

Visualizing place as a palimpsest: Mental maps in Russian geohumanities

Ivan Mitin (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia)
< gumgeo@gmail.com >

Two special kinds of mental maps emerging from the Russian geohumanities are described in the article. Russian geohumanities are regarded as a specific Russian Post-Soviet tradition of cultural geography focusing on perceptions and interpretations of space. The semiotic model of ‘place as palimpsest’ typical for Russian mythogeography is used to describe the multi-layered structure of a place, formed by different cultures’ visions of one and the same place. Two opposing meanings of mental maps are discussed, namely, (1) mental spatial information, representing the image of the city and orientations schemes, (2) cartographic geovisualization, which reflects individual or collective perception of space. Mental maps, combining the traits of both classes (with the example of K. Lynch’s generalized urban maps based on the results of individual cities’ perceptions) are argued to be the most prospective. Urban ‘mythogeographical’ mental maps from the Russian geohumanities are regarded as another kind of that compromise, being transformed from the diagram-like ‘image-geographical’ maps by localizing place myths into ‘sign places’ of a city.

Keywords: mental maps, palimpsest, place myth, Russian geohumanities, mythogeography, semiotics

1. Geohumanities in Russia

‘Geohumanities’ is a neologism that was introduced by Denis Cosgrove in the prologue of two recent volumes (Daniels et al., 2011; Dear et al., 2011) as a result of geography’s close connections to the humanities & arts. “The ‘cultural turn’ finds geographers working with materials and methods conventionally associated with the Humanities, for example the interpretation of texts and images <...>. This has strengthened the connection with the arts in practice” (Daniels et al., 2011, p. xxiv).

These connections bring the international geohumanities close to a specific kind of cultural geography that has emerged in Post-Soviet Russia as ‘humanitarian geography’ in word-for-word translation (Mitin, 2012).

After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), geographers were inspired by the new possibilities regarding research, freedom of thought and the romantic fleur of French philosophy providing a medium between space and place on the one hand, and human and culture on the other. Dmitry Zamyatin was the first one to state ‘humanitarian geography’ to be the “interdisciplinary research field focusing on various kinds of representation & interpretation of space within human activity, including mental activity” (2010, p. 126). It may be also understood as “a unity of closely connected trends in geography, studying the laws of formation & development of systems of geographical space’ representations (in the minds of individuals, social, ethnic, cultural, racial groups, etc.), that people use in order to arrange their behavior in certain areas” (Zamyatina & Mitin, 2007, p. 151).

A semiotic approach to representations of space is characteristic of Russian geohumanities with a concept of a 'geographical image' in the centre, which is regarded as an entirely interconnected semiological system of senses, identities and imageries instead of a visual image of a place. Links with semiotics may be also found in several studies on spatial myths and mythogeography (Mitin, 2007b, 2014) and the semantics of cultural landscapes (Lavrenova, 2003, 2010).

Geohumanities in Russia seem to be a substitute of cultural geography, as there is hardly any research on cultural geography without a 'geohumanitarian' focus. Russian Post-Soviet reinvented cultural geography focuses on spatial representations, literary and artistic text analysis, theory and methods rather than empirical field studies, and may be regarded as an original national academic tradition under the name of geohumanities (Mitin, 2012).

2. Mythogeography: Place as palimpsest

Mythogeography deals with geographical images, spatial myths and stereotypes people are projecting upon their surroundings. Different individuals and diverse cultures (ethnic, regional, local etc.) living together form an endless variety of multiple spaces in every place. Mythogeography's main peculiarity is in the special vision of the 'filling' of every place with constructed realities, created with the help of mythological models of communication and the theory of the semiosis of modern myths. 'Place as palimpsest' is a central model of the mythogeographical approach.

A palimpsest is a conceptual model of a place as a multilayered structure that emphasizes the coexistence of multiple visions and impacts of different cultures on the landscape (Mitin, 2010). Originally the term referred to medieval manuscripts, where new text was written over previous text that had been partly erased.

