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Embedding historical maps in the practices of historical GIS and Geosemantics: From URLs to URIs

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The last twenty years have seen large developments both in digital map librarianship and in historical GIS, and the related field of historical gazetteers, but there has been little cross-fertilization. Much of historical GIS is about creating vector representations of map features, but the map sources are cited no more systematically than were the origins of base maps in traditional thematic atlas making. Similarly, toponymic researchers emphasise the tracing back of particular place names in ever-earlier archival documents to their earliest forms, but say little about the first stage of their work, which is the systematic harvesting of toponyms from nineteenth century mapping. These issues are the focus of a major project funded by the UK Joint Information Systems Committee, Old Maps Online.

Although that project is working closely with map librarians, and in many senses aims to serve them, this paper deliberately explores these two other perspectives to discover what they need from map librarians. Of course, the perspective it does not explore is that of the cartographic historian. One central conclusion is that digitisation is not enough, but neither is the improvement in searching that portals like Old Maps Online enables. Old maps online also need to be made more easily citable and quotable! Making digitised maps more easily citable is firstly about making the URLs that access them simpler and more persistent, following the rules for Uniform Resource Identifiers (URIs), and secondly about making it possible to reference locations within maps; this is perhaps especially important to place name researchers and gazetteer builders. Making maps quotably means enabling historical researchers to embed excerpts from maps, provided by digital map libraries, within their digital scholarly works. This is already technically possible, provided the maps are held within systems like IIPImage and Zoomify, but raises large IPR issues.