PLACE-_NAMES IN EARLY IRISH DOCUMENTATION: STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

The primary consideration of this paper was to establish from observation of place-name documentation in a number of selected texts the commonest structural patterns in earlier place-name formation. A secondary consideration was the observation of the commonest generic elements in the place-names of the sources examined. Place-names that are known to be transferred population-/ sept-names have been omitted from the assessment.

1. A preliminary to the main exercise was the consideration of what is probably the commonest structure in the place-name coverage of today, viz. 'Nom governing gen. of article and noun', e.g. Lag an Aoi ('hollow of the lime').

For each set of annals the proportional occurrence per century of the place-name structure 'Noun governing gen. of article and noun' was presented in a series of histograms. (Proportions were based on the total count of place-names within the century, with the omission of repeats and known transferred population-/ sept-names.) Excluding one 6th century entry, Ráth in Druad, instances of the place-name structure in All begin in the 11th and 12th centuries, both with ca 2%, with a marked increase in the 13th century to ca 11%. In All the structure is not documented with any degree of certainty until the 9th century (ca 1%) but the incidence is not markedly significant until the 12th and 13th centuries. Loch Cé covers the century-span that appears most significant in this study, the 11th - 16th centuries. Here we have a fairly steady increase in the incidence of the structure from ca 2% in the 11th century to 22% in the 16th century. The statistical tendency, on the combined evidence of the three sets of annals, would indicate that while names of the structure 'Noun governing gen. of article and noun' are instances as early as the 9th century, it is from the 11th century onwards that there is a noticeable increase in the frequency of usage.

These findings were upheld by the narrative texts examined: the non-occurrence of this place-name structure in the Book of Armagh material (7th - early 9th century) and the markedly low incidence of the structure in Bethu Phátraicic (original compilation ca 900 A.D.).

Also considered briefly at this stage was the incidence of the place-name structure 'Noun with article' which, according to the findings of the main exercise (discussed below in 4), is not significantly represented in early documentation. The proportional occurrence per century of this structure in the annals was presented alongside the corresponding 'Noun governing gen. of article and noun' histogram. The correspondence was sufficiently marked in all three sets of annals to indicate that the increase in frequency of the name-structure 'Noun governing gen. of article and noun' was related to the increase in frequency of the 'Noun with article' name-structure. It was also noted that in Bethu Phátraicic the
The first reservation above applies also to the new narrative area, the saga

The incidence of 'Nanin with article' was so low as to be negligible (TDC: 7%, LG: 6%), particularly so in view of the relative frequency of these classifications within the overall pattern of a larger study conducted by Flanagan. The exact contingency 4.

In considering the linguistic evidence, the frequency analysis of the components of the place-name formation in the period 5th-11th centuries, Flanagan suggests that the proportion of place-names should be essentially the same as that recorded in the earlier period.
6. Other findings were briefly noted, pending more detailed investigation.

7. It is in the category 'Noun without article' that we get our oldest stratum, or strata, of names. While an occasional name is immediately intelligible - Selmain 'slippery or smooth place', Lúachair 'rushing place', Dóbar 'water' - the majority of the names are not words which feature lexicographically in the composition of Old or Middle Irish texts. There is no manuscript indication that they had a natural usage in the vocabulary of the post 800 period: names like Fremaud, Uínech, Tensir, Carman, Taliltú, Cuib, Slange, Ocha, Clíu, Al, Críma, etc., the interpretation of which is dependent on philology rather than lexicography. On the other hand, in the category 'Noun governing gen. of noun', for the most part the primary element is immediately intelligible and the commonest instances of these elements are listed in 8 infra. It would appear that the category 'Noun without article' is firmly rooted in the pre-documentary period with a degree of continuity into the Old Irish period. The category 'Noun governing gen. of noun' appears to be well established by the beginning of the documentary period and, if the place-name documentation of the 5th- and 6th-century annals is even partially reliable, well established by the beginning of our historical period.

8. A charting of the incidence of commoner toponymical elements in each of the texts examined showed the following to have a significant frequency of occurrence: mag, 'plain'; lech, 'lake, sea-lough'; sliab, 'mountain'; drùim, 'hill-ridge'; cenn, 'head'; sród/aird, 'height/promontory'; gleann, 'glen', ins, 'island'. Of these mag had by far the highest incidence in all the texts. However, since the subject matter of the text can determine the frequency or infrequency of the elements instances, the relative incidence of the other seven elements listed was not seen to be of significance. A similar charting of elements relating to settlement, communication and artefact showed that of the primary settlement terms òth, 'fort' and rath, 'fort' were the commonest. (Celt was the common ecclesiastical settlement term in the annals and Arn.) Of the secondary settlement terms chusain, 'meadow' was seen to have the highest incidence; achadh, 'field', pasúr and cuill, 'corner, recess' were also well attested. Of the elements indicating man's activity 4th, 'ford' and cenn, 'council' had a significant frequency of usage.

The above elements appear to have been in common use in the place-name composition of the early documentary period. If the place-name documentation of the sources used for this study is - even to some degree - a reflection of the nomenclature of the period to which the subject matter relates, it may be argued that the elements listed were in common use in place-name composition in and around the beginning of the historical period.

NOTES

1. Discounting the problematic name 'Sescenn da cor', which Pokorny argued contained as its medial element a reduced form of the genitive plural of the article, Índa > da (Zeit. fü. Celtische Philol, XIV (1923), 270-71), Pokorny's supporting evidence for his theory that da in place-names may sometimes represent the genitive plural of the article and not the dual number is seen to be unconvincing. For an appraisal of the evidence cf. Bull. Ulster Place-Name Soc., ser. 2, vol. 3 (1980/1).

2. I am indebted to Dr. J. Maguire for permission to use his index of the place-names in Bethu Phadraic and his notes on the place-name analysis.

3. It was noted that 'single noun' names, documented without the article in the earlier centuries, begin commonly to feature the article by the 12th century.

4. More than half the names are used both with and without the article.

5. The post-7th century sequence was omitted from this consideration.

6. Several minor categories considered - 'Noun + gen. of noun + gen. of adjective', 'Noun + gen. of noun + gen. of noun' - have been omitted from this summary presentation.

7. The percentage would show a marginal increase if the related categories 'Noun + gen. of noun + gen. of adjective' and 'Noun + gen. of noun + gen. of noun' were added. Attested elements of lower frequency count have been omitted from this summary.

DEIRDRE FLANAGAN

The Queen's University Belfast