Toponymy of Celtic Scotland

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Abstract. It has long been known that there is a certain link between a geographic locality and its name. The paper attempts to link the history, geography, and culture of Scotland with the names of its cities, homesteads, rivers, streams, mountains, hills, and other localities that are either man-made creations or natural phenomena. Despite covering mere 80,000 km², Scotland is a unique region. Scotland is almost completely washed by sea, although most of its territory lies on the uplands. Mountains, hills, valleys, rich in diverse vegetation, conjure up an attractive look of Scotland. This very landscape forged the features of Scottish place names, one of the oldest place names on the world map. The paper will touch upon the earliest period when the names of Scottish geographic localities appeared, the period when this amazing country, currently part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, was conquered by the Celtic tribes who penetrated this land in different centuries. First, the author dwells on word-building formants enabling to classify the place names of Scotland as part of the “Celtic” period of language evolution. Some elements including aber, ach, aughte/ochter, baile/baile, barr, blair, coil, dal, de, inver, mach, pit, tulach, dating back to Celtic language culture, are part of most units of the place-name vocabulary of Scotland and primarily denote natural features of the landscape of the target region.

1 Introduction

Any vocabulary prominently features the names of geographic localities including the names of cities, settlements, rivers, valleys, hills, swamps, etc. Geographical names go along with people throughout their lives, from birth till death, since they are intrinsically intertwined with human being – not only material, but also spiritual. The place names have always been a priority direction in various scientific domains. However, for a very long time place names have been investigated by historians, geographers, ethnographers and other researchers who studied the relationship between names of particular geographical localities and the history, geography and culture of the country. Certainly, due to the fact that place names refer to the landscape of a particular area, toponymy is closely related to geography. On the other hand, place names are documents of an era, witnesses of the past. They can tell descendants a lot about their forebears, flip through the pages of history. Therefore, place names can be referred to as part of historical science. Place names are also markers of cultural heritage. Their inner form can encrypt the information about traditional folk crafts of an ethnic group, its religion, folklore, literature, and musical preferences. However, we should not forget that place names are, first, part of the vocabulary and they are bound to retain certain linguistic patterns. In this regard, researchers have long concluded that a linguistic dimension of toponymy is ahead of and encourages other dimensions concerned. Thus, culture, history, geography, and linguistic methods have been successfully applied in the studies of toponymy.

The linguistic studies of British toponymy can boast a firm grounding. For two centuries now, British scholars have been concerned with specific features of urban and rural names of the landscape of the British Isles.

It is believed that the first notable reference that included information on the toponymy of Great Britain was published in 1873. It was An Etymological Dictionary of the English language by W. Skeat. It was this book that became a practical and reliable source of information for quick accounts of the origin of English place names. It triggered a series of etymological studies to explore the geographical names of Great Britain, which was assumed as the basis by the English Place-Name Society, founded in 1923 by A. Mawer, and made a huge contribution to a place-name survey of the British Isles. Under the auspices of the society, in the latter half of the 20th century, Frank Stenton, Bruce Dickins, Hugh Smith, Kenneth Cameron, Eilert Ekwall and other British toponymists published their papers. However, all these studies had a general scope and addressed the entire toponymy of Great Britain, without being sensitive to regional features.

Like other researchers who contributed greatly to the toponymy of Great Britain (suffice it to recall the papers and monographs written by the Soviet linguist V.D. Belenkaya, although most of her studies were based on English-language sources of information that are not available to all), British scholars cover too many geographic names thus making their reviews seem superficial. It is a different matter if researchers address the toponymy of individual regions within a country. However, a great deal of place-name studies both in the

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In the first half of the 20th century, extensive research into the place names of Scotland, Ireland and Wales ceased. Hence, the place names of these “republics” were studied within general British toponymy. Only in the second half of the 20th century, researchers became interested in interpreting the geographical names of these three regions of the British Isles, because Scottish, Irish and Welsh toponymy is the most interesting historical and cultural dimension of linguistic research, as it is the most ancient stratum of place naming process.

Most often, British researchers come to explore Scottish place names, since the geographical names of Scotland are the most difficult to interpret, as they refer researchers to the Celtic language substratum, which has not been fully studied yet. The first scientist who was interested in the place names of Scotland (the term “toponym” is not used in the English-speaking linguistic scientific field, it is replaced by the lexeme “place-name”) was W. Skene, who published a unique three-volume Celtic Scotland in 1886. The scientist was one of the first to compile a table where he not just included the word-building elements of Scottish place names, but also indicated the counties where this or that element occurred, as well as the quantitative ratio of these elements [1, P. 3]. W. Skene was the first to suggest that the names of natural features (such as rivers, mountains, valleys, etc.) remain unchanged. “Even if indigenous people leave their native places, these names are used by their successors who speak a different language,” he noted [2, P. 147].

