
REVIEW ARTICLE

Retrieving the pre-industrial built environments of Europe: the Historic Towns Atlas programme and comparative morphological study

Michael P. Conzen, Committee on Geographical Studies, The University of Chicago, 5828 S. University Avenue, Chicago, 60637-1583, USA. E-mail: m-conzen@uchicago.edu

Urban form has fascinated scholars and citizens since the dawn of cities. The pictorial record of that interest is astonishingly rich and varied. After the Renaissance, urban cartography emerged to capture the dimensions and spatial composition of urban environments with increasing scientific accuracy and social purpose. Today we should be lost without ready access to sophisticated modern maps and plans of urban areas at all scales and with all manner of physical and cultural content. We take them for granted. But if we seek to understand how today's urban environments have evolved to their present state, to grasp the historical processes behind their transformations through time – which is the declared goal of genetic urban morphology as a broad field of study – the cartography available to us is largely that surviving from past epochs. The further back in time the greater the likely departure of the maps from what today we call planimetric accuracy. Intriguing and aesthetically delightful as much urban mapping from the past may be, the subjective informality of many town plans before the advent of modern cadastral surveys presents hefty challenges to their interpretation and meaning (Kain and Baigent, 1992).

Most difficult of all is the barrier to comparability among towns for scientific purposes posed by the variable scales and often-disparate content and completeness of their historical plans, not to mention endemic idiosyncrasies of symbolization and design. While maps of cities made centuries ago are fit

subjects for analytical deconstruction for the cultural significance that can be inferred from their style, content, authorship, production, dissemination, and audience, their possible shortcomings as accurate representations of conditions on the ground at the time do define their limits for advanced study. In short, the question remains: is there some way to create new maps of towns at past moments in their history made to modern standards of spatial accuracy that would present urban topography with comparable scientific precision across time and between regions, taking into account the enormous variety of the original documents? This is the challenge that the multinational European Historical Towns Atlas (HTA) programme has grappled with now for some four decades or more. Examining the collective response to this challenge is the purpose of this study.

The HTA project is not designed to produce comprehensive or eclectic historical atlases of towns in the conventional sense, in which general community history is glimpsed in maps of episodic social, economic, political, and military patterns tied to people and events and culled usually from secondary literature. Informative as such efforts are, they generally delineate the uniqueness of their towns' histories and are not meant to be compared head to head. The HTA programme, on the other hand, aims to map at a uniform scale and with similar design the built environment of many individual towns so they can be compared directly across the many individual

publications. Before looking into the particular nature of this project – its goals, products, and impact – it is worth asking how and why such a creative impulse emerges in the first place, and what precedents prepared the ground for its eventual florescence.

Antecedents

The impulse to make new maps of places in past times was fathered by the Renaissance and mothered by the sensibilities of the Enlightenment. Early projects were maps reconstructing the classical topography of Jerusalem and important seats of Western civilization such as Constantinople and Rome as singular symbols of cultural achievement (Oberhummer, 1907, p. 100). By the middle of the nineteenth century such sentiment had reached less lofty urban centres. In 1859 a cultural historian, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, could write of Augsburg that its town map served as the ground plan of society, meaning that the peculiarity of its layout and physical build expressed in material form the spirit of its people (Riehl, 1859, p. 270). By the latter decades of the century antiquarians were designing new maps of places to retrieve a visual sense of the daily environments of past generations and the grandeur of some of the world's greatest urban creations. Doubtless the most spectacular was the archaeologist Rodolfo Amedeo Lanciani's map of Rome, borrowing the title of its third century A.D. predecessor *Forma Urbis Romae*, issued in eight parts, featuring the cartography of Luigi Salomone (Lanciani and Salomone, 1893-1901).

It was in this very general context that Johannes Fritz, a Strassburg schoolteacher, published a small monograph containing a comparative study of German town plans (Fritz, 1894). Appearing in the journal of his school, it took some time to be noticed, but it caught the attention of geographer Otto Schlüter and archeologist/art historian Paul Jonas Meier, who in turn helped spark a growing interdisciplinary cadre of geographers, historians, and architects to study

town plans as keys to regional urban identity (Meier, 1907; Schlüter, 1899). At this time the essence of town-plan analysis lay in ordering the system of streets, and the distribution of public buildings and market places into simple typologies that correlated with regional patterns of historic German colonization across Central Europe, and with a trend over time from irregular arrangement to rectilinear grid forms. One motive for such interest lay in the potential town plans held for offering morphological evidence of how cities had first emerged and then developed, particularly in periods for which the documentary record was sparse. So early town-plan analysis was often most enthusiastically endorsed by medievalists, persuaded that in many instances streets, public spaces and important buildings have survived little changed in their spatial composition since at least the Middle Ages.

The graphic standard in this work consisted of simplified sketch maps of plans drawn from diverse sources reduced in scale to fit several on a page, like plant specimens pinned in a glass case. But gradually, the scope of interpretation of town plans widened: their divisibility into distinct growth phases became recognized, however superficially, as well as, occasionally, the patterns of urban plots within street-blocks (Klaiber, 1912; Neumann, 1911). A striking Austrian atlas appeared in this period also, Hugo Hassinger's *Kunst-historischer Atlas von Wien*, which focused on the documentation – and mapping – of architectural styles arising from a concern for historic preservation in the dynamic imperial city (Hassinger, 1916). The significance of all this expanding interdisciplinary work within the German-speaking regions of the early-twentieth century for the general development of genetic urban morphology has been expertly summarized by Whitehand (1981, pp. 2-7).

