

**SOME POSSIBILITIES AND DATA FOR
COMPARING
THE EARLY MODERN LVIV AND VILNUS
HISTORICAL TOPOGRAPHY AND
URBANONYMY**

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This article presents a comparative analysis of the spatial development and naming practices of two leading cities in East-Central Europe during the early modern period—Lviv and Vilnius. Both cities were founded in the 13th–14th centuries and share a number of structural and historical features. Their origins are tied to princely legends; early settlements formed around castles on elevated terrain; and the development of urban centers occurred following the arrival of German settlers who introduced legal systems based on Magdeburg and Chełmno law. At the same time, the spatial planning and administrative organization of these cities diverged significantly, revealing broader patterns in the evolution of medieval and early modern cities in the region.

The authors draw on archaeological findings, legal and fiscal sources, and historical maps to trace how these cities developed from a “castle-suburb” model into more complex structures that included jurydykas, suburbs, and urban villages. Special attention is given to naming practices—particularly of streets and city gates—as markers of memory, spatial organization, and legal authority. Referring to Ferdinand Opll’s typology of city gate names, the article reveals symbolic differences between the two urban landscapes: in Vilnius, gate names typically pointed to nearby settlements, while in Lviv, they referred to distant cities.

The article also explores how various ethnic and religious communities—Germans, Jews, Armenians, Ruthenians, Tatars, and others—shaped both the structure of the city and its naming conventions. Through examples such as Jewish Street (*platea Judeorum*), Ruthenian Street (*platea ruthenicali*), and Dominican Street (*ulica ku Dominicanom/Dominikonų gatvė*), the authors show how toponyms reflected community presence.

The spatial vocabulary of both cities is analyzed in the broader context of the “spatial turn” in urban history, particularly through the lens of Edward Soja’s ideas. In conclusion, the article shows that comparative urban studies help to understand better how city space was interpreted and organized. At the same time, it opens possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue between researchers of Lviv and Vilnius. Such dialogue can support mutual borrowing of approaches and methods: for example, in Lviv, studies on historical topography and urban names are more developed, while Lviv-based researchers could also learn from the archaeological practices used in Vilnius for studying the urban space.

Keywords: comparative studies, early modern period, urbanonyms, Lviv, Vilnius.

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Comparing two objects, one of which the author explores while the other remains almost a “terra incognita”, due to a language barrier, is both challenging and interesting. Several studies have recently focused on the historical topography and naming of Lviv. As scholars working primarily with Lviv sources, we are especially interested in seeing how questions that emerged from our work might resonate in the context of Vilnius. Therefore, the article focuses on some points that appear shared in the urban development of both cities. This includes the settlements of medieval Catholic communities, which later played an important role in shaping the cities under urban law, and the use of intra-city names. The authors hope that this publication will raise several questions from Lviv historians to Vilnius historians.

The study of comparative urban development offers an interesting way to look at how cities have changed over time. By comparing the histories of different urban centers, researchers gain valuable insights into what influences their growth and change. This article looks at the comparative analysis of two historically important cities: Vilnius and Lviv. We hope to find common patterns and unique paths in urban development of this two cities by examining their topography, cultural landscapes, and toponymy. Exploring these aspects not only deepens our understanding of each city’s past but also adds to the wider discussion about urban history.

This article does not aim to provide a final or systematic comparison of Lviv and Vilnius. Instead, it offers several examples and questions that may help in understanding how such a comparison could be developed further. The idea to place these two cities side by side comes from a broader interest in spatial studies and historical urban studies. These fields suggest that space and names are not just technical details; they also carry cultural meanings. Our approach is exploratory. We examine moments where the two histories seem to connect, such as castle-suburb models or similar naming patterns. We also highlight cases where the comparison becomes difficult or unclear. In this way, we hope to inspire further reflection and dialogue among historians studying these cities and their urban landscapes.

