

“Stadtatlas” as Methodical Tool in the Urban Planning Process

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Abstract: In the 13th century the dukes of Mecklenburg granted German town privileges to about 40 towns. These towns were planted in the interior of the country and create the backbone of the spatial structure in the region up until present day. These small urban communities share common traits such as geometry, market-square and the structure of the urban institutions. The morphological structure and the urban tissue of these towns is very distinct. These urban settlements are subject to an interdisciplinary research by historians, archaeologists, architects and urban historians. As part of the project Research on the Urban Heritage of Medieval Mecklenburg RUHMM a “Stadtatlas” is used as a tool to communicate research results to both the scientific community, stakeholders and the interested public. The “Stadtatlas” is structured as method of mapping and presenting informations from historical records, archaeological research, architecture and morphological analysis. By nature the “Stadtatlas” is a result of an interdisciplinary approach on the research on the urban heritage of these towns. The first volume of the Stadtatlas is about to be published in summer 2023. The contribution will show how the “Stadtatlas” as methodical tool is used to create narratives for contemporary urban planning. Based on the example of Woldegk and Malchin the contribution presents the result of processes where interdisciplinary research has generated motives and solutions for the urban renewal of these towns. The contribution intends to document positive effects of EBD creating lasting results for a sustainable future in small urban communities.

Keywords: Historic Towns Atlas, Narrative-based Urban Development, Medieval Town, Mecklenburg.

Introduction

This contribution intends to illustrate how historical and morphological research can contribute to developing narratives that improve sustainable urban renewal projects. Based on the work of the Research on the Urban Heritage of Medieval Mecklenburg (RUHMM), a historic towns atlas project is about to be realized. The effort includes scientific publications (a town atlas) and public outreach efforts such as public talks and publications. Finally, the contribution illustrates a case in the small Mecklenburg town of Woldegk, where a project based on historic narratives and morphological research is about to be realized.

1. Towns Atlas as a Tool of Historical Research

The depiction of urban settlements on maps has been conducted since the time of the Mesopotamian civilisation. Renaissance artists, such as Wenceslaus Hollar and Merian, primarily

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produced maps for documentary or military purposes. However, the subject of comparative historical research based on maps gained relevance at the end of the 19th century. While the history of the towns atlas as a tool of historic research is published in detail by Ehbrecht (2013), and Clarke and Simms (2017), the following introduction shall provide a short summary for the purpose of this contribution.

The idea that the geometry of the urban form could be linked to cultural phenomena already took hold in the 19th century. The cultural historian Wilhelm H. Riehl thought that the town plan of Augsburg would “express the spirit of its people in material form” (quoted after Simms, 2010: 2). In the shadow of growing awareness of the fading medieval culture in middle Europe at the time, the Strasbourg schoolteacher Johannes Fritz collected a number of German town plans and published them in 1894 (Fritz, 1894).

In the face of industrialisation and the formation of national states, the desire to shape ethnic and cultural identity introduced a golden age for the systematic collection of historical and geographical data. Although based on historical research and cadastral maps, this effort was driven by the expectation of uncovering “keys to the region’s urban identity” (Conzen, 2008), leading to an over-interpretation of findings for the purpose of the contemporary narratives of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The creation of simplified standard-patterns for street geometry and other morphological shapes, such as planned towns and organically grown structures, was used to construct a historical narrative influenced by the national ideologies of the age. By linking historical data and morphological form to ethnic origin, urban morphology became a tool in the attempt to legitimize concepts of the cultural superiority of certain ethnicities, especially while describing the *Ostexpansion* of the 13th and 14th centuries.

Despite its ideological shortcomings, the period of historical research up until WWII produced a great number of valuable encyclopedias, such as *Mecklenburgisches Urkundenbuch* (1863-1913) (Verein für Mecklenburgische Geschichte und Altertumskunde, 1863), Schlie’s *Kunst und Geschichtsdenkmäler Mecklenburgs* (1896-1901) (Schlie, 1898), Krüger’s *Kunst und Geschichtsdenkmäler Mecklenburg-Strelitz* (1921-1934) (Krüger, 1921) and Erich Keyser’s *Deutsches Städtebuch* (1939-) (Keyser, 1939). Regarding the work on towns atlases, the publication of Paul J. Meier’s *Niedersächsischer Städteatlas* in 1922 (Meier, 1922) marked a milestone. Meier recognised the need to supplement the maps with explanatory texts, such as summaries of the town’s history and significant urban institutions for the development of the urban structure, such as monasteries or hospices.

