

# The *Mel-* problem

An element *M-vowel-L* shows up in the ancient British place names [Μαλεος](#), [Malaca](#), [Maulion](#), [Melamoni](#), [Melezo](#), and [Milidunum](#). None starts out with a really certain location, so we need to work out what these names mean, but there are difficult linguistic issues. The classic PIE dictionary of Pokorny (1959) lists eight roots of form *\*mel-*, and up to a dozen more roots might lead to similar forms after extensions and suffixes, vowel changes, etc.

Here is a table showing these roots, as currently suggested by advanced linguists. What a mess! The table is unfinished, because geography came to the rescue with a simplification.

PIE roots	descendants in: English,OE, Greek, Latin, Irish, Welsh, Germanic, other languages
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-1</sup> <a href="#">716-719</a> to grind	mill, <i>myln</i> , <a href="#">μύλη</a> , <a href="#">mola</a>
* <i>melə-d-</i> <a href="#">718</a> soft	mild, <a href="#">meilid</a> , <a href="#">blydd</a>
* <i>melə-k-</i> <a href="#">718</a> soft	mulch, <a href="#">μαλακος</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-2</sup> <a href="#">719</a> bad	malign, <a href="#">male</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-3</sup> <a href="#">719</a> to hesitate	<a href="#">μελω</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-4</sup> <a href="#">720</a> strong	multi-, <a href="#">μαλα</a> , <a href="#">μαλεω</a> , <a href="#">melior</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-5</sup> <a href="#">720</a> limb	melody
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-6</sup> <a href="#">720</a> darkish	maul, <a href="#">μελας</a> , <a href="#">malen</a> , <a href="#">malina</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-7?</sup> <a href="#">718</a> woolen	<a href="#">Μαλλος</a>
* <i>mel</i> <sup>-8</sup> <a href="#">721</a> to appear, rise	?mould, <a href="#">μηλη</a> , <a href="#">προμολη</a> , <a href="#">mell</a> , <a href="#">mul</a> / <a href="#">moil</a> , <a href="#">mala</a>
* <i>me</i> <sup>-2</sup> <a href="#">703</a> to measure	meal(time), <a href="#">Mal</a> , <a href="#">Mahl</a>
* <i>meg-</i> <a href="#">708</a> great	mickle, <a href="#">μεγαλος</a> , <a href="#">mál</a> , <a href="#">mael</a> <sup>2</sup>
* <i>meldh-</i> <a href="#">722</a> to pray	meld
* <i>melg-</i> <a href="#">722</a> to milk	milk
* <i>melit-</i> <a href="#">723</a> honey	<a href="#">μελι</a> , <a href="#">mel</a> , <a href="#">mil</a> , <a href="#">mêl</a>
* <i>mai-</i> <a href="#">697</a> to cut	mangle, <a href="#">máel</a> , <a href="#">moel</a> <sup>3</sup>
?* <i>manu-</i> <a href="#">700</a> man	male, <a href="#">mas</a> , <a href="#">masculus</a>
* <i>sem-</i> <a href="#">902</a> sum/some +	mile, <a href="#">mille</a> , <a href="#">χιλιοι</a>
* <i>gheslo-</i> <a href="#">446</a> thousand	

The key is root *\*mel*<sup>-8</sup>, which is ignored or sidelined by the sources of expert linguistic guidance that are most accessible for English speakers, such as Watkins (2011), because its descendants in modern English are not obvious. However, an [Albanian](#) word *mal* ‘mountain’ shows up in place names across the Balkans ([Falileyev](#), 2006). And “straightforward etymology” from proto-Celtic *\*malo-* ‘rising, prominent’ can explain various words in the Celtic languages ([Falileyev](#), 2010).

There are also parallels in other, lesser-known Indo-European languages, and in more distant languages, such as Basque, Saami, and Dravidian. The “Moscow School” (see [Starostin](#)) lists their meanings as ‘edge, embankment, hill’. We shall discuss Germanic, Latin, and Greek parallels below. Possibly the best list of descendant words available online is by [Leschber](#) (2015), who stresses the deep time over which this word seems to have existed.

