The Element *Ath*/Ford
in Irish Place-Names

Breandán S. Mac Aodha

In times gone by, rivers formed serious obstacles to movement by land. Well into the present century stilts were employed as an aid to dry passage across many rivers, both in mainland Europe, e.g. the Taro,\(^1\) and in Ireland, e.g. the Moyola in Co. Derry.\(^2\) It is not surprising, then, that shallow stretches which facilitated crossing acquired great significance, and it was natural, too, that settlements would tend to develop at such crossing points, and to acquire their names from those features. Most surviving ‘ford’ names in Ireland are settlement-names, but in former times many crossing points remote from settlements were clearly identified by name.\(^3\)

A perusal of *Aimmeacha Gaeilge na mBailte Poit*\(^4\) reveals that the term *áth* (a ford) occurs in a number of different contexts in the names of Irish postal towns. Surprisingly, the simple nominative form is only the second most common of these. It is found in forty instances,\(^5\) e.g. *Áth Dara* ‘the ford of the oak-tree’ (Adare, Co. Limerick), *Áth na Cloiche* ‘the ford of the stone’ (Annacloney, near Downpatrick) and *Áth an Chláir* ‘the ford of the plain’ (Aclare, near Ballymote, Co. Sligo). Much more commonly, however, the word is found in the genitive case *áth* in a variety of combinations with other elements, and accompanied by the articles *an* and the definite article *án*. The most common combination of all is the form *bealtainn* *áth*. The late distinguished editor of *The Bulletin of the Ulster Place-Name Society* showed that this form, which lies concealed in the name of Belfast itself, occurs in the annals as far back as the twelfth century and became common from the fifteenth century onwards. It signifies ‘approach to a ford’.\(^6\)

There are fifty-one instances of names employing this particular formula, e.g. *Béal an Átha Fada* ‘approach to the long ford’ (Ballinafad, Co. Galway), *Béal an Átha Moir* ‘approach to the great ford’ (Balmamore, near Ballymoney, Co. Antrim), and *Béal an Átha Min* ‘approach to the smooth ford’ (Ballynaneem, Co. Roscommon).\(^7\) Examples without the definite article preceding *áth* include *Béal Átha an Tuair* ‘approach to ford of the bleaching green’ (Ballytore, near Athy, Co. Kildare), *Béal Átha na Leac* ‘approach to ford of the flagstones’ (Ballinalack, near Mullingar.

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40. The place-name has been discussed by Professor Melville Richards in *NTCB*, 154, and in ‘Welsh Influence’, 216, and by B. G. Charles in *NCPN*, 230–1, and in ‘Substitution’, 42–3. Professor Jackson also refers to it in ‘Angles & Britons’, 83.
41. Pitch-prominence does not appear in their discussions of any of the other normalized p.n.n. either.
42. *NTCB*, 154.
44. See note 9.
45. B. G. Charles (NCPN, 230) points out that some p.n.n. in Devon also retain the genitive plural: Prestacott, Priestacott, Priestaford (PNDevon, 129, 131, 465).
46. This vowel-change is a well-known phonological feature in Cwyd, revealed in Mostyn, Mertyn, Estyn, Sychdyn, Brychtyn, Axtyn, Gofyn, Kelstryn, Overtyn and in Shropshire’s Selattyn and Brognytyn; see the comment under type (2) above.
47. ‘Angles & Britons’, 83.
49. ‘Substitution’, 41.
51. *London Mediaeval Studies* 1 (1937), 48–55. He concerned himself with the difficulty of distinguishing in English place-names between final *leth*, *hyl*, and a noun-forming suffix *el*, each of which could appear indistinguishable from the others as an unaccented final *-le, -el* or *-la.*
Co. Westmeath) and Béal Átha na nEach 'approach to ford of the steeds' (Ballinag, Co. Cavan).