While urban historians worked on the standardisation of comprehensive methods in the middle of the 20th century, creating the idea of a “Städtebuch” (Ehbrecht, 2013), the initial concept of capturing the cultural essence, the *genus loci*, of a town by studying and interpreting its town-plan, became discredited. The ethnocentric debates over whether the rectangular town plans that began to appear in planted settlements east of the Elbe somewhat after 1200 should be linked to the continuous settlement efforts of German-speaking people delivered the narrative to justify German occupation in Eastern Europe during WWII. Keyser’s active role in the ethnic classification effort on humans at the Institute for Racial Studies of the Danzig did no good to the purpose of historical studies in this field.

After WWII, the International Commission for the History of Towns (ICHT) initiated the publication of historical town-atlases. However, their effort mainly focused on a phenomenological plotting of cartographic data based on the Urkataster of the 19th century.

Based on proposals by Heinz Stoob (Simms, 2010), an associate of Keyser, the ICHT agreed in 1968 on a methodical frame for the now pan-European town-atlas project (Oppl, 2011). According to Conzen, Stoob’s recommendations were based in large part on a structure Meier had used for his 1922-atlas (Conzen, 2008). This framework serves as the basis for

an ever-growing number of contemporary Stadtatlas-projects in 20 countries, publishing atlases for 581 towns as of September 2020 (Simms & Oppl, 1998).

2. The RUHMM-Project

In the 13th century, the dukes of Mecklenburg and Brandenburg granted a variation of German city laws to 43 towns in the area today known as Mecklenburg. These towns were primarily established in the interior of the country and formed the backbone of the region’s spatial structure up to the present day. These small urban communities share common morphological traits such as their position in the landscape, the layouts of streets and markets and the position of urban institutions such as churches, hospices, wells, and mills. The morphological structure and urban tissue of these towns have remained very distinct to this day.

Historical research from the early 20th century exclusively links the early history of these towns to the settlement activities of German-speaking settlers introduced to the area by the feudal lords (Hoffmann, 1930). However, later research suggests that, although the granting of town privileges was unknown in the Slavic period leading up to the 13th century, the existence of urban settlements was not unknown to the area even before German-speaking settlers were introduced to the area. The role of the then-indigenous Slavic people has since being re-evaluated, as Jegorov already proposed in 1915 (Jegorov, 1930) and later research shows (Biermann, 2013). Regardless of their cultural origin, the town-plans of these 43 towns are to be seen in themselves as a factual historical source. The fact that the towns were devastated by urban fires in the middle ages and especially during the early 18th century has led historians to believe that the morphological structure of plots, streets, and urban institutions had to be discredited as a source of information about the earliest period of town formation. But in fact, only a small number of towns were laid out from scratch after large urban fires in the 18th century in their entirety (Boizenburg, Dömitz). Archaeological reports from Malchin (Jänicke, 2015) and Woldegk (Jänicke, 2019) show that both street layout and plot structure found in the Urkataster maps of the 19th century have to be seen as a window into the morphology and geometry of the earliest period of town formation in significant parts of these two towns.

The selected urban settlements in Mecklenburg are subject of interdisciplinary research by historians, archaeologists, and architects as part of the Research on the Urban Heritage of Medieval Mecklenburg (RUHMM). The goal of the project is the compilation of all data and documents relevant to the genesis of the urban form in these towns, focusing on the period between the earliest period of settlement and the Reformation in 1552.