What matters here is the meaning of *M-vowel-L* in Roman Britain. Ptolemy’s [Μαλεος](#) is a good place to start, because its identification with the Scottish island of Mull is made certain by the name *Malea* used in Adomnan’s *Life of St Columba*. It had multiple ancient parallels, notably an almost identical twin in [Μαλεα](#) (still called [Cape Maleas](#)), a southern tip of mainland Greece. [Μαλεος](#) and [Μαλεα](#) even both have sacred outlying islands: Iona off Mull and Kithera off Greece. Another [Μαλεα](#) was probably [Cape Malea](#) at a southern tip of the island of Lesbos. And [Μαλεω ακρον](#) was at the southern end of Saurashtra, Gujarat, India, near the island of [Diu](#).

Many other ancient promontory names are similar. [Μαλανα](#) is now Cape Malan, near Jiwani, Pakistan. [Μαληνη](#) was near [Atarneus](#), near modern Dikli, Turkey, opposite Lesbos. [Μαλεθουβαλον](#) was by the triple northern tip of Tunisia, probably at Cap Zebit near [Metline](#). [Μελαινα](#) is modern [Melanios](#), the north-west tip of Chios. Another [Μελαινα](#) is modern [Site](#), a promontory on the Black Sea coast east of Istanbul. Yet another [Μελαινα](#) is a mountainous promontory in Turkey, now called [Karaburun](#), Turkish for ‘black cape’, evidently translating the Greek name as if it were [melaena](#) (black faeces) or the personal name Melania ‘blacky’. [Μελλαρια](#) was near Tarifa on the southern tip of mainland Spain.

Windswept headlands are not viable places to live, and \*mal- names often applied to towns, districts, or hills some way back from the actual headland. [Μαλεα](#) and [Μαλεατις](#) were well inside the Peloponnese. [Μαλεα](#) and [Μαλαα ορος](#) probably referred to [Adam’s Peak](#) a prominent hill in the south of Sri Lanka. [Malateca](#) (in AI) was probably modern [Marateca](#) near Cape [Espichel](#) and Lisbon. [Μαλλος](#) is modern [Kızıtahta](#), inland from [Akyatan](#) lagoon and a double cape in south-east Turkey.

Promontories can also stick out into a river. Thus [Malata/Malatis/Milatis](#) was at Petrovaradin, Serbia, “the Gibraltar of the Danube”, and/or on the adjacent hills at [Banoštor](#). This suggests that [Maulion](#), probably at Lurg Moor, Scotland, overlooking the Clyde estuary, was so named from the way it is perched above the Greenock promontory and not (as previously guessed) from the colour of moorland.

Malta’s ancient name was [Melita](#), which looks like a word for ‘honey’. Claims on the Internet that the name originally applied to the central citadel of Mdina, and came from a Punic word for ‘harbour’, are not accepted by local experts. Another [Melita](#) is now called [Mljet](#), off the coast of Croatia. [Μαλιχου](#) νησοι in the Red Sea, now called the [Hanish](#) islands were explicitly described as navigators’ landmarks.

Some M-vowel-L names lay well outside the Mediterranean zone best known to classical writers. [Μελιττα](#) was founded by Hanno around 500 BC on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, possibly near Agadir or Ait Melloul. [Μελιζειγαρα](#) was an island emporium on the west coast of India, probably south of Mumbai. [Μαλιαρφα](#) (modern [Mylapore](#)) and [Μαλαγγα](#) were near Chennai (Madras), in the east of India. Ptolemy’s [Μαλεου](#) κωλον ακρον (‘leg point’) was somewhere on the Malay peninsula.

It is not always obvious what visible feature in the landscape generated an M-vowel-L name. Ancient [Malaca](#)/Μαλακη (now Malaga, Spain) lies inside a wide bay, where one [theory](#) holds that its name started out as Phoenician \**Malaka* from a word for salt related to Hebrew [mlh](#) ‘to salt, to dry out’. Possibly more relevant is the steep hill beside its ancient emporium site, topped by [Gibralfaro](#) Castle, which is what an approaching ship would first see, and which fits a Basque word for ‘hill’.

Ancient *Maloenton*, which became *Maleventum*, and was rebadged into modern [Benevento](#) (near Naples), is *prima facie* a river-valley-bottom place, albeit surrounded by hills, but its [Rocca dei Rettori](#) sits on the highest point in the town. By the same argument as for [Camulodunum](#) even a modest rise of a few tens of metres may suffice for a citadel. The Greek island of Μηλος (modern [Milos](#) or Melos) is hilly, with the volcano cone of [Antimilos](#) dramatically visible offshore.

Neither ‘promontory’ nor ‘island’ can be the core meaning of M-vowel-L, because there is clear evidence for ‘hill’ as well, notably because [Διμαλη](#)/[Dimallum](#), near modern [Krotinë](#) in Albania was a fortress on [two hills](#). And several ancient peoples’ name might make sense as ‘highlanders’, including Pliny’s *Malli* and the *mons Mallus* or *Maleus* in the southern Punjab, and the [Μαλιεις](#) people in the [Malian Gulf](#) between the Aegean and Thermopylae, Greece.

This investigation of ancient M-vowel-L names began with an initial alphabetical list of 80 or so possibly relevant candidates in the *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* by Smith (1854). Of them about 40 can still be located with reasonable confidence, followed by a long slog of hunting for the best modern information, looking at the Terrain option of Google Maps, feeding hyperlinks into this text, and so on.

The best single English word to translate the root idea behind M-vowel-L geographical names (and also many dictionary words, as discussed below) is ‘protrusion’, something that visibly sticks out or up. One can easily imagine the names of recognisable headlands, islands, and mountain tops (what the modern airline industry calls waypoints) being passed around as nautical lore: “Sail xxx days in a yyy direction until you see zzz.” *Periplus* was one ancient word for written sailing directions.

Is this developing analysis strong enough to overrule any objections? Has data been cherry-picked? Do any names look like counter-examples? Possibly most worrying are some of the M-vowel-L names around ancient Illyria that are most cited by linguists. Modern [Molunat](#) definitely sticks out from the coast of Croatia but its claimed ancient name \**Malontum* cannot be verified. It is hard to see the relevance of [Mališevo](#), in a flat valley among mountains in Kosovo, or \**Malontina*, now called [Malta](#), deep in an alpine valley of Austria, or [Maglie](#) in southern Italy, or Melun (possibly \*[Melodunum](#)), an island in the Seine.

Inland M-vowel-L names are often problematic. A band of possibly relevant names runs across the Balkans (from Rome to Constantinople) on or near the [Via Egnatia](#). They include [Melitonus](#) near Μελίτι northern Greece/Macedonia, [Melissurgis](#) 20 miles west of Thessaloniki, and [Μηλοβοτειρα](#) in northern Greece, probably at modern [Edessa](#). [Mellosedum](#) was similar, but in the Alps, near [Mont-de-Lans](#).

[Μελίβοια](#), which could mean ‘sweet cow’, was applied to various women and [nymphs](#), but also to at least three places: [one](#) by a slight protuberance on the rugged east coast of Greece, [another](#) was further south, another in southern Turkey).

[Μελιτηνη](#) or [Melid](#), apparently descended from *Malidiya* in Hittite texts dated to about 1300 BC, may be the oldest relevant name considered here. Its archaeological site of Arslantepe near Malatya, Turkey, lies beyond the apex of a triangle of mountains pointing into a fertile plain beside a lake. [Μίλητος](#) (*Miletus*) on a [promontory](#) in modern Turkey was the mother city of many Greek colonies.

[Melezo](#) is the name which launched this whole investigation. The names Melbury and Fontmell are in the right area, in the north of Dorset, but the hilltop town of Shaftesbury is the most likely location. It looks like [méléze](#) ‘types of pine tree’ in Alpine Romance languages, which Delamarre (2003:223) interpreted as derived from \**melatia* and referring to sweet tree sap, though it is more likely that those trees were so named because they are high and prominent. Ancient personal names such as *Melid̄dus* mentioned by Delamarre might sometimes mean ‘sweetie-pie’, but perhaps ‘outstanding’ is more likely for males.