The third common combination is baile átha 'the settlement of the ford'. It occurs in such names as Baile Átha an Rí 'the settlement of the ford of the king', (Athlone, Co. Galway) and Baile Átha an Urchar 'the settlement of the ford of the shot' (Horseleap, Co. Westmeath). However, there are only ten instances in all of this particular format.8

Bealach átha 'the pass of the ford' occurs in one instance only: Bealach Átha (Newtonballyhe, Co. Cork). Ciann átha 'the head of the ford', is equally scarce, being found only in Ciann Átha Gad 'the head of the ford of witheys?' (Kinnegad, Co. Westmeath). So too is droichead átha 'the bridge of the ford', Droichead Átha (Drogheda, Co. Louth) being the only representative. However, the element droichead is also combined with áth in the composite term droichead béal an átha 'the bridge at the approach of the ford', but again in one instance only: Droichead Béal an Átha Móir 'the bridge at the approach to the great ford' (Ballinamore Bridge, Co. Galway). Dún átha 'the doon (fort, lios) of the ford', is found only in Dún Átha (Doonaha, Co. Clare), while the combination fiodh an átha 'the wood of the ford' occurs only in Fiodh an Átha (Finea, Co. Westmeath). One last combination recorded in a single instance only is lios béal átha 'the liss (doon, fort) at the approach to the ford': Lios Béal Átha (Lisbellaw, Co. Fermanagh).

Practically all the examples given above or listed in the notes at the end of this paper are long-established toponyms, some of which may date back to the first millennium A.D. or perhaps earlier still, but a tiny handful are recent concoctions 'translating' English-language place-names containing the element ford. These latter probably include Áth an Bhairinigh (Waringsford, Co. Down), Áth Bhriain (Bryansford, Co. Down) and Áth Stain (Stoneyford, Co. Kilken). Only nineteen of the official English versions of postal-town names contain the element ford.9 Perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that most English names were introduced late, at a time when the significance of such features had greatly diminished.

The rendering of Irish names into 'English' forms has spawned many different versions of the simple element áth, depending on its grammatical case (normally nominative or genitive), its combination with other elements or with the definite article, and the whim of the transliterator. Áth in the nominative case, unqualified by the definite article, and not followed by that part of speech, was usually written áth as in Athleague (Áth Liag, Co. Roscommon) or Athgarvan (Áth Garbháin, Co. Kildare).

However, it was sometimes represented simply by a, as in Adare (Áth Dara, Co. Limerick), or, before a vowel, by ah, as in Ahascragh (Áth Eascrach, Co. Galway), Ahenry (Áth Eine, Co. Tipperary) and Achoer (Áth Orá, Co. Armagh). By some strange corruption, it became aghan in the case of Aghanloo (Áth Lú, Co. Derry). When followed by the letter t, the usual rendering was at, as in Attymon (Áth Tiomáin, Co. Galway), Atynnas (Áth Ti an Mheasaigh, Co. Mayo), and Attanna (Áth Tanaí, Co. Laois). Only rare examples exist of the element ath followed by the definite article in the genitive masculine form an: this particular combination was normally transiterated as a, with loss of an, for example Aclare (Áth an Chráir, Co. Sligo) and Athea (Áth an Sléibhe, Co. Limerick). Rather more common is the grouping áth plus the genitive feminine form of the article, na. This emerged as anna, for instance Annamoe (Áth na Mo, Co. Wicklow), Annagassan (Áth na gCasáin, Co. Louth), Annacarty (Áth na Cárth, Co. Tipperary), Annaclog (Áth na Cloiche, Co. Down) and Annalong (Áth na Long, Co. Down). This particular transilation was also used for abhainn an 'river of', as in Annascaul (Abhainn an Scáil, Co. Kerry).

