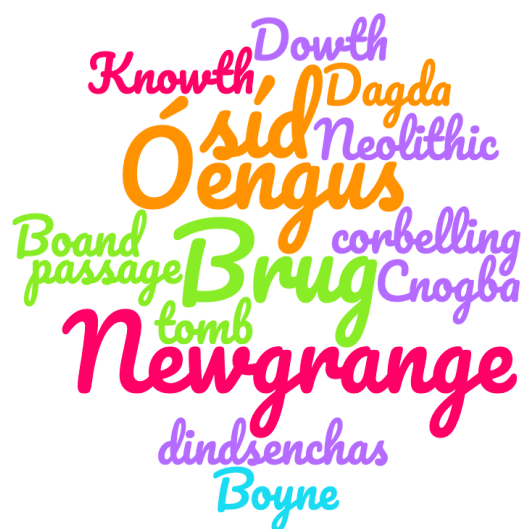


# Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld

## 1. Newgrange



One of the largest and best-known mounds in Ireland is **Newgrange**, also called the **Brug** in medieval texts, and located in a complex of other prehistoric structures at **Brú na Bóinne** ('the mansion of the Boyne'; *brú* is the modern Irish form of *brug*). The structure is a Neolithic **passage tomb**, or large burial mound containing interior chambers connected to the outside by a narrow passage, and was built in approximately 3200 BCE. This makes the 5200 year-old mound about 800 years older than the Great Pyramid and roughly 200–1000 years older than Stonehenge. The structure has a width of 26 metres and a height of 12 metres at its highest point. It is famous for its rock art, including the entrance stone and several curb stones around the edges, carved with many elaborate spiral motifs.

Newgrange was built with impressive engineering knowledge and technology. The roof of the central chamber is **corbelled**, which means that overlapping rows of solid building material with increasingly smaller diameters are stacked atop one another to form a vault. (A similar kind of architecture is found on a much smaller scale in the medieval monastic huts, or *clochán*, on Skellig Michael.) At Newgrange, a small opening or **roof box** above the passage entrance is aligned so that a beam of light passes through it as the sun rises on the Winter Solstice.



What did the medieval Irish think of the Brug? And how does it appear in medieval literature?

### ▪ **Óengus, Boand, and the Dagda**

In medieval literature, the Brug is associated with **Óengus** (Modern Irish Aonghus), the son of the **Dagda** (whose name *dag* + *da* literally translates as 'the good god') and **Boand**. Boand is the personification of the **River Boyne**, and her name is a compound of *bó* 'cow' and *find* 'white', meaning 'white cow'. All three characters are described as members of the **Túatha Dé Danann**, god-like, supernatural beings in Irish literature.

- Note: The medieval versions of the Túatha Dé Danann ('people of the goddess Danu') probably do not reflect much about the realities of pre-Christian Irish religion, although their names indicate that they likely had some kind of divine origin.

Óengus is usually said to live in the Brug, which is also sometimes referred to as *Síd in Broga* 'the *síd* of the Brug' in medieval Irish. Remember that a *síd* is a supernatural, otherworldly residence, usually inside of a mound or hill.

### ▪ *The Taking of the Síd*

A very short tale found in the twelfth-century manuscript, the **Book of Leinster**, tells one version of how Óengus acquires the Brug by tricking the Dagda. (Óengus is sometimes called the *Mac Óc* ‘the young son’.)

... Great was the Dagda’s power when he was king at the beginning; and it was he who divided the *síde* among the Fir Dé [‘men of the gods’]. ... They say, that *Síd in Broga* belonged to him at first. Óengus the Mac Óc came to the Dagda seeking territory when he had made the division to everyone; he was a fosterson of Midir of Brí Léith and of Nindid the prophet.

‘I have nothing for you,’ said the Dagda. ‘I have finished the distribution.’

‘Obtain for me then,’ said the Mac Óc, ‘just a day and a night in your own dwelling.’ That was granted to him then.

‘Now go to your house,’ said the Dagda, ‘for you have used up your time.’

‘It is plain,’ he said, ‘that the whole world is day and night, and that is what was granted to me.’

Then the Dagda departed from there, and the Mac Óc remained in his *síd*. That is a wondrous land. There are three trees perpetually bearing fruits, and an everliving pig on the hoof and a cooked pig, and a vessel with excellent liquor; and all of this never grows less.

*The Taking of the Síd*, transl. Carey, §88

There are several other versions of this story, but nearly all end with Óengus living in the Brug.

### ▪ **The Boyne Valley**

The **Boyne River Valley** contains many other archaeological sites besides Newgrange, including two other prehistoric passage tombs: **Knowth** and **Dowth**. Dowth, like Newgrange, is aligned with the movements of the sun on the Winter Solstice, while Knowth lines up with the Equinoxes.

