

**THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF ENGLISH TOPONYMS: ETYMOLOGICAL
LAYERS, FORMANTS, AND CANONIZATION**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical formation of English place names from a diachronic perspective. Based on a revised corpus of English units from the original comparative study, the article examines Celtic, Latin, Old English, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Norman layers, mechanisms of phonetic-morphological adaptation, as well as the role of written and cartographic canonization. It is shown that hydronyms and the names of large settlements prove to be the most stable, whereas settlement suffixes such as -ham, -ton, -ford, -by, and -chester preserve the memory of specific stages of colonization and economic development of the territory. A model of the historical development of English toponyms is proposed: substrate – contact – adaptation – canonization. The practical value of this work relates to historical onomastics, regional history, and the standardization of geographical names.

Keywords

historical toponymy, English toponyms, diachrony, etymology, formant, canonization, hydronym, oikonym

The historical toponymy of the English language represents one of the most extensively documented areas of European onomastics, as it combines a rich written tradition, advanced cartographic documentation, and a complex history of language contact. Contemporary studies emphasize that an English place name cannot be interpreted merely as a geographical label: it preserves information about the Celtic substrate, Roman infrastructure, Anglo-Saxon settlement, Scandinavian colonization, and Norman written adaptation. For this reason, the analysis of historical place names requires the integration of linguistic, historical-geographical, and documentary data.

Despite the extensive study of English material, the task of systematically describing not individual etymologies but the mechanism of a place name's historical formation remains relevant. International theory of historical toponymy proposes viewing a place name as the result of the interaction of form, motivation, and institutional fixation. However, in practice, studies often focus either on local dictionaries or on a single contact layer, whereas the comprehensive “substrate–contact–adaptation–canonization” model requires application to specific linguistic material.

The aim of this article is to identify the main patterns in the historical formation of English place names and to describe them using a diachronic model of development. To achieve this goal, the following tasks are addressed: to identify the leading etymological layers; to analyze the role of the most productive morphemes; to describe the mechanisms of phonetic and orthographic adaptation; to demonstrate the significance of documentary and cartographic canonization; and to clarify which types of names prove to be the most stable over time. The scientific novelty of the work lies in the transformation of comparative material into an independent model of the historical dynamics of English toponymy specifically. [Hoffmann, 2023, pp. 8–10; Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023, pp. 75–79]

The research material consisted of 40 English historical toponyms selected from the original comparative corpus. The sample included hydronyms, oikonyms, and macrotoponyms representing Celtic, Latin, Old English, Old Norse, and hybrid layers: Avon, Dover, Thames, Chester, Lancaster, Oxford, Norwich, Derby, Whitby, Selby, Grimsby, Scunthorpe, Nottingham, Lowestoft, and others. The selection was based not on modern frequency criteria, but on historical representativeness and consistent presence in the scholarly literature.

Methodologically, this study is based on a combination of etymological, comparative-historical, morphemic, and historical-cartographic analysis. For each place name, the following factors were taken into account: a) the earliest written record; b) the presumed root and affix; c) the degree of phonetic and orthographic change; d) the modern canonical form. This approach aligns with the recommendations of historical toponymy, according to which a reliable interpretation of a name should be based not on folk etymology, but on the comparison of written forms with landscape and historical data. [Hausner, 2017, pp. 26-2-26-3; Lauder, 2017, pp. 27-2-27-3]

The research procedure consisted of four steps. In the first stage, the earliest available layer was identified; in the second, key formants (-ham, -ton, -ford, -ley, -chester, -by, -thorpe); in the third, instances of hybridization and later phonetic adaptation were described; in the fourth, factors of administrative and cartographic consolidation were taken into account. This sequence is particularly important for English material, where the modern form often appears transparent, although early sources indicate a more complex origin. [Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023, pp. 64–75; Hausner, 2017, pp. 26–26–26–3]

Model 1. A four-stage model of the historical formation of a toponym

SUBSTRATE → CONTACT → ADAPTATION → CANONIZATION

The model illustrates the progression from an object's early name to its established standard form in writing and cartography.

