

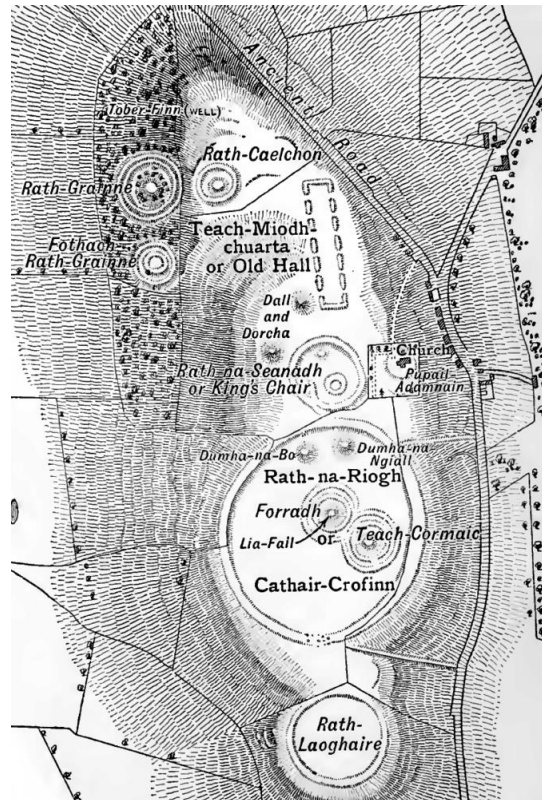
Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld

2. The Hill of Tara



The **Hill of Tara** (medieval Irish *Temair*) is one of the most important sites in Ireland, for modern archaeologists, historians, and literary scholars, as well as for medieval writers and audiences. The remains of at least twenty structures and mounds ranging from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages are visible at the site, and many more remain underground, waiting to be excavated. Tara is linked with kingship and legitimate rule in early Irish literature, and remains a symbol of identity for many people today.

One of the oldest and most impressive structures on the Hill of Tara is the **Mound of the Hostages** (medieval Irish **Duma na nGiall**), a Neolithic passage tomb, dating from roughly the same period as Newgrange. While you may recall that Newgrange was aligned with the rising sun on the Winter Solstice, the Mound of the Hostages is aligned with movements of the sun in spring and autumn. Somewhere between 250 and 500 people were buried in the mound during the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. The Mound of the Hostages is inside a later Iron Age enclosure or ring-fort known as **Ráth na Ríogh** (medieval Irish **Ráth na Ríg**), or ‘The Fort of the Kings’. Also within Ráth na Ríg is a structure known as **Teach Chormaic** (medieval Irish **Tech Cormaic**), or ‘Cormac’s House’.



Several other notable monuments at Tara include the **Lia Fáil**, or ‘Stone of Destiny’ atop the hill, which is associated with the high-kingship of Ireland, and the **Ráth of the Synods**, an Iron Age structure where some Roman artefacts have been found, and which is now part of a churchyard. **Ráth Laoghaire** (medieval Irish **Ráth Láegaire**) ‘Láegaire’s Fort’, and the **Teach Míodhchuarta** (medieval Irish **Tech Midchuarta**), sometimes understood as a hall for banquets, also occupy the Hill.

What role does Tara play in medieval literature?

▪ Tara and Conversion

You will recall the seventh-century Bishop Tírechán's *Collectanea* from the first 'Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld' worksheet. Tírechán informs us that Tara was a royal burial site for the pre-Christian Irish. King Láegaire tells St Patrick that he cannot convert to Christianity:

My father Níall did not allow me to accept the faith, but bade me to be buried on the ridges of Tara ... in the manner of men at war (for the pagans, armed in their tombs, have their weapons ready) until the day of *erdathe* (as the druids call it, that is, the day of the Lord's judgment) ...

Collectanea, transl. Bieler, §12

In Muirchú's *Life of St Patrick*, the saint eventually converts Láegaire at Tara, after winning a series of contests with Láegaire's druids.

▪ Tara and Kingship: *The Phantom's Frenzy*

In a medieval Irish text called *The Phantom's Frenzy* (*Baile in Scáil*), we learn more about the Lia Fáil and how Tara is connected to kingship when the main character, the legendary high-king of Ireland Conn of the Hundred Battles, goes for his morning walk:

One day Conn was in Tara, after overthrowing the kings. Early in the morning he went up onto the royal rampart of Tara, before sunrise, together with his three druids ... and his three *filid* [poets]. ... For that company used to arise every day to keep watch, lest the men of the *síde* capture Ireland without his noticing. It is onto the rampart that he used always to go; and he chanced upon a stone beneath his feet and trod upon it. The stone cried out beneath his feet, so that it was heard throughout all Tara, and throughout Brega.

