

## The position of historical geography in Germany: Interview with historical geographer Winfried Schenk (University of Bonn)

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Professor Winfried Schenk holds a chair in historical geography at the Department of Geography at the University of Bonn. From 2003 to 2021, Schenk was chairman of ARKUM, the *Arbeitskreis für Historische Kulturlandschaftsforschung in Mitteleuropa* (Working Committee for Historical Cultural Landscape Research in Central Europe). Every year, ARKUM comes out with a publication entitled *Siedlungsforschung. Archäologie – Geschichte – Geographie* [website <https://www.kulturlandschaft.org/publikationen/siedlungsforschung/>], of which the 2021 edition appeared as a Festschrift. Winfried Schenk will be retiring in 2022.



Q: Could you start off by introducing your own disciplinary background (studies, teachers, main research topics, scientific context)? Perhaps it is also interesting to tell us a little about Prof. Jäger, who was one of the last representatives of the former school of historical geography.

A: At the University of Würzburg, I studied German, history, and geography for teaching at grammar schools (1976–1983) and passed the Staatsexam (state examination) in Bavaria in these three subjects in 1982/83. At that time, this last course was very much geared towards the needs of future teachers and therefore included a lot of *Länderkunde* and *Landeskunde* (regional geography) as well as physical and cultural geography (now known as human geography). All of these topics were taught in close connection to one another. I implemented this method during my time in Würzburg in a large number of regional geographic works on Mainfranken (Main Franconia). The regional geography of Germany that I published together with Hans Gebhardt and Rüdiger Glaser in 2007 also fits into this tradition; the historical-geographical chapters are all mine. As a result of my regional geographic work, I was offered a professorship in *Anthropogeographie* (human geography) and regional studies of South-West Germany in Tübingen. I worked there until 2001.

But back to Würzburg. During my training as a teacher (1983–1985), I was already receiving teaching assignments from Prof. Helmut Jäger with a focus on historical-geographical topics. He had probably noticed me during seminars on the history of cultural landscapes because I was able to read and interpret historical sources, including Latin ones. This archival approach to historical geography, the importance of which was emphasised by Prof. Jäger, was certainly one of the reasons that he offered me a position as

a research assistant at the Institute for Geography in Würzburg after I completed my teacher's training. I worked at the Würzburg Institute for Geography in the same position from 1985 to 1996. During that time, I also wrote my dissertation (in 1988, on the spatial impacts of the Cistercian Abbey of Ebrach in Franconia in the Early Modern Period) as well as my habilitation thesis (in 1994, on forest use, forest condition and regional development in Central Germany in pre-industrial times) on the basis of written and cartographic sources. Prof. Jäger had pointed out both topics to me in a far-sighted manner, as he was aware of the large number of archival sources pertaining to these research fields. Back then, I did not suspect that they would inspire a life-long career in research!

In terms of the methodology I used for my major works, I always evaluated archival documents first before going into the field to observe the landscape. Only from a certain point in the research process does the interplay between archival studies and fieldwork really start to take place. In the field, I then found many manifestations of the researched phenomena, whether in material or immaterial forms (such as mentalities, language, or politics). Research into the persistence of spatial structures and elements in the broadest sense has fascinated me ever since.

Furthermore, my methodological approach is explicitly inductive. When dealing with a topic, I first use archive material to uncover its different aspects in a wide and open manner, which helps to structure my further research. Only then do I derive abstractions or general statements from my findings, such as the spatial impact of the Cistercian order or the history of forests. In the tradition of Helmut Jäger, my approach is not very theory-based, but rather utilises analytical concepts to capture the essence of a topic and to structure the material data. A good example can be found in the concept of the cultural landscape as it contains a multitude of aspects, though the analytical view is oriented towards the spatial activities of people in the past. With this approach, I have seen different discourses, such as environmental history, come and go in the course of my time as a researcher. But I can live with some hidden critique because my findings are in a way timeless, as they were directly drawn from sources. My participation in relevant discussions on environmental history, for example on the debate on 18<sup>th</sup> century wood scarcity, consisted primarily in reconstructing „real“ forest conditions in a specific region and period based on archival sources and from there, determining the corresponding wood supply. By evaluating serial sources such as forest accounts over a long period of time, I have shown that building “long series” can provide useful insights for this discourse.

