

# *Sheetlines*

The journal of  
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY  
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“The representation of a place-name term on OS  
maps”

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*Sheetlines*, 126 (April 2023), pp18-28

Stable URL: <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/sheetlines-articles/Issue126page18.pdf>

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Published by  
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for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps  
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## *The representation of a place-name term on OS maps*

*Nevis Hulme*

Previous studies of the representation of place-names on OS maps have drawn my attention to a number of points about searching for place-names and their presence on or absence from maps.<sup>1</sup>

Following on from a study of murders that occurred in the Gairloch area, c.1480, it was thought worthwhile to examine ‘mì-chomhairle’ place-names. This is not a common term in Highland place-names but it seemed to be sufficiently widespread to allow study of their representation. A search was made of the OS name-books (OSNBs) and a query was posted on Facebook to uncover any others known by participants of the Scottish Place-names forum.<sup>2</sup>

The OS maps reproduced here are reduced extracts, each at approximately the same scale, from the relevant 1:10,560 First Edition. Argyllshire, Inverness-shire maps (Mainland and Hebrides) and Ross and Cromarty (Mainland) are numbered using Roman numerals while those of Ross and Cromarty (Isle of Lewis) use Arabic for the First Edition but do change to Roman for the Second Edition. The Isle of Lewis was surveyed 1849-53 before the system using Roman numerals for 1:10,560 map sheets was adopted.<sup>3</sup>

Key	Name	Location
1	Cnoc(an) na Mì-chomhairle	Ciarcabost, Bearnaraigh, Lewis
2	Cnocan na Mì-chomhairle	Lacasaigh, Lewis
3	Eilean na Mì-chomhairle	Loch an Sticir, N. Uist
4	Creagan na Mì-chomhairle	Opinan (South Erradale), Wester Ross
5	Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle	Poolewe, Wester Ross
6	Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle	Kilmaronag, nr Connel, Argyll
7	Cnoc(an) na Mì-chomhairle	Glen Nevis, nr Fort William, Inverness-shire

Figure 1: Location of mì-chomhairle place-names arranged in grid reference order.

The first name encountered with this element, and the reason that this study came about, was that of Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle<sup>4</sup> near Poolewe in Wester Ross (*figure 1, no. 5*). It

<sup>1</sup> Nevis Hulme, *Sheetlines* 122, 6-14

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Place-names Facebook forum.

<sup>3</sup> Ordnancemaps forum, topic: Sub-divisions of 1st edition OS 1:10560 maps (Scotland) and 1:10,560 numbering systems. Isle of Lewis 1:2,500 sub-sheets were numbered with Arabic numerals, eg XL.13 being the southwest 25-inch sheet within 6 inch sheet XL, the 25 inch sheets being numbered on a four by four grid on the 6-inch sheet.

<sup>4</sup> Names are given in the standard form *Mì-chomhairle* unless quoting from a source in which case the form given is used.

is mentioned in the account in Dixon,<sup>5</sup> of the c.1480 murders and is the only source from which we are able to identify its location other than it being adjacent to the River Ewe. Dixon states that “he [Allan Macleod, then chief of Gairloch] lay down on the green hill at Croft, where the house of Kenneth Urquhart (called Kennie Rob) now stands. The hill is named to this day <sup>6</sup> Cnoc na mi-Chomhairle, or the ‘Hill of evil counsel’.” Campbell Smith’s survey of Gairloch Estate of 1844 includes the proposed croft boundaries and the intended tenants; number 9 of the Poolewe crofts was to be allocated to a Kenneth Urquhart.<sup>7</sup> Its location is shown in *figure 2*. Today, the hill has a number of houses built on it and is most easily identified as a hill from the south adjacent to where there is a short incline on the road.

Dixon’s book was published in 1886 and so it would be expected that the name Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle would have been known to the authorities who gave names to the OS in the surrounding area. Its omission may have been because it was not in fact known to these people, it was not a place asked for or offered, or it was not deemed suitable for inclusion on maps. It has been found that few place-names, other than of water-courses, are entered on maps within crofting townships despite there being a profusion of names within such areas.



*Figure 2: Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle, Poolewe, indicated by the dot. NG859797, no. 5. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1875 (Ross and Cromarty (Mainland), sheet XLV).*

<sup>5</sup> Dixon, 25-27.

