

Sídhe

also known as "Síth", "SÍ", "Síd", "Sídih"

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Entry tags: Celtic paganism, Monument, Religious Place, Hill, Religious Group, pre-Christian Irish, Irish Polytheism, Irish Paganism

The sídhe (pronounced "shee") are the hollow hills said to have been the homes of the ancient Irish gods, in other words, they are the Irish Otherworld. To most readers the term will be familiar from its appearance in banshee (ban-sídhe), referring to a woman of the sídhe. We cannot really determine when the concept of the sídhe first arose. However, the first surviving references appear in early Irish manuscript literature, dating to two or three centuries after Saint Patrick. Medieval and later manuscripts mention over 170 sídhe, and in local folk tradition there are many more. Often they are said to be artificial mounds, but the majority are isolated natural hills, sometimes with a manmade mound on the top. However, the term can also refer to lakes, rivers, springs, or islands. Those who live in the sídhe are referred to as the áes sídhe (modern Irish aos sí) or perhaps more often as "the good people." In earlier times they were known as the Tuatha Dé, or "tribe of the gods." According to the ancient Irish annals, the Tuatha Dé came to Ireland in ships, sailing through the sky, in 1897 BCE, a time that would be toward the end of the early Bronze Age. In translating the Irish tales into English, sídhe are often referred to as elf-mounds and their inhabitants as fairies. Both of these translations seriously distort the Irish understanding of the terms. A síd is associated with each of the major Iron Age ritual complexes referred to as "royal sites," located in the five ancient provinces, at Tara in Meath, Rathcroghan in Connacht, Emain Macha in Ulster, Dún Ailinne in Leinster, and Cashel in Munster. However, best known of the sídhe is Síd in Broga or Brugh na Bóinne ("mansion of the Boyne"), today known as the passage tumulus of Newgrange. Although at various times Newgrange is said to have been the home of the Dagda (the "good god"), of Elcmar, or of the Dagda's son Oengus, one important question, probably unanswerable, is whether the stories of the áes sídhe were created by people of a much later time to explain these monuments or the monuments were seen from the beginning as dwelling places of the gods, i.e., were they temples rather than primarily tombs, as they are usually interpreted by modern archaeologists. Since we are dealing with a class of places, many of the answers to the questions that follow should be modified by "sometimes" or "often."



Date Range: 600 CE - 1800 CE

Region: Island of Ireland

Region tags: Europe, Ireland

This region describes the island of Ireland, which is the primary location of the Sídhe.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Bitel, Lisa 2018 *Secrets of the Síd: the Supernatural in Medieval Irish Texts*. In *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits*, edited by Michael Ostling, pp. 79-101. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Source 2: Carey, John Time, Space, and the Otherworld. *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7:1-27.
- Source 3: Carey, John 2012 *Otherworld*. In *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture*, edited by John T. Koch and Antone Minard, Vol. 2, pp. 624-626. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Source 1: Joyce, Patrick W. 1869, 1871, 1912 *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*. Vols. 1, 2, 3. Dublin: Phoenix.
- Source 2: Mac Cana, Proinsias 1988 *Placenames and Mythology in Irish Tradition: Places, Pilgrimages and Things*. In *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, edited by Gordon MacLennan, pp. 319-341. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.
- Source 3: Mac Ritchie, David 1893 *Notes on the Word "Sidh."* *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 3:367-379.
- Source 1: Ó Cathasaigh, Tomas 1978 *The Semantics of 'Sídh.'* *Eigse* 17:137-154.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://research.ucc.ie/doi/locus/S>
- Source 1 Description: This is the section of Hogan's *Onomasticon Goedelicum* that contains a listing of many of the sídhe found in the Irish manuscripts.

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes



Type of excavation:

- Scientific



Years of excavation:

- Year range: various



Name of excavation

- Official or descriptive name: Newgrange is one example.

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

- Elevation

↳ Type of elevation

– Hill

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– No

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– No

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– Yes

↳ Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:

– No

↳ Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:

– Yes

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– No

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes

↳ A single structure

– Yes

Notes: Most often a passage tumulus or a cairn.

↳ The structure has a definite shape

– Circular

↳ One single feature

– Mound

↳ A group of structures:

– No

↳ A group of features:

– No

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– Yes

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Other [specify]: In the case of Newgrange, votive offerings were left in front of the entrance, but 30 centuries after it was built.

