

# The study and classification of medieval urban toponymy: the case of late medieval Brussels (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries)<sup>1</sup>

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## **1. Medieval urban toponymy: a linguistic and historic battlefield?**

Toponyms are an essential source in understanding the past. They are often relicts of vanished spatial and social realities. As we know, a toponym may be considered a linguistic reproduction (a name) of a spatial reality (a place). As any other proper name a toponym is an identifying linguistic sign. Created by human beings—or by society as a whole—it defines a spatial reality in a unique way. However, this determination is by no means an arbitrary choice. On the one hand toponyms encompass one or several inherent characteristics of the corresponding spatial reality. On the other they reflect the identities, ideologies and aspirations of their inventors and users. In brief, two factors have played a considerable role in the composition and use of toponyms: the corresponding spatial reality and the linguistic—and thus human—reproduction. As we will see, both factors are also very important in classifying toponyms.

Applied to the field of medieval urban history, the study of historical urban toponymy can lead to new insights into urban space and urban society. Unfortunately, rather few linguists and historians have devoted attention to medieval urban toponymy. Bouvier (2007: 9) has already noticed that scientific toponymic monographs deal predominantly with rural toponymy. With the development of historical geography, rural toponymy has been elevated to a scientific level (for the Flemish part of Belgium, see for instance Gysseling & Verhulst 1969; Devos 1991).

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Unfortunately, the hiatus is particularly noticeable within the field of urban history. At least, this is the case in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) and particularly in Flanders, although some exceptions exist. In the first half and middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century renowned Belgian urban historians paid particular attention to medieval urban toponymy. Cross-fertilization between urban history and toponymy has led to interesting (but outdated) results (see for instance Cuvelier 1935 for Leuven; Des Marez 1935 for Brussels; Prims 1944 for Antwerp; Gysseling 1954 for Ghent). It is no coincidence that some general studies on the topic were published during this period (Volckmann 1926; Meertens 1953).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the study of medieval urban toponymy was gradually sidelined, especially in the Low Countries. We must admit, however, that meanwhile local historians keep compiling street dictionaries on 'their own' town, following a tradition which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Numerous examples exist, whether in the Low Countries (see for instance Steussy 1951 for Amsterdam; Schouteet 1977 for Bruges; Vande Weghe 1977 for Antwerp; d'Osta 1979 for Brussels; Roelands 1984 for 's-Hertogenbosch; van der Krogt 2000 for Delft) as abroad (see for instance Hillairet 1963 for Paris; Smit 1970 for London). These studies, merely a *potpourri* of folklore and anecdotes, often contain legendary explanations of street and place names.

More serious work was done by some toponymists and/or historians editing toponymic monographies on a particular town who paid attention to essential toponymic features such as the oldest tradition, the different spellings, localisation problems and name interpretation (see for instance Van Loon 1982 for Antwerp; Kempeneers 1987 for Tienen; Dumon 1996 for Bruges; Debrabandere 1999 for Kortrijk; Van Durme 1999 for Zottegem; Meulemans 2004 for Leuven; Gillemacher 2009 for Sneek). But unfortunately, comparative work and general overviews on medieval urban toponymy were very rare (for two exceptions in the Low Countries, see Rentenaar 1988 and Van Loon 2000; for England, see Room 1992), although recently a break in trend is noticeable (see for instance Bouvier and Guillon 2001; Glasner 2002; Bouvier 2007).

The causes for the 'gap' in (medieval) urban toponymy are legion. Bouvier (2007: 9–10) has indicated some obvious causes. Many current street and place names seem to be too 'modern' and also perhaps

too frequent and/or widespread. For instance, nearly every French town has its *rue Maréchal Foch* and its *Place de la République* (or similar). Numerous Dutch-speaking cities have a *Nieuwstraat* (New Street), a *Hoogstraat* (High Street), a *Ridderstreet* (Knight Street), etc. According to Bouvier, explaining and studying these and other street names has generally afforded too little linguistic and historic excitement. This spirit was already abroad in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Jacques Collin de Plancy (1834: IX) argued:

Quoique Bruxelles n'ait que le quart des rues de Paris, elles sont désignées, comme dans la capitale de la France, d'une manière également pauvre et misérable; et si l'on en excepte une vingtaine à qui leur baptême a laissé un souvenir historique, la plupart des autres sont revêtus d'un écriteau qui n'a même pas toujours le modeste avantage de ne signifier rien.