Vilnius and Lviv share similar founding myths, documented by Alessandro Guagnini dei Rizzon (1534–1614) and Marcin Gruneweg (1562–?). According to these accounts, Lviv foundation site features Prince Lev hunting a dragon (Gruneweg) or a lion (Guagnini) in the middle of the 13th century¹. Meanwhile, where Vilnius was to be built, the Grand Duke was also hunting and had a dream about a wolf, after which a pagan priest advised him to establish a city and a castle atop the hill overlooking the Vilnia River².

1. О. Гваньїні, *Хроніка європейської Сарматії* (Київ: Видавничий дім «Киево-Могилянська академія»: 2007), 314–315; Я. Ісаєвич, «Альтана посеред раю»: Львів у 1582–1602 рр.», в *Львів. Історичні нариси* (Львів, 1996), 29–44.

2. K. Nastopka, “Two approaches to the myth of city foundations: Syntagmatic and paradigmatic,” *Sign Systems Studies* 30 (2) (2002): 504. <https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2002.30.2.09>.



Fig. 1. Painting of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas, unknown artist, 1709



Fig. 2. Portrait of Prince Lev Danylovych, Luka Dolynskyi (1745–1824), the end of the XVIII century

In reality, both cities were founded around the 13th–14th centuries and each had two castles, one on a high hill still known as “mountain” to this day: Gediminas’ in Vilnius and High Castle in Lviv. In both cases, there was a settlement beneath the castle, inhabited by people. We know that in the case of Lviv, it was the so-called Podil—an area without fortifications. Guagnini, however, says that Vilnius was founded as a “walled city with a long and wide radius, extending with suburbs for several miles”³. Could the mention of suburbs have been imagined by this 16th-century author based on his understanding of contemporary city designs? Archaeological findings show that Podil was indeed a place on the southwest side of Gediminas’ hill, where were settlement inhabited by Catholics existed early 14th century⁴.

Both myths and physical remnants (Gediminas’ tower and the remains of the High Castle) suggest a detailed comparative study of the period of cities near castles, the fort, which in Ukraine is known as the period of princes.

3. Гваньїні, *Хроніка європейської Сарматії*, 315.

4. I. Karpiūnaitė, “The role of the ‘German town’ in Vilnius in the second half of the 14th century,” *Ukraina Lithuanica* 4 (2017): 126, 130.

In terms of space, the time right after the castle-suburb era is when a regular city operated under some modified version of German law. We can study how such a city grew in two ways: infrastructural or administrative. Special archaeological research in Vilnius⁵ has uncovered two settlements of so-called Catholics migrants: one from the early 14th century and another from when they gained city rights after 1387. The latter was located within a part of the medieval walled city. In Lviv, around 1270, during Prince Lev's reign, a German community was invited, led by a mayor named Bertold. The prince granted him allodial land, a farmstead, and a mill situated between Podil and the village of Prince (or royal) Zniesienie. After a re-founding by Casimir III in 1356, this community became the foundation of the city center.

Both cities experienced a transitional period, where, under the castle-suburb conditions, a German community formed, initially under the castle and later in the city center. Ukrainian historians know little about Mayor Bertold Stecher and the community that came with him at Prince Lev's invitation. There are no details on the reasons for their settlement, their backgrounds, or the professions of the settlers, nor whether clergy were among them. Historical records from the 14th to 16th centuries suggest they were wealthy, as their descendants became patriciansmerchants and landowners in the suburbs⁶. More information has been gathered about the location and history of their leading mayor's properties. Three elements noted in Prince Lev's decree and Casimir III's privilege—*molendinum*, *villa*, *allodium* (a mill, a house in the countryside, an allotment)—form the core of the original layout of Lviv by the end of the 13th century⁷. This core was right next to the so-called "Virgin Mary's field," which was always described separately in documents until the 17th century and was owned by the Church of Our Lady of the Snows, the oldest Catholic church in Lviv (outside the city walls). The church, built by German settlers before 1340, was traditionally linked to Constance, the wife of Prince Lev. The field ran along the northern edge of the suburb, and the church was founded at its southern end.

