Ireland

Ireland is not the prime concern of this website, and its main author cannot claim to know its landscape and history really well. Nevertheless, Ireland does offer useful insights into the earliest geographical names of western Europe, because it was never conquered by the Roman army. Importantly, there is just one main source for its earliest names: Ptolemy’s Geography names 53 of them. So all of Ireland can be tackled in this one article.

The locations of Ptolemy’s Irish names have long been discussed, with recent attempts to improve the logic by Darcy and Flynn (2008), Kleineberg, Marx, and Lelgemann (2012), Warner (2013), and Counihan (2019). The present article was begun partly to help the work of Dmitri Gusev and colleagues, which is still only partly published at a conference. It takes the best Greek spellings from Stückelberger and Graßhoff (2006). Each name is transcribed once into the Latin alphabet and its position in Ptolemy’s text is reported as 2,2,2 or similar.

In the words of one website: “The tribal and place-names in Ireland listed by Ptolemy were Celtic, and many survive in Old or Middle Irish forms.” This is a reasonable view, but the hard work of historical linguists (notably de Bernardo Stempel, 2000,2005) to find parallels in Celtic languages for elements in early Irish names has had disappointingly little success. This led Mallory (2013) to stress how much Ptolemy’s text might have been corrupted over the centuries. However, as name-to-place assignments have improved, with better geographical understanding and access to reliable texts, the linkage between Ireland’s earliest names and written Celtic languages has got weaker.

In Scotland the earliest names of the Western Isles (supplied by the Ravenna Cosmography more than by Ptolemy) are almost totally disconnected from later Gaelic names at the same places, as discussed here and by Broderick (2013). Furthermore, many names in north-west Britain that are transparently Celtic may have been freshly created centuries after Ptolemy (James, 2011). So it is reasonable to think that many of Ptolemy’s names in Ireland were “Old European” or “pre-Celtic”.

Mallory (2013, chapter 9) discussed when Celtic speech first reached Ireland, and inclined to a view that it was well after 1000 BC, possibly with the arrival of a culture associated with hill-forts and iron weapons. I am starting to wonder if even that date is too early, so that Gaelic had not really crystallised as a language, or had not widely prevailed over earlier dialects (whether Indo-European or not), much before Ptolemy’s day.

As will become clear below, Ptolemy’s names in Ireland can be interpreted with much the same logic as in Britain. The key difference is that Ireland was never administered by the Roman army, with its multi-ethnic, often Germanic, personnel. Even though Latin did not arrive seriously before the Christian church, dictionaries of Latin and Greek still need to be scoured for parallels missed by previous investigators. All possibly relevant PIE roots must be checked, not just those known to have Celtic descendants. Shipborne traders supplied many of Ptolemy’s names, which were mainly navigation markers or places where customers might gather, so exotic languages (Punic, Basque, Uralic) might be in play, too. Above all, geographical character of places can help decide among competing name etymologies.

In what follows, OI means Old (or mediaeval) Irish, OE means Old English, and PIE means proto-Indo-European. PIE roots are mostly cited in the style of Watkins (2011), and accents on Greek letters are avoided. References without hyperlinks can be found in this website’s main reflist. Note that the consonant generally written and pronounced W in English was OY (ou) in Ptolemy’s Greek, V in Latin, and became F in Irish.

Let’s start at the northern tip of Ireland and tour clockwise around the coast, listing (and trying to locate) all the promontories, river mouths, and islands mentioned by Ptolemy.

Bореіон ἀκρον (Boreion 2,2,2) was ancient Greek for ‘northern point’, probably Malin Head.

Веннікніон ἀκρον (Wennniknion 2,2,2), was probably Inishowen Head, the eastern tip of Donegal, by the entrance to Lough Foyle. It was presumably named from people called *Венніквіон, compounded from two elements found right across ancient Europe: See under Venta how a name referring to a river basin now seems preferable that a link to *wen- ‘friends, our people’; –ікно (and similar forms) was patronymic, not implying close relationship ‘son of’ so much as ‘descendant’,
rather like Mac-, or like –son in British surnames. This name may perhaps survive in Dunfanaghy and Fanad.