Meier continued to publish on the subject, absorbing and reflecting these developments in his own work (Meier, 1909, 1914), and he must have taken note of Karl O. Müller's small atlas of Upper Swabian town plans (Müller, 1914). By the early 1920s, however, Meier had fixed on an ambitious map publication



Figure 1. Excerpt from P. J. Meier's *Niedersächsischer Städteatlas*, Braunschweig fascicle, Tafel 7: Braunschweig in 1760, 1:5000 (from the 3rd edn, 1926) – actual scale (reproduced from a copy in the Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago).

programme of an entirely new order. His *Niedersächsischer Städteatlas* contained folios of loose multi-coloured plans of 13 towns in Lower Saxony, each at a common scale of 1:5000, representing the towns as they appeared on the cadastral survey of the late-eighteenth century, and some including contours drawn from modern government maps (Meier, 1922). Attached was a text folio giving summary town histories. These plans set a new standard for comparative morphological study and offered a model for emulation in other regions (Figure 1). They introduced the individual urban plot as a fundamental spatial unit embedded within the town plan. The map series for Braunschweig even included plans for multiple dates, fortifications, and one identifying the town's growth phases.

The series was re-issued in 1926, and further folios of 7 additional towns appeared in 1933 and 1935. Although the publisher, Georg Westermann, reissued the atlas in part in 1953,

the political turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s had sapped the project of its energy well before Meier's death in 1946 at age 91. Although Meier never completed his regional atlas of reconstructed historical town plans, the seed he planted fell less on stony ground than simply on dry ground awaiting irrigation. After the terrible dislocations of the Second World War, and in part owing to them, the idea of studying urban history comparatively through the development of detailed morphological atlases would be revived, under completely different auspices, but following quite remarkably the model conceived by Meier.

An international co-operative atlas programme

The 'Historic Towns Atlas' programme initiated in 1955 by the Commission Internationale pour l'Histoire des Villes (Inter-

national Commission for the History of Towns, or ICHT) of the Comité Internationale des Sciences Historiques was not a declared attempt to resuscitate and expand the Meier legacy, but it had that indirect effect. The project was more immediately motivated, as Anngret Simms has put it, by a 'spirit of reconciliation in the aftermath of the devastating destruction of European towns in the Second World War', and more broadly as one effort to rediscover what Europeans have in common culturally, following a global conflict started in their very midst (Simms 2006a, p. 24). It was only one of the Commission's scientific initiatives, but it received support from influential members Hermann Aubin and Hektor Ammann.

While the Commission's remit was, of course, to set up an international – and also, incidentally, an interdisciplinary – programme of historical towns' atlases, the early thinking that informed its conceptualization and practical organization drew on prior German effort. A year before the ICHT was even formed, Erich Keyser and Emil Meynen, well-respected historian and geographer respectively, had co-written a position paper laying out the rationale and plan for a 'Deutscher Städteatlas' (Keyser, Kraus and Meynen, 1954). The idea meshed with the work of Heinz Stoob (1956), who continued to build on it and in 1968 made concrete proposals to the ICHT for a European-wide atlas programme, which were accepted (Simms, 2006a, p. 24). A year later Stoob founded the Institut für vergleichende Stadtgeschichte in Münster which would anchor much of what soon became an energetic and sustained German contribution to the multinational programme. While Stoob acknowledged Meier's groundbreaking 1922 historic towns' atlas of Lower Saxony of more than four decades earlier, he drew little attention to the remarkable extent of the similarity between Meier's atlas concept and the one accepted by the ICHT (Stoob, 1985, p. 583). The only key difference lay in the map scale chosen for the main cadastral map (1:5000 by Meier, 1:2500 by Stoob).

The central, enduring purpose of the HTA

programme has been, in the words of a British atlas committee member, 'the provision of atlases of cartographically standardized town plans accompanied by commentaries supported by subsidiary maps and plans, the whole to serve as a major research aid for the comparative study of the history of towns in Europe and the ultimate identification of historical types of towns' (M. R. G. Conzen, 1976a, p. 3). Particularly favoured in that history would be those centuries leading up to the early- and mid-nineteenth century, before the effects of industrialization transformed the areal scale and internal complexity of towns and disturbed the historical 'layering' of their urban cores. A key moment in a town's history would be sought for mapping that still reflected its traditional urban form.

To accomplish this goal, atlas committees were set up in member countries to recruit scholars – historians, geographers, archaeologists, cartographers, and other topographical specialists – for research, writing, and mapmaking, to obtain funding and secure research facilities for sustained work, and to find publishing partners. Most groups received governmental support in some form or other, many affiliating with national academies of sciences and humanities, and not infrequently obtaining supplementary support from interested commercial enterprises. Systematic information regarding this organizational side of the atlas programme is listed in the national entries on a supportive Vienna website (Oppl, 2008). In 1993 the ICHT established a standing Atlas Committee, headed by Professors Anngret Simms (Ireland) and Ferdinand Oppl (Austria), to co-ordinate progress among member nations, and the fall of the Iron Curtain after 1989 brought new members from Eastern Europe into the programme and a fresh infusion of energy. For some of these cases, the towns' atlas programme represented a golden opportunity for urban scholars to contribute to the retrieval of regional urban cultural consciousness suppressed during the Soviet era (Bocchi, 2006).

