

Place-names:

1. *Baile*, *Cell*, & the Built Environment



Many place-names (or **toponyms**) in Irish tell you about the history or appearance of the location. Sometimes the root words that make up a place-name can be difficult to see in modern English spellings. Often, toponyms include personal names, such as County **Tyrone**, a compound of *tír Eoghain*, or the ‘land of Eoghan’. This name comes from the *cenél nÉogain*, or ‘people/kin of Eoghan’. (Note the difference in spelling between modern and medieval Irish.) Similarly, the place-name **Tyrconnell** (*tír Conaill*) means ‘land of Conall’.

This worksheet will look at several place-names that include words for artificial structures or settlements. Sometimes the meanings of words drift over time, or come to signify related concepts. Thus, *cloch* ‘stone’ can refer to things made of stone as well as stone itself, including castles, gemstones, and even rosary beads!

▪ ***Baile*: Settlements and Towns**

Baile means ‘settlement; or ‘town’. In modern Irish, Dublin is also called **Baile Átha Cliath**, or ‘the town of the ford of hurdles’. The common place-name **Baile an Mhuilinn**, or ‘town/homestead of the mill’, found in County Galway (and elsewhere) has a literal translation as English ‘Milltown’.

- Fun fact: *baile* can also mean ‘frenzy’ or ‘madness’, as in medieval Irish tales like *Baile in Scáil* (‘The Phantom’s Frenzy’) or *Buile Suibhne* (‘The Madness of Sweeney’). The two words are unrelated.

Other words for ‘town’ include *borg* and *caistéil* (literally, ‘castle’, borrowed from English ‘castle’ or Latin *castellum*). *Tech* or *teg* means ‘house’, as in **Teach Naithí** (or Taney) in County Dublin, which means ‘Nath Í’s house’ after a sixth-century saint.

▪ ***Cell*: Churches**

A very common place-name element is *Cill* or *Kil-* (medieval Irish *cell*). This originally comes from Latin *cella* meaning ‘cell’, because early ascetic monks lived in small rooms or cells. This loanword quickly came to mean ‘church’ in general, regardless of its size, and is often followed by the name of a saint associated with a particular church. Thus, **Kilkenny** (*Cill Chainnigh*) is ‘the church of St Cainnech’.

Both the town and county of **Kildare** take their name from **St Brigid**'s monastery. The name **Cill Dara** means 'church of the oak' (*dair* is the medieval Irish for 'oak'). **Cogitosus** wrote a *Life of St Brigid* in the seventh century in which he describes the church and monastic community at Kildare:

Who can express in words the great beauty of this church and the countless wonders of the city around it, if it is right to call it a city even though it doesn't have walls surrounding it? Nonetheless it is called a vast and metropolitan city because of the many people who gather there. Holy Brigid marked out the area around it with a boundary so that it fears no human foe. It is the safest of all the cities of refuge in Ireland for those who flee to it. Kings keep secure their treasures there at that most exalted place.

The Life of Saint Brigid, transl. Freeman, p. 127

What other sorts of structures tend to be associated with churches?

➤ **Clochán**

A **clochán** is a small, beehive-shaped hut, often built by and for monks. The most famous examples may be those from Skellig Michael. The word itself is formed from **cloch**, the word for 'stone' we met above, plus the **diminutive** ending **-án**. (A diminutive indicates smallness or endearment, such as adding *-let* or *-y* on the end of words in English; e.g. pig, piglet, or Sarah, Sally.) The word **both** 'hut, cabin' can also denote a monastic cell.

➤ **Graves and Cemeteries**

There are many words for 'grave' or 'cemetery'. **Fert** usually means 'burial mound' and **lecht** (from Latin *lectus*, meaning 'bed') refers to a 'grave'. The two words often appear together, as when Fergus describes the landscape to Queen Medb in *The Cattle Raid of Cooley (Táin Bó Cúailnge)*:

'... every *fert* and every *lecht*, every stone (*lía*) and every tomb (*lige*) from here to the eastern part of Ireland is a *fert* and *lecht*, a stone (*lía*) and a tomb (*lige*) for some goodly hero or for some brave warrior who fell by the valiant leader of yonder band.'

Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster, transl. O'Rahilly, p. 263

There are two other, similar words in this passage. **Lía** means 'stone', as in the *Lia Fáil*, sometimes called the 'Stone of Destiny' or 'Speaking Stone' on the Hill of Tara. According to legend, kings of Ireland were crowned on the stone. **Lige** means 'sleeping', 'bed', or 'grave'.

▪ **Revisiting Fortresses: Dún and Ráth**

You may remember several words for 'fortress' from the 'Mounds, Graves, and the Otherworld' worksheet. **Dún** and **ráth** (pl. *rátha*) both usually mean hillfort or earthen embankment, many of which date to the Iron Age or early medieval period. These were often built on top of natural hills, or were themselves mistaken for hills in later eras.

Donegal, or Irish *Dún na nGall* literally means 'fort of the foreigners'. You may have encountered *gall* meaning 'foreigner' or occasionally specifically 'Viking' in another worksheet.

Activities

1. Can you match up these Irish words (and a few Latin-derived words) with their English translations?

Hint: there may be more than one right answer.

<i>clochán</i>	oak
<i>fert</i>	cabin
<i>baile</i>	church
<i>lecht</i>	stone
<i>cell</i>	land
<i>cloch</i>	grave
<i>dair</i>	hut
<i>dún</i>	mill
<i>both</i>	settlement
<i>tír</i>	burial mound
<i>muilend</i>	fortress

2. What do you think the place-names Cill Mhic Eoghain/Kilmacowen, Cill Mhic Aonghais, and Cill Phádraig/Kilpatrick mean? (Hint: *mic* is a form of *mac*, the medieval Irish for ‘son’.) How about Áth an Mhuilinn?
3. Go to the *Logainm* website: <https://www.logainm.ie/en/>, and go to the ‘Glossary and Distribution Maps’ tab or search in the ‘Search’ bar. See if you can find a place-name containing each word on the list in Question 1. Go through the ‘Glossary’ and find a new word not in this worksheet; give its definition and an example of place-names in which it is found.

Alternatively, go to the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project website:

<http://www.placenamesni.org/index.php>. Find a place-name in Northern Ireland not listed in this worksheet and explain what it means. Does it contain any of the place-name elements discussed above?

Bibliography

- P. Freeman, ‘The Life of Saint Brigid’, in *The World of Saint Patrick* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 95–128
C. O’Rahilly, transl., *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1970) – available online at <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T301035/index.html>

Websites:

Logainm, developed by Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge in collaboration with The Placenames Branch (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht) (<https://www.logainm.ie/en/>)

Northern Ireland Place-Name Project, developed by Queen’s University Belfast, in association with Land and Property Services, Department of Finance and Personnel (Northern Ireland), the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and Foras na Gaeilge (<http://www.placenamesni.org/index.php>)

Answer Sheet

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 1. <i>clochán</i> | hut |
| <i>fert</i> | burial mound |
| <i>baile</i> | settlement |
| <i>lecht</i> | grave |
| <i>cell</i> | church |
| <i>cloch</i> | stone |
| <i>dair</i> | oak |
| <i>dún</i> | fortress |
| <i>both</i> | cabin |
| <i>tír</i> | land |
| <i>muilend</i> | mill |
2. Cill Mhic Eoghain/Kilmacowen: ‘the church of the son of Eoghan’
Cill Mhic Aonghais: ‘the church of the son of Aonghus’
Cill Phádraig/Kilpatrick: ‘the church of Patrick’
Áth an Mhuilinn: ‘the ford of the mill (Millford)’
3. Answers may vary. You may need to look up modern Irish spellings for a few words (i.e. *cill* for *cell*; *muileann* for *muilend*), and are unlikely to find *lecht*.

Brigid Ehrmantraut, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge