



# VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues  
in urban morphology

## Johannes Fritz and the origins of urban morphology

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In 1894 Dr Johannes Fritz, a high school history teacher in Strasbourg, published a brochure entitled 'Deutsche Stadtanlagen' (The layout of German towns). With great courage he went against the orthodoxy among medieval historians of the time, which implied that the identity of a medieval town was solely founded on its legal status. He pointed out that a town has a body and encouraged comparisons of towns on the basis of their ground plans and building fabric. Fritz lamented that in his time there was no literature available on urban form. He would have been delighted with the foundation of the journal *Urban Morphology*!

Fritz considered town plans the most reliable source material for urban history. The only way that he could find access to urban maps was to look at the *Generalstabskarte* (1:25 000), called *Messtischblatt* in German. These were the maps used by the military. Unfortunately for him the scale of these maps was too small for any serious plan analysis. At that time cadastral surveys at the scale of 1:2500 were only available in government offices where they were used for real-estate or engineering purposes, certainly not for history.

Merian's topographical views of European towns were known to Fritz and he fervently wished for the collection of all German town plans to be published in books, county by county. It took a very long time before his vision was put into action by the European Historic Towns Atlas project established in the 1950s by the International Commission for the History of Towns (Conzen, 2008). Fritz's paper included 46 printed pages,

and there was an abundance of footnotes providing many possible avenues for further research. In fact Fritz could have provided a whole army of graduate students with research questions. The text was followed by five pages containing thumbnail sketches of the historical centres of towns, but no scales were provided. It is implied that the information for these sketches came from the 1:25 000 maps. For Rostock and Thorn (Thorún) the sketches show the constituent parts of the centre of the medieval town. Here we find urban morphology in the making.

### The classification of town layouts

Fritz classified German towns according to their layouts. He divided the country into western and north-eastern regions using the River Elbe as an important cultural marker. The characteristics of the main types of layout that he recognized can be summarized for each of those regions.

#### *Western Germany (west of the Elbe)*

1. Irregular plans (resembling villages) either with a distinct centre such as a cathedral or castle (Münster, Würzburg), or without a distinct centre following the layout of a former village, or comprising the amalgamation of a number of former villages (Erfurt, Colmar).
2. Irregular village-like ground plans with elements of regular ground plans that either date from Roman times (Strasbourg, Cologne), or are the result of early-medieval foundations

(Bremen, Magdeburg). Under this heading Fritz mentions as a separate category towns founded after 1200 with larger planned elements (Brunswick, Hildesheim).

3. Regular town plans, mostly small towns, founded prior to 1400, many of which incorporated settlements that had grown up outside the walls. These towns may have been founded more than once (Gotha, Göttingen, Freiburg, Heidelberg).
4. Towns founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with regular layouts (Mannheim, Kalsruhe).

#### *North-eastern Germany (east of the Elbe)*

1. Regular layouts according to the East-German model (round or oval), without remnants of a Slavic settlement from which the name of the town was taken.
2. Regular layouts surrounded by irregular elements either from the Slavic period, as in bishops' towns (Posen/Poznań, Breslau/Wrocław, Schwerin), or trading towns (Stettin/ Szczecin), or from the late-medieval period.
3. Regular layouts with villages in the neighbourhood by the same name which are distinguished by the addition of Old-, Small-, or Slavic-.
4. Incomplete regular layouts, round or oval.
5. Incomplete regular layouts, with irregular parts reminiscent of villages (transformation of a village into a market place?).
6. Irregular layouts, possibly from the Slavic period, which were transformed into German towns at a very early or very late stage and were particularly common in the provinces of Saxony and Posen.

#### **Fritz's interpretations**

For legal historians at the time the main distinction between a village and a town was the grant of a charter. Fritz searched for the morphological elements that would distinguish towns from villages. He observed that in north-eastern Germany the same model (church associated with a market place and regularly laid out streets) was often repeated. He also observed that in this model most streets run either north-south or west-east. He further noticed that the urban fortifications in western Germany were imposing stone structures while east of the Elbe the town walls, often built of brick, were more modest and were associated with earthen walls.

