

## Dialect in medieval Irish? Evidence from placenames<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction: *Status quaestionis*

**T**he question of dialect in medieval Irish (incorporating Old and Middle Irish; c. 600–1200 AD) has received much passing attention but very little direct study. It was only when T.F. O’Rahilly addressed the subject, with the publication of his *Irish dialects past and present*, that the first full-scale work on the topic incorporated evidence from medieval Irish. He concludes that we know very little about dialectal differences in medieval Irish and that it is ‘probably during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that the formative period of our modern dialects is to be placed’ (O’Rahilly 1932, 248). These conclusions anticipate most of the other work on the subject, which usually has two central theses, namely that any dialectal differences in medieval Irish were minor and have left no trace in the written sources and that Old Irish was such a uniform literary language that it tended to iron out possible traces of dialect.<sup>2</sup>

In comparing the *Senchas mór* with other law tracts of different provenance, D.A. Binchy notes that ‘one will search in vain for differences in style, composition or technical terminology’ (Binchy 1943, 209–10). He believes this to be the case because of regular interaction between the *literati* (including jurists) from all parts of medieval Ireland which helped keep the literary language free from dialect. He does argue, however, that a study of the later legal commentaries ‘may shed some light on the rise of dialects of spoken Irish’ (Binchy 1943, 211). Binchy does not explicitly state at what period in the compilation of these

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson (1983, 2) cautions that when we refer to the language of the early period we are referring to ‘a written language, not a spoken one’. This is especially important when one bears in mind Gerard Murphy’s claim that a form could ‘exist in the spoken language, dialectally perhaps at first, for more than a hundred years before it begins to appear in literature’ (Murphy 1940, 80).

commentaries he expects the question of dialect to intrude, though he seems to rule out early Middle as well as Old Irish. A very conservative interpretation of Binchy's views would lead one to a date of post-1000 as the earliest time in which he believes dialectal evidence *may* begin to be found in the law tracts. However, this puts the possibility of finding written examples of dialect in Irish sources back before that which O'Rahilly was willing to allow.<sup>3</sup>

Kenneth Jackson acknowledges his adherence to O'Rahilly's opinion that the modern Irish dialects came into existence in the thirteenth or fourteenth century at the earliest. He believes that medieval Irish was a homogeneous language throughout Ireland 'except for such small local differences and incipient nuances of dialect as are bound to occur over such a comparatively large area' (Jackson 1951, 79). The conclusion of his paper, dealing specifically with the evolution of the Goidelic languages, is worth quoting in full:

First, there is absolutely nothing to suggest that the Gaelic of Ireland, Scotland, and Man differed in any respect before the tenth century; and on the contrary, there is a body of decisive positive evidence tending to show that so far as we can tell they were identical. Second, Eastern and Western Gaelic<sup>4</sup> continued to be one language, sharing many new developments in common, from the tenth until the thirteenth century; but at the same time there are one or two significant indications, the oldest belonging to the tenth century, which point to the beginnings of the divergence between them. Third, the final break between East and West in the spoken tongue came in the thirteenth century (Jackson 1951, 91–2).

Jackson traces the 'beginnings of the divergence' back to the tenth century at the earliest – here he is referring to fully stressed disyllabic words with hiatus which began to be contracted in Irish during the Old Irish period (cf. Thurneysen 1946, §114) but which remain uncontracted in Scottish Gaelic to the present.<sup>5</sup> This, to my mind, is an example of the emergence of dialectic features in what Jackson refers to as 'Common Gaelic'.<sup>6</sup> McCone (1985, 88), however, would see this

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Greene (1973, 131), who in his discussion of the analytic conjugation of the verb remarks: 'The freedom to use analytic forms in every situation in the classical norm of Early Modern Irish is clear proof that some dialect areas had already advanced very far indeed in the use of these forms by the end of the twelfth century'. This view would allow for the beginnings of dialect emergence much earlier than 1200.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson (1951, 78) uses the term 'Western Gaelic' for Irish and 'Eastern Gaelic' for the Scottish Gaelic–Manx group.

<sup>5</sup> Carney (1964, xxix) in a discussion of hiatus argues 'that in certain dialects of Old Irish contraction had taken place before the middle of the eight[h] century'.