<sup>6</sup> This may have been the case in Dixon’s time but it does not appear in Mackenzie, KC.

<sup>7</sup> Hulme. Given that another translation of *mì-chomhairle* is *bad advice*, it was perhaps unfortunate that, at the time this finding was published in the local paper, one of the Gairloch doctors, Dr Marshall, lived here.

Another mì-chomhairle name in Gairloch parish, Wester Ross, is that of Creagan na Mì-chomhairle (*figure 1. no. 4*). This is a rock outcrop c80 metres north of the old school in Opinan. The outcrop is c3 metres in height, at its highest, and around 30 metres long. This name appears on the both the First (*figure 3*) and Second Edition OS maps, reasonably well placed, just to the north of its actual location. Its OSNB entry <sup>8</sup> gives this as meaning ‘Rock of the bad [*sic*] Advice’. The name is not on the 1:10,560 NG77SW survey of 1965, probably because of the presence of houses making its labelling difficult. It does, however, appear on the latest digital map, albeit only on the maximum zoom setting, somewhat north of its actual location and misspelt as Creagan na M-chomhairle.<sup>9</sup> Displacement and misspelling of names are not uncommon on maps, especially after the First Edition.

A tale recorded in 1988 from long-standing residents <sup>10</sup> says that this outcrop acquired its name because there used to be a school nearby and that the children were ‘mì-chomhairleach’ (ie unable to be advised or unwilling to listen to advice). Watson<sup>11</sup> gives a different explanation, viz. “Two men quarrelled and fought here. One wished to stop fighting, but the other would not, and both were killed.” Another name recorded for this crag is Creagan na Pàirc, the crag of the park, so called because it was on or near Pàirc an Taigh-sgoil, ‘the park of the school-house’.



Figure 3: Actual location of Creagan na Mì-chomhairle, Opinan (S. Erradale) indicated by the dot. NG745728, no. 4. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1875 (Ross and Cromarty (Mainland), sheet LVI).

<sup>8</sup> OSNB: Ross and Cromarty Mainland, volume 39, 81 (OS1/28/39/83 [*sic*]).

<sup>9</sup> Reference to digital maps is difficult because there appear to be a number of versions. The name given here comes from <https://pastmap.org.uk/map> as accessed in November, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Wentworth, place-name no. 7472/38.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, 222.

Three mì-chomhairle names have been identified in the Outer Hebrides. The most northerly one is found in Ciarcabost<sup>12</sup> on the island of Bèarnaraigh, or Great Bernera in English (figure 4). This was only found from a response on Facebook although it was later found in the OSNBs.<sup>13</sup> It would appear that this name, Cnocan na mi-Chomhairle, is also associated with murder. It is said that this “is supposedly where Donald Macaulay [Chief of the clan, c.1560-c.1640] ‘Domhnall Cam’ killed John Roy Mackay/Macphail from Bragar.”<sup>14</sup> Respondents on the Hebridean Connections and Facebook<sup>15</sup> also wrote that a sheep stealer had been hanged on this hillock or that ‘An Mòr MacAoidh (Big John Mackay) was beheaded here.<sup>16</sup> These three versions of the murder may all be the same person and event. The hill, which cannot be more than 10 metres in height, lies on croft no. 9 of the township of Ciarcabost and is named *cnoc* in sources other than the OS.



Figure 4: *Cnocan na mi-Chomhairle* [sic], Ciarcabost, Lewis. NB328220, no. 1. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1849-52 (Ross and Cromarty (Isle of Lewis), sheet 25).

The OSNB entry for this name originally shows the spelling Cnoceana Meechol but the subsequent entries fortunately display the more meaningful Cnoc na mi-Chomhairle which is entered on the map. The spelling here, without a final *e* could be explained by the dropping this final schwa sound in everyday speech; this is a common occurrence. The First Edition of the 1:2,500 map (Ross and Cromarty (Isle of Lewis), sheet XXV.1, resurveyed 1895 and dated 1897) has the same spelling for the name, i.e Cnocan na Mi-Chomhairle, as the Second Edition of the six-inch map using the same survey and dated 1898. Despite the name lacking a grave on the *i*, this is an example of the spelling of a name being amended correctly on the Second Edition.

