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 **tir Eoghan**, 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 (tir 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 **caistél** (literally, ‘castle’, borrowed from English ‘castle’ or Latin *castellum*). **Tech** or **teg** means ‘house’, as in **Teach Náithí** (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’.

* 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)
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 Cuáilnge):

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

*Táin Bó Cuáilnge 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.
   
   - clochán  oak
   - fert    cabin
   - baile   church
   - lecht   stone
   - cell    land
   - cloch   grave
   - dair    hut
   - dún     mill
   - both    settlement
   - tir     burial mound
   - muilend 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


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)

* you can look up all of these Irish words and their English translations in eDIL
Answer Sheet

1. clochán  
   hut

   fert  
   burial mound

   baile  
   settlement

   lecht  
   grave

   cell  
   church

   cloch  
   stone

   dair  
   oak

   dún  
   fortress

   both  
   cabin

   tir  
   land

   muilend  
   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