

## **The Belgian historical gazetteer: a tool to map Belgian toponyms beyond linguistic and chronological borders**

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Since the 1990s, historians have been paying significant attention to the spatial dimension of social phenomena. This “spatial turn” has emerged on the one hand from - and keeps resulting in - more exchange between historians and geographers. Historians are now more and more keen into analysing the spatial dimension of phenomena they study, and sometimes also want to explore how environmental factors might have influenced socio-economic realities. As a result, there is a growing need of spatial visualisations among historians.

Written sources dated from a variety of time periods brim with spatial information, mostly because a major part of the medieval and early modern remaining sources deals with land management, which often requires to be able to locate specific tenants or crop production. Information mentioned to locate properties, fields or buildings can however vary widely: to localize something, writers could use for instance landscape components (presence of a hill, a road crossing or a river for instance), well-known people’s houses (aldermen’s houses for instance) or place names. Some of the latter are still used nowadays (name of cities or villages), many of them have disappeared or have greatly evolved. Many ancient toponyms are therefore very difficult to locate.

As well-known this issue is for international historians, it might be even more familiar to researchers working with Belgian historical material. Belgian toponyms have indeed changed greatly in the past centuries due to the succession of different state administrations (the French one, the Dutch one and the Belgian one) and to the different languages that are used by inhabitants: toponyms were often translated from Dutch or German to French, and then re-translated, resulting in a variety of small but numerous changes, that occurred at every stage of translation.

Gazetteers can help historians with mapping toponyms that appear in the sources they analyse by providing them with lists of historical place names and extra information which can be used to disambiguate the latter, if it happens that several different places share a same name. This is the aim of initiatives such as the World Historical Gazetteer<sup>1</sup> or Pleiades<sup>2</sup>. However, despite their merits, the international scope of these tools impedes the use for regional and local historical research. Historians thus need more suitable gazetteer if they want to work at a more local scale.

This paper will introduce the project “Belgian Historical Gazetteer” whose aim is to fill in this gap for Belgium. Started in November 2022, this project will last two years. It is hosted at the University of Antwerp, financed by CLARIAH-VL (2021-2025)<sup>3</sup>, and undertaken in liaison with the Belgian National Geographical Institute (IGN/NGI). The aim of this project is to set up a historical gazetteer of toponyms for the whole present-day territory of Belgium, in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://whgazetteer.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pleiades.stoa.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://clariahvl.hypotheses.org/>

order to provide researchers with a collection of data that 1) does not stop at Belgian provincial borders and which 2) goes beyond the level of municipalities – such tool does not exist yet. This paper will present the methodology used to build the gazetteer as well as the project planning and its expected outcomes.

The first phase of the project consists in the gathering of an ancient and geographically homogeneous set of toponyms. This will be done by collecting all the toponyms mentioned on the ‘reduced cadastre’, a reduced version of the primitive cadastre drawn between 1847 and 1855 to prepare the creation of the first topographical map of Belgium in the second half of the nineteenth century. These toponyms are located by using points in QGIS and described via the PostGIS extension in a PostgreSQL database whose structure is very simple, highly adaptable to every source and compatible with Linked Open Data principles. In order to help researchers disambiguating place names, we add to the description of these toponyms a link to their Wikidata page if one already exists and/or to the corresponding paragraph of *Gemeenten van België*<sup>4</sup>, where Hervé Hasquin and his team summarized historical information (notably administrative and ecclesiastical belonging during the *Ancien Régime*) about municipalities. The second phase consists in establishing links between the recorded toponyms (for instance territorial belonging like ‘this hamlet belongs to this village’), as well as between the latter and the toponyms recorded in the present-day database of the IGN/NGI: by establishing these links we can describe how a toponym evolved during the nineteenth and the twentieth century in order to explore variations of the place names through time. In a third phase, toponyms extracted from older material will be added to the database and the same sort of links will be described.

At the end of the project, the gazetteer will be published on the World Historical Gazetteer as well as on a LOD platform, in order to make it easily reachable for everyone as well as potentially extendable. This gazetteer will enable researchers to easily identify place names they find in their sources, and could be used in the future to automatically ‘map’ (e.g. annotated) written sources to a great extent. Beyond other possible concrete contributions to historical research, this paper will also show that the gazetteer will open new perspectives in landscape history by making it possible to follow the evolution of the Belgian landscape through the evolution of toponyms (name and location) on the long-term.

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<sup>4</sup> Duvosquel, Jean-Marie, Hervé Hasquin, and Raymond Van Uytven. *Gemeenten Van België: Geschiedkundig En Administratief-Geografisch Woordenboek*. Bruxelles: La Renaissance du Livre, 1980.