<sup>12</sup> This township can also be found as Circabost, Circebst and Kiribost. It is described in the OSNB, in 1850 (probably), as the decayed village of Circabost.

<sup>13</sup> OSNB: Ross and Cromarty (insular), volume 46, 103 (OS1/27/46/103).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hebrideanconnections.com>. Tab: Browse Records, search 'Locations' with 'chomhairle'.

<sup>15</sup> *Scottish Place-names* Facebook forum.

<sup>16</sup> 'An is short for Iain and used in everyday speech in Gaelic. 'An Mòr is possibly the same person as John Roy ('An Ruadh) but misidentified by one of the sources.



No story has been found connected with the other name in Lewis. Cnocan na Mì-chomhairle is in the village of Lacasaigh, Lewis (*figure 5*). It is a low knoll next to the main road. The name is given in the OSNB<sup>17</sup> with various spellings but the form appearing on the maps from the First Edition is basically correct. On the First Edition, as in the OSNB, the *i* appears with a tittle (dot) and a grave and the name lacks a hyphen on the map. By the Second Edition, the name has its hyphen but only a tittle on the *i*. The name is printed in the same way on the current 1:25,000 map but with the name beginning some distance to the west, the result is that the name on the digital map has been displaced c200 metres to the west.

The last example found in the Western Isles is Eilean na Mì-chomhairle in Loch an Sticir, N Uist (*figure 6*). This is the more southwesterly island on the loch according to the OS. It is clearly so indicated on the 1:2,500 map published in 1879<sup>18</sup> as well as the 1:10,560 First and Second Editions maps. OS maps since the resurvey in 1967<sup>19</sup> show the island to be that to the northeast on which Dùn an Sticir (or Sticer, as the OS now prefer) is found.