As far as we understand, knowledge about the Catholic settlement and so-called "German town" is mostly based on archaeological research and the knowledge of the invitation of the Franciscan assembly⁸ to Vilnius and Gediminas' promise to grant city rights similar to Riga, namely Chelmnō. Irma Kaplūnaite concludes that archaeological research demonstrates material traces of the Livonian (Teutonic) Order in the settlement from the first half of the 14th century near the castle. A small Catholic community inhabited part of the settlement, mostly consisting of Franciscan monks. Their func-

5. I. Kaplūnaite, "The role of the 'German town,'" 125–145.

6. М. Долинська, «Нерухомість німецької родини Штегерів в пізньосередньовічному Львові: традиції та інтердисциплінарний погляд», в *Феномен мультикультурності в історії України і Польщі. Матеріали міжнародної наукової конференції* (Харків, 2016), 61–66.

7. М. Долинська, «Початки просторової локації Львова в останній третині XIII століття», *Місто: історія, культура, суспільство. Е-журнал урбаністичних студій* 6 (2019): 43.

8. Kaplūnaite, "The role of the 'German town,'" 126.

tions included spiritual care as well as administrative tasks for the grand duke. The rest were craftsmen (builders) and merchants.

In Vilnius, Germans began to settle in the area Smėlynė, a bit farther from the castle, which would become part of the city center, in the mid-14th century. Kaplunaite cites four reasons leading to the relocation of the German community: the original settlement's insufficient size, new castle fortifications in that area, and political and confessional changes. The condition for the Germans to move to the new settlement within the future Old Town was the newly established road network, with one significant landmark being St. Nicholas Church, built before the baptism in 1387, along with a nearby Franciscan monastery. In that same year, they received Magdeburg city rights.

After Casimir III conquered the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia, the area became fully settled, and later turned into the city center or the city within the walls over the following centuries. There are no documented facts proving the relocation of Bertold Stecher's community descendants from the original settlement. However, records from the end of 14th to the 15th century Lviv city books⁹ and the records in the 16th-century tax book show that the owners of houses on the Market square and major suburban estates were German families¹⁰.

At first glance, there seems to be a strong similarity in the growth of German settlements in both Lviv and Vilnius, posing a chance for comparison. Still, a researcher focusing on Lviv has many questions about the spatial layout of Vilnius old town. It appears there is no clear distinction between the city center and the suburbs. Why didn't the German community members, essential for city foundations under Magdeburg law, establish a formal plan for the city center? One assumption is they adapted to the existing layout of streets and roads, similar to what occurred with Armenian Street in Lviv. Alternatively, one might consider the shift from Chełmno law to Magdeburg law in 1387.

Therefore, from a different angle, a researcher in Vilnius may wonder how many settlers arrived with Mayor Bertold Stecher and where they lived since we only know about the mayor's estate.

The main difference between Vilnius and Lviv lies in how the spaces are organized. The development of suburban areas is equally noteworthy. Some historians argue that Lviv layout serves as a model for cities established under German law. The systematic layout of the city center reveals parcel dimensions and their subsequent sales. The 1368 privilege mentions walls around the city center, indicating it was laid out in the first half of the 14th century. Through four land donations (1356, 1368, 1415, 1444)¹¹, the city received 100 Frankish *laneus* (2,500 hectares) of land and unmeasured areas, as suggested by mapping studies indicating a similar land area. Two suburbs and seven urban villages arose from this territory, along with four more villages indirectly belonging to

9. *Pomniki dziejowe Lwowa z archiwum miasta* (1892, 1896, 1905, 1921), wydał Dr. Aleksander Czołowski et al., Tom I–IV (Lwów); *Raetska knyha Lvova* (1460–1506), upor. M. Kapral, B. Petryshak (Lviv, 2020).

10. Долинська, «Нерухомість німецької родини Штегерів», 56.

11. *Ibid.*, 40, 54.

Lviv's ownership. Urban villages are a unique feature of Lviv, and it is not excluded that their designation as villages was simply a misunderstanding in translating what Prince Lev granted to Mayor Stecher.