[Melamoni](#) was most likely at Okehampton, Devon, not far from modern Meldon. The actual Roman fort was in a river valley just beyond the northern edge of Dartmoor. This location outranks a previous guess of the Black Ridge, with Roman soldiers yomping over Dartmoor.

[Malaca](#) was an island off south-east England, presumably now joined to the mainland. Most likely it was at Dungeness, already a [cusate foreland](#) in Roman times, though probably not as prominent as now, nor as filled in with silt on its landward side.

[Milidunum](#) now seems most likely to be a lost enclosure on a low hill now crowned by a Norman castle motte at Totnes, Devon. Its location probably served to control the earliest

trade in tin, back when there were still easy pickings to be had in valleys of headstreams of its river Dart on Dartmoor, and is analogous with that of *Maloenton*/Benevento discussed above.

Malborough, near the southern tip of Devon, is a good example of a modern name that fits the promontory pattern discussed here but cannot be traced back to Roman times. The Malvern Hills very definitely protrude, and one could make a case for Melrose and Mallerstang being named for nearby hills too. Other late names that definitely fit the pattern are Malin Head, the northern tip of Ireland, and [Melilla](#), Spain's exclave in north Africa near [Cape Three Forks](#).

Lots of M-vowel-L words have survived in the English language, all with meanings possibly derived from that 'lump, protuberance, sticking-out' sense. It is probably fruitless to argue over their exact history, whether from Latin, Gaelic, Norse, or an indigenous language with deep Indo-European roots. The fact that in Scotland many headlands are named as Mull and many hilltops are named as [Meall](#) ultimately depends on decisions made by Ordnance Survey staff and the home languages of their informants about two hundred years ago.

It is instructive to check through all 21 M-vowel-L *English Place-Name Elements* discussed by Smith (1956). Old English [mæġ](#) illustrates the pile-up of meanings and range of potential etymologies that can occur when similar-sounding words cross-fertilise over millennia. As a precursor of meal, did it refer to milled corn or to measured time? When it appears to refer (in a place name) to a Christian cross, a church on the local high point, probably preceded by a pagan standing stone or barrow, seems more likely than something related to OE *mæle* 'dyed, stained, variegated'. And did OE [mæġ](#) 'speech' (the precursor of modern meld) arise from the idea of someone standing up to talk in an assembly?

Old Norse [melr](#) 'sand bank, sand dune' (which is essentially the same word as Russian мель 'shoal') contributed to names such as Cartmel, Ingoldmells, and Meols, on Britain's coast, but these places were headlands as well as being sandy. Rathmell, Yorkshire, has no obvious red sands, but it does face steep Pennine hills. [Malham Tarn](#), earlier *Malgewater*, inspired Ekwall (1928) to invoke a Swedish *\*malgi* 'stony or gravelly place'. Maybe Scandinavians were blasé about towering scenery that would impress a southerner and liked their rocks to be glacially ground down towards powder!

Irish [mell](#) 'ball, round mass, round protuberance, swelling' preserves the original sense of Indo-European M-vowel-L better than any other language, but one must not overstate the case. The Irish dictionary spoils the purity of vowel E by citing forms *mill*, *miull*, *mioll*, *meall*. Those who think that [mull](#) 'promontory' came from Gaelic, a language that may have reached Scotland only after Roman times, need to [describe](#) Ptolemy's Μαλεος as "pre-Gaelic". Actually no one knows whether the name Mull spread in Gaelic or [Norse](#).

Welsh [moel](#) now primarily means 'bald, shorn', and secondarily 'bare, barren'. It is claimed to refer specifically to treeless hills when it shows up in place names, but that is debatable since a primary sense of something sticking out could apply to a hilltop or a cranium whether or not it was covered (though [Calleva](#), Silchester, may have meant 'bald').

In Ireland the equivalent word [mael](#) 'bald' or '[tonsured](#)', seems to have had great religious significance, from pagan into Christian times. Many scholars have tried to disentangle the symbolism in early Irish texts, but see particularly [Anderson](#) (1981) about ancient Indo-European stories about cutting off hair, ears, or genitals. *Mael* shows up in personal names, such as [Malcolm](#) 'servant of Columba', or [Maelgwyn](#) (whom Gildas attacked), possibly the same as *Maglocunus* on an [inscription](#) with first element apparently *\*magl-* 'great, prince'.