To which Bouvier (2007: 8) countered very appropriately:

Mais rien n'est banal quand on essaie de comprendre le fonctionnement d'une société humaine à travers son langage.

However, we cannot only lay the blame at the door of researchers. Studying urban toponymy usually means dealing with a vast, heterogenic mass of source material, which covers several centuries. Molemans (1988: 19–35) enumerates many possible valuable records, from registers containing the acts of local aldermen, urban and other accounts, fiscal documents such as property acts, estate surveys, rent registers, etc., notary archives, cadastral documents to even oral traditions. Researchers need to devote considerable time to deal with this vast collection of source material.

In addition, understanding urban space and urban society is by no means an easy task. Urban space is characterised by considerable building and population density, the existence of different types of buildings and heterogenic social groups. Moreover, urban society has been subject to greater change than the countryside. These phenomena are clearly reflected in urban toponymy. Urban toponyms seem to change faster and are more numerous and heterogenic than those in rural locations. In brief, the complexity of urban society is systematically interwoven with urban toponymy.

Nonetheless, this situation is in sharp contrast with the currently booming discipline of urban history. The scientific analysis of urban

space is one of today's hot items and is currently being studied from a whole host of different angles. A plethora of historical town atlases have been published everywhere. Researchers in landscape history and historical ecology have concentrated on the physical and socio-economic interactions shaping urban space (for medieval Brussels, see for instance Deligne 2003; Charruadas 2004). Socio-political research has focused on the analysis of public urban space and its societal roles in terms of commercial transactions, justice, communication, processions, collective actions, festivities, drama plays, etc. (see for instance Arnade, Howell & Simons 2002; Lecuppre-Desjardin 2004; Boone & Porfyriou 2007; Deligne & Billen 2007).

There is therefore a requirement to stimulate scientific research on urban toponymy to fill the scientific gap and link the results to historical research on urban space and urban society in general. Methodologies must also be developed to achieve this goal. Urban toponymy probably rebuffs historians and toponymists given the vast and delicate mass of source material available. As a result, the study of urban toponymy is impossible without making appropriate classifications. Various methods do of course exist. Here, I shall treat four of them separately and indicate their strengths and weaknesses. I have chosen the case of medieval Brussels to illustrate these lines of thought.

## **2. Medieval urban toponymy in Brussels**

Brussels urban toponymy is hardly ever studied as a research topic in its own right. Historian Roel Jacobs (1994: 16) has strongly emphasised this infamous situation:

Brussels is a bilingual town with bilingual street signs. Nevertheless, any attempt to translate these names by means of a dictionary is doomed to failure (my translation).

Modern day Brussels street and place names are the result of complex linguistic changes. This situation is the result of the historic and historiographic evolution of the bilingual town of Brussels. I shall attempt to provide a brief explanation for this.

Originally, urban toponymy followed the language of the inhabitants, which was medieval Dutch. At least from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, administrative practices led to translations into Latin and, to a lesser extent, French. Over time, the translation and use of French street and

place names increased as a result of the overwhelming importance of the French-speaking political and administrative classes in Brussels. From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular, the (Dutch) oral tradition was no longer sufficient and every urban street and place required an official (French) name on paper. In addition, bureaucratic ratio reshaped urban space (Jacobs 1994: 16; the same was true for Leuven, the adjacent important town in Brabant, see De Man 1951). Long, narrow public spaces were categorized as *rues*, broad, tree-lined streets became *avenues* and all quadrangular, triangular or circular areas were called *places*. Due to these 19<sup>th</sup>-century transformations in urban toponymy, much old spatial and linguistic logic was totally disguised. Aimé Bernaerts & Roger Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche (1951: 108) described the situation by using the emblematic words *les épidémies de changements de dénominations*.

At about the same time, historians also came to the fore. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and continuing to the present day) ‘street dictionaries’ enumerating Brussels streets and places have been edited (see for instance Collin de Plancy 1834; Bochart 1853; Bernaerts & Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche 1951; d’Osta 1979; d’Osta 1986; Lebouc 2007). French-speaking historians completely dominated this tradition. Only recently have the same kind of books appeared in Dutch (Reinhard 2005; Reinhard 2006). These street dictionaries are very anecdotal—enumerating all the remarkable events that happened in a given street—and often contain legendary and folklore explanations of medieval and younger toponyms.

