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## S20 Names as cultural heritage

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The content of this module is based on teaching materials prepared by B. Helleland and F. Ormeling. These teaching materials are made available in the "[documents](#)" section.

The module contains the following chapters:

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[Chapter 1](#): Names as carriers of **meaning**

[Chapter 2](#): Names as carriers of **linguistic change**

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[Chapter 4](#): Naming **habits** and **changing attitudes** to names

[Chapter 5](#): Names in **colonisation-names** as **claims** or **mementos**

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When reading through the following pages, you will come across some unusual terms. These terms are hyperlinked to the UNGEGN [Glossary of Terminology \(pdf\)](#). Behind each term a number (#) is given that corresponds to the numbering applied in this glossary, e.g. [toponymy](#) (#344).

For exercises and documents (and literature) on this topic see respectively the "[Exercises](#)" and/or the "[Documents](#)" section of this module.

The complete module can be downloaded [here](#).

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## INTRODUCTION

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Geographical names represent a vital part of a nation's cultural heritage as they express the relationships between society and its environment. They function as a social consensus or as a sort of agreement regarding this environment reached over many generations. Through their functions as spatial identifiers, bearers of personal and social experiences, and as prints of the past, place-names represent huge cultural values. And that is why it is essential to treat and preserve them accordingly.

Place names, may be said to represent the oldest living part of human cultural heritage, in the sense that they have been handed down orally from generation to generation for hundreds or even thousands of years. People started naming their environment very long ago, and many of the names for rivers, conspicuous hills, extensive forests or swamps kept these names, if somewhat altered through adaptations to consecutive languages spoken in their areas. Through their form and the **orthographic** (#251) changes they were subjected to, these names also tell us something about the time period in which they were bestowed.

Apart from their original meaning, names also acquired **additional meaning**, for instance through the fact that locations with a specific name were the theatre of a battle for independence. Thus geographical names communicate cognitive, emotional, ideological, and social qualities.

Why is preservation necessary? Names are threatened because of various factors:

- there is the continued extension of towns and cities over the rural countryside, with the related loss of geographical names from fields, hamlets and farms;
- there is the immigration of population groups speaking other languages without previous links to the environment
- new mapping methods, not dependent any more on surveys in the terrain also tend to lose out on toponyms.

In the following we will deal with names as part of human's cultural heritage under the following aspects and issues:

1. [names as carriers of meaning](#)
2. [names as carriers of linguistic change](#)
3. [names as carriers of images](#)
4. [naming habits and changing attitudes to names](#)
5. [names in colonisation-names as claims or mementos](#)
6. [names as a living museum. Names are proof of all the different language communities that once lived in a region.](#)
7. [threats to cultural heritage aspects \(obliteration, cleansing, UN resolutions\)](#)

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## 1. NAMES AS CARRIERS OF MEANING

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Names that are a reflection of their original conditions, when the region was first settled, be it by nomadic or permanent inhabitants. Names could express:

- physical conditions - soils, vegetation, fauna, spectacular weather conditions, etc. (e.g. the isle of Skye (UK)).
- the object itself - new town, market place, castle, dam (e.g. Neustadt (Germany), Newcastle (UK), Neukirchen (Germany) or Amsterdam, see below).



*Amsterdam started as a fishing village on the river Amstel in which a dam was built to prevent flooding:  
Amstel + dam > Amstelredam > Amsterdam*

- the history of the object (an event, an important person that visited the place or the person that originally settled the place)

 Exercise 1: try to find the original meaning of place names in your area.

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## 2. NAMES AS CARRIERS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE

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Names become part of the language and when the language changes the names change with it. For example when other language groups come into an area, names are usually passed on and are adapted to the new language.