<sup>6</sup> O Maolalaigh (1995–6, 168) argues against the theory of Common Gaelic. His study of eclipsis 'implies a significant split between Gaelic dialects (i.e. between Irish and Scottish Gaelic) in the matter of eclipsis at an early stage, presumably during the Old Irish period itself'. Ó Maolalaigh

dichotomy as reflective of ‘a conservative learned register retentive of hiatus reacting with more colloquial levels of speech that had already contracted vowels in such cases’. He goes on to say: ‘these remarks, of course, apply only to Ireland: in Gaelic Scotland hiatus has been preserved in everyday speech right down to the present’. Surely, this treatment of hiatus forms represents an innovative dialectic feature in Ireland, not present in Scotland, in the language Jackson is content to label ‘Common Gaelic’ (cf. Gillies 2004, 256).

David Greene believes that Old Irish as a spoken language must have shown dialectal variation but argues that although the literary language preserves a diversity of forms it ‘does not offer any evidence that would allow us to assign a given form to a given area’ (Greene 1969, 16). This, in a nutshell, is the central problem. Variance in forms may, to a large part, reflect dialect differences, but it is difficult to locate these and thence look for dialectal patterns. Heinrich Wagner examines the treatment of certain words in the different dialects of Modern Irish and traces their beginnings back to Old Irish. For example, in looking at the Old Irish forms of *teach* ‘house’, he argues that the various forms of this word point towards ‘a dialect division which was already in existence in O[ld] Ir[ish]’ (Wagner 1983, 104). This is a significant conclusion regarding the existence of dialect in Old Irish.

James Carney is also quite willing to allow for the existence of dialect in Old Irish. In analysing *Saltair na rann* (which he would date to c. 870),<sup>7</sup> he argues that dialect usage is a marked feature of the text and he cautions against ‘the custom in dealing with early texts to dismiss any deviation from the O[ld] Ir[ish] standard as “Middle Irish”, thought of as a state of linguistic anarchy where anything could happen’ (Carney 1983, 211). Carney goes on to examine certain features of *Saltair na rann* (for example, *arsé*, *arsí* instead of *ol*; the frequent recourse to *o shunn*; the common use of the nominative for the accusative). He would not see these characteristics of the *Saltair* as evidence for the spread of Middle Irish, rather he would see them as examples of dialectal usage. Though the dating of *Saltair na rann* to the period about the year 1000 seems rather more secure, Carney’s central point remains: forms, as far back as the Glosses, that are perceived as Middle Irish developments, may in fact be dialectal variations.

In his study of the language of the Würzburg and Milan glosses, Kim McCone allows for the possibility of dialect. In discussing the formation of the

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points out that Ó Buachalla (1988, 45) has reached similar conclusions with regard to the development of the plural allomorphs in *-(e)an* in Scottish Gaelic; see further, Ó Buachalla 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Most commentators, however, would see *Saltair na rann* as belonging to the early Middle Irish period, towards the end of the tenth century; see Breatnach 1996, 223–224 §1.6 for a summary of the latest views on the subject.

prepositional relative in Old Irish, he suspects that the two different approaches ‘to creating an unambiguous prepositional relative in the very late prehistory of Irish ... may be one of the few cases where variant usages in the Glosses probably have a base in different regional dialects’ (McCone 1985, 96–97). Register, however, not dialect, is the main reason forwarded by McCone for the mix of forms in the Glosses; he suggests that deviations from the literary norm ‘are mostly due to occasional lapses into a basic sub-literary register approximating to popular speech’ (McCone 1985, 102). This observation adds to our range of possibilities. Combined with what we have already seen, forms which deviate from ‘standard’ Old Irish may be viewed as 1. Middle Irish developments; 2. Lapses from the written standard into a lower register; 3. Dialectal differences. Points two and three may coalesce to an extent, so that the separation of possible dialectal differences from excursions into a lower register may prove very hard to achieve.

In a recent contribution focused entirely on the question of dialects in Old Irish, Anders Ahlqvist (following Hessen, 1914 and Thurneysen, 1946, 12) deals with the variation in spelling of the anaphoric pronoun (*ón / són*) in the Glosses. Even though the variation in its distribution seems to indicate dialectal significance, he is forced to conclude that ‘these dialect differences seem to have left no trace in the modern language, so that their geographical implications remain unknown to me’ (Ahlqvist 1988, 26). Ahlqvist states his adherence to the basic position outlined by O’Rahilly (1932, 248 ff.) and followed by Jackson (1951, 78–80) that it was not until the thirteenth or fourteenth century that modern Irish dialects came into being. He is hopeful, however, that any future grammar of Old Irish will ‘include at least a full chapter devoted to an inventory of what it so far has not been possible to describe as anything more substantial than “nuances of dialect” in our still rather monolithic conception of Classical Old Irish’ (Ahlqvist 1988, 31).

