

Towards a Chronology of Topographical Elements in Irish Place-Names: Some Strategies for Establishing Relative Chronology

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues involved in establishing the chronology of elements referring to landscape features. Much work has been done on the Irish topographical lexicon in recent decades, notably by Prof. Liam Mac Mathúna, whose approach is rooted in word-field studies. His research has focussed on common nouns occurring in Old Irish and Middle Irish texts. This paper takes a complementary approach by asking what further light the evidence of place-names can shed on the topographical lexicon. It attempts to establish the outlines of a (largely relative) chronology, using the element *sliabh* as an example. It then goes on to consider some strategies which can help to refine this dating, using the elements *rinn* and *ros* from the word-field 'promontory'. In particular, the analysis of suffixes and tautological names are discussed as resources which can help to construct a relative chronology.

Any attempt to delimit the time-span during which a particular place-name element has been productive must begin with absolute chronology by examining the attestations of names in which the element appears. One such attempt to date an element common in Irish place-names is Alan Mac an Bhaird's analysis of 330 names whose first element is *sliabh*, carried out while working for the Place-Names Branch of the Ordnance Survey in Dublin during the 1970s. *Sliabh* is the most common Irish word for 'mountain', but which can also mean variously 'a mountain range', 'an area of upland', or 'a moor'.

Many syntactic structures are represented in this sample, including noun + noun (defining genitive), noun + adj., noun + existing name (which can be divided into sub-categories depending on the type of name, such as personal name, surname, place-name), noun + numeral + noun (the numeral usually being *dhá*, 'two'), etc. If we examine Mac an Bhaird's statistics for just two of the most common structures, we gain some useful insights into their chronology:

Structure 1 – sliabh + art + noun (+adj), e.g., *Sliabh an Iarainn* – 87 examples

First attestation

Before 1200: 2

Before 1550: 7

Before 1700: 24

1700 or after: 54

Structure 5 – sliabh + noun (+adj), e.g., *Sliabh Cairn* – 34 examples

First attestation

Before 1200: 5

Before 1550: 5

Before 1700: 9

1700 or after: 15

This shows that structure 5 has proportionally far more early occurrences than structure 1. Such observations across a large number of elements have led to the conclusion that structure 5, noun + noun (without intervening article), also called noun + defining genitive, is typical of the early stages of the language (up to the 10th century), whereas the use of the article, as in structure 1, became the norm for new names combining two nouns which were created subsequently.

Note that the majority of names with the older structure are, nonetheless attested after 1550. This is assumed to be due to the rarity of early attestations, a result of the scarcity of early documents. It is not taken to indicate that new names were still being created in the old structure after 1550, but rather that names of this type were continuing to appear in documents for the first time after this date. This point is particularly important when we come to consider structures which are considered even earlier than noun + defining genitive (henceforth noun + def. gen.).

With *sliabh* we are fortunate to have a number of early attestations for mountains which were important in local tradition. Indeed, names in *sliabh* are among the earliest place-names to be recorded in Irish texts: *Sliabh Mis* (Slemish, Co. Antrim) is recorded in A.D. 771 [*i Slébh Mis*]¹; *Sliabh gCuillinn* (Slieve Gullion, Co. Armagh) is mentioned in A.D. 830 [*moninni Sleibi Culinn*] (McKay 1999, 134), as is *Sliabh Liag* (Slieve League, Co. Donegal) [*i Sleibh Liacc*] (McKay 1999, 134).

However, some elements occurring predominantly in minor names may not be documented until much later if not common in townland or ecclesiastical names. For such elements, we may have to rely much more heavily on relative chronology. Observations such as those made by Mac an Bhaird about the relative age of syntactic structures have enabled Irish toponymists to propose approximate dates for the major structures occurring in place-names. The following schema is adapted from one drawn up by Mícheál Ó Mainnín, which builds on the work of Deirdre Flanagan, Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig and others on the chronology of Irish place-names. Note that the structure of the table should not be taken to imply that the structures occur in a simple chronological sequence or that names with a structure mentioned lower down are necessarily later than those with a structure mentioned above.