Most 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific historians studying medieval Brussels were also French-speaking. Either this group devoted very little attention to medieval Dutch toponymy or they used it clumsily for specific purposes. For example, considerable effort was expended to link all medieval toponyms in the lower town to the (legendary?) existence of a 10<sup>th</sup>-century fortress (see for instance Des Marez 1935; Martens 1963). Luckily, there was one exception. The bilingual historian Philippe Godding (1960: 394–409) made a statement by attaching a medieval Dutch toponymic list to his *magnum opus* on Brussels medieval property law. The youngest generation of French-speaking historians and archaeologists follow in his wake by integrating toponymy and other disciplines into their historical research (see for instance Demeter & De Keukeleire 1995; Despy 1997; Deligne 2003; Charruadas 2004).

Surprisingly, Dutch-speaking historians scarcely paid attention to Dutch toponymy. Frieda Janssens (1983) wrote a master thesis on the medieval urban toponymy of Brussels, but this study is less innovative and mainly based on outdated literature from French-speaking historians such as Guillaume Des Marez and Paul Bonenfant. Paul De Ridder made an in-depth study of the use of the Dutch language in Brussels over time, but paid scant attention to street and place names (see for instance De Ridder 1985: 172). We must, however, admit that Dutch-speaking toponymists made very in-depth studies of the street and place names of the villages surrounding Brussels, which underwent urbanisation during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (see for instance Van Loey 1931; Van Nieuwenhuysen 1979; Steffens 2007; Van Nieuwenhuysen 2009).

Unfortunately, the (medieval) town itself was unjustly under-researched. This situation is unreasonable. As many monographs on historic rural toponymy clearly show, studying street and place names offers many insights into historical geography and landscape history. My own Ph.D. research has shown that the study of medieval urban toponymy can enable totally new insights to be gained into medieval town development (Vannieuwenhuyze 2008a). This could only be achieved after collecting, classifying and studying about 750 street and place names spanning the medieval period (from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until 1570) (Vannieuwenhuyze 2008a: appendix 1). In the following paragraphs I shall show how to handle this enormous mass of material. I must however admit that the toponymic list is not yet complete, since I have only treated names referring to public spaces (such as streets, market places, areas and district names, rivers and brooks, city gates, walls and natural elements). I am in the process of completing the list by inserting house and field names as well. The current list contains about 1400 medieval urban toponyms, but work is still in progress (and will hopefully lead to the publication of a toponymic monograph).

### **3. Medieval urban toponymy classification: four possibilities with their pros and cons**

#### **3.1. From A to Z**

Most toponymic monographs are presented in the form of an alphabetically classified list of all historic place names in a chosen

geographical area, mostly modern day communities or towns. These monographs are often called (geographical) dictionaries or gazetteers. In Brussels, Eugène Bochart (1853) and Jean d'Osta (1979; 1986) have used this method. I shall also proceed in this way for the forthcoming medieval urban toponyms monograph on Brussels. From the perspective of authors and readers, this is the most efficient and easiest way to classify and handle toponymic material (Molemans 1988: 35). Readers can therefore easily find the toponyms in which they are interested. This is especially useful to people interested in urban toponymy, which—as argued above—always involves the consultation of extensive and massive research material.

Besides the practical use of the toponymic list, alphabetical classification also provides some opportunities for research. Toponyms beginning with the same onomastic elements are grouped together. For instance, it is clear that the successively classified medieval Brussels toponyms *Schaarbeeksepoort* (Schaarbeek Gate), *Schaarbeeksestraat* (Schaarbeek Street) and *Schaarbeekseweg* (Schaarbeek Road) were also interconnected in real space. All were located in the northern part of the town and indicated traffic flow to the nearby village of Schaarbeek. To take another example, medieval Brussels acquired several streets called *Nieuwstraat* (New Street), *Lindestraat(je)* (Lime Tree Street), *Vuilstraat* (Dirty Street), etc. which are all successively listed. This example shows that the alphabetical classification provides insights into toponymic replicas and could stimulate further in-depth study of this phenomenon. The existence of identical names does suggest the existence of identical spatial patterns and/or linguistic logics, extending over one and the same city (see for instance Vannieuwenhuyze 2008a: 174–176).