Donald Meinig (1979) was the first geographer to call a landscape a palimpsest. Later, historical models of landscapes as a palimpsest included the genesis of its different elements (Vervloet, 1986; Urbanc et al., 2004). New cultural / humanistic geography puts an emphasis on differences in place as it is 'interpreted' by social groups and individuals, differentiated by identity, occupation, lifestyles, experience, imaginative power, and emotional factors. A palimpsest indicates that the landscape consists of different fragments of the text, which can conflict with one another. This interpretation of the term turns reading of the landscape into a process of multivocal communication and the text into an intertext. Intertext, in semiotics, is a structure of mutual references of multiple meanings (Brockmeier, 2001); the same holds true for the palimpsest in geography.

For the study of the relationships between various layers of place as a palimpsest, a semiotic model is needed whenever the landscape itself is considered as a text. Place is seen as a complex of an endless number of coexisting semiological systems through the framework of mythogeography. Each of these systems is one of the layers of the palimpsest, and each layer is regarded as a context, not a narrative, because it is organized around one dominant idea. Such contexts may be the geographical description of a place, place perceptions and imaginations, images and metaphors of a place, and so on. Semiotics helps analyzing these layers as spatial myths, and the process of their formation is one of semiosis. The essence of this approach is in the endless interpretation of place, during which new senses of place emerge (Mitin, 2007b, 2010).

3. 3. Mental maps: the multiplicity of meanings

‘Mental map’ is a term to describe different kinds of visualization of human perceptions and/or imaginations of their environment and/or certain places (Mitin, 2017). In fact, it may be regarded as “psychological or internal representation of a place or places” (Jacobson, 2006, p. 299) or “cognitive representation of environmental information that a human being acquires through different (direct and indirect) sources” (Klippel, 2010).

It is important to stress that the meaning of mental maps in modern academic discourse is heterogeneous, embracing both human internal (mental) orientation schemata and any visualized map-like drawings of a given geographical space. A large amount of literature is available on the distortions of mental maps (Klippel, 2010) or on the very necessity of naming a mental map ‘a map’ (Graham, 1982; Downs, 1981; Kitchin, 1994), even when it may not look like a map in cartographic terms (Kitchin, 1994, pp. 3-5). Moreover, there is an ongoing discussion on whether ‘cognitive map’ or ‘mental map’ is better suited as an umbrella term (Jacobson, 2006, p. 300).

Instead of adding one more point of view on the aforementioned dispute, I will try to turn to the very essence of what is called mental map in contemporary academic discourse. I shall intend to make certain conclusions by analyzing their multiplicity of meanings mentioned above. Hence, I state an important dichotomy of two ‘polar’ approaches to mental mapping.

The first is a kind of information stored in the human minds used in the process of spatial orientation. It is connected to our perception of the environment and reflects an individual or a collective image of a place. It may or may not include a visual representation. In fact, what early descriptions of mental mapping meant were either internal orientation schemes (like Trowbridge’s (1913) ‘imaginary maps’ – see Figure 1) or concepts that did not include any visualization at all, as in Tolman’s classic article of 1948.