My method of working from the archival sources towards the cultural landscape also stands in opposition to the approach of many landscape planners

and architects. They systematically start from the current landscape and the elements and structures still visible there and then search for data to explain the corresponding phenomena they observed. Because limitations in terms of time and finances usually make archival research impossible, many of these explanations end up being extrapolations of results from research elsewhere. Form is ambiguous by definition. One cannot unambiguously deduce the genesis or function of an object from the form, but always needs additional information, which I draw mainly from archival documents.

Q: In 2001, you succeeded Prof. Klaus Fehn in Bonn. What research themes have you worked on during your Bonn years?

A: Since my professional move to Bonn, I have mainly dealt with questions of applied historical geography. In doing so, I have deliberately followed in the footsteps of Prof. Klaus Fehn who, in close contact with colleagues from the Netherlands, has made a significant contribution to the development of this field. Together with him and Dietrich Denecke, I had already published a textbook on “Kulturlandschaftspflege” (cultural landscape management) in 1997 during my time as a professor in regional geography in Tübingen. The institutional platform behind its development was a working group of the same name in the DAL, *Deutschen Akademie für Landeskunde* (German Academy for Regional Studies).

I practiced applied historical geography in a large number of reports on cultural landscape development and regional development, in the Rhineland mostly, in collaboration with Dr. Klaus-Dieter Kleefeld and Drs. Peter Burggraaff. The close cooperation with the department for cultural landscape maintenance at the *Landschaftsverband Rheinland* (Rhineland Regional Association) was particularly important for the development and content of the digital landscape information system *KulaDig* (*Kulturlandschaft Digital*). This cooperation was formalised with the signing of a cooperation agreement in 2011.

My application-related work has been recognised by appointments to commissions for the selection of World Heritage Sites. I am particularly pleased that my basic research on the Cistercians is now being continued throughout Europe in the context of the Cisterscape project, with a focus on certain aspects of regional development.

Q: What is the institutional position of historic landscape and settlement research in Central Europe? How is historical geography organised in Bonn (universities, organisations, regular meetings, journals)? With Fehn's retirement, the independent Seminar for Historical Geography was dissolved, and historical geography became part of the Faculty of Geography. What difference has this made?

A: In the 1990s and early 2000s in particular, I took part in various conferences organised by the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape (PECSRL) and the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH). While I gave presentations, I did not hold any leading positions. One of the main reasons for this was the workload that resulted from taking over the professorship for historical geography in Bonn as the successor to Prof. Klaus Fehn in 2001. He was able to conduct the Seminar for Historical Geography within the Faculty of Philosophy largely autonomously. However, when I took up my professorship in historical geography, the seminar was transferred to the Institute for Geography that is part of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. My input was crucial in making the move to another faculty, which was particularly successful thanks to the efforts of Prof. Fehn. Since my profile was that of a geographer, I really wanted to get into that department. I also feared that if I stayed in the Faculty of Philosophy, historical geography would be used as a “quarry” in the event of spending cuts.

Historical geography was now part of the largest geographical institute in Germany. As a consequence, I had to take on a multitude of teaching and administrative duties at institutional, disciplinary, and faculty levels. I also had to cooperate with many colleagues, supervise a large number of theses and write a corresponding number of reports.