Structure	Example	Dating
noun + noun compounds	e.g., <i>Mucros</i> , ‘pig-promontory’	pre-Christian (5 th c.)
simplex names	e.g., <i>Tailtiu</i>	pre-7 th c.
noun + qualifying noun	e.g., <i>Ros Muc</i> , ‘promontory (of) pigs’	from c. 400
noun + adjective	e.g., <i>Ros Mór</i> , ‘big promontory’	from c. 400
noun + article + qualifying noun	e.g., <i>Ros na Muc</i> , ‘promontory of the pigs’	evidence from 9 th /10 th c.
article + noun	e.g., <i>An Ros</i> , ‘the promontory’	evidence from 9 th /10 th c.

Figure 1: Chronology of some of the major naming structures, adapted from Ó Mainnín 2003.

A few years ago, as part of my Masters dissertation, I carried out a detailed analysis of Irish hill and mountain names containing the five most common generic elements, namely *binn*, *cnoc*, *cruach*, *mullach* and *sliabh*. The names analysed were selected from maps merely on the basis of height as an indicator of relative importance, not on the availability of documentation. Therefore, unlike Alan Mac an Bhaired’s sample, many of these names were not attested long before the first national survey at six inches to a mile by the Ordnance Survey in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, this analysis indicated that *sliabh* is the oldest of these five elements, based on several pieces of evidence. Firstly, in the sample of 141 names in *sliabh*, there were 43 occurrences of names with the structure noun + defining genitive. This represents 30.4% of all names in *sliabh*, a far higher proportion than found with any of the four other elements (*binn*, 20.6%; *cnoc*, 11.2%, *cruach*, 10.8%; *mullach*, 23.5%).

Furthermore, *sliabh* is the only one of the five elements examined to be found in NOUN + NOUN compounds (3.6%), e.g., *Troiscshliabh*. As Mac an Bhaired collected only those names in which *sliabh* is the first element, his analysis did not include such names, even though *sliabh* occurs as a generic in them, since close compounds have the generic in second position. The existence of such compounds, together with the high percentage of names of the type NOUN + DEF. GEN>, indicates that many names in *sliabh* are of great antiquity. Éamonn de hÓir was also of this view: “One gets the impression from the forms on the map that a good proportion of the names could be fairly old” (de hÓir 1970, 4 [my translation]). This impression is confirmed by the fact that a considerable number are combined with personal names of deities (e.g., *Sliabh Eibhlinne*²), figures from mythology (e.g., *Sliabh Bladhma* – a Milesian invader [MacKillop 1998, 38]), early Irish historical figures (e.g., *Sliabh Dónairt* – named after a saint contemporary with St. Patrick [Ó Mainnín 1993, 154–157]) and early population groups (e.g., *Sliabh Ara* – in the territory of the Araidh Tíre³).

In his study of this element, Mac an Bhaired found that of the 330 names in *sliabh* which he collected, 57 were recorded before A.D. 1200.⁴ Given the large percentage of Irish mountain

names which are not recorded before the making of the six-inch maps by the Ordnance Survey between 1825 and 1841, this figure is remarkably high. Although no equivalent statistics are available for the other elements to enable an accurate comparison, it is beyond doubt that none of the other four elements studied would approach this figure. In terms of the structures in which it occurs, the next oldest element is *binn*, meaning ‘peak’ or ‘cliff’, for which I found only four attestations before 1200. This is followed by *mullach* and *cruach*, while *cnoc* appears to be the most recent. One of the earliest occurrences of *cnoc* is in the Book of Armagh *Notulae*, dated to the eighth or ninth century (Mac Mathúna 1988, 50).

I would suggest there are several questions which it is useful to put about an element in order to establish an approximate relative chronology. We have already seen the utility of asking:

1. In which syntactic structures is it found?

In addition, we may also ask:

2. Is the element still actively used as a common noun in Irish? Or is it primarily known from place-names?
3. What suffixes can be attached to it? This can be informative if we know something of the chronology of the suffixes.
4. Is it found in tautological names? If so, is it embedded (suggesting an early date) or attached (suggesting a later date)?

