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A Historian's Perspective on Gazetteers and Interoperability

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If a historian wishes to study the political history of the region south of the Caspian Sea, she might begin with the Achmenaeid Persians, architects of the world's first great empire; trace the history of the region through its dominion by the Greek speaking Selucid and Parthian empires; chart its return to Persian rule during the Sasanian Empire, and note its conquest by the Arab Umayyad Caliphate and their Buwayhid successors. In medieval times, she would observe that the region was occupied by the Turkish Khanate of Khwarizm, the Mongol Il-Khanate, and the Turko-Mongol Timurids before reverting to Persian rule under the Safavids in the sixteenth century. With the emergence of nation-states in the eighteenth century, she would note that the region south of the Caspian became known as Persia, a name it maintained until the founding of Iran in 1921. As imperial fortunes shifted, the boundaries around and within the region south of the Caspian Sea changed dramatically. And, as suzerainty over the region changed hands between overlords of many linguistic backgrounds, place names changed as well. Often, places in this region were known simultaneously by names in many languages at the same time; naming systems that could represent different and conflicting perspectives about power and dominion. The historical trajectory of Persian political geography is hard to map with detail and precision, but is reasonably easy to model in a gazetteer.

Considered simply in their basic function as indexes of named places, gazetteers are an essential tool of historical geography, and, by extension, a crucial element of any kind of historical research whatsoever. Much geographically focused historical research, particularly on eras prior to the nineteenth century, is based on sources that are saturated with place names, but ones that can be assigned geographical coordinates only with difficulty and a very high degree of ambiguity. By contrast with historical GIS *per se*, with its premium on place, gazetteers have the capacity to liberate historical geographers from a preoccupation with location. They allow scholars to save untold quantities of time, money and frustration attempting to precisely georeference historical places and their indeterminate boundaries, while allowing us to accomplish what we do best: investigating how place and space made meaning to people. In a way that would be very difficult for a historical GIS system, a gazetteer can:

- model how places were related to one another (as components of a hierarchy or as nodes in a network, for instance)
- associate multiple coexisting names with one another through time and in many languages
- structure information about the changes to names, locations, feature types and relationships for any place
- link all of this information to sources, in the tradition of rich attribution expected by scholars of history and culture.

Why, at that point, should historians and humanists be encouraged to create gazetteers at all, rather than writing monographs, as our disciplinary tradition and colleagues

encourage? There are several answers to that question. First, as Willard McCarty has recently argued for the digital humanities in general, the creation of databases and taxonomies has the effect of “rendering knowledge problematic.” McCarty suggests that “the twin computational requirements of complete explicitness and absolute consistency” opens up a space for the scholar “to refine an inevitable mismatch between a representation and reality” in a way that other modes of production do not.

Second, a gazetteer is an extraordinary reference work and research tool for historians. A search of the Alexandria Digital Library for my hometown of Merced, for instance, produces a list of 80 results in the United States, Latin America and the Philippines—a rough map of the Spanish cultural world. Once the resource is complete, a search of the China Historical GIS for Beijing will yield a list and map of the dozen or more places that have been designated as a northern capital at any time in Chinese history.

Finally—and turning explicitly to the topic of this workshop session—historical geographical information structured into a digital gazetteer has the potential to have an immense impact if it is incorporated into an interoperable gazetteer system. A book on a shelf or a free-standing database on line about Sasanian or imperial Chinese geography would be interesting only to specialists. However, a global gazetteer that includes this data would be useful to people asking a wide range of questions.

An interoperable gazetteer system that incorporates historical information has one critical characteristic. That is, it will necessarily consist of many small component resources that have been created by hand, by individuals or small groups of specialists. A specialist on Tibetan Buddhist temples may be able to create an extraordinary gazetteer within his domain by trolling historical sources and archaeological reports, but would have no way to do the same for any area outside of his linguistic and scholarly expertise. Systems and services that incorporate historical gazetteers need to develop tools that can allow small gazetteers to be searched and used together, including disambiguation protocols and feature type cross-walks. Gazetteer developers need to be educated about lowest common denominator content standards and service protocols that will allow their efforts to be visible to such a system.

Finally, while gazetteers are super-powerful reference tools in their own right, they will find their greatest uptake as components of information systems. In the domain of contemporary place name information, we are aware of Google Maps and many other ubiquitous services. In the historical domain, gazetteer services should be a standard component of the resources that I think of as Atlases. Gazetteers can be incorporated with digital library services such as catalogue searching and links to images, timelines, texts or historical censuses. All developers in the digital humanities should be attuned to the presence and value of digital gazetteers, and design spatially aware systems that can incorporate place name search and map display.