Ουινδειος (or Ουδεια) river mouth (Widua 2,2,2) was the Foyle, evidently named from PIE *widhu- ‘tree’, whose descendants include OE widu and OI fid. This might refer to the mouth of Lough Foyle out towards the open sea, but more likely to further inland where the later name Derry referred to “extensive woodland that once covered much of the east bank of the River Foyle”.

Αργιτα river mouth (Argita 2,2,2) was the river Bann through Coleraine, a name based on PIE *arg- ‘white’, hence Greek ἀφρος ‘bright, shining’ or words for ‘silver’ such as Irish argat or Latin argentum. Celticists have suggested the river’s waters were considered ‘shining’ by local people, but it seems more likely that mariners would have noticed the extensive white sands in an estuary extending well inland in Ptolemy’s day, and now represented by Portstewart Strand and sand dunes.

Ροβογδιον ακρον (Robogdion 2,2,2) was probably Fair Head, the north-northeastern tip of Ireland opposite Rathlin Island (Ptolemy’s Πυκύς), though one cannot totally rule out other extremities, including Benbane Head (near the Giants Causeway) or Runabay Head. The name probably meant something like ‘front curve’, referring to the general shape of the coastline, where –bogd- (seen also in Medibogdo and compare OE boga ‘bow’) probably came from *bheug – ‘to bend’ plus a D/T ending that turns a verb into an abstract noun (compare Dutch bocht ‘bend’ and English bight). Ro- is often described as a Celtic intensive prefix (Delamarre 2003:260-1), meaning ‘very’, but it descends from pro- so here the sense is ‘before, in front of’. However, the loss of P, from Pro- to yield Ro-, is a distinctively Celtic trait.

Λογια river mouth (Logia 2,2,8) was probably the river Lagan into Belfast Lough. PIE *loig- – ‘to jump’ led to OI leog ‘calf’, hence debatable claims about ‘sea inlet of the calf’. A more likely leaping animal is the salmon (PIE *laks-, with descendants in most north-European languages, including lax or lox in English). Efforts are now under way to make the Lagan run with salmon again, as it must have done in Ptolemy’s day and as its namesake Lagan in Sweden still does.

Ουινδεριος (or louin dreadoς) river mouth (Winderios 2,2,8) probably meant something like ‘pleasant river’, which does not much help in deciding between possible candidates that would fit Ptolemy’s coordinates: Strangford Lough, suggested by Warner (2013); or the small river Fane well to the south, suggested by Gusev et al; or Dundalk Harbour, which is fed by at least four rivers. This name starts like Vindo-, seen in place names in Britain and elsewhere, which is commonly claimed to be Celtic for ‘white’ but is much more likely to mean ‘pleasant, happy, fair’, from the PIE root *wen-, whose descendants include OI fine ‘clan, family’, English winsome, Latin Venus, etc. The –rios part probably came from PIE *reio- (or *er-) ‘to flow (fast)’, as in the river Rhine or OE ryne ‘water channel’.

Ισαμμιον ακρον (Isamnion 2,2,8) brings to mind many early river names across Europe that began with Is- (discussed under IΣCA), which probably came from PIE *eit- ‘to go’. For the –annion part, Celticists favour a meaning like ‘under’ or ‘standing below’, though Latin annmis ‘river’ looks very similar. Either way, Ισαμμιον would make sense as derived from *Ισαμμιον people living in a river valley under the very visible Mountains of Mourne. Identifying their ακρον would then depend upon the identity of Ουινδεριος: if it was Carlingford Lough or Dundalk Harbour the headland leading to Ballagan Point and Cooley Point is most likely, whereas, if it was the river Fane, Dunany Head or Clogher Point are better.

Βουουνδια (or Bouvyvidia) river mouth (Bouwinda 2,2,8) has long been identified with the river Boyne, explained as meaning ‘white cow’, but claims that *Bouwinda was a river goddess who evolved into Boann mentioned in medieval Irish texts have fallen out of fashion.

Εβλανα πολις (Eblana 2,2,8) was a coastal place where people gathered, most likely the promontory fort and harbour at Drumanagh, near Loughshinny, where archaeologists have found traces of a possible Roman trading post. This would perfectly fit Εβλανα being a compound of *eb- ‘off’, much like Latin or German ab, from PIE *apo- (as seen in Eβουδα), and *lana ‘piece of land’, as in Vindolanda, from PIE *lendh-, from which Welsh llan came to mean ‘enclosure’ then ‘churchyard’ then ‘village’.

