FROM A VISION OF BRITAIN TO PASTPLACE

To the right we list the non-British content we are adding, but PastPlace also builds on our existing Vision of Britain system:

- The data model is the same, distinguishing between “places” and formal administrative entities but holding the various names for both in one easily searched list.
- PastPlace will access all our information for British places, except the small number missing from Wikipedia.
- Like Vision of Britain place pages, the PastPlace app features descriptive text and excerpts from old maps.

A GLOBAL MASTER GAZETTEER FROM WIKIDATA

Rather than use Geonames, an enormous global gazetteer but arguably with many duplicates and irrelevancies, our master list of “places” comes from Wikidata, a fairly new project of the Wikimedia Foundation designed to be a central and language-neutral authority file linking articles about essentially the same thing in the different language editions of Wikipedia. This means that eventually we will cover not just all the places in Britain with articles in the English version of Wikipedia, but also all the places in China described in the Chinese version.

The PastPlace gazetteer will be linked together by exactly the same set of numerical IDs as Wikidata, which inevitably are different from the place IDs used by Vision of Britain.

GAZETTEER OF THE WORLD OR DICTIONARY OF GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE (1856)

This seven-volume gazetteer was published by Fullarton’s of Edinburgh, and contains roughly 7.3m words in 87,000 articles. It has already been scanned for Google Books but we are cleaning up the text so that it can form a systematic part of the new gazetteer. It provides both descriptions and many relatively recent variant forms of place names.

PASTPLACE WEB MAP SERVER

Many “geographical” web sites use Google Maps as a base layer, and that includes pastplace web map server. Vision of Britain already uses a Web Map Server covering the whole of Europe, drawing on mid-20th century British and American military mapping. We are extending this globally, drawing on mid-20th century British covering the whole of Europe, many heritage sector sites.

We will instead use historical maps. Vision of Britain

•  Like pastplace –

PASTPLACE GAZETTEER AND API

PastPlace brings together all these components in a single object-relational database running on postgres software, on the same server as Vision of Britain. It is designed to be accessed mainly via an Application Programming Interface which can respond both to place name searches and to requests for all places within a given area. Results are returned in a variety of formats including RDF-XML, Turtle and JSON. An early version of the PastPlace API was presented at the 2013 Archives Discovery Forum. All gazetteer content will be under a Creative Commons — Attribution (CC-BY) license.

PASTPLACE APP

The PastPlace API essentially allows other computers to search and reference the gazetteer. To make the system accessible to humans, and to “eat our own dogfood”, we are also developing a PastPlace web app. This is based on much newer web technologies than Vision of Britain, in particular jQuery Mobile and a new and touch-friendly version of the OpenLayers map viewer, so that the same “page” works not just on computers but on tablets and smartphones. Unlike most web apps, we are taking care to ensure that the “site” supports distinct URIs (Uniform Resource Identifiers) for each “place”, and that it is crawlable by Googlebots.

OVERALL AIMS

- PastPlace will be a historical gazetteer in that all place-names are drawn from known and dated historical documents.
- Longer term, we aim to provide working hyperlinks to images of source documents, especially maps.
- Current work is internally funded by the University of Portsmouth, but we are collaborating with both Pelagios 3 and the NSF-funded Collaborative for Historical Information and Analysis, led by the University of Pittsburgh.

PELAGIOS PROJECT PROVIDES ALL THE NAMES FROM ALL PRE-1492 MAPS

The Southampton University-led Pelagios 3 project is extracting all the place names from all the “geospatial documents” created before 1492. This covers not just maps like the Mappa Mundi but texts such as the Itinerarium Burdigalense, dated from 333 AD, considered the oldest Christian pilgrimage document and mapped here. Each “annotation” created by Pelagios will contain not just the name in the source but a formal link to the “document” and a formal link to the master gazetteer, all expressed as RDF.

http://pelagios-project.blogspot.co.uk

EXTENDING PASTPLACE THROUGH CROWD-SOURCING

Pelagios funds map scholars to extract names from difficult sources, such as medieval portolanos. We aim to greatly extend the gazetteer by harvesting place names from more recent historical maps via crowd-sourcing. We hope to work with the Zooniverse “citizen science” platform, and an existing Welsh project (www.cymru1900wales.org) provides a partial prototype. However, our aim is not to build a quite new gazetteer but to find earlier instances of the places already in our master gazetteer, on maps which are not geographically accurate using names often substantially different from the modern name. We therefore aim to integrate the Annotational semantic annotation tool developed by the Austrian Institute of Technology, another Pelagios partner.

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