

Proposal for *Data for History 2020: Modelling Time,  
Places, Agents*

**Heraldry as a Historical Source to  
Conceptualize Medieval Spaces and Agents**  
From Historiographic Concepts to Data Modelling Approaches

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The talk explores the possibilities and challenges of modelling medieval territories and spaces by integrating a source-based perspective utilizing coats of arms.

Coats of arms evolved as a system of signs since the 12th century in central and western Europe and were established as an important way of visual communication in the following centuries next to the increasing significance of scripturality. Although in research they are mostly used for the identification and dating of historical artefacts, coats of arms are an important historical source in themselves, yielding evidence about genealogical identity, political membership and association, the communication and disambiguation of ideas and practices, and the history of mentalities to name just a few. Since the context of their presentation as well as the context of their reception needs to be known to study such issues, it is vital to take into account the people and places linked to individual coats of arms as well. <sup>1</sup> Thus, our goal needs to be the interlinkage of a certain type of historical source (coats of arms) with individual agents and historical spaces.

Modelling medieval spaces and places presents a number of challenges in itself. In order to avoid an anachronistic representation, which would distort historical research based on data modelled in such a way, one take into account the ideas and concepts with which historical places, spaces and territories were conceived and perceived. A particularly important aspect regarding the composition of political entities in the High Middle Ages is the prevalence of identifiable individual actors as opposed to institutions. To use the definition of Yi-Fu Tuan, a place can be understood as a "center of meaning, constructed by human experience". We can extract this *meaning* and shape it to a data model through the interpretation of historical source material. This presents us with two steps in the data modelling process:

1. We have to identify a historical conceptualization of our problem. This step can also lead to new research questions based on a re-conceptualization of traditional or well-known historiographic assumptions.
2. We will then discuss how we can use these preliminary assumptions for implementing a model by utilizing existing means and technologies.

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<sup>1</sup>These factors must also be considered, when the aim is to study the development and spread of certain heraldic traditions; e.g. the combination of certain colours and symbols as well as to the usage of coats of arms in general.

Regarding the first step, coats of arms and their linkage to people can help us grasp the underlying concepts behind medieval territories. Although in principal everyone could bear a coat of arms, in my talk, I will focus on the coats of arms of noblemen. Their heraldry can be used to approach a medieval conception of space in a direct as well as an indirect way in interpreting historical sources.

Directly, we can for example consider armorials in the form of rolls, depicting the membership of a bearer of a coat of arms in a religious or knightly institution, a region, or his participation at a tournament. Aside from these, armorials could also appear as manuscripts. Here we can find various instances of how coats of arms were utilized to represent medieval conceptualisations of space based on the membership of certain people to a (political or religious) entity. There are several cases in manuscripts where the visual arrangement of coats of arms aims to communicate different kinds of political membership.<sup>2</sup> This can be in the form of vassalship, territorial membership, or the attribution to so called *marches of arms*; the latter being an example for an imagined space, partially but not completely overlapping with political territories. Data modelling has to take the differences between these various spatial concepts into account.

One has to keep in mind though, that such armorials are sources from a cultural, not a political context. They were not always intended to represent true political affiliations and extends of dominions, but instead to communicate claims over lands and people not actually held. Therefore their ambiguity as source material representing real as well as imagined historical conditions at the same time poses an additional data modelling challenge.

Furthermore, the fact that by this arrangement we get a conception of spatial entities with the bearers of single coats of arms as its members is significant. This offers an additional, more indirect way to utilize coats of arms as historical sources for conceptualizing medieval space: While we can locate individual bearers of coats of arms in relation to other entities, the increasing mobility of noblemen in the High Middle Ages makes it more difficult to locate the individuals themselves and thereby get a more precise understanding in the extend of territories as well as the spatial spread of heraldic traditions. The problem, presenting itself here, is the increasing absence of nobles from their *Stammsitz*, the place where they were seated according to their noble name. Families merged and aquired additional land property through various means while at the same time individual nobles could hold offices at courts or religious institutions not related to the regions they would originally be associated with. I therefore propose the integration of offices and marriages when modelling the geographical membership of individual noblemen. In practice, this is possible by the linkage to databases holding information about historical persons. Prominent examples for this, being the *Germania Sacra Online*<sup>3</sup> and the *Repertorium Academicum Germanicum*.<sup>4</sup>

The talk will explore approaches on how to solve these issues with existing means and technologies. In accordance with the FAIR principles I promote the usage of Semantic Web Technologies as well as the mapping of ones ontology to the classes of de-facto standards. I will therefore discuss the possibilities and limitations of the CIDOC CRM as a top-level ontology for implementing the concepts regarding the interoperability of spaces and individual agents as described above. The inclusion of extensions like *CRMgeo* enables us to further differentiate the prerequisites of historical places and spaces.

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<sup>2</sup>On visual communication with armorials, see the PhD thesis (HOFMAN, Elmar, *Armorials in Medieval Manuscripts. Collections of Coats of Arms as Means of Communication and Historical Sources in France and the Holy Roman Empire (13th – Early 16th Centuries)*, Münster: University of Münster, 2019) (currently in print).

<sup>3</sup><http://germania-sacra-datenbank.uni-goettingen.de/> (last visited 2020-03-09)

<sup>4</sup><https://rag-online.org/> (last visited 2020-03-09)

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