Two Mountain Names: Slieve Felim and Mauherslieve

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This article deals with two mountain names from Counties Limerick and Tipperary: one the name of a peak, the other the name of a range in which, according to early sources, the peak is located. These names illustrate some issues which arise regularly in Irish toponymy. Mauherslieve exemplifies the difficulties of interpreting names of topographical features for which early sources are lacking. In Slieve Felim we see the re-interpretation of a pre-Christian female name, possibly that of a pagan deity, as a male name, apparently that of a king or chieftain. This is further complicated by the emergence of a ghost name on certain maps and reference works. In both cases there are questions about the location/extent of the feature named. A selection of historical forms relevant to the discussion is cited, but these lists are by no means complete.

Slieve Felim / Sliabh Eibhinne

Location
Parish: Abington / Toghe / Doon / Toem (minimum extent, see below)
Barony: Owney Beg / Coonagh / Kilnamanagh Upper
County: Limerick / Tipperary
Maximum height: 462m, 1524 ft. (Cullaun, grid ref. R823574)

The extent of Slieve Felim / Sliabh Eibhinne as a range varies somewhat from source to source. Nowadays the name is understood locally to apply only to the hills located south of the Newport – Rear Cross road, which follows the valley of the Annagh River, and the highest summit included in it is Cullaun (462m).\(^1\) *Liostaí Logainmneacha – Contae Thiobraid Árann* places it on OS 6’ sheet nos. 32 and 38 for Tipperary, suggesting that it extends north of the Annagh River to include at least Mauherslieve.\(^2\) However, on sixteenth and seventeenth-century maps it is indicated as an even more extensive range.

Irish forms

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\(^1\) This was confirmed for me by Mr. James T. Nolan of Rear Cross.

English forms

*The xii great hylls of phelem*  
Lythe’s map of Munster (1572)

*Mountaine of Phelim*  
Boazio’s map of Ireland (1599)

*The 12 great Hilles of Phelim Ghe Madona*  
Speed’s map of Munster (1610)

*The 12 great Hilles of Phelim Ghe Madona*  
Speed’s map of Ireland (1610)

*The 12 great Hilles of Phelim Ghe Madona*  
Blaeu’s map of Munster (1654)

Discussion

There are numerous early references to this name and within the scope of this article it is only feasible to mention a few. The earliest of which I am aware is in *The Annals of Inisfallen*, AD 531: ‘Bellum Eblinna’ (i.e. ‘the battle of Éblenn’). The nominative of this name is *Éblu* or *Éblenn* in Old Irish (modern form: *Éibhleann*). It is suggested the first element in the name is Old Irish *oíph*, ‘sheen, beauty, radiance.’ If so, it would have a similar meaning and etymology to the name *Aife* (*Aoife*). T.F. O’Rahilly went so far as to suggest that *Éblu* was the name of an ancient Irish sun-goddess. This idea is also supported by the fact that she is portrayed as the sister of Lugh Lámhfhota, who is himself a sun-deity, his long arms representing the long rays of the sun. However, it must be said that the proposed etymology is more convincing for *Aoife* than for *Éblu*.

Note that the place-name in *The Annals of Inisfallen* is simply *Éblenn*, identical with the personal name. It is not attested in combination with the element *slabh* until later, although there is no reason to doubt that the reference is to the same mountain group. No details of the battle of Éblenn are given in *The Annals of Inisfallen*. However, *The Annals of Ulster* record the same battle (‘Bellum Eblinna’) two years later in 533, naming a Muirchertach as the victor.

*Éblu* is also the name of the wife of Maíríd, king of Munster, in the tale of the Death of Cechaidh, son of Maíríd, which is contained within *Lebor na hUidre*. We are told that Éblu is the daughter of *Guaire*. ‘Éblu im ingen Guáirí a Bruig Meic ind Orc* is *i ba ben do Maíríd*. It is also explained that *Slabh Eblinna* is named after her: ‘is ond Eblind sin dano ainmghiter Slabh nEblinde.’ In this tale Éblu makes advances to her step-son Cechaidh, who eventually elopes with her, taking his brother Rib and a huge complement of men. This tells us how Lough Neagh was formed.