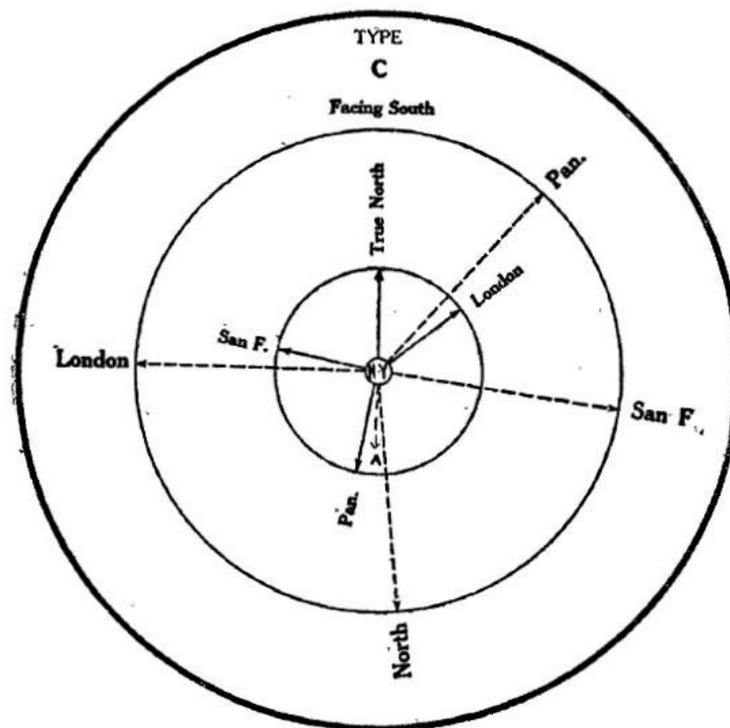


Figure 1. Example of Trowbridge’s ‘imaginary map’ (Trowbridge, 1913, p. 893)

This approach, thus, includes all the different mental products, but also those like “cartographic representation of how people differ in their evaluation of places” (Tuan, 1975, p. 6, footnote). In spite of what Tuan argued, this is in most cases not a map-like, i.e. not a cartographic product (Stolle, 2017). The extreme branch of this approach is a vivid example here – a Buzan’s mind map (see Figure 2).