Áth is frequently found in combination with béal 'mouth, approach to', in a variety of different guises. These include the forms béal átha (not followed by the definite article), béal átha na where the article appears in the feminine genitive singular form, and also in the genitive plural (both genders). The first of these is the commonest. Because it is most often transilated as bally it is very frequently confused by the unwary with the element baile 'town, settlement, townland', occurring in such names as Ballycastle (Baile an Chaisil, Co. Mayo). Examples of this usage include Ballymore (Béal Átha Mó, Co. Galway), Ballyhaunis (Béal Átha hAimhnaí, Co. Mayo), Ballyfarnon (Béal Átha Fearnán, Co. Roscommon), and many others of the names given in note 7, above. However, the combination béal Átha was not always treated in this way: bella was another, though much less frequent, rendering of it, as in Bellacorick (Béal Átha Chomhrac, Co. Mayo), as also were ballya, e.g. Ballygran (Béal Átha Ghean, Co. Limerick), and belfast, e.g. Lisbellaw (Lios Béal Átha, Co. Fermanagh). In rare instances elision produced the form ball, e.g. Ballineen (Béal Átha Fhein, Co. Cork).

Béal átha an normally became ballyn: well-known examples are Ballynear (Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh, Co. Cork), Ballinhassig (Béal Átha an Cheasaigh, Co. Cork), Ballinode (Béal Átha an Fhíóid, Co. Monaghan) and Ballintirlick (Béal Átha an Tri Liag, Co. Sligo).
The combination béal átha na was rendered much less consistently. Probably the most common version was ballina as in Ballinamallard (Béal Átha na Mailacht, Co. Fermanagh), Ballinamuck (Béal Átha na Muc, Co. Longford), Ballingore (Béal Átha na Gobhar, Co. Westmeath) and Ballingar (Béal Átha na Muille, Co. Roscommon); ballae, e.g. Ballanagar (Béal Átha na gCarr, Co. Roscommon); and balli as in Ballinagh (Béal Átha na nEaich, Co. Cavan).

In a very few instances the combination of béal and átha is found with the definite article preceding the second element, in the Irish form béal an átha. This is variously rendered as ballina, ballinea and balna. The first of these is the commonest: it occurs in Ballina (Béal an Átha, Co. Mayo), Ballinafad (Béal an Átha Fada, Co. Galway), Ballinamore (Béal an Átha Mór, Co. Leitrim) and Ballinameen (Béal an Átha Míne, Co. Roscommon). The form ballinea seems to be peculiar to Ballinea (Béal an Átha, Co. Westmeath). Balna is found in Balnamore (Béal an Átha Mór, Co. Antrim), even though the Irish version of this name is identical for Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim.

The simple genitive form átha was expressed either as a, as in Drogheda (Droichead Átha, Co. Louth), or as a, as in Doonaha (Daín Átha, Co. Clare). This genitive form occurs ten times after the element baile 'a town'. In four instances the English version of the name disregarded the initial element, and the second was transliterated as ath, e.g. Athenry (Baile Átha an Rí, Co. Galway), Athboy (Baile Átha Bui, Co. Meath), Athy (Baile Átha Í, Co. Kildare), and Athlone (Baile Átha Luain, Co. Westmeath). In a fifth case the th was elided to produce Ardee (Baile Átha Phirdia, Co. Louth). Dublin, the name used in English for Ireland's capital city, was not based on the ford element, and the name Horseleap (Baile Átha an Urchair, Co. Westmeath) bears no relationship to the Irish original. Trim (Baile Átha Troim, Co. Meath) reflects the common English-language practice of ignoring the initial elements in the Irish name (cf. Dublin). In the remaining two instances baile átha became bally: they are Ballyhooly (Baile Átha hUíla, Co. Cork) and Ballyroan (Baile Átha an Roin, Co. Laois). Lastly, the element átha (genitive case) is found after the elements conn 'head, upper portion' and fiodh 'a wood'. In the first case it was anglicised as kinne, e.g. Kinnead (Cionn Átha Gad, Co. Westmeath); in the latter as ea, e.g. Finea (Fiodh an Átha, Co. Westmeath). All the samples given above are names of postal towns. However, the element ath is of much more widespread occurrence, as it also forms part of many parish, townland and minor names.