Today, the most comprehensive reference on the place names of Scotland is the above book The Place-names of Scotland, although the author, J. B. Johnston, calls his book a “pathetic attempt” to collect all the names of “timeless” geographic localities of Scotland. The book was written away from large libraries. In a bid to interpret a particular name, the author was guided by his own intuition, although he claimed that the findings may be faulty, as he did not have a good command of the languages of the first settlers inhabiting Britain (primarily, the ancient Celtic languages). In the Preface to his book, he noted that he did not claim to be “scientifically accurate”, but only provided hypotheses. Hence, he frequently used the words “perhaps” and “probably” [3].

Later, in 1934, J. Johnston said that the oldest place names in the British Isles were Scottish and Welsh place names, since they, “like hard granite, are highly weatherproof” [3, P. XIII]. Nevertheless, over the past century and a half, little has been done to explore the place-name phenomenon of Scotland. Of course, we can refer to the studies of E. Ekwall who dealt with British hydronymy. Thus, in his book English River-Names, published in 1928, he classified Celtic hydronyms to their semantic qualities [4]. Although he gave a few examples for each group and took monosyllabic names as a basis, his work gave a grounding in the surveys of water bodies located in Scotland. Worthy of mention are the publications of the German linguist W. Nicolaissen who was engaged in onomastic research: The Semantic Structure of Scottish Hydronymy (1957) [5] and Scottish Place-Names (2001) [6], as well as the works of some British and American scientists written at the nexus of geography and linguistics. One of the best works in this field is the book by M. Gelling and E. Cole Landscape of Place-names, devoted to the relationship between the elements of Scottish place names and the topographic environment to which this place name refers to [7]. Nevertheless, despite the interest of researchers in Scottish place names as the most distinctive and mysterious area of the British Isles, these linguistic units are not well understood and require more etymological and lexical-semantic attention.

2 Materials and Methods

When you seek to examine place-name strata, you should first rely on the methods adopted in the field of placename (more broadly – onomastic) studies. The methods are chosen subject to the goals and objectives pursued.

Subsequent upon a range of issues discussed in the scientific literature, three blocks of major topics require thorough resolution by those who study place name vocabulary.

The first block includes general questions related to the way the place name is understood as a linguistic unit. Here it is necessary to understand that place names are “a special class of words that forms its own system and at the same time is an integral part of common-language system” [8, P. 21].

The second block includes a series of questions addressed by onomasiology, including the principles of place naming, word-formation models, structure of place names and their formants (native and borrowed).

The third block involves the issues studied by semasiology. The range of questions here is concerned with meanings of place names, based on their internal forms, the relationship of geographical names concerned with the geographical space and landscape of an area, historical and cultural features in the organization of an array of target place names.

The paper aims to analyze the ethno specificity of the oldest Scottish place names – place names of “Celtic” Scotland, through historical, cultural and geographical data being an interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, the following methods for studying place naming procedure will be focused on.

1. Formant method. It involves the segmentation of formants (word-building elements) of Celtic origin from a place name, followed by ethno-linguistic and semantic interpretation.
2. **Etymological method.** Estimating place names should start with their origin. The principles of etymological analysis involve consideration of historical facts, identification of ancient place-name elements dating back to the past. The etymological analysis is based on the principle of historicism and provides regular changes indicated in the lexical and semantic structure of the place name at different stages of its evolution.

3. **Paleo geographic method.** It consists in “studying, if possible, not only the current features of a geographic locality whose name is being investigated, but also its past characteristics when this name was given” [9, P. 227].

The paper rests on these three methods. Describing geographic localities of Celtic origin, the author first studied the geographical position of a locality, appealing to the past, then she segmented a formant of Celtic origin from this place name and, finally, carried out an etymological analysis of the entire place name, with a priority account for the meaning of the formant (or formants).

### 3 Results and Discussion

In his studies of Scottish place names, J. Johnston writes: “Definitely, we cannot say for sure, but Celtic names of Scottish geographic localities outnumber all other names almost tenfold” [3, P. XVII]. He argues that “until the death of Malcolm II of Scotland in 1056, all Scotland was purely Celtic” [3, P. XVII]. However, interpreting Scottish place names of Celtic origin in a semantic way is not always an easy task. Scottish place naming, based on its oldest stratum, viewed to be Celtic, according to J. Johnston’s metaphor, is “a vast swamp with little solid support along the edges; a vast swamp, without roads or street lamps, and with many will-o’-the-wisps dancing deceptively around to confuse the unlucky explorer” [3, P. XVII].

