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# **The Element *sceilg* in Irish Place-names – A Borrowing of Latin *spelu(n)ca*?**

## Abstract

Modern Irish *sceilg* is defined as a ‘steep rock’ or ‘crag’ (Ó Dónaill, 1977). The Old Irish form is *sceillec* (Dictionary of the Irish Language, 1913–1976). It is rare and now chiefly known through a handful of toponyms but is of considerable importance due to its occurrence in names at two notable early Christian monastic sites, namely *Sceilg Mhíchíl* (Eng. ‘Skellig Michael’), a rocky island located off the coast of Co. Kerry, and *Teampall na Sceilge* (Eng. ‘Templenaskellig’) at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. Both Skellig Michael and Glendalough are believed to have been founded by hermit saints in the 6th century AD.

There is no consensus regarding the etymology of *sceilg* (Vendryes, 1974). In this paper it will be argued that *sceilg* is a variant of *speilg*, another rare element in Irish place names with a complimentary, more northerly distribution, also denoting a rock feature, and that both are loans of Vulgar Latin *spelū(n)ca*, meaning ‘cave’ (sometimes a hermit’s dwelling) or ‘den’. Irish *sceilg*, as well as *speilg*, seems to have undergone a semantic shift, acquiring a more general sense of ‘rock, crag’. An earlier meaning ‘cave, hermitage’, closer to that of Latin *spelunca*, is only evident at the hermitage sites of *Sceilg Mhíchíl* and *Teampall na Sceilge*. In the latter case, the presence of a hermit’s cave, *Leaba Chaoimhín* (Eng. ‘Saint Kevin’s Bed’), in the immediate vicinity is particularly relevant.

### Keywords

Irish place-names, Latin loan-words in Irish

## 1. Introduction

This paper deals with the element *sceilg* in Irish place names, in particular its etymology, and explores possible relationships with two other elements, *speilg* and *béillic*, which also occur in topographical place names. My objectives are: 1) to highlight the fact that *sceilg* is known primarily through place names and is no longer used in Modern Irish as a common noun; 2) to show that most instances of the element are secondary and derive from one of two primary occurrences at early Christian monastic settlements: *Sceilg Mhichil*/Skellig Michael, an island off the coast of Co. Kerry, and *Teampall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow; 3) to propose an origin for *sceilg* as a borrowing of Latin *spelū(n)ca*, meaning ‘cave’, with subsequent semantic shift, and to argue that a loan from Latin as part of an ecclesiastical vocabulary into a very early stage of the Irish language is explicable in terms of regular sound changes and is likely, given the rarity of the element and its strong association with two of the most important early medieval monastic complexes in Ireland. The standard form in Classical Latin is *spelunca* but the reason for writing *spelū(n)ca* will become apparent.

The present investigation of *sceilg* builds on work begun in my doctoral thesis, “A study of selection of topographical elements in Irish place-names” (Tempan, 2011). This involved a detailed examination of eight rare and/or problematic elements referring to land-forms or rock features, namely *trosc*, *collann/callann*, *mala/malaidh*, *málainn*, *carbad*, *fothair/fothar/foithir*, *mionnán/mionán/meannán*, *glinsce*. I also investigated possible pre-Celtic elements (e.g., *ára/árainn*, *ros*, *tul*, *tor*). The aim was to develop a methodology for establishing origin and meaning of rare and/or problematic elements. A three-pronged method was developed, involving: 1) observation in the field and graphic presentation of findings, modelled on the approach of Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole in “The Landscape of Place-Names” (Gelling & Cole, 2000); 2) etymological research; 3) “comparative toponymy” drawing on works on place-names outside Ireland (e.g. “Les noms de lieux celtiques”, Falc’hun & Tanguy, 1966–1979). An all-Ireland approach was adopted as the evidence is often sparse and widely scattered. Such an approach is essential to examine *sceilg* and its potential variants for the same reasons.

## 2. Dictionary definitions of *sceilg*

The relevant headword in the “Dictionary of the Irish Language” (DIL) is *sceil-lec*. Note that the spelling at this stage of the language can be deceptive, since a written final *-c* is pronounced as a voiced /g/ in Old Irish. Furthermore, the modern pronunciation of *sceilg* is /ʃk'el'ig/ with two syllables, despite the absence of a written vowel in the second syllable. Thus, the word was already pronounced in Old Irish in much the same way as in Modern Irish. It is given as a masculine o-stem noun and also as a feminine ā-stem noun. It is defined as a) ‘a rock, a stone’; b) ‘steep rock, crag’; c) ‘precious stone’. The last of these is seems to be based on a single attestation.

The modern form of the word is usually *sceilg*, defined by Ó Dónaill (1977) as a ‘steep rock’ or ‘crag’. Dinneen (1927) gives a variant spelling *sceillig* and defines it as ‘a splinter, a reef, rocky islet or pinnacle of rock, a crag’. Both these dictionaries of Modern Irish give the word as feminine. We may note that the second half of Dinneen’s definition is almost a landscape description of the Skelligs in Kerry, and the form of these islands clearly shaped his definition.