Example: the city of York in Northern England:

- Pre-Roman times: **Eborakon** (place of yew trees) - *Celtic language*
- Roman times: **Eboracum** - *Latin influences*
- Anglian period: **Eoforwic** - *probably because they took the 'ebor' as referring to eofor, which denotes a wild boar (a wild boar is still called 'ever' in Dutch); hence the meaning would change to **place of the wild boar***
- Viking period: **Yorvik** - *Eoforwic was misunderstood by the Norsemen who invaded the area in the 8th century, and took the ending -wic - for the Norse word -vik - that is **'port'**, and contracting 'eofor' to 'yor' and consequently changed it into Yorvik, which gradually turned into York.*

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## 3. NAMES AS CARRIERS OF IMAGES

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Geographical names are the links that are forged by the inhabitants of an area with topographic objects (farms, fields, mountains) around them, and as such they form a part of the identity of these local inhabitants.

Helleland (2008) calls this ***Landschape identity***, defined as the unity between persons and the landscape they experience in given circumstances. When a person/inhabitant hears a name, he immediately recognizes this and has associations with this particular name. During a lifetime, through media or through education they will also get immediate associations with other geographical names, e.g.:

- Paris: The name of the French capital has associations with light and freedom (French revolution)
- Name pairs like Karl Marx stadt / Chemnitz or Leningrad / Sankt Peterburg have political connotations, as different political groups might go for one or the other of these names.

To quote Helleland, place names form a part of one's identity both as linguistic terms and as identifiers of one's environments. As such, place-names may be used to bring forth a wide range of mental and emotional associations - associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life.

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## 4. NAMING HABITS AND CHANGING ATTITUDES TO NAMES

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Personal names are definitely influenced by trends; one year parents may call their children after the newly born royal prince, the next year after a famous popstar. In naming places similar trends may be observed, although these trends usually take longer periods of time.

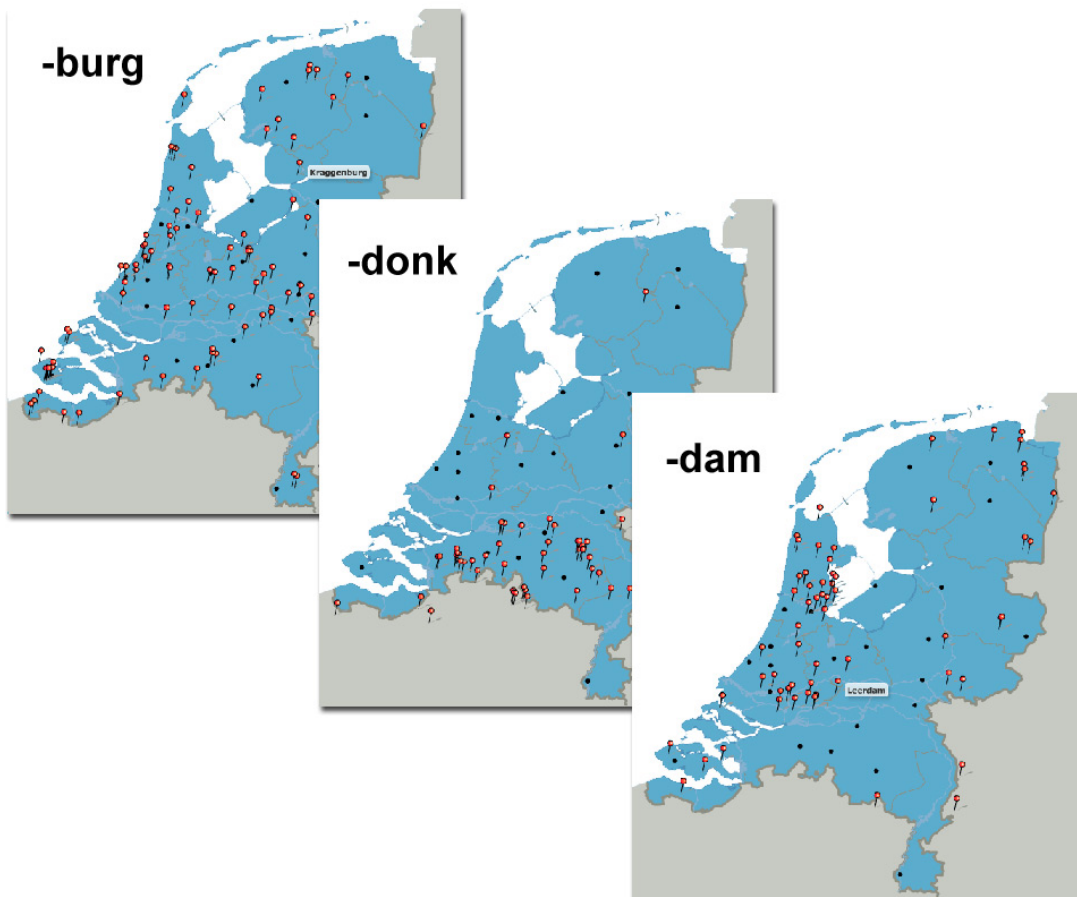
Naming is often done by analogy: new names are given on the same pattern as already existing names in the area with which the name-givers are familiar. This is one of the reasons why certain name types tend to occur with greater frequency than others in particular areas.

