The only evidence for the word ἀκεσταλίος ascribed to Stesichorus appears to come from the third book of Ptolemaeus Chennus’ *Nova Historia* (transmitted via Photius *Bibl*. 148’32 Bekker = 3.56 Henry). The text of Photius’ outline runs:

περὶ τῶν παρὰ Στησίχορωι ζητούμενων ἀκεσταλίων ὀρνίθων

This addition to the vocabulary was recorded by the new LSJ Supplement, but editors, lexicographers and commentators alike have deemed the word ἀκεσταλίος unclear.1) In this note I would like to suggest a possible explanation for the enigmatic word.

In terms of meaning there is little to go by, so I will proceed straight to the formal analysis. I would like to suggest that the base word from which the word

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1) Obelized by Chatzis (1914, 24); “certe non adhuc intellexit” (*PMGF*); “non intelligit” (*PMG*); “still unexplained” (Campbell 1991); “unexplained adj.” (*LSJ Suppl*. 1996). Mancuso (1912, 253), Vürtheim (1919, 93), Tomberg (1968, 171 n. 107), de Martino (1984, 263) and Willi (2008, 74 n. 97) are all agnostic. The emendation to ἀκεστήριος ‘medicinal, *ad sanandum idoneus*’ suggested by Kleine (1828, 132) does not provide a satisfactory sense (see Lazzeri 2008, 363). Lastly, Lazzeri (2008, 364) hesitantly suggested to analyze ἀκεστάλιος as a compound of ἀκος and the verbal root τλη-/τλα- (even though the resulting meaning is not quite clear); however, this analysis violates an important morphological rule of Greek: verbal governing compounds do not take the suffix -ιο-, see Sommer 1948, 116 (therefore not only Lazzeri’s ἀκεσ-τάλιος, but also a virtual ἀκε-στάλιος of φερέοικος type is out of the question). Compounds with ἀ- *privativum* are not formed with the suffix -ιο- either (see Sandsjoe 1918, 81), which effectively precludes any analysis that starts with a segmentation ἀ-κεστάλιος. Since no metrical reason could be responsible for a replacement of a properly formed compound *ἀκέσταλος* (whatever its segmentation should be) by ἀκεστάλιος, it appears that the only linguistically sound way to solve the mystery of ἀκεστάλιος is to analyze this word as a simplex.
ἀκεστάλιος was derived is an *-s stem *ἀκος, *ἀκεος ‘grain’ (= Latin acus, -eris). This word was lost in Greek (most likely due to its homonymy with ἀκος ‘cure’); nevertheless, its derivative ἀκοστή is found with the meaning ‘barley’ at Nic. Al. 106, Hesychius glosses it as κριθή (παρὰ Κυπρίοις) and according to the scholion on Il. 6.506 ἀκοστή was the Thessalian word for grain of all kinds.2) It is possible to emend ἀκεσταλίων to ἀκοσταλίων, but in fact there is no need for such an emendation: ἀκεστάλιος would be a regular formation based on a stem *ἀκεστο- which is itself derived from an oblique stem *ἀκεσ- (compare κηδεστής, ἀκηδεστος from κῆδος, κήδεος).3) The coexistence of ἀκοστή and *ἀκεστο- is not surprising: across different Indo-European languages we find *-to- derivatives made from either *-es- or *-os- allomorphs of -s-stems. Italic is the one branch where this derivation remained productive and in Latin we find examples of both *-os-to- and *-es-to-, compare scelestus from scelus, honestus from honōs, but onustus from onus, vetustus from vetus.4) There are thus no formal objections against positing a stem *ἀκεστο- ‘corn, grain’; moreover, this stem is possibly reflected in the name of a Sicilian town Ἀκέστη known from Sophocles (ὁχοις Ἀκεσταίοισιν, fr. 672 Radt)5) and Stephaneus Byzantius (Ἀκέστη, πόλις Σικελίας, 1.159.2). A Sicilian toponym furnishes a welcome parallel for the vocabulary of the poet from Himera;6) in any event, it is likely that the stem *ἀκεστο- was a local variant of ἀκοστο-, ἀκοστή, preserved on the periphery of the Greek-speaking world.

