

Old English *meresteall* and Old Swedish **marstall* A Northwest Germanic Compound and Place Name Element?

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Abstract

In the province of Uppland in Sweden there is a village called *Marstalla*, written in *marstaldum*, in *marstal* 1312. The first element has been interpreted as *mar* ‘marsh, lake’ or **mar* ‘horse’. In the latter case the second element is explained as **stadhul* ‘enclosure’ or ‘dwelling-place’, i.e., a compound **marstadhul* ‘enclosure or pasture for horses’. In the same province there is a large meadow area called *Marstallen*. This name has been interpreted accordingly.

Old English *meresteall* means ‘a pool of stagnant water’. It has been argued that the etymological meaning of *meresteall* would be ‘a place where a pool is liable to form in wet seasons’. The sense ‘standing water’ is well documented for the words evolving from Old Germanic **mari-*.

It is a striking fact that the two localities *Marstalla* and *Marstallen* corresponds remarkably well with the meaning of Old English *meresteall*. In both cases there are rivers that flood seasonally, creating large areas of standing water. I therefore conclude that the names are formed from an Old Swedish **marstall*, formally and semantically identical with Old English *meresteall*. Most probably it is actually the same word, a Northwest Germanic **maristallaz*.

In the northern part of the province of Uppland in central Sweden, there is a village by the name of *Marstalla* (in central standard Swedish pronounced “*Masjtalla*”). It is nowadays probably most well known as the home of the legendary 19th century folk fiddler Marstalla-Olle. The earliest record of the village name is in a tax register, written in Latin from 1312 (SD 3: 90), where three farmers are mentioned, living in *marstaldum* [twice] or in *marstal*. About one hundred years later (1421 Holmp), the name is written *j marstalle* (‘in Marstall’) in an Old Swedish document. In the tax registers of the early 16th century, you encounter the following name forms:

Marstall 1541, 1544 jb, Marstal 1549 jb, Marstall 1551 jb, 1560 tl, 1569 jb, Marsttal 1590
jb, Marstall 1610 jb, Marstalla 1645 ml, 1680– jb.

Also in the province of Uppland, but in the southern part, there is a very large, low-lying meadow area on a plain around the river Örsundaån, that variably is called *Marstallen* (in definite singular form), *Marstallarna* (i.e., in definite plural), or *Marstallsängen* (‘the Marstall meadow’). There is no medieval mentioning of this name, which is hardly surprising, being a field-name, but it can be found in a document in 1560 as *Marstalle* (DMS 1:8: 57).

The two names, the village name *Marstalla* and the field-name *Marstallen*, naturally, have been linked together in the efforts by scholars to explain the etymology of the names. As for the first element *Mar-*, it has been equated on the one hand with the Swedish word *mar*, meaning ‘marsh’ or ‘small lake’ (Calissendorff 1986: 135), on the other hand with a supposed Old Swedish **mar*, identical to Old Norse *marr* ‘horse’. The second element *-stall* has been interpreted either as Swedish *stall* ‘stable (for horses)’ or as Old Swedish **stapul* (which is known as a place-name element, although not recorded as a noun in Old Swedish), with an

assumed meaning ‘enclosure’ or ‘dwelling-place’. Mats Wahlberg (1988: 52 f.), who is the latest scholar to have asserted a position on the matter, reckons that the two names are formed from an Old Swedish noun **marstadhul* ‘enclosure or pasture for horses’.

As concerns the meadow area Marstallen, there are local traditions of the place once being the pasture for the horses of the king. This is most certainly due to folk etymology, where the last element is associated with Swedish *stall* ‘stable (for horses)’. Even an early scholar, Johan Nordlander (1913: 217) seems to adhere to this tradition, but in a different way, when he states that the meadow-name probably contains the German word *Marstall* ‘stable (for horses)’. This interpretation is not very probable, since it presupposes an early borrowing of the word, which is not elsewhere known or recorded in Old Swedish. It is probably just a case of accidental homonymy.