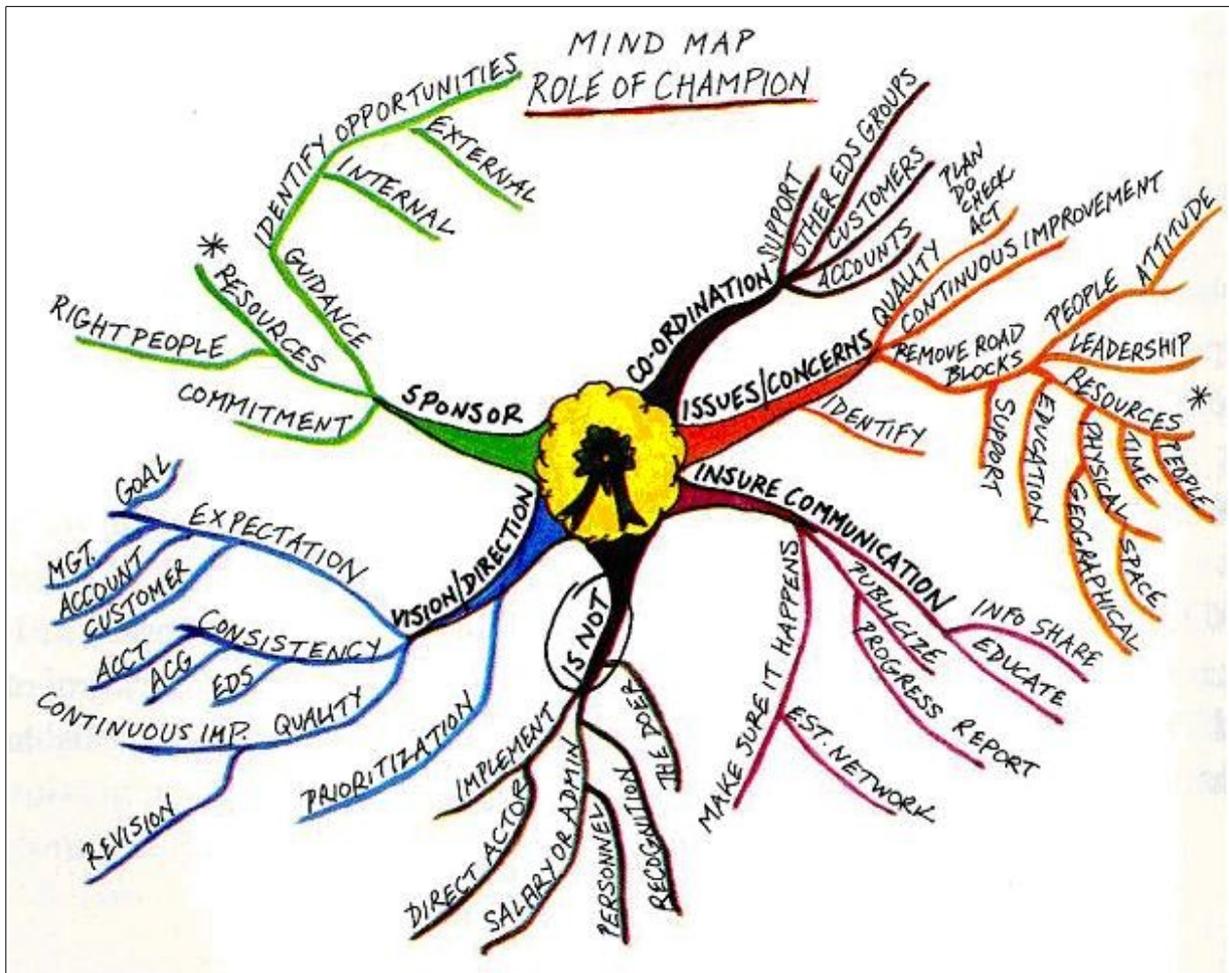


Figure 2. An example of Buzan’s ‘mind map’ (Buzan & Buzan, 1994, p. 266).

The second approach is characterized as map-like, either in terms of a cartographic map, or having certain objective map properties. This kind of mental map also reflects human perceptions of a certain place. As Pocock argues, “mental maps may be derived by either direct or indirect means” (Pocock, 1976, p. 493). If the first approach seems to be a result of indirect mapping, the second is initiated by direct means – that is what we call sketch maps (see Figure 3) (Graham, 1982). The tradition of sketch maps’ analysis is focused on the personal qualities of the informants, not the place identities (Shemyakin, 1962; Appleyard, 1970; Pocock, 1976; Murray, Spencer, 1979).

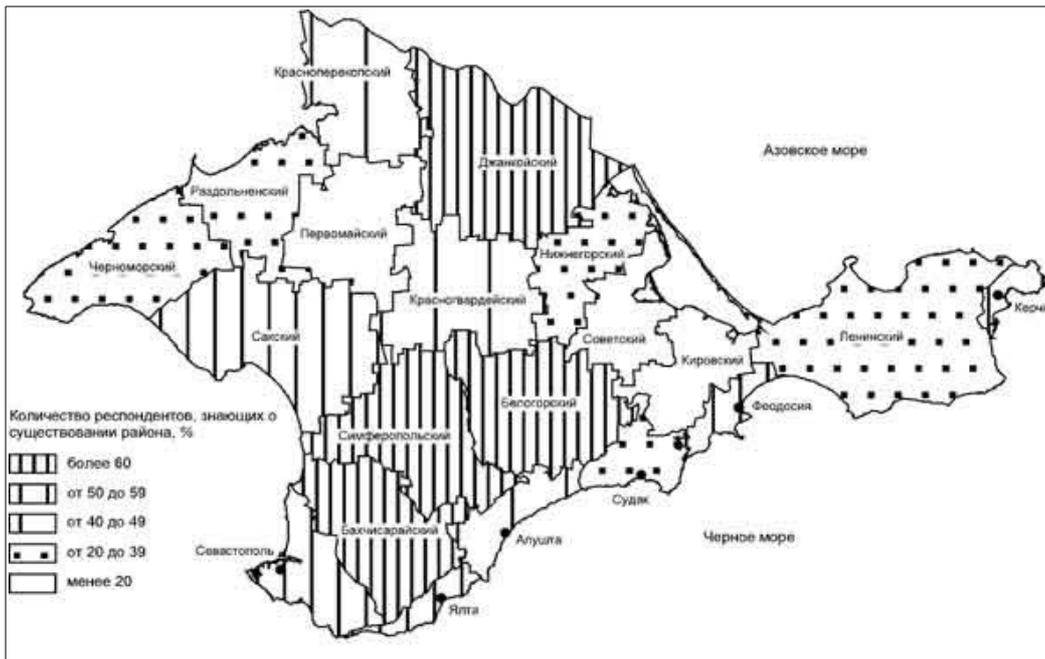


Figure 4. A map of awareness of Crimea’s regions (Kovalenko, 2000).

Are those ‘polar’ approaches really that contradictory, as I described? Surely, not. It started on the eve of mental mapping, when researchers tried to use their own interpretations of personal imageries of places (Robinson & Hefner, 1968; Downs & Stea, 1973), thus shifting towards collective images of a place. I use the dichotomy mentioned here in order to describe the multiplicity and in order to classify those various kinds of mental maps.

