

# How did the Vikings influence the Irish language?

## 1. Personal and Family Names



The Vikings began raiding Ireland at the end of the eighth century – but their activity in Ireland quickly began to diversify in the following centuries. They began to settle there, to found towns such as Dublin and Cork, to establish trading networks, and even to fight alongside Irish kings.

This would have resulted in all sorts of interactions between the Vikings and the medieval Irish – and looking at how these interactions are reflected in the language can be a really useful way of tracking how relationships between these two peoples developed. This worksheet will look at what evidence **personal and family names** can give us about these interactions.

### ▪ Words for ‘Viking’

In the worksheet ‘What is a Viking?’, we saw a number of different terms that the medieval Irish used to refer to the Vikings, and what this told us about how they viewed these raiders and settlers.

For example, a word that was used during the earliest Viking raids was *genti* ‘heathens’, indicating that the medieval Irish defined the Vikings as different, as ‘Other’, to themselves in terms of their difference in religion: the medieval Irish were Christians, while the Vikings were pagans (at least until the tenth century).

Another word the medieval Irish used for the Vikings was *gall* ‘foreigner’ – so again they were defining the Vikings as different to themselves, as something external and hostile that was invading Ireland. Sometimes they added other words onto the front of *gall*, to produce something more descriptive: *dubgall* ‘dark foreigner’ or *findgall* ‘fair foreigner’, for example.

### ▪ *Dubgall* and *Lochlannach*

We’ve seen that medieval Irish words such as *genti* and *gall* characterised the Vikings as ‘Other’, as outsiders. But interestingly, the word *dubgall* ‘dark foreigner’ actually survives in the modern day as the personal name **Dougal** – and it also survives in the surname **McDowell**.

The modern personal name **Lochlan** or **Lachlann**, meanwhile, comes from *Lochlannach* ‘someone from *Lochlann*’ (another term from the worksheet ‘What is a Viking?’).

This tells us that at some point the medieval Irish stopped viewing the Vikings so much as outsiders, and started to accept them as a part of their own society, at least to some extent. We know that the Vikings started to settle in Ireland from the ninth century, and at some point they must have started to intermarry with the Irish people they were now living alongside, so that their children would then be of mixed heritage.

### ▪ **Mc and O' Surnames**

This mixing of cultures starts to appear in the Irish language, including in its family names. For example, the family name **McDowell** is formed from *dubgall* 'dark foreigner', and *mac*, which meant 'son' in medieval Ireland (and also in medieval Scotland, where they spoke a similar language at this time). So names starting with Mac or Mc are like English surnames ending in -son (e.g. Johnson, Williamson). McDowell therefore originally meant 'son of a dark foreigner'.

In Irish surnames, you also find names starting O' (Ó in Irish), like O'Grady or O'Brien. This O' comes from the medieval Irish word *ua*, which means 'grandson' or 'descendant'. So **O'Brien** was originally *Ua Briain*, 'descendant of Brian', used for the descendants of Brian Bórama, who died at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

But another medieval Irish family name was *Ua Ímair*, which means 'descendant of Ímar', or 'Ívarr' in its Norse spelling. In other words, the descendants of a Viking called Ívarr chose to use the Irish term *ua*. Here we can see that the two cultures were starting to merge and intermingle, even to borrow words from each other.

We can see this even more strongly in the modern surname **O'Higgins** (in Irish **Ó hUiginn**). In medieval Irish, this was *Ua Uiginn*, formed from *ua* and *ucing*, an Irish word for 'Viking' which we also met in the worksheet 'What is a Viking?'. This word *ucing* was borrowed from the Old Norse word *vikingr*, which gives us the English word 'Viking' as well. So the surname O'Higgins originally meant 'descendant of a Viking'.

### ▪ **Loan-words**

What we're starting to see here is that essentially the Irish and Norse inhabitants of Ireland were learning to live with one another! Names that meant 'Viking' were becoming acceptable, the Norse inhabitants of Ireland were borrowing Irish naming elements, and even more significantly, the Irish language was starting to borrow words (like *vikingr*) from Old Norse, leading to what are known as 'loan-words'. Looking at these loan-words can give us a real insight into what interactions between the Irish and the Vikings might have consisted of – and this is what the next worksheet ('How did the Vikings affect the Irish language? 2. Loan-words') will be looking at ...

## Activities

1. Give the meanings of the following personal and family names:

Dougal

Ua Ímair

Lochlan

O'Higgins

McDowell

O'Brien

2. Which medieval Irish words do the surname markers Mc and O' come from?

Can you think of any other modern surnames that use these markers? Can you guess what they would originally have meant?

3. What can the personal names Dougal and Lochlan tell us about changing attitudes towards the Vikings in medieval Ireland?

## Bibliography

Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (October, 2019)

Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, *From the Viking Word-Hoard: A Dictionary of Scandinavian Words in the Languages of Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 2010)

Website: *The Viking Age c. 790–1066*, developed by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge (<https://asncvikingage.wixsite.com/pilot>)



\* you can look up all of these Irish words and their English translations in eDIL (Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language): [www.dil.ie](http://www.dil.ie)

## Answer Sheet

1. Dougal 'dark foreigner', from the medieval Irish word *dubgall*  
Ua Ímair 'descendant of Ímar', using the medieval Irish word *ua* 'grandson, descendant'  
Lochlan 'Viking', from the medieval Irish word *Lochlannach* 'someone from *Lochlann*'  
O'Higgins 'descendant of a Viking', from the medieval Irish words *ua* 'grandson, descendant' and *ucing* 'Viking'  
McDowell 'son of a dark foreigner', from the medieval Irish words *mac* 'son' and *dubgall* 'dark foreigner'  
O'Brien 'descendant of Brian', using the medieval Irish word *ua* 'grandson, descendant'

2. Mc (or Mac) comes from the medieval Irish word *mac* 'son'. O' comes from the medieval Irish word *ua* 'grandson' or (later) 'descendant'.

Many surnames using Mc and O' are based on personal names, such as McDonald, MacCormack, MacHugh, O'Connor and O'Neill.

Notably, a number of Irish surnames are based on Norse personal names, including MacAuliffe ('son of Olaf', Mod. Ir. Mac Amhlaoibh) and MacManus ('son of Magnus', Mod. Ir. Mac Maghnuis).

3. The medieval Irish origins of these names are 'dark foreigner' and 'someone from *Lochlann*' (a location across the sea from which the Vikings were said to come, later used as a term for Norway). So they originated as names designating the Vikings as 'Other', people who were foreign and external to Ireland. The fact that these words were then used as personal names shows that they must have lost their negative connotations over time, since people applied them to their own children. We can therefore conclude that relations with the Vikings were no longer purely hostile. Such names may also indicate intermarrying between the Irish and the Viking settlers, since they might have been descriptive of a child of partial Norse heritage – as names like 'son or descendant of a Viking' also indicate.

## Bibliography

Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (forthcoming, 2019)

Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, *From the Viking Word-Hoard: A Dictionary of Scandinavian Words in the Languages of Britain and Ireland* (Dublin, 2010)

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