Εδρου (or Aδρου) νιος (Edru 2,2,12) was Lambay island, near the large headland fort at Drumanagh, north of Dublin, which together may have traded with Roman Britain, especially
**Dobunni** from the Severn Estuary. PIE *sed*—‘to sit, settle’ had descendants in many languages, including Greek ἕδωρ (hedra) ‘sitting place’ whose many specific uses included ‘base for ships’.

**Oβοκα** river mouth (*Oboca* 2,2,8) was almost certainly the river Liffey through Dublin, not the Avoca. This name looks very like a compound of *oba* ‘river (bank)’ discussed here plus the pan-European adjectival ending that led to Latin –acus, English –ic, etc. The clear implication is that Dublin people were engaged in trade at the water’s edge centuries before the Vikings arrived.

**Λιμνος** νησιος (*Limnu* 2,2,12) was an island south of Εθρου and close to Dublin. It has been identified with Dalkey island, which is tiny, as is Ireland’s Eye, but it is probably better to guess that the Nose of Houth peninsula was at least a tidal island in Ptolemy’s day. The name is much more likely to derive from Greek λιμνυ ‘harbour’ than from Celtic words for ‘smooth’ or ‘elm’.

**Μαναπιοι** πολις (*Manapia* 2,2,8) was a settlement south of Dublin, of the Μαναπιοι, who were probably not part of a travelling *Menapii* tribe, as explained under **Manavi**. Whereas in Belgium Man- makes best sense as ‘man’, in Ireland ‘outstanding, prominent, high’ (*James*, 2014:2,268), from PIE *men- ‘to project’, may be better. That might refer to mounds like those in the Boyne complex, but if –apia referred to water that might refer to the Wicklow Mountains, as a sort of Irish Lake District. For the actual πολις a reasonable guess might be Rathgall hill fort

**Μοδονυ** (or Μοδουνου) river mouth (*Modonu* 2,2,8) was the river Slaney into the harbour at Wexford, whose name originated as Old Norse for its mudflats. Words such as Dutch *modder* ‘mud’ probably descend from PIE *meu-*, also the apparent source of OI *muad*, a word with many meanings including ‘damp’, which named the river Moy (at the other end of Ireland).

**Ιερον** ακρον (*Hieron* 2,2,6) was ancient Greek for ‘sacred promontory’ at Carnsore Point, the south-east extremity of Ireland. Near there is the “Lane of Stones” and there is an interesting megalithic monuments. If the spelling Ουοδιατ for people there can be relied upon, it might refer to seers.

**Βιργου** river mouth (*Birgu* 2,2,6) was the river Barrow at Waterford Harbour. Βιργου would make excellent sense derived from PIE *bhergh- ‘to hide, to protect’, a root related to (or confused with) another PIE *bhergh- ‘high, hill’, which led to the English word barrow. There is an interesting parallel in Birgu, the historic capital of Malta, inside Grand Harbour, and also in Pergamon from Greek *νυρος* ‘tower’, but no Irish relative appears to be widely cited.

**Δαβρονα** river mouth (*Dabrona* 2,2,6) was the river Lee past Cork and Cobh. A scribal error may have changed Δ into Δ, so that the river was originally called *Labrona*. As explained here, early river names containing Lav- (or similar) do not fit the usual Gaelic explanation of ‘talkative’ nearly as well as a pan-European or Latin-influenced ‘likely to rise’. Cork is extremely vulnerable to flooding because it lies in the middle of a large and complex river catchment.

**Νοτιον** ακρον (*Notion* 2,2,4) was ancient Greek for ‘southern promontory’ at Brow Head. Early mariners would surely have noticed the rocks there, in what became a copper-mining area, analogous with Cornwall, because they would have had coloured outcrops.

**Ιερνου** river mouth (*Iermu* 2,2,4) should perhaps be emended into Ιωερνου (*Hywermu*) or Ιερν (Hieron) to fit other names in Ireland. The modern Iveragh peninsula is explained in Irish as *Ui bh Rathach* ‘descendants of Rathach’, but that might just be reinterpretation. This river could be either the Miami into Castlemaine Harbour or the Roughty into Kenmare Bay. The latter seems marginally more likely, because it has more evidence of early habitation and is fractionally warmer (according to online climate data), as also discussed below under Ιωερως.