As the word is rare and known principally from place names, it has slipped below the radar of most etymological inquiries. Pokorny (1959) mentions Middle Irish *sceillec*, defining it as ‘Fels’ (i.e. ‘cliff, crag’), and linking it to an Indo-European root *kel-* or *skel-* meaning ‘to cut’, with the addition of a similar ending to that found in Old Irish *carraic*, ‘rock’ (Modern Irish *carraig*). He suggests a possible link with Middle Irish *scell*, *scellán*, ‘seed, pip, stone of a fruit’, although it is hard to see how the latter belongs here semantically. He also attributes Latin *silex*, ‘hard stone, flint, granite’ to the same root but this would depend on it being the result of dissimilation from an unattested form *\*scilec-*, earlier *\*scelec-* (Pokorny, 1959, p. 924).

Vendryes gives a good summary of the evidence in “Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien” (LEIA) and, like Dinneen, cites the name *Sceilg Mhichíl* as the most notable occurrence of the word. He reviews Pokorny’s proposal, including the linkage with *scell*, *scellán* and Latin *silex*. However, he dismisses all of these as unconvincing and concludes that no satisfactory explanation has yet been offered (LEIA, Vol. 3, s.v.). Magne Oftedal (1976) proposed an Old Norse origin from *skellingar*, ‘resounding ones’ (pp. 128–129) but this was roundly rejected by Donnchadh Ó Corráin (1999) on the basis that references

to *Sceilg Mhichíl* occur too early for the name to be Norse and because the element occurs elsewhere in Ireland, including inland locations (pp. 310–311).<sup>17</sup> We will see later that the only significant inland example is at Glendalough in Co. Wicklow, but I find Ó Corráin’s reasoning convincing regarding the dating. Furthermore, the form is unsuitable as there are no attestations ending with *-ng*.

*Sceilg* is not treated by MacBain (1911) as it is not present in Scottish Gaelic. Nor is it dealt with by Matasović (2009) in his “Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic”, probably because it is poorly attested as a common noun and is mainly known from a handful of Irish place names. There is no cognate found in Scottish Gaelic<sup>18</sup> or in the Brittonic languages. I will argue that a loan into Irish of the Latin word *spelū(n)ca* provides a more plausible origin than Pokorny’s (1959) treatment of *sceilg* as a native Irish word derived from Proto-Celtic and, further back, from Indo-European.

### 3. The evidence of place names

Having reviewed lexicographical treatments of *sceilg*, let us now consider the evidence of place names. The element is treated by P. W. Joyce (1875), who spells it *sceilig*. Joyce refers to O’Donovan’s definition as ‘sea rock’, but points to its occurrence in some inland names. The examples which he discusses are the Skellig Rocks of the coast of Kerry, particularly *Sceilig Mhichíl (sic)*; the Bay of Ballinskelligs, Co. Kerry; Templenaskellig at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow; Bunskeellig, a townland on the Beara Peninsula, Co. Cork; and two townlands

<sup>17</sup> The Norsemen do indeed feature in the early history of *Sceilig Mhichíl*. In AD 824 Vikings carried away the abbot, who subsequently starved to death. However, he was named in “The Annals of Ulster” as *Eitgal Sceillig* (AU, Vol. 1), i.e. Eitgal of Skellig, implying that the island monastery already bore this name before the attack. The phonology also seems suspect, since a borrowing of *skellingar* in the Viking era ought to yield \**sceilling-* or the like, rather than the actually attested *sceillec*. Furthermore, the application of a Norse term to a rock feature far inland at Glendalough seems unlikely in the case of *Teampall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig, since Norse names in Ireland are coastal, almost without exception (Mac Giolla Easpaig, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> *Skelly* is treated by Taylor not as a Gaelic word, but as a variant of Scots *skerry*, though possibly influenced in form by Old Irish *sceillec* (Taylor, 2012, Vol. 5, p. 500).

called Skelgagh in Co. Tyrone. Joyce then discusses *speilic* as a dialect word used in Louth meaning ‘a splintery rock’. He suggests that it is a ‘very probably a corruption of *sceilig*’ (Joyce, 1875, pp. 420–421). I will return later to this topic of a potential relationship between *sceilg* and *speilg*.

The element *sceilg* occurs as a simplex or generic element in just six names in Ireland listed in the online database “Logainm: Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann” (<https://logainm.ie>):

- (1) *Sceilg Mhichíl*/Skellig Michael or Great Skellig, Co. Kerry (Figure 1)
- (2) *An Sceilg Bheag*/Small Skellig or Little Skellig, Co. Kerry
- (3) *Scelec*, in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow (Calendar of Archbishop Alen’s Register, AD 1198, subsequently occurring only as specific in *Teampall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig)
- (4) *Sceilig*/Skellig, hill (214 m) near Ardgroom, Co. Cork
- (5) *Sceilg*/Sceilig, street in Sunday’s Well, Cork City
- (6) *Sceilg Ard*/Sceilig Ard, street in Ballinfoyle, Galway City

(6) is a new street in a modern housing estate. (5) may be a little older by a century or two, but is of no great antiquity. Both names are probably instances of name transfer from (1). (4) may be a discrete occurrence of the element but could well be named from a physical resemblance to (1). It is steep, pointed and, at 214 m, very close in height to *Sceilg Mhichíl* (217 m), which would have been known to many inhabitants of the Ardgroom area due to the tradition of pilgrimage and the ‘Skellig Lists’ which mocked the unmarried. (2), *An Sceilg Bheag*, is named in reference to (1) as its smaller neighbour and is not mentioned in the early historical record. It has never been settled by humans but is the site of one of the world’s largest gannet colonies. In light of the above, only (1) and (3) can be securely regarded as primary names, the others probably being instances of name transfer from (1).

There are four place names listed at [logainm.ie](https://logainm.ie) in which *sceilg* occurs as a specific element:

- (a) *Teampall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig, in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow (referring to (3)). This is the most remote of the Glendalough churches (Figure 2). “Excavations in the 1950s by Françoise Henry found settlement evidence from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and possibly also from the ninth, on platforms immediately to the west” (McDermott et al., 2021).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I wish to thank George McClafferty of the Office of Public Works and the members of the Glendalough Heritage Forum, particularly Graeme Warren, for providing information on the

- (b) *Baile an Sceilg*/Ballinskelligs, village and townland in parish of Prior, Co. Kerry (referring to **(1)**). This was the lay community which supported the monks of *Sceilg Mhichíl* until they abandoned the island and settled on the mainland at Ballinskelligs Priory in the twelfth century. This is the only clear instance of a place name in which *sceilg* is treated as a masculine noun. If it were feminine, as in all other instance, one would expect *\*Baile na Sceilge*.
- (c) *Bun Sceilige*/Bunskeellig, a townland near Ardgroom in the parish of Kilkatherine, Co. Cork (referring to **(4)**). This name is explained as “the base of Sceilgín [presumably an alternative form of **(4)**], a conical rock rising some hundreds of feet above its base” (Mac Cárthaigh, 1972–1973, p. 12).
- (d) *Bior na Sceilge*/The Spit, a fragment of rock, part of the pilgrimage route at **(1)**. Once again, this group confirms the primacy of the monastic settlements, three out of the four clearly being ex-nomine names referring to either **(1)** or **(3)**. The derivative element *sceilgeach*, apparently meaning ‘rocky’, probably accounts for two townlands named Skelgagh in Co. Tyrone, listed at Place-namesNI.org, the online database of the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project:
- (a) *Skelgagh*, townland in parish of Clogher, Co. Tyrone. A cluster of boulders in the townland is marked *Rock* on the Ordnance Survey 6 inch to the mile map.
- (b) *Skelgagh*, townland in parish of Donacavey, Co. Tyrone

Given that names **(1)** and **(3)** stand apart from the others both in terms of their great antiquity (both associated with early Christian monasteries founded in the sixth/seventh century) and as primary names which account for the other names as ex-nomine or transferred names, we should note the importance of these two sites:

*Sceilg Mhichíl* (Skellig Michael), Co. Kerry, an ascetic monastic settlement on the Great Skellig island dedicated to St Michael. The foundation date of the monastery is unknown, but records mention a Viking attack in 823 and the deaths of monks there in 950 and 1044. The settlement is perched roughly 550 feet above sea level (...) On the hazardous southern peak of the island there are traces of a hermitage and the foundations of a small oratory. (Moss, 2002a, p. 232)

sites at the Upper Lake. I am also indebted to Conor McDermott for kindly providing photographs of St. Kevin’s Bed and Temple-na-Skellig.

Local tradition names the founder as Fíonán Cam of Kinnitty, who is said to have lived in the sixth century (Ó Riain, 2011, pp. 327–330; Tempan, 2007). This is not confirmed by medieval records, but archaeological evidence supports a foundation no later than the seventh century (Bourke et al., 2011, p. 19). The island lies 11.6 km from the mainland. The ninth century hermitage and oratory were re-discovered in 1986 (Horn et al., 1990, p. 71). After the monks abandoned the island, it remained important as a pilgrimage site.