The thing is that even a scholar who knows the Gaelic language will not always be able to identify a Celtic formant in a place name. As an example, D. Johnston cites the name of a small settlement in Scotland Achnacroicheich, which is composed of two words – achadh – “field, land” and clach – “stone”. Thus, the place name can be translated as “land with many stones.” However, whenever the clach/cloich formant occurs in the structure of a place name, researchers begin to argue. What kind of stone are we talking about? Is this stone a relic of the Druids, or is it an ordinary stone, of which there are thousands in Scotland? And then in the first case cloich is a Celtic formant, whereas in the second case this word is a Picts name of an ordinary stone. It appears that the origin of the formant can be derived from the type of stone. Although, since it is impossible to find a single piece of land with ancient stones lying on it near this settlement, it is also impossible to be 100% sure that the place name Achnacroicheich is purely Celtic, and was not brought to this land by the Picts. Before the Celts came to Scotland, the country was inhabited by the Picts. Since the Picts language is part of the Celtic language group (according to one of the versions, the Picts originated from the Celts, but at the very early stage of their historical development they “broke off”), it is easy to confuse purely Celtic elements in the structure of words with Pictish elements.

However, the Picts were not the first inhabitants of the territory that accommodates present-day Scotland. Anthropologists refer the native inhabitants of this land to certain Iberians – “cave dwellers with dark complexion, black hair, a long skull and a short, weak build, whose remains were found in long barrows. Julius Caesar calls them Silures” [3, P. XVIII]. Traces of these tribes can be found all over Scotland, north of Galloway and in the Hebrides (for example, on the Isles of Barra). However, where did the tribes called Iberians come from? Iberia is the ancient name of Spain, and therefore it can be assumed that the natives of Britain came from Spain and, most likely, from the southern coast of the Bay of Biscay, i.e. from the Basque country. A few linguistic elements of the Basque language (let us call them pre-Celtic elements) are found to be present even in the modern Gaelic language. Let alone the language spoken by the ancient Celts who moved to Scotland! An element borrowed from the Basque language, for example, is urr meaning “water”. It is the name of a river that flows near the Scottish town of Dalbeattie (the ancient name is Dalbeattic). There is also the River Isla in Scotland, the name of which was given by the element il-, which is very common in Basque place names.

The researchers involved in Scottish place names are tasked to recognize pre-Celtic formants among the purely Celtic elements constituting the structure of place names. British professor of the second half of the 19th century T.W. Rhys, relied upon by D. Johnston, proposed the following method for detecting pre-Celtic elements in some Scottish place names. Given that a place name includes Scottish names, absent in Gaelic, which resemble the names of princesses, heroes or deities mentioned in the earliest Welsh and Irish legends, these Scottish place names are thought to be pre-Celtic [3, P.XIX-XX]. Thus, from his point of view, the name of the Clyde River is derived from the name of the pre-Celtic deity Clota. However, as modern British toponymists believe, this analysis can be misleading, because the Celts also worshiped the goddess Clota, considering her the mistress of this river. Therefore, it is not obvious whether the Celts gave this name to the Clyde River or whether they borrowed it from their predecessors inhabiting this land. By the way, the Welsh word Clwyd, consonant with Clyde, means ’warm’, and therefore it can be assumed that the name of the river was borrowed from the Welsh language (this river was very warm). Hence, the method of distinguishing between pre-Celtic and Celtic elements in the place-name vocabulary of Scotland, proposed by T.W. Rhys, does not justify itself.

Until the beginning of the 6th century, two-thirds of Scotland was entirely Pictish. There were both northern and southern kingdoms of the Picts, separated by the Grampian Mountain Range and the Argyll Mountains (a current historical region in the west of Scotland). The Picts called their land Drumalban, i.e. Alban Ridge.

However, the Picts did not greatly influence the way Scottish place names developed. Although some Scottish
place names contain the prefix *pit*– (transformed *p*ett meaning ‘share, allotment of land’). For example, Pitlochry (a city in central Scotland), Pittenweem (a fishing village on the east coast of Scotland). This prefix is associated with light dry soils, often with southern slopes that are most suitable for plowing [10, P. 65].

The first troublemakers for the Picts and the Iberians who lived side by side were the Gaels, or, otherwise referred to as, the Goidels, and after a while a Celtic tribe of stronger and more militant Britons came to reside in the island. These are the two largest branches of the Celtic “race” in Britain, who intermingled over time. However, the word “Gaelic” is now used to relate to the language of the Scottish Celts, while “Goidels”, or “Gadhels” generally refer to the Irish, the populations of the Isle of Man and Cornwall.