The gathering of data from different research milieus such as urban history, archaeology, cultural heritage, and morphology has posed a persistent methodological challenge for the project. Historical records, observations, archaeological reports, and statistical and cartographic data need to be presented systematically to allow for comparative analysis. In 2021, Ebert proposed a systematic method for gathering relevant data in a matrix structure (Ebert, 2021), similar to Keyser’s systematic tabulations in *Deutsches Städtebuch* (Keyser, 1939). The method was presented at a seminar in March 2022 and later redefined based on critical feedback. The now-adjusted structure serves as the basis for the first volume of the *Mecklenburgischer Städteatlas*, which focuses on the town of Malchin. Malchin, founded in the early 13th century and granted town privileges in 1236 will have its town-atlas published by the RUHMM-project in 2024.

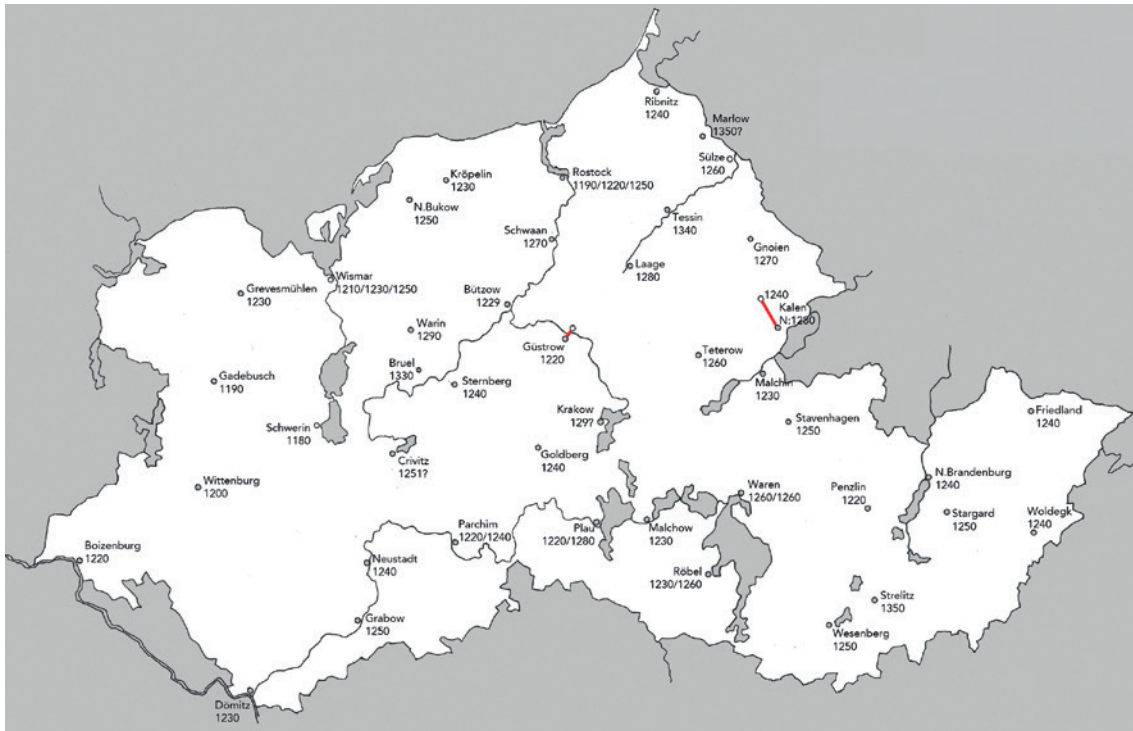


Figure 1. Map of planted towns in Mecklenburg (Source: illustration by the author).



Figure 2. Urkataster-map of Malchin (Source: illustration by the author based on Urkataster-map from 1867, revised in 1929 and 1940, provided by Landkreis Mecklenburgische Seenplatte).

3. A Short History of Planted Towns Through the Mirror of Cadastral Maps

The town of Malchin received its privileges on April 7th, 1236, from Nikolaus, duke of Mecklenburg-Werle (1210-1277). During his reign, seven urban settlements were granted town

privileges, earning him the title of “town founder”. Although the settlement received its privileges from the dukes of Werle, it was likely established at a time when the area was still ruled by the dukes of Pomerania. The oldest archaeological finds of corduroy roads north of the market square date to the second decade of the 13th century. The significant discovery of these corduroy roads indicated that the rectangular road structure of Malchin predates the town’s privileges by at least 25 years. Even the width of the streets in the 13th century resembles the geometry depicted in the Urkataster-maps, as the streets consisted of two parallel corduroy roads, aligning the front of the buildings with their documented position in 19th-century maps.

The burghers of Malchin gained increasing independence over time, as documented in the written documents of the 14th century. In 1367, the burghers destroyed the bailiff’s house and negotiated an agreement with the dukes of Werle, freeing them from any obligation to host any ducal institutions inside the town walls.

The war of 1618-1648 devastated Mecklenburg significantly. The town of Malchin was looted 24 times between 1637 and 1639 (Brockmann, 1902: 47f). The following economic downturn and the decline of urban life were accompanied by devastating fires in 1663 and 1692, as well as a bombardment in 1761. At that time, the burghers of Malchin, once powerful enough to destroy the bailiff’s house without major repercussions from the duke, had to see the town sink to the status of a small agrarian-urban community with slightly over 2000 inhabitants in 1805. Many buildings in the 18th century were stables and straw-covered houses, which were prohibited by council decree in 1757. In pre-1945 published photos, plastered half-timbered houses dating to the 18th and 19th centuries dominate the urban scenery (Böttcher & Böttcher, 1998). Only a few structures from the medieval period, such as the parochial church, the town-wall with two of its outer gates, and a small number of medieval brick structures, remain. Malchin suffered its largest loss of urban structure when the 2nd Belorussian Army laid fire to its buildings on April 30th and May 1st, 1945, destroying about 75% of the structures inside the medieval walls.

The reconstruction of destroyed towns in Europe remains a growing field of research. As of today, research primarily focuses on prevailing trends in urban reconstruction (Paul, 1985) and case studies of large cities, such as Munich (Enss, 2016), Warsaw (Popiolek-Roßkamp, 2021), and Vienna (Knauer, 2023). Only minor research has been conducted on the small towns of Mecklenburg, such as Neu Brandenburg (Wiesemann, 1993) and Anklam (Nutz, 1998).

Malchin was declared a “Wiederaufbaustadt, Kategorie III”, meaning that resources would be prioritised for the rebuilding of the town. However, this classification also limited the



Figure 3. Plan of corduroy roads in the south-western part of Malchin with dendro-dating documenting the continuity of the street geometry from the early 13th century until today (Source: illustration by the author based on archaeological reports kept by the LAKD MV).

rights of private plot-owners, empowering authorities to seize large areas within the town. The rebuilding was conducted with industrial methods, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. To enable industrial building technology, the historical plot structure and small-town volumes were abandoned. Since the town had been declared a “Wiederaufbaustadt”, legal constraints were lifted from the authorities to dispose of the plots in the center of town. While some housing quarters were not rebuilt and would serve as parking lots, the remaining streets lost their geometry and spatial characteristics by having modern 4- and 5-story buildings retracted from the street.

The urban ideals of the post-war era followed the then-dominating view of “overcoming” the medieval past by modern housing, guided by the principles of the CIAM-ideology (Mumford, 2009).

4. From “Growth at Any Price” to Narrative-Based Urban Development

Initiated by the political changes in East-Germany, the development of small urban communities such as Malchin has been very dynamic since the early 1990s. Rapid de-industrialisation and the westward-migration of the well-educated workforce (Hannemann, 2003), resulted in a significant population decline in the small towns of Mecklenburg. In addition to the general population decline of 29% from 1990 to 2020, the historical centers of these small towns suffered additional population loss due to planning authorities regulating large areas outside the historic centers for suburban housing.

In effect, urban structures within the medieval town limits fell further into decay. Despite efforts by authorities to improve the urban infrastructure by renewing water and waste management and enhancing public roads and pedestrian walkways, a large number of historical buildings, mostly dating to the 18th and 19th centuries were subsequently demolished due to public safety concerns.

As the population decline came to a halt by 2010, it became clear that the historic urban centers of Mecklenburg faced massive structural challenges in preserving and rebuilding the urban culture inside the town walls. During the economic rise following the crisis of 2008, a great number of construction projects were initiated, especially in the towns close to the tourism centers by the Baltic Sea. While many of the projects involved leisure homes and holiday residences, a number of urban renewal projects were initiated, for example, the rebuilding of the quarter north of the marketplace in Malchin (2002-2014) or the Eastern marketfront in Woldegk (2004-2019), while plans to rebuild the North Quarter in Malchin had to be abandoned in 2019 due to a lack of interest.

