CHRISTIAN ZSCHIESCHANG
Sorbian Institute, Cottbus
ch.zsch@web.de

MERSEBURG PARS PRO TOTO: NAME, ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Abstract

Place-name research seems to be dominated by etymological questions. But other perspectives are important as well, as is demonstrated in one particular case: the conviction Thietmar of Merseburg manifests in his chronicle in the early 11th century that the place of his bishopric seat was named after *Mars*, the Roman god of war. This was not just his personal belief, but rather it fully corresponds with the then prevailing beliefs used in explaining the world and names at that time. And, seemingly, this prominent etymology raised the importance and prestige of the place and its imperial palace, as it is outlined in the present article.[1]

From outside, onomastics often seems to be etymological research on proper names. Most notably are dictionaries explaining toponyms of a certain area,[2] or giving parents help when naming their newborns by presenting them the "meaning" of various first names (e.g. Kohlheim, Kohlheim 2016; Meškank 2017). But onomastics is much more and comprises all aspects of the role the phenomenon of the "proper name" plays in language and society. Among these aspects, the theoretical character of the meaning of proper names has been a topic of discussion up to now. This discussion is too complex to be reduced to just one remark within the present

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[1] The author thanks Amanda Treppmann for improving the English of the present article.

[2] See e.g. *NMP*; *BNB*; Foster, Willich (2007); for the former area of Old Sorbian the literature listed in Walther (2004: 115–123). Since then Hengst (2003), Eichler, Walther (2010), Eichler, Zschieschang (2011). Because of the huge amount of literature there can be given here and in the following titles only as examples.

article. But it is sighted here to highlight that the meaning of a name is not just the meaning of the lexeme it was generated from. In fact, the specific "proprial meaning" proper names must be differentiated from their synonymous appellatives (Šrámek 2007a; Šrámek 2007b – in Czech language Šrámek 2016). This idea is not a new one, but well known (see e.g. Windberger-Heidenkummer 2017: 651 and already Freydank 1971: 2).

So, etymology is only a fundamental element of onomastic analysis, but a very important and necessary one. The dominance it has in the onomastic literature results from the huge amount of work which is necessary to clarify the etymology of the names, especially the extensive search in historic sources to find written mentions which illustrate the linguistic development of the names.

Onomastic analysis can only be reliable after such detailed etymological research is conducted. There are many fields of such linguistic and extra-linguistic analysis. E.g. the phonological development of place-names enriches research on the historical grammar of languages (Schaarschmidt 1998). Onomastics also contributes to the examination of language-contact (cf. Popowska-Taborska 1965 as a fundamental case study; basically e.g. Eichler 1976; Debus 1993; Nicolaisen 1996; Hengst et al. 1997; Stellmacher 2004; Hengst 2014). A further field is reconstruction of settlement development by the analysis of place-names. For many regions geographic investigations were conducted on the basis of a relative chronological differentiation between certain types of place-names to identify early-settled areas (Šmilauer 2015/1960; Eichler, Walther 1967: 175–195; Eichler, Walther 1970; Eichler, Walther 1984: 100–104; Eichler, Zschieschang 2011: 76–80; recently with a theoretical approach Zschieschang 2017: 75–86, 154–168).

In cases where there isn't one satisfying explanation for a name, discussions about etymological questions remain on-going. Although those discussion can easily dominate onomastic literature, it shouldn't be overlooked that they concern only a minority of names. E.g. a controversy about place-names in Lower and Upper Lusatia some years ago was dedicated to only ten percent of all toponyms in the region, while the explanations of the overwhelming 90 percent are clear and have not provided any reason for discussion (Zschieschang 2014: 522–523).

But, of course, there are the "difficult" names with several etymological theories and proposals, which necessarily must be discussed amongst onomastic scholars. Actually, there was such discussion about *Merseburg,* the name of a city at the Saale River on the Western Periphery of the historical Slavic language area, known from the famous *Zaubersprüche* (Merseburg charms/incantations; cf. Beck, Cottin 2015 as a brief introduction). Since publication of the regional place-name dictionary in the 1980s there were four primary possible explanations of the name (Eichler, Walther 1984: 219; Hartig 2012: 406).

