# Anngret Simms:
# Urban Morphology and the European Historic Towns Atlas Project

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This paper explores the way in which historic towns-atlases can contribute towards the study of urban morphology – that is to say, urban form. It was in 1955, in the spirit of reconciliation after the Second World War, that the International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) recommended the publication of a series of European national historic towns-atlases in order to facilitate comparative urban studies and encourage a better understanding of common European roots.

Historical town plans, as they have been produced from the early-modern period onwards at various scales and cartographic styles, are most valuable for their content in the context of cultural history. But, in order to find cartographical material for the purpose of comparative study of the origin and morphological transformation of towns across Europe, another type of source material, capable of being represented at the same scale across Europe, had to be found. In the context of the multi-national European towns-atlas project, it was decided to focus on the earliest nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps (or their equivalent in other European countries) at the scale of 1:2500, and to redraw these to modern standards of spatial accuracy. Although advances in urban archaeology since the 1960s have highlighted the problematic relationship between the oldest extant town plans and the actual origins of a town, these early town plans are still a prerequisite for the better understanding of the evolution of our towns. These atlases are not only an academic exercise, serving as a source for urban history, but they also provide guidelines for planners; last but not least, the atlases are a goldmine for the local historian. The fact that the towns-atlas project has come of age might be reflected in the fact that it is discussed in Wikipedia (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Städteatlas).

## Antecedents

Where did the 'creative impulse' for the creation of the historic towns-atlases come from? The atlas project is not the brainchild of the ICHT alone, but draws on pioneering work by nineteenth-century German scholars. The first scholar to emphasise the importance of the town plan in the exploration of urban history was the German social

and cultural historian, W.H. Riehl. He wrote in 1859 that the town plan of Augsburg served as the ground plan of society and expressed the spirit of its people in material form (Riehl, 1859, p. 270). Towards the end of the nineteenth century Johannes Fritz, a schoolteacher in Strasburg, wrote a comparative study of German town plans (Fritz, 1894). This was published in the school journal, so some time passed before it came to the attention of the cultural geographer Otto Schlüter and the archaeologist and art historian Paul Jonas Meier, prompting a discussion as to the usefulness of town plans for indicators of urban identity (Conzen, 2008, p. 144). Town plan analysis at that time was preoccupied with attempts to define regional identities of town plans and to explore the emergence of regular town plans in the context of German colonisation east of the Elbe. Medieval historians were supportive of these studies for sparsely-documented periods and they began to assume that street patterns could be traced back to the period of a town's origin. This was a controversial thesis, strongly criticised and disproved by archaeologists.

Early work on town-plan analysis often consisted of sketch maps of plans which were fitted next to each other on a page, like samples of plants or coins. This method is still used by archaeologists, as, for example, in John Bradley's article, 'Planned Anglo-Norman Towns in Ireland' (1985, vol. 2, p. 423). From the early twentieth century also stems a masterpiece of thematic urban mapping at a large scale – Hugo Hassinger's *Kunsthistorischer Atlas von Wien* (1916). In this remarkable work, Hassinger indicated the age of individual buildings through the use of colour (often distinguishing between facades and the rear of the building) thereby providing information for the preservation of historic buildings as well as a good example of the phased character of urban morphogenesis in historical towns. It is fortunate that Jeremy Whitehand (1981), in the introduction of his publication of papers by M.R.G. Conzen, has reviewed the work done by German-speaking scholars in the first decades of the twentieth century on the formation of the paradigm of genetic urban morphology (Genetische Stadtmorphologie).

According to the German historian Stoob (1985, p. 583), former editor of the Deutsche Städte Atlas, efforts to produce a worthwhile towns atlas go back a long way. In 1913 two geographers published a volume of 50 multicoloured plans of German towns. Stoob criticised this project because the format was too small and comparisons were limited as the project only included big towns. Different town plans were drawn to different scales. Only street blocks were shown but not individual house plots, which are vital in the interpretation of a town plan. The main problem was that the maps included all the post-industrial changes in town centres. Apparently the first attempt at compiling a small regional towns atlas was K.O. Müller's *Alte und neue Stadtpläne der oberschäbischen Reichsstädte:…ihre Entstehung und ältere Verfassung* (1914).

