

Compass toponymy and space orientation in the Southern Low Countries before 1800¹

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Abstract

Generally the so-called compass toponyms (meaning toponyms with one of the four wind directions as a component) are discussed shortly and rather trivially. However, it seems that the use of these compass toponyms was variable from region to region and changed through the times. Until now, this phenomenon was neither mapped nor explained. For this paper, we focus on compass toponyms in the Dutch speaking parts of the Southern Low Countries prior to 1800. We collected data from some extensive corpuses and gazetteers including thousands and thousands historic micro-toponyms in these regions. These data are mapped by means of the so-called Kloeke-system in order to gain insight in their spatial distribution over the centuries. These maps allow us to draw an imaginary line between the regions where compass toponyms were commonly and daily used and the regions where they were more or less absent. In the second part of our paper, we endeavour to find a historical explanation for the distribution pattern and its evolution through the times. It is possible that the use of these toponyms was influenced by administrative traditions, but it seems that advances in navigation methods and the introduction of cartography also have played a role.

Introduction

Following the terminology of Room (1992: 38) place-names including one of the four cardinal directions (north, east, south and west) as a primary element may be called compass toponyms or compass names. There appears to have been a remarkable difference in the use of these so-called compass names between the coastal area of Flanders and the town of Brussels in Brabant (our respective areas of research)² during the late medieval period. In late medieval coastal Flanders, a multitude of compass toponyms existed, including names of regions, districts, parishes, villages or communes, right down to the level of streets, houses, farmsteads and parcels. In the late medieval town of Brussels, on the contrary, these compass names were totally lacking.

Furthermore, already in the 13th century the system of reference by which plots of land were situated in the coastal area was predominantly based on the cardinal directions. Parcels, farmsteads, etc., were often situated to the west, the east, the north or the south of adjacent topographic features. In a chart dating to 1281, for instance, a plot of land with a farmstead on it, located near the village of Oostburg, was situated as follows: ‘to the south lies the land belonging to this farmstead [...], to the north lies the land of the children of Hughe Beyer [...], to the west lies the land of Jan Valken [...], to the east lies a common road which

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stretches unto a sandy road and the highway’.³ This is but one example from many dozens. In late medieval Brussels, the situation was different: in order to locate their goods people usually referred to streets, their neighbours and neighbouring landmarks by means of the words ‘next to’, ‘above’, ‘opposite’, ‘below’, etc. (Vannieuwenhuyze, 2009).

In short, we uncover a peculiar phenomenon in which people living in two adjacent regions made use of two different systems of spatial reference. Surprisingly, the phenomenon appears to have received relatively little attention in scholarly literature. If mentioned, it is usually taken for granted as if it were somewhat self-evident, e.g. the words of Room (1992: 38) himself: “Of a purely locational street names, *North Street*, *East Street*, *West Street* and *South Street* must be among the most common.” The use of this particular kind of toponyms is not often adequately studied in its own right, especially where it concerns chronological or geographical differences.

Here we focus on the use of compass names on the meso- and micro- level, i.e. the level of parish names, village names and names of smaller entities (such as farmsteads, streets or fields). Starting from the observed differences between our own areas of research, we would first of all like to expand our focus to a more general view. Was the presence or absence of compass names a purely regional phenomenon, or it is possible to discern general trends over a larger area? Is there a chronological evolution to these trends? And, finally, how can these trends possibly be explained?

Methodology

First, it is necessary to shed light on some important methodological issues and tackle a number of heuristic obstacles. We limited our research to the Dutch speaking parts of the Southern Low Countries, including the former territories of Flanders, Brabant, Antwerp, Limburg, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and Artois. We chose not to incorporate the actual Netherlands as this would have increased the research significantly. Furthermore, we studied the period of the Ancient Regime (approximately from 800 up to 1800). On the one hand, compass names only appeared in written records from the 8th century onwards; on the other hand, systematic data for the 19th and 20th centuries are hardly accessible and much more heterogenic. Indeed, it seems that the specific developments of the 19th century, especially the spectacular expansion of the old towns, administrative changes and the (second) industrial revolution, strongly influenced the creation of new toponyms, including compass toponyms (e.g. the names of railway stations, belt highways or shopping arcades).