Interviews with local authorities show that to incentivise investments, local authorities are increasingly willing to discard regulations introduced in the 1990 as guidelines for the urban renewal of small towns in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern². In the small town of Tribsees, for example, local authorities undertake a program to acquire plots from the owners of small houses or deserted sites, merge them into larger plots, and sell them to potential investors. This approach has led to the erection of a large number of projects driven by property speculation rather than being rooted in the medieval plot structure or volumes resembling the typical small town culture of the area. Examples of such developments this can be seen especially in larger towns such as Rostock (Hansequartier), Neubrandenburg (Marien-Quarre and Marktplatz-Center), and Friedland (Stadt-Center). Especially the replacement of urban structures with mall-like centers featuring internal

2. Interview with Stefanie Timm, chief of administration in Recknitz-Trebeltal, 13th of September 2022, conducted by the author.

street systems poses a significant threat to the urban character of the medieval town centers of Mecklenburg.

The danger in replacing the small-scale urban structures is to irreversible loss of these medieval heritage in these towns. Despite the low economic dynamics in the area, the projects have faced little to no local criticism. However, large-scale developments threaten the uniqueness of the small medieval town centers depriving them of the sources of local identity and opportunities for sustainable tourism.

Therefore, the RUHMM-project has set as one of its goals to introduce historical narratives into modern urban projects. By informing about the genesis of the small towns in Mecklenburg and popularizing historic continuities, the project aims to influence future planning processes in the medieval town centers of the area.

5. The Heiligen Geist Quarter in Woldegk as a Case of Narrative-Based Urban Development

The small town of Woldegk in eastern Mecklenburg was destroyed by Russian troops in the days after its capture in April 1945. Subsequent reconstruction efforts took place during the 1970s and 1980s with large-scale buildings made of prefabricated concrete slabs (Stadt Woldegk, 2014). During the population decline between 1990 and 2010, a great number of apartments fell empty.

The site of the former Holy Spirit Hospice, first mentioned in 1358 (MUB 8503), is situated on the north-western periphery of the town, positioned on the corner of the block, only a few meters from the former Brandenburg town gate. Following the removal of the chapel belonging to the Holy Spirit Hospice by the council of Woldegk in 1796, it was replaced by two town houses in late baroque style. After the destruction of Woldegk in 1945, two four-story buildings were erected at the site in 1969, constructed using prefabricated concrete slabs with industrial building methods. These buildings were retracted from the sidewalks of the neighbouring streets by 10 meters to avoid the need to clear the ground from the remains of the cellars of the perished houses. After 1990, these two buildings also increasingly became vacant. Consequently, one of them was removed in 2021; while the second building, containing 32 apartments, is planned to be removed in 2024.

In the autumn of 2021, an architectural and urban-design competition was launched to develop the site on which the old Holy Spirit Hospice once stood. The historic hospice consisted of a chapel, removed in 1796, and at least an Almshouse as can be seen on the 1927-copy of the town-plan dated to 1580³. The memory of the former site of Holy Spirit Hospice had been dwindling to a degree that the town of Woldegk refrained from mentioning it in the announcement of the competition (Stadt Woldegk, 2021). Accordingly, six of the seven competitors failed to recognise the design potential of the historical link. Some of the design-proposals incorporated the medieval plot-structure on the site and featured designed structured volumes, while others focused on designing large scale buildings to fulfil the technical requirements of the developer.

