

Teaching Place-Names and Landscape

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Abstract

In the spring of 2011 I gave a course for university students in “Place-names and landscape”. The aim of the course was to introduce place-name studies and its place within historical geography to students coming from a variety of institutional backgrounds, such as linguistics, history, geography and archaeology. The course took the students through a variety of different source types and methods within historical geography connected to place-name studies. The paper will present the structure of the course, its intended aims, implementation and outcome.

How do you recruit new people to a small scholarly field? This is probably a relevant question to many small niche studies in the university world. It certainly is for the study of Danish place-names, which has never constituted a school with a high number of practitioners, and the entire Danish school can to some extent be found at the Name Research Section at the University of Copenhagen. Its existence as a department at a very little institute, which is even a research institute and therefore only performs a limited amount of teaching, means that the school is very easily ignored by students – and thus by the very same people who potentially could be the ones to carry it on. If we as place-name scholars wish our school to continue after we have retired, we constantly have to think about new ways to make the exciting possibilities and relevance of our field visible to potential heirs.

Onomastic studies are traditionally linked to linguistic history, and most place-name scholars therefore also come from a linguist background. The study of Danish place-names has, however, since its early scientific beginnings in the second half of the nineteenth century continuously attracted scholars from other academic fields, such as historians, archaeologists and geographers. This has occasionally caused clashes between linguists and non-linguists concerning the use of methods and results of place-name studies, for instance in relation to settlement history. But in recent years the Name Research Section at the University of Copenhagen itself has endorsed integration and education of non-linguist students in the study of place-names. The reason for this is partly a wish to expand the potential field of recruitment, but just as much to strengthen the school of place-name studies itself through new ideas and methodologies from neighbouring schools. I myself am one of these ‘externally recruited’ place-name scholars with a background in medieval history and historical geography.

In the following, I will present a method to teach university students from different institutional backgrounds on an interdisciplinary course combining place-names with various historical-geographical features in the cultural landscape. The method was implemented on a course on ‘Place-names and landscape’ held at the Name Research Section in the spring of 2011. The course was explicitly interdisciplinary in its whole core, both directed at linguistic students with an interest in place-names’ relations to non-linguistic features and at students from the schools of history, archaeology and geography with an interest in how place-names can be used as a source for their fields as well. It had a distinct historical angle with a focus on the period from around AD 500 to 1700. The level of the course was aimed at MA

students, but apart from that no further pre-qualifications were required in either linguistic history or landscape history.

The aim of the course was to give the students an introduction to place-names and their relations to landscape, both physical geography and cultural geography, as well as a basic understanding of how place-names can be used as one landscape-historical tool among many other historical-geographical source types. Or put in a more precise question: *How can place-names contribute to the understanding of other landscape-related study areas and vice versa – and which ‘interdisciplinary minefields’ should you stay clear of in this respect?*

The course consisted of 12 lessons each lasting three hours (10 am - 1 pm), which were divided into three overall sections. The first three lessons gave the students a general introduction to place-names, both settlement names and names of physical-geographical features, and their structure and usage, including theories and methods of place-name studies, especially focusing on etymology and dating. The second section consisted of three lessons presenting different types of sources for historical references to place-names, such as medieval letters and charters (‘diploma’), cadastres and historical maps. In the third and final section we looked at place-names’ usage in relation to various features in the historical landscape: physical geography, land use, economic records, settlement types, village land structures, parish structures and religion in general.