The district is also mentioned in *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (often called ‘The Book of Invasions’), contained within the *Book of Leinster*) and again the name occurs as a simplex: ‘Acalsat Foltla i nÉblinniu.’ It is here that the newly-arrived Milesians meet with the goddess Fódla, who appeals to Aermín, leader of the invaders, to name the country after her. This is the second such encounter: they had already met with the goddess Banba on *Slabh Mis*, and subsequently at *Uisnech* they meet *Éire*, to whose wish they accede. The country is then named *Éire* after her, although Banba and Fódla are retained as by-names. It is worth noting that, in addition to the three goddesses encountered by the Milesians, two more goddess-names feature in this passage in the mountain names, since both *Mis* and *Éblu* can be regarded as deities.  

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1. For further references, see Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Gaelicum* (1910) p. 608.
5. Quoted in O Corráin & Maguire, *Irish Names*, p. 82.
8. *Bruig Meic ind Orc* is identified as *Brú na Bóinne* (Newgrange) by Hogan, *Onomasticon Gaelicum*, p. 130.
11. Dr. Kay Muir (personal comment, September 2006) has remarked that these references suggest that Éblu was a deity of place rather than a sun-goddess.
Another version of the Milesian invasion is given in Leabhar Mór na nGénealach, compiled by Dubhaltach Mac Fhírbhisigh. Here the same three places are mentioned: “Tiagaid as sin go Sliabh Mis, a-sidhe go Sliabh nEbhlinne, as sin doibh go hUisneach Midhe.” This passage provides confirmation that Ébléim Ébleinn and Sliabh Éibhlinne are synonymous as place-names.

In certain later versions of Lebor Gabála Érenn it is said that these mountains were named after a Milesian chieftain, Eblindí son of Breogán, king of Spain: “Eblindi mac Breguin, a quo Sliabh nEbhlinde.” If there were any doubt, it is made clear from the word mac (‘son of’) that Eblindi is intended as the name of a man in this passage. However, since one of the purposes of this passage is to explain a list of Irish place-names, many of them mountain names, it is quite likely that the person was invented to suit the occasion. As there are no other sources which expand on this character, we need not set too much store by this reference to a male Eblindi.

The name Ébléim Ébleinn in Sliabh Éibhlinne seems to have been confused in late medieval/early modern times with the male name Feidhlimidh/Feidhlim, perhaps because the former was no longer widely used as a name, and Feidhlim was more familiar. The intrusive F- arises, of course, from the final consonant of sliabh, so that Sliabh Éibhlinne came to be interpreted as *Sliabh Feidhlim or the like.

It is not known exactly when this confusion arose and how widespread it was, but the transformation is apparent on Lythe’s map of Munster (1572), which refers to The xii great hylls of phelen. It is not clear whether the name was understood to refer to a particular historical personage named Phelim. There were several kings of this name, though the best known is probably Fedelmid mac Crimthainn (d. 847) of the Eoganacht Caisil, an ecclesiastic and king of Munster who attempted to gain control of all of Ireland.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the earliest reference to Sliabh Éibhlinne/Sliabh Felim as a group of twelve peaks. However, the group of twelve was not any map-maker’s invention. It also occurs in the tale of ‘In Gilla Deacair’ (‘The Hard Servant’) in Silva Gadelicca. Although this version of the tale was copied in 1765 in Co. Meath, the composition of the tale has been dated to the late 15th or early 16th century. Here the group of twelve is used in combination with the original name Ébléim: ‘ocus co dá sliab déc Ébléinn’ (‘...and to the twelve mountains of Ebléinn.’)