Perhaps because the tradition of scholarly town-plan analysis discussed earlier was so

well embedded in German historiography, or perhaps for other reasons, the German programme spawned multiple atlas series, and thereby stands apart from all other national efforts. Stooß established the national-scale *Deutscher Städteatlas* and the regional-scale *Westfälischer Städteatlas* series in Münster, while Edith Ennen founded a regional-scale *Rheinischer Städteatlas* series in Bonn. Much more recently, a *Hessischer Städteatlas* series was added, based in Marburg.

From the very inception of the atlas programme all parties understood the projects would take years and possibly decades to complete. The first publication was a volume of selected English towns issued in 1969, and the first atlas folio published in Germany followed 3 years later. Over the nearly 40 years since, publications covering nearly 450 towns in 17 countries have been issued (up to mid-2008) (Oppl, 2008).

Atlas content

The goal of comparability across regional atlas products demanded that guidelines be established. Stooß took the lead in this respect and defined a three-part model for basic contents, which he put into effect for the *Deutscher Städteatlas* and the *Westfälischer Städteatlas*, and which the ICHT adopted in principle. Notwithstanding the fact that the initial volumes of the British and Rhineland atlases appeared in print earlier and departed in some respects from the Stooß model, it became the standard against which all others would be judged. The key components of the official guidelines were, and still are, (1) three 'canonical' maps, (2) supplementary maps, and (3) a commentary on the principal map. Additional features are found in many atlas series but have generally been considered optional. While the need for some flexibility has always been acknowledged, the extent to which atlases might depart from strict adherence to the guidelines has long been a source of discussion, dispute, and sometimes, apparently, plain disregard.

Canonical maps

The three essential maps are as follows:

(a) a cadastral map or 'main map', multi-coloured and newly-drawn, reconstructing the built-up area of the town as it appeared in the early-nineteenth century at 1:2500 scale – a scale sufficient to show significant details of building footprints, street lines, and plot patterns with measurable accuracy; based on one of various types of large scale maps, usually an official cadastral survey from the first half of the nineteenth century;

(b) a regional map showing the situation of the town in the same period at 1:25 000 scale (which for convenience may be a reproduction of an old map); and

(c) a modern town plan at 1:5000 scale (reproducing a modern government topographic map for simplicity's sake).

There is a fourth map so basic to the interpretive utility of the atlas that it was included by Stooß as a matter of course in the two atlas series he initiated, and that is

(d) a growth-phases map. This shows a classification of the town quarters (or plan units) by their periods of planning and construction, giving a diachronic view of the areal pattern and sequence by which the town grew. It provides invaluable context for examining the details of the town's morphological texture appearing on the cadastral map. While maps (a) – (c) can be considered the irreducible 'canon', the present author, in agreement with Stooß, prefers to regard the admirable canon as a '3 + 1' combination including the growth-phases map as well.

An example of a historically reconstructed cadastral map intended to be the centrepiece of every town atlas is given in Figure 2. Although it is missing from or appears in modified form in some national atlas series, it appears as expected in over 90 per cent of town atlases overall (thanks to the sheer number of German cases). It was the original goal to have such a map at a large uniform scale for historical towns all across Europe. As for the growth-phases map, an outstanding example is that included in the new *Deutscher*