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– No

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– No

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– No

Notes: In most cases, no. Newgrange has been.

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: They were seen as the homes of beings who could appear human at times but had superhuman powers, including the power to take on animal forms. Whether they were seen as places of worship is unclear and may have changed over time. Certainly in later times they were often seen as places to be avoided, but that may have been because of their pagan associations.

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– No

Notes: The communities who built any associated monuments were essentially tribal and kin-based. In later times they shifted from local chiefdoms to more hierarchical structures.

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Field doesn't know

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Notes: Although in a few cases they were associated with the birth of important figures (e.g., Cúchulainn).

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– No

Notes: They seem always to have existed, but the Tuatha Dé were forced to move into them as a result of their defeat in battle by the Sons of Mil (i.e., the ancestors of the modern Irish).

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– No

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

–Other [specify]: Defeat of the tribe of the gods by humans.

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– Yes

↳ In the average place, what percentage of area is taken up by built monuments:
– Percentage: 5

↳ Footprint of largest single religious monument, square meters:
Please add dimensions in the comments, if known.
– I don't know

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:
– Height, meters: 10

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:
– Square meters: 12

↳ Height of average monument, meters:
– Height, meters: 2

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

↳ Earth

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Sand

– No

↳ Clay

– No

↳ Plaster

– No

↳ Wood

– No

↳ Grass

– No

↳ Stone

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

Notes: Usually, but in a few cases quartz for decoration is brought in from as much as 50 km away.

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

Notes: Except in the case of the quartz.

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: Other materials not normally present.

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– No

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– No

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– Field doesn't know

Notes: In the rare instances in which decoration is present there is little agreement as to its meaning. It does seem likely that at least some is figural.

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Probably not.

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– Yes

Notes: While much of it is visible, some is certainly not and in other cases it is likely to have been visible only to those participating in rituals.

↳ Can the decoration be revealed:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– Yes

↳ Reliefs representing the god(s) worshipped at the place:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: They most likely represent the associated gods, but we can't be sure.

↳ Reliefs representing mythological narratives:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Given that there are narratives associated with some of the sídhe, it seems likely.

↳ Reliefs representing human/historical narratives:

– No

Notes: There is nothing to suggest this may be the case.

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Again, there are motifs for which we have no explanation.

↳ Are there paintings present:

– No

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– No

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– No

↳ Other type of decoration:

- Yes [specify]: In at least one case, there is a quartz facade or pavement. And the very shape of some monuments may have meaning.

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not)

– Yes

Notes: in the rare instances in which iconography is present, there are elements (e.g., spirals) that could be interpreted as eyes)

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic)

– Yes

Notes: There are motifs that have been interpreted as zoomorphic (e.g., owls).

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic)

– Yes

Notes: It is possible that some are geomorphic. For example, a meandering or wavy line might represent a river or the deity associated with the river.

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic)

– Field doesn't know

Notes: I know of no motifs that are obviously anthropomorphic. However, in a number of cases the sl itself--a rounded hill with a cairn on top--appears to symbolize a breast of the earth. Some of these are definitely associated with female figures in the mythology (e.g., Síd Brí Éile). And in the case of Síd in Broga, it has been suggested that the tumulus, with a 20-meter passage leading to an inner chamber illuminated by the sunrise at winter solstice may represent the pregnant belly or womb of the earth. It is certain that the earth was thought of as female, associated with female deities.

↳ Supernatural beings (abstract)

– Yes

Notes: Possibly. There are certainly motifs whose meanings are unknown.

↳ Portrayals of afterlife

– No

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols)

– Yes

Notes: This would seem to be the most likely explanation for some of the associated motifs, from the breast-like appearance of some sidhe to the triple spirals found at Newgrange.

↳ Humans

– No

↳ Supernatural narratives

– Field doesn't know

↳ Human narratives

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: There is no evidence to suggest other meanings or purposes.

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– Yes

Notes: Human remains have been found at some of the sidhe, but it is unclear whether these were honored members of the community, sacrifices, or had some other significance.

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Some have argued for ancestor worship, but there is disagreement on this.

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Notes: This does not appear to have been the case.

Are grave goods present:

– No

Notes: While artifacts have been found at some sites, they appear to be votive offerings rather than grave goods.

Are formal burials present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: In most cases, this answer to this question is unknown, and in the few where human remains have been found, they do not seem to represent formal burials.

