Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld

The medieval Irish had many words for 'burial mound' or 'grave'. The Irish landscape is scattered with mounds, from Neolithic monuments, like Newgrange and Knowth, to Iron Age or even early medieval burials.

One of most common words for 'mound' (usually artificial) in medieval Irish is *síd*, referring to a structure inhabited by the **Túatha Dé Danann** or **Áes Síde** ('people of the *síd*'), supernatural beings who appear in Irish sagas. You may find older dictionary entries that define *síd* as 'elf-mound' or 'fairy-mound'.

However, many other words referring to mounds or mound-like topographic features exist as well, including *fert* 'burial mound', *ráth* and *dún* 'fort', *carn* 'heap', and *cnocc* and *tulach* 'hill'. Sometimes it is not always clear what kind of structure is meant, or what purpose medieval authors envisioned for it. Modern archaeology allows us to tell whether mounds are naturally-occurring hills, burials, forts, or overgrown settlements (or some combination), but landscapes in medieval texts are sometimes difficult to interpret.

Where do these words appear in literature and what do they mean?

- *Síd*: The Otherworld

One of the first extant uses of the word *síd* (pl. *síde*) is from the *Collectanea*, a Latin work about St Patrick attributed to the seventh-century bishop **Tírechán**. When the daughters of King Láegaire first meet Patrick and his clerics,

> … they did not know whence they were or of what shape or from what people or from what region, but thought they were men of the *síd* or earth-gods or a phantom. …
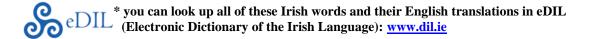
Collectanea, transl. Bieler, §26

Síde are frequently depicted as beautiful, paradise-like locations under the earth (or sometimes across the sea), full of abundant food and drink. These locations are sometimes called the '**Otherworld(s)**', similar to the regular world, but often magical and not always accessible to humans. Their inhabitants are immortal beings who may be medieval literary re-imaginings of pre-Christian gods.

In a poem from the medieval Irish saga *The Wooing of Étaín* (*Tochmarc Étaíne*), the Otherworld is described as follows:

> A wondrous land is the land I tell of:
> there, youth does not depart before old age.
> Warm, sweet streams flow through the land,
> the best pick of mead and wine.

The Wooing of Étaín, transl. based on Bergin and Best., p. 181

➢ Fun fact: *síd* can also mean 'peace'. Some scholars think this is because the Otherworld is an ideal, peaceful place, although it does not always appear that way in literature.

▪ *Fert*: A Burial Mound

Another term for mound, **fert** (pl. *ferta*), usually specifically means 'burial mound' or 'barrow'. You may have also seen the Latin word **tumulus** borrowed into modern English with a similar meaning. In fact, **fert** appears as a **gloss** (a definition or clarification for a word or phrase in a manuscript, usually written in by a later scribe) defining **tumulus** in a tenth-century manuscript of Vergil.

Are *ferta* Christian or pagan burials? The evidence is contradictory. In Tírechán's *Collectanea*, the daughters of Láegaire (whom we met above) die after being baptised and are buried by St Patrick:

> … they made a round ditch after the manner of a **fert**, because this is what the heathen Irish used to do, but we call it **reilic**, that is, the 'remains' of the maidens. And the **fert** was made over to Patrick with the bones of the holy virgins, and to his heirs after him for ever, and he made an earthen church in that place.

Collectanea, transl. Bieler, §26

In the twelfth- or thirteenth-century *Colloquy of the Elders* (*Acallam na Sénorach*), a work that draws on Tírechán, St Patrick exhumes a pagan from a **fert** and sends him to heaven, after giving the treasure he was buried with to the church. These examples would seem to indicate that burying the dead in mounds (and/or with grave goods) is a pagan practice. But another seventh-century Latin text, Muirchú's *Life of St Patrick*, mentions the '**ferta** of martyrs', suggesting the word can refer to Christian burials too.

Ferta sometimes marked property boundaries, especially if they contained the graves of people's ancestors. An early medieval legal tract tells us that the medieval Irish could claim land by riding over these **ferta.**

▪ *Ráth* and *Dún*: Forts and Royal Residences

Other words describe artificial mounds that are not graves, although the distinction is sometimes unclear. **Ráth** (pl. *rátha*) and **dún** both usually mean 'hillfort' or 'earthen embankment'. These were often built on top of natural hills, or, after a period of decay, looked like hills to later observers.

Like **síd** and **fert**, these words often appear in place-names, such as **Rathcroghan** (the **ráth** of Crúachan or Crúachu). In *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*), Rathcroghan is the royal seat of Connacht and the home of Queen Medb.

Abandoned fortifications are sometimes grave-like. In *The Martyrology of Óengus* (*Félire Óengusso*), a work ascribed to a ninth-century bishop, pagan settlements, graves, and monuments are contrasted with Christian monasteries and cemeteries. We are told that Rathcroghan is now uninhabited, and that:

> … guilty pagans [are] carried off, their **rátha** are not dwelt in.

The Martyrology of Óengus, transl. Stokes, ll. 175–8

How do people interpret the past?

The words encountered here show that the medieval Irish were interested in understanding the past and the landscape around them.

Some prehistoric mounds were interpreted as **síde**, the fantastic homes of supernatural beings. Some were clearly graves, either pre-Christian or later. Others might be the remains of earlier forts, or natural hills. These were often linked to both historical people and mythological or legendary characters, like St Patrick and Queen Medb.

The words used to describe mounds and structures often give us clues as to how people made sense of the world around them, and what sorts of stories they told about their landscapes and themselves.