Wahlberg, in his discussion of the names in question, also mentions another possibility of interpretation, namely a counterpart of the Old English word *meresteall*, which also is known to form place-names, but he rejects this alternative on the ground that the Old Swedish word *stall* only is known in the sense ‘stable (for horses)’, not in the etymologically more basic significance ‘place, locality’, related to the root of the verb Old Swedish *sta* ‘stand’.

However, this is exactly the position which I aim to propose and defend here. Old English *meresteall* – as well as the synonymous *merestōw* – has been translated as ‘a pool of stagnant water, pond’ (Forsberg 1984: 13, Cederlöf 1998: 43). The Swedish Anglist Rune Forsberg (1984: 13) convincingly has argued that the second element *steall* in this case has the meaning ‘place, locality’ – a sense that is known in Old English for the simplex noun *steall* (Sandred 1963: 38, Cederlöf 1998: 26 f.). Forsberg (1984: 13) further asserts that the basic meaning of *meresteall*, then, is “a place where a pool is liable to form in wet seasons”. He (1984: 4 ff.) compares with Old English *burnstōw* as a parallel in meaning to *meresteall* and *merestōw*. *Burnstōw* designates “the channel or bed of an intermittent stream” (1984: 11), i. e., a channel or bed where a burn or brook is running only seasonally. Correspondingly, *merestōw* and *meresteall* allude to localities or areas, where standing water appears seasonally.

The second element *steall* of *meresteall* cannot have the abstract sense ‘standstill, stagnation’, which is also known in Old English (Sandred 1963: 37 ff.) – a sense that superfluously maybe is near at hand, considering the allusion to standing water. But this would imply that the first element *mere* here meant ‘water’, which is not a known significance of this Germanic word. You could contrast to Old English *wætersteall* ‘pool’, where the second element appealingly has been suggested to be “an independent semantic development from the abstract sense of ‘a standing position’” (Sandred 1963: 39; cf. Jacobsson 1997: 30). There is also an Old English place-name element *steall*, which has been assumed to mean ‘place where water stands still’ as a concrete development from the abstract sense ‘standstill, stagnation’ (Jacobsson 1997: 30; cf. Latin *stagnum*), but perhaps rather is to be perceived as an elliptical form of *wætersteall*.

Just as *meresteall* and *merestōw*, simplex Old English *mere* has a relatively common significance of ‘land liable to flood’ or ‘seasonally flooded river-valley’ (see Cole 1993: 47 f., Jacobsson 1997: 208, 215), a sense frequent also as the first element of the usual place-name compound *Meretūn* (Jacobsson 1997: 217 f.).

Considering the Indo-European root behind the words Swedish *mar* and English *mere*, it, as we all know, can be found also in e.g., French *mer*, Latin *mare*, and Russian *morje*, all meaning ‘sea’ (and related by ablaut in e.g., English *moor*). Although the sense ‘sea’, thus, is very well and early established in many Indo-European languages, it nevertheless seems that the only sensible position is to assume ‘standing water’ as the basic meaning of these words, from which ‘sea’ is a secondary development; or as Albert Greule (2004: 201 ff.) puts it: “Es scheint sich also um ein Antonym zur Bedeutung ‘fließendes Gewässer’ zu handeln.” In the Germanic languages, this

sense of ‘standing water’ is generally well evidenced (Jonsson 1966: 242 ff.; cf. also Darms 1978: 158 ff.).

Wahlberg (1988: 52) describes the topography around the village of Marstalla as such:

De åkrar som utbreder sig norr om Marstalla i Harbo genomflyts av Marstallabäcken och var tidigare till stor del sankt ängsmarker. Där bäcken mynnar ut i Harboån, bildas vår och höst ett stort översvämningsområde. Före Tämnarens sänkning på 1870-talet var dessa årliga översvämnningar mycket omfattande. (‘The fields expanding north of Marstalla in the parish of Harbo are traversed by the Marstalla stream and earlier on were to a large part marshy meadow grounds. Where the stream runs out into the Harbo river, during spring and autumn a large flooded area is formed. Before the lowering of Lake Tämnaren during the 1870s, these yearly floodings were very extensive.’)