**Δουρ** river mouth (*Dur* 2,2,4) was the river Lee through Tralee. Several rivers elsewhere in Europe had similar ancient names, possibly like a Celtic word for ‘water’ (*Ekwall, 1928:128*), but also like Greek δουρη ‘tree, timber for ships’, from PIE *doru- ‘hard’. Interestingly, Ptolemy’s *Dou* and his *Toourofios* in Wales share a significant geographical feature with the Douro in Iberia and the Dora Baltea in northern Italy – extensive sandbanks clogging their mouths – which is tempting to relate to PIE *dlwer- ‘door*. On the Lee estuary Hickson (1894) spotted an interesting survival in the Irish name *Bun-abhainn-dur* ‘end of the river Dur’.

**Σηνου** (Σινου) river mouth (*Senu* or *Sinu* 2,2,4) is usually identified with the modern river Shannon. This name probably came from PIE *sai/−sei- ‘to bind’, the root of English sinew and Irish *sin* ‘collar’, referring to the long and sinuous estuary leading up to Limerick. This analysis
rejects the common idea that the name meant ‘old’, from PIE *sen-, and also a possible link with PIE *sen- ‘apart’.

**Λιβνιο** river mouth (*Libniu* 2,2,4) was probably the river Moy through Ballina. The name may derive from PIE *lei- ‘to flow’ via words such as *λεβος/λιβο or *libo ‘to pour’. Or else it might come (like Libya) from *λυ/λιβο ‘(south)west’, in contrast with the previous name’s sense of ‘east’. Or it might come from PIE *leubh- ‘to love’, the root of words such as libido, perhaps suggesting that mariners would get a friendly welcome in contrast with the next name.

**Ναγνατα** (or Μαγνατοι) πολις (*Nagnata* 2,2,4) was a settlement at Sligo, of the Ναγνατοι (or Μαγνατοι) people. An element -gnata naturally means either or both of ‘known’ and ‘born, descended from’ (Delamarre, 2003:180-181) in a range of ancient languages, as also discussed here. So, if Na- meant ‘not’, the Ναγνατοι might have been ‘unknown’ or ‘unrelated’ people, implying that that region on the west of Ireland was ethnically or linguistically different from further east.

**Ραοπνο** river mouth (*Rawiua* 2,2,4) was Donegal Bay. *Rav- is a difficult name element, which Italian scholars explain with “pre-Latin” *rava- ‘cliff landslide’ in Ravello, and possibly Ravenna. For the early names in Britain *Ardua ravenaton, Ravatonium, and Αβραονονυνου* we also discuss words for ‘river’, ‘grey-yellow’, and ‘raven (sea bird)’. All these explanations tend to point towards the high sea cliffs of *Sliéve League* near the mouth of the Bay, rather than the river Erne flowing through Ballyshannon into the Bay.

Further inland, Ptolemy provided seven town names. His word πολις meant ‘city’ around the Mediterranean, but in Ireland it probably just meant a *central place*, the base of a chieftain and/or where people could gather for ceremonies, feasts, and markets. The outline of early Irish history by MacNeill (1920) has been built on by later historians and archaeologists to yield plausible candidates for these seven names. Let’s take another clockwise tour, of the πολις names.

**Ρηνια** πολις (*Regia or Rigia* 2,2,10) was probably *Navan Fort* (*Emain Macha* in Irish) near modern Armagh. This name probably refers to a king or ruler, from PIE *reg- ‘to move in a straight line, to direct’ (but other possibilities include some based on PIE *reg- ‘to reach, stretch out’).

**Ραβνα** (or Ρεβα) πολις (*Raiba* 2,2,10) is the feminine or plural of Greek πατβος ‘crooked, bent’, which is a meaning often attributed to place names, but does not help to identify this site. It was identified with Castle Rheban, south west of Dublin, by Camden around 1600, but somewhere nearer the centre of Ireland, such as Rathcrogan (the *Ráth of Cruachan*, the ancient capital of Connacht) and/or Carnfree seems more likely.