However, some problems and risks are inherent to this classification method. Despite the examples above, the list often lacks spatial coherence. The various streets called *Nieuwstraat* are successively mentioned, but the *Kleine Nieuwstraat* (Small New Street) is ranked under the letter K. *Schaarbeeksepoort*, *Schaarbeeksestraat* and *Schaarbeekseweg* are grouped together, but *Oude Schaarbeekseweg* (Old Schaarbeek Road) is mentioned elsewhere. In medieval times, the *Schaarbeekseweg* was often called *Ezelweg* (Donkey Road), so by sticking to *Schaarbeek* toponyms it is not possible to find all toponymic information on this road. It is clear that the spatial coherence within the list only exists as regards toponyms beginning with the

same onomastic elements. Conversely, toponyms ending with an identical onomastic element (such as *-street*, *-hill*, *-fountain*, *-brook*, etc.) are spread throughout the alphabetical list. Consequently, cross references and synthetic analysis are absolutely essential. It is obvious that an alphabetically classified list needs to be linked to a good toponymic, chronological and historical synthesis.

In addition, grammatical problems emerge. Before the emergence of administrative linearity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, names were written in many ways and were liable to change. Medieval toponyms could have more than one notation. Magda Devos (1995: 236–242) enumerated the possible systematic and unsystematic changes to proper nouns—and thus also toponyms—through history and stated that they were subject to greater formal changes and alteration than common nouns. This means that authors have to choose appropriate lemmas for their toponymic monographs, since slight changes in toponymic notation can lead to a totally different classification. In concrete terms, choices have to be made between original (medieval) and current notations. Philippe Godding, for instance, has classified medieval Brussels toponyms according to their Dutch medieval spelling. In his list, the medieval Brussels *Filipsbrug* (Philip's Bridge) is mentioned under its original spellings (*Philipsche brugge*, *Philis brugghe* or *Philipsbrugge*) and thus classified under the letter P and not under the letter F.

Word order is another tricky area. Does the medieval *straatje van Moorsele* (alley of Moorsele) have to be classified under the letter S (> *straatje*) or should the word order be changed to *Moorsele, straatje van* (thereby classifying the toponym under the letter M)? In my opinion, it is appropriate and efficient to 'translate' or 'transform' the original medieval names into modern day names and to put the main constituents of toponymic combinations at the front of the lemma.

### 3.2. Thematic or typological classification

As argued above, two factors have played a considerable role in the composition and use of toponyms: the corresponding spatial reality and linguistic creation through human reproduction. It is logical for both factors to function as classification 'guidelines' as well. Toponyms can be classified according to their underlying spatial realities. In this case, we are talking about thematic (or ideological) classification. Toponyms are subdivided into thematic categories referring to



geographical or topographic features such as settlements, hamlets, streets, walls, gates, mills, houses, farms, chapels, crosses, brooks, wells, pools, hills, valleys, etc. (Molemans 1988: 56–57).

This method has the great advantage that the toponymic material is grouped according to coherent spatial aspects. Consequently, researchers are required to have empirical knowledge of the historical geography of their research area before they can choose spatial categories. Although some general categories exist, every researcher seems to choose his own categories. Magda Devos (1995: 227–228) mentions settlement names, house and farm names, site and field names, street and road names, height and depression names, orientation point names and hydrographical names while D. P. Blok (1988: 18) enumerates *Raumnamen*, *Ortsnamen*, *Flurnamen*, *Gewässernamen* and *Bergnamen*.

However, it is important to be aware that thematic classification also suffers from two great disadvantages. Firstly, the connection between spatial reality and proper name is not always crystal clear. Or worse still, toponyms can mislead researchers. This is mainly due to linguistic changes over time. Here are some examples. The medieval Brussels toponym *Borgwal* originally referred to a defensive wall round a castle or hamlet, but from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards it came to indicate a little alley. In this case, it is very difficult to decide if the toponym belongs to the ‘wall names’ or ‘street names’ category. In the same way, the toponym *ter Kapellen* referred initially to a particular church (the so-called Chapel church), but was subsequently used as the name of a hamlet. The toponym Brussels itself comprises the generic words *broek* (marsh) and *zele* (meaning an inferior settlement reserved for cattle-breeding). In the beginning it thus referred to an inferior settlement, but the area covered by the name gradually evolved firstly into a town, then a capital city before now encompassing an entire region. These examples clearly show that spatial realities behind toponyms can change radically or evolve over time. Consequently, researchers using the thematic classification system should always clearly indicate which spatial categories they have taken into consideration. Most of the time, it is the etymological (and thus original) significance of the name that is used, although the oldest form of a name is not always instructive (Devos 1995: 249).