Let's ignore some rare elements in English place-names (OE *mal* 'bargaining, rent', French *mal* 'bad', personal names, etc) and now turn to ordinary dictionary words. Mallet, maul and

mell, types of hammer, started out meaning ‘club’, i.e. a stone on the end of a stick, used as a weapon or tool, which might or might not have reached English from Latin [malleus](#). Contrary to what dictionaries say, mill is probably a cognate word, because a millstone is really just a highly evolved form of club, and hunter-gatherers were around for a long time before farmers had corn to grind.

German [malen](#) ‘to paint’ and its Greek cognate [μελας](#) ‘black’ may derive from the same root as milling, because cave paintings show that the technology of grinding [powder pigments](#) has existed for at least 40 thousand years. Latin [mola](#) ‘mill(stone)’, as a tool for grinding, should be likened to [moles](#) ‘shapeless heavy mass’, not derived from its product, corn-meal.

Mole (stone pier or breakwater) obviously fits this pattern of a protruding lump. Mole (the animal) is probably cognate with Latin [meles](#) ‘marten, badger’, referring to their snout or muzzle, which is [Maul](#) in German, with cognates in Dutch and Norse. Mole (skin mark) is usually explained from its pigmentation, but Irish *mell* can have a sense of ‘pustule’.

Mould and mildew (fungus) protrude, though they are not usually explained that way. Mould (hollow container) comes from OE [molda](#) ‘top of head’. Mule has no agreed etymology. Mullet fishes have prominent dorsal fins. Mallow flowers are fairly upstanding in Britain, but the word may have originated with different species in the Mediterranean. Mell is a dialect term for the last sheaf of corn to be cut at harvest. OE [melde](#) ‘[orache](#)’ is a tall, salt-tolerant plant eaten like spinach, with a decorative red form.

[Mars Mullo](#) is known from multiple inscriptions found on low hills by river confluences in north-west France. Latin [malus](#) ‘upright pole, mast’ obviously protrudes. Latin [malus](#), Greek [μηλα](#) ‘apple tree’ sticks up but it seems more logical to suppose that [μηλον](#) (or [μαλον](#)) ‘apple’ was the protrusion, especially considering the other objects for which the Greeks used that word. Melon comes from the same root as apple.

At this point the reader is probably wondering cynically if there are any M-vowel-L words that cannot be explained as somehow sticking out. OE [mæle](#) or [méle](#) ‘bowl, bucket’ conceivably resembles an inverted cranium. [Mel](#) or [μελι](#) ‘honey’ is an obvious problem, since crystalline sugar as sold in a modern shop did not exist in the ancient world, but there may be a simple solution in the other meaning of [μελι](#) as the sweet gum exuded from certain plants, notably tamarisk, which might explain the biblical [manna](#).

Several Latin M-vowel-L words have no agreed etymologies, including [malus](#) ‘bad’, [melior](#) ‘better’, [miliun](#) ‘millet’, and [mille](#) ‘thousand’. Was their common feature that they all stand out? Millet is a particularly tall seed crop. [Miles](#) ‘soldier’ (which may have begun life spelled *meil-*, and shares an ending with [pedes](#) ‘foot-soldier’ and [eques](#) ‘horseman’) was perhaps originally someone who stood up in disciplined ranks.

For Hebrew [mlh](#) ‘to salt, to dry out’ and Ethiopic [malha](#) ‘to salt, to tear out’ one might argue that salt (hugely important in ancient commerce) inherently came in lumps. Semitic *mlk* ‘king’, as in the biblical [Moloch](#) or the Phoenician [Melqart](#), presumably referred to outstanding personages, but one must beware of past reluctance to recognise phallic figures.

The M-vowel-L word seems to be a [Wanderwort](#) ‘wandering word’, present in many languages, both Indo-European and further afield, and in use for a very long time. So this text has avoided drawing any conclusions from the actually observed vowels regarding loans from one language to another. Maybe advanced linguists can do better. In particular, there is information still waiting to be extracted from other elements that joined with M-vowel-L to make place names.