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: In the earliest tales, probably reflecting the true pagan tradition, the Dagda (Eochaid Ollathair) is depicted as the chief of the gods, who assigns the sídhe to other members of the Tuatha Dé (Hull 1933:56-57):. And each síd is considered to have its own ruler.

↳ Are they anthropomorphic:

– Yes

Notes: But an animal form can be assumed. For example, the lord of Benaughlin appears as a giant horse.

↳ Are they sky deity:

– Yes

Notes: At least some seem to be. This is not stated explicitly, but Etaín, for example, seems to personify the moon (Hicks 2009).

↳ Are they chthonic (underworld)

– Yes

Notes: In that they live in the sídhe, all can be thought of as chthonic, but it is more complicated than that. In a sense, they are thought to live side-by-side with humans, but invisibly.

↳ Are they fused with king/kingship role (king = high god)

– No

Notes: However, the kings/chieftains are thought to be married to the goddess of sovereignty of their lands, and the inauguration ceremony for at least some seems to have involved a marriage ceremony.

↳ Are they the monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

↳ Are they kin relation to elites:

– Yes

Notes: As part of the agreement to allow the Túatha Dé possession of the underground, they agreed to provide wives for the Milesian ancestors of the modern Irish (Todd 1848:251).

↳ Are they other type of loyalty or connection to elites:

– Yes

Notes: As a key part of the social system, children of the elites were sent to live in the homes of other members of the elite, who were responsible for their education. This system of fosterage is spelled out in detail in legal documents. In some cases, in the tales, a member of the Tuatha Dé is said to be the foster father of a mortal (e.g., Oengus is the foster-father of Diarmuid). This system was thought to exist among the Tuatha Dé themselves (e.g., Mider was the foster-father of Oengus).

↳ Are they unquestionably good:

– No

Notes: There are numerous examples of members of the Tuatha Dé behaving badly. These tales seem to have served to some extent to exemplify proper and improper behavior.

↳ Are they other:

– Other [specify]: In many ways, their world paralleled that of humans. As noted in the previous answer, they could behave badly.

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– Yes

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

↳ In trance possession:

– Yes

Notes: Some of the tales could be interpreted this way.

↳ Through divination practices:

– Yes

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: The Tuatha Dé interacted and communicated with humans in many ways, some of them only at certain times of year when it was possible to learn about the future.

Are previously human spirits present:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be physically felt:

– Yes

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Notes: They do not communicate with the living at sídhe, but they do at other places. For example, heads taken in battle are sometimes said to talk.

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

– No

Notes: At least insofar as the Tuatha Dé can sometimes take animal form.

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– Yes

|

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

↳ In trance possession:

– No

↳ Through divination practices:

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: While I cannot think of other examples, they may well exist.

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

– Yes

Notes: CúChulainn is one example, through a triple conception, one of his fathers being Lugh.

↳ Mixed human-divine spirits can be seen:

– Yes

↳ Mixed human-divine spirits can be physically felt:

– Yes

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

– No

Notes: However, it is possible in a few cases that a pillar in a tumulus at the site represents his penis.

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– Field doesn't know

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Although it seems likely.

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

– Yes



Are there animal sacrifices:

– I don't know

Notes: No examples come readily to mind, but it seems likely. Given the small number of excavations, there is much we don't know.



Are there human sacrifices:

– Yes

Notes: The best example is the bog body found in Oldcroghan Townland at the foot of Sídh Brí Ele (Kelly 2012). In the tale *Boyish Exploits of Finn* (Meyer 1904), we are told that men would come to woo Ele at Samhain, end of the harvest and of the ancient Irish year, and that one of the retinue of such men would be taken, no one knowing by whom.



Adults

– Yes



Is biological sex available from evidence:

– Male

Notes: In most cases, this information is not currently available.



Children

– No



Foreigners and/or slaves

– Field doesn't know

Notes: From available evidence it seems likely that they were prisoners taken in war or criminals or even volunteers, but we cannot say for certain. Some may even have been deposed kings.

↳ Elites

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is evidence of elite status in the Oldcroghan bog bod. Kelly () has suggested that some may have been deposed kings.

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Hostages, prisoners of war, criminals, or volunteers may have been sacrificed. There is also evidence in early documents of possible random selection (e.g., by lottery).

