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### Citation

Vaan, M. A. C. de. (2000). The Low Franconian toponym niel 'on a downward slope'. *Nowele : North-Western European Language Evolution*, 36, 69-75. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14133>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

THE LOW FRANCONIAN TOPONYM *NIEL* 'ON A  
DOWNWARD SLOPE'

1. Middle Dutch *niel* 'down, on the ground' is quoted twice by Verwijs-Verdam 1899 IV: 2390, both times in connection with the verb *ligghen* 'to lie'. Praet 2982 (ed. Bormans 1872) reads *die scalchede sloech edelhede met haren zwerde, so dat soe viel ende lach al niel platt up die erde* 'deceit struck nobleness with her sword, so that she fell and lay flat on the ground'; Parth. 4668ff. (ed. Bormans 1871) *dat hi von sinen orse viel / sonder hoverde ende bleef int niel / ligghende int groen gras* 'so that he fell off his horse without pride and remained lying down in the green grass'.

*Niel* and its cognates Old English *nihol*, *nīol* 'deep, down; forward', derivation *nīolness* 'depth, abyss', *niwellīc* 'deep' and Middle Low German *nygel* (*Inijəl* /), *nūl(e)* 'down, inclined'<sup>1</sup> continue a PGmc. local adjective *\*niχyula-* 'situated below', which Schaffner 1996 derives from Proto-Indo-European *\*nī-kʷe-lo-*, built ultimately on the pre-verb *\*ni* 'down, below'. With the stress on the first syllable, *\*nīkʷelo-* would regularly yield PGmc. *\*niχyela-*, which was probably remade into *\*niχyila-* with the productive suffix *\*-ila-* forming agent nouns and diminutives.<sup>2</sup> This suffix is preserved in West Saxon *niwel* < *\*niχyila-*,<sup>3</sup> but was apparently replaced by *\*-ula-* in the forms with a voiceless fricative (Schaffner 1996:170).

In the Old English glosses, *\*niχyula-* may also be used as a substantivized adjective, e.g. 'infima' *niol*, 'cernua' *ða niowelan*, 'ut de carne iens imis caream' *þætte of lichoman utgeongende deosum neolum ic ðolige* 'that I, going out of the body, be without these lowest'.<sup>4</sup>

In Middle Dutch, the expression *int niel* in the passage quoted from the Parthenopeus fragments seems to point to the substantivized use of *niel*,<sup>5</sup> but it cannot be ruled out that *int* (*\*in het*) originally occurred in front of *groen* only, having been repeated in front of *niel* by a later scribe. At any rate, the passage from Praet suggests to us that *niel ligghen* is the original expression, parallel to Old English Josh. 7.10 *hwi list ðu neowel on eorðan* 'Why are you lying face down on the

ground?' and Middle Low German Josua 7.10 *sta up, worumme lychstu nül uppe der erden* 'stand up, why are you lying down on the ground?'

2. That independent use of *\*nixyula-* was indeed possible in continental WGmc. is shown by a number of place-names in *Nie(h)l* in the southern part of the Dutch linguistic area and the neighbouring Rhineland. Kaspers 1941:98-101 has argued for a number of them that these are based on Old Franconian *\*niyol* < *\*nixyula-* 'inclined downward', and this has been accepted as the standard explanation by Sturmfels-Bischof 1965. Different etymologies can still be found in other works of reference, and at the same time place-names are derived from *\*niyol* which should be kept apart. This unclear state of affairs justifies a new discussion of the evidence.

3. In order to establish the etymology of a place-name we must, apart from general toponymical notions, take into consideration two important sources of information, viz. firstly the pronunciation of a name in the contemporaneous dialect of that (or a nearby) place and secondly the spelling of the place-name in early charters and documents.

A thorough discussion of the problems and possibilities connected with the contemporaneous dialect method is provided by Stevens 1944. In our case, dialect descriptions from which we can reconstruct the historical phonology of the given place and which provide us with the local name are available only for *Niel* south of Antwerp and for *Nijlen*. For several other place-names, preliminary studies have been carried out (especially by Stevens 1944 and Kaspers 1941), so that we can find most of the relevant information in the literature.

As for charter attestations, especially those of the Old Germanic period (before 1100) are important, since in later times greater spelling confusion seems to arise and because for place-names the locative is the probably the most often used case, blurring our view on the original stem formation.

4. The most important place-names that occur in the literature are, from west to east: *Nielles* (several places in NW France), *Nevele* (west of Ghent), *Nil-St.-Vincent* (near Nivelles/Nijvel), *Nivelles/Nijvel*, *Niel* (s Antwerp), *Nijlen* (e Antwerp), *Niel-bij-St.-Truiden* (= *Niel* near Gingelom), *Masnîl* south of Heers and Gelinden (sw Tongeren), *Kerniel* (s

Tongeren), *Niel* near As, *Maasniel* near Roermond, *Nivelle-sur-Meuse* (near Lixhe, n Liège), *Waldniel* (w Mönchen-Gladbach), *Niel* near Rees (Kleve), *Niel* near Heerdt (Düsseldorf), *Niehl* near Cologne and *Niehl* near Bitburg.