The metrical *Dindsenchas* (from *dind* ‘place’ + *senchas* ‘old tales, knowledge, history’; the modern Irish word *dinnsheanchas* means ‘topography’), a collection of place-name lore, offers several possible origin stories for Knowth (or *Cnogba* in medieval Irish). In at least one, it is a grave (recall that *cnocc* means ‘hill’):

Bua, daughter of Ruadri Ruad,  
wife of Lug mac Cein of the red spears,  
it is there her body was hidden;  
over her was a great *cnocc* built up.

*The Metrical Dindsenchas*, vol. 3, transl. Gwynn, p. 41

Later burials and ritual practices occurred at all three passage tombs in the millennia after their initial construction. Knowth was even used as a hillfort in the early Middle Ages! In the eighth through twelfth centuries, this fortification expanded into a village, and the area eventually became part of a Cistercian monastery.

### ▪ **Roman Coins and Later Use**

Roman coins and jewellery have been found deposited near Newgrange. There are multiple theories as to why and how they got there. The Romans never conquered Ireland, so perhaps the items travelled to Ireland as trade goods or were brought by merchants from neighbouring Britain, or even by Romans on holiday! Their placement as well as other Iron Age archaeological finds seems to indicate the Brug’s on-going significance, long after the Neolithic period.

Later inhabitants of the region and even visitors from farther away clearly responded to the impressive structures in the Boyne valley. Medieval texts about these structures show that people continued to try to explain their local megaliths and make up stories about their geography.

## Activities

1. Can you describe or define the following?

*Óengus*

*corbelling*

*Boand*

*Knowth*

*The Dagda*

*síd*

*Boyne*

*passage tomb*

2. Another medieval saga, *The Wooing of Étain*, gives a longer and slightly different version of how Óengus obtained the Brug. Read it at <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T300012/index.html> (the entire text is fairly long, so you only need to read to ¶15, p. 153), and comment on how it diverges from *The Taking of the Síd* above. Which characters do not appear in *The Taking of the Síd*? How are the roles of specific characters different? What else do we learn about the Brug?
3. Go to the *Brú na Bóinne* website: <http://www.worldheritageireland.ie/bru-na-boinne/>. What else can you learn about Newgrange and its surrounding archaeological sites? Who excavated Newgrange and when? How was the stone art made and what theories do people have as to why?
4. People have reused the entire Brú na Bóinne complex in multiple ways over time. List a few of them and theorise as why mounds might be reused in those ways.

## Bibliography

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E. Gwynn, transl., *The Metrical Dindsenchas* (Dublin, 1903–5) – available online at <https://celt.ucc.ie/publishd.html>

Website: *Brú na Bóinne*, developed by World Heritage Ireland  
(<http://www.worldheritageireland.ie/bru-na-boinne/>)

Image credit: 'Newgrange passage tomb', Public Domain Images  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Newgrange\\_-\\_media/File:New\\_grange\\_passage\\_tomb.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Newgrange_-_media/File:New_grange_passage_tomb.jpg))

## Answer Sheet

1. Can you describe or define the following?

*Óengus*: The ‘young son’, son of the Dagda and Boand. Resident of the Brug.

*corbelling*: A building technique used at Newgrange and Skellig Michael involving overlapping rows of solid building material with increasingly smaller diameters that are stacked atop one another to form a vault.

*Boand*: ‘White cow’, the personification of the River Boyne; in medieval Irish literature she is often described as Óengus’s mother.

*Knowth*: A Neolithic passage tomb near Newgrange. Some medieval texts describe it as a grave.

*The Dagda*: The ‘good god’; Óengus’s father and in some texts, the individual from whom he obtains the Brug.

*síd*: An Otherworldly habitation inside of a mound.

*Boyne*: A river in Leinster, part of which flows past the Brú na Bóinne complex of prehistoric sites.

*passage tomb*: A megalithic burial containing one or more chambers, joined to the outside by a central passage, such as Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth.

2. Answers may vary. Some possible answers could include, Midir receives a more prominent role; Boand/Eithne and Elcmar are not present in *The Taking of the Síd*; Óengus tricks the Dagda out of the Brug in *The Taking of the Síd* but Midir and the Dagda help him get it from Elcmar in *The Wooing of Étain*; we learn more about Óengus’s conception and the political and social relationships between the Túatha Dé Danann in *The Wooing of Étain*. The Brug is clearly an important and contested structure in both tales.
3. Answers may vary. Newgrange was excavated by M.J. O’Kelly in the 1960s and 1970s (Knowth was excavated by G. Eogan at about the same time); both mounds have also been the objects of subsequent study and archaeology. The stone art was carved by incision and by ‘picking or poking’. Scholars generally believe it has some sort of cosmological or ritual significance, perhaps depicting natural processes or paths to the Otherworld, or had a meditative purpose. Any theory must be speculative.
4. Answers may vary. As discussed in the first ‘Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld’ worksheet, people generally try to respond to earlier features of their landscape, or link their identity to pre-existing topography. Impressive structures in the landscape like Newgrange may have drawn ritual activities or been recognized as burial sites and thus likely places for future burials. Pragmatically, a site like Knowth is large enough and high enough above ground level that it makes a good defensive location for a fort or village.

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