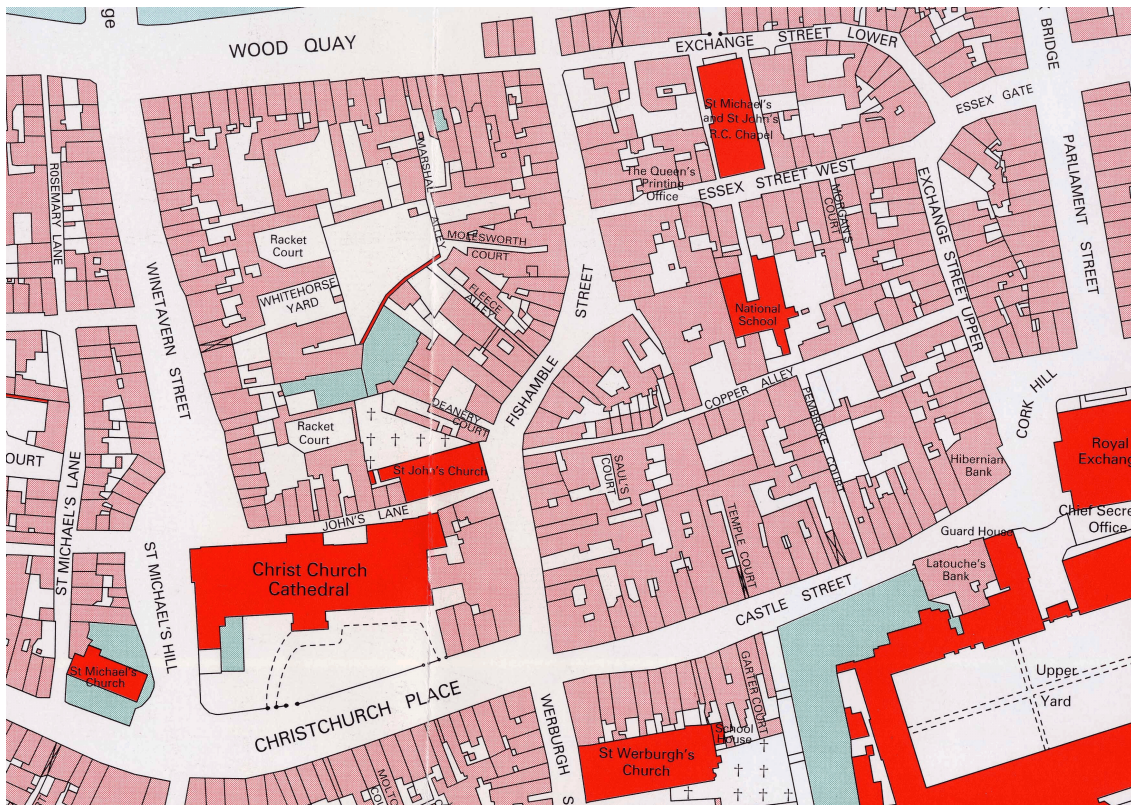


Figure 2. Example of the canonical 1:2500 comparative ‘main map’ in the HTA programme: excerpt from the *Irish historic towns atlas*, Dublin fascicle, Map 2: Reconstruction 1846–7 (2002) – actual scale (reproduced with permission from the Royal Irish Academy).

Historischer Städteatlas folio for Quedlinburg (Figure 3).

Supplementary maps and other visual material

The history of individual towns’ urban form usually provides opportunities to include subsidiary maps focusing on special features of the town plan, such as fortifications, the outlines of a Roman castrum beneath the medieval city, special zones such as a Jewish ghetto or a monastic site, modifications to the street system, parish boundaries, or distribution maps of social characteristics (such as occupations, or rents). There is a wide range of possibilities here, and atlases have usually taken advantage of specialized maps that archives have yielded or data that atlas cartographers have been able to plot on base maps. Generally, there is great variety in

size, scale and coverage of the town in these maps.

Pictorial illustrations grace most town atlases in the programme. Historical panoramas have been especially popular, but graphic works of street scenes and major buildings have obvious appeal and relevance to the interpretation of the main cadastral map. There has been a significant increase in this class of content in recent years.

Commentary

Stoob decreed a fixed length of two folio sheets of text to explicate the content and meaning of each town’s cadastral map. Most atlases in the programme have opted for a more flexible formula to adjust for town size and historical complexity. There has also been considerable variation in the degree to which

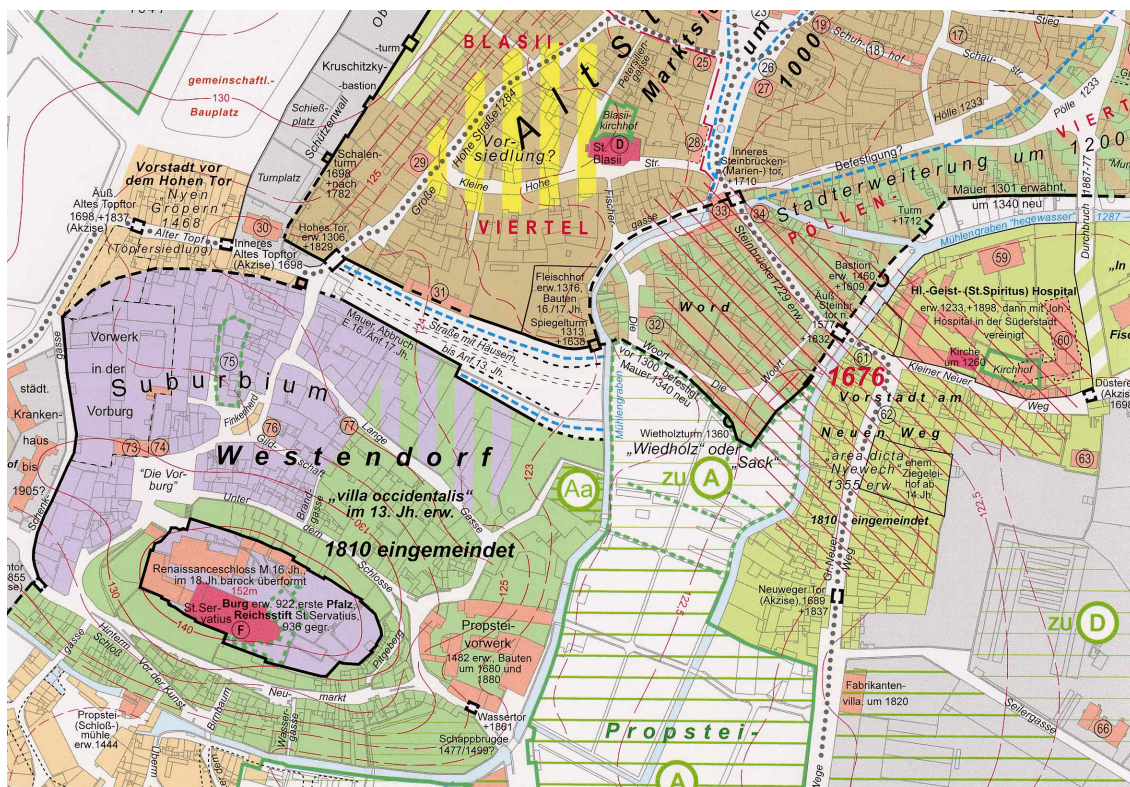


Figure 3. Example of a ‘growth-phases’ map (1:5000): excerpt from the *Deutscher Historischer Städteatlas*, Quedlinburg fascicle (2006) – actual scale (reproduced with permission from the Institut für Vergleichende Städtegeschichte, Münster).

the commentaries actually clarify the content and geography of the features on the map. Some early British texts summarize the town’s general history with no reference to the cadastral map at all, an editorial failing that has drawn much criticism (M. R. G. Conzen, 1976a; Slater, 1996, p. 746).