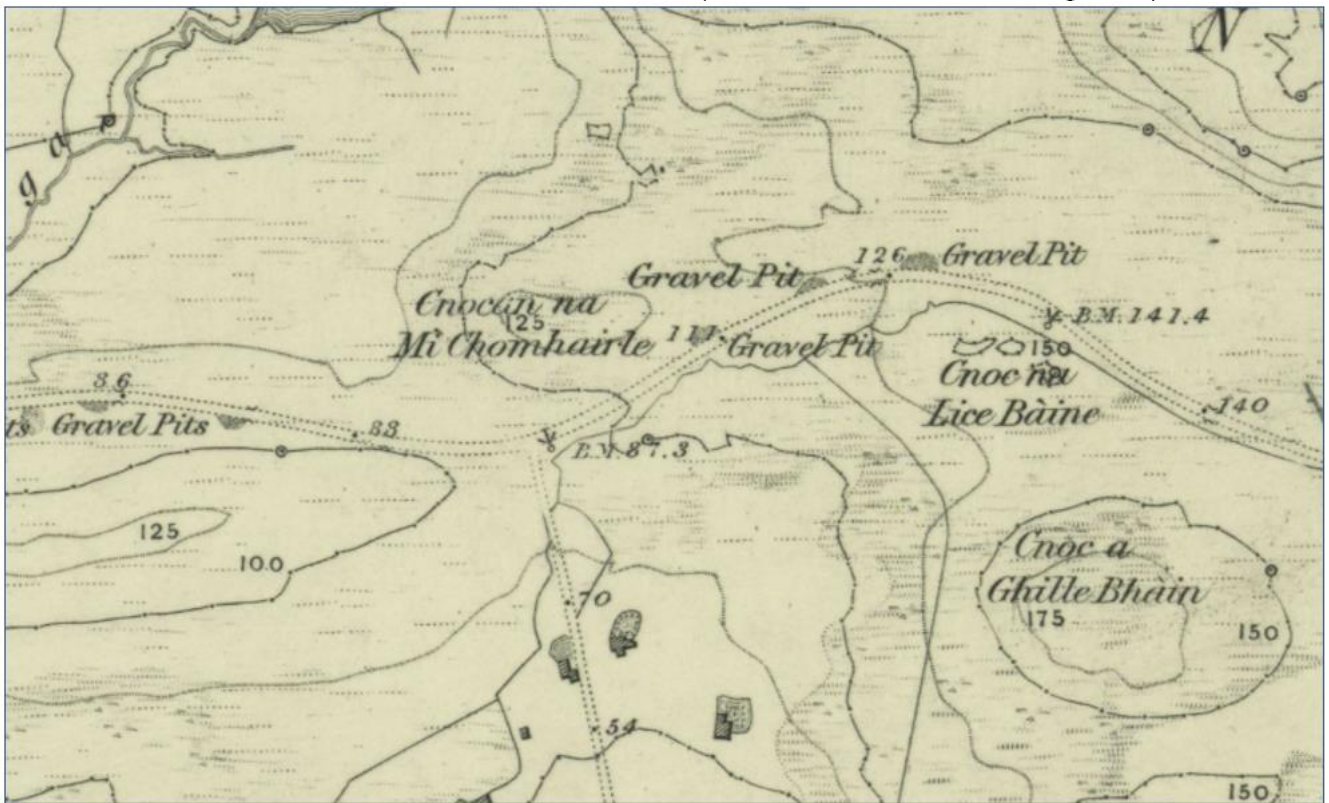


Figure 5: Cnocan na Mì-chomhairle, Lacasaigh (Lewis). NB328220, no. 2. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1849 (Ross and Cromarty (Isle of Lewis), sheet 32).

Alexander Mackenzie<sup>20</sup> gives a detailed account of how Hugh Macdonald (Ùisdean 'ic Ghilleasbaig Chlàirich) set out to deceive his uncle, the seventh chief of Sleat (in Skye). The chief discovered this and sent a “strong retinue” to this location where Hugh resided. He attempted to avoid capture by dressing in women’s clothing and working with a quern (or

<sup>17</sup> OSNB: Ross and Cromarty (insular), volume 91, 24 (OS1/27/91/24).

<sup>18</sup> OS First Edition map, 1:2,500, surveyed 1878 (Inverness-shire – Hebrides, sheet XXXI.3).

<sup>19</sup> OS 1:10,560, NF87NE, revised in 1970 and published 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Mackenzie A., 190-192.

hand-mill). “The size and masculine appearance of the grinder soon attracted the notice of the party when they entered the house.” After a struggle, he was bound and taken to Skye where he died of thirst in the dungeon of Duntulm Castle. The OSNB<sup>21</sup> gives a different account. Hugh had “fled Skye to escape capture from his chief (against whom he had conspired) to this Dun – He was here captured by the treachery of the woman who brought him food...”. The unfortunate outcome for Hugh, however, was the same.



Figure 6: Eilean na Mi-chomhairle, near Port nan Long (N. Uist). NF896776, no. 3. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1878 (Inverness-shire (Hebrides), sheet XXXI).

<sup>21</sup> OSNB: Inverness-shire Outer Hebrides, volume 6, 78 (OS1/18/6/78).

The Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle, near Kilmaronag,<sup>22</sup> Connel, (*figure 7*) is a wee tree-covered knoll beside the A85. It has yet another conflict associated with it. It was said that two chieftains met with their supporting forces to sort out a dispute. The men were instructed that they were only to fight if one of the chiefs drew his weapon. As the two men climbed the mound to discuss matters, an adder appeared from a rock. One chief drew his dagger to behead the reptile upon which savage and mortal combat broke out among the armed men below. It took some time for order to be restored by which time many men on both sides had been killed.<sup>23</sup> The story follows the same pattern as a version of the Battle of Camlann, between King Arthur and his relative, Mordred.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 7a: Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle, near Kilmaronag, Connel (Argyll). NM942342, no. 6. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1871 (Argyllshire, sheet LXXXVII).

<sup>22</sup> Spelt more recently Kilmaronaig.

<sup>23</sup> Macfarlane, J. from oral tradition. Personal communication.

<sup>24</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Camlann](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Camlann).





*Figure 7b: Cnoc na Mì-chomhairle, near Kilmaronag, from the south.*

The location of this knoll is not shown on any OS map and its location is little known. It was recorded orally as Cnoc a' Mhì-comhairle but, for consistency, is referred to here in the standard form.