The central problem, in trying to identify possible dialectal features, is tying down a noted variant in language to a particular geographical area.<sup>8</sup> In an important article on ‘Dialekte im Altirischen?’, Patricia Kelly compares the ‘regular’ word for certain animals with rarer words for the same creatures and articulates the following proposition:

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<sup>8</sup> This problem of locating possible dialectal features is exacerbated by the fact that much of the material under investigation is anonymous. Gearóid Mac Eoin’s remarks regarding Middle Irish literature hold good for the earlier period as well: ‘The absence of a reliable ascription to the real author deprives us of the knowledge of the date of composition or the place of origin ... [thus the] ... language remains unfixd in period or dialect’ (Mac Eoin 1982, 113).

Meine These ist, daß diese Wörter nicht einer älteren Schicht eines gemeinsprachlichen Wortschatzes zuzurechnen sind, welche dann erneuert wurde durch Wörter wie *bó*, *ech*, *mucc*, *cáera*, *gabor*, *sinnach* – denn diese sind auch schon in den ältesten Texten belegt – sondern daß diese Wörter Dialekten entstammen könnten, die in der früh entstandenen Schriftsprache nicht stark vertreten sind (Kelly 1982, 86).

In this attempt ‘to ascribe the origin of certain highly-marked items of Old Irish vocabulary to a certain dialect’, as Ahlqvist (1988, 24) would have it, she anticipates the work (noted above) of McCone on the use of *-(s)a* in prepositional relatives and that of Wagner on words such as *teach*. This approach facilitates the study of medieval Irish vocabulary as a repository of dialect. It is this concept which allows one to undertake research in Irish placenames and placename elements in the hope that fruitful results for the study of dialect in medieval Irish may be forthcoming.

### Placenames

One area of study which gets round the problem of locating differences in the language is research on placenames.<sup>9</sup> This is a very good field in which to examine questions of dialect because many early placenames can be geographically located and, as is well known, placenames are liable to fossilise early forms of the language. The focus here is on a number of placenames and placename elements which may have dialectal implications.<sup>10</sup>

The word *muirbolc* is a compound of *muir* ‘sea’ and *bolc* ‘bag, gap’, literally ‘sea-bag’ or ‘sea-indentation’, and has the meaning ‘inlet of the sea’ or ‘small bay’ (Quin et al. 1913–76, s.v. *muir* 194.8).<sup>11</sup> It occurs as a placename and placename element in various early sources, listed forthwith:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The most important recent work on placenames as a resource for historical linguistics is Ó Maolalaigh (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Placenames sometimes preserve examples of words, which have disappeared out of a certain dialect. For example, Scottish Gaelic has preserved placenames with *íochar* ‘causeway, pavement’ (e.g. Duntocher, Kintocher) but the word is now unknown in common speech. The same situation exists in Scottish Gaelic regarding the word *conair* ‘path, road’. See Watson (1926, 486).

<sup>11</sup> For varying explanations of the word *bolg*, see Lewis (1940); O’Rahilly (1942, 163–166); Carey (1988).

<sup>12</sup> When researching this word, I came across the comprehensive list of placename forms using *muirbolc* assembled by Fiachra Mac Gabhann (1997, 198–199), which I have used extensively in the construction of this argument. This list also contains a large number of forms from later sources.

1. Stokes & Strachan 1901–3, ii, 274: *de Euernia navigatores ad locum qui dicitur Muirbolc Paradisi peruenientes*.<sup>13</sup>
2. Stokes & Strachan 1901–3, ii, 280: *in loco anchoritarum in Muirbulc mar*.<sup>14</sup>
3. Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, s.a. 731.5: *Bellum inter Cruithne 7 Dal Riati in Murbuilgg ubi Cruithni deuicti*.<sup>15</sup>
4. Bannerman 1966, 154: *Óen mac deac dano la olc[h]ain mac echdach munremair qui habitant i mmurbulc la dal riatai*.
5. Best et al. 1954–83, i 630: *Cath Murbuilg i nDal Riatai*.
6. Best et al. 1954–83, i 723: *cath Murbuilg*.
7. Best et al. 1954–83, i 1841–3: *cumtach ... Cairge Brachaide. i mMurbulc la Mantan mac Cachir*.<sup>16</sup>
8. O'Brien 1962, 158, 23 (= Best et al. 1954–83, vi 43726–7): *Ní fácbaitis ní dia n-urd / maicne Durthecht a mMurbulg*.<sup>17</sup>
9. Best et al. 1954–83, iv 22779–80): *i n-airichill Conaill Chernaig meic Amairgin ac Carraic Murbuilg*.<sup>18</sup>
10. Dinneen 1908, 302: *Fairche easpuig Cuinnire ... ó Phort Murbhoilg go hOllorbha*.
11. Stokes 1862, xliv: *Cormac gaileng a quo na ceithre gailenga .i. ... gailenga murbuilg*.