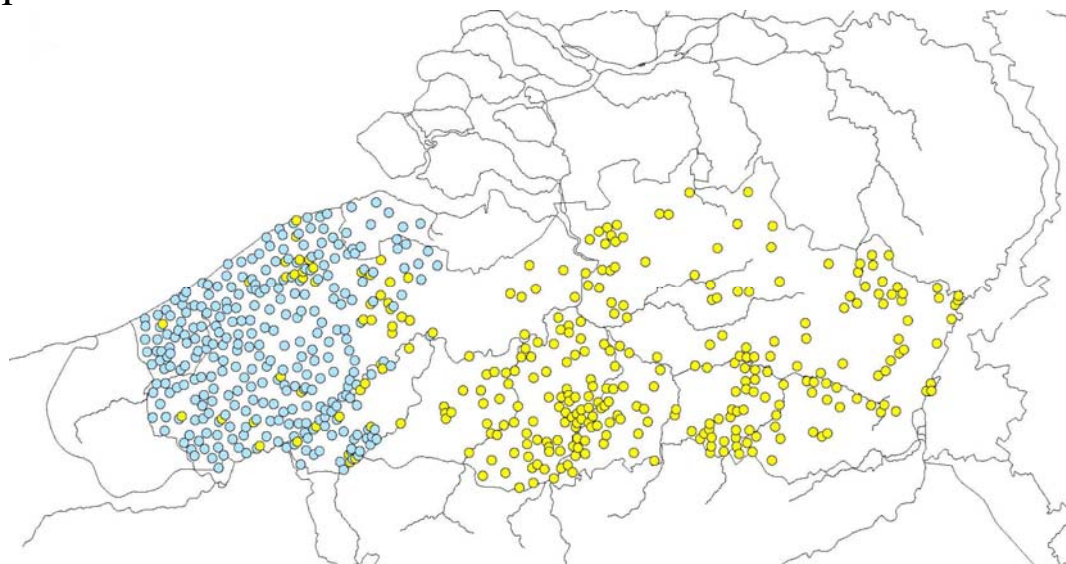
The majority of our data is gleaned from more than 280 toponymic monographs and articles. Generally speaking, these monographs contain extensive toponymic gazetteers for a well demarcated area, mostly a commune. Usually, besides the name of the area itself, different kinds of micro-toponyms are listed, such as street names, field names, house names, hydronyms, names of small landscape elements, etc. Often they are ascribed a certain date as well, on which basis it is possible to discern when the toponym first came into existence, or, more correctly, when it first appeared in the written records. For our study, we leave aside the names of bigger geographic or administrative entities (such as states, seigniories, liberties or districts), which are to be recognized as macro-toponyms. These names are not treated systematically in the aforementioned monographs and are much more difficult to pinpoint on our maps (*cfr. infra*).

Obviously, the scientific quality, degree of exhaustivity and internal composition of these monographs are quite diverse. For our purpose, monographs containing alphabetical lists of toponyms, chronological attestations and etymologic explanations were extremely useful; on the contrary, monographs with a thematic approach or lacking a systematic toponymic

³ Bruges State Archives, Charters Blauwe Nummers, nr. 4732.

gazetteer were not or less useful. In addition, we also made use of some linguistic dictionaries and larger toponymic gazetteers, especially the extensive toponymic dictionary edited by De Flou (1914-1938), containing many thousands of toponyms from Western Flanders and some neighbouring areas. In sum, we collected data for a plethora of communes, villages and hamlets. On map 1 the data gleaned from the work of De Flou (blue dots) are juxtaposed to the data gleaned from other monographs (yellow dots), which individually focus on smaller areas but taken together contain many thousands of toponyms as well.⁴

Map 1



The map sheds light on an important methodological consideration. It indicates that whereas the work of De Flou indeed forms an integral part of our research, it is by no means based on that single, voluminous monographic series. However, certain areas are very well covered, whereas other areas are not or barely studied at all. On the whole, however, we maintain that our results are fairly representative, and not likely due to a distortion based on the quality of the monographs used.