The Gaels and Britons left many place names in modern Scotland. As soon as we come to study the Celtic place-names of Scotland, we expect to find two types of these units: some of them must be Gaelic, and the other Brythonic. However, it is not all that simple. The Britons were a stronger tribe, and they very soon enslaved the Gaels, who are, by nature, a timid and very calm nation soon speaking a Brythonic dialect of Celtic. Thus, studying Scottish place names, namely its Celtic layer, it is impossible to classify the geographical features of Britain as Brythonic and Gaelic.

As far as the historical context of Scottish toponymy is concerned, it is necessary to mention another Celtic tribe that gave the country its name. In 498, a nation sailed from Ireland on wicker boats, which in the future would be called Scotts, i.e., Scotts (these people moved to Ireland from the continent). The tribe lived in Ulster, thus being further referred to as Ulstermen. The ethnonym Scotts appeared only in the 11th century. The Scot tribe, also Celtic, conquered all of Argyll, and then the islands south of the Ardnamurchan peninsula (Gaelic: *Ard nam Murchan* – ‘peak of the great seas’). Then they founded the kingdom of Dal Reed that covered both Scottish and Irish territories, and, finally, promoted its own language among other inhabitants of the island, or, more precisely, a Celtic dialect.

Like the Jutes and Angles who made the natives of Britain speak their language, replacing the names of settlements, rivers, mountains, valleys with their own names, so did these Scottish-Irish who forced all the tribes that lived in Scotland (Gaels, Picts, Britons) to speak their language, which was reflected in the place-name vocabulary that now consists of elements of all the inhabitants of the peninsula. However, the languages of these tribes, especially Scottish Gaelic and Pictish, differ slightly from each other. They share many common names of mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, which have become part of place names. Therefore, it is now difficult to identify which elements in place names are Pictish and which are Scottish.

Meanwhile, there are some phonetic differences between place names. Thus, Gaelic does not have formants with the letter *p*. Therefore, if we encounter the element *pen*- or *pin*- in a place name, this place name is of British origin. In Gaelic, we find *ben*– instead of *pen*–.

In many Scottish place names, we find the prefix *aber*- and *inver*-. Toponymists still debate whether the element *aber-,* from *abhr-ir* is a Brythonic formant or not. In Brythonic Celtic, the word *aber* means ‘the mouth of a river or stream’, ‘the confluence of rivers’. Thus, Aberdeen is a town that lies at the confluence of the Dee and Don rivers, which determined its name: *Aber + Dee + (Do)n*. However, there are some geographical localities in Scotland (mostly cities or settlements) with the formant *aber-,* which are not located at the mouths of rivers or where the rivers join. An example of this is the place name Abermuthy. The village with this name is also located on the river, but not at the mouth of the river. This town used to be the capital of the Picts, and therefore a fortress that protected the people from the raids of other tribes. The Picts referred *aber* to ‘fort, fortress’. Thus, the formant *aber* in this place name cannot be related to the Brythonic dialect of the Celtic language.

J. Johnston believes that the Gaels used the element *inver-* instead of the element *aber,-,* that *ber-,* and *ver-* are the same root spelled differently [3. P. XXVII] and provides the place names with this formant that in some names is translated as ‘the mouth of the river’, and in others – as ‘fortress’, which indicates both British and Pictish borrowings in the toponymy of Scotland. For example, the name of the city of Inverary, built by the Gaels, is translated as ‘a city built at the mouth of the Ari River’, and the name of the village of Inverdovet is translated as ‘black fortress’.

Most of the Scottish place names that appeared in “Celtic” times tend to be rather natural. The Celts were a harsh, but rather emotional nation, looking for poetry in the world around. The fact that the Celts viewed severe natural environment as their daily companion and friend is evidenced by many place names. Rivers, hills, forests, mountains, valleys – all natural features were given names by the Celts, most of which were quite simple: *Ballinavin* meaning ‘village on the river’, *Brechin* meaning ‘place of covered hills and slopes’, *Glenfinnan* meaning ‘clean river’, *Tighnabruach* meaning ‘house on the shore’ (hiltside). Besides, you can also find such names that describe some geographical features. For example, *Greenock* (Gaelic: *grian* – ‘sun’ + *cnoc* – ‘hill, elevation’) – ‘sunlit hill’; *Auchtendimny* (Gaelic: *dinat* – ‘wooded valley’) – ‘a field with a wooded valley’.