Another way of giving geographical names is to transfer existing names to new entities in order to compare them with or to commemorate the original place, through the process known as **baptism**. People are commemorated as well in many geographical names.

In some cases, the written geographical names may tell us in a general way about the **time spans** of settlements. For example, Blok, in referring to Dutch-speaking parts of Europe, indicated that: names ending in:

- burg** or **-ingen** were recorded in the period of the **7th-9th** century; names ending in
- donk** were recorded after the **10th** century; names ending in
- kerke** were recorded in the period from the **12th-13th** century; and names ending in
- dam** were recorded after the **13th** century.

See image below for spatial distribution of placenames containing respectively -burg, -donk, and -dam.



Source: [Atlas van Nederland](#)

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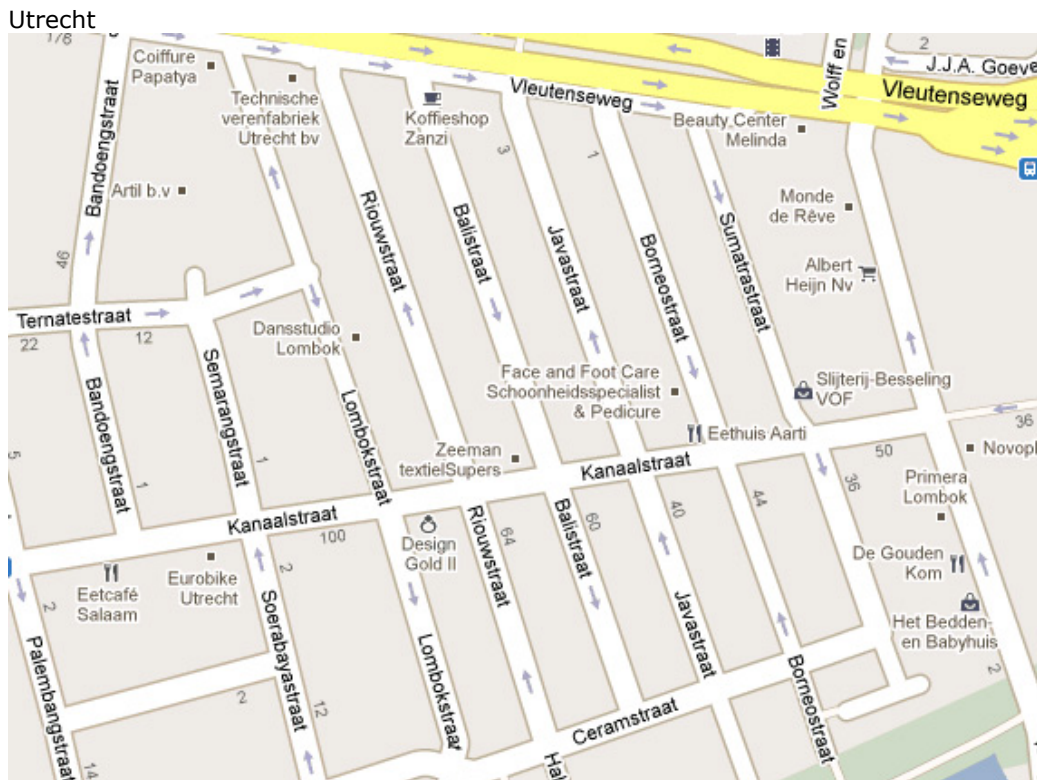
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## 4. NAMING HABITS AND CHANGING ATTITUDES TO NAMES (CONTINUED ...)