We mapped our data by means of the so-called Kloeke-system, which is intensively used by Flemish and Dutch linguists for the creation of dialectal dictionaries. Kloeke, a prominent Dutch linguist in the first half and the middle of the 20th century, devised a system of numeric codes which were subsequently linked to the hundreds of parishes, hamlets, villages and quarters that existed within the Dutch language area, i.e. the actual Netherlands, Flanders, and some parts of France and Germany (Grootaers & Kloeke, 1934). By means of these numeric codes, we were able to map linguistic and historic data on a meso-level. The dots on maps 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 represent the oldest attestations of north-, east-, south- and west-toponyms we could find for the hundreds of parishes, villages and hamlets. Of course, these attestations serve as a *terminus post quem*. From that moment on, one or more compass names were used within the locality. Nevertheless compass names may in fact have been used earlier in oral tradition, but this remains largely tentative. Indeed, toponyms may have existed for hundreds of years before they first made their way into the written records.

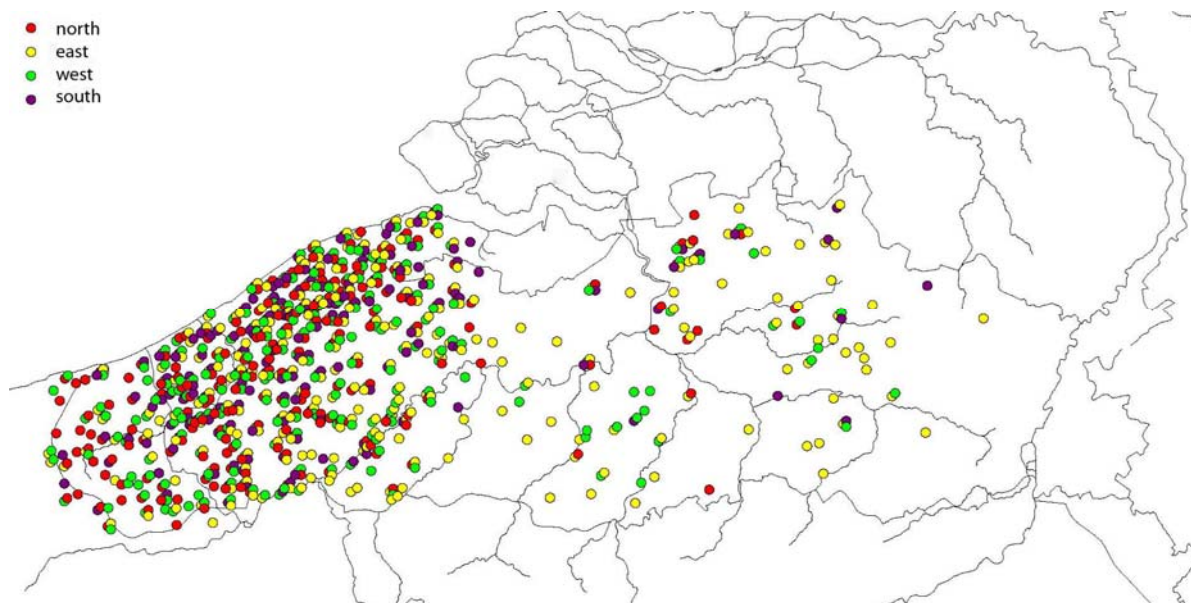
⁴The dots on the maps only cover present day Flanders, although we also used data for the Flemish speaking parts of Northern France, also covered by De Flou. The dozens of monographs are too numerous to be listed here in full detail. Instead, we refer to the forthcoming bibliographical overview of micro-toponymic gazetteers for the territory of actual Flanders, which will be edited by Bram Vannieuwenhuyze.

A last important methodological consideration concerns the false compass names. As languages and dialects change over time, the meaning and morphology of toponyms are not fixed, but subject to change. Some apparent compass names were not compass names at all as they did not originally refer to the cardinal directions. Over time, however, they transformed into an apparent compass name. Two examples of this would be the village of *Westkapelle* (meaning ‘western chapel’) in the coastal area, which originally was called *Waescapelle*, meaning water chapel (De Flou, 1936: 384-392). Over the centuries, the first part of the name gradually transformed into ‘west’. A second example is the seignior of *Oostkamp* in sandy Flanders. *Oostkamp* (meaning ‘eastern camp’) was originally called *Orscamp*, meaning ‘horse camp’, and the name was gradually warped as well (De Flou, 1930: 935-946). Evidently it was necessary to remove these and other false compass names as they would have distorted our results. Nevertheless, the simple fact that those names transformed into compass toponyms clearly indicates that the latter were quite successful, especially as deteriorated name for toponyms whose etymology had become unclear.