An important innovation in some atlases has been the inclusion of gazetteer information of various kinds. This ranges from full listing of all significant buildings with copious historical data on each, to extensive lists of source materials used in the mapwork and commentary, and sometimes includes additional material on property features, such as tenure and taxes, or even a listing of inhabitants at certain points in time. The Irish atlases are considered excellent in this regard, as are the folios of the Rhineland series (Clarke, forthcoming, a; Hennessy, forthcoming).

Format

Original thinking emphatically favoured a loose-leaf folio format for all atlases in the programme. The advantage of this over bound volumes is that map sheets can vary in size to fit the conditions of towns small and large, and can be placed easily next to other sheets on a desk and compared synoptically with ease. But there have been notable exceptions to this initial understanding, which will reappear later in the discussion.

The progress of mapping

Over the more than 40-year life of the atlas programme a remarkable array of towns has been mapped across Europe. The distribution of these towns (Figure 4) reflects the pattern of countries for which atlas initiatives have been

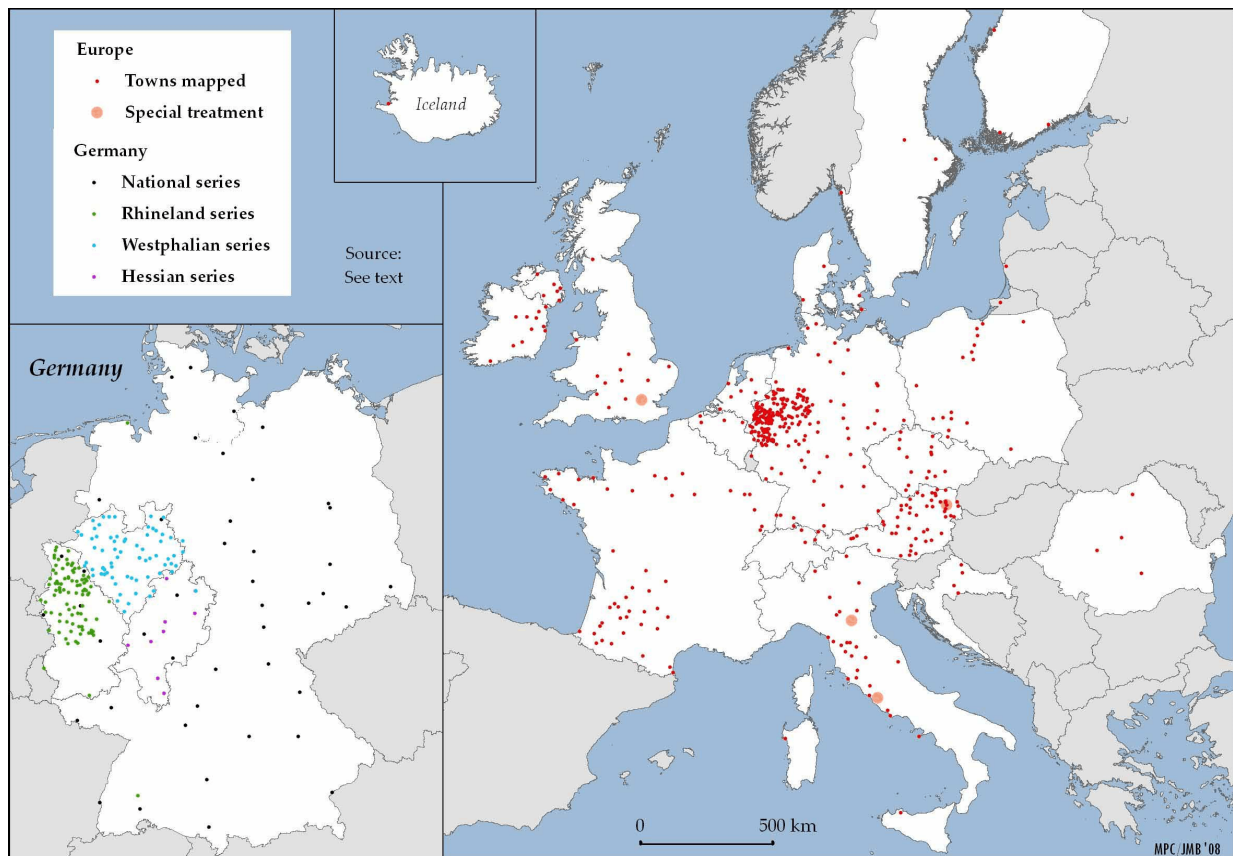


Figure 4. Distribution of European towns mapped by the HTA programme, to 2008.

formed and products created. It is a testimony to the drive and perseverance of the ICHT programme's lead editors (in the early years Stooß, and in the later years Simms and Opll), that urbanists in seventeen countries have been persuaded to join this arduous international effort. Strikingly, no atlases have been created for towns in Norway, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, although there are signs that Spanish interest in 'joining the club' is growing (Clarke, forthcoming, b).

The internal distribution of 'atlased' towns within countries reveals stronger biases than the original selection criteria would have led one to predict. Space does not permit an adequate discussion of this aspect, but the goals of mapping a representative array of different historical town types (medieval, post-medieval, capitals, ports, market centres, mining towns, and so on), as well as seeking a broad regional spread were necessarily subject to practical limits set by accessible sources,

willing personnel, and available funding. The extraordinary *fleißigkeit* – hard work – of the German teams has resulted not only in the most even national coverage but also in an amazing density of mapped towns in some western regions (see inset in Figure 4). In addition, the Austrian coverage has achieved excellent density and regional balance. These qualities go far toward achieving the intensive cartographic portrait for these areas that was envisaged at the outset in the programme for Europe as a whole.