The titles and organisation of the 12 lessons were as follows:

1. Introduction to the course and to place-names
2. Place-names in settlements
3. Place-names in natural features
4. Place-names in the diplomataria
5. Place-names in land registers and cadastres
6. Place-names in historical maps
7. Place-names and the physical landscape
8. Place-names and land use
9. Place-names and settlement
10. Place-names and village land structures
11. Place-names and churches and parish structures
12. Place-names and religion

The structure of the course meant that each lesson started with a new topic, introducing a new thematic question or source type, with a presentation of the most important research historiography and connected theories and methods. Here I will give three short examples of how the lessons were built up, one from each of the three thematic sections. Lesson 2 on ‘Place-names in settlements’ gave the students an introduction to place-names (continued from lesson 1) with a focus on settlement names. A central part of this was the classification and dating of the main Danish place-name types, below crudely simplified into three overall age groups:

<i>Place-name suffix</i>	<i>Period of name activity</i>
<i>-inge, -løse, -lev, -sted</i>	AD 0-800 (Iron Age)
<i>-by, -torp</i>	AD 800-1000 (Viking Age)
<i>-torp, -tved, -rød</i>	AD 1000-1300 (High Medieval)

It was seriously and continuously stressed to the students that this basic understanding of the internal age structure of place-names was vital, not just for place-name studies in general, but also for the students' own chances of doing the course and passing exams.

As a central element of the whole course structure, each lesson ended with a practical exercise, where the students were to use what they were supposed to have learned in this particular lesson on a specific geographical area of their own choice. This study area, the size of five parishes, was to be used for exercises by the students throughout the course, and it could furthermore form the basis of the final written report for their examination. In lesson 2, the students were told to classify all the historical settlement names from before 1688 recorded in their respective areas by the use of the published catalogue *Danmarks Stednavne* ['Place-names of Denmark'], and, based on this, to offer an overall description of the area's settlement-historical development. This was to be presented *in plenum* at the beginning of the next lesson. Thus, each lesson henceforth began with a discussion of the exercise given at the preceding lesson.

In the section presenting different kinds of sources for historical place-names, lesson 4 was on 'Place-names and the diplomataria', that is letters and charters of various types, which in Denmark go back to around AD 1100. After a general introduction to medieval and early modern diploma and how they have been published in Denmark, the students were taught how Danish diplomataria can be used as a source for place-names, and how the first instances not only may indicate something about the age of the name, but also by its oldest forms contain an important key to understanding the true etymology of the name. Furthermore, the important difference between original forms and transcript forms was underlined. In the aforementioned catalogue of *Danmarks Stednavne* many of these instances are recorded, but in a highly lexicographical and academic way with a multitude of abbreviations which the students – just as any other new reader – need to have explained to have any chance of decoding them. An example of what *Danmarks Stednavne* has listed on the village of Gryderup is shown below:

Gryderup, lb. VJb 1231 (13. årh.) Grætæthorp; 1398 (1607 DiplDan 4rk VI 713) Gryderop; 20/11 1399 (Sandvig) Grydorpp; 2/6 1406 (Brandt) Gryderup; 6/11 1416 Grydorpp; 1475 (1607 ÆDA IV 78), 1487 (1607 ÆDA IV 79) Gryderup; Werlauff 1850 p. 87 10/1 1520 Gryderwp; 1531 (1607 ÆDA IV 168) Gryderop; HdDb II 452 før 23/3 1544, KronSk 10/6 1539, KronSk 17/6 1560 KronSk 20/4 1561, Kvægskatreg 1566, RKJb 1568, KronSk 24/10 1585, Mandt 1606, Jb 1609 Gryderup; Jb 1610 Gryderop, Gryderup; MB 1681, Matr 1688, DATl 1767, VSKOrig 1770, Matr 1844, Gst 1865, Gst 1894 Gryderup; HU 1916 [gryð(ə)råp]; BOF 1980 [gryðərɔb]; PostAdr 1992, Gst 1996 Gryderup.

For this lesson, the exercise was to find at least five instances concerning a settlement in their respective selected areas from at least three different source publications, and then to note the date and what the entry was all about in regard to the settlement in question.

My third and final example is from lesson 8, where the focus was on relations between place-names and land use (such as arable fields, meadows, pastures and forest), as well as infrastructure (roads, bridges, etc.). The aim was to clarify which land-use features we can expect to find in the place-name material and how they have been used, and to what extent it is possible to identify connections between place-names and certain types of landscape usage. The exercise for this lesson was to search their selected areas for connections between place-names and various land-use types, and to compare the place-names found on present-day

maps with those on historical maps, among other things to identify and possibly explain cases where land-use indicating place-names did not correspond with the mapped land usage.

