
Cäsar Flaischlen's "Graphische Litteratur- Tafel" – digitising a giant historical flowchart of foreign influences on German literature

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Introduction

By publishing his "Graphische Litteratur-Tafel" [Graphic Literature Table] in 1890, German writer Cäsar Flaischlen (1864–1920) aimed to portray the influences of foreign literatures on the development of German literature. Flaischlen produced a 58×86.5-cm poster, depicting German Literature as a stream with feeder rivers from mainly other European (national) literatures. His chart covers the development of German literature from its beginnings with various sources, forming two parallel rivers subsumed under the concepts of "Volkspoesie" [folk poetry] and "Kunstpoesie" [artistic poetry], intertwining and finally converging into one broad stream of German literature. The broadening river reaches from the beginnings of German literature at around 750 to Flaischlen's present, the 1890s.

Cäsar Flaischlen was not much of a practising literary scholar, nor an academic. After completing a dissertation around the same time as he published his

"Graphische Litteratur-Tafel", he left academia to continue writing (dialect) poetry, novels and plays, while working as an editor for arts and literary magazines.

The flowchart, although being a flamboyantly beautiful one, is not as novel and unique, as one might think: It follows a long tradition of visualising developments along the axis of time (cf. Rosenberg and Grafton, 2010) and follows the patterns of the highly influential graphical visualisation of history, "Strom der Zeiten", published in 1804 by Austrian historiographer Friedrich Strass.

Being a representative of positive thinking of his time, Flaischlen builds on the time-stream metaphor, but strives to connect this idea with the exact sciences. Although he does not mention the sources used for compiling his chart, this early visualisation of literary history relies on some kind of data, even if, in his 8-column preface, Flaischlen de-emphasises the connection between quantitative evidence and visualisation: For example, he points at the fact that the breadth of the stream was not calculated mathematically ("nicht mathematisch berechnet"), but nonetheless, there seems to be a connection between the selection and especially placement and typographical styling of influencing and influenced authors' names on the chart.

As this example illustrates, the information density of the chart is enormously high:

Flaischlen includes names of authors, texts, literary groups and schools and uses typography (font, font size, font decoration, colour), symbols (circles in various sizes, Roman and Latin numerals), shading of creeks and rivers and language-information to visualise the information.

Our digital edition of Cäsar Flaischlen's "Graphische Litteratur-Tafel" aims to make digitally available the information deeply encoded in the table. Extracted data points are presented in two shapes: on an easily navigable website and in a machine-readable version.

For this reason, the preface was OCRed and encoded in XML according to the TEI guidelines. The flowchart was scanned and transcribed following the recommendations on "Advanced Uses of <surface> and <zone>" (cf. TEI guidelines) to also record spatial information. Coordinates of authors and texts were calculated by help of the GIMP ImageMap editor, then linked to corresponding authority files (VIAF, GND, and Wikidata). The cartographic inventory of the map is marked-up and made searchable by using CSS as a descriptive language for capturing the rendering within TEI @style attributes.

The TEI data is provided via a GitHub repository and processed via XSLT for displaying the flowchart as a web page.

The interface combines the three separate sections of Flaischlen's map and allows for searches via an index. For presentation on the web, the sections were stitched and put together into one giant river. In an analogue format, the river would be almost three meters long, now one can scroll seamlessly down and up the river online. A prototype of the edition is available on the [project website](#).

Flaischlen's map is not only an inspiring prototype for contemporary attempts to visualise data of literary history with "graphs, maps and trees" (Moretti, 2007), but also challenges the development and encoding of older graphical representations of (literary) history on a methodological level.

Flaischlen's 1890 visualisation "Graphische Litteratur-Tafel" deserves further recognition and our online edition could serve as a test case for other – so far unknown and/or not edited – flowcharts of literary history.

Bibliography

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