For Vilnius, Alessandro Guagnini highlighted the presence of stone buildings and castles in his chronicles along with a large stone bridge covered with shingles. The city was fortified in 1503–1522, and the mention of ruined castle walls dates back to the 14th century. It appears that the whole large area, densely populated with stone buildings, which would often be difficult to label as a city center in other places, was called such by the chronicler. This area was not annexed to the city all at once; various settlements gradually joined the city. There is reference to the royal village of Lavioris a few miles from Vilnius, but the author does not mention any administrative relationship between the settlements¹². Some studies refer to Lukishkes as an open field, which became a suburb by the end of the 15th century¹³. Once the fortifications were completed (1503–1522), this suburb was enclosed within the fortifications, forming the unique infrastructure of the medieval city¹⁴. One interpretation suggests the city developed according to the original concept – castle-suburb – where the suburb was represented by the entire fortified territory, as younger German settlements integrated with older ones at key crossroads, with markets and town halls appearing in new areas¹⁵. The main route of this territory—Pilies Street or Castle Street—started at the castle in the north and extended southward to the town hall, dividing the city into different confessional zones¹⁶.

This approach to urban development appears in the extensive studies by Antanas Čaplinskis¹⁷ and Józef Maroszek¹⁸, who examined the toponyms, especially street names, in Vilnius. The street names of Lviv from the 14th to 18th centuries are gathered in the “Interactive Cartography of Lviv” database¹⁹.

Meanwhile, Ferdinand Opll researched the topographic names of city gates in the Middle Ages and identified two categories. The first category included names connected to locations near the city gates, showing directions to the nearest towns or settlements. The second category involved names that indicated directions to places much farther from the city²⁰.

12. Гваньїні, *Хроніка європейської Сарматії*, 531.

13. V. Jogėla, V. Pugačiauskas, & E. Meilus, *Lukiškės: nuo priemiesčio iki centro (XV a. – XX a. pradžia)* (Vilnius: Diemedis, 2008), 291.

14. O. Valionienė, *Viduramžių Vilnius. Erdvės evoliucija (XIII a. vidurys – XVI a. pirmas ketvirtis)* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2019), 299.

15. *Ibid.*, 54–61.