Viewed chronologically (Figure 5), the progress of atlas production shows an interesting cyclical pattern. The British and German efforts charged ahead first, although the latter showed much more staying power and continue energetically to this day with new releases. The British project limped along but foundered after the London volume, permitting Terry Slater – in a splendid review of the entire programme in the mid-1990s – to

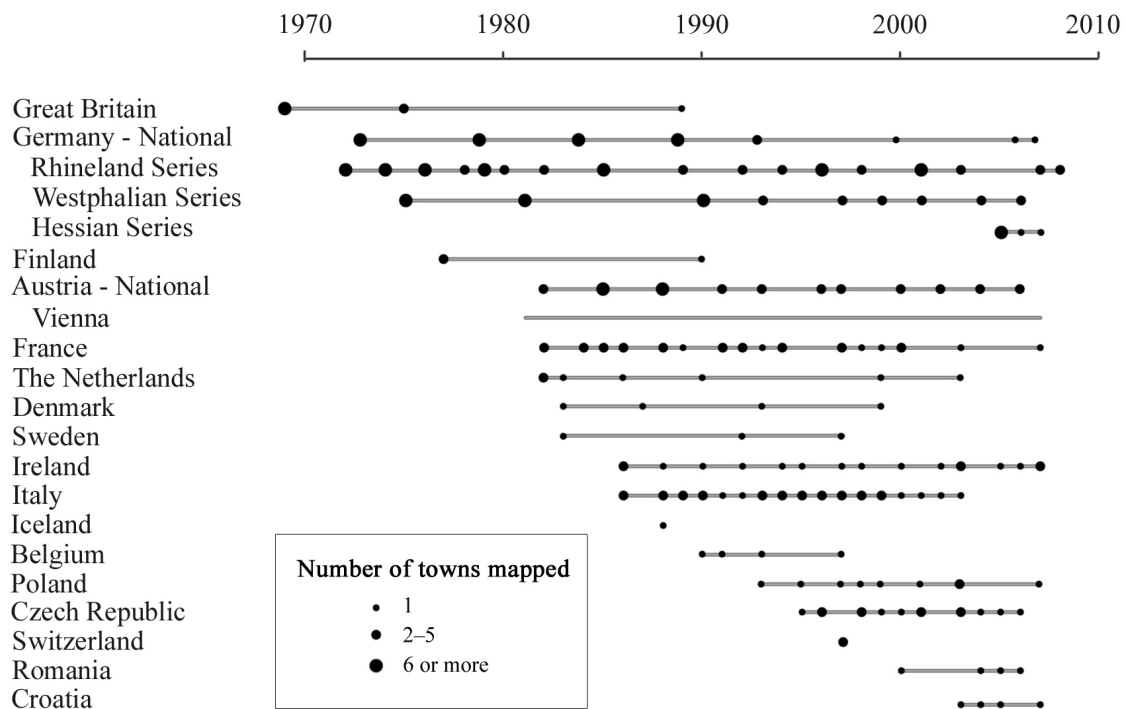


Figure 5. Historic Towns Atlas production history.

declare the British effort moribund (Slater, 1996, p. 747). Fortunately, this situation has been reversed, and work is advancing on an atlas for Winchester and six other towns (Keene, forthcoming). A second cycle opened in the early 1980s when six national teams brought out their first atlases; among these Austria and France have maintained momentum. In 1981 the Austrians began issuing newly-conceived sheet maps for a folio atlas of Vienna that has since reached majestic proportions, treating numerous morphological as well as socio-economic themes on a scale so far without parallel in a European urban historical atlas. Soon after, Ireland and Italy entered at a solid pace, although it is 5 years since the last Italian volume appeared. The last 20 years have seen the enthusiastic participation of Central and East European groups, especially those in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as late-appearing token efforts from Belgium and Switzerland. Figure 5 reveals the difficulty some regional teams have had in proceeding in a sustained way.

National variations in subject matter and comparability

These differences in gestation signal a broader pattern of variation in what the atlases have to offer. Space does not permit an extended review of the legion of particular differences among the 27 or so distinct atlas series, but two earlier comparative review articles provide close examinations of many of the key features of the earlier but now more mature series (BorgWik and Hall, 1981; Slater, 1996).

To present a synoptic view of atlas characteristics of the current array – albeit a necessarily abbreviated one – a tabulation has been made from perusal of about half of all the atlases published to date, including all cases for countries with a small list (Table 1). The line entries for each national and regional atlas series represent a judgment on the author’s part of the overall character of that series, based on examination of many cases in each series, with care taken to include early, middle, and late dates of publication to capture trends. Some temporal trends are apparent, but mostly