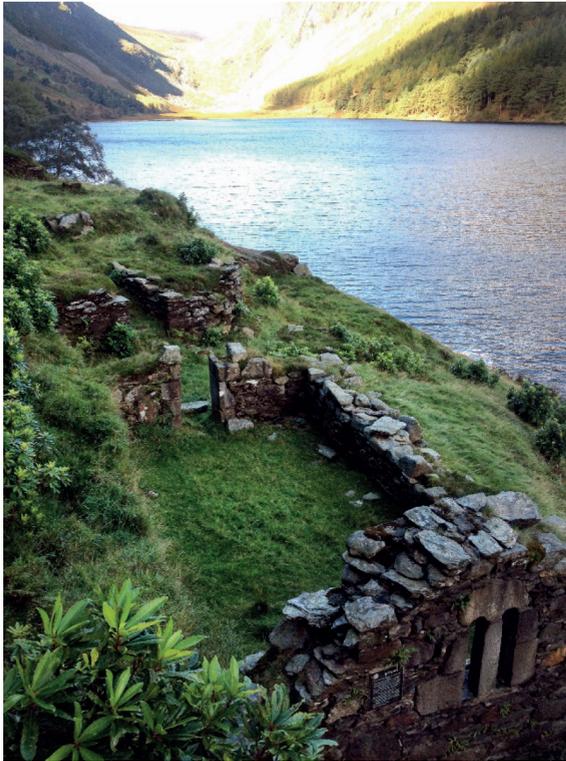
Regarding *Tempall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig, Moss (2002b) writes:

Glendalough, an important early Irish monastery in Co. Wicklow famed for its setting in the ‘valley of the two lakes’. The settlement was originally eremitical, founded by St Kevin in the sixth century. A large monastery grew up around the cult of the saint, and in 1111 Glendalough was made the seat of a bishopric. (...) The original hermitage was probably sited on the hillside above the upper lake where a small oratory, Tempall-na-Skellig, now stands. (Moss, 2002b, p. 525)



**Figure 1. The south peak of Sceilg Mhichíl/Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry. 9th century hermitage/oratory on ledge near summit**

Source: photo by Paul Tempan.



**Figure 2. Teampall na Sceilge/Templenaskellig (12th c.), Glendalough, Co. Wicklow**

Source: photo by © Conor McDermott, UCD School of Archaeology.

#### **4. Historical forms**

The following is a small selection of some of the most important early references to *Sceilg Mhichil*/Skellig Michael (Co. Kerry), all of which are cited at [logainm.ie](http://logainm.ie):

- 800c. – *in Scelic* (genitive) (“Martyrology of Tallaght”)
- 824 – *Eitgal Sceiligg* (“Annals of Ulster I”)
- 824 – *Scelec* (“Annals of Inisfallen”)
- 882 – *abb Scelic* (“Annals of Inisfallen”)

- 1044 – *Aed Scelic* (“Annals of Inisfallen”)
- 1100c. – *Scellig Michil...Etagal in Scelig* (“Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh”)
- 1100c. – *Scelleg Michil* (“Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh”)
- 1100c. – *i Sceliuc* (“Book of Leinster (Lebor Gabála Érenn)”)

Attestations for *Scelec* and *Teampall na Sceilge*/Templenaskellig (Co. Wicklow) commence considerably later:

- 1198 – *Scelec* (“Calendar of Archbishop Alen’s Register”)
- 1655 – *Skillig chappel on ye Pilgrim’s Rock* (“Down Survey”)
- 1786 – *Teampull na Skellig* (“Archdall, Mon. Hib.”)
- 1838 – “Disert was the ancient name of the place on which Templenaskellig (*Templum de Rupe*) stands. The church is called in old records *Priory de Rupe* and the *Convent de Deserto*.” (Ledwich, “Antiquities of Ireland,” p. 178)
- 1840 – “The name of this church is in Irish *Teampull na Sceilge*, which signifies the Church of the Rock. It is called in Latin *Prioratus de Rupe* and also *Conventus de Deserto*.” (OSL Wicklow, p. 444)
- 1840 – “In the cliff, over this [Teampull na Sceilge] is St. Kevin’s Bed which is said to have been made in the rock by St. Kevin’s own hand. This is the cave called *Spelunca de Deserto* in Kevin’s life.” (OSL Wicklow, p. 512)

