

## Place-names:

### 2. Rivers, Fords, & Waterways



**Toponyms** frequently contain words for natural features; words for rivers, fords, and other waterways are particularly common. This may partly be because settlements were often built near sources of fresh water, and because waterways (including the ocean) provided a means of easy transportation, linking distant communities. You will remember that **Baile Átha Cliath** means ‘the town of the ford of hurdles’, indicating a place where the River Liffey could be crossed at a ford (*áth*). The city’s other common name, **Dublin**, also refers to water: *dub* ‘dark, black’ + *linn* ‘pool’.

This worksheet will focus on place-names involving water. Sometimes these can tell us more about the traditions and legends surrounding various places than they can about modern geography. They offer us valuable clues as to how people described and visualised the world around them.

#### ▪ Rivers and Streams

You may remember the **River Boyne** from the worksheet on Newgrange, the name of which comes from *bó* ‘cow’ + *find* ‘white’, and is shared with the female character **Boand** in medieval Irish sagas. In some stories, the river is created when Boand drowns. The metrical *Dindsenchas* (from *dind* ‘place’ + *senchas* ‘old tales, knowledge, history’), a collection of place-name lore, recounts a version where Boand is swept out to sea after walking around a magic well:

As thrice she walked round  
about the well heedlessly,  
three waves burst from it,  
whence came the death of Boand ...  
Every way the woman went  
the cold white water followed  
from the *Síd* to the sea (not weak it was),  
so that thence it is called Boand.

*The Metrical Dindsenchas*, vol. 3, transl. Gwynn, p. 31

The medieval Irish word for ‘river’ is *ab*, and you may see the modern spelling *abhainn* or *abha* in place-names. You may have encountered one of several rivers named **An Abhainn Mhór**, which literally translates to ‘the great river’ or ‘the big river’.

- Fun fact: **ab** shares a root with the Welsh word *afon*, also meaning ‘river’ (from which we get the names of several River Avons in England, including the Warwickshire Avon, near which Shakespeare was born).

Another word for ‘stream’ in medieval Irish is **sruth** (pl. *srotha(e)*). **Sruth n-Iordanen** or **Sruth Iordainn** refers to the River Jordan in some medieval texts. Sometimes *sruth* also appears in more metaphoric descriptions: in the medieval Irish *Tale of Mac Dathó’s Pig* (*Scéla Mucce Meicc Da Thó*) a fight breaks out between warriors until ‘*srotha* of blood flowed over the door’!

#### ▪ Fords and Lakes

At the end of the medieval Irish saga *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*), the two bulls that have been contested over during the tale fight and kill one another. As they run across Ireland, new place-names are created. Many of these are fords (**áth**) and the text even gives an alternative explanation for Áth Clíath:

The bull Donn Cúailnge came forward to the brink of Áth Mór and there he left the loin (*lón*) of the bull Findbennach. Whence the name Áth Luain (‘the ford of the loin’). He came eastwards into the land of Meath to Áth Troim (‘the ford of the liver’) and there he left the liver (*trom*) of Findbennach. He tossed his head fiercely and shook off Findbennach over Ireland. ... He threw his rib-cage (*clíath*) as far as Dublin which is called Áth Clíath (‘the ford of the hurdles’).

*Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, transl. O’Rahilly, p. 272

You have probably encountered the word **loch** meaning ‘lake’ in Irish or Scottish Gaelic. It appears in place-names like **Loch Cé** (Lough Key) and **Tuaim Fhionnlocha** (Tomfinlough), which means ‘the tomb of the white lake’ (*túaim* ‘tomb’; *find* ‘white, fair’ + *loch*).

#### ▪ The Ocean

The sea provided a vital means of transport, linking Ireland to the rest of the Irish Sea and the wider medieval world, before, during, and after the Middle Ages. Irish saints often perform miracles involving the ocean or sea creatures. In **Adomnán’s** *Life of St Columba*, **St Columba** performs a miracle by which a milk vessel that has been swept out to sea returns on the next day’s tide:

... the saint addressed those who stood near him, and said, ‘Let one of you now go to the sea, for the leather vessel for which Lugaid was lamenting, when it was carried away by the ebbing tide, hath been brought back by the returning tide, and is to be found at the place from which it was taken.’ Upon hearing these words spoken by the saint, a certain active youth ran to the sea-shore, where he found the vessel, as the saint had predicted.

*Life of Saint Columba*, transl. Reeves, ch. 39

Medieval Irish words for the sea include **muir**, **rían**, and even the loanword **ocían**. **Inis** means ‘island,’ as in **Innisfallen**, **Innisfree**, or even **Ennis**.

## Activities

1. Can you match up these Irish words with their English translations?  
Hint: there may be more than one right answer.

<i>loch</i>	black, dark
<i>find</i>	sea
<i>áth</i>	stream
<i>muir</i>	lake
<i>sruth</i>	pool
<i>ab</i>	ford
<i>inis</i>	white, fair
<i>linn</i>	ocean
<i>dub</i>	river
<i>rían</i>	island

2. 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 (except *rían*, which is used chiefly in poetry); you may need to use the modern Irish spellings of *ab* (*abhainn*) and *dub* (*dubh*); *finn* or *find* may turn up places named for the legendary hero Finn (Fionn), whose name ultimately derives from the same word as the adjective discussed here. Go through the ‘Glossary’ and find a new word for a waterway or water-related natural feature 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

- E. Gwynn, transl., *The Metrical Dindsenchas* (Dublin, 1903–35) – available online at <https://celt.ucc.ie/publishd.html>
- 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>
- W. Reeves, transl., *Life of Saint Columba* (Edinburgh, 1874) – available online at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/columba-e.asp>
- \*\*\*Note: for a more up-to-date edition and translation, see R. Sharpe, transl., *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995)

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. There are multiple acceptable answers for *muir*, *rían*, *loch*, and *linn* (although ‘lake’ is a better definition for *loch* than ‘pool’).

<i>loch</i>	lake, pool
<i>find</i>	white, fair
<i>áth</i>	ford
<i>muir</i>	sea, ocean
<i>sruth</i>	stream
<i>ab</i>	river
<i>inis</i>	island
<i>linn</i>	pool, lake
<i>dub</i>	black, dark
<i>rían</i>	ocean, sea

2. Answers may vary. If a word does not appear in the ‘Glossary’, try simply searching it in the ‘Search’ bar.

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