

Space, Place, Narratives – Toponym registries and atlases as resources for historical place names research

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Abstract:

With the spatial turn in the humanities, the representation of space through places as distinct entities becomes more significant. This has redefined the potential importance of place name registers, whether analogue or digital.

As the demand for information related to places as uniquely identifiable entities has grown, digital online gazetteers such as GOV (Historical Place Inventory), GeoNames and thesaurus-like structured databases of geographic names (Getty Thesaurus) try to step in using technical approaches such as linking data or employing Volunteered Geographic Information, to provide the information needed. In addition, numerous area-, period- and topic-related gazetteers are produced in and for specific, project-driven research contexts, rarely transcending disciplinary borders. The majority of these data repositories focus on expanding horizontally (more names) rather than (vertically) accumulating information about already documented geographical entities, which adds to multiplicity and to uncertainty. Furthermore, place names (and places) change over time which is the major source of the ambiguity. Such, in different historical and regional contexts, the given digital data results in inconclusive information for users, leaving them with unclear georeferencing results.

Over the last four years, the project “Names change, places too” has developed an open-source tool (gazetteers.net) to evaluate consistency, accuracy and uncertainty of historic place names in large gazetteer databases. The application supports the identification of toponyms in different databases that possibly refer to the same geographical entity and the creation of links corresponding items across gazetteers, facilitating data aggregation and comparison.

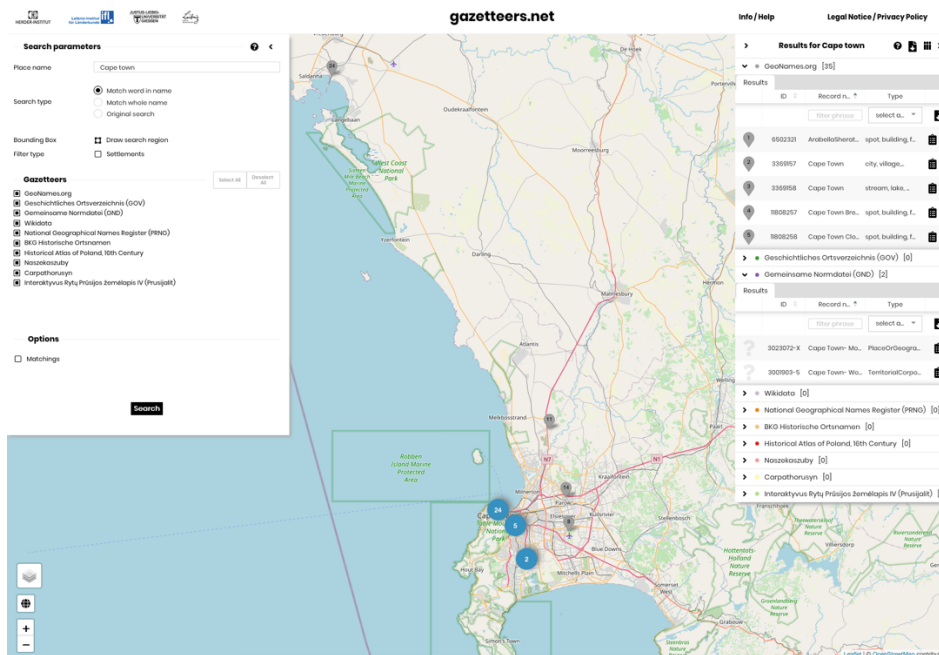


Figure 1: Web application gazetteers.net

For a harmonized data structure, digital gazetteers have been examined for their structure (semantics, description of metadata) and content (reliability of assignment between place names and coordinates) to revise and refine an open metadata structure which forms the basis for the integration of additional gazetteers.

As secondary source, atlases for centuries have been a main reference for place names. Based on concepts going back to Ptolemy, combining lists of place names with cartographic visualization geographically identifies the locational referents of proper names. Historically this function has driven the atlas development over time and „containing more places“ has been a major selling point until today e.g. in advertising the 15th edition of the Times Atlas as „fully updated mapping with now over 200,000 place names“. In this respect, every atlas is a knowledge organization system, that can be understood as analogue gazetteer and that can be employed to horizontally and vertically enrich gazetteers (Losang 2021).

The paper shows the integration of place related data in atlases, to enable the assessment of spatial information derived by adapting the different information modes (lists of place names and related maps) in atlases for the use in the above-mentioned online tool.

By employing a critical cartographic approach, the paper aims to connect geographical discourses inherent in existing gazetteers to atlases and their narratives to reveal specific power-knowledge relations that may facilitate the understanding of the importance of gazetteers in atlases as outstanding source for historic research.

Reference:

Losang, E., 2021, The Atlas as Gazetteer – facilitating historical research by enriching digital place names databases with digitized atlas indexes. *Abstr. Int. Cartogr. Assoc.*, 3, 186, <https://doi.org/10.5194/ica-abs-3-186-2021>, 2021