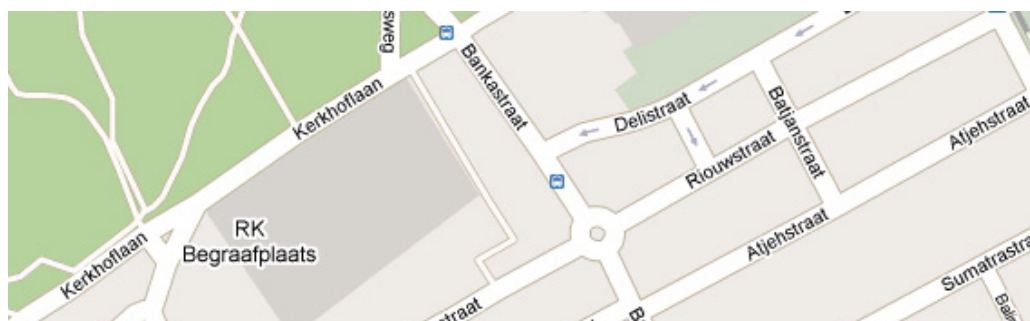
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These naming habits can be found back in our towns and cities via **streetnames** that reflect the urbanization history, the location of specific trades, or support for a royal family.

In the 19th and 20th century the customs to name new streets after **flowers, painters, composers**, or in case of the Netherlands after **Indonesian islands**. This is colonialism petrified and turned into street signs. We do not only find this in Amsterdam, but in all Dutch cities and towns that expanded in the period 1880-1940.



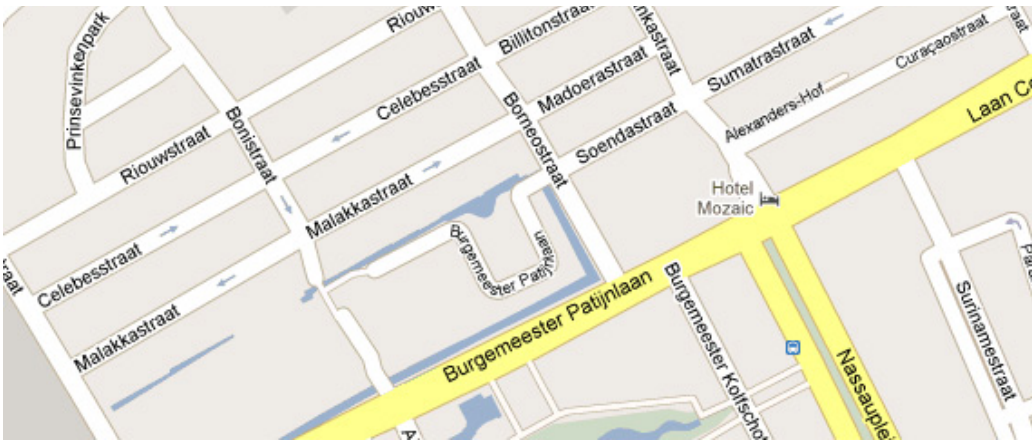
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Source: Googlemaps

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4. NAMING HABITS AND CHANGING ATTITUDES TO NAMES (CONTINUED ...)

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Naming habits can also be found back in names of **oceans** and **seas**.