Results

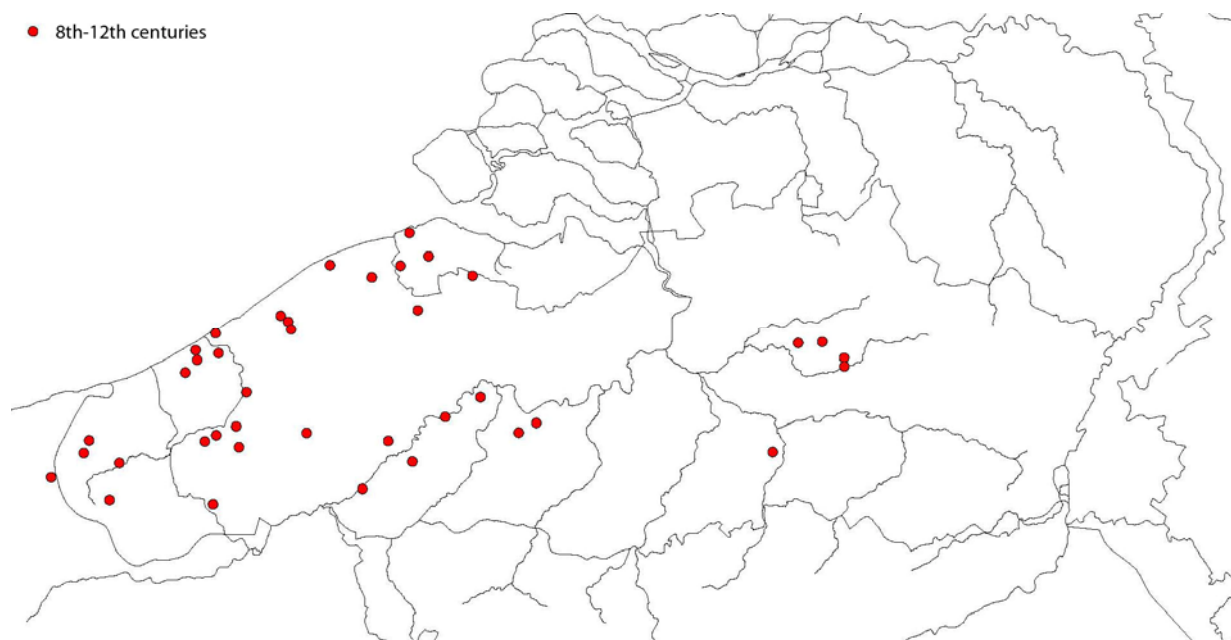
The coloured dots on map 2 represent the villages, hamlets and parishes in which the four different compass names have been attested before 1800. The aforementioned discrepancy between the western part of Flanders – where the use of compass names was abundant – and the interior – where they only locally existed – is very striking. As a result we can answer our first question positively: the trends we observed for late medieval Brussels and the late medieval coastal area of Flanders are indeed representative for a larger area. Again, as we strove for a coverage as complete as possible, it is unlikely that this phenomenon is due to flaws in our research.

Map 2



Let us now examine the phenomenon more closely by arranging the data chronologically. As map 3 shows, the oldest compass names roughly appeared from the second half of the 8th century onwards until well into the 12th century. Most of them appeared in the coastal area, although some were located further inland, near the rivers Leie and Scheldt and within the Campine region.

Map 3



We did find some very old attestations prior to the year 1000, but they are very scarce:

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Toponym</i> | <i>Location</i> | <i>Reference</i> |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---|
| 768-814 | <i>Sudaccra</i> | near Deurle | Gysseling, 1960: 944 |
| 768-914 | <i>Westiria accra</i> | Maldegem | De Vos, Stockman & Taeldeman, 1990: 131 |
| 877 | <i>Wuistkirka</i> | near Oostende | Gysseling, 1960: 1067 |
| 891-900 | <i>Asdunc</i> | Mendonk | Gysseling, 1960: 765 |
| 941 | <i>Ostarfurost</i> | Petegem-aan-de-Leie | Goeminne & Vanhee, 2000: 179 |
| 973 | <i>Osthold</i> | near Watervliet | Gysseling, 1960: 767 |