The group of twelve is a familiar motif in dinnseanchas. There were considered to be twelve great mountains, twelve great lakes and twelve great rivers of Ireland. The formula is also preserved in the range known in English as ‘The Twelve Benks of Connemara’, although the names of the exact twelve peaks are no longer known. Similarly, I am unaware of any source which lists the Twelve Great Hills of Phelim, but is worthy of note that this grouping would probably necessitate the older, larger definition of the range, since the modern definition seems too limited in area to include 12 distinctive peaks.

16 Note that the name Eibléin (Eileen, equivalent to Evelyn) is of a different origin and was first introduced to Ireland by the Anglo-Normans. Ó Corráin & Maguire, Irish Names, p. 84.
17 Note that this re-interpretation has only affected the anglicised version of the name. The official Irish version remains Sliabh Éibhlinne, a modernised version of the form attested in Lebor na hUidre.
21 From the tale Tóraighcheadh in ghilla dheicreoc us a chapaill in Standish O’Grady (ed.), Silva Gadelicca, A Collection of Tales in Irish (1892) p. 258.
23 The Irish name of these mountains, Beanina Beola, makes no reference to a specific number.
Next to The xii great hylls of phelem on Lythe's map is another name: Ghe macdona or possibly Glie madona. These two names were erroneously read as one by several subsequent cartographers whose work relies to some extent on Lythe's survey. Speed (1610) renders the name as The 12 great Hilles of Phelem Ghe Madona on his map of Munster and The 12 great Hilles of Phelim Ghe Madona on his map of Ireland. These are reported by O'Donovan as The 12 great Hilles of Phelmghe Macrova and this is cited as a source by Hogan, in both cases without explanation. I am not clear what Lythe's Ghe madona represents, but I am quite convinced that he intended to name a separate feature, judging by the capital G and from the fact that it is not quite aligned with The xii great hylls of phelem. If I am correct, The 12 great Hilles of Phelim Ghe Madona and its variants are ghost names.

Joan Bleau has an identical form to Speed's on his map of Munster (1654). On this map, which has quite clear marking of relief, the name seems to apply to a group including Mauherslieve, Keeper Hill and the Silvermines Mountains. O'Donovan had a similar understanding of the range, describing Sliabh Eibhilinne / Sléibhte Eibhilinne in his supplement to O'Reilly's Dictionary as 'mountains extending from the baronies of Owneybeg and Coonagh, in the county of Limerick, in the direction of Cashel [south-east] and Nenagh [north], in the county of Tipperary.

To summarise, the district of Slieve Felim / Sliabh Eibhilinne is first attested simply as Ébleinn in early medieval sources. Later it appears as Sliab n'Éblíin and the like. Sometimes the range was regarded as a group of twelve mountains, as shown by forms such as dá sliab dèc Éibhilinne. In the late sixteenth century English language versions of the name arise which show that the female name Éblu Ébleinn has been re-interpreted as the male name Feidhlim. Through the conflation of two distinct place-names, the name was incorrectly rendered The 12 great Hilles of Phelem Ghe Madona by Speed in 1610, a ghost name which was repeated on several other maps and in reference works. The modern Irish version of the name, Sliabh Éibhilinne, has resisted any re-interpretation. The name seems once to have applied to an extensive range of hills, but is now understood to apply only to a sub-section of this range. Due to the wealth of early references, further research on this name is called for and it is likely that much remains to be said.

Mauherslieve or Moher Mountain

Location

Grid reference: R873619, approx. 3km NE of Rear Cross (OS 6' sheets 38, 39)
Townland: at the junction of Foilduff, Comnnagillagh and Laghile
Parish: on boundary of Abington and Dolla
Barony: on boundary of Owney & Arra and Ormond Upper
Height: 541m, 1783 ft.

