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Changes of urban “namescapes” in Basel

RESEARCH PROJECT: NAMENBUCH BASEL-STADT

In 2008 started the research project “Namenbuch Basel-Stadt” for the coming six years. As one of the three projects of the master project “Namenbuch der Nordwestschweiz” it has a particular focus on an urban and especially an urbanised environment (www.ortsnamen.unibas.ch). Inga Siegfried and Jürgen Mischke conduct the project under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Annelies Häcki-Buhofer (Deutsches Seminar, University of Basel).

Aim of the project is to collect all the actual and forgotten names in the area of the canton of Basel-City (streets, sites, rivers, houses etc.). Furthermore we want to discuss and explain the origin of these names from a linguistic and historical perspective. The results will be published in an explicit dictionary. Therefore it is necessary to collect historical name evidences. These are accessible in the archives of the canton and fortunately Basel is in the possession of a lot of historical documents back to the middle ages. Till today the project team collected over 40’000 evidences of names which are unequally spread over the last 1000 years. This is a capable basis for the dictionary but also for further analysis.

All name evidences are stored in a powerful database called FLUNA. The related projects to “Namenbuch der Nordwestschweiz” and additionally the name research centre of Berne are connected to the same database making it possible to compare data and research results beyond the own study area almost in real time. The entire database contains over 800’000 name evidences now.

Moreover this database allows us to arrange names geographically, chronologically or typologically. In a diachronic perspective this makes it possible to look at name layers as some kind of toponomastic archaeology. Because of this it is an excellent device for several scientific issues. A number of dissertations are in progress right now (P. Hofmann, J. Mischke, J. Reber, B. Wiggenhauser).

Nevertheless the data shows the special case of Basel-City. Name research projects in Switzerland have little experience in the scientific analysis of named areas and objects (except street names) within an urban centre. Thus we are facing certain problems but also very interesting possibilities in the way of analysing and understanding this kind of named space and its interaction with society.

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Exemplary Problems

What are the toponyms inside the city? Certainly street names belong to them. Normally dictionaries about city place names only explain these. But what about house names or names of statues for example? What about names, only a specific group of people use? We think the conditions that give an object or a place the ability to establish a stable toponym are not fully understood yet. Almost everything or every sign is able to become a toponym as long as it is capable helping to orientate. So how to choose THE toponyms of the city?

A city changes its extension through history a lot more like a village with countryside. With the change of the settlement structure also the names can change or distort and make it difficult to reconstruct the origin of them.

Exemplary Possibilities

The shown problems also may be opportunities. We work with the difficulty of not being able to define city toponyms every day. Therefore we also analyse the conditions of their genesis and so we achieve a contribution to the theory of city toponyms.

The changing nature of a city and its place names is a possibility to analyse name, space and human interaction in a diachronic perspective. Every time has its own “namescape” a synchronic network of language trying to be an image of human surrounding. Hence “namescapes” are an interesting field of research. How do societies generate these mirrored layers and what do they say about humans perception of the world (mental map)?

Grosspeter Tower
Future: Grosspeter Tower

Grosspeter Hotel
Future: *Grosspeter Hotel

Grosspter Garage
2010: Grosspeter Garage
1933: Gross-Peter Garage

Grosspeterstrasse (street)
2010: Grosspeterstrasse (Stadtplan Basel, St. Alban)
1859: Gross Peter Sträslein (SitPlan Basel, S3)

Grosspeterstrasse (tram station)
2010: Grosspeterstrasse (Stadtplan Basel, St. Alban)
1907: Grosspeterstrasse (BvB, Aeschenplatz)