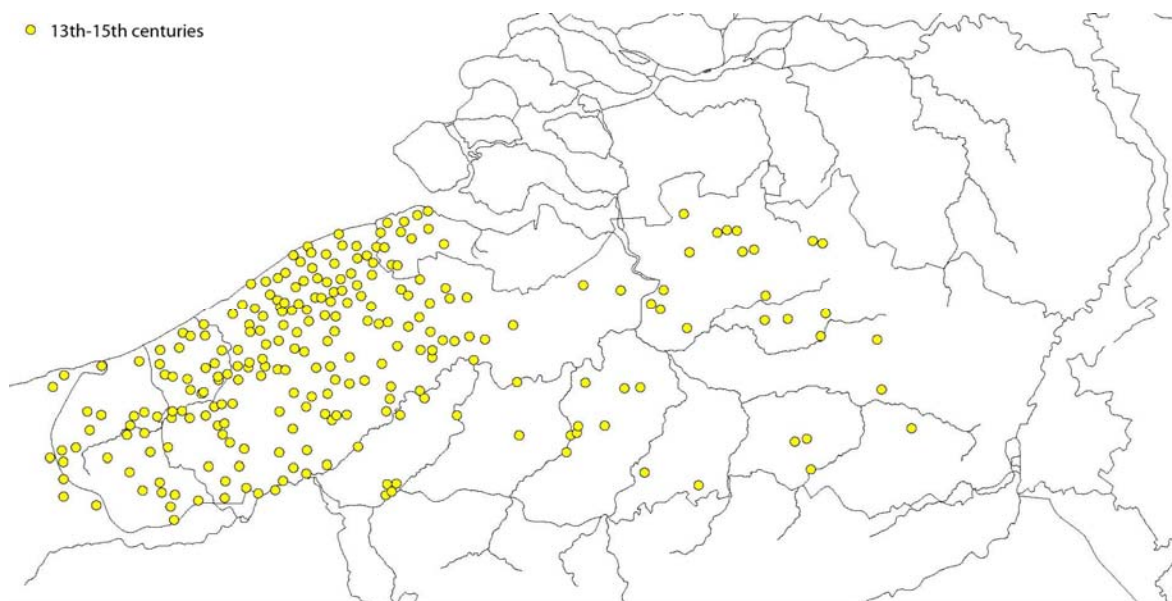
The use of compass names was not very widespread prior to 1200. Either the use of compass names was only just appearing in this period, or they were in fact more common than the results suggest. Of course, this remains largely tentative.

The Old Dutch words for the cardinal directions derive from proto-Germanic. During the Migration Period (A.D. 300 – A.D. 700), proto-Germanic words gradually entered the Roman languages. The etymology of the words for the cardinal directions attribute a principal role to the movement of the sun in the heavens. The proto-Germanic word for ‘north’, for example, is taken to mean ‘to the left of the rising sun’ (Reinsma, 2006: 35). The word for ‘south’ is

associated with ‘the region of the sun’, whereas the words for ‘east’ and ‘west’ are associated with ‘dawn’ and ‘evening’ respectively (Pokorny, 1959: 86-87, 765-766, 914-915 & 1173). The oldest mentions of the Old Dutch words date from the second half of the 8th century onwards,⁵ about the same time as the first compass names are attested. According to the *Dictionary of Old Dutch* the words north and *ōst* are only known as toponymic components.

Map 4 details the appearance of compass names between 1200 and 1500. As we can see, the map is starting to show a denser pattern of compass names in the western area, while they were comparatively lacking in the interior. As written sources became much more widespread from the 1250's onwards, micro-toponyms, compass names included, were recorded more often as well. However, as stated before, this phenomenon was very typical for the coastal area.