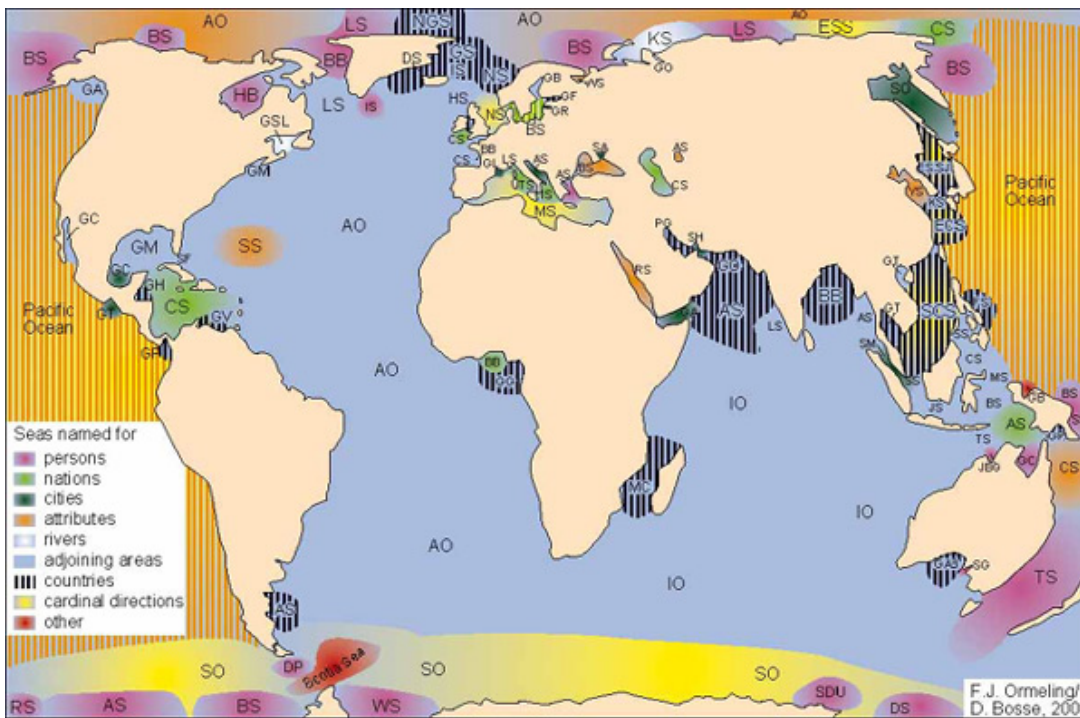
In **Antiquity** seas were named after **adjoining areas** or **countries** (Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean (supposedly adjacent to the mythical Atlantis) or after mythical persons (Aegean Sea), or after neighbouring tribes (Caspian Sea).

Later it was the qualities of the sea that inspired their naming:

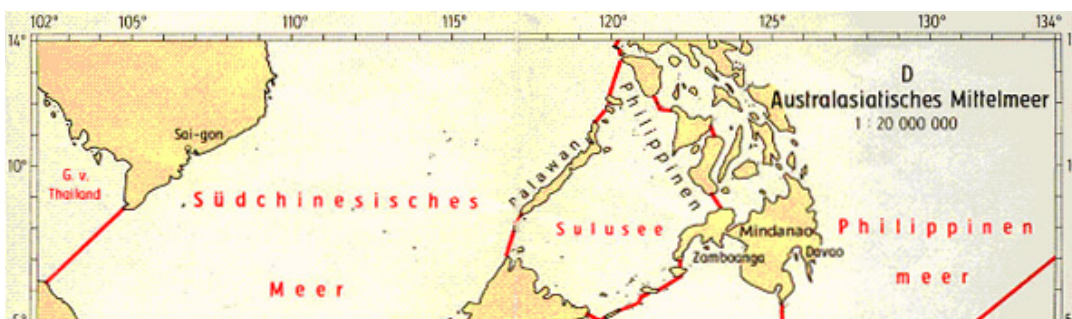
- the quietly rolling waves of the largest ocean (Pacific)
- the red waters of the sea of Sudan (Red Sea)

In the **Middle Ages** Directions were used for naming seas (North Sea, East Sea (Continental European name for the Baltic Sea)).

In the **19th** and **20th** century arctic seas were named after their discoverers (Bering Sea, Beaufort Sea, Davis Strait, Weddell Sea).



