# Mapping 38 Years of Excavation: The Dissemination of Vector-data from Elephantine, Egypt

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#### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the implementation of an open source solution for providing vector-data through a WebGIS. It will serve as a central access to and the possibility for manipulating the graphic information of the Elephantine excavation project conducted by the German Archaeological Institute Cairo in collaboration with the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research Cairo.

The solution addresses common problems in multidisciplinary, international projects working in remote regions. It is neither aiming to present data to the public nor to the wider scientific community. It rather provides a solution for the widespread but internal exchange of geometric data during the phases of analysis and interpretation within such a project.

#### Keywords

Elephantine, dissemination, web service, wms, wfs, pdf, printing, open standards, open source, fossgis

#### 1. Introduction

During the last three decades the island of Elephantine became a major site for the study of settlements in ancient Egypt. Since the late 1960s fieldwork has been conducted for several months each year at this small town on the southern border of Egypt (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut 2010). Due to the specific processes of stratification of mud brick architecture, Elephantine comprises rich evidence of about four thousand years of continuous settlement in more than twenty major stratigraphic phases.

The German Archaeological Institute initiated different projects to support the presentation of the results achieved. The most outstanding is the innovative approach to "Virtual Egyptology" by the IEMAR at Vienna University of Technology (Institute of Architectural Sciences, Vienna University of Technology 2006), that was presented by Peter Ferschin at the CAA 2007 (Ferschin *et al.* 2008).

What is presented here has its seeds in the attempt to supply the scientists involved in the project with a consistent set of georeferenced vector-data containing all built structures uncovered during the excavation. The intention was to deliver the raw geometry of walls and features in order to serve for the creation of maps adapted to specific topics by the different disciplines involved.

Three major challenges had to be met during the capture of the data:

- Elephantine witnesses the ongoing development of surveying techniques applied to archaeological field work. Several grids are present on the site and the original drawings differ in their framework of reference.
- The concept of recording features changed. It has been coherent only sience the middle of the 1980s.
- The existing data are widespread and their processing is in different statuses.

Not all the problems in data acquisition are solved satisfactorily yet. But already during this early stage another issue was addressed. How to later disseminate the data to the flock of scientists? Which data-format is sufficient for the forecited demands and can be handled by the individual researchers?

Due to it's status as a de facto standard for GIS-data and its capabilities for storing metadata, the shapefile-format(ESRI1998) was chosen for archiving the vector-data from Elephantine. The shapefile, however, is not suitable for graphic applications used in Egyptology, e.g. the Adobe Illustrator.

The solution was developed at the Department of Geoinformation of the Canton Solothurn (CH) and is described in the second part of the paper. It allows to search for specific data in a PostGIS-database and to determine the scale of the print and the paper size. The output is a pdf-document with the raw geometric data originally stored in the shapefile.

# 2. Objectives

Web-based GIS is heavenly used for presenting geospatial data. Besides a lot of advantages over desktop GIS there are some drawbacks like poor printing support. Printing is not as functional as a in a desktop GIS and the quality of the output is disappointing. The common way of printing from a web GIS is quite simple: the system converts the produced image into a Portable Document Format file (PDF). It's possible to add several datasets but they all have to be rendered first on the screen before they can be sent to the printer.

Screen-rendered images have a resolution of 72 dpi, which is insufficient for a high quality print product. There is a workaround to obtain better quality by requesting a bigger image of the same section and scaling down the image again. The result is a graphic with 144 or 288 dpi. A huge problem by using this solution is the size of the map symbology: Line-widths and font-sizes will be scaled down too, which can make a map unreadable. This approach is ideal if the input data – like aerial photographs or a topographical map – is in a raster format but suboptimal for vector data.

The paper based map production of web GIS is unsatisfying. The printing support is too inflexible and qualitatively insufficient.

The main objectives of the "high-quality-webprinting" project are as follows:

- creating top quality print products with a web solution
- usage of open standards and interfaces
- high flexibility
- usage of open source software.

#### 2.1. Quality

In today's printing solutions vector-data is turned into raster-data (e.g. JPEG, PNG or TIFF). To obtain ideal results it is necessary that the input vector-data will pass into vector-data in the print product. Since the Portable File Format (PDF) is able to store vector data there is no loss in quality. Further advantages of storing/printing the data as vectors are:

 scaling the print product (e.g. A4 -> A0) without any loss of quality postprocessing the map in a vector graphics editor.

#### 2.2. Open Standards

The use of open standards and interfaces guarantees a fast dissemination of a software since it is possible to integrate it in one's own products. If the source code is open to the public there will be a huge community that will enhance the software and allocate it again.

By using well-known interfaces it is possible to use only one component of the whole project. The access between the modules with open standards permits the user to use only the printing tool and to embed it in his own GIS client.