Table 1. Broad characteristics of the national Historic Towns Atlas products

National programme	Binding format	Language	CANONICAL MAPS				SUPPLEMENTARY MAPS				TEXT		Remarks	
			Cadastral 1:2,500 (drafted)	Regional 1:25,000 (reprod.)	Modern 1:5,000 (reprod.)	Growth 1:5,000 (drafted)	Intraurban Created Morph.	Reprod. Demog.	Territorial Created	Reprod.	Extent of Commen- tary	Gazetteer elements		
Great Britain	HC book	E	■	■	■	—	■c	—	—	—	■	Substantial	—	Volume 1 a pioneer effort
London (to 1520)	HC book	E	◆	■	1520	—	■	—	—	■	—	Extensive	■	
Germany-National	Folio	G	■c	■c	■	■	■	□	—	■	■	Concise	■	Reflects original intent
National – new series	Folio	G	■c	■	■c	■	■	□	■	□	■	Medium	■	Attractive balance
Rhine-land series	Folio	G	■c	■	■	—	▲	—	—	—	—	Notes	—	No growth-phases map !
Westphalian series	Folio	G	■c	■	■	■	■	□	▲	■	■	Concise	▲	■
Hessian series	Folio	G	■c	□	■	■	■	—	■	—	—	Substantial	■	
Finland	Folio	Fi, S, E	▲	□	—	▲	—	■	■	—	—	Concise	—	
New series – 1990	Folio	Fi, S, E	○	—	—	—	■	■	■	—	■	Concise (3 lang)	—	
Austria-National	Folio	G	■c	■	■	■	▲	□	—	—	—	Medium	—	
Vienna	Folio	G	■c	■	■	■	■	■	—	■	—	Intro (G, E)	◆	Extreme scholarship
France	Folio	Fr	■c	▲	—	—	—	—	—	—	▲	Concise	—	
New series – 2003	PB book	Fr	■c◆	■	—	—	—	—	□	□	—	Substantial	—	Seeking mass-market
The Netherlands	Folio	Du	□	□	□	■	■	—	■	—	—	Medium	—	Buildings undefined
Denmark	Folio	Da	□	□	□c	—	■	■	■	—	—	Substantial	■	Buildings undefined
Sweden	Folio	S, E	□	□	□	—	—	■	■	—	—	Substantial	—	Buildings undefined
Ireland	Folio	E	■	■	■	■	■	□	■	—	—	Medium	■	Balanced for wider audience
Italy-National	PB book	It, E	■c	□	▲	▲	■	□	■	—	■	Medium	■	
Bologna	PB book	It, E	◆c	—	◆	—	■	■	■	■	—	Extensive	■	Sumptuous illustrations
Rome (selec. periods/dists.)	PB book	It, E	—	—	□◆	—	■	—	■	—	—	Extensive	■	Art & architecture emphasis
Iceland	Folio	lc, S, E	○	■	—	—	■	■	■	—	—	Medium	■	
Belgium	HC book	Du	○◆	—	—	▲	□	—	■	—	■	Extensive	■	Seeking art-book look
Poland	Folio	P, G	■c	■	□	■	▲	—	■	▲	■	Medium	▲	Becoming more elaborate
Czech Republic	Folio	Cz, G, E	○□	▲	▲	■	▲	□	—	■	—	Medium	■	Becoming more elaborate
Switzerland	Folio	G	■	■	□c	□	—	□	—	—	—	Concise	—	Spartan
Romania	Folio	R, G	■	□	□	■	■	□	■	—	■	Substantial	■	Comprehensive
Croatia	HC book	Cr, E	—	—	—	—	—	—	■	—	■	Substantial	—	Non-standard, but informative

■ prescribed format □ deviation ○ reproduction substitute □ some coverage ▲▲ rising / declining coverage ◆ map divided & segments dispersed c = with contours

Sources: Author's personal inspection of a sample of half the atlases listed on the Vienna website, <http://www.wien.gv.at/kultur/archiv/kooperationen/lbi/staedteatlas/bibliographie/index.html>
Data concerning the Romanian and Croatian atlases courtesy of Prof. Howard B. Clarke (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin).

each series has tended to stick with one format, once determined. This is especially true of the several German series, whose dedication to fulfilling the 'canon' as discussed earlier is notable (see also Wensky, 2005).

Nevertheless, the immediate picture is one of an unsettling heterogeneity of methodology and treatment that calls into question the adherence of many national teams to the programme's guidelines. Most series have been published as loose folios for easy map comparison, but the Italian, Belgian, the new French series, most of the British atlases, and now the Croatian series are stiff-bound in book form. Most bizarre of all is the dissection of the Bologna 'main map' and its printing in eight separate sections across adjacent pairs of facing pages dispersed among the four hardbound volumes that comprise the other-

wise magnificent Bologna atlas – one can sort of 'see' half of the map at a time if one lines up the volumes on a table like the panes of a window, open at the relevant pages! The failure to insist that the publisher print this as a sheet map folded and placed in a slip-case at the end of one of the volumes is unfathomable. Only 15 of the 27 series meet the prescribed standard for the main cadastral map (departures being mostly of scale – the cardinal sin), and 12 of the 27 offer no growth-phases map. The Scandinavian series offer extensive distribution maps of social phenomena but provide no information regarding building coverage on their main maps, even when old reproductions suggest the data in some cases exist.

One has to wonder why the guidelines have been so often disregarded, some in seemingly

egregious ways, when such departures from the canon mean significant loss of comparability. Three obvious reasons suggest themselves: lack of suitable source material; lack of technical resources (for example, to execute new cartography); and lack of cartographic sensibility and focus on the original research objectives. Many departures have been well justified in the accompanying texts, or in related project descriptions (e.g. M. R. G. Conzen, 1976c; Czaja, 2002; Davies, 2004; Wensky, 2005), but too often gaps, omissions, and substitutions appear without explanation.