The most easterly of the names is in Glen Nevis near Fort William (*figure 8*). There is a reference to it, as Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle, on the Clan Cameron website. It is stated that a body of men from Clan Chattan (a sept (or branch) of Mackintosh), having visited MacSorlie (a sept of Cameron), were insulted by the playing of a Cameron song (Sons of the Hound<sup>25</sup>) on the pipes as they departed Dùn Dìge, the Cameron residence in Glen Nevis (NN125719). The Chattans stopped at this hillock and made the decision to return and ambush the MacSorlies. This they did and murdered or wounded all but the infant heir to the chief who was saved.

A similar, more detailed account is given by Drummond-Norie putting the date of the incident "Sometime after the great fight at Invernahavon in 1386."<sup>26</sup> He gives the location of the hillock, which he calls Cnocan-na-mi-chomhairle, as being the hill immediately at the rear of 'Clach-an-turramain or rocking stone'. The stone is marked on OS maps at NN124715 placing the hillock around NN124714.

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<sup>25</sup> It is no surprise that this was taken as an insult being the war cry of the Camerons.

<sup>26</sup> Drummond-Norie, 221 onward.

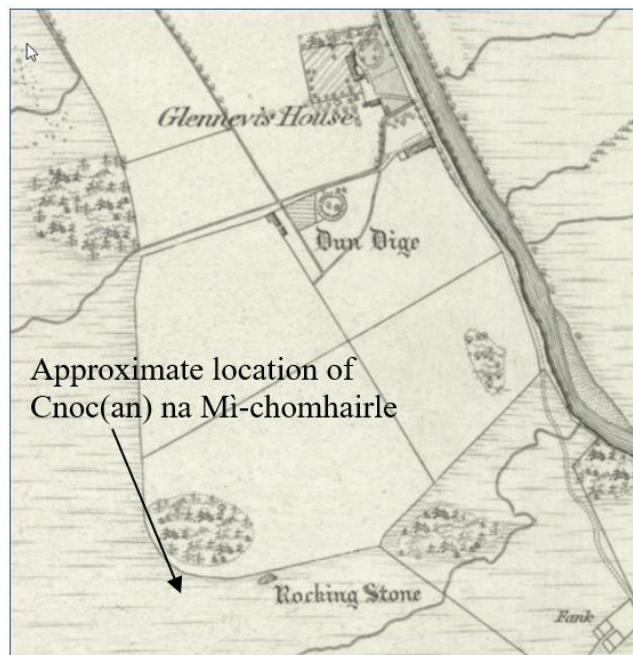


Figure 8: *Cnoc(an) na Mi-chomhairle*, the knoll of the evil counsel near Fort William. c.NN124714, no. 7. OS First Edition map, surveyed 1871 (Inverness-shire (Mainland), sheet CL).

### **Translation of the term**

It is intriguing that the same term appears for these murderous activities. Could it be that the tales of what had taken place were passed on at fireside recitations and encouraged the term to be copied for other locations connected with such deeds?

The term *mì-chomhairle* has generally been translated as ‘evil counsel, bad advice’ or a variant of these words. This, I would suggest, is misleading to those interpreting it nowadays. The meanings of ‘counsel’ that first come to mind are those given first in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED),<sup>27</sup> i.e. consultation, advice and deliberation. Examination of the events associated with locations incorporating this term, informs us that, in most cases, a physical action was performed at these locations or, in the remaining example where there is an associated event, a decision was taken. The OED offers a number of preferable definitions for the term: ‘purpose’ or ‘intention’, in particular, are appropriate for both the actions carried out at these places and the decision-making. This is supported in Irish<sup>28</sup> where the definition of *comhairle* includes ‘intent’.

There are many possibilities for the prefix ‘mì’ which Dwelly<sup>29</sup> defines as “indicating the opposite of, or the want of, the quality expressed by the word to which it is prefixed, equivalent to the English, in-, un- ... Sometimes it signifies Evil, the worst.” In consideration of what took place at the *mì-chomhairle* locations, ‘evil’ is entirely suitable.

A clearer translation of *mì-chomhairle*, then, would be ‘evil intention’ with the place-name *Cnoc na mì-chomhairle* being translated as ‘the knoll of the evil intention’. It could be argued that this is not entirely satisfactory given that, in at least five cases, a physical action was carried out at the place making it more than an intention.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/42604?rskey=DWWOfV&result=1#eid> (requires account access).