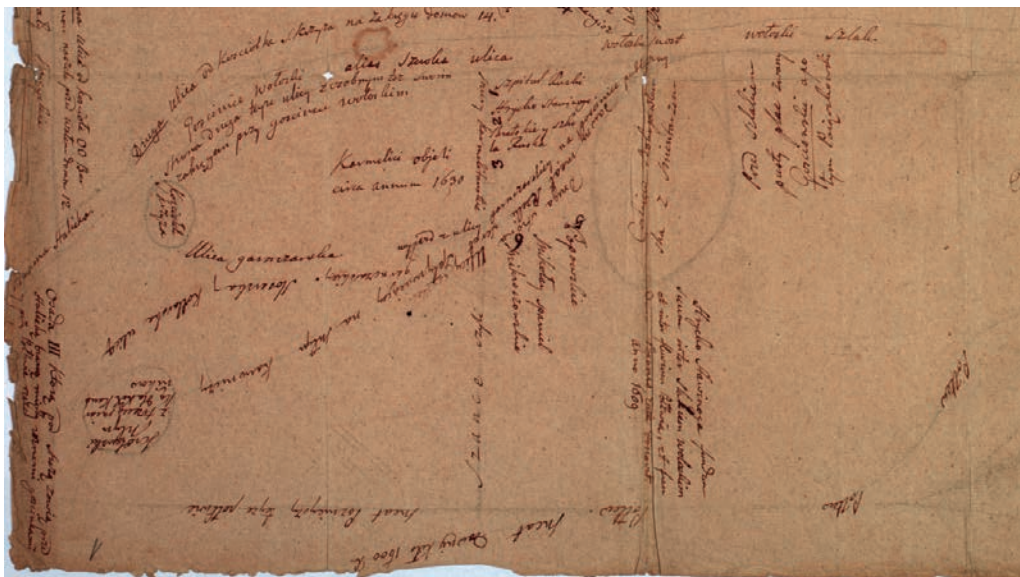
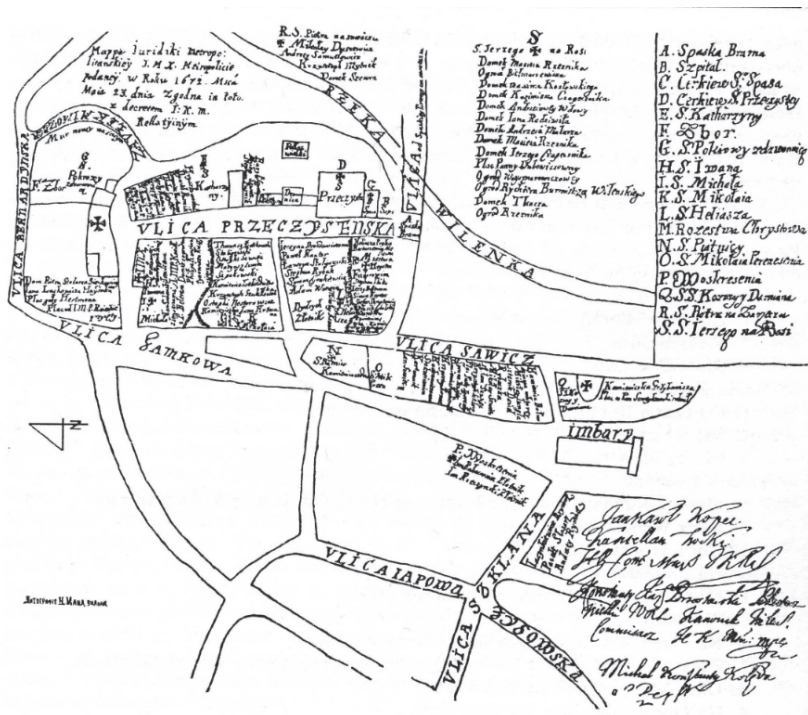
16. I. Kaplūnaitė, “Between Greeks and Latins: Pilies Street in Medieval Vilnius”, *Athens Journal of History* 8 (3) (2022): 191–214. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajhis.8-3-2>.

17. A. R. Čaplinskis, *Vilniaus Gatvės: Istorija Vardynas Žemėlapiai = Vilnius Streets: History Street Names Maps* (Charibdė, 2000).

18. J. Maroszek, “Ulice Wilna w XIV–XVIII wieku,” *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* 47 (1–2) (1999): 163–186.

19. O. Vira (comp.), *Interactive Map of Lviv*, Ukrainian Catholic University, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://map.humaniora.ucu.edu.ua/en/>.

20. F. Opll, “Topographische Benennungen in der mittelalterlichen Stadt als Spiegel von Raumvorstellungen,” in *Cities and their spaces. Concepts and their use in Europe* (Köln–Weimar–Wien, 2014), 50–51.



Interestingly, the topographic names of gates in Vilnius belong to the first category. They signify routes to nearby settlements, such as Rudninki Gate, Trakai Gate, and Vilija (Vilnius) Gate (*Rūdninkų vartai*, *Trakų vartai*, *Vilijos (Vilniaus) vartai*)²¹. In contrast, city gates of Lviv were named after distant cities, such as Krakiv Gate (*porta Cracouiensis*) and Halych Gate (*porta Haliciensis*). Thus, they fall into Ferdinand Opll's second category.

Regarding street names, researcher Leszek Bednarczuk²² also points out the names of alleys in Vilnius. In Lviv, documents did not record any alley names for a long period.

Overall, according to Leszek Bednarczuk and Józef Maroszek, the first mentions of street names in Vilnius are from the 16th and 17th centuries. The “golden age of Vilnius” between the 16th and early 17th centuries arose from free economic growth that was not disturbed by military actions²³.

