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## Perspectives

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## Sealing the Land: Recognizing Urban Developments in Past and Present Göttingen

Today, it is considered normal that before entering historically and culturally interesting city centers, we have to overcome a broad belt of monotonous suburbs built on previously fertile soils. Even a freeway interchange can cover the same surface area as the historic center of a small town it passes or dissects. At a glance, it is easy to see that a large proportion of built-up areas and their infrastructure have arisen in the last few decades. Yet few people seem disturbed by the rapid pace at which the landscape has changed. Perhaps the human mind just does not recognize these changes. However, such developments did not only take place during the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, they are rooted in the nineteenth century when together with the acceleration of industrialization, the landscape people had been used to for centuries was subjected to a process of radical change. As a result, the view of rural landscapes today is often visually ambiguous, as can be observed in the Leine River valley in Central Germany.

The wide valley of the Leine River between Göttingen and Hanover is, relatively speaking, a peaceful place. On both sides of the dale are rolling hills full of green trees. Sometimes a medieval tower shines through, recalling times when knights controlled the dues of merchants passing from Kassel to Hanover. Yet, in parts of the valley, the view is far from empty and less than beautiful. Several highways, the national A7 freeway, and four railway tracks cut through the landscape, which is flooded with industrial developments and residential housing near Göttingen (fig. 1).



**Figure 1**  
Commercial buildings north of Göttingen constructed in 2019 on what was previously green space (Source: Author)

I am wondering what this landscape—which I cross several times per week—looked like before industrialization took place, which was ignited by the building of the Göttingen to Hanover railway in the 1850s. How did inhabitants and visitors back then perceive the Leine Valley, the university town of Göttingen, the surroundings, and the changes taking place?

Delving even further into the past helps to provide a better understanding of the answers to these questions and a perception of landscape changes across time. In my current research, I am therefore working on the environmental history of early modern cities, with a focus on how their inhabitants dealt with resource scarcities and natural hazards, while trying to bring attention to pre-industrial interactions between humans and the environment, including examples of urban agriculture in and around cities. For me, the great importance of fertile soils for city inhabitants of the eighteenth century is a starting point for looking at developments in the Leine Valley during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the landscape was understood as a resource for infrastructure and industry rather than as a fertile agricultural plain.

Understanding the concept of landscape can be challenging when one relies solely on the interpretation of written sources. By using a multitude of different, sometimes unusual, source materials we can create more tangible and relevant environmental histories of regions such as the Leine Valley. An etching by Matthäus Merian d.Ä., who edited a band of 30 fine volumes of townscapes in the seventeenth century (*Topographia Germaniae*), shows with surprising detail and realism the meadows, gardens, fields, and hills surrounding Göttingen around 1610—scenery that hardly changed until the 1850s (fig. 2).

Fortunately, following the founding of the university in Göttingen in 1737, many students and scholars documented their experiences of landscape changes, allowing historians like myself to gain a more intimate view of the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of them, the Danish student Johann Georg Bärens, drafted a description of Göttingen and its surroundings in 1754 alluding to the fertile lands, the plain fields, and the nearby villages. Thirty years later, the traveler and theologian Christoph Friedrich Rinck from Karlsruhe described how



Figure 2  
Matthäus Merian d.Ä.  
*Göttingen, Gesamt-  
ansicht von Westen*,  
1641. Copperplate  
etching, 20 × 30.5 cm,  
<http://www.zeno.org>,  
Contumax GmbH &  
Co. KG

he could observe fields, woods, cottages, and villages when standing on the town's ramparts. When I tried to repeat his experience by walking these same ramparts one cool morning (together with many joggers and dog owners), I also saw much green because the circle encompassing the city center is today like a narrow park. Starting in the 1760s, after the defortification of the city, trees were planted in this area. Yet I know that behind these trees, traffic now rushes by—I could distinguish broad streets, noisy construction sites, and high buildings breaching the canopy. In contrast, historical sources show that back in the eighteenth century, open landscape began more or less directly beyond the city gates. Göttingen was also clearly separated from neighboring villages such as Weende and Grone, which are today integral parts of the city.

One source that has proved particularly informative in gaining an understanding of cities and their surroundings in the eighteenth century is a detailed map from 1784 (fig. 3). Created during a landscape survey of the electorate of Hanover (*Kurfürstentum Hannover*), it took the officers of the Corps of Engineers 20 years to complete. In its fine lines, one can see not only how land was previously used but also the



of the town (*Hainholz*), which is now a popular location for walking and recreation, surmounted by a lookout tower called the Bismarckturm. This wooded area was reforested from as recently as 1872. When looking at today's woods around Göttingen, a curious and informed eye can distinguish the areas that were previously species-rich, with a mixture of old and young trees, shrubs, and coppice, from the monotonous high canopy forests that shape our current view of a "normal" wood, thus translating the present landscape into historical insights.

Around 1800, leaving a town like Göttingen was rather easy—so much so that it even inspired the writings of authors such as Heinrich Heine, who lived in Göttingen for a short time in 1820 and again in 1824/25 while he completed his legal studies. On departing the town in 1824 to wander to the famous Brocken—the highest point of the Harz mountains—he described his feelings in *Harzreise* after passing the Weender Gate to the north of the city.

Fresh morning air blew over the road, the birds sang cheerily, and little by little, with the breeze and the birds, my mind also became fresh and cheerful. [...] Milk-maids occasionally passed, as did also donkey drivers, with their grey pupils.

