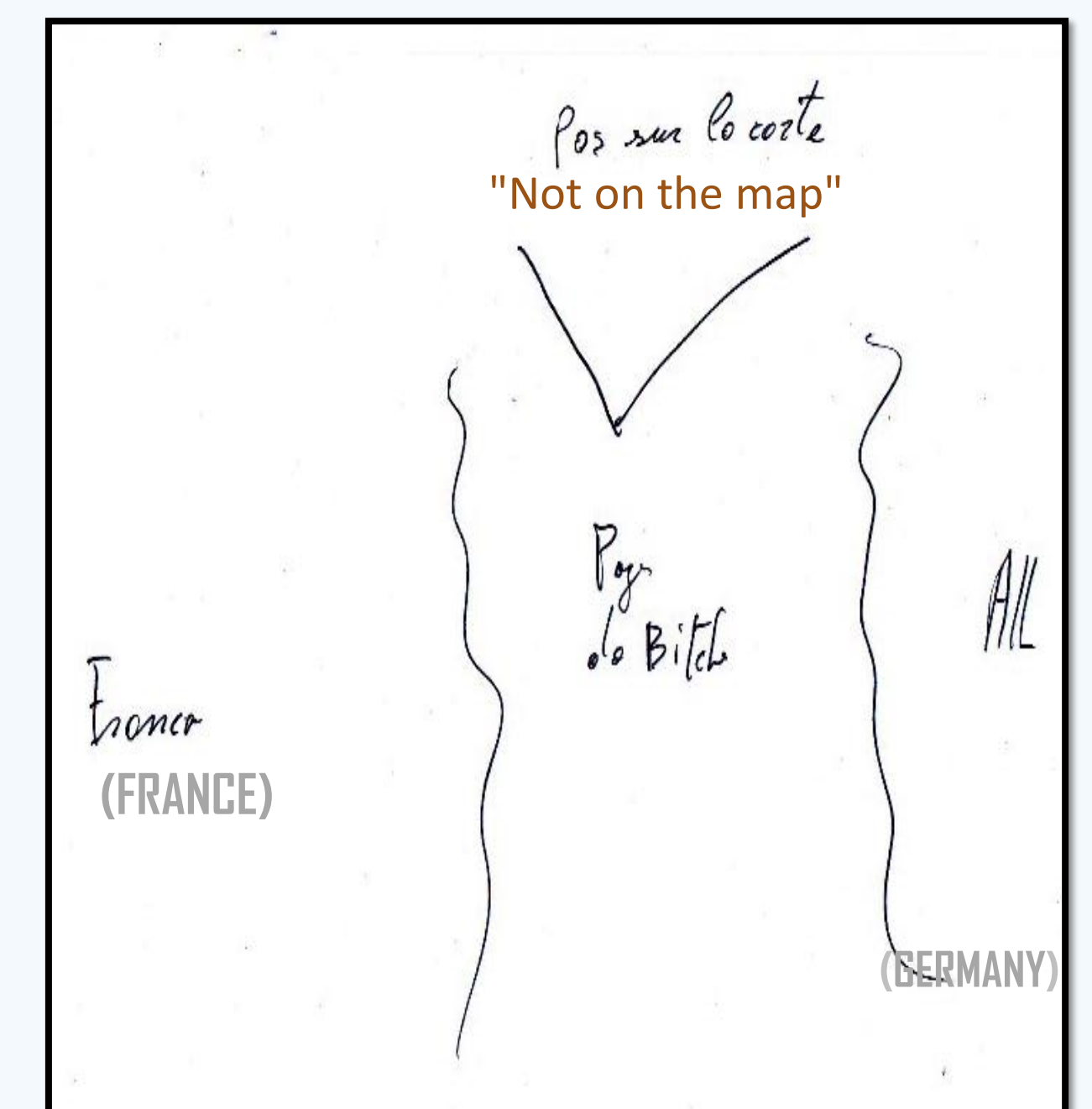
## A geographic approach of spaces

The territory is the result of a political and territorial construction that the inhabitants do not always take up. Some informants, through their illustrations, have favored a **geographical approach** to the territory to emphasize its **political construction** and assert **its borders**. Many of them also describe and portrayed the relative **isolation of their territory** between to two areas of the Grand-Est that were considered more prosperous and the German border territory, which was more attractive especially in terms of employment.

Aware that their territory is "landlocked", poorly served by transport routes and local services, the people encountered don't suffer geographical or social isolation because the use of the car is routine; it is not experienced as a constraint, and social relations are rather dense, especially at the level of the village and those around it.



Mind map made by a 44-year-old farmer. The surrounding towns are represented: Sarreguemines, Haguenau, Strasbourg (in France), and Pirmasens and Sarrebruck in Germany. The town of Bitche is in the center and the main traffic routes are shown to explain the difficulties that the inhabitants encounter in reaching the territory from the surrounding towns.



Mind map represented by a young farmer who emphasizes the importance of borders and the character, according to him, "lost" of the territory. Note that the Pays de Bitche, distinctly, is surrounded by France and Germany, without being part of it. The territory is thus separated and differentiated from these two countries.