The seventh design proposal, designed by Neue Heimat AS (Norway) and Milatz/Schmidt Architekten (Neubrandenburg), actively integrated consideration of the communal functions of the medieval Holy Spirit Hospice, connecting them with the communal functions required in the building program. The jury awarded this narrative approach with the 2nd prize (1st prize was not rewarded) and ultimately commissioned the project. The winning project related its approach to historic narratives by:

3. Landeshauptarchiv Schwerin; Reg. Nr. 12.12-2.

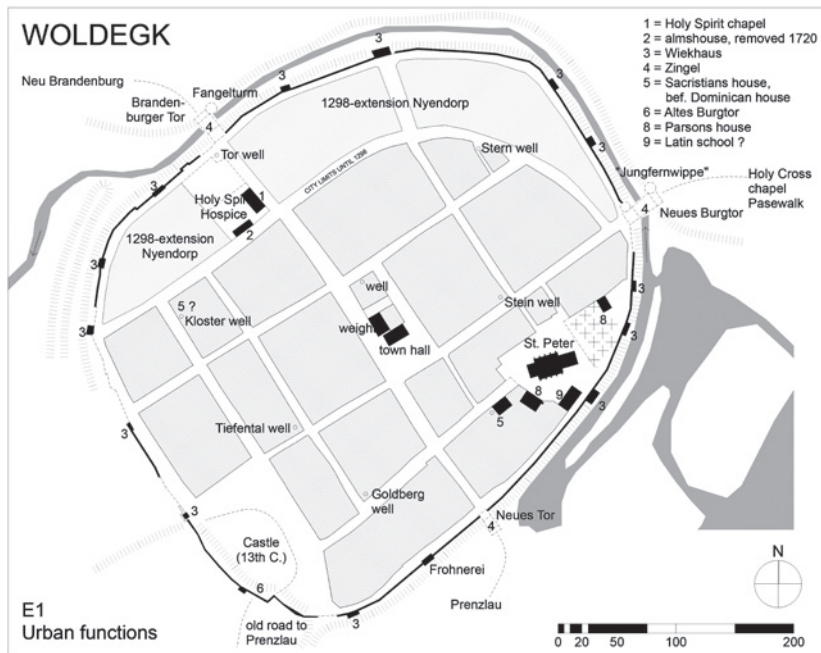


Figure 4. *Holy Spirit hospice in urban fabric of Medieval Woldegk* (Source: illustration by the author based on digital data provided by Landesamt für innere Verwaltung MV).

- Placing a community hall on the spot where the old chapel once stood, referring to the functional narrative of “community service”.
- Recreating urban street- and block structure by placing volumes along the sidewalks.
- Adjusting volumes and building height in accordance with the historic plot geometry.

The knowledge of the history of the site and the opportunity to relate the urban renewal of the site to its history have given the project an advantage. Since the design competition was concluded in May 2022, the RUHMM project has mounted an outreach program to build the narrative and create public awareness for the design of the project. Two lectures held in January and May 2023 reached a numerous audience and were widely reported.

6. Historic Towns Atlas as a Methodical Tool in the Urban Planning Process

The case of the Heiligen Geist site in Woldegk illustrated how knowledge of historical narratives can help mediate modern design processes and promote local identity. A tool like the towns atlas as defined by the ICHT can help to both gather historic and cadastral data for the small towns of Mecklenburg. The RUHMM-project has therefore decided to implement the formal requirements of the European Historical Towns Atlas project at the same time as it proceeds with its original method presented in 2021. The necessity of supplying cartographic presentations with a detailed summary of the existing knowledge gathered by historians, archaeologists, and cultural heritage experts over time lies in the challenge of supporting both scientific research and public outreach.

Modern planning processes, whether mediated by public urban developers or private entities, require narratives rooted in urban heritage to develop small towns sustainably. These narratives help build identity, create opportunities for local businesses and promote tourism in the area. The combination of the traditional cartographic towns atlas and matrix-based historical research gives the RUHMM-project “Mecklenburgischer Städtatlas” an edge by providing both scientific methods, an interdisciplinary approach, and public outreach, making it a valuable tool in the future planning practice of the medieval towns of Mecklenburg.

The first volume of “Mecklenburgischer Städtatlas” is scheduled for publication in 2024, putting the theory behind this tool for urban development to the test. The RUHMM-project



Figure 5. Heiligengeist-Quartier. Winning entry of the design competition 2022, marking the street corner where the small tower of the Holy Spirit Chapel once was situated (Source: Neue Heimat AS, Norway, and Milatz-Schmidt Architekten, Germany).

will monitor the effects of using the towns atlas to determine if it provides the anticipated results for a sustainable future in small urban communities in Mecklenburg.

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