

Ireland

Ireland is not the prime concern of this website, and we 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), and [Warner](#) (2013). Here we shall rely upon the latest analysis by Dmitri Gusev and his colleagues as it gradually firms up for publication, and take the best Greek spellings from [Stückelberger and Graßhoff](#) (2006). We transcribe each name once into the Latin alphabet and report its position in Ptolemy's text (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. We are 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, we use the geographical character of places to 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. We mostly follow Watkins (2011) in citing PIE forms, and avoid accents on Greek letters. References without hyperlinks can be found in our [reflist](#). 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.

Βορειον ακρον (*Boreion* 2,2,2) was ancient Greek for ‘northern point’, probably Malin Head.

Ουεννικνιον ακρον (*Wenniknion* 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 *Ουεννικνιοι, compounded from two elements found right across ancient Europe: **wen-* ‘friends, our people’, is discussed under [Venta](#); *-ikno* (and similar forms) was patronymic, not implying close relationship ‘son of’ so much as ‘descendant’, rather like Mac- or –son or in British surnames.

Ουιδουα (or Ουδια) 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”.

Αργίτα river mouth (*Argita* 2,2,2) was the river Bann through Coleraine, a name based on PIE [*arg-](#) ‘white’, hence Greek [αργής](#) ‘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-north-eastern tip of Ireland opposite Rathlin Island (Ptolemy’s [Ρικίνα](#)), though one cannot totally rule out other extremities, including Benbane Head (near the Giants Causeway) or Runabay Head. The name probably meant something like ‘great curve’, referring to the general shape of the coastline, where *-bogd-* (seen also in [Medibogdo](#)) probably came from [*bheug-](#) ‘to bend’, which led to OE [boga](#) ‘bow’. This rejects the Celticists’ theory that Ροβογδιοι people were ‘mighty fighters’, but retains their idea of initial *Ro-* as ‘great’, which might have evolved from PIE [*per-](#) ‘to pass over’, via [*pro-](#) then loss of initial P, or from PIE [*ghreu-](#) ‘to grind’, the source of words such as gross and great, which lost an initial GH sound.

Λογία river mouth (*Logia* 2,2,8) was probably the river Lagan into Belfast Lough. PIE [*loig-](#) ‘to jump’ led to OI [loeg](#) ‘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 its namesake [Lagan](#) in Sweden still does.

Ουνδεριος (or Ιουνδεριος) 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’, from the PIE root [*wen-](#), whose descendants include OI [fine](#) ‘clan, family’, English winsome, Latin *Venus*, etc. The *-rios* part probably came from PIE [*reiā-](#) (or [*er-](#)) ‘to flow (fast)’, as in the river Rhine or OE [ryne](#) ‘water channel’.

Ισαμνιον ακρον (*Isamnion* 2,2,8) brings to mind many early river names across Europe that began with *Is-* (discussed under [Isca](#)), which probably came from PIE [*ei-](#) ‘to go’. For the *-amnion* part, Celticists favour a meaning like ‘under’ or ‘standing below’, though Latin [amnis](#) ‘river’ looks very similar. Either way, Ισαμνιον would make sense as derived from [*Ισαμνιοι](#) people living in a river valley under the very visible Mountains of Mourne. Identifying their ακρον would then depend upon the identity of Ουνδεριος: 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.

Βουουινδα (or Βουβινδα) 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 [mediaeval 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. There is no easy explanation of the name Εβλανα. The closest parallel is [Ebla](#), near modern Aleppo in Syria, an important trading post and centre of learning in the Bronze Age. Then various Gaulish names contained a Germanic element [*iblio-](#) ‘sparrow-hawk’. And [-ebla](#) was a suffix that helped to form the future of a few OI verbs. Or maybe PIE [*pela-](#) ‘to fill’, precursor of OI [lan](#) ‘full’, led to a word like Latin [populus](#) ‘people’, but Celtic speakers could not pronounce the letter P, and turned it into B, as in Welsh [ebol](#) ‘foal’. Most appropriate for a trading place is a precursor of OE [gebland](#) ‘mixture’ (literally ‘[blended](#)’), with a *ge-* prefix that readily lost its initial G.

Εδρου (or Αδρου) νισος (*Edru* 2,2,12) was Lambay island, near Loughshinny, for which it would have been a good navigation marker. PIE [*sed-](#) ‘to sit, settle’ had descendants in many languages, including Greek [ἔδρα](#) (*hedra*) ‘sitting place’ whose many specific uses included ‘base for ships’.

Οβoka 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.

Λιμνου νισος (*Limnu* 2,2,12) was an island south of Εδρου 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 [λιμνη](#) ‘harbour’ than from Celtic words for ‘smooth’ or ‘elm’.

Μαναπια πολις (*Manapia* 2,2,8) was a settlement at Wexford of the *Μαναπιοι*, who were probably wetland people (as explained under [Manavi](#)) rather than part of a travelling **Menapii* tribe.

