

Oundle, Northamptonshire

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The name of Oundle, noted earliest as the death-place of St Wilfrid and later of St Cett, and as the burial-place of archbishop Wulfstan of York, has not received a fully satisfactory explanation, despite a wealth of early mentions. The editors of PN Nth (213–14) present a rich range of trustworthy and mutually supportive spellings, but confine themselves to rejecting earlier untenable explanations, such as that of Camden (1610), without offering any new etymology.

The pre-Conquest forms in PN Nth, supplemented from S/BCS, Ekwall (DEPN) and Watts (CDEPN), and with the Domesday spelling, are:

- (in) *Undalum* Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (MS. D) annal 708, (MS. E) 709 (11th, 12th)
- (in) *Undolum* c.720–25 (11th) *Life of Wilfrid* 9.141, 145
- (in *prouincia quae uocatur*) *Inundalum* and (in *prouincia*) *Undalum* c.731 (8th) Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.19
- (an *þære mægþe seo is gecyged/geciged*) *Inundalum* and on *Undalana mægþe* c.890 (10–12th) OE Bede 5.17
- (to) *Vndelum*, (into) *Undelan* ?963 (c.1200) episcopal grant, S 1448 (BCS 1128); bounds, date uncertain (MS. c.1200) S 1566 (BCS 1129)
- (*villam quoque*), (*de ipsa villa*) *Undale* 970 (12th) royal grant, S 787 (BCS 1258, 1280)
- (*þone tun þe man cleopað*) *Undela* (. *mid eall þet þær to lið . þet is þet man cleopeð Eahte hundred*) 972 abbreviated version in Old English of previous, S 787 (BCS 1281)
- (into) *undelum*, (*æt*) *Vndelum* 972×992 (12th) sureties list, BCS 1130 (not in S)
- (on *þa^m mynstre þe is genemnod*), (*in monasterio quod nominatur*) *Undola* 11th Saints (Liebermann 1889: 12; Rollason 1978: 89)
- Undele* 1086 Domesday Book

Ekwall (DEPN xiv, 353b) gives a formally defensible account of the name. He analyses it as comprising Old English *un-*, the negative prefix, plus an inflected form of *dāl* ‘dole, share, portion’, and maintains this analysis from the first edition of his dictionary. He interprets this as representing an unattested adjective *undāl* meaning “‘that has no share’ or ‘undivided’”, and tentatively views the place-name as a tribal name used toponymically, like *Wessex* or *Hastings*, without exploring what such a tribal name might imply historically or genealogically. That it is a tribal name is guaranteed by *on Undalana mægpe* ‘among the stock/kindred/ tribe of the U.’ Cox (1975–6: 41) notes the place-name as one of those recorded before c.731, i.e. no later than Bede, but does not challenge Ekwall’s etymology. Watts (CDEPN 455b) agrees that the record suggests a tribal name, regards the proposed etymology as “very uncertain”, but suggests no alternative. The phonology of this solution is satisfactory; the initial [u] is in a late Old English lengthening environment (before the cluster [nd]), and the resultant [u:nd] is subject to the late-medieval Great Vowel Shift, giving modern [aund(ə)l].

There is a potential objection to this explanation, namely the paucity of OE adjectives formed without morphological or phonological adjustment from a noun prefixed with *un-*. One apparently clear case exists according to ASD: *undēaw* ‘without dew’, in the inflected form *undēawe* (*Leechdoms* 2.92, line 17), but the base form may actually have been *undēawe*. There are others for which the direction of derivation is unclear, for they exist as both nouns and adjectives. It is another matter altogether how likely it is for an adjective which is itself derived from a noun then to be morphologically “re-equipped” as a tribal name.

Most of the early mentions show the name with the dative plural suffix *-um*, and with that evidence alone it would be impossible to determine its declensional class. However, one of the mentions in the OE translation of Bede’s HE, *Undalana*, shows what is clearly a genitive plural form. With these forms taken together, we can be sure that the name is plural, and that it is reasonable to take it as a tribal name declined like *Mierce* (genitive *Mierc(e)na*) ‘Mercians’ or *Seaxe* (genitive *Seax(e)na*) ‘Saxons’ (Campbell 1959: 245). Its nominative form will therefore have been **Undāle*, although the attested variation between *Seaxe* and weak *Seaxan* leaves open the possibility that the form was really or alternatively **Undālan*. The former possibility is supported by the spellings in Saints and S 787 and, for what it is worth, that in Domesday. It is unclear why Watts (CDEPN 455b) prefers “**Undalas* or *Undalan*”, but he is presumably keeping open the possibility that the name derives straightforwardly from a strong common noun and

therefore has an unattested nominative plural in *-as*, and is not a tribal name at all, even though he inclines to the latter solution. Mills (2003: 358a) has essentially the same account, but opts exclusively for *Undalas*.

Since all commentators are to some degree hesitant about the meaning of the proposed original form, even if agreement could be reached about what that original form was, it is desirable to pursue the matter further. Two other formally possible alternatives come to mind. One is that it is a genuine topographical name, a straightforward application of a noun *undāl* in the plural meaning ‘bad shares, bad divisions’, ‘misdivisions’ (compare the meaning of e.g. *unlār* ‘bad, evil doctrine’); but then one would definitely expect the strong nominative plural *-as* and genitive plural *-a* proper to the strong masculine noun *dāl*. The second, and far more plausible, is that we are dealing with a compound noun whose second element is indeed *dāl*, but whose first is the feminine noun *unn* ‘grant’, a variant of the more usual weak masculine *unna* or feminine *unne*. This may be seen in the dative case in “be minre unne 7 gife” in an 11th-century Abingdon writ (S 1066, translating “meo concessu et dono”), if the form can be trusted.¹ A name of such a structure, **Unn-dāl-* becoming **Un-dāl-*, could be satisfactorily compared with the Old English compound words *fen-land* from *fenn*, *den-bēre* ‘swinepasture’ from *denn* and *wyn-land* ‘land of joy’ from *wynn*.² It could therefore be taken as meaning ‘shares or divisions made by grant’ as opposed to by some local administrative arrangement (e.g. by lot).³ Whether such divisions might have any connection with the eight hundreds (*Eahta/Eahte hundred*) which belonged to Oundle according to a charter of 972 (BCS 1258, 1280, 1281; S 787; of questionable authenticity; see also VCH) is unknown, but the phrase invites speculation.

A difficult issue is whether such a common noun as **Unn-dāl-* could then be inflectionally adapted as a tribal name (used toponymically). But it is likely that the *Gyrwa* and *Spalda* of the Tribal Hidage provide satisfactory parallels, being adaptations (here in a strong genitive plural form) of the lexical words *gyr*, *gyru* ‘fen’ and the **spald* ‘ditch’ proposed in EPNE 2134–5, as **Gyrwe* (compare the *Australium Gyruiorum* of the

¹ Harmer (1952: 127, text 132) regards this writ, possibly inauthentic in its present form, as having a probably authentic basis.

² The compound structure might also account for the appearance in late Old English of <o> in the second element, if this is regarded as evidence for vowel reduction.

³ Note that the completely consistent early spellings with *Und-* preclude the possibility that we have a reduced version of the genitive singular *unnan* of the weak noun *unna* or *unne* ‘grant’ (ASD).

Fenland in Bede, HE 4.17) and **Spalde*;⁴ but we do not know for sure what their nominative plural forms were.

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⁴ EPNE suggests *Spaldas* as the nominative form, but clearly that need not be so.

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