The etymology of *Masnîl* has been discussed in detail by Stevens 1944:391-93 and will play no further role: *Masnîl* reflects Romance *\*mansionile* 'small settlement'. The place *Newel* near Trier (981 *Nûuelae*, 11th c. *Novile*) has been explained convincingly as *\*nova villa* by Jungandreas 1962:732. The remaining place-names to be discussed continue *\*niyol* and *\*niwialxa*.

5. Nearly all of the names in *Nie(h)l* reflect Wgmc. *\*nixyula-*. The dialect description of *Niel* s Antwerp (RND 1958, K 286) shows that [*ni:l*] 'Niel' has the same reflex of *\*io* and *\*e<sup>2</sup>* as for instance [*li:kə*] 'little song' and [*bri:f*] 'letter', but a different one from the reflexes [*æ:*] < *\*i* and [*e:*] < *\*i* in open syllable. The same is true for *Maasniel*, which is locally called [*ne:l*], with an [*e:*] that can reflect either *\*io*, *e<sup>2</sup>* or lengthened *\*i* in open syllable.<sup>6</sup> A 943 charter spelling *Nieol* clinches the matter in favour of *\*niol*. For *Niel-bij-St.-Truiden* and *Kerniel*, no old charter spellings are known,<sup>7</sup> but Stevens 1944:392 has proved that in these places too, the local pronunciation (Stevens transcribes *nii:l*) is identical to the reflex of *\*io*.

As far as the places in Germany are concerned, the dialectal form [*ne:l*] for *Niehl* near Cologne (spelling *Niele* AD 927) forces us to reconstruct *\*niol*, cf. Kaspers 1941:98. For *Niel* near Rees a spelling *Niol* is found in a 892 charter, leaving no room for doubt. Uncertainties remain only about *Niehl* near Bitburg, which is spelled *Nila* in 786-87. It is questionable whether *\*niol* would already have simplified its vowel at such an early date. Being unfamiliar with the dialectal pronunciation of this name, we must leave it aside.

6. Although for *Niel* near As and *Waldniel* I have not found the local pronunciation of the name nor an old charter spelling, we may here too consider *\*niyol* on account of the position of both places. As Kaspers 1941 l.c. argues, all places for which *\*niol* can be posited with certainty can be brought together under the meaning 'place on a downward slope, towards a watercourse'. In a similar position we find *Niel* near As and *Waldniel*, and it once applied to the manor *Niehl*

near Heerdt (towards 1100 in *Nielo*), which was swallowed up by the Rhine in 1541.

Kaspers furthermore connects two places which are nowadays situated on Romance territory, but show Germanic *\*niūol*. These are *Nelhain* (north-east of Liège, *\*niol-haim*, close to *Dalhem* 'valley-home') and *Enhet* (near Ciney, Namur, 1265 in *Nehaim* < *\*Nelhaim*). Carnoy 1948:499 has added *Nil-St-Vincent* near Nivelles/Nijvel (1224 *Niel Saint-Vincent*). In all cases this concerns places 'auf Gelände, das sich Wasserläufen zuneigt' (Kaspers 1941:101).

7. Not to be connected with *\*niūol* are *Nivelles* (Dutch *Nijvel*, attested in the 7th c. as *Niwialcha* and *Niviala*), *Nevele* (1088 *Nivela*), *Nivelle-sur-Meuse* (7th-8th c. *Niviala*, 1155 *Nivella*) and *Nivelle* (Valenciennes, 864 *Nivella*, 899 *Nivielle*). Adopting the etymology coined by Marchot 1929:16f. and defended by Gamillscheg 1938:7 = 1962:287, we can reconstruct these names as *\*niwi-alχa* 'new settlement',<sup>8</sup> still preserved in the oldest spelling *Niwialcha*.

Gysseling 1960 II:738 has suggested that Franconian *\*niwialχa* may also lie at the basis of the North-French names in *Nielles*, *Nesle(s)* and *Noyelle(s)*, which are found in quite a large number north of Paris. A few of them were placed with *\*niūol* by Kaspers 1941:101, but the attested charter spellings suggest a different scenario.

A large collection of these place-names in old charters is provided by Nègre 1990 I:280ff. The oldest spellings found still retain the intervocalic *w*, e.g. *Niviellam* (for *Noyelles-sur-Mer*, 830), a few times written with a 'latinizing' *g* between *i* and *e*, e.g. 1080 *Nivigella* for *Nesles*. Loss of *w* lead to *[niela]*, which is usually spelled *Nigella* (e.g. *Nigelam* for *Noyelles-sur-Mer*, 844) until well into the 12th century. Spellings without *g* become more frequent after 1050 (*Nieles* 1069, *Niella* 1101), but note *Niallam* for *Noyelles-sur-Mer* already in 856.