In contrast, the earliest records of street names in Lviv go back to 1382. Comparing street names across such different timeframes may lack objectivity due to the long gap between mentions in Vilnius and Lviv. Still, this comparison helps reveal historical similarities between street names in both cities.

As noted above, the spatial planning of the two cities was quite different. Lviv began to form in the late Middle Ages when it became a major center in the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia. After regaining Magdeburg rights in 1356, Lviv underwent significant spatial changes. It became a typical city governed by German law, featuring a central grid-like structure surrounded by defensive walls, two suburbs, and urban villages.

In Vilnius, there was little regulation of spatial planning. The layout of the city lacked defined squares. Streets followed paths from pre-urbanization times. Other streets, serving as intersections of main roads, emerged as needed without predetermined designs. As a result, they were often randomly or abruptly ended, driven by local conditions²⁴.

Nevertheless, similar names persisted, indicating a shared cultural aspect in the naming among European cities²⁵, as noted by researcher Kwiryna Handke.

Both cities featured a Market Square (*Rynok circulus*), which served as an important trading hub for residents and merchants. Close to the market in Lviv were slaughter stalls (*Laniorum Maccella*) where meat and fish were processed. *Jatkų gatvė*, where butchers also operated, dates back to 1636 in Vilnius²⁶.

Ethnic names often rank among the oldest in medieval and early modern cities. Vilnius, being a polyethnic city, had a wide range of such names. For instance, Jews began settling in Vilnius en masse in the 16th and 17th centuries²⁷, although records point to

21. Maroszek, “Ulice Wilna w XIV–XVIII wieku,” 165–166.

22. L. Bednarczuk, “Nazwy Wilna i jego mieszkańców w dokumentach Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego (WKL),” *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Linguistica* V (2010): 9.

23. J. Waldoch, “Vilnius under magdeburg law,” *Proceedings of History Faculty of Lviv University* 17 (2016): 45.

24. Maroszek, “Ulice Wilna w XIV–XVIII wieku,” 163.

25. K. Handke, “Nazewnictwo miejskie — świadek epoki i cenny zabytek,” *Ochrona Zabytków* 3–4 (2004): 125.

26. Bednarczuk, “Nazwy Wilna i jego mieszkańców,” 9.

27. U. Pawluczuk, “Wilno w okresie Soboru 1514 roku,” *Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 5 (2014): 89.

Žydu gatvė as dating back to 1633²⁸. In Lviv, as Myron Kapral indicates, the Jewish community developed soon after the foundation of the city in the 13th century. The first mention of Jews in Lviv is found in a privilege from 1356, granting them the right to establish their own judicial system under the guidance of the city's alderman²⁹. This enabled Jews to establish their rights and judicial system, build synagogues, schools, and other institutions to meet the needs of their community. The first mention of Jewish Street (*platea Judeorum*) in Lviv city center is from 1383, and there was also a community in the Krakiv suburb with another Jewish street.

It is also important to discuss the Ruthenian part of Vilnius, which declared the presence of this confessional group in Vilnius. The Ruthenians in Lviv occupied a smaller area—only one urban quarter with a street named “*platea ruthenicali*,” first recorded in 1471.

Around the 14th and 15th centuries, Grand Duke Vytautas settled several thousand Tatars and several hundred Karaites near Vilnius in Trakai³⁰. They settled by the Tatar Gate (Totorių vartai) and had their own Tatar Street (Totorių gatvė). In Lviv, there was a Tatar Gate (*porta Tatariensis*) and street, but only until 1436³¹, when the name changed to “Krakivska.” Historian Olexandr Osipian suggests that during the 13th and 14th centuries, the “Tatars” likely were military settlers, possibly descendants of the Polovtsi (Cumans, Kipchaks), who entered service with Prince Danylo during the Mongol invasion and settled in his lands³². Over time, they assimilated with residents of Lviv, leading to the disappearance of the name. The exact reasons for changing the name to Krakivska are unclear.