The results showed that Old English morphemes and roots form the core of the English material: 16 out of 40 units, or 40% of the corpus. The Scandinavian layer is represented by 8 units (20%), the Celtic layer by 6 units (15%), the Latin-Romance layer by 5 units (12.5%), and hybrid formations also by 5 units (12.5%). This distribution alone demonstrates that English toponymy did not develop as a monolingual system, but rather as the result of the successive superimposition of several historical waves of naming. [Kahnberg, 2020, pp. 108–112; Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023, p. 47]

The most stable formants were those associated with settlement and landscape classification. The components -ham and -ton correspond to a settlement or farmstead, -ford indicates a ford, -ley denotes a clearing or meadow, and -chester/-caster derives from the Latin castra and marks a Roman layer or a later interpretation of Roman infrastructure. This is precisely why English historical toponyms often preserve spatial memory within their own word-formation structure.

The Scandinavian layer is most noticeable in the northern and eastern regions of England. According to M. Kahnberg, the by/bi formant in areas associated with the Humber region accounts for 6.6% of all identified elements, in Cumbria—5.2%, while in Herefordshire it is virtually absent.

This suggests that place names such as Derby, Whitby, Selby, Grimsby, or Scunthorpe do not reflect random borrowings, but rather a consistent layer of Scandinavian toponymy associated with the settlement and economic development of the region.

The role of hybridization deserves special emphasis. The modern English form rarely reflects a single historical period directly: a Celtic or Scandinavian root could combine with an Old English suffix, while later spelling might adapt to Norman or standard English orthographic

norms. Therefore, a toponym functions as a palimpsest, where the root, formant, and orthographic standard belong to different historical periods.

The study also confirmed the particular conservatism of hydronyms and the names of large settlements. It is precisely in these groups that Celtic and Latin layers are more often preserved, since such names enter the written tradition earlier and remain in collective memory longer. Consequently, the depth of the historical layer is determined not only by the origin of the name but also by the functional rank of the object itself.

Phonetic-graphic adaptation in English toponymy is primarily linked to the gradual unification of the written standard. Although local oral tradition often diverged from written records, the administrative codification of spellings on maps and in documents gradually established one variant as the official one.

Consequently, the history of an English place name is both a history of language and a history of institutional selection among competing forms. [Lauder, 2017, pp. 27–27–3; Hoffmann, 2023, pp. 9–10]

Table 1. Etymological layers of English place names in the author’s corpus

| Layer | Quantit y | % | Typical Formants | Examples |
|-------------------|--------------|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Old English | 16 | 40, 0 | -ham, -ton, - ford, -ley | Oxford, Hampton, Brighton |
| Scandinavian | 8 | 20, 0 | -by, -thorpe | Derby, Whitby, Grimsby |
| Celtic | 6 | 15, 0 | hydronymic stems | Avon, Dover, Thames |
| Latin- Romance | 5 | 12, 5 | -chester/- caster | Chester, Lancaster |
| Hybrid | 5 | 12, 5 | mixed stems | Nottingham, Lowestoft |

A discussion of the results suggests that the historical formation of English place names follows a general four-stage logic. In the first stage, a primary name emerges, motivated by the terrain, hydrography, type of settlement, or political function of the object. In the second stage, under conditions of contact, the name is transferred to a new linguistic environment or undergoes a secondary reinterpretation. In the third stage, phonetic and morphological adaptation occurs. In the fourth stage, the name is standardized in writing, on maps, and in administrative practice.

A high degree of morphological reconstructability is particularly characteristic of the English tradition. In many cases, the formant itself suggests the type of object and the era of its settlement, making English historical toponymy a productive basis for typological and areal studies.

However, this does not eliminate the risk of folk etymology: the more transparent the modern form, the more carefully early records must be examined to avoid a false “breakdown” of the name into its modern components.

The practical significance of this study lies in historical lexicology, regional history, the teaching of onomastics, and the standardization of geographical names. The proposed model can be applied when compiling educational materials on the history of the English language and

when interpreting names on historical maps, where it is important to explain not only the modern form but also the path of its formation.

Thus, English toponyms are formed as a result of the sequential interaction of substratum, contact, and institutional factors. Old English and Scandinavian elements proved to be the most productive in the corpus studied, while hydronyms and the names of large settlements were the most stable. The scientific novelty of this article lies in the fact that the comparative material has been transformed into an independent model of the historical dynamics of English toponyms, described through the chain “substrate – contact – adaptation – canonization.” A prospect for further research is to expand the corpus using local dictionaries, digitized maps, and regional documents. This will allow for a more precise description of the areas where Celtic, Old English, and Scandinavian layers overlap, as well as clarify the role of later written standardization in the fate of individual names.

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