It is not only plants and trees that make a geographical feature so specific, but animals as well. The Celts were very fond of perpetuating the names of their domestic animals, mainly cattle. Thus, the name of the settlement *Bochastle* is translated as ‘castle with many cows’, and the place name *Bowlund* means ‘land of cows’ (Gaelic: *bo* – ‘cow’). The place names *Lochmaddy* and *Polmadie* have a hidden Gaelic word *Madadh* that translates as ‘wild dog’ (so the Celts called wolves), and the meanings of the place names *Auchturmacht*, *Drummerkloch* and *Muckhart* are associated with pig breeding (Gaelic: *muc* – ‘pig’). These place names designate either a field where pigs graze or a pen for pigs.

Some place names are somewhat metaphorical. The Gaels could notice some natural feature of a locality resembling a person, and reflected it in the name. A tributary of the river Clyde is called the *Strone*, and there
is a little headland called the Stronachlachar on Lake Catherine. The structure of these place names includes the Gaelic word stron meaning 'nose'. The place name Kinaldie (settlement) was derived from the word cinn, or kin, 'head'.

Unlike the Celts who settled in England, the Scottish Celts did not like to perpetuate their names or the names of their family members. If in England many towns and settlements bear the names of the Saxons who became famous for something, Scotland, though, have few of them. However, the names of the heroes praised by Scottish legends and tales became part of some place names. Among them are Athole, Caithness, Fiddich, Mearns. Place names like Balmacellean ('village of McLellan') are hardly ever found.

Some Scottish place names going back to the “Celtic” times were derived from the names of pagan gods worshiped by the Druids. For example, the town of Elgin is named after the goddess Elga.

Researchers believe that the place names of “Celtic” Scotland can be identified by the following word-building elements:

1. Aber (Gaelic: Abhir) that has already been discussed above;
2. Achadh meaning ‘field, land’; this word became the affix ach- in place names such as Achmacarry ('field where traps are set') and Cabrach ('land of deer');
3. Aichter or ochter ('land on a hill'), which became part of the place names Aichterye/Oichteiry ('village on a hill'), Auchtermuchty ('pig pen on a hill');
4. Bail/baile ('village, homestead', sometimes ‘house'): there are at least fifty villages with this formant in the valleys of Aberdeen: Balnabruaich ('village on the coast'), Ballater ('village on a hillside'), Ballindalloch ('village in a hollow');
5. Barr ('elevation, hill'): Barra, Barra, Barrasie;
6. Blair (Gaelic: Bldr) ('plain'): Balblair ('village on the plain'), Blairgowrie ('plain where geese graze');
7. Coll or cuil ('secluded nook'): Colfin ('secluded nook in the woods'), Culross ('safe promontory harbor');
8. Dal ('meadow', ‘valley'): Dalnassie ('promontory meadow'), Dalnassidal ('tavern in the valley');
9. Gart, from Gaelic ga-radh ('fenced patch of land'): Gartcosh ('clef'), Gartnavel ('apple orchard');
10. Inver (Gaelic: inbhir), mentioned above;
11. Mach, from Gaelic magh ('palm'): Machrabanish ('narrow plain resembling a human palm');
12. Pit (considered above): Pitgavenny ('Pict dwelling');
13. Tulach ('hillside’, ‘hill'): Kirkintilloch ('church on the mountain'), Mortlach ('big hill').

It is impossible to be 100% sure that the presence of all the above affixes in the structure of Scottish place names indicates their “Celtic” origin. Nevertheless, according to Western European (mainly British) scholars, these word-building elements are the very “lights” that will light up the way for a novice “explorer of the truth” in the topographic “maze” of Scotland.

4 Conclusion

The toponymy of Scotland has stemmed from longstanding interactions between peoples who came to this land at different periods. In this regard, researchers distinguish several layers (or strata) of place-name vocabulary. The earliest place names in Scotland date back to the Celtic era, representing a Celtic stratum of place names. Having evaluated these units in the context of synchronic and diachronic analysis, relying on etymology and related disciplines (such as history and geography), the paper identified 13 word-building elements that helped in interpreting the meanings of the names of geographical natural and man-made features. These place names provide information about the features of the landscape of this country, about the occupations of the people inhabiting it. If you compile a map of Scotland, involving the “Celtic” layer of place names, the map will present the entire geographical nomenclature of the mountainous regions as “possession of the Celts”. In the south, the number of Celtic names is declining. There are very few place names of Celtic origin in the southeast because the area was massively settled by the Angles.

The earliest Celtic explorations of Scottish lands had a huge impact on the composition of modern toponymy in this administrative unit of the United Kingdom, although many of the localities addressed from a linguistic perspective are absent from the map of the country. Nevertheless, all these place names not only render the past of the country, but also reflect the earliest status of the language of its indigenous people – a careful nurse of the cultural heritage.

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