

Final Report: NeDiMAH Science Meeting

European Place Names Projects
WG Meeting 5 of the NEDIMAH Space and Time Group

Date/Location

September 10 / 11, National Library of Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands

Participants

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Abstract

As the Digital Humanities advance, it is becoming evident that high quality historical gazetteers of geographical entities such as place names, landmark names and borders are needed as a crucial piece of infrastructure. The meetings held by NeDiMAH WG 1 on Space and Time had frequently discussed this lacuna in spatial research, and accordingly a small final meeting was agreed in order to address the feasibility of developing such a resource. Ultimately, the conclusion of the meeting was advancing the need for such a resource in terms of addressing the research questions that should drive its development, and potential partners. The ultimate conclusion of the meeting was that an initiative to develop a resource of this nature could be taken forward at some point in the future, and that the meeting had been a valuable first step in articulating the scientific foreground for advancing the state of the art.

Scientific Summary

The Workshop explored the possibilities, obstacles and benefits of developing a gazetteer of geographical features (names of towns, rivers, regions, monuments etc), with a focus on early modern Europe. Medieval, early modern to twentieth century periods require specific attention. Ancient and medieval place names are well covered by the Pelagios service, and modern place names by GeoNames and data available via Wikipedia. However, there is no convincing gazetteer for the dates between those two eras.

A fully developed place name gazetteer has immense advantages as a resource for numerous different scholarly disciplines. For examples, economic historians can explore the relationship between material (or other forms) of wealth and how they may have been represented in geographical names. With a full gazetteer, urban historians can explore numerous facets of the development of towns, villages and cities, investigating how changes in names act as markers of larger change: for example, how villages might expand and become suburbs within cities, or diminish in size and vanish. Political historians can investigate how the names of towns, rivers,

mountains change according to variations in political status, government, political institutions, number of citizens and languages

Such a gazetteer would also have immense benefits for the broader study of the digital humanities. With a gazetteer, references to any geographical feature in any digitised text (whatever the source) could be correctly identified and related to other references to the same feature. For those studying texts, the ability to understand the geographical dimension of a text, or set of texts, would be much enhanced. To give a simple example, the references to regions in a corpus of newspapers to see how often that region was cited and what the context of that citation was.

This workshop reviewed existing research in this area, and identify ways to link the key stakeholders. Specifically, researchers from different discipline working with geo-historical content; libraries and archives that have digital data and maps; and communities of practice who can contribute to research in this area; and experts on the underlying digital infrastructures. The meeting also addressed specific challenges that have been noted at previous NeDiMAH WG1 meetings. These include integration of OCR on a multiplicity of different maps; weakness in current gazetteers; and integration of annotation approaches.

The Workshop also explored the public dimension of creation of such a Gazetteer, specifically looking at public engagement / crowdsourcing of digitised map. The approach has already been taken by the British Library and the National Library of Wales for a number of maps in its collection. This could be rolled out to other national and research libraries in Europe give it a truly European dimension.

Key areas of discussion

The key to addressing the research questions that underpin this issue are to understand placenames as historical markers (e.g economic derivation of placenames), or contested place names in cross-border disputes. Some of these issues have already been discussed at the NeDiMAH Space and Time workshops.

The development of an integrated gazetteer needs to be an iterative discussion between researchers and libraries and those familiar with research infrastructure issues. An interesting demonstrator project is the Welsh Cynefin project (<http://cynefin.archiveswales.org.uk/>).

Another excellent demonstrator is Humphrey Southall's Vision of Britain (www.visionofbritain.org.uk/) which was the basis for Old Maps Online (www.oldmapsonline.org/)

Pelagios (<http://pelagios-project.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-pelagios.html>) was also explored, which offers ways of connecting texts, inscriptions, museum object and archaeological data via ancient places, with 39 partners from 6 countries at the moment, and near 1m annotations.

Programme

Wednesday September 10th

1.00 - Lunch, Introductions and Purpose of Day (AD)

1.15 - What have we achieved so far ? (ALL)

Ten- fifteen minute presentation from each delegate on achievements so far in the context of the day's purpose

2.45 - Break 15 mins

3.00 - Brainstorm Ideas (ALL)

What would we like to achieve? What would we like to achieve in the short-term (1 year), medium-term (3 years) , and long-term (5 years +) Open Discussion

Consider possibilities in different categories (Infrastructure, Innovation, Research, Outreach, Other)

3.00 - Continue brainstorming

4.00 - Break 15 mins

4.15 - Summarise the key problems and ideas

4.30 What are the practical opportunities ?

Horizon 2020 (AD)

Other opportunities (All)

5.15 Close

Thursday September 11th

9.00 Identify key demands of any call for projects

9.45 - Prioritise idea identified yesterday

10.30 - Formulate ideas into manageable work proposal related to call for projects

11.00 Coffee Break

11.15 - Continue with Discussion

12.00 - Assess Weaknesses and Identify Partners / Ideas Required

1.00 Lunch

2.00 Assign responsibilities for proposal

3.00 Close