25 John Speed, The Province of Munster (1610).
26 John Speed, The Kingdom of Ireland (1610).
27 Identifying this name is made harder by the fact that the region immediately west of Lough Derg is largely devoid of names in contrast to the rest of the map, suggesting that Lythe did not manage to survey this district. There are therefore few neighbouring points of reference. The feature one would most expect to be named at this location is Silevekintula / Keeper Hill, but the attested form does not seem compatible with this. Comparison with other maps of the same era has not yet clarified this name, but further research may provide a solution.
29 Note that Lythe uses capitals very sparingly, e.g. only for the initial of the first word in The xii great hylls of phelem.
30 I am indebted to Dr. Kay Muhr for drawing Lythe's map to my attention and for her help in interpreting the names on it. Part of it is reproduced in Michael Swift, Historical Maps of Ireland (1999) p. 29.
32 Joan Blacu, Momonia (1654).
O'Donovan made an uncharacteristic error in his supplement to O'Reilly's Irish-English Dictionary, giving Máthair-shliabh as an alias for Sliabh Coimeálta or Keeper Hill, which is, however, about 7km to the NW and much higher at 694m. This is repeated by Hogan in his Onomasticon Goedelicum but does not seem to be supported by any other independent source. The Ordnance Survey Complete Road Atlas of Ireland shows the name Mauherslieve or Mother Mountain in a trough about 3km W of the 541m peak. This also seems erroneous. The location on the OS 1:50,000 Discovery Series and 6’ maps is the correct one.

Pronunciation
/mɔhər′kleː/ = Moherclea (local pronunciation collected in Rear Cross, 2005).
/mɔhər/ = Moher (local pronunciation collected in Newport, 2005).

English/anglicised forms
Maherlea
Mauherslieve or Mother Mountain
Mauherslieve or Moher Mountain
Moherslieve Mountain
cited in OSNB
OS 6’ map sheet 38 and OSI Discovery map sheet 59
Liostá Logainmneacha (2004)
Gleeson, History of the Territory of Ely O’Carroll (1915)

Irish forms
Máthair-shliabh
Moitharshliabh
Máthair Shléibhe
O'Donovan’s supplement to O'Reilly’s Dictionary (1864)
OSi Discovery Map sheet 59
Liostá Logainmneacha (2004)

Discussion
This mountain seems to have suffered more than most from false identifications and locations. There is also considerable uncertainty about its correct names in both Irish and English. To my knowledge, the only written Irish language forms available for this name are modern attempts at interpretation based on English language forms. The various forms attested on maps, in the OSNB and in local pronunciations are not easy to reconcile. Indeed, it is necessary to consider the possibility that more than one name may lie behind this range of forms. However, despite these difficulties, I would like to offer a tentative solution.

Firstly, the problem can be made a little easier by stating that the form Mother Mountain does not seem to have any local currency today, nor is it supported by any local folklore. A leaflet for walkers on the Slieve Felim Way gives the mountain's name as Mauherslieve and makes no mention of Mother Mountain as an alias. O'Donovan's explanation in his supplement to O'Reilly's Dictionary ('This is locally termed Máthair-shliabh, as being the largest of the mountains of Sliabh Eibhilinne') carries no weight since the identification with Sliabh Coimeálta Keeper Hill, as already mentioned, is incorrect. Admittedly, Mother Mountain is recorded in the OSNB as an alias known to three local informants ('Maherlea or Mother Mountain, John Hunt Esq, ditto, John Kennedy Esq, ditto, Mr. P.O'Callaghan'). However, since this curious name, which cries out for an explanation, is not discussed in the OSNB - nor is there even

31 Ibid.
35 The Ordnance Survey Name Books were compiled in preparation for the first national survey of Ireland at 6 inches to the mile (1824-40). They are unpublished, but the OSNB for Co. Tipperary is available to view in typescript at Tipperary County Library, Thurles. I am indebted to Mary Guinan-Darmody of the County Library at Thurles for supplying me with the above forms from the OSNB.
a comment about the want of an explanation - I am inclined to wonder whether the name they provided may have rather been *Moher Mountain, this being subsequently altered to Mother Mountain by the Ordnance Survey officer who recorded the information. This would be consistent not only with the form /məhər/, which I obtained from local informants in 2005, but also with Gleeson's Moherslieve Mountain. The shortage of evidence for Mother Mountain may well explain the decision by An Brainte Logainmeacha to amend the English language form of the name to Mautherslieve or Moher Mountain in their recent publication, removing the t from the form previously used on Ordnance Survey maps. This change is to be welcomed, since the new form eliminates a confusion and is closer to local usage.