**Λαβφρος** πολις (*Laberos* 2,2,10) may be the *Hill of Tara*. The name probably meant ‘talking place’, because there was a pan-European word (possibly from PIE *lab- ‘to lick’) exemplified by Irish labar ‘talkative, boastful’ and its Celtic cognates, but also by German labern ‘to talk at length’, Dutch labben ‘to chatter’, English blabber, Latin labrum ‘lip’, and Greek λαβος ‘furious’. Ireland is famous for its great writers and talkers, but also for its ring-forts (called ráths) reviewed by Fitzpatrick (2009). “There is great use among the Irish to make great assemblies together upon a Ráth or hill, there to parley” (Edmund Spenser, 1596, vol 6, p 628). The cultural tradition for such gatherings, across many countries and from the Stone Ages into modern times, was investigated by Allcroft (1927, 1930).

**Μακολικον** πολις (*Macolicon* 2,2,10) was probably near Limerick, where a strong candidate is Ireland’s largest hillfort at Mooghaun, source of a famous gold hoard. In Greek the name would mean something like ‘destroys in battle’, from μαγην ‘battle’ and οληκα ‘to destroy, to kill’, with spelling changes X to K and E to I perhaps due to a Latin intermediate. In Celtic it could mean something like ‘stony fields’, from Irish macha ‘milking yard’ (hence machair ‘fertile plain’) and lecc ‘stone’.
Δουνον πόλις (Dunon 2,2,10) is a word for ‘fort’ widely used across the north-western Roman Empire. This one is usually identified with Dinn Righ (‘fort of the kings’), the base of rulers of Leinster, probably on the river Barrow just south of Leighlinbridge. A substantial structure there called Ballyknockan Moat was reported in the 1800s but seems to attract little interest now.

Iουερνις (or Ιουερνις) πόλις (Iverniss 2,2,10) is obviously related to Ιερνου river mouth above and the Ιουερνικοι people below, as a possible overwintering place like Ibernia in England. Its past identification with Teamhair’ Erann at Ballahantouragh in County Kerry is not convincing. South-west Ireland is full of stone circles and other megalithic monuments (mapped here), but they are particularly thick on the ground around Kenmare. Even where the megalithic stonework visible today is quite late (Christian era), it inherited a farming tradition stretching back to the Bronze Age. To find a fort that might qualify as Ptolemy’s πόλις one needs to look further out towards the ocean on the Iveragh peninsula, for example at Caherdaniel.

Ptolemy mentioned 16 peoples, or “tribes”, in Ireland. He stated their general locations, but did not assign particular towns to them as he did elsewhere in his Geography. Irish archaeologists and historians, building on MacNeill (1920), have tried to link Ptolemy’s peoples with tribal names in later mediaeval Irish texts, while De Bernardo Stempel (2000) analysed what Ptolemy’s names might mean if they were created in a Celtic language. Let’s take another clockwise tour.

Ουερνικνιοι (Wennicnioi 2,2,3) lived in the north-west. See Ουεννικνιοι ακρον above.

Ροβογδιοι (Robogdioi 2,2,3 and 2,2,9) lived in the north-east, near Ῥοβογδίοι ακρον discussed above. The theory that Ροβογδιοι people were ‘mighty fighters’ is probably nonsense.

Δαρινοι (Darinoi 2,2,9) lived in the north-east, modern Antrim and Down facing Britain. Many Celtic words might possibly explain Δαρινοι, notably OI dairid ‘bulls’, which would presumably make them analogous with the Taurini of northern Italy. Much better is OI dair ‘oak’, and modern Derry, which may make the Δαρινοι analogous with the Iceni. PIE *deru- ‘hard, tree’ had many descendants (not just Druids and oaks) all over Europe, of which possibly most relevant in Ireland is tar, hugely important for caulking skin-boats to sail to Scotland.

Ουολοντιοι (Woluntioi 2,2,9) lived further south, around the modern Northern Irish border. The name probably survived into the later Ulaid people and the modern name Ulster. A link has been argued with Gaelic ulcha ‘beard’, considered an important symbol of warrior manhood in many societies, and with a possible parallel in the Langobards/Lombards in northern Germany, but ulcha lacks a convincing deeper etymology. As written, Woluntioi looks like a cross between Latin voluntas and volentia ‘will, choice’, perhaps implying that these people were happy to see Roman traders, sending slaves (or even army volunteers?) across to Britain.