The 19th century was also the century in which all the Indonesian waters were named after the adjacent islands: Bali Sea, Banda Sea, Celebes Sea, Ceram Sea, Timor Sea, etc.



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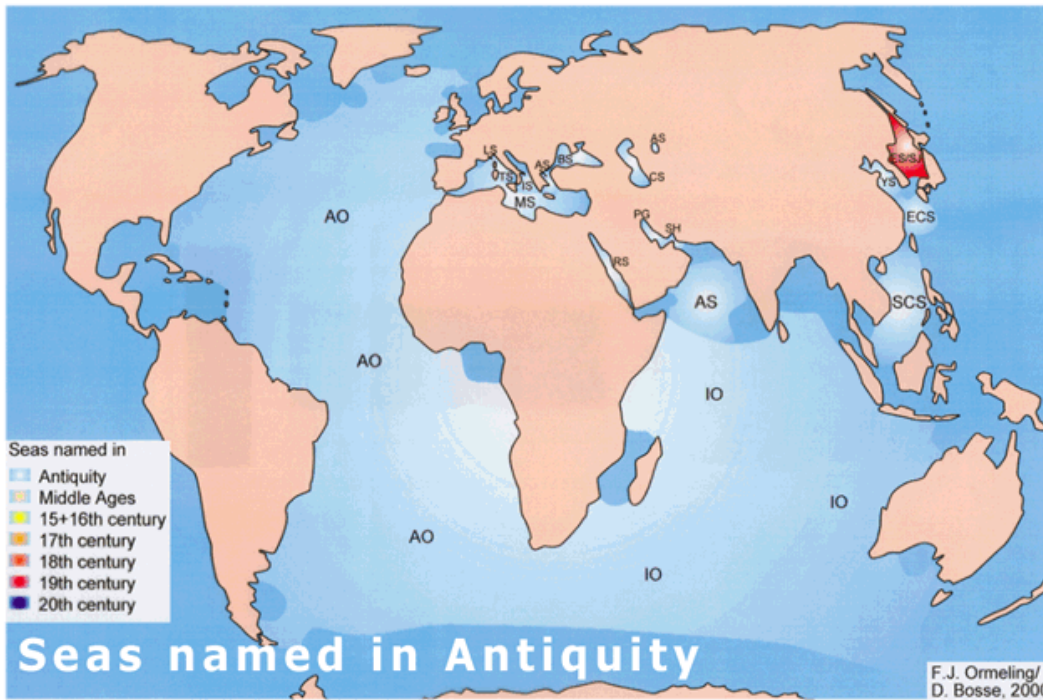
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Below an animation of the naming of oceans through time.



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## 5. NAMES IN COLONISATION-NAMES AS CLAIMS OR MEMENTOS

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When we look at North America in the 17th century the areas colonized by the maritime powers of Europe were called, respectively, **Nouvelle France** (Nova Francia), **New England** (Nova Anglia), **Nieuw Nederland** (Nova Belgium), and **New Scotland** (Nova Scotia). Below fragments of a map by Janssonius (1636) showing the claimed lands by the maritime powers. Virginia was named by English explorers after their virgin Queen, Elisabeth I..



Click [here](#) or on image above for a full image of the map by Janssonius (Source: [Fordham University / Library](#)).

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5. NAMES IN COLONISATION-NAMES AS CLAIMS OR MEMENTOS (*CONTINUED ...*)

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Towns or areas were sometimes renamed when new powers took over. Therefore, through time, city or area names changed. For example, the capital of Nieuw-Nederland was called Nieuw-Amsterdam, later, after 1674 when it was occupied by England, it was renamed New York. The names Nieuw-Amsterdam and New York were memento's of the towns back home from which the colonizers had left.