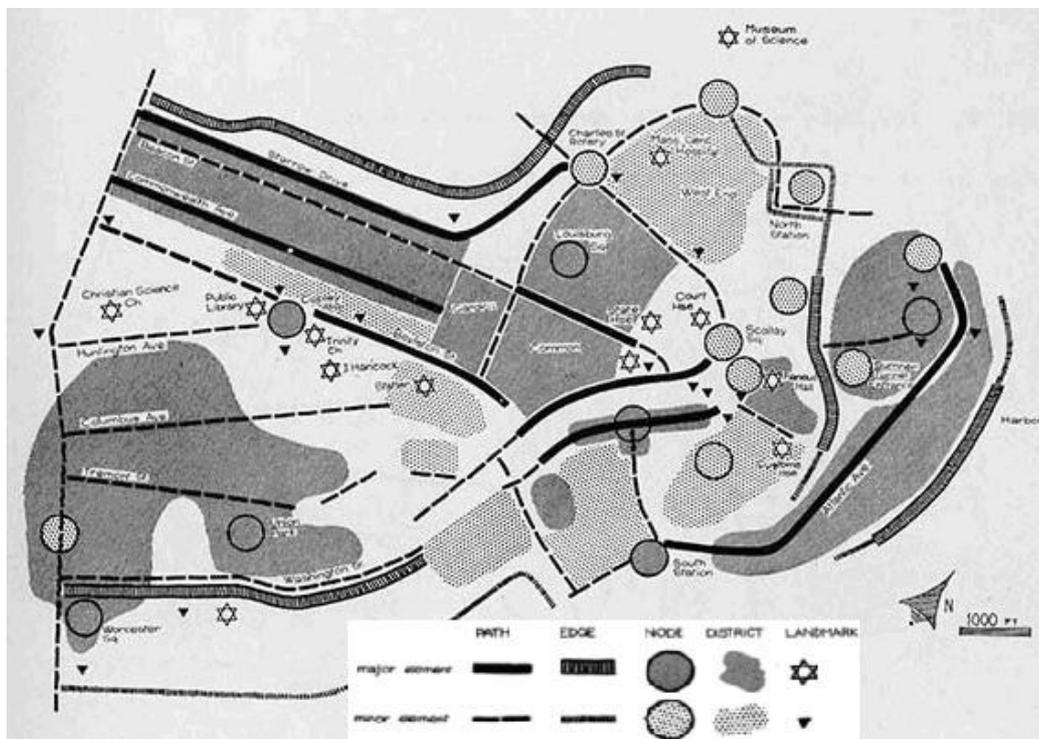


Figure 5. An example of Lynch’s mental map of Boston (Lynch, 1960, p. 18-19)

Kevin Lynch approaches to urban mental maps are fine examples to illustrate a possible compromise between the dichotomist visions. Lynch combined data from individual sketch maps, his own interpretation of in-depth interviews and researchers' fieldwork in order to legitimize his famous idea of paths, edges, nodes, districts and landmarks of a city (Lynch, 1960, see figure 5).

This was a step away from the individual sketch maps made by locals towards collective visions of a city made by the researcher himself, summarizing the previous multimodal experiences.

Is it possible to make the same step from abstract mental maps to a 'more cartographic' visualization? This is what I conclude within the next section.

4. Mythogeographical mapping: mental maps in the Russian geohumanities

Abstract mental maps of the first type are good examples of cognitive structures, i.e. a scheme of a mental construct that stimulates our memory and may be helpful in education. However, as I have argued, these mental maps look like diagrams, not cartographic maps; and they may or may not deal with spatial data.

This approach to mental mapping was the first one to be used in Russian geohumanities in order to (re)present the results of field research in small towns. Dmitry Zamyatin introduced a technique looking like Venn diagrams under the name of 'image-geographical maps' (Zamyatin, 2007; 2006, pp. 122-125). They are described as "a graphic model of a geographical image" (Zamyatin, 2007, p. 322) and may be regarded as "compact, but meaningful place representation" (Mitin, 2005, p. 268) or "a visualization of the results of cultural geographical research of a town, that represents its major & minor peculiar features" (Mitin, 2007a, p. 115).