Timeline of Prehistoric and Medieval Ireland

How long ago was the Neolithic? When do the Middle Ages begin? Here's a helpful timeline for basic reference (date ranges are approximate).

- Palaeolithic ('Old Stone Age'): pre 8000 BCE

- Mesolithic ('Middle Stone Age'): 8000 – 4000 BCE

- Neolithic ('New Stone Age'): 4000 – 2500 BCE

  o Newgrange built at Brú na Bóinne; Mound of the Hostages built at Tara: 3200 BCE

- Chalcolithic ('Copper Age'): 2500 – 1800 BCE

- Bronze Age: 2000 – 500 BCE

- Iron Age: 500 BC – 400 CE

  o Roman Period (in Britain): 43 – 410 CE

  o Archaic/Primitive Irish spoken c. 300 – 600 CE

- Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: 400 – 1169 CE

  o Traditional date of the death of St Patrick: 457 CE

  o Old Irish spoken: c. 600 – 900 CE

  o First recorded Viking raid in Ireland: 795 CE

  o Book of Kells created: c. 800 CE

  o Middle Irish spoken: c. 900 – 1200 CE

  o Norman conquest of England: 1066 CE

  o Book of Leinster compiled: c. 1160

  o Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland: 1169 CE

- Later Middle Ages, Early Modern, and Modern Periods: post 1169 CE

  o Early Modern Irish spoken: c. 1200 – 1600 CE

  o Modern Irish spoken: c. 1600 CE – present

Activities

1. Can you match up these Irish words (and a few Latin-derived words) with their English translations? Hint: there may be more than one right answer.

síd	burial mound
fert	hillfort
tumulus	barrow
ráth	Otherworld
carn	remains
tulach	hill
reilic	heap
dún	embankment
cnocc	mound

2. Several of these words sound similar to words in English. Can you tell which ones they are? A few of these are derived from Latin; can you identify which ones?

3. Why do you think people build (burial) mounds? Who might be buried in them? A number of barrows in Ireland have been reopened over time and new burials added, sometimes thousands of years after the mound was initially built; why do you think this is, and how do you think this relates to a developing understanding of the past?

4. Go to the *Mapping Death* website: http://www.mappingdeathdb.ie/querysearch/index, and investigate Iron Age and medieval burials in Ireland. Find a ***fert*** near you, or one of your choosing (select the box marked 'Ferta'). How many inhumations were discovered there? Cremations? Were any grave goods found? Has the site been reused over time? Are there any other interesting aspects worth commenting on?

   Alternatively, try finding prehistoric sites at *The Atlas of Hillforts*: https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk, or *The Megalithic Portal*: https://www.megalithic.co.uk/index.php (go to 'The Megalith Map: UK and Ireland'). Which sites are nearest to you? What information can you find about them? Are there any later (late Iron Age, medieval, post-medieval) sites in the same location or nearby?

Bibliography
L. Bieler, transl., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979) – available online at https://www.confessio.ie/ (under 'Special Features')
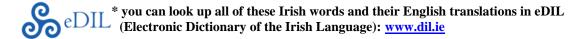
Websites:
The Atlas of Hillforts, developed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University of Oxford, the University of Edinburgh, and University College Cork (https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk)

Mapping Death, developed by the Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute for the Study of Irish History and Civilisation, University College Dublin, and the Discovery Programme (http://www.mappingdeathdb.ie/querysearch/index)

The Megalithic Portal, developed by Andy Burnham *et al* (https://www.megalithic.co.uk/index.php) (especially good for pictures and maps)

Translations of *The Wooing of Étaín* and *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* are available online at: https://celt.ucc.ie/publishd.html, and *The Martyrology of Óengus* at: https://archive.org/details/martyrologyoeng01stokgoog/page/n4.

eDIL *** you can look up all of these Irish words and their English translations in eDIL (Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language): www.dil.ie**

Answer Sheet

1. 'Mound' is a correct definition for any word.

síd	Otherworld
fert	burial mound, barrow
tumulus	burial mound, barrow
ráth	hillfort, embankment
carn	heap
tulach	hill
reilic	remains
dún	hillfort, embankment
cnocc	hill

2. *Dún* = 'down' (in the sense of 'hill'; think of Tolkien's 'barrow-downs' in *The Lord of the Rings*). *Carn* = 'cairn', borrowed into English from Scottish Gaelic, a language descended from Old Irish. Latin *tumulus* is related to Latin *tumba* = 'tomb'. Latin *reliquiae* = medieval Irish *reilic* and English 'relic', meaning '(bodily) remains', especially applied to remains of saints.

3. Answers may vary and there are no 'right answers'.

    Mounds might be built as a means to represent social or religious status, communal identity, as boundary markers, sacred places, or assembly sites, or, most likely, some combination of the above. People of high status are often postulated to have been buried in particularly showy or impressive burials, like mounds.

    People have built new barrows near older mounds (or natural features resembling mounds), or added new burials to existing mounds throughout Ireland and the British Isles for millennia. Some theories as to why include the desire to create continuity with past cultures or specific individuals, cement ancestral claims to the landscape, and as a means of demonstrating political, religious, and/or economic power and identity. Reusing sites reflects an attempt to somehow construct a link with the past, and respond to the surrounding environment.

4. Answers may vary. Some site entries may not contain the length and level of detail to answer all of the potential questions posed. If students are having trouble finding sites, select fewer fields to query (i.e. not all counties listed may have a *fert*, or not all seventh-century burials may have specific grave goods; in fact, these are likely to decrease over time), or scroll through the results under 'Browse' tab on the top right of the page instead.

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