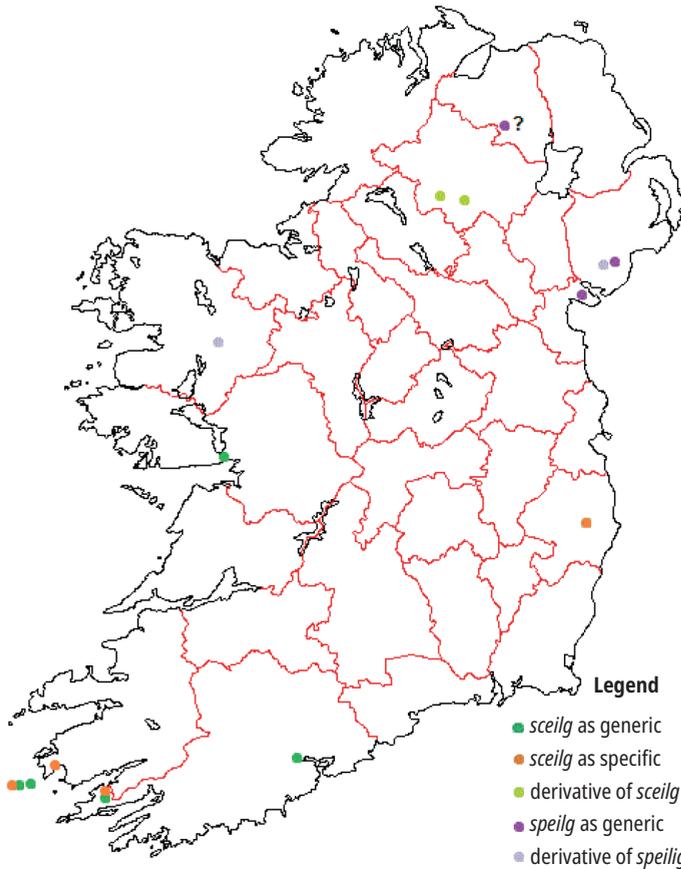
## 5. *Sceilg* and *speilg*

As mentioned earlier, P. W. Joyce (1875) suggested an etymological connection between *sceilg* and *speilg*, a dialect word from Co. Louth meaning ‘splintery rock’ (p. 421). It is defined as ‘pointed rock’ by Dinneen (1927, s.v.). However, rather than following Joyce in regarding *speilg* as a corruption, I would prefer to see it as the regular outcome of *spelu(n)ca* being loaned into early Irish, whilst treating *sceilg* as a variant form explained by the tendency to avoid /p/ as an alien sound in early Irish. The loss of initial Indo-European /p/ is a defining feature of the Celtic languages and Old Irish still lacked this sound, unlike Brittonic, which had reacquired it as a development of Indo-European /kʷ/. Nor had initial /sp/ been retained in Old Irish as it had been reduced to /s/ (Thurneysen 1909/1946, § 226, pp. 138–139). As Irish speakers were aware of the equivalence between Irish /k/ (written *c*) and Brittonic /p/, the absence

of a native /p/ had the effect that /p/ in early loan-words into Old Irish was replaced with /k/, whether these loans were of Brittonic origin or not, for example, *casc* < Latin *Pascha*, ‘Easter’, *corcur* < Latin *purpura*, ‘purple’ (Thurneysen, 1909/1946, § 920, pp. 570–571). There are few examples of loan words with initial /sp/, making it difficult to generalise about their treatment. This cluster is retained in Old Irish *spirut* (Modern Irish *spiorad* < Latin *spiritus*). However, the substitution of /sk/ for /sp/ is illustrated by another Latin loan into Old Irish, namely *fescor* ‘evening, vespers’ < Lat. *vesper*, albeit in medial position. Probably also relevant is *scibar*, variant form of *pipar*, ‘pepper’ < Lat. *piper*, which presupposes an intermediate form *\*spipar* or *\*spibar* (DIL, s.v. *scibar*; Mc Manus 1983, p. 41, n. 47). The cluster /sk/ was familiar in Irish, which had retained it in native words (e.g. Old Irish *scál*, *scaraid*). It is, therefore, thoroughly credible that an early borrowing of Latin *spelun(c)a* could yield the form *sceillec* in Old Irish, alongside a more regular form with initial /sp/, which developed to Modern Irish *speilg*.

*Speilg* too is feminine, like *sceilg* and Latin *spelunca*. It appears in one place name in the Cooley Mountains, possibly in two names in the Mourne Mountains of Co. Down and in one outlier in Co. Mayo (for the geographical distribution of *sceilg* and *speilg* in toponymy see Figure 3). Treating *speilg* and *sceilg* as variants, both derived from Latin *spelunca*, seems to offer a neat, economical solution. *Spellickanee* (Irish *Speilg an Fhiaigh*) is the name of a townland in the parish of Ballymascanlan, Co. Louth, apparently derived from a rocky hill nearby which is called Raven’s Rock (see Figure 4) in English (logainm.ie). *Spelga* (Irish *Speilgeach*, a derivative with adjectival or collective function), Co. Down, is well-known on account of Spelga Dam, but is also the name of a hill. Similarly, Spellack is a crag on Slieve Meelmore overlooking the Trassey Track (Placenamesni.org, 2021).<sup>20</sup> Spillaggadaun (197 m high) is