But, in the last few years some other proposals have appeared. Most convincing seems a derivation from G *mersō* 'gravel' (Bichlmeier 2015: 23–27; Bichlmeier 2016) according to the landscape: Exactly here, above the river valley of the Saale and the higher terrace is situated a narrow strip of gravel (Bichlmeier 2016: 27–29; *GSK 4637*), which would be a distinctive motivation for the naming of the

place. But this explanation was doubted, and instead preferred G *Mars̱i-* (Casemir, Udolph 2017: 142). Another hypothesis refers to **mars* 'highly situated secure position' (Hengst 2015b: 447f.; Hengst 2016: 64–66). But this etymon is a naval term and obviously of Romanic origin (*Etymologiebank*).[3] So, it is questionable whether it could be the origin of a place name far in the Central European inland already in the Early Middle Ages or before.

The question is whether such etymological discussions are actually fruitful. Of course, the exact determination of the elements in the single names is the essential fundament of onomastics. But, in many "difficult" cases, it is clear that one distinct explanation without any alternative is hardly achievable, and it is rather a question of which of the several theories is most probable. On the other hand, the focus on etymology can inhibit the view of some other aspects of place-name history, as in the case of Merseburg.

A thousand years ago, Thietmar of Merseburg, the famous chronicler of the border region between Franks and Saxons on one side and the Slavs on the other, in his voluminous chronicle, gave his view on the etymology of the name of his seat: *Et quia tunc fuit hec apta bellis et in omnibus semper triumphalis, antiquo more Martis signata est nomine* (*Chronik* I, 2; *Thietmar*: 5). In another source this explanation is extended to the historic context:

> Sed quoniam a flumine magno Reno usque ad fluvium Salam et ultra universa victricibus armis Marte prosperante domuerat, hanc urbem bellis aptam deo Marti, quem praecipue colebat dicavit ac nomine consecravit eamque Marsburg, i. e. Martis urbem, appellavit. (*Chronica episcoporum*: 164; Rademacher 1903: 14)

From the view of current linguistics, this etymology is, of course, nonsense.[4] There are no direct Latin or Italic influences on medieval place-names in the North of Central Europe.[5] But, in the 11th century, looking for those influences was the height of linguistic research. Bishop Thietmar, as a well-educated cleric, belonged to the intellectual elites during a time when the origin of toponyms was determined on the basis of the contemporary names (in written or orally used form) without considering its diachronic development. Furthermore, it was common opinion that this kind of etymology is closely connected to the named object, and that this connection has its origin in God's creation of the world (cf. Haubrichs 1995). In this context, Thietmar's explanation had during his lifetime the same status as the above mentioned current etymological thesis of present scientists has today. That is why recipients of his Latin etymology of Merseburg in the 11th century believed it without any question. Moreover, for the ruling elites, it was a very attractive theory, as this reference to

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[3] This reference was given already in Zschieschang (2016a: 110, n. 62), Zschieschang (2016b: 215, n. 19).

[4] About Thietmar's explanation cf. Hengst (2015a: 452–455), but without the conclusions stated in the present article.

[5] A different aspect is the reinterpretation of names by humanistic scholars, as an example see former *Boldewinsluch* or *Boldenstorff* near Wittenberg, which in the 16th century was re-semantized into *Apollensdorf* under humanistic influences by university scholars (Bergmann 1981).

ancient history raised the importance of the place. A settlement with such prominent roots should be an important one, and because of this outstanding history it was considered dignified enough to host important persons, especially as a residence for the king or emperor (Zschieschang 2016a; Zschieschang 2016b). Even in the wider surrounding area there was no other castle erected by the Roman god of war.

In the 10th and 11th centuries Merseburg was indeed one of the favourite seats of the Ottonian kings and emperors (Schlesinger 1963: 174–180; Ehlers 2005: 12). Furthermore, it was the place where important guests were welcomed, such as the Polish king Bolesław Chrobry in 1013 (*Regesten* 3: 315–317, No. 463–465). There is no explicit evidence that it was mainly the place-name which led to the preference of Merseburg, but that such a name belonged to the 'potential of the place' (Ehlers 2005: 14) can hardly be doubted.

Regarding the importance of proper names for medieval history, it isn't only their etymology which is important. How medieval people interpreted the names themselves can also be instructive when attempting to better understand the human societies of that time.

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