Furthermore, I wanted to get through to the large number of geography students! Until the abolition of the *Magister* degree in 2007, I was in an ideal situation: I was able to teach historical geography to a large number of students from different related subjects such as archaeology, history or ethnology as well as to reach students from all degree programs in geography. After the introduction of the new bachelor's and master's degrees, I was faced with a very young audience who barely had any historical knowledge and were hardly acquainted with historical methodology and the corresponding auxiliary sciences. I could therefore only introduce topics from the field of historical geography in homeopathic doses or in relation to a few case-studies in the current curricula. This made it very difficult to train them in historical geography, so I referred students who wanted to study historical geography more intensively to my former colleague, Prof. Dr. Andreas Dix, who offers a master's degree in historical geography in Bamberg.

In retrospect, switching to the Institute for Geography was the right step, because it offered an ideal organisational, financial, personal, infrastructural, and collegial framework for my work.

Q: As chairman of ARKUM, you had a central position in interdisciplinary settlement research. When you took over that position, ARKUM was reorganised

and received a new name: *Arbeitskreis für Historische Kulturlandschaftsforschung in Mitteleuropa* (Working Committee for Historic Cultural Landscape Research in Central Europe). Before that, the group was known as the *Arbeitskreis für genetische Siedlungsforschung in Mitteleuropa* (Working Group for Historic Settlement Research in Central Europe), founded 1972. The name ARKUM reflects a shift from historic settlement research towards historic landscape research. What do you think of these developments?

A: I do not see a fundamental difference in content between the working group for genetic settlement research under Fehn's leadership and ARKUM under my chairmanship. The older name was mostly the result of tactical considerations. Indeed, in the years that the working group was founded, “landscape” was a contaminated term within geography, and other disciplines had not yet gone through the shift to more spatial approaches. This also explains why the name *Siedlungsforschung* (settlement research) was chosen for the association's annual publication. Today, the term “landscape” can once again be used more freely in geography, as the work of Olaf Kühne shows. I consciously use the term “cultural landscape” because it focuses on spatial human activities from a historical perspective, which allows to combine archaeology, history and human geography into one single working group, which positions itself knowingly outside of the field of geography. That is not a problem for me. Rather, I see the interdisciplinarity that arises from it as a strength, which becomes visible in the innovative topics that emerge from the annual meetings.

Q: How do you see the future of historic landscape research in Central Europe? Are there differences between countries? We have the impression that the field of landscape is thriving and that the public interest in the concept of landscape has grown. At the same time, geographers seem to be leaving this field of study behind, in particular at universities.

A: I perceive a contradiction between, on the one hand, the high demand for „my“ topics and for historically-geographically trained graduates (for example for the cultural landscape management department in the *Landschaftsverband Rheinland*) and, on the other hand, the weakening institutional anchoring of historical geography at universities in Central Europe, including the Netherlands. At the University of Bonn, my position will be taken over by someone who was not trained as a historical geographer. Historical geography will end with my retirement in September 2022. This fits in a long-running trend towards the reduction of positions for historical geography in Central Europe. The number of relevant positions in Germany is now so low that one cannot advise younger people to try and make a name

for themselves in the field of historical geography – especially since the demand for such discursive research within geography seems to have reached a critically low level. I am very pleased, however, that more and more students from other disciplines are finding their way into historical geography. They take up new and interesting topics, which, however, hardly ever go back further than the 18th century. Examples of this can be found in the volume edited by Jan Erik Steinkrüger and myself about a conference entitled „Between Space and Time“. Many of these topics are influenced by thoughts from New Cultural Geography which could be characterised as Historical Cultural Geography. In this respect,

research on the persistence of borders, religious imprints, memory or critical toponymies are innovative. Nevertheless, the „classic“ thematic fields such as historic settlement research should not be abandoned, because it is evident that the demand for such data has not disappeared. On the contrary, older fields of research abandoned by historical geography, such as desertification research, are successively being taken over by medieval archaeology, for example. One future task will be to integrate these two groups into the specialist tradition of historical geography so that its knowledge is not lost, while at the same time enabling them to find new topics and methodological approaches.

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