

# **The area told as a story. An inquiry into the relationship between verbal and map-based expressions of geographical information**

*Presentation of a PhD project proposal with some preliminary results from the first few months of work.*

Different theories exist for how people think about the geography of the world they live in. The idea of mental maps in our heads is common, whereas in other researcher's opinion, a true description will have to be more dynamic, with a closer relation to navigating in the world.

In our social life, people of all cultures communicate about geography. This is even common beyond the human species, as numerous examples from insects to mammals show us. For such communication, many different techniques are available, including spoken and written texts, pictograms, images, maps, cartoons, music and dance.

When we talk about geographical communication today maps are often seen as natural, almost at the level of invisibility. This has not always been the case. In many cultures maps are not used much for geographical navigation. There are many practical reasons for this. Lack of knowledge of maps and lack of practical ways to transport a map are two examples. In my PhD project, a hypothesis is that there are reasons for this non-use of maps other than the practical ones. I argue that there are things that can be said using other means of communication – words, songs, dances – that can not be said using maps.

I will use a material rich in geographical descriptions for the practical parts of this project. It was created as a manuscript in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of the preparations for the border treaty between Denmark-Norway and Sweden-Finland. It was collected by Peter Schnitler, a Danish-Norwegian military officer educated in law, and a major part consists of transcripts of court hearings in which locals in the border area — farmers, reindeer herders, workers, civil servants — gave testimony about the border area. The material also contains Schnitler's aggregations of the information from the court protocols. He also made some maps in connection to his work. The culturally complicated situation in the creation of this material, the meetings between Schnitler and the Norwegian, Sami and Finnish people he gathered information from, makes it very interesting for my work. What was said during the meeting, and what was unsaid? Who were the witnesses for Schnitler, who was he for them? What was he open for, what was heard even if it was not said, what was not heard even if it was said? Any text comes from somewhere. What is the history of this text? How much of the experience of the landscape did survive into the text?

In order to test the hypothesis that there are things that can be said in texts but not expressed on a map, a conceptual model will be created based on the geographical information I read out of the texts, and it will be evaluated if the information in this model is expressible as a map. If the hypothesis is supported by the experiment, the really interesting part of my work comes: To describe why this is so, and what the consequences may be. Central in this discussion will be how the current changes in cartography and the development of hybrid cartographic-textual interactive documents, such as navigation systems available on the web as well as GIS based hand-held or car mounted systems, do change the picture.

If the hypothesis is not supported, on the other hand, it will be necessary to investigate if this is because of problems with the setup of the experiment. If so, better experiments will be needed. If not, the results points towards the conclusion that any geographical information can be express on a map. If this unlikely result occurs, I will have to rethink the basic assumptions of my research, with open and very exciting consequences.