Grosspeter (site)
1878: Gross Peter (Siegfried Karte, Basel);
1875: ùm den ſüdlichen Theil des Großpeters herüm (Expropriation Nauenrain, 14)
1859: Gross Peter (SitPlan Basel, S3)
1820: Gros Peter (Hofer Plan Grossbasel)
1709: äusserhalb dem Großpeter (Spital L 2.1, 49)
1608: Räben der groß peter genant (GerA E15, 89v)
1579: gegen dem Groß Petter (Bau SS8, 1v)
1425 von groß peters guot (SpitalA R 4.1, 164v)
1392: bona dicti Groſpeter (KloA,Ulrich Urk, 14)

Grosspeter Acker (field)
1472: Zwùſchent groſpeters acker (Elendh.Urk, 79)
1436: nebent groß peters akker (SpitalA R 4.2, 25v)
1425: von groß peters acker (SpitalA R 4.1, 164v)
1425: ſpricht groß peters acker (SpitalAR4.1, 21r)
1408: von großpeter acker (SpitalA R 3, 303v)

Gross Peter (anthroponym)
1436: nebent groß peters akker (SpitalA R 4.2, 25v)
1415: Juta Groſpeterin (GerA A11, 7r)
1413: alz Groſpeterin (GerA A10, 28)
1413: Adelheite Großpeterin Wilent elich Frowe Peter Hugen ſeligen den man namete Groß Peter des Rebmannes (Spital Urk, 323)
1410: großpetrin (GerA A7, 9r)
1408: von großpeter acker (SpitalA R 3, 303v)
1407: Petrus hug alias dictus Größpeter (KloA St. Alban Urk, 269)
1395: peter hug alias groſſ peter (KloA St. Alban F, 24v).

Stability and Distortion: Example Grosspeter

Near the main station of Basel is a street called “Grosspeterstrasse”. The etymology is obvious: big peter street. But our database FLUNA gives us an impression of the genesis of this toponym and its relation to other name bearer. The origin of the name lies in the 14th century. A man with the name Peter Hug (son of someone called Hugo) owned a respectable piece of land in this area. In the beginning of the 15th century this wine grower Peter Hug also called the big died and his wife maintained the fields under the name Grosspeter acre or just Grosspeter. In the records this name stays stable till the 19th century.

The city grew and streets in this area had do be named. The old site name seemed appropriate. In the 20th century a businessman called Konrad Peter established a garage in this street giving it the programmatic name Grosspeter Garage making a reference to his own family name Peter. The later tall office building had a clearly visible inscription. Therefore most people think the name comes from the garage. This distortion of the names meaning continues in the future when the big Grosspeter Tower and the Grosspeter Hotel will be built.

Urbanisation

In the middle of the 19th century the appearance of Basel changed fundamentally. Because of certain problems like overpopulation, diseases and traffic the government decided to break down the medieval walls, towers and gates to open the city.

Therefore a premodern border and symbol of orientation and identification disappeared within a few years. During the same time the city had to grow over the countryside beyond the walls and transform farmland to a modern city with a modern symbolism. The process of urbanisation is not only architectonical. It is also a development of a modern city identification system especially when old symbols like gates, monasteries or markets vanish.

Place names play an important role in this progress. They negotiate and memorise premodern names and create new kinds of place names. This modern name texture generates a symbolic network trying to evoke not characteristics of the named place but of the entire city as an identification platform for its citizens.

The Old in the New: Example Tellplatz and Wettsteinplatz

Modern city toponyms were often used to generate an image of the cities history. Nothing but the written name on the plate connects the name with place. It refers not to the place but to the city identification image. The Tellplatz and the nearby Schillerstrasse refer to the national mythology. In premodern times the Wettsteinplatz near the St. Theodor Church should have been named certainly after the church. But this example shows that the historical personnel (in this case the mayor Wettstein) are the new saints of modern times.

Premodern Appearance

Basel has an old history going back to celtic and roman roots. Since the 11th century the city was surrounded by several walls. Beyond these walls the landsite without any buildings expanded. The main impressions of the city appearance were its towers and churches. Quarters and places were named after saints or local handcraft. This changed essentially in the 19th century when the medieval boundaries were restructured completely.