The Phantom's Frenzy, transl. Dillon

Conn's druids tell him that the stone, or Lia Fáil, cries out when a king walks over it; the number of its cries represent the number of kings that will come from that individual's family. Conn then encounters the *scál* (or 'phantom', of the tale's title) in an Otherworldly dwelling, together with a woman that the tale tells us is the Sovereignty of Ireland. She lists the names of the rulers that will succeed Conn, gives him a drink, and sends him home.

In this tale, the physical landscape of Tara is integrally related to kingship. Tara is also a location in which to encounter the Otherworld, either in the form of the 'men of the *síde*', who now appear as a threat to be countered, or as a beautiful Otherworldly source from whence legitimate kingship stems. A very real site with many prehistoric structures is transformed by medieval writers into an Otherworldly foundation for political power.

▪ Landscape and Identity

The Latin Christian texts and the vernacular secular tale discussed above illustrate different ways in which medieval identity was tightly linked to prominent features and prehistoric structures in the landscape, such as the Hill of Tara.

In Tírechán's and Muirchú's works, Tara is a place for Patrick's Christian faith to triumph over Láegaire's pagan practices. Prehistoric burials are reimagined as the graves of the high kings of Ireland. In *The Phantom's Frenzy*, Tara is a place from which to rule and encounter the Otherworld.

Religious, political, and cultural identity were associated with the landscape itself and prehistoric structures were reinterpreted through myths and stories. The fact that the real-world Hill of Tara contains structures from many eras, often reused as locations for burials, settlements, fortifications, and even churches is evidence for the on-going and developing relationship between landscape and identity in prehistoric and early medieval Ireland.

Activities

1. Can you match the word with its definition?

<i>baile</i>	Stone of Destiny
<i>Láegaire</i>	house
<i>tech</i>	phantom
<i>ráth</i>	Hill of Tara
<i>Lia Fáil</i>	frenzy, madness
<i>Temair</i>	a (possibly legendary) pre-Christian king of Ireland
<i>scál</i>	fort

2. Compare and contrast the portrayal of Tara in medieval texts with that of Newgrange/the Brug. How does the portrayal of the ‘men of the *síde*’ in the excerpt from *The Phantom’s Frenzy* differ from the *síde* or Túatha Dé Danann you encountered in other worksheets? (You may wish to read the rest of the text here: <https://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/phantom.html>, or in one of the editions recommended below.)
3. Why do you think people build churches on or near older pre-historic sites? Why might medieval authors have included pre-historic sites in their stories?

Bibliography

- L. Bieler, transl., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979) – available online at <https://www.confessio.ie/> (under ‘Special Features’)
- E. Bhreathnach, ed., *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005)
- M. Dillon, transl., *The Phantom’s Frenzy in The Cycle of the Kings* (Oxford, 1946) – available online at <https://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/phantom.html>
- ***Note: for a more up-to-date edition and translation, see K. Murray, transl., *Baile in Scáil: The Phantom’s Frenzy* (London, 2004)

Image credit: W.F. Wakeman, *Wakeman's Handbook of Irish Antiquities* (Dublin, 1903), p. 166

Answer Sheet

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>baile</i> | frenzy, madness |
| <i>Láegaire</i> | a (possibly legendary) pre-Christian king of Ireland |
| <i>tech</i> | house |
| <i>ráth</i> | fort |
| <i>Lia Fáil</i> | Stone of Destiny |
| <i>Temair</i> | Hill of Tara |
| <i>scál</i> | phantom |
2. Answers may vary. Newgrange/the Brug is not associated with (human) kingship in the same way that Tara is and does not feature as heavily in conversion stories. However, both locations are mythologized by medieval authors, with stories provided to explain their creation and history. The Túatha Dé Danann/people of the *síde* are often beautiful, god-like characters, although they can also be portrayed in more negative lights, as in the opening of *The Phantom's Frenzy*, where Conn must guard against them, even as he travels to an Otherworldly location reminiscent of other descriptions of the *síde* (like those from *The Wooing of Étaín* and *The Taking of the Síde* in earlier worksheets).
3. Answers may vary, but ideally should resemble the answers to similar questions about memory, identity, and reuse from 'Mounds, Graves, & the Otherworld' and 'Newgrange' worksheets. People often respond to their landscape by trying to explain it and link their own identity or right to inhabit or rule a certain area to pre-existing local monuments. Medieval authors, like people before and after them, might have told stories with the intent of explaining the existence of certain landscape features, or to link their topography to historical events, rulers, saints, and churches. For example, if a place like Tara was associated with kingship already, it becomes a natural setting for St Patrick to triumph over a king and demonstrate the higher power of his religion.

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