The second disadvantage relates to names which defy classification. Some toponyms are very difficult to explain and associate with

spatial realities. For instance, it is still impossible or very difficult to understand medieval Brussels place names such as *Vlade* or *Etengat*. Another problem is that toponyms sometimes fit into more than one single category. A place name such as Brussels itself refers to two spatial categories: a marsh (*broek*) and a settlement (*sele*).

In Brussels, thematic classification has been used by Frieda Janssens (1983) and Aimé Bernaerts & Roger Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche (1951). Despite the value of their work, the problems mentioned above are clearly present. In both works, concrete but often heterogenic categories have been selected to classify the toponymic material. For instance, Frieda Janssens (1983: 3–4) defined the following categories: 1) the castle, 2) ‘natural state’, 3) ‘remarkable qualities’, 4) agriculture and cattle-breeding, 5) navigation and fisheries, 6) professions and guilds, 7) governmental positions and dignities, 8) ecclesiastical and charitable institutions, 9) ‘presence of Jewish people’ 10) personal names, 11) houses and inns and 12) various. Clearly, these categories are the result of personal choices. It seems that category and motivation are used in a mixed way up. A cursory look immediately makes it clear that some medieval toponyms have been omitted (because they do not fit into the categories) and others have been ranked under the category ‘various’.

It is possible to solve some of these problems by opting for a typological (and not a thematic) classification method. This means that the toponyms themselves rather than the corresponding spatial realities are classified. Toponyms are grouped according to similar or identical linguistic features (generic elements). Generic elements such as *-street* (*-straat*), *road* (*-weg*), *-hill* (*-berg*), *-marsh* (*-broek*), *-wood* (*-bos*), etc. appear repeatedly in place names. They function as typological categories and can help explain the etymology, location and origins of problematic names (Devos 1995: 247).

Of course, typological classification can offer new insights into urban morphology. In my own Ph.D. thesis, I focused on the morphological aspects of the Brussels urban road network. Therefore all streets (*strate*, *vicus*), alleys (*straetken*, *parvus vicus*), roads (*weg*, *via*), paved roads (*steenweg*, *via lapidea*, *platea*, *calcidea*), gaps (*gat*), markets (*merct*, *forum*) and places (*plaats*) were selected from the toponymic list and treated separately (Vannieuwenhuyze 2008a: 146–156). In this way, it has become possible to understand how these spaces acquired their names. At the same time, it has shown to what

extent toponymic studies can heighten our knowledge of medieval urban space.

### 3.3. Date of appearance

Only a few toponymic monographs have been built up according to a chronological classification of toponyms. According to Frieda Janssens (1983: 7), this method suffers from a big drawback as the survey is influenced by accidental traditions. Although this is certainly true, chronological aspects are nonetheless very important in studying toponymy. It is obvious that the oldest mention of a toponym confirms the existence and use of the name itself. At the same time, this mention offers a *terminus ante quem* for the existence of the underlying spatial reality to which the original name referred. In other words, the oldest mention of the toponym is the one most closely linked to the period when the name came into being. As a result, the risk of the names having already undergone any grammatical change is lower, so researchers can more easily and safely analyse etymology and name formation (Rentenaar 2002: 140–141).