### 2.3. Flexibility

The ambition is to uncouple the presentation of the map on the screen and the printing process. To print a collection of geospatial data, the data do not have to be added to the map first. To achieve this aim there are at least two modules:

- a server module that produces the map
- a client module where the user can process some queries and request the map.

# 3. Programming languages, techniques and interfaces

#### 3.1. Java

Java is an object-oriented programming language developed by Sun Microsystems (Sun Microsystems (2010). Java applications (classes) are compiled to bytecode that can be run on any operating system with a Java virtual machine.

Java servlets are special classes that can be executed on a web server using GET- and POST-parameters, e.g.:

http://localhost:8080/MyFirstServlet/
MyFirstServlet?forename=stefan&surname
=ziegler

The example executes the servlet "MyFirstServlet" and passes the two GET-parameters "forename" and "surname" with the values "stefan" and "ziegler".

#### 3.2. Javascript, Ajax

Javascript is an object-oriented scripting language developed originally for Netscape Navigator. By now almost every browser has been supporting Javascript. Unlike PHP, Javascript is executed on the client side. By adopting Javascript the user is able to change the content of a website dynamically, e.g. the color of the text or the text itself.

For some time the usage of Javascript has not been not state of the art web-programming. By the appearance of Ajax / web 2.0 using Javascript is quite acceptable again. With Ajax (asynchronous Javascript and XML) it is possible to send and receive data without reloading the website. Complete libraries ease the use of Ajax:

This international standard defines a 'map' to be a portrayal of geographic information as a digital image file suitable for display on a computer screen. A map is not the data itself. WMS-produced maps are generally rendered in a pictorial format such as PNG, TIFF or JPEG, or occasionally as vector-based graphical elements in Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) or Web Computer Graphics Metafile (WebCGM) formats. This is in contrast to a Web Feature Service (WFS), which returns actual vector data, and a Web Coverage Service (WCS), which returns actual raster data. "(Wikipedia 2010).

The user receives the desired map image and does not have to pay attention to the administration of the data. Since the map is a derived product, the data provider does not need to deliver the data itself

```
function FirstAjaxFunction() {
    new Ajax.Request('http://localhost:8080/MyFirstServlet/MyFirstServlet', {
    method: 'get',
    parameters: {forename: "stefan", surname: "ziegler"},
    onSuccess: function(transport) {
        $('myDiv').innerHTML = "Congratulations!";
    },
    onFailure: function() {
        $('myDiv').innerHTML = "There's an error!";
    },
    onLoading: function() {
        $('myDiv').innerHTML = "Loading...";
    }
}
```

In the example above the servlet "MyFirstServlet" is executed again with the same parameters. Callback routines allow to control the website against the servlet's feedback:

- On success: "Congratulations" will be written in the "myDiv"-Element.
- On failure: "There's an error!" will be written in the "myDiv"-Element.
- During executing the servlet: "Loading..." will be written in the "myDiv"-Element.

Unlike to a conventional request (as a normal link) the website is not reloaded and the user can continue to work without any dead time.

#### 3.3. WMS

"An Open Geospatial Consortium Web Map Service (WMS) produces maps of spatially referenced data dynamically from geographic information.

and exercises control on the data. The user only gets a "dump" map, that is only good for visualization. It is not possible to make some queries like buffering or intersecting polygons. At least it is possible to change the presentation (e.g. change the color of all houses from black to red) of the map by using Styled Layer Descriptor (SLD).

The standard defines two mandatory requests:

- GetCapabilites: The Web Map Service delivers a well-formed and valid XML document with all the significant information: available requests, data layers and spatial reference systems.
- GetMap: With the obtained data the user is able to request a map from the server by using the GetMap-request.

Example of a GetMap-Request:

http://www.sogis1.so.ch/cgi-bin/sogis/sogis\_uep.wms?
SERVICE=wms&VERSION=1.1.1&REQUEST=GetMap&LAYERS=uep\_gray,gemeinde&STYLES=
&SRS=EPSG:

21781&BBOX=607700,227800,608100,228100&WIDTH=400&HEIGHT=300&FORMAT=image/png

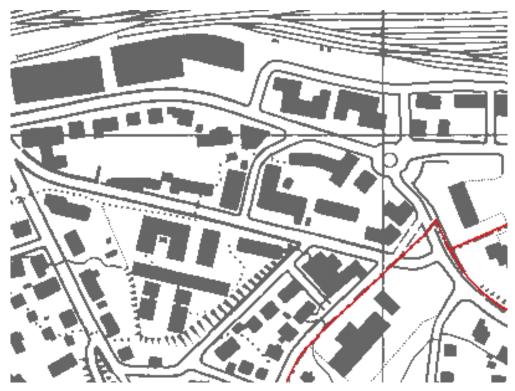


Fig. 1. Result of a GetMap-request.