<sup>28</sup> Dictionary of the Irish Language.

<sup>29</sup> Dwelly, 649.



### **Pronunciation**

The only precise indication of a pronunciation for our term comes from Roy Wentworth and the name Creagan na Mi-chomhairle that he collected, probably, from two residents who had been brought up in Opinan.

It is given as [k<sup>h</sup>riekən nə 'mi: 'xɔ̃.əɹ̥iə] in which it should be noted that both *mì* and *chomhairle* have primary stress. The fact that *mì* [mi:] was noted as pronounced with a lengthened vowel (cf. [mi]) suggests that it was indeed stressed. It can only be supposed that this pronunciation would be the case for the other *mì-chomhairle* place-names.

### **Analysis of the *mì-chomhairle* names**

The table (*figure 9, below*) shows all the names, their general location, the associated outcome and whether it was recorded by the OS. The distribution of these names is widespread although restricted to the west of the Highlands and the Outer Hebrides.

It can be seen that the majority were connected with a fight that led to the death of at least one person and, in some cases, many more. The place in N Uist is not recorded as being a place where a death occurred but we do know that the captive died from having water withheld while imprisoned. The knoll in Lochaber certainly led to murder although it was not perpetrated at the location named *mì-chomhairle*. While nothing is known about the event at the remaining location, it would be surprising if there was no death associated with it.

Four of the seven names appear on OS maps (*figure 9, last column*) although this does vary over time and scale of map. Some have been removed from the latest maps and some have been displaced to the extent that their precise location is not clear. Where OSNBs have been transcribed, a search will reveal the name but this is not necessarily reliable because of the variable quality of recording names, especially related to spelling, by the OS in the 19th century. The example from W. Lewis (*no. 1*) is pertinent here with *chomhairle* losing its final *e*. The search facility on the website containing the OSNBs, at the time of writing, only allows whole words to be searched. Three of the names have not appeared on any map; this may be because of the lack of space, especially in more populated areas; because the names were not known to those passing them on or because a decision was made to exclude the name. These findings of variable representation on maps match those for other place-names in the Highlands.<sup>30</sup>

Key	Name	Location	GR	Event	Named by <u>O.S</u>
1	<u>Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle</u>	W. Lewis	NB188344	violent murder	yes
2	<u>Cnocan na Mi-chomhairle</u>	E. Lewis	NB328220	?	yes
3	<u>Eilean na Mi-chomhairle</u>	N. Uist	NF896776	capture leading to murder	yes
4	<u>Creagan na Mi-chomhairle</u>	W. Ross	NG745728	violent murder	yes
5	<u>Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle</u>	W. Ross	NG859797	violent murder	no
6	<u>Cnoc na Mi-chomhairle</u>	Lorne	NM942342	violent murder	no
7	<u>Cnoc(an) na Mi-chomhairle</u>	Lochaber	NN124714	decision leading to violent murder	no

*Figure 9 Summary of *mì-chomhairle* names*

<sup>30</sup> Scottish Place-name News, no. 51 Autumn 2021,. 2-4

It is noteworthy that all but one of these names are related to an elevated location. In some cases, they may have been examples of Cnoc a' Mhòid, 'the knoll of the court', where local issues were discussed<sup>31</sup> and subsequently gained the names we have today from the notable events that occurred there and described above.

This analysis of one place-name term has hopefully served three purposes. It has analysed how mì-chomhairle place-names have a place in the historical record; how they are distributed in northern Scotland and what their varied recording and appearance or otherwise on maps shows us of the reliability of OS maps as a source for place-names. It is probable that many other terms could be analysed similarly to useful effect.

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Currently being digitised and edited by N Hulme.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Jake King, Janet Maclellan, Donnie Macleod, Gilbert Markus, Peadar Morgan, Richard Oliver and Maggie Smith for their assistance with this work. Special thanks to John Macfarlane for his efforts to help me identify and tell the story of name six, and who gave permission to reproduce his photograph. The maps and reference books available on the website of the National Library of Scotland (NLS) have been invaluable. The reproduction of OS maps here is with the permission of the NLS.

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<sup>31</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moot\\_hill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moot_hill)