Here are some Brussels examples to illustrate these points. Until now, historians have had doubts about the original notation and meaning of modern day Brussels *Trapstraat* (Stairs Street). Some referred to the medieval spelling of *Drabstrate*, mentioned back in 1406 (Janssens 1983: 72), but encountered difficulties in explaining the street name properly. Ghent still has a *Drabstraat*, but it is possibly a derivation of *Drafstrate*, which referred to a muddy and marshy street (Gyseling 1954: 43). Nevertheless, the oldest mention of the Brussels street is not *Drabstraat*, but really *Trapstrate* and dates back to 1244 (d'Osta 1979: 67; Janssens 1983: 47). Consequently, it seems a reliable assumption that this toponym referred to the existence of steps, which are indeed mentioned in some other records (dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, see Verscheure 2000: 3, 60 & 109). The appearance of the street name in 1244 clearly indicates the presence of steps in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These steps were obviously visible enough to give their name to a street. Unfortunately, the oldest mention of the toponym does not offer a *terminus post quem* for their existence. They may even have dated back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Classifying toponyms chronologically can offer totally new insights. It is known that linguistic changes often occurred in medieval

urban toponymy (Rentenaar 1988: 65). This phenomenon seems also to implicate changes in spatial and social patterns. This is particularly illustrated in the case of the Brussels *Grote Markt* (Grand'Place). The oldest name for this space was *Nedermarkt* (Lower Market), either referring to a low-lying market space (Des Marez 1935: 43; Janssens 1983: 99) or revealing a relative localization compared to other markets in the upper town (Vannieuwenhuyze 2008a: 254). *Nedermarkt* has been mentioned as a place name since 1174. From the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the shorter version *Markt* (Market) also appeared in the records. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century another variant appeared: *Gemene markt* (Common Market), indicating a common use of the space. Research into other settlements and cities has indicated that late medieval central market places were originally ill-defined and irregular spaces which were often sited in rural landscapes or on common pastures (Rentenaar 1988: 73; Lachaert 2004: 274–276). This was probably also the case in Brussels. During 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries an intriguing phenomenon occurred in Brussels as well as in other cities in the Low Countries. There was a dramatic increase in the urban power of cities. Tangible proof of this trend both spatially and architecturally occurred on and around the *Nedermarkt* with the construction of a monumental town hall, an urban cloth hall, some ducal trade and administration complexes and a rectangular-shaped public square. Consequently, the name of the former *Nedermarkt* underwent a change to *Grote Markt* (Grand'Place), which did not only refer to the increased surface of the market place, but also reflected the high ambitions and centralising policy of the urban town council.

This example clearly illustrates toponymic adaptation. On the one hand, the study of consecutive names provides opportunities to trace urban and social change. On the other, we must bear in mind that the oldest mention of a toponym may already have been influenced by grammatical, etymological or spatial changes. Some Brussels streets are known to have only recently acquired a proper name. Previously, they were just indicated by referring to two or more local orientation points. By way of example, we know the actual Brussels *Jonkerstraat* (Squire Street) existed back in late medieval times, but the street did not have a name. It was indicated and located by referring to nearby buildings: Saint Gudula church, the High school, the tithe barn and/or Saint Martin's churchyard (Laurent 1963: 173). There are many other such examples.

This inconvenient problem can possibly be solved by determining chronological layers in the toponymic stock and linking them to important urban or social trends. This toponymic stratification can be defined by both historical and linguistic criteria. Jos Molemans (1988: 7) strongly encouraged this kind of research and provided some incentives. In his eyes, differences in the toponymic layers could have been caused by land reclamation, demographic growth, urbanisation and town planning and the emergence or creation of new settlements. Of course, it is also possible to distinguish toponymic layers in accordance with historical periods (prehistoric, Roman, medieval, modern, contemporary names, etc.), but this does not seem to be very useful since the demarcation of historical periods does not always correspond with spatial, geographical, linguistic and/or toponymic changes.

Applied to medieval Brussels, a quick look at the chronologically classified toponymic list immediately gives rise to some intriguing statements. The toponymic stock can be divided effectively into several layers. These layers are distinguished from each other both chronologically and spatially. Differences between them seem to be linked to (or even caused by) the densification of urban space. The two oldest toponymic layers both go back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and follow more or less the same chronological scheme. The first layer consists of settlement (or neighbourhood) names such as Brussels itself, *Obbrussel*, *Coudenberg*, *Ruisbroek*, *Orsendal* and *Overmolen*, which always cover wider geographical areas. The second layer contains important and demarcating buildings, such as the castle, Saint Gudula church and Stone gate.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, street names appeared in the records. This new layer consisted of quite short, simple and uniform street names such as *Stoofstraat* (Stove street), *Trapstraat* (Stairs street) and *Nieuwstraat* (New street). However, this street name layer has to be split up, because over time increasingly complex names appeared. Street names such as *Ridderstreet* (Knight Street) were transformed and doubled in length becoming *Lange Ridderstraat* (Long Knight Street), *Grote Ridderstraat* (Big Knight Street), *Korte Ridderstraat* (Short Knight Street) and/or *Kleine Ridderstraat* (Small Knight Street). I would argue that these linguistic changes were the reflection of the ongoing densification and the complexity of the urbanization process. As a result, many more toponymic layers can be distinguished in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries: street furniture