Joyce instances Agolagh (Ath-gobhlach, Co. Antrim),10 Drumaa (Druaim-átha, Co. Fermanagh),11 Athlunkard (Ath Longhfort, Co. Limerick),12 Athmid (Ath Nid, Co. Tipperary),13 Atholls (Ath Solais, Co. Cork)14, Annalaha (Ath na hÁithe, Co. Armagh)15 and Aughusalis (Ath an Solais, Co. Tipperary).16 The Irish Place-Names Commission is currently preparing standardized Irish versions of the names of townlands on a county basis. Until these become available for the entire country it will not be possible to assess the real relative significance of ath and other elements. Even then the vast corpus of minor place-names will remain untapped: from it such 'fossils' as Béal Átha Buidhe (in Cahiragh townland, Co. Armagh) and Ford Mouth (in Ballygarvey townland, Co. Antrim) must be painstakingly quarried. What is already clear is that terms signifying river crossing-points stretch back far into Irish history, and that they have played a very major role in name-formation in the Irish countryside.17

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NOTES

2. B. S. MacAodha, 'Na Spéiríne', Studia Hibernica 1 (1961), 158.
3. e.g. Áth Cualain and Béil Átha Doire Dabhain. E. Hogan, Onomastica Gaedelica (Dublin, 1910), 57 and 105.
5. The full list is as follows:
Áth an Bhairinigh (Waringford, Co. Down)
Áth an Cliair (Aclare, Co. Sligo)
Áth an Chóiste (Coachford, Co. Cork)
Áth an Chórrain (Craanford, Co. Wexford)
Áth an Chulinn (Hollyford, Co. Tipperary)
Áth an Ghainnimh (Sandyford, Co. Dublin)
Áth an Mhaide (Riverstick, Co. Cork)
Áth an Mhuilinn (Millford, Co. Cork)
Áth an Mhuilinn (Millford, Co. Armagh)
Áth an Phortain (Upperlands, Co. Derry)
Áth an Ísleibhe (Athea, Co. Limerick)
Áth Bhraoin (Bryansford, Co. Down)
Áth Cinn (Headford, Co. Galway)
Áth Dara (Adare, Co. Limerick)
Áth Eascraigh (Abascragh, Co. Galway)
Áth Éine (Athenny, Co. Tipperary)
Áth Garbháin (Asthgarvan, Co. Kildare)
An tÁth Glárách (Glarryford, Co. Antrim)
An Íth Leachach (Athlacca, Co. Limerick)  
Áth Leathan (Broadford, Co. Clare)  
An Íth Leathan (Broadford, Co. Kildare)  
Áth Liag (Athleague, Co. Roscommon)  
Áth Lú (Aghanloo, Co. Derry)  
Áth Mhic Giolla (Giford, Co. Down)  
Áth na Caíre (Annacarty, Co. Tipperary)  
Áth na Cloiche (Annacloy, Co. Down)  
Áth na Furseighe (Ashford, Co. Wicklow)  
Áth na Gásán (Annagassan, Co. Louth)  
Áth na GCloch (Stoneyford, Co. Antrim)  
Áth na Long (Annalong, Co. Down)  
Áth na mBó (Annamoe, Co. Wicklow)  
Áth na Muilte (Milford, Co. Carlow)  
Áth na Urlain (Urlingford, Co. Kilkenny)  
Áth na Scéire (Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow)  
Áth na Sraide (Stratford-on-Slaney, Co. Wicklow)  
Áth Órai (Ahorey, Co. Armagh)  
Áth Stúin (Stoneyford, Co. Kilkenny)  
Áth Táin (Attacca, Co. Laois)  
Áth Tí an Mheasaigh (Artymass, Co. Mayo)  
Áth Tiomáin (Artymon, Co. Galway)  
Áth Tí an Sána (Newmarket, Co. Cork)

6. Deirdre Ui Fhirannagain, 'Béal Feirste agus Átainnnaechta Laistigh' in *Topothesia*, edited by B. S. MacAodha, (Galway, 1982), 45-64.