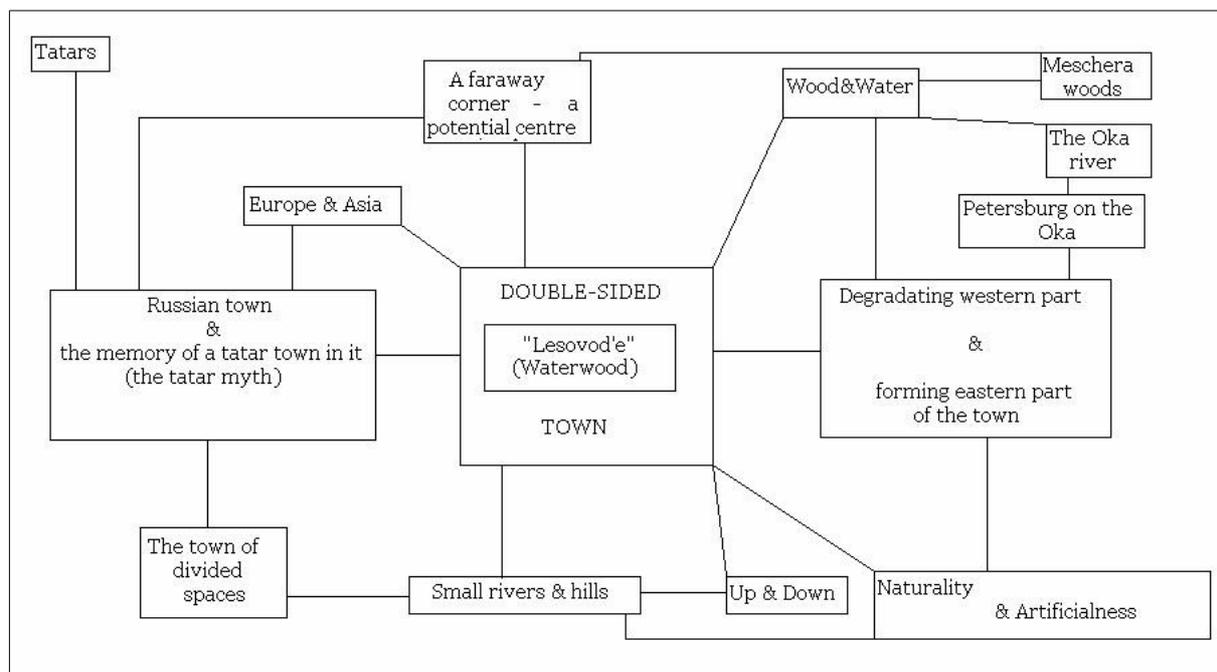


Figure 6. Example of an image-geographical map of Kasimov (Ryazan region, Russia); (Mitin, 2005, p. 269, translated by the author)

These image-geographical maps consist of several certain peculiar features of a place, namely those considered unique for the place and those making it different from all other places, according to the results of field research (incl. in-depth interviews, visual sociological research methods, participant observation and sketch maps in various combinations). As elements of a mental map, these features may vary in size, indicating their respective importance. The connections between the peculiar features of a place (defining its overall picture) form another element of the image-geographical map (see Figure 6). Thus, an image-geographical map is a well structured scheme of a complex geographical description (Mitin, 2007a,b) of a place, featuring its main (dominant) and other unique characteristics, as well as the connection between them as a unite totality that is a certain layer of place as palimpsest.

As I have argued before, this kind of a mental map does not look like a cartographic map, though it is a result of a thorough geographical research. There was an attempt within Russian geohumanities to make a step away from those mental maps of the first kind towards a more balanced compromise between the two polar approaches – i.e.: a step to meet Lynch's maps from the opposite side. What was necessary to make this step was putting that diagram onto a map-like visualization, or sticking the important unique features of a place to certain geographical points, e.g. important place sites (and sights). That was not an easy task, and the implementation of such a complicated mental mapping was not the ideal one. However, this is what I introduced under the name of 'mythogeographical maps' (Mitin, 2005; 2007a, pp. 116-117,138-139).