(fountain names, cross names, barrier names, etc.), wall names (gates, city moats, towers, etc.), house names (inns, private houses), public institutions (hospitals, trade halls, chapels, etc). Of course it seems clear that other trends (such as growing literacy and the expansion of administrative systems) also played a role (from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the number of written records increased enormously, see Dickstein-Bernard 1981: 55).

### 3.4. A walk through the city

Some monographs take the form of a toponymic walk through the area under review. This method is called the peripatetic method, which relies on the principle that name and place are indissoluble (Molemans 1988: 56). Many old place names are indeed linguistic representations of landscape perception. These principles are applied to the research as well as to the editing process by mentioning and analyzing street and place names by through a toponymic walk.

Despite the relevant basic principle, this method gives rise to many problems. Jos Molemans (1988: 56) has already enumerated four disadvantages. Because of the strong—or even exclusive—connection to the geographical landscape, some types of toponyms cannot be treated. This is the case not only for toponyms derived from anthroponyms, but also toponyms which can no longer be located. Secondly (and especially in an urban context), the medieval landscape often no longer exists or has changed beyond recognition. Reconstructing a medieval toponymic walk would become a very virtual experience. Thirdly, geographical maps and aerial views seem to be more useful for studying toponymy than making a walk. And fourthly, a peripatetic monograph is less practical for readers. An alphabetical index is an absolute necessity and the monograph itself is not conveniently arranged, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the area under review.

Another annoying problem lies in delimiting the track. The author has to choose the track he wants to ‘walk’. For medieval times this is no easy task since the urban space has undergone enormous changes, especially in the industrialised cities of the West. For Brussels, this problem can be solved by choosing the tracks of the commissioners of the so-called hearth census. In 1453, 1496 and 1526 hearth census were organised in the Duchy of Brabant, meaning that all the hearths

in the towns and on the countryside were systematically counted. In Brussels, this was carried out district by district by sworn commissioners, who wrote down descriptions of the tracks they followed (Vannieuwenhuyze 2008b: 77). Therefore, they employed several toponyms, as this example clearly shows:

The tenth district, outside the *Wolfswiket* (Wolfs Gate), along the ditch, with the *Zilverstraat* (Silver Street), continuing through the *Warmoesbroek* (Vegetable Marsh) up to *Orsendal* (Horse valley) and the *Keulsepoort* (Köln Gate) and behind Saint Laurence along the inner side of the ditches up to the monastery church. (Laurent 1965: 474–475, my translation).

Although these descriptions of late medieval Brussels districts can be a good starting point, it remains however very difficult to reconstruct the tracks with any precision. Moreover, it seems that the districts did not cover the entire town surface.

As the previous remarks have pointed out, the peripatetic method seems to apply less to the study and classification of urban toponymy. It is therefore hardly surprising that it was less used. I only know the extensive monograph on Leuven house and street names by Alfons Meulemans (2004) and the toponymic walk through ‘s-Hertogenbosch (Roelands 1984). About Brussels no peripatetic monograph has ever been produced, barring the study on two nearby villages, Elsene and Ukkel (Van Loey 1931).

#### 4. Conclusions

It is obvious that all four classification systems have their strengths and weaknesses. It seems impossible to indicate the best method, simply because the choice depends to a great extent on the purposes of researchers and often on practical issues too. Nevertheless, it is essential to come to some conclusions or statements, which can serve as guidelines in the editing of upcoming toponymic monographs. In addition, it was my goal to propose some principles or incentives with the aim of stimulating reflection on the study and classification of medieval urban toponymy.

No one single classification system is adhered to. It seems much more beneficial to combine as many methods as possible. In this way, it is possible to get round methodological problems inherent to one

particular classification method. More toponyms can be handled in an appropriate way and only a few will slip through the net. But most importantly, spatial change, urban complexity and density can be understood in as wide a context as possible.