**More examples of English vs. Dutch place names in the Northwestern part of the USA**

English version	Dutch version
Peconic Bay	Cromme Gouwe
Rhodes Island	Rood Eylant
Elisabeth Islands	Kabeljauws Eilanden
Martha's Vineyard	Texel
Nantucket Island	Vlieland
Nantucket Sound	Zuyderzee
Cape Cod Bay	Noordzee
Cape Cod Peninsula (New York, Delaware, NJ)	Nieuw Holland
Cape Cod	Staten Hoeck
Connecticut River	Verssche Rivier
Thames River	Vriesche Rivier

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## 5. NAMES IN COLONISATION-NAMES AS CLAIMS OR MEMENTOS (CONTINUED ...)

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When the European powers laid claims on the newly developed lands, they did not always take into account the Indian inhabitants.

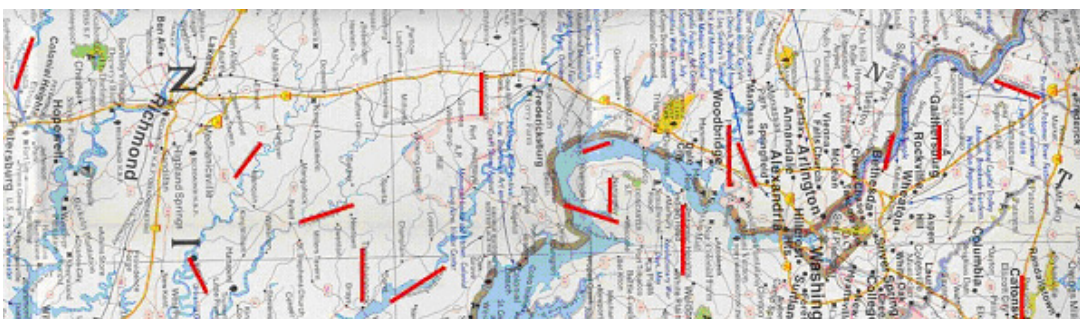
Example: Virginia

- Original English maps: almost only Indian names
- These were increasingly dropped, keeping pace with colonization, or were just drowned in a sea of new "place names" given by the colonists.
- Only hydronyms were kept in the original form



Map of Virginia by John Smith

The only Indian names still visible on nowadays maps are hydronyms (see underlined names below)



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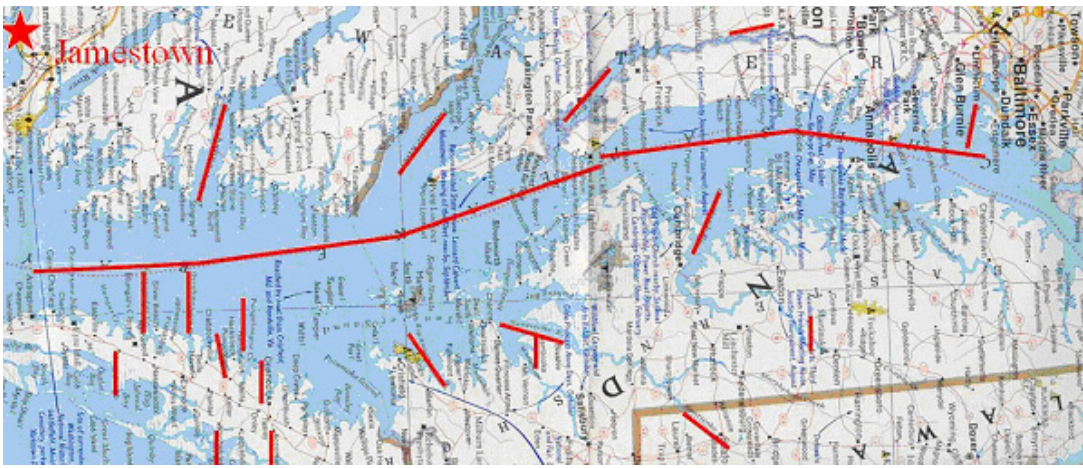
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### Spanish and Portuguese exploration in America

- Coastal names mostly descriptive, religious (more than in Africa) or commemorative
- Inland settlement names in former Aztec and Inca empires (many cities) mostly in indigenous form
- As in Africa, mythical elements in the interior: 7 cities of Cibola, Lake Parime (el Dorado)

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6. NAMES AS A LIVING MUSEUM

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Some geographical names can be proof of all different language communities that once lived in a region.