Εβλανιοι (or Εβδανιοι) (Eblaniioi 2,2,9). See under Εβλανα above.

Καυκοι (Caucoi 2,2,9) lived further south still, towards Dublin. An obvious parallel is the Chauci people, who lived along the Frisian coastline in the area from which Saxons were later said to come. Chauci has long been explained as from Germanic *hauhaz ‘high’, from PIE *keu- ‘to swell’, making it cognate with Gothic haus, Norse haugr, Russian кур, the English place-name element hoh, etc, with further links to church, Welsh crug, etc, all having a sense of ‘small hill, mound’, called terpen in Frisia. The Καυκοι lived in an area famous for Newgrange and its sister mounds at Dowth and Knowth, in the Boyne bend, plus an extensive and very ancient ritual landscape. It is extremely unlikely that Germanic Chauci people migrated there en masse.

Μαναπιοι (Manapioi 2,2,9) were people living around Μαναπα, tentatively suggested above to be Rathgall hillfort. It is extremely unlikely that Belgic Menapii people migrated there en masse, not least because the Μαναπιοι homeland probably included the Wicklow Mountains and was significantly higher than the Flanders homeland of the Menapii. Nevertheless the two areas are similar in that people lived on local high ground surrounded by wet bogs. It is conceivable that Cill Mhantain (in Wicklow) preserves a folkloric memory of this name.

Κορινονδιοι (Coriondoi 2,2,9) has been analysed as derived from PIE *koro- ‘war’, whose descendants include OI cuire ‘troop, muster’, German Heer ‘army’, Greek κοινωνος ‘king, commander’, etc. It is more likely, in the light of the last two names, that words for an assembly,
such as Greek ζωτοποιον ‘place, town’ and Latin curia ‘court, temple, senate’, link with the words for burial mounds and ring enclosures ancestral to Welsh crug, English church, and Russian/Turkish kyryan, which Allcroft (1927, 1930) traced back deep into prehistory as tribal gathering places.

Вріґантєς (or Вріґантας) (Brigantes 2,2,7 and 2,2,9) were ‘hill people’, presumably living in the Wicklow mountains, with a name that occurred across Europe in various forms. In Iberia -briga in early place names is a marker for the zone of Indo-European speech.

Ουνδαι (or Ουνδαί) (Wodiai or Usdiai 2,2,7) lived in the south-east. Their name might come from PIE *swat- ‘insane, passionate’, whose descendants include OE wod ‘crazy’, OI faith and Latin vates ‘seer’, the Norse god Wotan/Odin, etc. Maybe they had energetic Druids. On the other hand, maybe Ουνδαι is to be preferred, on the grounds that this area later became the kingdom of Ossory, irrigated by the Three Sisters rivers. Then Ουν- may have a parallel in the English river name Ouse (derived in some way from a PIE word for water), while the –δαι (ultimately from a root meaning ‘two’) may have a parallel in the Ελίδιοι people of Kintyre.

Ιουερνοι (Ιουβερνοι) (Huvernoi or Hubernoi 2,2,7) lived in the south, around Cork. This name resembles Latin hibernus ‘belonging to winter’, possibly from PIE *ghei- ‘snow, winter’. On the other hand, this area’s mild climate, due to the Gulf Stream, might have made it suitable for early traders from the Mediterranean to over-winter, just as Latin hiberno ‘to occupy winter quarters’ may explain Ibernia, at Iverne in Dorset. On balance it seems marginally more likely that Romans were prejudiced into considering Ireland had winter all year round! By world standards, the south’s rainfall is not spectacularly high, but the west has some of highest winds in Europe. Orosius mentioned people called Luceni, which sounds suspiciously like a mis-copied Iuerni.

The classical name Hibernia has been much discussed. Isaac (2009) suggested that PIE *auer- ‘to flow’ led to early Celtic *eiweryon ‘upon the water’ (hence ‘at the edge of the world’), from which Greek-style loss of W led to Irish forms such as modern Eire, whereas Latin ierbus ‘to occupy winter quarters’ may explain Ibernia, at Iverne in Dorset. On balance it seems marginally more likely that Romans were prejudiced into considering Ireland had winter all year round! By world standards, the south’s rainfall is not spectacularly high, but the west has some of highest winds in Europe. Orosius mentioned people called Luceni, which sounds suspiciously like a mis-copied Iuerni.

