

Place-names:

3. Mountains, Hills, & Plains



The topography of Ireland is far from flat. Many places in Ireland take their names from hills and promontories, or lower depressions and plains. Like waterways, hills can be useful places to settle for a number of reasons, including defensibility, visibility, and ecological features; proximity to water and good farmland can make plains equally attractive. The name of both the county and town **Roscommon** comes from *ros* ‘wooded height’ + *Comán*, the first abbot of Roscommon.

This worksheet will explore words for landscape features including mountains, hills, and plains, as well as the place-names in which they appear.

▪ Mountains

In addition to describing an area’s physical surroundings, toponyms often commemorate someone who has died in a particular place. The metrical *Dindsenchas* gives two versions of the origins of the place-name **Slíab Mairge** (modern Slievemargy, County Laois), ‘the mountain of Marg’. In one version, a woman named Marg dies of grief at the death of her beloved. In another version, a warrior named Marg dies of thirst when his host does not offer proper generosity:

As the champion’s drink did not arrive
along with the warrior's food,
thirst killed him thereafter by its violence,
over against old Slíab Mairge.

The Metrical Dindsenchas, vol. 3, transl. Gwynn, p. 163

▪ Hills and Heights

You may have already met several words for ‘hill’ in the ‘Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld’ worksheet. Words for naturally-occurring hills include *cnocc* and *tulach*.

Ard can also mean ‘height’ or ‘high place’, though it is less specific than *slíab* ‘mountain’. The place-name **Armagh** means ‘the height (*ard*) of **Macha**’.

Macha is a mythological character also commemorated in the name of nearby **Emain Macha** (modern **Navan**, County Armagh).

In one tale called *The Debility of the Ulstermen (Noínden Ulad)*, Macha's foolish husband tells the king of Ulster that she can run faster than his horses. The king forces Macha to race (even though she is pregnant) and although she wins, she gives birth to twins immediately afterwards. Macha subsequently curses the Ulstermen so that someday they will feel the pangs of childbirth at the least convenient moment possible:

When a time of oppression falls upon you, each one of you who dwells in this province will be overcome with weakness, as the weakness of a woman in child-birth, and this will remain upon you for five days and four nights; to the ninth generation it shall be so.

The Debility of the Ultonian Warriors, transl. Hull, p. 100

Macha's curse comes to pass during the Cattle Raid of Cooley (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*); since the men of Ulster are debilitated by labour pains, the youth Cú Chulainn must defend the province. The story explains that Emain Macha (literally, 'Macha's twins') is named after the legendary events.

A few miles from Emain Macha, Armagh is the site of one of St Patrick's most important churches. Armagh continued to be an important site throughout Irish history and was rebuilt multiple times. The **Annals of Ulster** recount how in 823,

Fire from heaven struck the abbot's platform in Armagh and burnt it.

The Chronicle of Ireland, transl. Charles-Edwards, p. 282

Church-burning was a relatively common occurrence, either from natural disasters like that mentioned above, or as a result of conflicts or even Viking raids. The fact that Armagh survived burning and continued to be a centre of episcopal administration attests to its enduring legacy throughout the medieval period and beyond.

▪ Plains and Fields

Mag (modern Irish *maigh*) is a common place-name element meaning 'field' or 'plain'. Sometimes **mag** also appears as a poetic term for the sea or refers to **Mag Mell** 'the pleasant plain', an Otherworldly location across the sea. In *The Voyage of Bran (Immram Brain)*, the heaven-like paradise of **Mag Mell** is described in riddling terms:

Though but one chariot-rider is seen
in Mag Mell of many flowers,
there are many steeds on its surface,
though them thou seest not.

The size of the plain, the number of the host,
colours glisten with pure glory,
a fair stream of silver, cloths of gold,
afford a welcome with all abundance.

The Voyage of Bran son of Febal, transl. Meyer, §39-40

Mag also appears in the title *Cath Maige Tuired* (sometimes Anglicised as 'Moytura'), or 'The Battle of the Field of Pillars', a name applied to two medieval Irish texts that involve the Túatha Dé Danann fighting off various other mythological peoples. **Mag** can also be found in names of real-world places, such as **Mag Eó (Mayo)**, 'the plain of the yew trees'.

Activities

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

<i>ros</i>	voyage (genre of literature)
<i>ard</i>	pleasant
<i>mag</i>	mountain
<i>eó</i>	hill
<i>cnocc</i>	wooded height
<i>slíab</i>	height
<i>tulach</i>	promontory
<i>mell</i>	yew
<i>immram</i>	field

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 that refers to a specific landscape feature. Go through the ‘Glossary’ and find a new word for a geographic 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

- T. M. Charles-Edwards, transl., *The Chronicle of Ireland* (Liverpool, 2006) – available online through Liverpool University Press Online (subscription required)
- E. Gwynn, transl., *The Metrical Dindsenchas* (Dublin, 1903–35) – available online at <https://celt.ucc.ie/publishd.html>
- E. Hull, transl., ‘The Debility of the Ultonian Warriors’, in *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 98–100 – available online at <https://archive.org/details/cuchullinsagain00cuchgoog/page/n186>
- K. Meyer, transl., *The Voyage of Bran son of Febal* (London, 1895) – available online at <https://iso.ucc.ie/Immram-brain/Immram-brain-text.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. There may be multiple right answers (*ard*, *cnocc*, and *tulach* could mean ‘height’, ‘hill’, and ‘promontory’ interchangeably).

<i>ros</i>	wooded height
<i>ard</i>	height
<i>mag</i>	field
<i>eó</i>	yew
<i>cnocc</i>	hill
<i>slíab</i>	mountain
<i>tulach</i>	promontory
<i>mell</i>	pleasant
<i>immram</i>	voyage (genre of literature)

2. Answers may vary.

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