The Brussels examples clearly showed the advantages and benefits of some underestimated methods, namely chronological and typological classification systems. Nevertheless, these methods are capable of providing many new insights into urban morphology and urbanization processes. Consequently handling the toponymic records in this way could go a long way towards stimulating further research on urban space and development. In my eyes, an alphabetically classified toponymic monograph combined with chronological and typological lists and analysis seems a very advantageous and appropriate way to study (medieval) urban toponymy.

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**Summary: The study and classification of medieval urban toponymy: the case of late medieval Brussels (13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

The complexity of medieval urban space and urban society is systematically interwoven with medieval urban toponymy. For instance, urban toponyms seem to change faster and are more numerous and heterogenic than those in rural locations. There is therefore a requirement to stimulate scientific research on urban toponymy and to develop methodologies to achieve this goal. In this paper, four classification systems of medieval urban toponymy are treated separately: alphabetical classification, typological classification, chronological classification, and ‘a walk through the city’. Examples taken from medieval Brussels toponymy illustrate the underlying principles, strengths, and weaknesses of these classification systems. But, instead of choosing one single classification system, it seems very beneficial to combine as many methods as possible. Such a combination will make it possible to get around methodological limitations and to understand spatial change, urban complexity, and density in as wide a context as possible.

**Resumé: Étude et classification de la toponymie urbaine médiévale: le cas de Bruxelles à la fin du Moyen Âge (XIII<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles).**

La complexité de l’espace et de la société urbains est systématiquement mêlée à la toponymie médiévale urbaine. Par exemple, les toponymes urbains paraissent changer plus vite et sont plus nombreux que ceux du monde rural. Ce qui pousse à stimuler la recherche scientifique sur la toponymie urbaine et à développer des méthodologies à cette fin. Dans le présent article, quatre systèmes de classification de la toponymie urbaine médiévale sont traités séparément: alphabétique, typologique, chronologique et péripatétique. Des exemples empruntés à la toponymie médiévale de Bruxelles illustrent les principes de base, les forces et les faiblesses de ces systèmes. Néanmoins, au lieu de choisir un seul système, il est préférable d’en combiner autant que possible. Une telle

combinaison permettra d'échapper aux limites méthodologiques et de comprendre les changements spatiaux, la complexité urbaine et la densité dans un contexte aussi large que possible.

**Zusammenfassung: Zur Untersuchung und Klassifizierung mittelalterlicher innerstädtischer Namen am Beispiel des spätmittelalterlichen Brüssel (13.-16. Jh.)**

Die Komplexität städtischer Raumbildung und städtischer Gesellschaft im Mittelalter ist in systematischer Weise verwoben mit den für diese Räume geltenden Toponymen. Nicht zuletzt deshalb scheint sich ein Namenwechsel bei innerstädtischen Namen schneller zu vollziehen als in ländlichen Siedlungen; insgesamt scheinen städtische Siedlungen reicher an Straßennamen zu sein, und diese machen den Eindruck einer stärkeren Heterogenität. Daraus ergibt sich die Dringlichkeit, die wissenschaftliche Erforschung der städtischen Toponymie voranzutreiben und methodische Ansätze zur Umsetzung dieses Desiderats zu entwickeln. In diesem Beitrag werden vier Klassifikationssysteme für die Toponymie mittelalterlicher Städte getrennt voneinander behandelt, nämlich die alphabetische, die typologische und die chronologische Klassifizierung, und schließlich die Ordnung der Namen nach dem Prinzip eines ‚Stadtrundgangs‘. Vor- und Nachteile der jeweiligen Prinzipien werden dabei jeweils unter Zuhilfenahme von Beispielen aus dem mittelalterlichen Brüssel illustriert. Dabei scheint es sich als sehr günstig zu erweisen, so viele Methoden wie möglich miteinander zu kombinieren, anstatt einem bestimmten Klassifikationssystem den Vorzug zu geben. Mit Hilfe eines solchen kombinierten Systems lassen sich methodische Begrenzungen überwinden; dies erleichtert das Verständnis für den historischen Raumwandel und die Komplexität und Dichte städtischer Räume, die in einen möglichst breiten Kontext eingebettet werden.