I will now consider promontories as a sample word-field, focussing particularly on two sample elements: *ros* and *rinn*. These are just two of the most common elements denoting a promontory or peninsula in Irish place-names: others include *aird* (e.g., *Aird Mhic Giollagáin*, Magilligan Point, Co. Derry), *ceann*, often appearing in dative form, *cionn* (e.g., *Ceann Sléibhe*, Sleá Head, Co. Kerry or *Cionn Mhálanna*, Malin Head, Co. Donegal), *iorras* (usually applied to a whole peninsula rather than just the tip, e.g., *Iorras Domhnann*, Erris [Peninsula], Co. Mayo), *pointe* (e.g., *Pointe Dhúlainn*, Doolin Point, Co. Clare), *rú* (modernized form of *rubha*) (e.g., *An Rú*, Rue Point, Co. Antrim), *reannach* (e.g., *An Reannach Rua*, Bloody Foreland, Co. Donegal), and *binn* (strictly meaning a cliff, but common in names of headlands such as *Binn Éadair* [Howth Head, Co. Dublin] and *Binn Bhuí* [Benwee Head, Co. Mayo]).⁵

1. In which syntactic structures is *ros* found?

Gasaitéar na hÉireann contains 30 names in which the generic element is *ros* in first position. Of these, six exhibit the structure NOUN + DEF. GEN., e.g., *Ros Dumhach*, while just two show the later structure with a definite article between the two nouns, e.g., *Ros an Droichid*. These make up 20% and 6.6% of the total respectively. This compares with 5 (21.7%) for each structure in the case of the element *rinn*, which shows a slightly stronger tendency for the more modern structure.

There are also four simplex names (with article), namely three instances of *An Ros* (Rush, Co. Dublin; Ross, Co. Meath; and Rosses Point, Co. Sligo) and one instance of *Na Rosa* (The Rosses, Co. Donegal).

However, the strongest evidence from syntactic analysis comes from close compound names. *Ros* is one of only 12 elements which are commonly found as generics in Irish place-names with the structure NOUN + NOUN compound, e.g., *Mucros* (Muckross, Co. Kerry and Muckros, Co. Donegal), ‘pig promontory’. Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig, who has analysed this group in detail, argues that this structure was unproductive by the Early Christian era and may have ceased to yield new names as early as A.D. 400 (Mac Giolla Easpaig, 1981, 152). A key argument is that ring-forts are not named with the N + N structure. Instead they are usually named *dún*, *ráth*, *lios*

or *cathair* and are frequently followed by the name of a chieftain or by a defining common noun in the genitive case.

Unlike *ros*, neither *rinn* nor any of the other elements in the word-field ‘promontory’ occur in this structure.

2. Is *ros* used actively as a common noun in Irish? Or is it mainly known from place-names?

Ros does not appear to have been part of the active vocabulary in the Old Irish period, if we can judge by its absence as a common noun from the body of texts of this period analysed by Prof. Liam Mac Mathúna. In his doctoral thesis ‘Semantische und Etymologische Untersuchungen zum Wortfeld *Land* im Altirischen’, one of the sub-categories of the word-field ‘Land’ which he examines is 1.2.1.8. (d) ‘Promontory’. The only word listed in this sub-category is *rind* (Mod. Ir. *rinn*), and three citations of its use as a common noun in Old Irish texts are given, from *Senchus Mór* (Hancock and O’Mahony 1865, 160, l. 5), *Aided Chon Roí* (Best 1905, 26, l. 5) and *In Cath Catharda* (Stokes 1909, l. 5844). Although the body of texts is not comprehensive, it is substantial and there are good reasons to take this as evidence that *ros* in the sense of ‘promontory’ was not common in the active vocabulary in this period. This view is supported by the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, which gives the meanings of *ros* as 1a) ‘a wood’ and 1b) by extension ‘wood, timber’, with just one citation from the Irish *Liber Hymnorum* (Bernard and Atkinson 1898, 76) indicating the meaning ‘promontory’, where the Latin *promontoriis* is glossed “o arusaib.” This is glossed “o rossaib” in Stokes’ edition in *Goidelica* (Stokes 1872, 70). Some of the elements in this word-field, such as *pointe*, are likely to have entered Irish as loans after the Old Irish period. However, we shall see below that this is unlikely to apply to *ros*.