Μοδονου (or Μοδουννου) 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 the wider area has a fair sprinkling of [megalithic](#) monuments, but most interesting is the name of the Ουοδιαι people there, discussed below as meaning ‘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 [πυργος](#) ‘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 Λ 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 (*Iernu* 2,2,4) should perhaps be emended into Ιουερνου (*Hywernu*) or Ιερον (*Hieron*) to fit other names in Ireland. The modern Iveragh peninsula is explained in Irish as *Uibh Rathach* ‘descendants of *Rathach*’, but that might just be reinterpretation. This river could be either the Maine 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 Ιουερνις.

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 equally well like Greek [δουρα](#) ‘tree, timber for ships’, from PIE **doru-* ‘hard’. Interestingly, Ptolemy’s Δουρ and his [Τουεροβιος](#) 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 **dhwer-* ‘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 **senə-* ‘apart’.

Αυσοβα river mouth (*Ausoba* 2,2,4) was Galway Bay, into which the main inflowing river was the Corrib. This name looks like a compound of PIE **aus-* ‘to shine’ (hence words for ‘east’) and **oba* ‘water, river(bank)’ discussed [here](#), presumably describing how the coastline inside the bay is so far east from the Atlantic. Ptolemy’s coordinates (as they have survived) actually place Αυσοβα

due east of Σηνου, which has contributed to some debate about name locations in the west.

[Ausona](#), an unlocated city near the east coast of Italy north of Naples is a good parallel,

Λιβνίου 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 [λειβω/λιβω](#) or [libo](#) ‘to pour’. Or else it might come (like Libya) from [λυψ/λιβος](#) ‘(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 *Μαγνατα*) πόλις (*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.

Ραουίου river mouth (*Rawiu* 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 ravenatone](#), [Ravatonium](#), and [Αβραουαννου](#) we also discuss words for ‘river’, ‘grey-yellow’, and ‘raven (sea bird)’. All these explanations tend to point towards the high sea cliffs of [Slieve 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 πόλις 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 these πόλις names.

Ρηγία πόλις (*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 **reig-* ‘to reach, stretch out’).

Ραιβα (or *Ρεβα*) πόλις (*Raiba* 2,2,10) is the feminine or plural of Greek [ραιβος](#) ‘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.

Λαβηρος πόλις (*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 [λαβρος](#) ‘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 Rath 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 πόλις (*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 [μαχη](#) ‘battle’ and [ολεκω](#) ‘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’.

ἑτέρα Ρηγία πόλις (‘the other *Regia* or *Rigia*’ 2,2,10) may be the Rath of [Feerwore](#), source of the [Turoe Stone](#), east of Galway.

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 Riogh* (‘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.

Ιουερνις (or Ιοερνις) πολις (*Iwernis* 2,2,10) is obviously related to Ιερνυ river mouth above and the Ιουερνοι people below, as a possible overwintering place like [Ibernio](#) 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 πολις 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.

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

Ροβογδιοι (*Robogdioi* 2,2,3 and 2,2,9) lived in the north-east. See Ροβογδιον ακρον above,

Δαρινοι (*Darinoi* 2,2,9) lived in the north-east, modern Antrim and Down facing Britain. Maybe their name was Celtic for 'leaping' by analogy with OI [dairid](#) 'bulls', which would presumably make them analogous with the [Taurini](#) of northern Italy. A better parallel is OI [dair](#) 'oak', and modern Derry, which would make the Δαρινοι analogous with the [Iceni](#).

Ουολουντιοι (*Woluntioi* 2,2,9) lived further south, around the border of modern Northern Ireland. The name is possibly Celtic for 'bearded', like OI [ulach](#) and a precursor of the later [Ulaid](#) people. A better parallel may be Latin [voluntas](#) 'freewill, desire', from PIE [*wel-](#) 'to will, to wish', implying that these people were happy to see traders.

Εβλανιοι (or Εβδανιοι) (*Eblanioi* 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. Most likely the name came from PIE [*kau-](#) 'to cut', whose descendants range from English hew and haggis to Russian [кузнец](#) 'blacksmith', but nothing obvious in Celtic languages. Unless one is willing to guess that a Germanic people migrated all the way to Ireland, this name must be an outsiders' general description of a lifestyle. Our best guess for the common feature of the [Chauci](#) and the Καυκοι is mounds: [terpen](#) in Frisia and [Newgrange](#) etc in Ireland.

Μαναπιοι (*Manapioi* 2,2,9) were wetland people near Wexford discussed above under Μαναπια.

Κοριονδοι (*Coriondoi* 2,2,9) has been analysed as derived from PIE [*koro-](#) 'war', whose descendants include OI [cuire](#) 'troop, muster', German [Heer](#) 'army', Greek [κοιρανος](#) 'king, commander', etc. Alternatively, words for an assembly, such as Greek [χωριον](#) 'place, town' and Latin [curia](#) 'court, temple, senate', may link with the words for burial mounds and ring enclosures ancestral to Welsh [crug](#), English church, and Russian/Turkish [курган](#), which Allcroft (1927, 1930) traced back deep into prehistory.