I used different teaching tools in the lessons with a combination of old-fashioned blackboard teaching, PowerPoint and digital interactive mapping (G.I.S.: *Geographical Information System*), depending on the kind of data material and expected discussions of the day, including considerations of the need to alter teaching methods during a lesson. This variation seemed to function well.

Besides the 12 obligatory lessons, the students were offered an extra voluntary lesson introducing them to digital mapping with a one-day 'crash course' in the use of G.I.S. (here MapInfo), a computer tool which can be used with great benefit in a study approach like this, but it was neither mandatory nor necessary to perform the exercises or the final report. All five students took the G.I.S. lesson, but only two of them used it in their continued work.

A potential problem with very interdisciplinary courses like this can be to limit the number of necessary text books, not least for the sake of the students' budget, but in this case it was possible to base the whole course on just two major text books – one of them, admittedly, written by myself and a co-author a few years ago with exactly such a course in mind. In addition to this, a compendium with a series of specific articles was offered to the students.

The course had a class of five students. This may sound very few and a sign of failure in itself, but it was what could be expected and did not deviate from other courses run at the institute for students at the MA level. As hoped, the students came from different institutional backgrounds, representing the schools of linguistics (Danish), history, archaeology and geography, and thus covering all the potential institutes of recruitment.

Students at the University of Copenhagen can choose between a number of examination forms, but for this course they were recommended to write a report of about 15 pages presenting the place-names of their selected area, and a problem to be analyzed of their own choice within the range of the course, describing the theory of the chosen topics and the methods to be used. All five students chose this examination form. In this way, all the work invested in the exercises of each lesson could be used in the final report, a fact that undoubtedly encouraged the students to put quite a lot of effort and interest into the exercises. Classes took place at the Name Research Section itself, allowing the students access to all the books, maps and other sources needed for their work, and they often stayed for several hours after the end of the lesson to work on their exercises and final reports.

It is my feeling that the course in general was a success. In particular the idea of combining theoretical lectures on sources and methods directly with practical exercises on a continuous study area of their own choice (usually their personal home region) proved quite fruitful. Also the direct link between exercises and the final report, as described above, seems to have encouraged student engagement.

The students themselves appeared very happy with the course and what they had learned from it. A list of representative comments from the students' evaluation looks like this:

- I have a natural interest for language and landscape.
- The course provides a good insight to place-name studies.
- Interesting interdisciplinarity with good combination of names and landscapes.

- Good structure in the lessons with a logical chronology.
- Good combination of different teaching methods, activating the students.
- Nice to have weekly exercises relating to the taught topics.
- You get a lot of new knowledge and try it out for yourself.
- Clearly defined exercises make it easy to prepare.
- Nice that the lessons take place at the department with access to books and maps – inspiring.
- First time I have seen teachers serve coffee and tea for the students!

The primary problem from my point of view was that it often could be difficult to engage all the students in the plenum discussions. This is of course hardly a surprising problem to face for a teacher, but it becomes even more apparent in such a small class. Another problem turned out to be that even though all five students completed the course in terms of attending lessons, only three of them submitted their final reports for examination, one of them even making use of a possible ‘second attempt-submission’ in the following semester. A reason for this could be that the ambitions of some students for their reports perhaps became too high, and that an interdisciplinary course like this easily ‘piles up’ possible themes and sources to be included in the analyses, eventually causing an ‘overload’ for the student.

Fortunately, all three reports submitted were very fine and produced top grades. Two of these students subsequently did their MA-theses at the Name Research Section, one of them on a topic closely related to the course. Whereas this in itself must be considered a prove of success for the course, the long-term criteria of success will be if any of the five students also in the future will choose an academic career directly or indirectly involving place-name studies. As one of the two most interested post-graduates is currently applying for a PhD at the institute within name studies, the chance of fulfilling this aim as well is certainly within range.

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