For example, the Banat is an area in the Balkans (at present subdivided by Hungary, Romania and Serbia) that has been depopulated in the 17th century due to the warfare between Turkey and the Habsburg monarchy.

The Habsburgs tried to populate the area again by promising tax exemption in exchange for military services. From many areas in the Balkan people arrived, and were settled in villages made up solely of Germans, Serbs, Rumanians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, etc. They all bestowed names on these villages in their own language, and many of these names have survived.

Below is a map of the resettlement of the Banat region in 1743. The red circles refer to Romanian villages, the blue to Serbian, the yellow to German, the green to Bulgarian and the beige circles to Italian villages.



Source: [Wikipedia](#) / Author: [Colinspancev](#) - [Creative Commons Licenses](#)

Click [here](#) or on map for enlargement of the above map.

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## 7. THREATS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE ASPECTS

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So geographical names are **irreplaceable cultural values** of vital significance to people's **sense of well-being**. They are an important part of local identity and contribute to a **sense of belonging**.

Geographical names constitute a part of the **collective memory** and **heritage** and thus function as **social identifiers**.

But they are threatened by:

- the continued extension of towns and cities over the rural countryside, with the related loss of geographical names for fields and hamlets, villages and farms.
- The same is due to extensification of agriculture, or the abandoning of marginal farms;
- there is the immigration of population groups speaking other languages without previous links to the environment.
- there is the lack of interest in the names minority groups are using to refer to their environment.
- New mapping methods, not depending on terrain surveys tend to lose on toponyms.
- Toponymical cleansing: countries try to change the names because they want other countries to believe that the names areas are only inhabited by citizens speaking the country's major language.

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- Go to "[The Atlas of True names](http://www.kalimedia.com/Atlas_of_True_Names.html)" ([http://www.kalimedia.com/Atlas\\_of\\_True\\_Names.html](http://www.kalimedia.com/Atlas_of_True_Names.html))

On this website some previews from the above atlas are made public. The atlas details show the original meaning of a selection of geographical names.

- Select an illustration displaying your area of choice. Write down 5 place names and their original meaning.

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## DOCUMENTS AND LITERATURE



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## Available documents:

- [D20-01](#): Ormeling, F.J. (2004). *Toponymic history*. Powerpoint presentation presented at the toponymy course held in Bathurst, Australia.
- [D20-02](#): Helleland, B. (2008). *Place Names as identity Markers* ([URL](#)).

## Literature:

- Helleland, B. (2006). *The social and cultural values of geographical names*. In H. Kerfoot (ed.) - Manual for the national standardization of geographical names. United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, United Nations. Statistical Division. ISBN 92-1-161490-2. pp. 121-128.
- Helleland, B. (2009). *Place names as identity markers*. In Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Onomastic Sciences on Names in Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural and Multi-Ethnic Contact, Toronto, Canada, 17-22 August, 2008. Pp. 501-510. ([URL](#) / [pdf](#)).
- Helleland, B. (2009). *Place names as a means of landscape identity*. In P. Jordan et al. - Geographical names as part of the cultural heritage. Wiener Schriften zur Geographie und Kartographie Band 18, 2009.

## Online resources:

The United Nations sell the following publications which also can be downloaded from the [UNGEGN](#) website:

- [Glossary of Terms for the Standardization of Geographical Names \(New York 2002\)](#) / [pdf](#)
- [Manual for the national standardization of geographical names \(UN - Ecosoc, New York, 2006 ST/ESA/STAT/SERM/88 Sales No. E.06.XVII.7 ISBN 92-1-161490-2, available in the 6 UN languages\)](#) / [pdf](#)
- [Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names \(New York, 2007\)](#) / [pdf](#)
- [Resolutions adopted at the nine UN Conferences on the standardization of geographical names \(English \(pdf\) / French \(pdf\)\)](#)