The Norse Perception of the World project is creating an online, searchable index with mapping capabilities of foreign place names and other spatial references in medieval Swedish and Danish texts. East Norse (Old Swedish and Old Danish) literature is a mine of information on how foreign lands were visualised in the Middle Ages: What places were written about and where? Are some places more popular in certain text types or at certain times? How do place names link different texts? Is there a shared concept of spatiality? How is space gendered?

Spatial humanities, the spatialisation of literary studies, and cognitive mapping are growing fields within digital humanities, but the study of spatial thinking and knowledge in medieval Scandinavia and its development as an area of enquiry are hampered by a dearth of information on place names in literary texts. Any research aiming to uncover what pre-modern Scandinavians understood about places abroad requires as a minimum an index of foreign place names in East Norse literature, an infrastructure that has not existed until now.

The overall aim of the project is to create an infrastructure in the form of an online, open access searchable index and mapping of foreign place names found in medieval East Norse texts. This is accomplished by a bespoke back-end MySQL database containing the data (i.e. the index), Norse World (2018–2020), an interactive search and mapping resource based on the Leaflet library, and a REST-API, a separate back-end application that allows end-users to access the database. The REST-API uses JSON as its open standard format and is compatible with both GeoJSON and JSON-LD. The data are freely accessible to scholars and other interested parties around the world under a CC-BY 4.0 licence and can also be downloaded as a CSV-file, usable in for instance Microsoft Excel or offline GIS applications as QGIS.

The data are extracted from a corpus of all Swedish and Danish literary, non-biblical medieval texts extant in a handful of medieval runic inscriptions as well as around 210 manuscripts, manuscript fragments, and early prints (from before 1515), such as romances, travel stories, pilgrim guides, saints’ lives, devotional literature, revelations, prayers, didactic works, and sermons as well as encyclopaedic works. Some of these texts exist in editions of varying quality while others are as yet unedited and housed in different archives and libraries in Scandinavia. The project is thus collecting data that are scattered and otherwise difficult to access, sorting and presenting them in a uniform manner. It also means that it is hard to estimate how many entries the finished database will hold. Outside of the East Scandinavian context several similar resources exist: Recogito (Pelagios Commons), World Historical Gazetteer (Grossner, 2019), and Icelandic Saga Map (Lethbridge, 2019).

One of the challenges of the project is to represent the complexities of the data accurately from an onomastic and philological point of view. First of all, geo referencing itself can be an issue. If a text was translated in the late 14th century, is preserved in a manuscript from around 1450, and was read until the end of the medieval period (1515 for the project’s purposes), it is impossible to decide what borders for instance France would have had in the context of a reader’s reception of the text. For this reason, among others, we have chosen primarily to make use of a modern gazetteer, GeoNames (https://www.geonames.org/). Furthermore, just because Paris, for instance, is mentioned, that does not mean that the reader had any clear idea of where it was or how to get there, but its context would have impacted how it fitted into the reader’s world-view. A further complication is place name identification, both when a name is hard to interpret and when the same place name has different geographic meanings. The former can be studied by using the filter Level of certainty on the Norse World map. For the latter we create different locations by closely following the context of the text. If for instance a place, ‘Paris,’ is called a lake, it will be distinguished from the city of Paris.

Secondly, the different forms of place names and non-name spatial references play a major role in structuring the data. The Original form, which is closest to the source in presentation, is transcribed according to diplomatic principles and also contains the immediate textual context. To facilitate orthographic, morphological, and onomastic investigations there are two normalised forms based on the Original form. The Variant from is slightly normalised, for instance, place names begin with a capital letter but spelling variation is preserved. The Lemma form is normalised further so that spelling variation is not preserved. A new Lemma form is created when there is a new place-name formation. The top level is Standard form, usually a modern English form of the place name or spatial reference. The structure, Original form > Variant form > Lemma form, runs parallel for Old Swedish and Old
Danish, but the Standard form ties them together. It is the Standard form that has assigned coordinates from GeoNames. In some cases the Lemma forms might be completely different from the Standard form, e.g. ‘Bern’ and ‘Verona’ for the city of Verona. By having a Standard form the user does not have to be aware of all possible variations of a place name or non-name spatial reference to use the resource.

To add further layers to the data every Original form is also linked to information on the work and its dating and description; the source, whether a runic inscription, manuscript, or early print, and its dating, material composition, and repository; edition used; and links to available electronic digitised sources or editions. Every Original form is thus at the core of a complex network linking it to other medieval texts and sources, modern digital resources and linguistic information ready to be used by researches and students as a starting point to study the world-view presented in East Norse texts.

Appendix A

Bibliography