Scholarly reception and utility

The scholarly reception of the HTA publications over the years has been generally very good indeed, reviewers recognizing the ‘arduous multidisciplinary tasks and rigorous technical constraints associated with the preparation of such sophisticated publications’ (Clarke, 1991). This is quite fitting for a specialized, intricate research programme that has taken on a difficult challenge at the borders of several disciplines whose core practitioners normally do not concern themselves centrally with the urban morphology of towns and often do not think particularly in spatial terms about the past. Reviewers drawn from such ranks have been usually admiring of the cartographic achievements of the atlases (Harvey, 1977). It has fallen to those whose interests are more directly engaged in similar work to be more searching – and therefore more useful to the atlas enterprise – in their assessments (M. R. G. Conzen, 1976b; Slater, 1997). As the publication realm of the HTA has expanded and involved more national team efforts, more reviews have been given to colleagues from within the larger enterprise, presumably on account of their greater familiarity with the nature of the works (Johanek, 1996).

How much used are the publications of the multinational HTA programme, and what difference have they made in the direction of scholarship on the urban form of European towns? It is impossible in this review to

address these questions with any adequacy. Undoubtedly the atlases have attracted widespread casual and indirect scholarly use simply through the serendipity of their existence in libraries. More pointedly, they have drawn on the historical expertise of historians and others who, having had a hand in their creation, are more aware of their value, and whose work may have become more spatially sophisticated than it otherwise would have been.

It is unrealistic to expect, despite the ‘spatial turn’ in historical studies and in the social sciences over the last two or three decades, that the atlases would have upended or radically revised broad understandings about towns and town life in the Middle Ages or the Early Modern period. But in their now significant numbers they are improving understanding of how the built environment has developed. Their influence can be gauged in the sheer concentration of activity around their production, the training of atlas workers who have gone on to independent academic careers from such atlas offices as those in Münster, Bonn, Dublin, and Vienna, and the relative abundance of publications that, as a result, feature excerpts from the atlas folios, or reflect their authors’ interest in urban form.

The list of such works is far too long for mention here, but note should certainly be taken of the regular conferences held at the Institut für Vergleichende Städtegeschichte, just to name one such centre, and the books that result from them (e.g. the *Städteforschung Reihe A* series from Münster, which frequently favours urban morphological themes. Most interesting is the shift in emphasis in the work of some of the HTA’s leading scholars towards explicitly comparative research using the atlases as direct input (e.g. Blaschke, 1997; Brodt, 2004). Just to give two cases, Anngret Simms has used atlas evidence from France, Germany, Denmark, Ireland, Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland to examine the systematic placement of churches, town halls, and market places in medieval towns (Simms, 2006b, 2007), and Mark Hennessy has similarly exploited atlas maps to chart the growing presence of the centralizing state in

the institutional landscapes of Irish, German and Polish towns during the nineteenth century (Hennessy, forthcoming).

Conclusions and forward glance

What are the findings from this retrospective review of the European Historic Towns Atlas programme over its four decades of existence, and what is the immediate outlook? Five themes with implications for the future seem to emerge from the evidence. The first is that 'original intent', that is, the initial objectives of and plans for the atlas project have suffered considerable dilution through departures from the guidelines for atlas content and treatment over the years. In a voluntary environment the ICHT has never been able to insist on strict adherence to the 'canon' of maps and supplementary material for which Heinz Stoob gained official acceptance. Hence the comparability of atlases across the continent has been compromised, quite severely in some cases. Table 1 looks like a family of adopted children in which several of the youngsters, not to mention some adults, have behaved badly. There is no threat of expulsion if national teams produce non-conforming atlases while claiming the symbolic benefits of family membership. Nevertheless, one can look on the bright side: there are few intellectual enterprises in this day and age that survive changes in academic fashion long enough to reach completion, and the HTA might just have enough attractiveness and staying-power to approach that point.

Secondly, there has been an evident tension between participants from different backgrounds. To simplify, many historians are comfortable with the reproduction of old-maps-as-documents, whereas many geographer-cartographers are keen to draft new maps for clarity and scientific precision. Creating new maps is difficult, requiring massaging of the historical and graphic evidence and technical training in map making. There has been a notable decline in purpose-made maps and an increase in repro-

ductions of existing old maps; scanning images is easier than thinking hard about creating thematically rigorous new maps, but that is often no solution.

Thirdly, there is a detectable drift in recent HTA ventures from composing atlases as tools for scholarly and scientific use towards atlases for the enjoyment of a lay public. The new national German series, the *Deutscher Historischer Städteatlas*, together with the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, show how the scientific can be made visually attractive while retaining its scholarly value; the new French series, on the other hand, in its rush to the coffee table is courting diminished respect as a scholarly aid.

Fourthly, this raises a legitimate question: just how much research to put into the HTA volumes? How many ancillary maps and other data, such as pictures and distribution maps, should be included rather than saving them for a different kind of publication – particularly when the determination to include such valuable but mentally hard-to-produce features such as growth-phase maps may be in question? Is the HTA in danger of losing its soul if it yields too easily to the mavericks?

And, finally, what about the HTA in a digital age? There have been CD-ROMs issued for some Italian and Irish atlas material (Bocchi, 1999; Royal Irish Academy, 2007), to be sure, and talk of the same in Austria and Germany, among other places. But the activity has been so far haphazard. What should be the policy on digital dissemination? Without monster screens and large computers it is difficult to compare digital images from differently-formatted compact disks simultaneously, even for mere viewing. What about the needs of future morphologists who wish to download and mix HTA material for sophisticated digitally-based research? What prospects for merging HTA maps into GIS systems? Can such questions lead to a common policy among participants in the atlas programme? And will such developments come to overwhelm the paper products that have by and large been for the last four decades the pride and joy of the *European Historic Towns Atlas*?

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