Regarding the meadow-land Marstallen, the following has been said (Om Marstallen: 5):

Strandängarna vid Örsundaån var [...] betydligt mera vattendränkta än nu. Stora delar av nuvarande Marstallen var översvämmad. (‘The shore meadows of the Örsunda river used to be [...] considerably more watery than nowadays. Large parts of the present Marstallen were flooded.’)

A local (Kobbe 1995) has described:

de ständiga översvämnarna på Marstallsslätten, som under vissa vintrar var helt isbelagd, till stort nöje för skridskoåkande ungdomar (‘the recurrent floodings on the Marstall plain, which during some winters was completely ice-coated, to the great pleasure of skating youngsters’)

It is, thus, a striking fact that the two localities *Marstalla* and *Marstallen* correspond remarkably well with the meaning of Old English *meresteall*. In both cases there are rivers that flood seasonally, creating large areas of standing water. I therefore conclude that the names in question are formed from an Old Swedish appellative noun **marstall* ‘place recurrently flooded with standing water’, formally and semantically identical with Old English *meresteall*. Most probably it is actually the same word, a Northwest Germanic **maristallaz*, a compound that has existed in both North and West Germanic languages, rather than two independent formations. That the meaning ‘place, locality’ of the word *stall* is not attested in Old Swedish, then, is not an obstacle to this interpretation, since the appellative compound supposedly is formed already during the Northwest Germanic period. Forsberg (1984: 14) holds the opinion that “*meresteall* may have been (chiefly) Anglian”, which from the point of view of dialect geography, perhaps more easily would explain the correspondence in this case between Scandinavian and Old English, if the homeland of the Angles was, as Bede states, between the Saxons and the Jutes (Nielsen 2000: 335 f.). If this is true, it would then be natural to assume that the word **maristallaz* had a continuous Northwest Germanic distribution, ranging, at least, from the *Svear* (‘the Swedes’) in the north to the Angles in the south, before the emigration of the latter to Britain in the 5th century A. D.

Another objection, made by Wahlberg (1988: 52) against this way of interpreting the names *Marstalla* and *Marstallen*, is that there are, in the same district as the village of Marstalla, in two neighbouring parishes, two other localities called *Marstalla* that obviously contain the same word, but where the topography doesn’t admit the existence of wet-lands or seasonally flooded grounds. It is, however, to my mind here the question of two younger field-names, which are in one way or another secondary to or named after the large, old and probably well-known village of Marstalla. The first case is a field belonging to the village of Åby in the parish of Nora, neighbouring, where the name, as far as I know, has its earliest attestation in 1811 as *Åby Marstalls Rödning* (‘the Marstall clearing of Åby’). The other case in question is the name of a farm *Marstalla* in the parish of Huddunge that is known only as late as in the 1880s. However the farm’s name, here, is secondary to a name of a meadow land, earliest known as *Marstalls skiftet* (‘the Marstall field’) in 1774 (Wahlberg 1988: 71).

On the other hand, there are two localities in the province of Västergötland, in the southwestern part of Sweden, with names that have been brought into discussion in the context of the word **marstall*. One is a vein of water with a surrounding quagmire called *Marstall* or *Marstallet* near the Råmmån river in the parish of Källby, where a local describes the place as containing “bottenlös dy” (‘bottomless mud’). The other is a fen in the parish of Skälvum, also known as *Marstall*. The localities are not, thus, as prototypical for a **marstall* as *Marstalla* and *Marstallen* in Uppland, but could, as alluding to marsh-lands, very well contain the word, thereby, as representing the territory of the ancient tribe of the *Götar*, geographically forming a link between the Svear of Uppland and the Angles.

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