↳ Are the sacrificed humans associated in some way:

– Field doesn't know

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– Field doesn't know

Are material offerings present:

– Yes

Notes: The best example comes from Síð in Broga (Brugh na Boinne, Newgrange) where deposits of Roman coins, rings, brooches, and the like were found in front of the entrance and at other locations (Carson & O'Kelly 1977). They serve to indicate its sacred nature centuries after it was constructed.

Reference: Robert Carson A., Claire O'Kelly. A Catalogue of the Roman Coins from Newgrange, Co. Meath, and Notes on the Coins and Related Finds..

↳ Are material offerings mandatory:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):

– Yes

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: There is evidence for offerings of such things as milk and perhaps butter at other sites, but it is unknown if this was true of sídhe.

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

– Field doesn't know

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Field doesn't know

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

↳ How strict is pilgrimage:

– field doesn't know

↳ Are pilgrimages the main reason for construction/establishment of the place:

– No

↳ Are pilgrimages to this place associated with significant life events:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Does pilgrimage to this place involve following established routes (roads):

– Yes

Notes: In at least one case (Sid Druim, more commonly known as Cashel) there is a processional way. This may be associated with its role as an inauguration site rather than as a síd, as would seem to be the case at Tara, where the processional does not lead to the síd.

↳ Are these routes maintained together with the place:

– Field doesn't know

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Field doesn't know

Are festivals present:

– Yes

Notes: While we have a reference to a link between Samhain and Sid Brí Ele, and there seem to have been visits to some of the sidhe at Lughnasa, it is unclear to what extent the festivals and the sidhe were associated.

↳ Frequency of festivals

– specify: There are four major festivals near the cross-quarter days, linked with the agricultural cycle. There may also have been festivals at the solstices. It is not clear that all of these involved the sidhe.

↳ Do all members of the society participate in the festival(s):

– All members

↳ Are festivals a defining element in the construction/decoration of the place:

– No

Notes: However, at least some have monuments oriented on a festival sunrise or sunset.

↳ On average, how many participants gather at this place:

– number: Impossible to say. Much of the community would have gathered.

↳ Is feasting part of the festival(s):

– Yes

Notes: Feasting was certainly a major part of the Samhain festival at the beginning of November, but it is unlikely that this occurred at the síd.

↳ Is food consumption limited to certain members of the population:

– Elites

– Religious professionals

Notes: There was an obligation, at least in later times, for the sub-kings to feast at the seat of the high king at Samhain, but to what extent the non-elites participated is unknown.

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– Yes

Notes: The exact nature of the practices isn't clear, but at some of the sites activities certainly seem to have involved seeking knowledge about the future. This was true at Benaughlin. Although it doesn't seem to have involved divination, we are told that at Síd Droma Déan (Fornocht), for three days and nights before and after Samhain, Uinche Keymouth, whose lips were otherwise sealed, "would

announce to his household the deeds of the [coming] year" (Stokes 1894:327-328).

- ↳ Divination by examination of the exta:
Animals remains, internal organs, answer this question and subsequent question once for each species
 - Field doesn't know

- ↳ Divination through human communication:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Is a human being the vehicle for the oracle:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Is a human being the interpreter of the oracle:
 - No
 - ↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified sex/gender:
 - No
 - ↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified ethnicity:
 - No
 - ↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified class:
 - No
 - ↳ Is sex-deprivation required:
 - No
 - ↳ Are intoxicants required:
 - No
 - ↳ Physical ordeal required:
 - No

- ↳ Divination through animal-behavior:
 - No

– No

↳ Divination through non-living material:

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: Though bonfires are a component of at least some of the festivals, they do not seem to be connected with divination nor are they known to be at the sídhe.

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: At Benaughlin, the spirit horse would appear at Lughnasa to make pronouncements about the future.

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– Yes

Notes: Healing is more commonly associated with wells or springs, though in a few cases these may be on sídhe.

↳ Incubation

– No

↳ Healing magic

– No

Notes: Healing

↳ Cleansing

– No

↳ Offerings of models of body parts:

– No

↳ Expiation

– No

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Cures of one sort or another are occasionally associated with hills, but not notably with those known as sídhe.

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Field doesn't know

Notes: From the presence of monuments and mentions of gatherings, it seems likely, but we cannot say for sure.

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– No

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– No

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– No

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– No

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– No

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– No

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– No

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– No

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

– No

Notes: While there are certainly tales associated with the *síde*, many of which refer to the old gods or other figures from myth or legend, it is probably not accurate to refer to these as scriptures.

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