Those mythogeographical maps combine the most important features of a place ('place myths') and the 'sign places' (Zamyatin, 2005) – the definite geographical sites on the map, that symbolize those myths. Thus the spatial myths of a place are localized in precise geographical points (Mitin, 2005, p. 271). The image-geographical map is combined and intertwined with a regular cartographic map, defining a mythogeographical map (see Fig. 7).

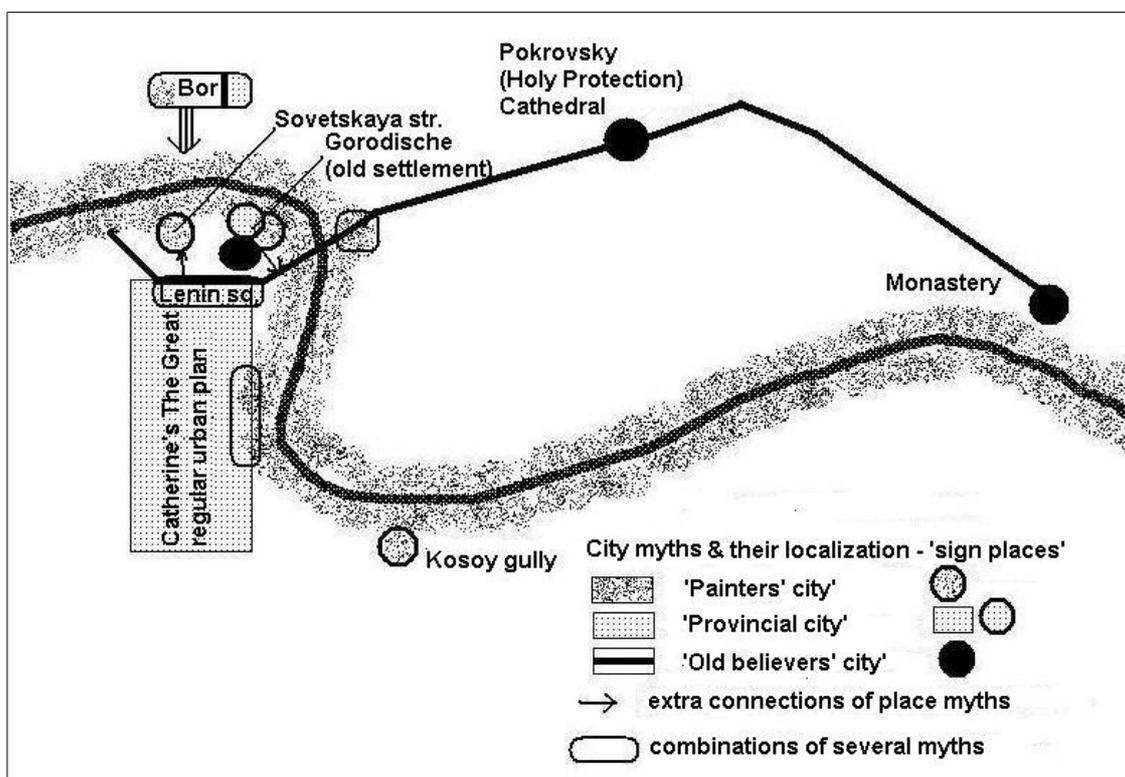


Figure 7. An example of a mythogeographical map of Borovsk (Kaluga region, Russia), (Mitin, 2005, p. 272, translated by the author)

As Russian geohumanities focus on space perceptions and imaginations, mental mapping is of special interest and importance. I argue that a compromise between two opposing approaches to mental maps is needed for Russian geohumanities in order to step away from individual sketch maps to some common peculiarities of place perception, and from structured schemes of place uniqueness to the localized semiotic ‘mythogeographical maps’. Of course, some new mapping techniques and approaches are needed for mythogeography in order to map the layers of place as palimpsest (1) in a map-like manner, (2) with well structured content (3) based on thorough cultural geographical research.

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