Fritz acknowledged that Posen (Poznań) and Breslau (Wrocław) were busy Slavic trading places in the tenth century, but in the thirteenth century they were reinvented according to German town law in association with a new regular town plan. He believed that the regular town plan was the physical expression of the legal processes formalized in the charter.

How did Fritz explain the regular town plans? His line of thought appears to be as follows. A newly-founded town was granted the fields (*Feldmark*) of one or more Slavic villages. The new town was then built at the site of the previous village and the fortifications, often earthworks, were thrown up. Fritz makes the surprising statement that the German planners must have been conservative in attitude, as the name of the new town, its location, and the type of fortification all followed the Slavic tradition – a point which could also be applied to other European colonial towns of the medieval period.

Where did the model for the gridiron town plan come from? Fritz mentions the regular layouts of towns in Italy and those of medieval towns in Germany and Switzerland created by the Dukes of Zähringen, for example Freiburg and Bern. As he had concluded that the granting of town law and the physical formation of a town prompted each other, he looked for signs of regularity in the town plans of significant medieval towns and found them in Magdeburg, Bremen and Brunswick. Though he thought there was a plan underlying the historical centres of these towns, he was also aware that others considered them to be the result of piecemeal growth. He chose the evolutionary model for the explanation of the regular town plans east of the Elbe and suggested that certain early towns like Brunswick may have served as the model for further developments in former Slavic lands. Fritz called for research to be undertaken to explore the question of where the idea for these early regular street patterns came from. He was right in pointing out that in legal and topographical terms these new towns take their origin from the market place.

#### **Fritz's legacy**

As Fritz did not publish his paper in a scientific journal it probably took some time before it came to the attention of the cultural geographer Otto Schlüter, who used some of Fritz's maps when he produced an article on the importance of ground plans as source material in urban history (Schlüter, 1899).

It is surprising that Fritz's work, which initiated so many aspects of urban morphology as it would develop in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, was not referred to by historians who were involved in setting up the Historic Towns Atlases – for example Heinz Stoob, who founded the German atlas. Fortunately there were others who were conscious of his work. Kaeber (1916) wrote an essay on Berlin in a political journal and referred to Fritz as the person who drew attention to some medieval towns consisting of two independent halves before being merged into one. Later, Frölich (1930) in the context of exploring towns in Lower Saxony mentioned Fritz's focus on ground plans in a journal dedicated to law and Germanic studies. The following year Uhlemann (1931), in a journal for social and economic history, referred to Fritz's paradigm of ground plans. In 1943, Planitz, who produced one of the standard textbooks on medieval towns, published a journal article on German towns from the ninth to the eleventh century in which he acknowledged inspiration he received from Fritz (Planitz, 1943). The architectural historian Meckseper mentioned in 2007 in the editorial to a book on the origins and transformations of medieval towns in Thuringia that Fritz's distinction between piecemeal towns and planned towns remained influential in urban history. Gauthiez (2004), in an article on measuring towns in a French journal, referenced Fritz as the person who offered the first simple classification of towns. More recently, in Portugal Oliveira and Monteiro (2014) referred to Fritz's focus on town plans in their article on urban morphology and geography in Germany.

To my knowledge Fritz's ideas were first introduced into England by Whitehand in his 'Background to the urban morphogenetic tradition' (Whitehand, 1981). He was referenced in M. P. Conzen's survey of the European Historic Towns Atlas project (Conzen, 2008) and was briefly discussed by Simms in her chapter on 'The European Historic Towns Atlas Project: origin and potential' (Simms, 2015).

If urban morphology is about explaining urban landscapes then Fritz should certainly be considered one of its founders. He deserves our attention as the person who called for the morphological turn in urban history at a time when he was very much alone in this.

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