In the request above the user demands for two data layers: "uep\_gray" and "gemeinde". The parameter BBOX defines the displayed area in the spatial reference system (SRS=EPSG:21781). The size of the image is controlled by the parameters HEIGHT and WIDTH.

#### 3.2. WFS

Web Feature Service provides an interface allowing requests for geospatial features across the web. Instead of getting a "dump" map the user is now able to request a copy of the data (= feature) itself and also query the features. The standard output format of a Web Feature Service is GML (Geography Markup Language) but other formats like ESRI shapefiles are also imaginable. WFS-T (Web Feature Service Transactional) is a derived standard, that allows to create, delete and update features.

The standard defines three mandatory requests:

- GetCapabilities: Analog to the WMS GetCapabilities-request.
- GetFeatures: The service returns the requested feature(s).

 DescripeFeatureType: The service returns information about a layer as a XML schema.

#### 4. Software

# 4.1. PostgreSQL / Postgis

Postgis (Refractions 2010) enables the open source database server PostgreSQL (PostgreSQL Global development Group 2010) to store geographical datatypes. A two-dimensional point is no longer stored as an x- and y-attribute but can be defined as point datatype. Lines and polygons can be handled in an analogous manner.

Postgis supports Simple Features according to the specification of the OpenGIS Consortium (OGC). Popular GIS analysis functions (buffer, intersection) and spatial indexing are provided too. The spatial indexing increases the speed of queries.

#### 4.2. Apache Tomcat

As a servlet container Apache Tomcat (The Apache Software Foundation 2010) can execute Java Servlets on a web server. The software is bundled with its own

HTTP server but the better known Apache web server can also be used as a web server. In the latter case Tomcat works as a plugin in the Apache web server.

#### 4.3. GeoServer

GeoServer (GeoServer 2010) provides server software services like Web Map Service (WMS), Web Feature Service (WFS) and Web Coverage Service (WCS). GeoServer is written in Java and runs in a Apache Tomcat environment. As a server software GeoServer delivers – in case of WMS – only the map as an image through standardized requests. A graphical user interface for zooming and panning is not part of the development.

One of the main advantages over other WMS servers is the amount of output formats. Besides the usual raster images formats – like JPEG, PNG or TIFF – GeoServer supports native PDF output, SVG, KML and GeoRSS. The native PDF output does not convert JPEG to PDF but it produces PDF vector graphics. The output has neither a frame nor a title or north arrow.

#### 4.4. iText

IText (iText Software Corp 2009) is a java written open source library for creating and manipulating PDF, RTF and HTML files.

#### 4.5. MapFish

MapFish (MapFish 2010) is an extensible web GIS application that is composed of MapFish Client and MapFish Server. MapFish Client is based on OpenLayers for the mapping part and ExtJS for the graphical user interface.

#### 4.6. OpenLayers

OpenLayers (OpenLayers 2010) is an open source, completely written in JavaScript library for visualization of geospatial data in the browser. OpenLayers is mostly used as WMS client but can also be used to present KML or GML. An interface to include Google Maps is also provided.

#### **4.7. ExtJS**

ExtJS (Ext LLC 2010) is a JavaScript written crossbrowser library for building rich internet applications (RIA).

## 5. Implementation

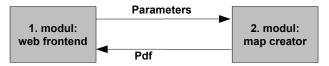


Fig. 2. Basic application workflow.

To achieve all the demands two modules are developed. The first one is a web frontend where the user can choose the desired section of the map, scale, data layers, paper size etc. These informations will be passed to the second module which will return the map.

#### 5.1. Web frontend

The web frontend is developed with MapFish by creating two new widgets: a) the printing widget and b) the query widget.

The printing widget lets the user choose:

- the paper format
- the paper orientation
- the map scale

After assigning values to the three parameters, a map frame appears on the map and the user can move the frame to the desired section of the map (*Fig. 3*).

The query widgets has implemented some hardcoded queries. As a prototype for archaeologists the user can query for walls by choosing the house number or the occupation level. The results of the query are presented in a table where every single wall can be selected to show up on the map (Fig. 4). The queries are realized as WFS requests with a filter argument, there is no need to make use of PHP that connects the database. A big advantage of this approach is the independence of the data storage type of the data provider. As long as the data is served as WFS the provider can switch from shapefiles to an Oracle Spatial database to Postgis.

