

Should the Historic Towns Atlases continue beyond the first Ordnance Survey?

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Up to now the Historic Towns Atlases which more or less followed the guidelines of the International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) focused on the period before the first Ordnance Survey maps – in other words before the industrial revolution. This approach is in accordance with traditional urban historical research with its preference for the middle ages and the early modern period. Yet, there are also atlases containing topographical gazeteers like the data in the fascicles of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas or similiar addenda in other atlases that often give information about sites or developments after the first Ordnance Survey was carried out. That is also true for a number of Scandinavian towns, especially for the Helsinki-Atlas, whose dynamic historical evolution did not start before the 19th century, or for towns-atlas-projects like the „Rheinischer Städteatlas“.

Nevertheless a survey of the existing publications of towns atlases (more than 500 by now) confirms the impression that maps focusing on the growth and/or changes of towns from the second half of the 19th century onwards are missing or only present as additions. The chronological limit for atlases was never the turn from the 19th to the 20th century but the emergence of the first Ordnance Survey. In that sense the question cannot be “Should the Atlases continue beyond 1900?”, but: “Should the Atlases continue beyond the first Ordnance Survey?”

In many respects these considerations are similiar to urban historical research in general: For the period of the 19th and 20th centuries the scientific discipline of urbanistics has developed ways of approaching urban development processes in quite distinctive manners of its own. Urbanistics is characterised by the combination and cooperation of different scientific disciplines, comprising a large number of different aspects of urban life, historical, social, geographical and urbanistic. An illuminating example is given by the topics being treated by the “Deutsches Institut für

Urbanistik” in Berlin extending from demography and social development to mobility and infrastructure, politics, law and administration, architectural and urban development, environment and sustainability, economy, finances and methodologies (see: <http://www.difu.de/themenfelder>; 16 July, 2012). – In any case, over the last two centuries due to manifold changes and ruptures in this period urban historical research had to cover a much wider spectrum of thematic approaches than was necessary for the study of antiquity and the middle ages/early modern period. On the other hand it should not be forgotten that our object of investigation, the town, remains the same, albeit it has become a much more multifaceted phenomenon than before.

Applying such considerations to the European Historic Towns Atlas project we are well advised to differentiate between the size and the importance of different towns: For small and medium towns – and I deliberately avoid any form of quantification – due to the lack of sources as well as to a much lesser rate of change in the period after the first Ordnance Survey mappings, thematic approaches typical for urbanistic studies cannot easily be carried out. Totally different is the situation for big towns and metropolises, and indeed it is not by chance that this type of town is much more often the object of urbanistic analyses and studies than small town. As a rule, for big towns and metropolises there is an abundant record of written as well as cartographic sources and on this basis a wide-spread thematic analysis of the urban modifications and alterations during the 19th and 20th centuries is possible.

In Austria from the start of the country’s participation in the towns atlasprogramme of the ICHT the decision was made to produce a separate thematic atlas for the only really big town of the country, for Vienna: the “Historischer Atlas von Wien”. The conceptual framework for this project consisted of the chronological treatment of special thematic topics in a series of maps, while the commentaries were to be given in separate volumes. From the start the chronological limit was the beginning of World War II while the period after 1945 was more or less handed over to town-planning and urban management indepartments for the administration of the city. It was only after A.D. 2000 that the editors of the Vienna Atlas decided to cover the period after 1945 on the basis of population censuses beginning in 1951 extending to the end of the last millennium.

Seen from the perspective of someone who is familiar with the project of Historic Towns Atlases since the end of the 1970's I would like to combine two observations resulting from my own experiences with regard to possible recommendations for the chronological continuation of the Historic Towns Atlas project:

1. Over time it became obvious that the institutions that financed our project over protracted periods were always very interested in bringing the atlases up to date. Sponsors wanted to gain a solid basis for present-day evaluations or planning decisions. In short: Historical research and analysis that covers not only the past but also the present or at least the recent past will stir up the interest not only of the scientific world, but also of the political public. And – to repeat this once more – such a chronological extension of our historical approach will make it easier to provide long-term projects with the necessary financial resources.
2. The experience gained on the basis of the publications of more than 500 European historic towns atlases is in fact of great value in itself and provides more than just a critical mass for further considerations. Already at this very moment I am absolutely convinced that it is possible to make some suggestions for a chronological extension of the Historic Towns Atlas project. In doing so two factors are important: size as well as different types of European towns.:

