

10-1-2015

Exploring Place in the French of Italy, 1st Edition

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Recommended Citation

Morreale, Laura PhD and Hill, Heather V., "Exploring Place in the French of Italy, 1st Edition" (2015). *Fordham Archived Digital Projects*. 4.

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Archiving Dossier Narrative
Exploring Place in the French of Italy, 1st Edition
Fordham University, Center for Medieval Studies
October 29, 2018

Project Catalogue record:

https://fordham.bepress.com/ddp_archivingdossier/4/

Persistent Identifier:

10.5281/zenodo.2562276

Current Project URL:

<https://medievalomeka.ace.fordham.edu/exhibits/show/exploring-place>

Launch Date: 10/01/2015

Archive Date: 10/29/2018

Narrative Section 1. Project Rationale and Scope

"Exploring Place in the French of Italy" (EPFOI) is a digital humanities project by Fordham University's Center for Medieval Studies that was started in the summer of 2015. Using the methodology described by Dr. David Wrisley in his "Visualizing Medieval Places, the goal of the project is to map all of the place names mentioned in a selection of medieval French-language works created or copied on the Italian peninsula from roughly 1250 to 1500 and featured on Fordham's French of Italy website.

The EPFOI website contains these maps of all the identifiable place names for sixteen individual French language texts written in Italy, as well as a composite map that plots all of the place-names mentioned in our chosen corpus (the simple map view plots all of these points only once). Users may also see how frequently particular sites are mentioned, both for individual works and for the corpus as a whole (the weighted map view provides this data). The essays that accompany this collection of maps are intended to explain the value of a geographic approach, offer a perspective on how the geographic information fits in with ideas about the French of Italy corpus, and provide examples of some of the ways in which this data might be used. The micro-essays page highlights questions that came to us as we created the maps, and invites users to think through these visualizations in similarly innovative ways. To this end, the accumulated data underlying these maps can be examined, downloaded, and re-purposed by our site users.

Narrative Section 2. Project Trajectory

Stage 1: Data Collection

The first stage of EPFOI, Data Collection, was completed in four steps. First, we examined the printed index of each selected text to compile a list of place names mentioned in the edition. We did this manually to ensure that we had properly identified a place name, rather than a person's

name or another non-place name. In some instances, the edition had no index but the text itself was so short (such as Chanson du Roi de Sicile), we simply skimmed the text for place names and included them in our data.

Second, we used digital gazetteers, or geographical directories, to identify modern locations that might correspond to each of the place names found in the index. Our preferred gazetteers were Geonames.org and Geohack, which is the gazetteer developed by Wikipedia.[1] After locating the corresponding name and place, we copied the latitude and longitude assigned to each locale and inserted the coordinates into our datasheets.

Third, we scanned our texts electronically and uploaded the images into ABBYY FineReader, a type of optical character recognition (OCR) software. ABBYY FineReader allowed us to convert the scanned images, of each text into a different text format, called a plain text file.

Finally, we used the freeware program AntConc to determine the number of occurrences of each location in the plain text file. AntConc searches plain text for instances of a string of characters (i.e. the place name) and creates a concordance to aid textual analysis. We then added the number of occurrences to our datasheets.

Stage 2: Map Visualizations

After we collected the data and inserted into our datasheets, we used the mapping platform CartoDB to present our information geographically. CartoDB is a web mapping tool built on open-source software that is offered as a “freemium” service, meaning it is free for accounts up to a certain size. CartoDB users can upload datasheets or connect them to their account and manipulate the code to display the perfect map. Once a visualization (map) is created, it can be published via the URL or embedded into a website via an iframe, available through the “Publish” button in the upper right-hand corner. We have chosen the embedding option, placing the iframe for each visualization in the HTML code for the corresponding profile page on Omeka.

Stage 3: Website Creation

EPFOI is built on Omeka, a free open-source platform initially created to curate online exhibits. We created each page of EPFOI in the “Exhibits” plugin, using HTML to format each page. Some pages, such as the profile pages and the “Download Our Data” page, include downloadable datasheets that can be shared via the “Items” plugin Omeka. Items are cataloged by the Dublin Core Metadata standards and allow for documents, images, and other media to be displayed on Omeka websites.

Narrative Section 3. Project-Specific Digital Objects

Websites - Omeka 1.0

Datasheets - Google Sheets; Excel

Digital maps - CartoDB

Narrative Section 4. Project Outcomes

No analytics recorded; Presentations were given at NYCDH Week, DHSI 2016, Keystone DH

Narrative Section 5. Documentation Statement

This project is being archived because the original website is being decommissioned by Fordham University. A second edition of the site is in development.

Narrative Section 6. Project Bibliography

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