An important advance was the town atlas of Lower Saxony compiled by P.J. Meier, first published in 1926. This atlas contained 29 loose multi-coloured plans of 13 towns, each at the scale 1:5000. This atlas took the earliest cadastral map (Urkataster) from about 1830 (the first appearance of such maps in Central Europe) as its centrepiece. These plans showed the pre-industrial town plan in several colours. They are a suitable source material for comparative analysis. An essay provided a short history of the town. The maps clearly showed that the individual urban plot constitutes the fundamental spatial unit of a town plan. For the historic town of Braunschweig, Meier provided plans for a cross-section of maps at different dates in the town's development and he produced a growth map. Growth maps were to become a feature of most individual towns atlases.

Meier's atlas was reissued in 1926 and folios for further 7 additional towns were published in 1933 and 1935. The two World Wars were probably responsible for the fact that his project was unfinished when he died at 91 years of age in 1946, but Meyer's approach to comparative urban studies on the basis of large-scale maps was eventually to be revived on a large scale.


## The early history of the European Historic Towns Atlas project

The vehicle for the new European Historic Towns Atlas project was to be the International Commission for the History of Towns, which was established in 1955 in Rome at the International Congress for Historical Sciences. The initial idea behind the project was to encourage a better understanding of common European roots on the basis of comparative urban studies (Stoob, 1985, pp 583–616). In the early 1960s, Hermann Aubin and H. Ammann, the first two Presidents of the ICHT, began to discuss the possibility of a European town atlas project to be directed by the Commission. They agreed that the atlas was to be based on the representation of primary sources focused on the cadastral map, and its interpretation in a growth map and an interpretative text with references.

The task of setting up the European towns atlas project was facilitated by the fact that in 1954, a year before the ICHT was set up, three well-known German scholars, the historian Erich Keyser, and the geographers Theodor Kraus and Emil Meynen, wrote a paper in which they discussed the concept and structure of a future 'Deutsche Städteatlas' (Keyser, Kraus and Meynen, 1954). Michael Conzen discovered this *Denkschrift* (position paper) in the Institut für Deutsche Landeskunde in Leipzig (see appendix; also available in digital form). He draws attention to the fact 'that Stoob acknowledged Meier's groundbreaking 1922 historic towns' atlas of Lower Saxony of more than four decades earlier, but he drew little attention to the remarkable extent of the similarity between Meier's atlas concept and the one accepted by the

Commission' (Conzen, 2008, p. 146). The only difference lay in the scale of the town plans, 1:5000 in the case of Meier and 1:2500 in the case of Stoob.

At the ICHT meeting in Switzerland in 1967, Heinz Stoob proposed a generally-acceptable cartographic scheme for the historic towns atlas project. It was to consist of three principal maps:

1. a multi-coloured cadastral map at the scale 1:2500 (Kataster)

2. a map of the town in its surrounding region (Umlandkarte)

3. a modern town plan (Stadtkarte)

The proposal was discussed and, a year later at the meeting of the ICHT in Oxford, the guidelines were adopted. Conzen (2008, p. 146) has drawn attention to the remarkable extent of the similarity between Meier's atlas concept and the one promoted by the ICHT. The only important difference is in relation to the scale of the cadastral map, which was 1:5000 in Meier's scheme and 1:2500 in the ICHT's project.