For big towns and metropolises, especially for capitals, it would be best to add to the existing material a thematic section dealing with the evolution of a town from the middle of the 19th century onwards. For this type of town it will be possible on the basis of written records (especially statistical data) as well as on the basis of abundant cartographic material to add such a final section to any historic towns atlas making use of the approaches of urbanistics for the period after the first Ordnance Survey. Without any doubt such atlases would stimulate the interest in our common project in a decisive way and it is more than probable that chances for funding would be improved on the national level as also within the framework of the European Union. – For small and medium towns a case by case decision needs to be taken whether a thematic atlas of the type mentioned before would be feasible.

I am also in favour of producing maps beyond the chronological limit of the first Ordnance Survey. In addition to the existing programme, small towns included, a specific cartographic documentation for the last two centuries should be added. It goes without saying that for new historic towns atlases such a procedure should be integrated into the preparation of the publication from the start. These more recent maps should follow an agreed scale. For smaller and medium towns a scale of 1:5.000, at a maximum 1:10.000 would be convenient. With regard to the dates of origin of such more recent town-plans it would be advisable to agree on a set of years after the first Ordnance Survey. For big towns an interval of approximately 25 years could be possible and appropriate. Based on the historic experience of the majority of continental-European towns at least four maps could or should be chosen: (1) for the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, (2) for the period after World War I, (3) for the years soon after World War II and (4) for the years around the turn of the millennium. Such an approach would make it possible to have a cartographical documentation of the effects not only of the changes following industrialisation, but also of the profound political, economic and social caesura in the aftermath of the two world wars and of the situation immediately before the economic crisis of the late first decade of our own century.

Finally, I would like to add some considerations with regard to the recent development of the European Historic Towns Atlas project: During the last two decades the 18 European countries taking part in this big scientific undertaking have worked hard to intensify the exchange of opinions relating to the methodologies applied. Especially the countries of East Central Europe – Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary – promoted the expansion of the atlasproject. All of them have contributed a lot providing manifold thematic approaches to the history of individual towns.

There are, indeed, at the moment two different types of historic towns atlases: one type focusing strictly on the guidelines of Münster compiled in 1995 containing maps as suggested by the guidelines and a short scientific text about a town's historical evolution. – The other type is the one with an abundant text,

with overviews of the written and cartographic sources and thematic – mostly topographical – gazetteers similar to the „Städtebuch“-volumes in Germany and Austria or the gazetteers of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas. It is not so astonishing that after so many decades of the project a certain diversification has arisen, in fact it is much more amazing that in spite of so much diversity the core guidelines have been adhered to.

Without any doubt the future belongs to the more abundant type of historic towns atlases as they are already in existence as for example the French project with the wonderful Bordeaux-Atlas edited by Sandrine Lavaud and her colleague Ézéchiél Jean-Courret. My own plea for the future goes into that direction and I am convinced that it would be best for our common project to extend this new approach also beyond the period of the Ordnance Survey mapping. By doing so we would not only bring our project up to date, but we would also increase its attractiveness for the public but also for possible sponsors. Last, but not least, such an extension of the atlas programme would also be of greatest importance for the endeavours to go on the web with our atlases, endeavours that are brought forward by our colleagues Katalin Szende, Sarah Gearty and Keith Lilley.

Summing up, the point is to extend the European Historic Towns Atlas project into a new direction: Up to now colleagues from countries without a historic towns atlas were encouraged to join the project by starting an atlas series of their own – which should also happen in the future. By an extension of the atlas-programme into the 19th and 20th centuries it would be possible to provide sustainable links to present-day demands and also to help finding better and more promising funds for the continuation of the European Historic Towns Atlas project.

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