Ουνελαβροι (or Ουνελαβροι) (Wellaboroi 2,2,5) were in the very south of Ireland. 300 years later Orosius spelled the name Velabri, which has a very exact parallel in Latin velabrum ‘awning stretched above the theatre’ and in Velabrum, a low swampy area in ancient Rome, but that may have been mere re-interpretation, otherwise known as folk etymology. Anyway, the best efforts of many writers, ancient and modern, have failed to explain velabrum. De Vaan (2008:660) considers it a derivative of velum ‘sail’, but then cannot decide whether that came from PIE *wegh- ‘to weave’ or *wegh- ‘to convey’. It seems best to focus on Ptolemy’s spelling Ουελαβροι, and reckon that the best way (of several) to segment it is wella-boroi. Then should the first element be likened to Latin vela ‘wallflower’, velum ‘sail’, or velus ‘fleece’? And the second element to Boreas ‘north wind’, boato ‘food’, Dutch Boer ‘farmer’, Gaelic borr ‘swollen, haughty’, or English bower/byre? Pursuing those roots further into Celtic does not greatly help, and no single interpretation of this name (or indeed most Irish tribal names) comes anywhere near certainty. On balance, the best guess seems to be that these people were cattle farmers.

Γγαγαβοι (Ganganoi 2,2,5) lived in the south-west, probably around the mouth of the Shannon. See the discussion of Γγαγαβος αρχον in Wales, and the possible interpretation like ‘gone away’.

Αυτενοι (Αυτενοι) (Autenoi 2,2,5) lived in the west, modern county Galway, and were probably ancestors of the Uathni. PIE *au- ‘off, away’ developed in many ways, including to OI ūath ‘fear, terror’, from which a bad name translation as ‘the terrible ones’ has arisen. Discussion of a name Autagis on a Gaulish plate, notably by Delamarre (2003: 62), lays out some better possibilities. The –teinoi might be a banal adjectival ending ‘-tine’ often applied to peoples or it might come from PIE *ten- ‘to stretch’, seen for example in Pretannia, making these the outer people. Maybe Greek οτρη ‘battle cry’ means these people were fierce. More likely, these people were aboriginal inhabitants of the west, with a name built from otto- ‘self’ that prefigured Sinn Fein ‘ourselves’.

Ναγνατοι (Μαγνατοι) (Nagnatoi 2,2,5) see above about Ναγνατα.
Ερδίνοι (or Ερπεδιτανοί) (Erdinoi 2.2.5) seem to have lived in the north-west, in Donegal, which is fairly mountainous. The name came from PIE *erədh- ‘high’, whose descendants include OI ard ‘high’. The variant spelling Ερπεδιτανοι was presumably influenced by Latin pedito ‘to go on foot’ or πεδητης ‘one who fetters, a hinderer’, but also possibly by πεδίος ‘flat, of the plain’.

The latest revision of this article has benefitted from discussions with Martin Counihan, who has clarified how some clan names in Irish tradition may preserve a memory of Ptolemy’s tribal names. However, he has not yet made a convincing case that many elements in these names came from an ancient Irish language that was well on its way to becoming the Gaelic that was written after AD 800. Mediaeval Irish supplies descendants to many of the relevant PIE roots, but they are often no better than descendants in English or other languages. It remains true that Ptolemy’s names tend to make best geographical sense if they are interpreted in Greek or in “pre-Celtic” Indo-European.

To take the story further than this article really needs a skilled linguist who knows Gaelic and the archaeology of Ireland’s proto-towns. A lot of romantic nonsense circulates about life in Iron-Age Ireland, just as in Wales or England. To cut through it, one needs to recognise that post-Roman writers knew very little about life in Ptolemy’s time, and used their imagination to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Just four modern river names (Shannon, Boyne, Lagan, Barrow) seem to preserve a shadow of Ptolemy’s names. Never forget that many resourceful, intelligent people lived in Ireland for at least 3000 years before traders started to arrive from inside the Roman Empire.

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