2) Even though the attestations of ἀκοστή are late, the denominative verb ἀκοστέω appears already in Homer (ὕπος ἀκοστήσας, Il. 6.506, 15.263).
3) Given the semantic interpretation of ἀκεσταλίων ὄρνιθων proposed in this paper it might appear plausible to analyze the sequence ἀκεστ- as a reflex of Proto-Greek *ak-ed-(t-) ‘grain-eat(er)’ (for the root *ak- compare (Δημήτερος/ἀλφίτου) ἀκτή), but this solution is morphologically unacceptable (on the inadmissibility of the suffix -ιο- in the compounds of this type see above, n. 1) and leaves the end of the word (-αλιο-) unexplained.
4) From the perspective of comparative reconstruction the type in *-es-to- is certainly the older one and *-os-to- is secondary; therefore *ἀκεστο- is not only a regular formation, but also the expected one. The reason the stem *ἀκεστο- has been (nearly) replaced by ἀκοστο-/ἀκοστή is of course the same as the one responsible for the loss of *ἀκος ‘grain’ (= Latin acus), namely, the desire to disambiguate between words referring to grain and its kinds and words meaning ‘cure, medicine’ (compare ἀκεστός ‘curable’, ἀκεστής ‘healer’, etc.).
5) Hsch. Ἀκεσταίοι Ὀχοι· Σικελικά ὄχεματα.
6) Nevertheless, the possibility remains that Ἀκέστη is an Italic onomastic element in Sicily (although nothing in particular speaks in favor of identifying Ἀκέστη with the place name Segesta rendered in Greek sources as Αἵγεστα).
From the stem ἀκεστό- a further derivative ἀκεστάλιο- ‘corn field’ could have been made with the suffix -αλιο- (e.g. Homeric πηδάλιον ‘rudder’ from πηδόν or ἄρμαλιή ‘food’, possibly from ἄρμα). This suffix was not productive in post-Homeric times; it is therefore unlikely that ἀκεστάλιο- was a Stesichorean coinedage: the word must be older. Importantly, there is a perfect derivational parallel to our case: this is the word φυτάλιος ‘planted place, esp. orchard or vineyard’ (attested already in Mycenaean pu-ta-ri-ja KN E 849) with related adjective φυτάλιος, an epithet of gods (Poll. 1.24; Corn. ND 22), likewise derived from a stem with a suffix -το-, namely, φυτόν ‘(garden) plant’. It is remarkable that ἀκεστάλιο- (if interpreted according to the argument put forth in this paper) and φυτάλιο- belong to the same semantic field and are in fact Reimwörter.

It is impossible to decide whether our form is a gen. pl. of a substantive ἀκεστάλιον with the meaning ‘corn, corn field’ or of an adjective ἀκεστάλιος ‘of corn(-field)’; either way, the meaning of ἀκεσταλίων ὀρνίθων is ‘birds of the corn field’. And if this analysis is correct, it becomes clear why this passage in Stesichorus constituted a zêtêma for the Hellenistic scholars: while they may have understood what the word meant, the subject of a scholarly controversy was the precise identity of the birds.

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8) The transmitted accent speaks against a substantive *ἀκεσταλίη ‘corn-field’, but there is no reason why the accent should be deemed particularly trustworthy in our case.
9) Or ‘granivores’, put in strict zoological parlance.
10) As ζητουμένων in Photius’ text makes clear.
11) Ptolemaeus Chennus systematically collected stories of the bizarre and miraculous and therefore the only thing about these birds that can be assumed with some certainty is that they were fabulous birds of some sort or, more likely, played a part in a mythological narrative. Roulez (1834) thought the birds were halcyons (and Vürtheim (1919, 93) seems to be sympathetic with this view), but this solution is unlikely, since ἀλκυών was a familiar mythical bird and if ἀκεστάλιοι ὀρνίθες were in fact halcyons, their identity must have been fairly obvious to the participants in the debate, who presumably had access to the full context in Stesichorus. The same applies to Adrados’ (1978, 264) identification of the birds with the well-known Stymphalian birds.
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