Gaelic Place-Names: ‘dùn’ and ‘caisteal’

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word *dùn* (pronounced **doon**) means ‘fort, castle, fortified hill’. It is found in place-names including *Dundonald* ‘Donald’s fort’ in Ayrshire, *Dunbeg* ‘small fort’ near Oban on the west coast of Scotland, *An Dun Mhor* ‘the big fort’ on the island of Arran, *Dunduff* ‘black fort’ in Ayrshire and *Dun an Ruigh Ruadh* ‘fort of the red slope’, beside Loch Broom in Western Scotland.

Some place-names containing the word *dùn* are likely to be very old, dating to the earliest stratum of Gaelic naming in Scotland. For example, *Dunragit* ‘fort of Rheged’ in Galloway contains the name of a Brythonic-speaking kingdom which flourished in Southern Scotland and Northern England between the fifth and the eighth centuries. Similarly, *Dumbarton* ‘fort of the Britons’ on the Clyde refers to *Dumbarton Rock*, which was the capital of the Brythonic kingdom of Strathclyde, and *Dunkeld* ‘fort of the Caledonians’ refers to a site associated with a Pictish-speaking tribe who lived in Northern Scotland.

The Brythonic language contains a cognate form *din*, also meaning ‘fort’, and some Gaelic names in *dùn* may be partial translations of older Brythonic forms. For instance, the Gaelic form of the name *Edinburgh* is *Dùn Èideann* ‘fort of Eidyn’ which appears to be a translation of the Brythonic form *Din Eidyn*, first recorded in the famous Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*. Additionally, the name *Dunbar* ‘summit fort’ in East Lothian is likely to have been a translation of an earlier Brythonic name *Din-bar* with the same meaning. Hill names such as *Din Fell* and *Din Law* in the Scottish Borders also appear to contain the Brythonic form of the word, with the Scots words *fell* ‘a rocky hill’ and *law* ‘a rounded hill’ being later additions to these names.

In the case of Dumbarton above, the *dun*– form has evolved into *dum*-, and this is because it is easier to pronounce *dum*– than *dun*– in front of certain consonants. Other examples include *Dumfries* ‘fort of the copse’, *Dumbreck* ‘speckled fort’ and *Dumgoyne* ‘arrow fort’, both of which are in the Campsie Fells to the north of

Glasgow.

Dùn is also attested in the diminutive form *dùnan*, meaning ‘a small fort, a fortlet’, with examples including *Dunan* ‘fortlet’ on the island of Skye, *Dùnan liath* ‘grey fortlet’ in Ross and Cromarty, and *Dunan Mor* ‘big fortlet’ and *Dunan Beag* ‘little fortlet’, the sites of two Megalithic chambered cairns on the island of Arran.

There is another Gaelic word with a similar meaning to *dùn*. The word *caisteal* (pronounced **kash**-tyall) means ‘castle, stone fort’. It is found in place-names including *Caisteal Nan Con* ‘castle of the hounds’ on the island of Mull, *Caisteal Fliuch* ‘wet castle’ on the island of Arran, *Caisteal Breac* ‘speckled castle’ on the Ardnamurchan peninsula, *Caisteal Nan Caillich* ‘castle of the old woman’ in Aberdeenshire and *Caisteal na Nighinn Ruaidhe* ‘castle of the red haired maiden’ on the small island of Innis Luana in Loch Avich in Argyll. The ruins of a castle are still visible on the island, which was once a stronghold of the Clan Campbell.

The word *caisteal* is also attested as a qualifying element in place-names, with examples including *Torr a’ Chaisteal* ‘mound of the castle’, which is the site of an Iron Age fort on the island of Arran, and *Creag a’ Chaisteal* ‘crag of the castle’ on the island of Mull, which is also the site of a fort. There is a stone circle at *Allt a’ Chaisteil* ‘burn of the castle’ in Sutherland, and *Leac a’ Chaisteil* ‘ledge of the castle’ refers to a rocky hill on the island of Mull. There are also two mountains named *Beinn a’ Chaisteil* ‘mountain of the castle’, one on the edge of Argyll and the other in Ross and Cromarty.

A variant form of *caisteal* is *caiseal*, which is found in place-names such as *Cashel* ‘castle’ on the banks of Loch Lomond, *Cashel Dhu* ‘black castle’ in Sutherland, *Tom Chaiseil* ‘knoll of the castle’, in Perthshire and *Craigcaiseal* ‘castle rock’ in Stirlingshire.

Not all of the *caisteal* or *caiseal* names refer to a literal castle. In some cases, hills which are shaped like a castle, or have the appearance of an impregnable or commanding position, have also been named *caisteal*. The mountain *An Caisteal* ‘the castle’ in Stirlingshire is likely to have been named because of its shape, and *Caisteil na Cloinne* ‘the children’s castle’ near Gairloch in Wester Ross was apparently the name given to a large rock full of holes in which children would play.

However, in many cases, the element does refer to an actual castle. *Caisteal Maol*

‘bare castle’ is the name of a ruined hill-top castle which belonged to the Clan Mackinnon on the island of Skye, and the current name may reflect the ruinous state of the castle. The older name of this castle was *Dùn Akin* ‘Haakon’s fort or castle’, and this may be a reference to King Haakon IV of Norway, who is believed to anchored his fleet here prior to his defeat at the Battle of Largs in 1263.

References & Further Information

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