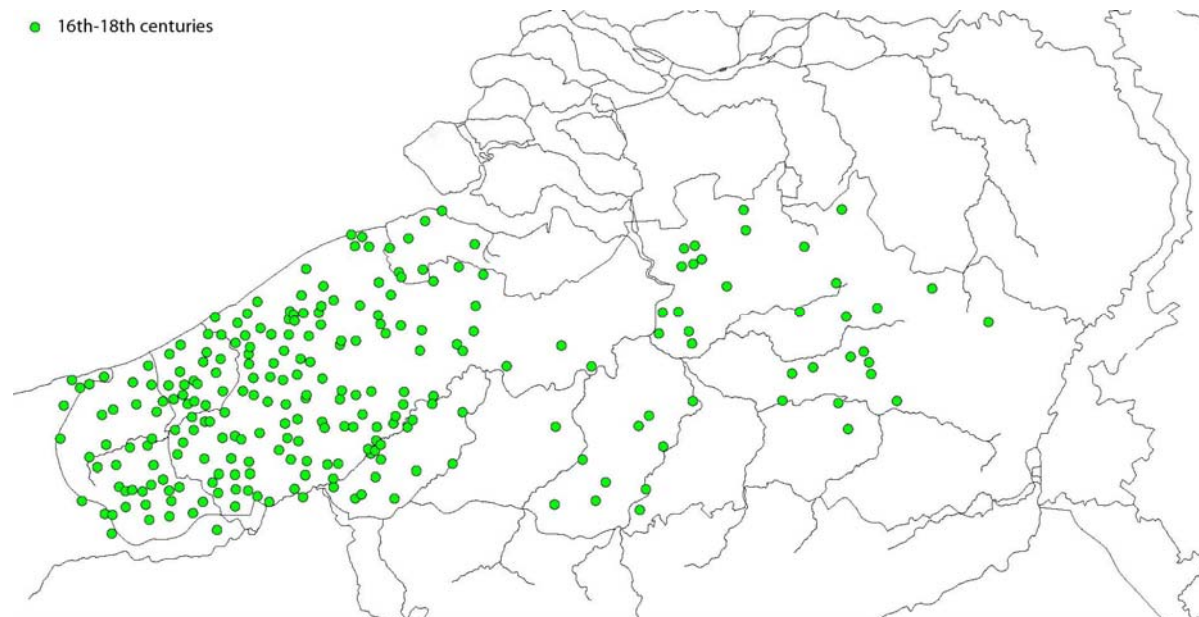
Map 4



Finally, map 5 shows the attestations of compass names from 1500 to 1800. The densification increased further still, especially in the western part of Flanders. This indicates that there was indeed a discernible chronological evolution. Compass names were relatively rare prior to 1200; from 1200 until 1800 a gradual densification took place. There was no clear shift from one area to the other. As we have mentioned before, compass names became much more commonplace after 1800, leading to previous discrepancy gradually disappearing.

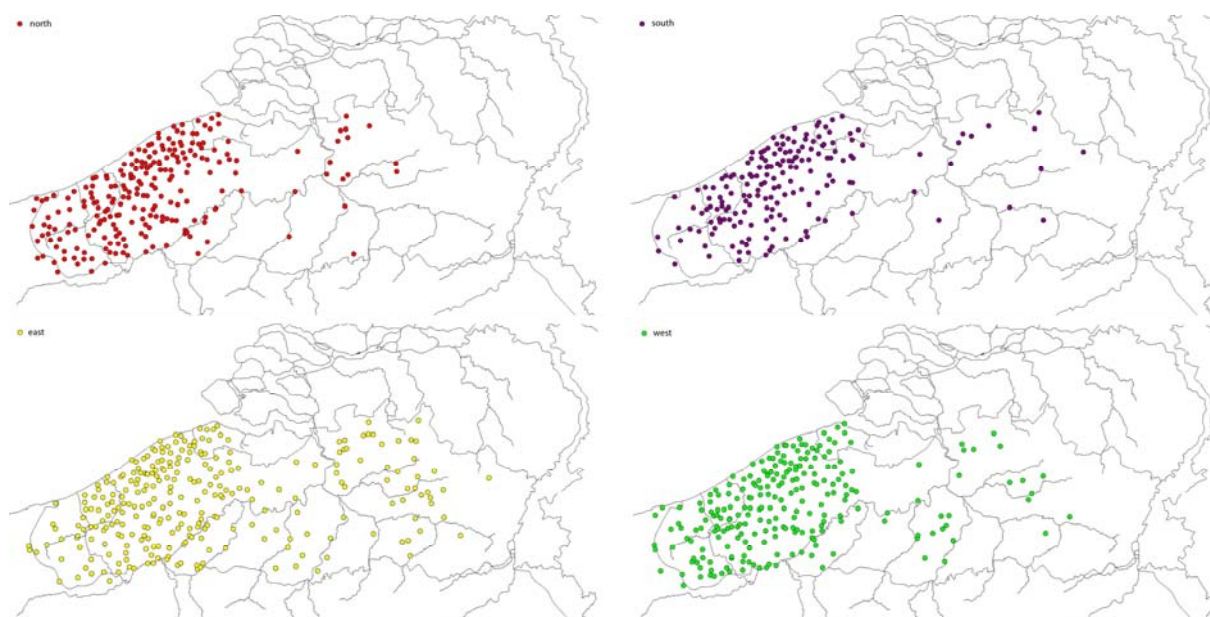
⁵ Oldest attestations: 790-793 for north, 802-822 for *ōst*, 768-814 for *sūth* (or *sunth*) and 877 for west (see the *Dictionary of Old Dutch*: <http://gtb.inl.nl/>).