The first of the Irish forms, i.e., Motharsliabh from the Discovery map, seems the most likely on the basis of the attested English language forms, the modern local pronunciation and other data gathered in the area. The element mothar ('thicket' or 'overgrown wilderness') is common in this area. There are several townlands whose names include this element within 12km of Mautherslieve: Moher / An Mothar (parish of Upperchurch), Moheragh / Na Mothracha (Donohill), Moher East / An Mothar Thoir and Moher West / An Mothar Thiar (Toem), as well as another Mother / Mothar in Co. Limerick (parish of Abington). Motharsliabh would be consistent with the English forms Mautherslieve and perhaps Maherlea (but only if this spelling indicates /ə/ rather than /e/ for the final vowel).

However, the local pronunciation /məhərˈkle/ (= Moherecla), noted in 2005, presents a difficulty. It would seem at first sight to suggest Mothr Céibh, 'overgrown wilderness of the basket.' The element cliabh is occasionally found in placenames and may refer literally to a basket, or to a landform such as a deep hollow or glacial cirque which resembles a basket. Indeed, it occurs in Béal Átha Cliabhí / Bealaclohe, a townland in Abington parish on the western slopes of Mautherslieve. Elsewhere it appears in Macha na Céibhe / Maughanaclea, Co. Cork (where it appears to be feminine) and under a diminutive form in Mullach Cliabháin, Mullaghcleavaun, Co. Wicklow (where it almost certainly refers to a mountain hollow containing a lake). There is a deep hollow cut into the east side of Mautherslieve, visible from the Inch – Dolla road (see photo), which could be the feature alluded to in this name, and there are similar hollows on the western side near Bealaclohe.

Alternatively, it is possible that the second element is sliabh rather than cliabh, and that the pronunciation /məhərˈkle/ could represent the local realisation of Māthair Sliabhí, the Irish form proposed by Pádraig Ó Ceartbhall in Liosainnmeacha – Contae Thibraid Áran. The realisation of the leithead s- as a velar plosive would be unusual, but finds a parallel in the townland of Gortislae /Gort an tSliabhí (parish of Ballymacelligott, Co. Kerry), where Gortaclea is found as an alternative anglicisation alongside the official spelling. However, there are two objections to māthair as the first element. Firstly, we have seen that the equation of Moher-Moher- in anglicised spellings with Mr. māthair is questionable. Secondly, it is hard to find any parallels for the occurrence of māthair as a generic element in Irish place-names. If the second element in /məhərˈkle/ is sliabh rather than cliabh, I would suggest that it is more likely to be derived from Mothr Sliabhí or Mothar an tSliabhí, 'overgrown wilderness of the mountain/moorland'.

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40 All these forms from Ó Ceartbhail, Liosainnmeacha – Contae Thibraid Áran, p. 106.
41 Art Ó Maolfeabhlí, Logainmeacha na hÉireann, vol. 1. Conné Lásinnghé (1990) p. 223. However, the historical forms for this particular townland are problematic (e.g. Moéggor and Moegor in the Civil Survey (1655), and Moogher in the Down Survey (1557)). Ó Maolfeabhlí comments: 'Is lár nach s Mothar a bhí ann sin seo tracht.' (It is clear that this name was something other than Mothar at one time.) Whilst this is true, it is not easy to say what the earlier form of the name might be.
42 Ó Ceartbhail, Liosainnmeacha – Contae Thibraid Áran, p. 33.
43 OS Discovery map, sheet 85.
45 Ó Ceartbhail, Liosainnmeacha – Contae Thibraid Áran, p. 260.
46 I am grateful to Mr. Dermot Curran of Tralee, who provided me with a local pronunciation which accords with the spelling Gortaclea.
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Fig. 1 Mauherslieve from the east (Photo: Aidan Dillon).