The examples above, with the exception of no. 11 which cannot be contextually located, along with the other forms listed in Mac Gabhann (1997, 198–199), all seem to refer to either Ulster or Scotland. There is some confusion as to how many of the references to *Muirbolc* (nos 3–8) are to the area around Murlough Bay, Co. Antrim as some may refer to an inlet near Dunseverick, Co. Antrim (cf. O'Donovan 1856, i 26 (3501 a.m.): *Dun Sobhairce i Murbholg Dal Riada*) or to present-day Maghera, Co. Down, formerly called *Ráith Muirbuilc* (see Mac Gabhann 1997, 199 and Hogan 1910, s.n.). Joyce (1875, 255) points out that *muirbolc* is 'generally anglicised Murlough' (though this may also be the anglicised

<sup>13</sup> Sharpe (1995, 275 n. 93) follows Watson's conjecture (1926, 79–80) in identifying *Muirbolc Paradisi* as Kentra Bay in Ardnamurchan, Scotland.

<sup>14</sup> Sharpe (1995, 376 n. 415 and 306–308, n. 194) notes that *Muirbolc Mór* ('The Great Bay') was in the island of Hinba and tentatively identifies this *muirbolc* as the substantial dry anchorage between Colonsay and Oronsay, Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> Probably the coastal area near Murlough Bay, par. Culfeightrin, bar. Cary, Co. Antrim (Ó Murchadha 1997, 173).

<sup>16</sup> Either the area near Murlough Bay (as suggested in n. 14 above) or else near tl. Carrickabraghy, par. Conmany, bar. Inishowen E., Co. Donegal.

<sup>17</sup> This poem consists of a list of Ulster heroes and is part of *Senchus Síol hÍr*. It is clear from the context that *Muirbolc* is to be located in Ulster. Eógan mac Durthacht is called *rí Fermaige* in the exile of the sons of Uisliu. According to Ó Murchadha (1997, 144), the original location of Fermag was around Loch Uaithne (Lough Oony, par. Clones, Co. Monaghan); it later gave its name to the bar. of Farnay in the same county.

<sup>18</sup> It seems clear from the text that *Carrac Muirbuilc* is to be located somewhere in Ulster.

form of *muirloch* 'lagoon'). All four examples of the placename Murlough gathered in the 1901 Census are found in Ulster, two in Co. Donegal and two in Co. Down. Watson (1926, 80–1) also treats of Scottish placenames derived from *muirbolc*, and its diminutive in *-án*, of which he has gathered quite a number of examples. In Ireland, outside of Ulster, I know of only one possibility of *muirbolc* used in a placename – that is *Muirbolcán* (present-day Trabolgan, Co. Cork), which may be a diminutive form of *muirbolc*.<sup>19</sup> However, it seems to be satisfactorily explained as *Muir Bolcáin* 'the sea of Bolcán', later *Tráig Bolcáin* 'the strand of Bolcán' (Joyce 1875, 22), though the possibility of it being a diminutive of *muirbolc* must remain.

The onomastic evidence here cited – the early examples above (nos 1–10) along with the later examples of the survival of the placename – points conclusively towards *muirbolc* being a word common to Ulster Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Its lack of representation outside of Ulster and Scottish placenames point towards it having a very localised usage, a usage that I would posit was dialect based.

It may be argued that many of these examples of the use of *muirbolc* in placenames occur in Irish manuscripts which do not have a northern provenance. It may be noted, however, that these samples are all onomastic – the context gives no hint whatsoever that the scribes of the various manuscripts knew the word *muirbolc* as a regular Old Irish word meaning 'inlet of the sea'. The lack of a qualifying genitive or descriptive adjective in most cases may also point in the same direction. That both words of the compound, *muir* and *bolc*, were well-known countrywide seems clear, but the use of the compound seems to have been more restricted. Outside of its utilisation in placenames, it has not proved possible to locate the word *muirbolc* in any early texts.