Map 5



Map 6 shows a compilation of the appearance of north-, south-, east- and west-toponyms over time. Again, each these maps clearly illustrates the discrepancy between the western part of Flanders and the interior. Also, there seems to have been somewhat of an over-representation of east-toponyms, which is perhaps due to the importance of sunrise in the Christian world. This strikingly contrasts with the statements of Bouvier (2007: 72), who noted the preponderant use of north-toponyms in France. Unfortunately, we are still seeking for an explanation for this difference.

Map 6



According to Room (1992: 38), “whenever a compass name is found, a contrasting name will usually also exist”. This is of course not visible on our maps, but during the compilation of our data, we indeed noticed that compass names were often coupled. For instance, whenever there was an ‘east gate’, a ‘west gate’ most likely existed; similarly a seignior named *Noordschote* had *Zuidschote* as its opposite. Furthermore, keeping in accord with Reinsma (2006: 33), the majority of these were bipolar combinations (north and south, east and west). Examples of these include the moated sites of *Noord-Beukemare* and *Zuid-Beukemare*, and the villages of *Westmalle* and *Oostmalle*, etc.

Explanations and conclusions

Of course, the use of compass toponyms implies the presence of an artificial sense of spatial orientation, based on the principles of the compass. Knowledge of the cardinal directions was inherent to any society able to observe the movement of the sun in the sky and was of course not limited to the Southern Low Countries, so this cannot account for the aforementioned discrepancies. Moreover, the use of the cardinal reference system and compass names existed within the entire area at least from the 8th century onwards. In other words, people in the coastal area and people in the interior had knowledge of the cardinal directions, but for some reason the former were more likely to draw upon it than the latter.

Nonetheless, we do not believe the use of compass names was very abundant in this period. Prior to the year 1000 the Southern Low Countries as a whole were a sparsely populated area. People relied mainly on oral communication and the landscape was not very intensively exploited. From the 11th century onwards, a commercial and demographic lift off took place, which caused a dramatic increase in the exploitation of the landscape (including urbanisation, land reclamation, road building, digging of canals, impolderings, foundation of new parishes and/or villages, etc. – for a synthesis, see Verhulst, 1995: 128-152).

In turn, these evolutions required a huge increase of the micro-and meso-toponymic stock and necessitated the development of administrative systems in order to manage landscape change (for the advance of administrative systems in Flanders, see Prevenier & De Hemptinne, 2005; De Paermentier, 2010). Oral communication was no longer sufficient. As a result, the explosive increase of both written records and compass names was not coincidental at all. Although new compass names were not always immediately recorded in written documents, most of them were probably not that much older. In short, we believe this phenomenon is related to the intensively exploited landscape, as ever more place names were needed to identify and locate goods, properties and topographic features precisely. People from western Flanders seem to have innately drawn upon the cardinal directions when it came to providing these names, whereas people from the interior did not.

We must however be aware that written records never represent a neutral view or perception of space. As the aforementioned administrative reforms were mainly initiated by the ruling elites, the spatial perception of the landscape by the local people is difficult to reconstruct. Written documents are biased towards the administrations that employed them, which gives us a distorted top-down perspective. In other words, compass names could be superimposed by official administrators, while local people, on the contrary, used alternative names. In this regard, a tangible tip of the veil is lifted by the village of *Volcravenskinderkerke*, located in the coastal plain of Flanders (near Furnes). *Volcravenskinderkerke*, meaning ‘church or chapel of the children of *Volcraven*’, was founded by the descendants of a man named *Volcraven*, who subsequently gave their name to the fledgling community. As this *Volcraven* had been lord of *Lampernisse*, situated to the west of the newly founded village, *Volcravenskinderkerke* also became known as *Oostkerke* (meaning ‘eastern chapel’). The toponymic duality was maintained in the written records. Both were used interchangeably

until the end of the 18th century, after which *Oostkerke* was officialised and the former 'official' name *Volcravenskinderkkerke* was finally dropped (De Flou, 1930: 958-964).