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Thomas Owen Clancy, who chaired this paper at ICOS XXVII, for alerting me to the existence of the Scots word *spelk*, meaning a) ‘a rod or bar used in a building’; b) ‘a splinter’ (DSL). If an extension of the meaning to cover ‘splintery rock’ were allowed, this could be considered relevant to the origin of the three place names mentioned above from Cos Louth and Down, particularly Spellack, which appears to be a simplex and ends in an unvoiced consonant. However, a number of points speak against this possibility: I have found little evidence for this word in Ulster-Scots or in Hiberno-English. It is not listed in the Concise Ulster Dictionary (Macafee, 1996). My thanks to Liz McCord, my colleague at Libraries NI, for pointing out that the word *skelf* is more common in Ulster-Scots for ‘splinter’ (Macafee, 1996, p. 306). Furthermore, an Irish origin seems certain for Spelga, in view of the Irish suffix



**Figure 3. Geographical distribution of *sceilg* and *speilg* in Irish toponymy**

Source: own work.

a hill in the parish of Manulla, Co. Mayo. The Irish form of this name, *Cnoc an Speilgeadáin*, is interpreted as “hill of the pointed rock” (Mac Gabhann, 2014, p. 609). I conducted a field visit in May 2022 but this did not reveal any notable pointed rock-form, nor did an inspection of the site with maps and Google Earth. The hill does rise quite abruptly from the plains of Mayo but is rather

added to form *Speilg-each*, and also for Spellickanee, in view of the Irish specific *an Fhiaigh* added to make *Speilg an Fhiaigh*.

rounded. Indeed, this highlights a general problem with the interpretation of *speilg* as ‘pointed rock’. The three hills in Cos Louth and Down could all be described as somewhat ‘craggy’, but hardly as ‘pointed’. An intriguing alternative interpretation for the Co. Mayo hill is suggested by the presence of cave underneath a ring-fort on the lower SE slopes in the townland of Rathredmond. However, this possibility must be treated with some caution. As far as I am aware, no connection is made between this cave and the name of the hill by any local informants.

## 6. Latin *spelunca*

Why, then, should we consider Latin *spelunca* as a donor word for Irish *sceilg* and *speilg*? *Spelunca* means ‘cave, cavern, den’. It is ultimately of Greek origin, from σπήλυξ (*spelynx*), also meaning ‘cave’. *Spelunca* is one of several words used in Latin for ‘cave’ including *caverna* and *antrum*. It is often used of an inhabited cave. The term was applied to a sea-cave used and furnished by the Roman emperor Tiberius on his estate between Rome and Naples at a place now known as *Sperlonga* (Lewis & Short, s.v.; Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 2006, p. 638). The word *spelunca* was also used in medieval Latin texts to denote a hermit’s cave, for example, the cave dwelling of Paul of Thebes in the thirteenth century *Legenda Aurea* (de Voragine, 1470/1900, Vol. 2, p. 91).<sup>21</sup> Paul, regarded as the first Christian hermit saint, lived in the third and fourth centuries AD, a forerunner to the ‘Desert Fathers’. He retreated into the Egyptian desert to escape persecution and is said to have dwelt for sixty years in a cave. The standard Italian form of the word is *spelunca*, which occurs in the name of a twelfth century church near Lucca called *San Giorgio della Spelunca*. The church site includes a natural cave used as a hermitage (Augnet, n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> “Paulus primus eremita, ut testatur Hieronymus, qui eius vitam conscripsit, fervente Decii persecutione, eremum vastissimum adiit ibique in quadam spelunca LX annis hominibus incognitus permansit.”

Latin *spelunca* could also have decidedly negative connotations. *Spelunca latronum* is used in Latin translations of the Bible to denote “a den of thieves” (e.g., in Jeremiah 7:11), where the prophet rebukes those responsible for what he sees as the corruption of the temple of the Lord. The Polish language, for example, is one of several Slavonic languages which have adopted this word. *Spelunka* is used in a similar sense to denote a house or tavern of ill repute (WSJP).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in German *Spelunke* is a derogatory word denoting 1) ‘bar’; 2) ‘dirty accommodation’ (DWDS). These examples show us that the term could refer literally to a cave or figuratively to some kind of rudimentary habitation and that the potential occupants could cover a wide spectrum of humanity from hermit saints to sinners. It could also denote a wild animal’s lair.

*Spelunca* is feminine, like *speilg/sceilg*. The sense ‘lair’ seems relevant to *Speilg an Fhiaigh*, so perhaps we should think of it as ‘the raven’s lair or nest’ rather than simply ‘the raven’s rock’. The sense of a hermit’s dwelling fits perfectly with the monastic settlement of *Sceilg Mhíchil*, where the whole island complex can be regarded as a hermitage on account of its remoteness from the mainland and the ruggedness of the landscape. It also suits *Teampall na Sceilge* at Glendalough, where the hermit’s hideaway is *Leaba Chaoimhín*/St. Kevin’s Bed, a small man-made recess in a cliff above the Upper Lake (see Figure 5), located about 200 m to the east.<sup>23</sup> This is confirmed by a passage from *The Lives of the Irish Saints*: “dotheigheadh go minic don sgeilg ⁊ don uaimh dá ngoirther leaba Caoimhghin. He would often go to the crag and to the cave which is called Coemgen’s Bed” (Plummer, 1922, Vol. 1, § 5, p. 156). Since there are also Latin sources for the life of St. Kevin, it is natural to ask whether the word *spelunca* was used in any text referring to *Leaba Chaoimhín*. However, “*Vita Sancti Coemgeni*” reflects a different tradition regarding the saint’s place of retreat as a hermit, according to which he dwelt not in this cave but in a hollow tree: “in quadam arbore cauata” (Plummer, 1910, Vol. 1, p. 237). There is a reference in the Ordnance Survey Letters to *Spelunca de Deserto* as the Latin designation for *Leaba Chaoimhín* in Kevin’s Life (OSL Wicklow, p. 512). I regret that I have not been able to trace this reference so far.