3. What suffixes can be attached to *ros*?

The following derivatives of *ros* are found: *rosán* (e.g., *An Rosán* / Rossane, Co. Tipperary), *roisín* (e.g., *Roisín an Bholgáin* / Rusheenyvulligan, Co. Galway). *Roisean* is a rather rarer derivative of *ros* which occurs in Slieve Rushen (on the border of Cos. Cavan and Fermanagh) and also in Rushen on the Isle of Man, where it is the name both of a sheading and part of the name of the parish of Kirk Christ Rushen, indicating that the name is of considerable antiquity (Broderick 2002 vi, 165–66). *Rosnat* is an obsolete Irish name for a monastic foundation somewhere in Britain, perhaps at Whithorn (Hogan 1910, 588). This name appears to break down as *Ros* + *-án* + *-a(i)t*, a pattern which is also found in some personal names, particularly early names, such as *Gobnait*, *Damhnait* and *Ornait*. This structure is rare in place-names. There are some examples of the termination *-a(i)t* (later *-a(i)d*) mentioned by Joyce (ii, 1875, 15–16) such as *Caolad* (Kealid, Co. Kerry) and *Fánaid* (Fanad, Co. Donegal), the latter showing the slender variant. However, exact parallels for *Rosnat* (with *-án* + *-a(i)t*) are difficult to find. *Cruachnait* (Croghnut Island, Co. Galway) is one such example (also with a slender termination). *Fianait* (Fenit, Co. Kerry) may be another, but it seems probable that this breaks down as *fian* (‘wild’) + *-ait*, rather than *fiadh* (‘wild’) + *-án* + *-ait*.

4. Is *ros* found in tautological names?

A number of names in *ros* are tautological, a further factor indicating the antiquity of this element.⁶ Names such as Ross Point (Co. Mayo), the English form of *Ros Mac Pháidín*, show a form of tautology which is commonplace in Irish place-names: the Irish word *ros* is anglicised as *Ross*, and the English word *point*, with roughly the same meaning, is appended to it. The reason for this duplication is clear: the element *ros* is not transparent to most English speakers and is therefore treated as an obscure name, to which *point* is added to clarify the type of feature in question. Tautology usually occurs in place-names when an element’s meaning is not understood by speakers employing a name. It is often an indicator of contact between languages or of an

older element falling out of use. This point is made by García Sanchez in relation to the toponymy of Spain, where it is accepted that many linguistic layers are discernible in the country's place-names. "The occurrence of tautologies (repetitions of the same notion in different ways) is usually due to the arrival of speakers of a new language who are unaware of the significance of the appellative which gave rise to the initial toponym, corresponding to the language previously spoken in that territory. Consequently, many tautological toponyms are hybrids" (García Sanchez 2007, 307 [my translation]). He cites *Los Llanos de Aridane* in the Canary Islands and *Valle de Arán* in the Pyrenees as examples. Many similar examples can be found in Ireland, such as Barnesmore Gap, Co. Donegal (Ir. *bearna(s)*, 'gap'), Garinish Island, Co. Cork (Ir. *inis*, 'island'), Slieve Mish Mountains (Ir. *sliabh*, 'mountain').

However, what is particularly interesting about some of the names in *ros* is that they also show tautology in their Irish forms, irrespective of their English forms. There are several examples in which *ceann* appears to have been added to an existing name in *ros*, such as *Ceann Ros Eoghain* (Rossan Point, Co. Donegal), *Ceann Damhrois* (Dawros Head, Co. Donegal) and *Ceann Eachrois* (Aughris Head, Co. Sligo). These all appear to be secondary names, implying the prior existence of a more basic name in *ros*: *Ros Eoghain*, *Damhros* and *Eachros*. Similarly, *rinn* has been added to *Ros Láir* to form *Rinn Ros Láir* (Rosslare Point, Co. Wexford). One can argue that, while tautological, the addition of *rinn* now serves to distinguish the actual promontory from the port and town of Rosslare, which derives its name from the same promontory. The case of *Rinn Ramhrois* (Rinrawros Point, Co. Donegal) is similar. The addition of *rinn* helps to distinguish the promontory from a townland called *Ramhros* (Rawros), though the townland derives its name from the promontory. We also find *pointe* appended to names in *ros*, for example in *Pointe Luacharois* (Loughros Point, Co. Donegal) and *Pointe Charraig an Rois* (St. John's Point, Co. Donegal). This last name implies a three-stage development: *An Ros* → *Carraig an Rois* → *Pointe Charraig an Rois*.