The form *[niellə]* underwent divergent developments according to the local dialect, with a retained diphthong in the far northwestern corner (*Nielles-lès-Ardres*, *Nielles-lès-Bléquin*, *Nielles-lès-Calais*, *Nielles-lès-Thérouanne*), lowering to *[nejelə]* and subsequent contraction in the places spelled *Nesle(s)* (in the départements Somme, Seine-et-Marne, Marne, Aisne, Côte d'Or) and the rounding of *[ej]* to *[oj]* resulting in *Noyelle(s)* (earliest spelling *Noella* 1104) mainly in Pas-de-Calais and Nord.

8. The discussion of the *Nijlen* dialect in RND 1958 (K 296) has shown that this place-name necessarily reflects *\*nīlə*. The local form *[næ:lə]* shows the reflex *[æ:]* of WGmc. *\*ī* which we find also in e.g. *[wæ:n]* 'wine' and *[wæ:t]* 'wide'. As the earliest charter spellings, Gysseling 1960 gives the forms in *Nile* (1146), *Nillam* (Acc., 1155), *de Nilo*, *Nille* (1205), the form *Nillam* showing that the Nom. was *Nilla* /*nīla*/. The conspicuous spelling with double *ll* may be explained as an attempt to express the length of the *[i:]*, or as a scribal mistake for *\*Nijle*, with *ij* for *[i:]* as often in Middle Dutch.

A WGmc. etymon *\*nīla* being unknown, we may consider the possibility that *Nijlen* represents a local development of older *\*niwi-* 'new', with an early syncope of *\*w* as must be assumed for Dutch names in *Nij-* such as *Nijkerk* 'Newchurch', *Nijhuis* 'Newhouse', etc. One possible etymology for *Nijlen* would be *\*niwialχa* which we discussed in the previous paragraph, developing through *\*nījala* to the form *\*nīlə*. As an alternative preform *\*niwi-lauh* 'new open space in the forest' cannot be excluded, with the second element *\*lauh* found in many Dutch place-names, sometimes preserved as *-loo* (*Waterloo*), but also often weakened to *-le* (*Baarle*, *Goirle*).

Further to the north in Brabant, a similar development resulted in the place-name *Nijnsel* (1288 *Neynsel*) on the Dommel river, north of Eindhoven. In the dialect of nearby St.-Oedenrode (described in RND 1966), *Nijnsel* is called *[nɛ:nsəl]* with the same reflex of *\*ī* as in *[kɛ:kə]* 'to watch', and nearly the same as in *[wɛ:n]* 'wine' or *[rɛ:p]* 'ripe'. We can thus reconstruct *\*Nīnsəl*, which may go back to *\*niwin-sal*, 'new manor'. This supports the possibility that *Nijlen* too reflects a compound in *\*niwi-*.

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## Notes

1. See Schaffner 1996 for a discussion of the variants in Old English (esp. West Saxon *niwel* and *nīowol*), Old Frisian (R 1 XX:114 +*niuu*) and Middle Low German (*nūgel*).
2. For this view of the development of PIE unstressed \*-e- in Germanic in general and the PGmc. suffix \*-ila- in particular, see Lloyd 1961:848f.
3. From an end-stressed form \**ni-kye-ló-*.
4. For references and a more complete collection of attestations, see Schaffner 1996:134ff.
5. Bormans 1971:XXXIII even wonders whether *nīel* could be a substantive in both attestations.
6. For the pronunciation of *Maasniel* I rely on my own observation; the historical phonology of nearby Roermond can be deduced from Kats 1939.
7. Förstemann 1913-16 II 2:408 assumes, upon authority of Holder-Egger 1838:826, that the place-name *Niviola* in the 1050 St.-Trond 'Ex miraculis S. Trudonis auctore Stepelino' refers to the nearby *Niel*, but this is disputable. On the same page, several other persons are mentioned which had come to St. Trudo for help, their origin ranging from 'Texandria' to Huy and Haeren near Brussels. Therefore, *Niviola* could equally well refer to *Nivelles-sur-Meuse* or even *Nivelles/Nijvel*, for which see § 7.
8. Dat./Loc.sg. of \**niwi-alχ*, with \**alχ* 'protected place' as attested in Old English *ealh* m. 'temple', Old Saxon *alah* m. id., both of which are inflected as Gmc. *a*-stems as opposed to Goth. *alhs* 'temple' which is a feminine consonant-stem. The precise meaning and development of the toponym \**alalχ* in Old Franconian glosses have been studied by Schmidt-Wiegand 1967:28-43.

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