For the sake of better comparability between European towns, the ICHT recommended that the atlas should have a unified concept. At a meeting of the ICHT in 1969 in Oxford (*Cahiers Bruxellois*, XIV, 1969, appendix), and again at a meeting in Münster in 1995 (Münster protocol – see appendix), the type and scale of maps to be included was determined. Three principal maps were decided upon. The core map is a large-scale (1:2500) cadastral map of the town as it stood in the early nineteenth century. These maps show the street patterns and house plots before industrialisation. At a smaller scale, maps showing the town's surroundings and the modern town plan were produced. Each atlas, with the exception of the Rheinische Städte Atlas, is accompanied by an explanatory text. The Rheinische Stadte Atlas and the Irish Historic Towns Atlas are the only projects to include an extensive topographical information section. The English were the first to publish their historic towns atlas in 1969, followed the Germans in 1972. The Irish Historic Towns Atlas was first publicly discussed at the interdisciplinary symposium 'Irish towns and medieval Europe' in Dublin in 1978, where Heinz Stoob from Münster lectured on the German Atlas. The countries of East-Central Europe only joined the project after the fall of communism, as previously the private printing of maps was not allowed. The first Polish Historic Towns Atlas appeared in 1993, followed by the Czech in 1995, the Croatian in 2003 and the Hungarian in 2010. The success or failure of this programme across various European countries has been evaluated by Michael Conzen in a review paper in which he supplies broad characteristics of the national historic towns atlas publications. This led him to discuss 'an unsettling heterogeneity of methodology and treatment that calls into question the adherence of many national teams to the programme's guidelines' (p. 152).

In 1992 Adrian Verhulst, then President of the ICHT, appointed Ferdinand Opll (then Director of the City Archive of Vienna) and Anngret Simms (Department of Geography, University College Dublin) to be the coordinators of a working group consisting of the editors of the historic towns atlases, who were also members of the ICHT. The first task was to compile a bibliography of historic towns atlases, which was published as a brochure, as well as in the German journal *Siedlungsforschung.* The list of publications has since been steadily updated by Ferdinand Opll on the website of the Vienna Municipal Archives (Simms and Opll, 1997, pp 303–25). Since the fall of communism, Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia and, most recently, Hungary have joined the scheme. In 2010 the number of towns published amounts to *c*. 500 in 17 different countries. Unfortunately, some countries have as yet not joined the programme mainly because no-one was willing to make a start. The second task was to organize events, which were to focus on the practicalities of production, as well as the historic towns atlases as a source for comparative urban history. With the support of colleagues, a number of symposia have been organized so far:

1993, Munster: 'Historic Towns Atlases Theory and practice', hosted by Prof. Peter Johanek

1997, Bologna: 'Medieval Metropolises: Cologne and Vienna', hosted by Prof. Francesca Bocchi

1999, Bordeaux: 'The topography of power: an exploration on the basis of Historic Towns Atlas maps', hosted by Prof. J.B. Marquette

2002, Edinburgh: 'Space as an explanatory factor in urban history', held in the context of the Sixth International Conference of European Urban Historians

2006, Dublin: 'The topography of power in European towns: the contribution of the European historic towns atlases', hosted by the Irish Historic Towns Atlas.


## Intellectual reach

The production of these atlases is expensive and the projects run most smoothly if a national Academy, University or regional government institution facilitates its publication. In the Irish scheme, editors and authors work on a voluntary basis, while the project manager/cartographic editor and the editorial assistant occupy two full-time positions within the Royal Irish Academy. How, then, do we justify the effort and expense o producing these atlases?


The interest in cadastral maps is also alive outside atlas circles, as a conference held in Rome in 2008 under the title 'Descriptio Urbis' shows. This conference was jointly

organized by Universitá Roma Tre with the Municipal Archive of Rome (Archivo storico Caitolino). Katalina Szende (Budapest) and Jacinta Prunty (Maynooth), both atlas project editors, jointly organized a session entitled 'How far back? The use of cadastral maps in reconstructing the urban past'.

In an attempt to make a start with comparative research based on the large-scale maps, I explored the locational aspect of the oldest church and oldest market place in towns originating in the Carolingian period, in comparison to towns founded in the late twelfth and thirteenth century. I used the town plans as evidence for the analysis of the processes at work in the early formation of towns. In this way the category of space becomes an important explanatory variable.

The town of Wetzlar is located where the long distance route from Cologne to Frankfurt crosses the river Lahn, a tributary of the Rhine on its eastern flank. The first settlement at the site was a royal manor. The first documentary record for Wetzlar dates from 897, when the bishop of Wurzburg consecrated a chapel to St Salvador. The former area of the churchyard to the west and south of the church became the medieval market place. There is evidence of market activities around the early church and of an enclosure built before 1190. This early enclosure is reflected in the early-nineteenth century town plan by a line north of Kornmarket. Wetzlar was first mentioned by name in 1142. Frederic I granted the burgesses urban liberties. The thirteenth century was a strong period of growth, as the Kornmarkt and Eisenmarkt were laid out. The first stone wall was built around 1260 (identical with wall shown on nineteenth-century map). What interests us here is the proximity of the earliest parish church and the market place, which grew out of the cemetery site.