By hitting the "Print"-button the parameters are passed as a HTTP-request to the second module:

http://localhost:8080/MapCreator/GetMap?mode=3&size=A2&orientation=portrait&scale =500&title=CAA2008&timestamp=122262186229&

datalayers=caa:isolines,caa:areas&BBOX=600000,200000,600100,200200

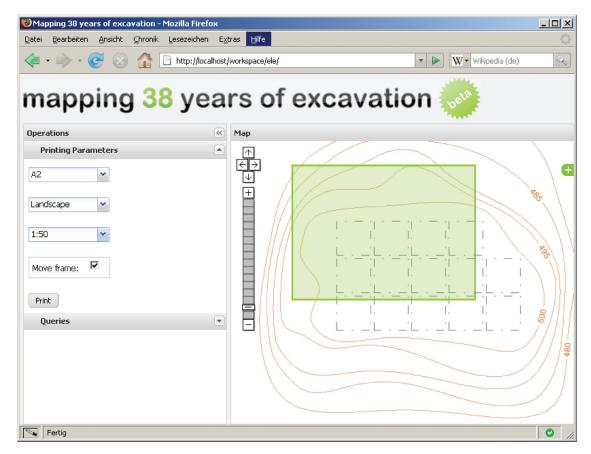


Fig. 3. Printing widget.

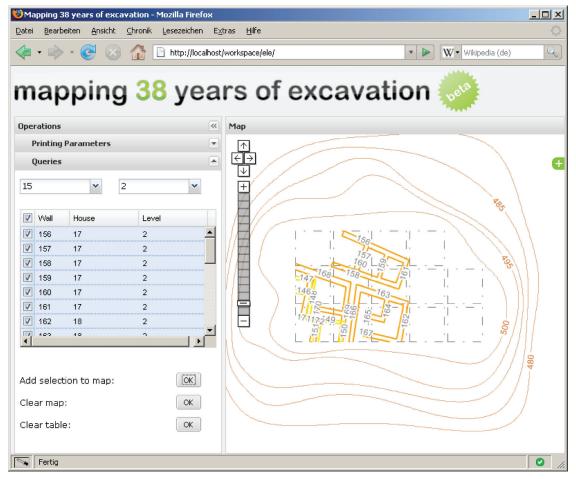


Fig. 4. Query widget.

The sample above is requesting an A3 sized PDF with portrait orientation and map scale 1:500 and two data layers: "caa:isolines" and "caa:areas".

# 5.2. Map creator

The second module is a Java Servlet that works as a wrapper between the web frontend and GeoServer. (Fig. 5).

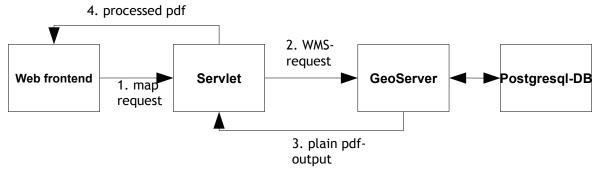


Fig. 5. Application workflow.

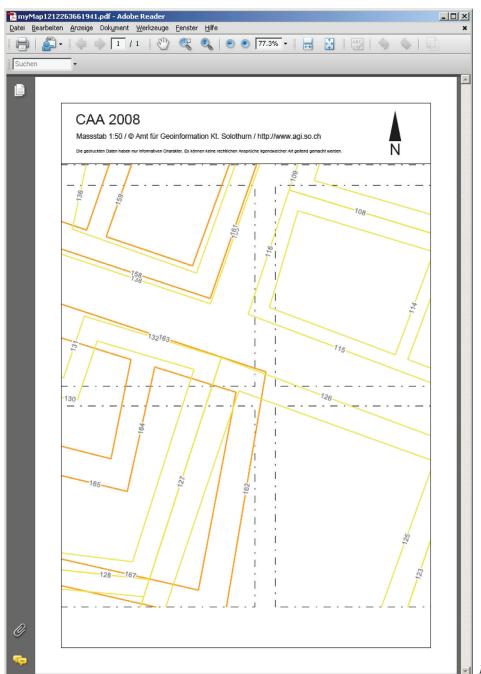


Fig. 6. Resulting print product.

The servlet generates WMS requests from the parameters passed by the web frontend and sends them to a Web Map Service. GeoServer returns a plain PDF which is postprocessed by the servlet by adding a frame and additional information, e.g. title, scale, north arrow (*Fig. 6*).

#### 6. Conclusion

High quality web printing is feasible with open source components. The developed solution is reliable and fast (no noticable delay even for an Ao sized print). It is used in the administration of the Canton Solothurn to produce cadastral surveying maps. It's also possible to combine vector data with raster data (aerial photographs), but speed and hardware will be an issue since it requests an approximately 100'000'000 pixel image for an Ao plot. The web frontend is not used in the administration, but thanks to the easy interface, it was not hard to implement the printing part into the existing web GIS.

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