Βριγαντες (or Βριγαντας) (*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 Iberian early place names *-briga* is a marker for the zone of Indo-European speech.

Ουοδιαι (or Ουσδιαι) (*Wodiai* or *Usdaii* 2,2,7) lived in the south-east. Their name most likely came from PIE [*wat-](#) '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.

Ιουερνοι (Ιουβερνοι) (*Huvernoi* or *Hubernoi* 2,2,7) lived in the south, around Cork. Latin [hibernus](#) 'belonging to winter', possibly from PIE [*ghei-](#) 'snow, winter', would suit this area, with its mild climate due to the Gulf Stream. This might have made it suitable for early traders from the Mediterranean to over-winter, though they might also have considered that high rainfall made that area winter all year! [Ibernio](#), at Iwerne in Dorset, is a parallel, from Latin [hiberno](#) 'to occupy winter quarters'.

If this winter logic is correct, the classical name [Hibernia](#) originally meant the south of Ireland before being generalised to the whole island. [Isaac](#) (2009) discussed early names for Ireland and

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 *viridis* ‘green’ (of uncertain deep etymology) led to Welsh *gwyrdd* which allowed reinterpretation into *Ywerdon* ‘the greenery’.

Ουελλαβοροι (or Ουτελαβοροι) (*Wellaboroi* 2,2,5) in the very south of Ireland had a name that looks rather like the plant name *ἐλλεβορος* ‘hellebore’, which raises a suspicion that Ptolemy’s text has been corrupted, perhaps from something closer to the spelling *Velabri* of Orosius 300 years later. Presumably it was lack of any viable Celtic etymology that prompted De Bernardo Stempel (2000) to suggest that these people were ‘wallflower eaters’, from the roots of Latin/Gaulish *vela* ‘erysimum’ plus Greek *βορα* ‘food’. Better parallels may be Latin *velum* ‘sail’ plus *boreas* ‘north wind, northern’, meaning that these people were known for sailing to Iberia, a long voyage but easy to navigate since it was due north-south.

Γαγγανοι (*Ganganoi* 2,2,5) lived in the south-west, probably around the mouth of the Shannon. See the discussion of *Γαγγανων* ακρον in Wales.

Αυτεινοι (Αυτινοι) (*Auteinoi* 2,2,5) lived in the west, modern county Galway, and were probably ancestors of the *Uaithni*. PIE **au-* ‘off, away’ developed in many ways, including to OI *úath* ‘fear, terror’, from which a bad name translation as ‘the terrible ones’ has arisen. It is better to analyse this name as *Au-* ‘out’ plus *-tenoi* either as a banal adjectival ending ‘-tine’ often applied to peoples or, more likely, as like PIE **ten-* ‘to stretch’ seen in early British names such as *Tiva*. A name *Autagis* written on a Gaulish plate has been much discussed, notably by Delamarre (2003: 62).

Ναγνατοι (Μαγνατοι) (*Nagnatoi* 2,2,5) see above about *Ναγνατα*.

Ερδινοι (or Ερπεδιτανοι) (*Erdinoi* 2,2,5) seem to have lived in the north-west, in Donegal, which is fairly mountainous. The name came from PIE **eradh-* ‘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 *πεδιας* ‘flat, of the plain’.

This article still needs to be checked over by people with specialist knowledge of Irish history and archaeology. We do not yet know enough about all the candidate sites, especially the proto-towns, and obviously cannot speak or read Gaelic. Yet, despite all the follies that this article must still contain, its main conclusion is clear. Ptolemy’s names make good geographical sense if they are interpreted in Greek or in “pre-Celtic” Indo-European. Irish (as it was written after AD 800) supplies clear descendants to many of the relevant PIE roots, but they are often no better than descendants in English or other languages.

Irish descendant words are disadvantaged by their spelling conventions, which look strange to native English speakers. In particular, Irish uses F, where English has retained W for the consonant written as OY (ou) by Ptolemy or as V in Latin. Even with due allowance for all this, it is striking how over-enthusiasm for Celtic parallels has led previous investigators astray almost as badly as in England. Just four modern river names (Shannon, Boyne, Lagan, Barrow) seem to preserve a shadow of Ptolemy’s names. We hope that, once Gusev et al have published their results, some heavy-duty linguists will turn their attention again to the fine details of early Irish names.

So who actually created the names that Ptolemy recorded? If later Irish Gaelic is not a particularly good match to the observed spellings, should one deduce that the speech of indigenous people had not developed far from a more basic Indo-European? Or were the names created, as well as filtered and transmitted, through the speech of traders? Our best guess is that the answer lies in lively trade links up the western seaboard of Europe, which Koch and Cunliffe (2013) see as the cradle of Celtic speech. One wonders how many centuries before the Spanish Armada ships started sailing directly between Iberia and Ireland.

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