The town-plan of Monbeliard in eastern France, near the Swiss border, shows this transition (published in French atlas, 1994). As in Wetzlar, the town developed from a Carolongian manor into a medieval borough. As a consequence of economic growth, the churchyard was relocated and a proper market place was laid out next to the church of St Martin's.

In Ireland, an example of a town that originated in an Early Christian monastery, is Kells. It is located in the fertile lands of County Meath, north-west of Dublin. The origins go back to a Columban monastery founded in 807. The inner and outer enclosure of the former monastic precinct are clearly evident in the semi-circular alignment of the present-day street pattern. At the time when the monastery attracted large numbers of pilgrims, the market functions would have been carried out around the stone-cross at the eastern entrance to the monastic site. When the Anglo-Normans came, Kells became the site of a manor and was granted a charter. A castle was built in what was to become Castle Street. In the eighteenth century, the landlord initiated the laying-out of Market Street.

## Towns in the context of medieval colonisation

We will now look at towns which were the result of medieval settlement colonisation, either by lords in their own country or in newly-colonised areas. Our first example is Pardubice in Bohemia in the Czech Republic, which was published as part of the *Historický Atlas Měst České Republiky* in 1996. The oldest church was documented for the first time in 1295. The castle of the feudal lord dates to the end of the thirteenth century. The church of St Mary's was built in 1350, removed from the market place.

The town of Opole (formerly Oppeln) is located in present-day Poland. It was published in the context of the Deutscher Städteatlas in 1979 (Kuhn, 1979). The town is located on the upper reaches of the River Oder. There were islands in the river which made the crossing easier for the long-distance route from Prague via Opole to Krakow and Kiev. Opole is the old Slavic name for the territorial association of a number of small Slavic settlements. From the ninth to the thirteenth century, a Slavic *civitas* existed on the island in the river, which included craftsmen and traders. Before 1217 Count Kasimir decided to invite German settlers (*hospites)* to settle on the right bank of the Oder, opposite the Slavic stronghold. He granted them the law of Magdeburg.

The oldest part of Opole lies around the church of the Holy Cross, which is mentioned in documents before 1223. As a result of the Mongol invasion in 1241, this oldest part of the later town was largely destroyed. A new and bigger Opole was built in 1246 under the guidance of Count Lakam, who was Count Kasimir's successor. He created the regularly-laid-out town with the large, centrally-located market place with stalls for long-distance merchants. On the northern side of the enclosed town, the old Kollegiatkirche of the Holy Cross was included in the town, but in a peripheral location. In 1248, Franciscans settled on the western side of the town. The Dominican Friary was built in 1295.

The regularly-laid-out house plots on the nineteenth-century map, lying parallel to each other, have a width of 8–9 metres and a length of 40–50 metres. The enclosed town contained 16 ha and had 250 houses. Individual families had a lot more space here than they would have had in the old Slavic stronghold. The town plan reflects very clearly the importance of the merchant community in the establishment of the new town in the middle of the thirteenth century. The parish church lies on the periphery, because the older core was replaced by the planned layout of the new town.

In Ireland there are many examples of towns set up in the context of the Anglo-Norman colonisation. Many of those were established under the protection of a feudal castle and would therefore also qualify for the category stronghold settlements*.* We will look at the example of Carrickfergus, which was published in the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* series in 1986. Located on the northern shore of Belfast Lough, Carrickfergus is a colonial town established in the late twelfth century by the Anglo-Norman lord, de Courcy. The massive castle is built on a rock jutting into the sea. The

town is a creation in the shadow of the feudal castle. Tradition says that King John granted the town a charter in 1210, when he visited the place and took over the castle. The first burgesses were recorded in 1221.