This example is illustrative for other traditions in name giving as well. In the 11th century and the first half of the 12th century, several new parishes were founded and named after their eponymous founder, usually a nobleman or someone of local prominence. From the second half of the 12th century, however, we notice this trend disappearing. New villages were subsequently almost invariably named after saints. While compass names had been in use since the 8th century, it is not impossible that they too became much more popular over time. Here we refer to the remarkable increase of compass toponyms from the 13th century onwards, as was shown and mentioned earlier. This can likely be related to the intensively exploited landscape, as ever more place names were needed to identify and locate goods, properties and topographic features precisely.

It has become clear that different areas of the Southern Low Countries knew different traditions in the use of compass names over time. It is however much more difficult to explain these discrepancies. Of course, the outlook and characteristics of the landscape itself must have influenced the use of compass toponyms. We presume compass names were much more used in areas where natural landmarks were sparse and the horizon was relatively flat. In the coastal area people would have been more inclined to refer to an artificial system of spatial reference, i.e. compass names, because of the lack of eye-catching topographic features and differences in altitude. In the interior, both were much more abundant or distinct and, as such, they played a pivotal role in the formation of place names. For instance, in this area many micro- and meso-toponyms referred to higher or lower ground or a location upstream or downstream. Unfortunately, we did not yet have the time to make an in-depth study of this particular phenomenon, but it may very well have been an alternative tradition in name giving opposed to the use of compass toponyms. In the coastal area, the use of this kind of place names seemed to be entirely lacking.

Another key influence might have been the increase in navigation and shipping from the 11th century onwards. This coincided with the previously mentioned commercial and demographic lift off. During this period, many towns in the coastal area began to prosper as international centres of commerce. The same took place in the interior of the Southern Low Countries, but on a much smaller scale, as these towns did not have direct access to the sea. While navigation and shipping had been important to many societies of the past, in this case it had two major side effects. First, it would lead to an increasingly scientific approach of navigation over the following centuries, culminating into the genesis and professionalization of cartography. Instruments such as the compass were introduced, Portolan maps circulated, etc. In turn, this influenced the development of 'professional' land surveying which tied in to the administrative need of local and central governments (Pouls, 1984; Mosselmans, 2001).

We believe that innovations in navigation and shipping and the commercial boom indirectly influenced the perception of landscape for society as a whole. Merchants from Flanders and to a lesser extent the interior of the country would increasingly trade over ever larger distances, ranging from the Baltic countries to Eastern Europe, Italy, France and England. Previously the perception of the landscape had taken place on a smaller scale. While a peasant probably possessed the same innate knowledge of cardinal directions as did the international merchant, the former did not need to actively draw upon it. In other words, the peasant's knowledge of the cardinal directions remained mostly passive, whereas the merchant expanded his spatial perception through his commercial activities and travels. Their intellectual influence on ruling elites and growing administrative services of western Flanders was high enough in order to spread this particular kind of spatial perception and influence name giving practices on land.

To conclude, we hope to have shown that the use of compass names is not to be taken for granted. While the inhabitants of the coastal area and the interior may innately (and perhaps unconsciously) have drawn upon their customary spatial reference systems, this phenomenon was not necessarily self-evident. On the contrary, various traditions in name giving existed and evolved over time. Landscape, people, societies, spatial perception and orientation systems changed over time and influenced each other mutually.

It is clear that this intriguing research is not yet completed. Further study is required, aimed at deepening our understanding of the phenomenon by both increasing the number of available case-studies and by comparing them to other regions. In the future, we plan to take into account alternative spatial reference systems and their influences on place names (for example: toponyms containing *op-*, *over-*, *neder-*, etc.). Secondly, we hope our results will be compared with data from neighbouring regions such as the Netherlands, France, Britain, Germany, etc., in order to open an international debate on the issue.

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