All of these names are taken from *Gasaitéar na hÉireann*. It is remarkable that no tautological names are to be found in this source in which *ros* is appended to existing names in *ceann*, *pointe* or *rinn*. This strongly suggests that these names in *ros* are typically primary names, from which secondary names have been formed at some later date by the addition of synonyms, once the meaning of *ros* had become at least partly opaque to Irish speakers in the areas concerned.

In summary we can say that both *ros* and *rinn* appear in some early names for promontories, but that there is evidence for *ros* being productive at a somewhat earlier stage. However, given the possible connection between Ir. *rinn* and W. *rhyn*, 'hill' (*penrhyn*, 'promontory') it would be unwise to treat absence of evidence as evidence of absence and to rule out the possibility of *rinn* going back to the Common Celtic era. At the other end of the time-scale, we can say that *ros* appears to have produced few names of promontories after the 10th century (note that the same would not be true of *ros* in the sense of 'a wood') and that *rinn* appears to have remained considerably longer in the lexicon.

Appendix – Place-names in *rinn* and *ros* referred to in text**Rinn**

Rinn Ros Láir, Rosslare Point, Co. Wexford.

Rinn Ramhrois, Rinrawros Point, par. Mevagh, Co. Donegal.

Ros

Ros Dumhach, Rosspport, po, par. Kilcommon, Co. Mayo.

Ros an Droichid, Rossadrehid, po, par. Templeneiry, Co. Tipperary.

An Ros, Rush, po, par. Lusk, Co. Dublin.

An Ros Ross, po, par. Killeagh, Co. Meath.

An Ros, Rosses Point, promontory, par. Drumcliff, Co. Sligo.

Na Rosa, The Rosses, district, Co. Donegal.

Mucros, ‘pig promontory’, Muckross, par. Killarney, Co. Kerry (also Muckros Head, par. Kilcar, Co. Donegal).

Pointe Luacharois, Loughros Point, par. Inishkeel, Co. Donegal.

Pointe Charraig an Rois, St. John’s Point, par. Killaghtee, Co. Donegal.

(All above examples of *ros* taken from *Gasaitéar na hÉireann*.)

Ramhros, Rinrawros, tl., par. Mevagh, Co. Donegal.

An Rosán, Rossane, par. Kilvemnon, Co. Tipperary.

Roisín an Bholgáin, Rusheenyvulligan, par. Moyrus, Co. Galway.

Sliabh Roisean, Slieve Rushen, hill (404m), par. Tomregan/Kinawley, Cos. Cavan/Fermanagh.

[*co*] *Sliabh Rusén* [7 *go Loch Erne*] (*Annals of the Four Masters*, 1111)

Rosnat, an Irish name for a monastery in Britain, where St. Tigernach is said to have been educated. Identified variously as Candida Casa (Whithorn, Scotland), Tintagel (Cornwall) and other places.

[*de*] *Rostnat*[-*ensi monasterio*]; [*in*] *Rosnat*[-*ensi monasterio*]; [*de*] *Rostat*[-*ensi monasterio*];

[*ad*] *Rostnat*[-*ense monasterium*], (Codex Salmanticensis, early 14th c.)

Abbreviations:

par. – parish; po. – settlement with a post office; tl. – townland.

Notes

1. In this year, *The Annals of the Four Masters* record a battle on Sliabh Mis between elements of the Dál nAraide in which Nia, son of Cucongalt, was slain.
2. Ó Maolfabhail 1990, 248. “Ébliu nó Éblenn an bunainm, ainm baindé a úsáideadh níos déanaí mar ainm dúiche.”
3. Araidh Tíre – a population group who inhabited what is now part of N.W. Tipperary, particularly the barony of Owney and Arra. See Ó Riain, Ó Murchadha and Murray 2003, 76.
4. Mac an Bhaire, ‘Logainmneacha dár Céad Eilimint Sliabh’ (unpublished survey of place-names whose first element is *sliabh*; compiled 1978).
5. These examples are drawn from An Brainse Logainmneacha. 1989. *Gasaitéar na hÉireann*; McKay. 1999. *A Dictionary of Ulster Place-Names*; and Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann (www.logainm.ie, 2008).
6. Such names are, of course, tautological from the toponymist’s point of view, but not for most speakers using them on a daily basis.

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