<sup>22</sup> Retrieved December 3, 2021, from <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/87218/spelunka>

<sup>23</sup> “St. Kevin’s Bed is an artificial cave in a cliff-face above the lake (SMR No. W1023-021), reputedly a place of retreat and prayer for Kevin. The ‘cave’ is too small to stand up or lie down in and is best suited to meditation. The Bed was a retreat for famous figures, such as St. Laurence O’Toole whilst he was archbishop of Dublin in the twelfth century. In the nineteenth century it became part of the tourist circuit” (McDermott et al., 2021).



**Figure 4. Leaba Chaoimhín/St. Kevin’s Bed (cave), Glendalough, Co. Wicklow**

Source: photo by © Conor McDermott, UCD School of Archaeology.

## 7. Discussion

*Speilg*, which is the form typically found in northern place names, can be regarded as the regular development of the Lat. *spelū(n)ca*. *Sceilg* can then be seen as an earlier and/or southern form, in which *sp-* was altered to *sc-* after borrowing, probably for the same reason that initial *p* was modified to *c* in words such as *Cáisc* < *Pascha*. It may be significant of a dialectal boundary that, in the case of *sceilg*, the cluster /*sp*/ was alien enough to prompt this change in the south, whereas the northern dialect, which had less difficulty with /*p*/ in common with Brittonic, tended to leave the cluster unchanged in *speilg*. It also should be noted that a derivation from *spelū(n)ca* fully accounts for the

entirety of the word as one piece (i.e. both syllables, not just the root), as with Pokorny's (1959) derivation from Indo-European *kel-* or *skel-*, which required the second syllable to be a suffix comparable with *carraig*, 'rock'.

In Irish the words *speilg* and *sceilg* seem to have acquired a more general sense of 'rock, crag' and a vestige of the Latin meaning 'hermit's dwelling' is only retained at the monastic sites of *Sceilg Mhíchíl* and *Teampall na Sceilge*. Perhaps this widening of meaning is explained by the fact that, throughout the Middle Ages, the rocky Skellig Islands were the most familiar instance of the word, and thus came to embody the meaning in popular thought. Such a semantic shift is not exceptional. Parallels include Ir. *ros*, which has developed from 'head' to 'hill, headland' and further to 'wood' (Tempan, 2009, pp. 946–949; Tempan, 2011, pp. 253–258); and *cathair*, originally meaning 'stone-fort', developing to 'citadel' and 'city'. We may also note that the aforementioned Polish word *spelunka* meaning 'premises of ill repute' also represents a considerable semantic shift from the Latin original.

If the meaning of *speilg* and *sceilg* was originally much more specific than 'rock, crag' and they were not simply synonyms of *carraig* or *faill*, for example, this would account for the rarity of these words as common nouns and place-name elements. The basic Latin sense of 'cave, cavern' is not found with these two elements in Irish place names, as far as I am aware, with the possible exception of *Cnoc an Speilgeadáin/Spillaggadaun*, Co. Mayo. However, this sense is retained in the word *béillic*, found in the dialects of Cork and Kerry. It is applied particularly to natural rock-shelters used by shepherds. The hill Bealick, located on the north-west side of Gougane Barra, is named from such a rock-shelter nearby (MountainViews, n.d.). The change /sp/ > /b/ appears to be a different reaction to the alien consonant cluster, for which it is hard to find exact parallels, but it can perhaps be explained as follows by a two-step process: Latin *s* is sometimes lost in consonant clusters, for example, OIr. *cruimther*, 'priest', a borrowing of Lat. *presbyter* via Brittonic (Thurneysen, 1909/1946, p. 137). An example of the loss of initial *s* is Modern Irish *pósadh*, 'to marry', borrowed from Lat. *sponsare*, 'to betrothe' (DIL s.v. *pósaid*). The resulting *p*- may then have been pronounced as /b/ as frequently occurred in initial position, cf. spellings of *bóc* for *póc*, 'kiss', *bellec* for *pellec*, 'small bag' (Thurneysen, 1909/1946, p. 571). The interpretation of *béillic* as *béal lice* 'mouth of flagstone' proposed in some sources is clearly a folk etymology and is not supported by Dinneen.