Today, the scene described by Heine in the above revelation is dominated by noisy major roads leading to a freeway, a gas station, and multistory buildings. While the scenery depicted by Heine in *Harzreise* may appear quaint, even nostalgic, to the contemporary sensibility so often besieged by the noise and pollution created by industrialized landscapes, it was not approved of by everyone at the time. Supporters of "progress" in high positions within the city administration, such as the mayor Georg Julius Philipp Merkel, in retrospect complained about the jumble of field paths, the disturbing flocks of sheep, and the disorderly mosaic of fields that lacked proper drainage surrounding the city. Here, we get a sense of one of the numerous conflicts concerning land use at the time. In environmental, economic, and social history research, such conflicts are widely discussed. They often centered on issues like who was allowed to collect firewood in local forests or drive cattle on meadows, which were part of the city's fortification, or extract ore from certain parts of the landscape, thereby destroying the livelihoods of people living nearby. Similar conflicts confront us today as global population growth reduces the area available for use by individuals, aggravated by environmental pollution and climate change. Land and water use conflicts thus now take place on an even greater scale than was ever imaginable in the past.

During the nineteenth century, more and more people came to live in the prosperous university town of Göttingen, especially after the introduction of the railroad in 1854. In 1860, there were 12,200 inhabitants—over twice as many as one hundred years earlier (today, there are 134,000, a similar size to Cambridge, England). The resulting housing shortage inside the city, together with the supposed “neglect” of the city’s surroundings, led to administrative activities such as the creation of a new building law (*Bauordnung für die Stadt Göttingen*) in 1877. This law can be traced back through a vast array of documents in the city archives—and subsequently led to the expansion of the sealed areas due to buildings and infrastructure from the 1860s onwards, with developments beginning in the north and southeast of the city. Around 1900, new buildings had already reached the borders of the city and the merging of neighboring villages began. Whether it was despite these urban advances—the city’s denser population, its sprawl, and the reduction of untilled areas—or because of them, well-to-do citizens of Göttingen around this time favored quiet and bucolic places. One example of this trend is the cottage of the writer Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861–1937) and her husband, the Orientalist Friedrich Carl Andreas, which looked out onto the city from the east, boasting old trees, an orchard, vegetable patches, and even a chicken run.

In the 1920s, the historic town center of Göttingen became encircled by land belonging to the railroad, apartment buildings, a hospital area, developments with two-family houses with gardens, a villa quarter to the east, and barracks to the south. Quite a lot had changed since the days of Heinrich Heine, in part due to advancements in building materials driven by new ideologies and infrastructure. The use of asphalt in road construction distinctly increased in the second half of the nineteenth century, and concrete had already become a widespread building material, as we learn from a 1905 edition of *Meyers Encyclopedia*. This development was intimately linked to novel 1950s/60s ideals of a car-friendly town—ideals that did not consider the historic worth of the fabric of the city and its surroundings. Indeed, the number of commuters to Göttingen notably increased from the 1950s onwards, while the number of family houses in neighboring villages such as Rosdorf and Bovenden soared.

Today, approximately seven percent of the land in Lower Saxony, where Göttingen is situated, is sealed by buildings and infrastructure, which equals 3,340 square kilometers, or four times the area of Hamburg. The sealing of the soil with infrastructure prevents the filtration of contaminants, lowers water storage capacity, and precludes the use of

underlying fertile soils. The regional government in Lower Saxony is at least trying to limit land consumption to four hectares a day by 2030, and Göttingen's city council is also well aware of the value of open, green spaces for its inhabitants, but admits in its policy guidelines from 2012 (*Leitbild 2020*) that there is an economic need for new commercial areas.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of such policies and the economic push of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many central European landscapes, especially in the fertile river valleys of the Rhine, Main, and Neckar, have been sealed by infrastructure, with buildings replacing the original soils, altering the landscape for good. These changes occurred in many very small steps from the nineteenth century onwards, with most people becoming accustomed to them and tending to quickly forget how things looked just a few years or months earlier. I, for instance, no longer recall how the area covered with new buildings near the railway tracks in Göttingen looked beforehand (see fig. 1). There was probably a field, a park, or garden plots there. The brief glimpses afforded of the landscape when traveling by train perhaps lead me to forget. Nevertheless, I cannot ignore a feeling of loss when thinking of what was surely an "ideal" open landscape, and the improbability of getting it back. In 1824, Heinrich Heine took a whole day to walk from Göttingen to Osterode, over 40 kilometers, and remarked that evening, "I was as tired as a dog and slept like a god." The fast pace of modern life has apparently led to my more cursory perception of this now urban environment.

Changes within urban space often go unnoticed either because of their relative slowness, or, as shown in the nineteenth century, because they are tied to new and unquestioned ideals of progress and economic development. Many such ideals still offer convincing arguments for sealing the land today, even though this is one of our most valuable and sensitive resources, which is easily neglected by people—including myself—who hurry past in a train or car thinking about their daily grind. One task for the environmental historian is, therefore, to record these changes and uncover and translate diverse records documenting landscape change throughout time. Although much has changed in Göttingen since the times of Heinrich Heine, when bucolic scenery surrounded the town, not everything points to deterioration. For example, the reforested hills east of Göttingen are highly regarded by residents of the city, showing that a return to more sustainable land use practices is indeed possible in the long run.

1 "Städtebauliches Leitbild 2020," Stadt Göttingen, accessed March 2020, <https://www.goettingen.de/rathaus/konzepte/wohnen-und-bauen/staedtebauliches-leitbild-2020.html>.



**Further Reading**

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