7. A complete list is given below:

Béal an Ítha (Ballina, Co. Mayo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballina, Co. Westmeath)  
Béal an Ítha (Broadford, Co. Limerick)  
Béal an Ítha Fada (Ballinafad, Co. Galway)  
Béal an Ítha Fada (Ballinafad, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha Mín (Ballinameen, Co. Roscommon)  
Béal an Ítha Móir (Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim)  
Béal an Ítha Móir (Ballinameen, Co. Antrim)  
Béal an Ítha Móir (Ballinameen, Co. Donegal)  
Béal an Ítha (Silverbridge, Co. Armagh)  
Béal an Ítha (Silverbridge, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Monaghan)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Donegal)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Leitrim)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Donegal)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Leitrim)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Donegal)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Leitrim)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Donegal)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Leitrim)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Cork)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Sligo)  
Béal an Ítha (Ballynade, Co. Donegal)

8. The full list is as follows:

Béal Átha an Ri (Athenny, Co. Galway)  
Béal Átha an Róine (Ballyroan, Co. Laois)  
Béal Átha an Urchair (Horseleap, Co. Westmeath)  
Béal Átha Bui (Athboy, Co. Meath)  
Béal Átha Clath (Dublin)  
Béal Átha Flurthia (Ardee, Co. Louth)  
Béal Átha hUlla (Ballyhooly, Co. Cork)  
Béal Átha Í (Athy, Co. Kildare)  
Béal Átha Luain (Athlone, Co. Westmeath)  
Béal Átha Troim (Trim, Co. Meath)

9. They are as follows: Giford (Co. Armagh), Milford (Co. Armagh), Stoneyford (Co. Kilkenny), Milford (Co. Carlow), Bradford (Co. Kildare), Stratford-on-Slaney (Co. Wicklow), Crafnford (Co. Wexford), Ballylongford (Co. Limerick), Broadford (Co. Limerick, Coachford, Co. Cork), Milford, (Co. Cork), Milford (Co. Carlow), Milford (Co. Donegal), Broadford (Co. Clare), Hollyford (Co. Atlantic).
Mercator’s Map of Ireland as a Source for Mountain-Names

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High relief is indicated by pictograms in the shape of molehills on Mercator’s map of Ireland. Unfortunately, only a small proportion of these symbols are named. Nevertheless, there is something of value to be learned about the sixteenth-century view of Ireland, and about the evolution of anglicised forms of Irish place-names, from a detailed study of such toponyms as were recorded on the map (Fig. 1).

The order of treatment is as follows: Louth, Down, Antrim, Derry and Central Ulster, Donegal; Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Clare; Limerick, Kerry, Cork, Waterford; Kilkenny, Tipperary, Offaly, Laois, Wexford, Carlow, Wicklow, Dublin, Westmeath, Longford, Meath. Mercator’s version of each name is followed by the modern Irish form and the standard O.S. English spelling (where these are available), and notes where relevant.

No mountains are named in Co. Louth. Cooley is not marked, but Carlingford is recorded as a settlement name. Neither are the Mournes named, though Mourne does occur as a territorial name. Mountain symbols are numerous in Co. Antrim, but not even Slemish is titled.

Ulster

1. Slieve Gallen. Ir. Sliabh gCallan, Eng. Slieve Gallion. Older Irish forms Sliabh Callian and Sliabh Callainn.1 While next to nothing was known of Glen Conkien, this outer bastion of the Sperrins was very conspicuous: it dominates the entire western shore of Lough Neagh. Curiously, the Sperrins themselves were left without a name.

2. The Bovhill. No Irish or English form. This possibly refers to Sawel, the highest peak in the Sperrin range.


4. Slieve Gare. No Irish or English form. This can only relate to the low hills (<600–800 feet) in the Ballybay—Shercock area. No