The case of the relatively rare *muirbolc* may just reflect the use of highly marked lexical items. Common medieval Irish words, however, often seem to be treated restrictively in placename contexts, which may be indicative of regional or dialectal usage or preference.<sup>20</sup> I append a list of some examples here below.

- *Accomol* 'union': This common word is found in the Würzburg, St Gall and Milan Glosses. Ó Máille (1953) has shown that this word survives in the placenames *Uggool*, *Uggoon* in Counties Mayo, Galway and Clare, and is used to describe a piece of land which is seen to join or connect other features in the landscape. The restricted use of *accomol* with this meaning in placenames seems to be confined to these counties and,

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<sup>19</sup> The same (or similar) name, *Murbolcán*, is to be found in Dillon (1962, 619, 653) in a list of strongholds of the kings of Cashel.

<sup>20</sup> The development in meaning of aspects of Irish vocabulary (which may ultimately prove to be partly dialect-based, even for the earlier material) is dealt with briefly in Jackson (1983, 17–18).

thus, may be regional or dialectal based, though it is impossible to date the rise of this usage.

- *Cathair* ‘stone enclosure, dwelling’: The distribution of this word as a first element in placenames was the subject of a talk given by Alan Mac an Bhaird at the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Galway in 1979. Though a published version of this talk is not available, the summary by Mac an Bhaird, available in the Congress handbook, contains the following:

Placenames composed of *cathair* and a second element are found in two contiguous zones. The zone of densest distribution comprises the northwest of Co. Clare, a north-south band across the middle of Co. Galway and the barony of Kilmaine in Co. Mayo. A more diffuse zone covers the rest of Co. Clare and counties Limerick, Kerry and Cork. ‘Outriders’ are sparse. Within these zones, names with *cathair* appear in the earliest records of placenames available ... most of these cases point to a pre-Norman date.

This distribution may also be seen on the map in Flanagan and Flanagan (1994, 46).

The use of *cathair* in placenames would seem to indicate dialect preference, not lack of stone-dwellings elsewhere, as there is no shortage of easily accessible building stone in many areas which lie outside this zone. The surviving stone-dwellings in the northern half of the country are variously called by other non-dialect specific titles, e.g. *badún* ‘fortified enclosure’, *cloch* ‘stone (building)’, *dún* ‘fort’, *grianán* ‘sunny place’ and *tech* ‘dwelling’, among other terms.

- *Cobfán* ‘slope, hollow’: This word, a compound of *com* + *fán*, is found as a placename element (with and without qualification), generally spelt *cabán*. Of 90 names beginning with Cavan listed in the 1901 census, 80 are located in Ulster, 7 are in counties which border Ulster, leaving just three ‘outriders’.<sup>21</sup> However, I have no examples of its use in placename composition before the twelfth century.
- *Imblech* ‘land bordering on a lake or marsh’: Though this word is very common in placenames, Hogan (1910) has only noted three definite examples (out of over 40 cited) of its occurrence in Ulster (s.nn. *i. cluane*, *i. coba*, *i. corco duib*), only one of which is demonstrably early. Allied to this, the 1901 Census lists 57 townlands and 4 parishes beginning with Emlagh / Emly, not one of which is in Ulster.<sup>22</sup>
- *Irrus* ‘promontory’: With the probable exception of one example, *Irrus Foichne* (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, s.a. 727.3) which has not yet been satisfactorily identified, all 17 examples of this placename element listed in Hogan (1910) occur outside Ulster. In the 1901 Census, none of the small number of placenames listed beginning with

<sup>21</sup> These are tls Cavan and Cavanquarter, par. Ballinrobe, bar. Kilmaine, Co. Mayo and tl. Cavansheath, par. Clonagh and Clonagheen, bar. Maryborough, Co. Laois.

<sup>22</sup> However, there is a tl. Imlick in par. Killea, bar. Raphoe N., Co. Donegal.

Erris are in Ulster; however, there are two probable examples of Ulster *irrus*-names listed elsewhere in the Census.<sup>23</sup>

- *Mell* ‘a round mass, protuberance’: The use of this common word as a placename element meaning ‘knoll’, anglicised as ‘Maul’, is confined to counties Cork and Kerry (see Flanagan and Flanagan, 1994, 120–1).<sup>24</sup> The emergence of this specific usage of the word has not yet been traced.
- *Sód* ‘weir’: As Diarmuid Ó Murchadha (1994–5, 130) has shown, the earliest example of the word *sód* in placenames (*Sódh Macáin*) probably goes back to the early-tenth century. The most fascinating aspect of the word, however, is its extremely restricted use in placenames, along the southern stretch of the river Shannon between Lough Derg and Limerick.

