

RESEARCH REPORT

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World-Historical Gazetteer Research Report

Human activity takes place in space, but it does not transpire on an abstract Cartesian grid. Rather, it happens in locations to which people ascribe meaning, which they often do by assigning names to those places. A gazetteer is a specialized index of place names. Developing a historical gazetteer can be a complex undertaking, since the same place may have many names over time, and it may well have multiple names at the same time. Its geometry may change and its spatial extent may be uncertain. It may need to be described according to terms that are multiple, contested, and evolving. Considered globally, places have names in multiple languages and scripts as well.

For all of these reasons, gazetteers are important reference works. For digital projects and data integration tasks, they are absolutely essential. However, because it is so difficult to develop a historical gazetteer, most of the existing ones are quite specialized. For years, the spatial history community has sought to find a way to develop a single gazetteer of world-historical scope or a network of many interrelated and interoperable specialized gazetteers. With this report, I am pleased to notify the community that I have recently been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities to do so.

The goal of this three-year project is to create content, standards and digital infrastructure for a World-Historical Gazetteer (WHG). The WHG has two parts. One is a spatially and temporally comprehensive index of significant world historical place names that we call a Spine. The other is a system to support collaborative digital and data-driven historical scholarship at the global scale: an Ecosystem. The project focuses significantly but not exclusively on the centuries since 1500, so as to dovetail with synergistic efforts devoted to the ancient and medieval world – the Pleiades gazetteer and the Pelagios Linked Open Data system in particular.

The Spine will be a broad-but-shallow gazetteer of place names for all continents and regions, and all centuries since 1500: including names of polities, districts and significant settlements; and ethnonyms, language names, and names of physical features as well. The goal is for it to be a viable collection of reference names that covers the whole globe. Through a Linked Open Data paradigm, any specialist research projects within the domain of world history will be able to associate detailed place names and particular attributes of their own projects to a set of shared reference names – that is the Ecosystem. This will be the basis for collaboration among world history projects that have a spatial component.

Since world historians engage in research that focuses upon cross-regional exchanges, connections, and comparisons, a resource to support spatial integration and collaboration is a critical piece of digital infrastructure for the field as a whole. The project is attuned to the particular intellectual aspirations of world history, along with allied humanistic fields. We are therefore developing a system that assists quantitative and empirical historical reasoning at the global scale. We are modeling routes of travel and commodity flows as well as points and polygonal areas. We are also including content about terrestrial physical geography and ethnonyms in order to cover sparsely named regions of the earth. Finally, we are collaborating with quantitative historians and historical quantitative social scientists to ensure that the WHG is suitable for handling quantitative information from the age of censuses and tariffs.

Karl Grossner, a geographer with many years of expertise in historical spatial ontology, historical route modeling, and system design, is the technical developer. Our workplan has three components. We will complete the Spine, integrating a limited bibliography of existing indexes and developing a simple temporal and spatial ontology. We will then link specialist gazetteers and datasets to the Spine and to one another, focusing on two pilot areas: Maritime Asia, and the Atlantic World. We will create a public interface with a map and timeline component and implement a sustainability plan that will allow the WHG to grow and live on after the term of the grant.

For world history as a field, we expect that the WHG will be an extraordinary reference work in its own right: a world historical gazetteer with a map and timeline interface. It will lightly cover the entire world for the past five hundred years and will support deep dives into a growing number of specialist resources. Moreover, it will create a shared infrastructure that allows a wide range of spatially explicit world-historical projects to inherit spatial information from one another, rather than requiring each such project to perform redundant research, create projects that are not interoperable, and unnecessarily proliferate contradictory and ambiguous results. Furthermore, it will help to test and extend Linked Open Data methods, one of the most promising and rapidly evolving directions in the digital and spatial humanities. Finally, it will extend the gazetteer framework beyond individual named places to include places organized into itineraries and spatio-temporal entities such as winds and currents.

We will hold a project launch meeting at the University of Pittsburgh in September 2017, and we look forward to providing future reports of progress in this journal.

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