If *sceilg* is to be derived from Classical Latin *spēlunca*, along with *speilg*, then the loss of /n/ requires explanation. Words inherited from Celtic containing

the cluster /nk/ underwent the sound change /nk/ > /gg/, which had already occurred by the Old Irish period. Damian Mc Manus (1983), following Kenneth Jackson (1994), regards the sound changes /nk/ > /gg/ and /nt/ > /dd/ as complete before AD 400, and before the borrowing of any of the numerous Latin loanwords which he cites (Mc Manus, 1983, p. 30; Jackson, 1994).<sup>24</sup> However, the current proposal is precisely to treat *sceilg/speilg* as a loan from Latin and not as a native Celtic word. Furthermore, a borrowing before AD 400 would not only be exceptionally early but would also be at odds with the arrival of the word in Ireland as part of the early Christian cultural package. One of the earliest Christian missionaries in Ireland was St. Declan of Ardmore, who, according to some traditions, was active a decade or two before St. Patrick in the early fifth century, perhaps in the decade beginning AD 420 (Ó Riain-Raedel, 1998, pp. 17–22). However, even if the borrowing of this word were associated with the earliest of such early Christian missionaries, this would still leave us a few decades short of the timeframe required by Jackson and Mc Manus. Therefore, the sound change /nk/ > /gg/ cannot provide a solution.

A more satisfactory explanation involves the loss of /n/ already in Latin. It is clear that *spēlūnca* had a by-form *\*spēlūca* in Vulgar Latin in view of dialect words in the Romance languages and place names found in parts of Spain, France, Switzerland and Italy (FEW, Vol. 12, pp. 163–164).<sup>25</sup> For example, in the Italian province of Como is a village called *Montespluga*, situated below a pass, *Passo dello Spluga*, which crosses the Alps into Switzerland (Pellegrini, 2008, p. 202). In some areas the meaning has shifted away from ‘cave’. In Cilento (part of Campania), *spelonga* is recorded in the sense ‘sterile ground’. In the dialect of Verona the word *spiuga* signifies ‘abyss’ (FEW, Vol. 12, p. 163). This latter meaning is particularly pertinent to the instances of *sceilg* at *Sceilg Mhichíl* in Co. Kerry and *Teampall na Sceilge* in Co. Wicklow, where cliffs feature prominently in the landscape.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The loans from Latin containing *-nc-* are assigned to two groups, the earlier group showing *-ng-*, e.g. Old Irish *ungae* < Latin *uncia*, the later group leaving *-nc-* unchanged, e.g. Old Irish *ponc* < Latin *punctum* (Mc Manus, 1983, p. 22). The key point here is that both groups of loans retain *-n-* in these clusters. Clearly, *sceilg* and its Old Irish form *sceillec*, do not fit into either of these groups.

<sup>25</sup> I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the Vulgar Latin by-form *\*spēlūca*, its reflexes in the Romance languages and the place names including these elements.

<sup>26</sup> Another noteworthy reflex is *belugue* in the dialect of Armagnac (FEW, Vol. 12, p. 163). This form implies a sound change /sp/ > /b/, which could also account for Ir. *béillic*.

The Old Irish form *sceillec* can be seen as evidence of an early date for the loan, since both /p/ and /sp/ had become acceptable in all dialects by the Middle Irish period. The form *sceillec* must have been adopted while /sp/ was still an alien combination of sounds, prompting its substitution with /sk/. It is noteworthy that there is no fluctuation between spellings in *sc-* and *sp-* found in the historical forms for *Sceilg Mhíchíl* or *Teampall na Sceilge*. The voicing of the final consonant of Old Irish *sceillec*, Modern Irish *sceilg* (and *speilg*) is explained by Brittonic influence, a feature typical of borrowings from Latin in the Old Irish period. Thurneysen (1909/1946) highlights the two-fold treatment of single postvocalic tenues in Latin loan-words, either becoming spirants following Irish sound laws or becoming voiced stops following Brittonic pronunciation. It is clear that *sceillec* falls into the second group, influenced by Brittonic, like *oifíc* < Latin *officium*, ‘office’, and *relic* < Latin *reliquiae*, ‘graveyard’ (Thurneysen, 1909/1946, § 915, pp. 566–568). The voicing is present already in Old Irish but is more evident in the Modern Irish orthography: *sceilg*, *oifig*, *reilig*. Cultural factors also point to a borrowing in the Old Irish period. Hermitage sites were characteristic of the ascetic ethos of the early church, both in Ireland and elsewhere. An ecclesiastical context seems most likely for the transmission of such a word from Latin to Irish. A loan of the Vulgar Latin by-form \**spĕlūca* between the 5th and 7th centuries is probable. The borrowing can, therefore, probably be associated with the very beginnings of Christianity in Ireland, between 1,300 and 1,500 years ago.

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