The Dominican Order arrived in Lviv as early as the late 14th century. There was a church of the Holy Body and a street of the same name in the city. However, over time, the street transformed, and starting in 1623, it was referred to as “*ulica ku Domini-canom*.” The name Dominikonų gatvė in Vilnius appears from the late 18th century.

Both cities featured Castle Streets leading to their castles—Pilies gatvė and “*platea Castrensis*.” However, the name was rarely used in Lviv documents.

Many European cities had a Broad Street, including Lviv and Vilnius, with this name not always reflecting the actual width of the streets. References to such a street in Lviv emerged in the mid-15th century. Notably, Lviv had at least three distinct wide streets—two in the Halych suburb and one in the Krakiv suburb—but different records listed the street in two separate locations.

The origin of the names Dog Gate and Street (Subačiaus vartai and gatvė) in Vilnius and “*platea canina*” (Psi Rynek) in Lviv is challenging to determine. Maria Lowmianska

28. Bednarczuk, *Nazwy Wilna i jego mieszkańców*, 11.

29. М. Капраль, *Національні громади Львова XVI–XVIII ст. (соціально-правові взаємини)* (Львів, 2003), 82–83.

30. Pawluczuk, “Wilno w okresie Soboru 1514 roku,” 89.

31. K. Badecki, “Zaginione księgi średniowiecznego rekonstrukcyjne,” *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 41 (1927): 533.

32. О. Осіп'ян, «Етнічна та конфесійна ідентичності у формуванні міських “націй” Львова в другій половині XIV — першій половині XV ст. (“вірмени”, “татари”»)», *Наукові записки УКУ 7: Історія* 2 (2015): 108–109.

believed that the executioner and his helpers, who removed stray dogs from the streets, lived right at the gate³³. Such an interpretation is rather a derivation of “folk” etymology, on which one should not always rely entirely. As for Lviv’s Dog Market, there are also no entirely credible theories about the origin of such a name.

Despite their different urban evolutions, both cities shared some similarities in naming certain streets and neighborhoods. Notably, some names appeared in both Vilnius and Lviv.

Comparing the histories of the two cities uncovers aspects of one city that researchers have explored based on existing sources but may be absent or unexamined in the other. This prompts the search for suitable sources and related questions. In examining the spatial development of Vilnius and Lviv, issues surrounding Vilnius territorial growth and social matters arise.

The comparison of spatial organization in Lviv after the four donations involved systematically organizing the area within the city walls and a designated space for auxiliary activities, developing gradually over time, starting within the walls. In Vilnius, the city governed by German law absorbed the castle, and later, other settlements became suburbs. Plans for the suburbs were very different.

In Vilnius, the Catholic clergy aimed to provide spiritual care for incoming Catholics, while in Lviv, this role fell to the wife of Prince Lev and her court. No sources have confirmed the presence of Franciscans in Lviv until the 13th century, although literary tradition acknowledges that they were there.

This brief review encourages a closer look at why these two cities, nearly contemporary and founded under similar circumstances, have such different layouts. Additionally, it is worth examining other factors, such as urban nomenclature and spatial location concerning “jurydyka.”

All these questions lead to the study of the essence of urban space—exploring the relationships and interactions between names and the areas described by those names. This aligns with Edward William Soja’s³⁴ spatial turn and the principle that there are real objects, and their names are the result of the imagination of the inhabitants about these objects³⁵.

Comparative studies of urban development histories offer unique insights into various historical and spatial aspects. They motivate further research into how cities evolved and interacted with their environments over time. A comparative approach makes it possible to identify the unique features of each city and establish general trends in their development. The study of these aspects leads to the generalization of the principles of the ontology of urban space and the study of various aspects of the relationship between names and territories.

33. Maroszek, “Ulice Wilna w XIV–XVIII wieku,” 166.

34. H. Manikowska, “Główne nurty badań nad przestrzenią miasta średniowiecznego,” *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* 2 (2015): 189–199.

35. М. Долинська, «До питання методики класифікації урбанонімів як історичного джерела», *Вісник Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна. Серія «Історія України. Українознавство: історичні та філософські науки»*, 27.

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