The town consists of one principal street, High Street. An Elizabethan map of of *c.*1560 shows a market cross at the west end of this street. This is where the market place is located on the early nineteenth-century map. The parish church dedicated to St Nicholas, typical not only for early merchant settlements but also for medieval port towns, was built by de Courcy. It is located off the market place. This arrangement is characteristic for other colonial towns as well, where the church and the market are established contemporaneously, rather than the market evolving out of an existing church settlement.

Present-day High Street came into its own when, in the 1230s, a Franciscan friary was built at its eastern end. Archaeological evidence confirms that there were burgage plots on both sides of High Street, which have been dated to the fourteenth century. Carrickfergus remained a major trading town into the later medieval period. Right through the Middle Ages the castle was in the hands either of feudal lords or of the king, who acted as proprietors of the town. There is no specific building mentioned as the town hall. Corporation minutes for the sixteenth century recorded that the council met in various meeting rooms. The strong feudal influence over the town probably prevented the construction of a separate town hall. In the late sixteenth century Carrickfergus became a plantation town with a new charter and radical changes were carried out on the town's fabric.

In relation to the Irish Historic Towns Atlas I have explored the theme of education in Irish towns in the nineteenth century. Kildare, in the fertile lands south-west of Dublin, is one example of the formation of a Catholic quarter. My colleague Mark Hennessy has explored the imprint of the British state in nineteenth-century Irish towns.

No doubt the organisation of space as expressed in the town plans is an important historical variable. Susan Reynolds put it well in 1977, when she wrote: 'The topographical history of a town, its streets and buildings, can no more be separated from the history of urban society than one can separate the physical appearance of as human being from his or her personality.'

## Conclusions

The exploration of the locational aspects of urban institutions in medieval towns supports the distinction between primary towns with roots in the Carolingian period and planted or colonial towns which emerged in the thirteenth century. In the primary towns the medieval parish church in association with the merchants constitutes the original core of the settlement around which a market developed on the land of the

former churchyard. A town hall, in many instances located between the church precinct and the market, reflects the power of the emerging town council. In contrast, from the thirteenth century onwards we find in planned medieval new towns the market place with a town hall at the centre of the town plan. The parish church was slightly removed from the central feature of the market place. These topographical differences reflect a shift in the power structure of these towns during medieval times. The merchants' productivity was to be to the lord's advantage and as a consequence the merchant community gained in status over time. In the earlier towns it was the church, set into a feudal context, in whose proximity markets developed, while in the colonial towns a merchant community was induced by a lord to establish a town, which was often granted a charter at the very beginning of its existence. Accordingly the merchants' market was located at the very heart of the town. As far as the ground plan is concerned, the new element is that converging streets have been replaced by parallel streets. The resultant 'rectangularity' of the ground plan is the element of innovation. The town plans are laid out according to rational guidelines. These new towns express in near perfect geometry the idea of a new social order.

It is fascinating to observe how urban form has been reinvented in medieval societies where towns were established as planned settlements and how elementary geometric form has been integrated into the culture of post-Carolingian Europe. It was only when I had finished my comparative scrutiny of town plans, that I realised that the topographical evidence let me to define the same categories for the origin of medieval towns as my colleague Howard Clarke and I had arrived at, when we edited two volumes of case histories of the origin of European towns outside the former Roman Empire. We came then, in 1985, to distinguish early-medieval towns according to their primary dynamic: trading settlements, cult settlements, stronghold settlements, market settlements (eleventh and early twelfth century). These we contrasted with the planned towns of the high-medieval period (thirteenth century), when concepts of regular town planning were implemented (Clarke and Simms, 1985).

It is remarkable that a spatial concept such as the regularly-laid-out market place with a dominating town hall would cross so many language boundaries on its way across Europe. The evidence points towards common processes in medieval European society. These common processes, which primarily included the spread of Christianity, the establishments of international religious orders, the building of universities as well as the spread of the architectural style of Romanesque and Gothic from west to east, produced a uniform cultural pattern across Europe.

Finally, the exploration of early nineteenth-century town plans from the various European historic town atlases has confirmed the importance of the spatial dimension for our understanding of the transformation of the medieval town. The interpretation of particular town plans revealed why urban space was formed in particular ways and

how it was reinvented under changing conditions. The full appreciation of the history of our towns depends on the understanding of processes in space as well as in time.

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