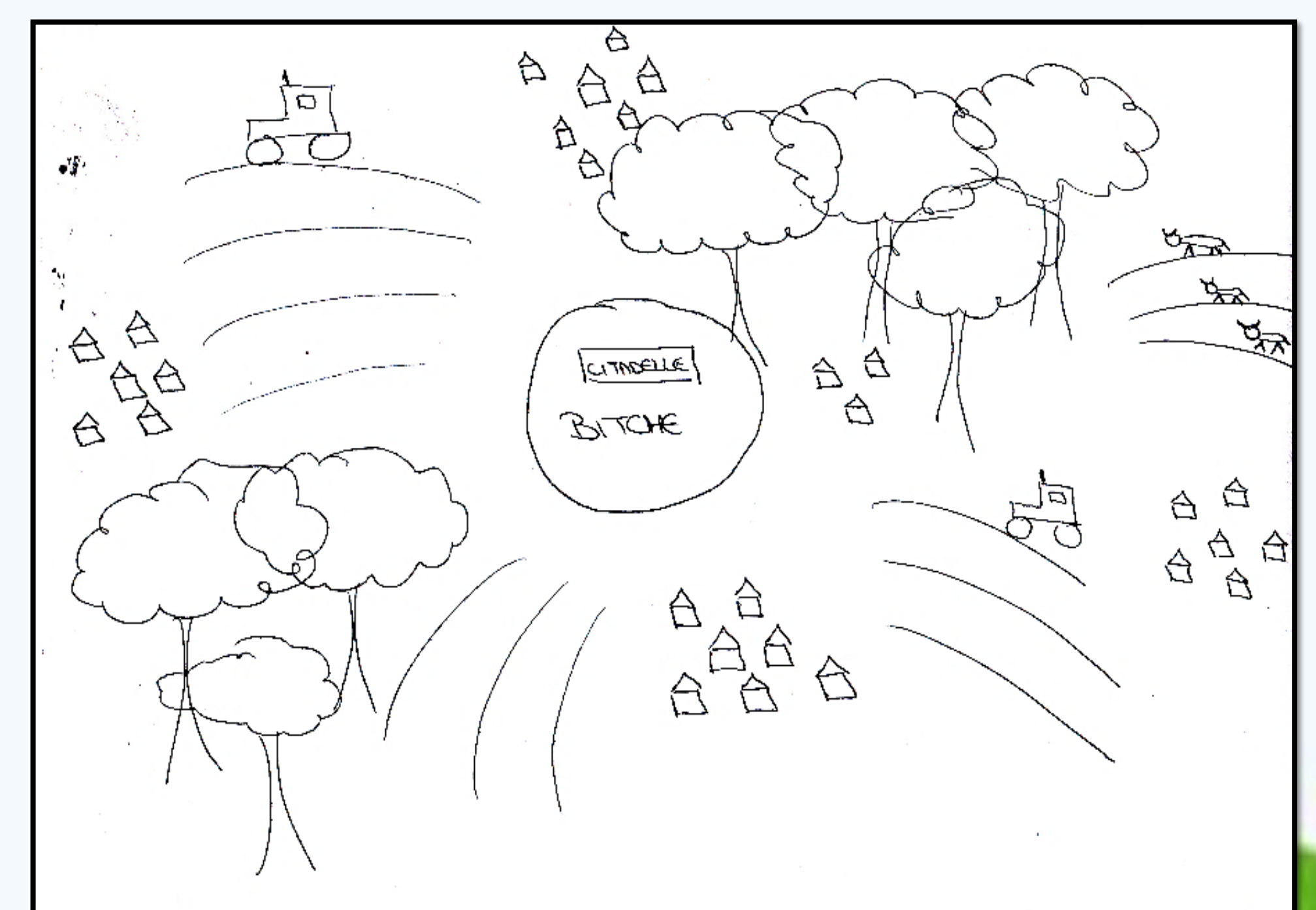
## A territory based on human activities, "traditions" and nature



Mind map of a young woman farmer. We can notice the low anthropization, the hilly forest and agricultural landscape, the watercourse. The landscape of the Pays de Bitche is also marked by the military presence, the remnants of war such as the bunker in the foreground and the citadel dominating the center of the drawing. Tourism and leisure activities are also emphasized with keywords: "picnic" (a pint of beer, a wine glass, cheese and sausages are laid out on a tablecloth on the grass), "promenade", "village festival", "music", "Platt", "speaking Platt", "village", "rural world", "crafts", "that we no longer find elsewhere".

To **counterbalance** these rather **negative stereotypes** which usually weigh on the Pays de Bitche seen as a landlocked, "sad", "isolated" territory, it is very often presented in terms of **human activities and cultural and linguistic "traditions", local products**, etc., seen as popular and characteristic things of the area.

This territory is rather represented as a **preserved cultural, social and heritage space**, rather stable and immobile, and, at the same time, it is described as a **locality "on the move"**. The inhabitants of *Bitcherland* carries a strong social identity, with a **language**, a shared dialect (called the *Platt*), a certain way of life considered "traditional", and common representations of what the rural landscape, nature and agriculture are.



Mind map made by the wife of a young farmer. She began her drawing with the citadel of Bitche in the center. The walled city is surrounded by woods, cultivated and curved fields, meadows and small villages.

The mind maps refer very clearly to **diversified** and **"preserved" "natural"** environments, little anthropized, but also to **landscapes worked by farmers**. The richness is constituted in the **diversity** of landscapes in the Pays de Bitche. The alternation of meadows, forests, fields, "wastelands", orchards (called "hautes-tiges") and remnants of wars is described as typical of this territory. Whether they live in *covered* or *uncovered* country, informants did not cite altitude as a feature of the landscape. Because they do not generally have the impression of living in a mountain area. This feeling is reinforced by an overall impression of plains, hills or plateau which prevails and which is reinforced by the absence of summits.