There are problems with placename distributions, however, which must be taken into account. For example, it has been shown by Deirdre Flanagan (1984, 31) that the use of the word *domnach* ‘church building’ (< Lat. *dominicium*) ‘relates to the first phase of Christianity in Ireland and appears to have fallen into disuse by the 7th century’. Thus, the distribution of *domnach*-names (in English commonly written *donagh*), with their paucity in Munster, Scotland and on the western seaboard, reflects the extent of the early christianising mission and not dialect preference with regard to the naming of ecclesiastical settlements. Another problematic form is that of *tamlacht(ae)* ‘(plague) burial-place’.<sup>25</sup> This word is well attested in placenames and as a placename element in early sources (e.g. Stokes & Strachan 1901–3, ii 238.8; Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, s.a. 811.2). Apart from the famous monastery at Tullaght, Co. Dublin, and two later examples of Tullaght placenames in Co. Kerry, all our early records of *Tamlacht(ae)* placenames refer to Ulster.<sup>26</sup> Of the 33 tl. names and 4 par. names with Tamlaght, Tamlat, Tawlaght or Towlaght as the first element listed in the 1901 census, all are in Ulster with the exception of two near Mohill, Co. Leitrim, two in bar. Boyle, Co. Roscommon and one near Clonard, Co. Meath. Thus, its usage is quite restricted and it would seem to be a good candidate for inclusion in a survey such

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<sup>23</sup> These are tl. Urros, par. Inishmacsaint, bar. Magheraboy, Co. Fermanagh and tl. Urrismenagh, par. Clonmany, bar. Inishowen E., Co. Donegal.

<sup>24</sup> Flanagan and Flanagan (1994), in the first section of their book, highlight a number of placename elements which are more prominent in certain areas of the country and whose distribution may possibly be an indicator of dialectal usage.

<sup>25</sup> *Tamlacht(ae)* (< *tám* ‘plague’ + *lechta* ‘graves?’) is regularly assumed to mean ‘plague burial-place’ (cf. Joyce (1869, 162); Dinneen (1927) s.n. *Támhlacht*; Flanagan and Flanagan (1994, 145–146)), though this meaning is nowhere explicitly attested; cf. Quin et al. (1913–76) s.v. *táimlecht(ae)* and s.n. *Tamlacht(ae)*.

<sup>26</sup> See the map to this effect in Flanagan and Flanagan (1994, 146).

as this. However, it seems very possible that the distribution pattern of this element primarily reflects the spread of the plague (and need for plague burial-grounds) rather than dialectal variation.<sup>27</sup> No other Irish word for plague burial-ground is known to me.

As should be clear from the above, placename evidence must be used with circumspection in these matters.<sup>28</sup> For example, chronology is one of the central problems. We can only use the earliest written form of the placename as evidence even though many of these names have, quite probably, a longer history behind them. Thus, arguments most often be constructed on partial evidence. Despite xunavailable elsewhere – its very quantity and variety ensures that it will never be exhausted as a source.

### Conclusions

- Old Irish was a very standardised written language but dialect features are present. It is still difficult, however, to move their description beyond ‘nuances of dialect’.
- The best area in which to look for these dialectal variations is vocabulary, where authors could involuntarily betray their origins.
- From about 1000 AD onwards, these dialect differences become more marked in the literature.
- Issues of register must remain central to the debate. Many questions will fail to be resolved because of our lack of knowledge of the use of register in medieval Irish versus the use of dialect.
- We must view the retention in Scottish Gaelic of certain features present in Old Irish as evidence that innovative dialect features (as represented by their modification in Ireland) were present in the language as far back as the time of the Glosses.
- Placenames would seem to offer the most hope for geographically locating possible dialectal features in medieval Irish vocabulary.

### Abbreviations

bar. barony; Co. county; par. parish; tl. townland.

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<sup>27</sup> Dr Gene Haley presented an interesting paper on the distribution of *tamlachtae* sites to the 22nd Annual Harvard Celtic Colloquium, October 10–13, 2002, titled ‘*Tamlachtae*: The Map of Plague Burials and its Implications for Early Irish History’; it is due to appear in a future number of *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*.

<sup>28</sup> Convenient lists of the main advantages and disadvantages in using placename evidence are given in Ó Maolalaigh (1998, 16–17).

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