Gaelic Place Names: ‘Sìth’ and ‘Sìthean’

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word *sìth* or *sìdh* (pronounced *shee*) can mean ‘fairy’ and ‘hill’ and in Scottish place-names is usually considered to denote a ‘fairy hill’. It probably derives from the ellipsis of the Irish phrase *aos sídhe* ‘people of peace’. According to medieval Irish sources such as the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*, the *aos sídhe* were an ancient supernatural race who dwelt beneath the surface of the earth, a belief which is reflected in the fact that in Ireland a number of *sídhe* sites are pre-Celtic burial mounds.

In Scotland, *sìth* is found in place-names including Glenshee ‘fairy glen’ or ‘glen of the fairy hills’, *Sìdh Beg* and *Sìdh Mòr* ‘small fairy hill’ and ‘big fairy hill’ respectively, *Schiehallion* ‘fairy hill of the Caledonians, *Ben Hee* from *Beinn Shìth* ‘fairy mountain’ and similarly *Ben Tee* above Loch Lochy is *Beinn an t-Sìth* ‘mountain of the fairies’. The same element is found in the word *banshee* (Gaelic *bean* ‘woman, female’ and *sìdh* ‘fairy’, ultimately from Old Irish *ben síde*). In Celtic folk-tales, the banshee were reputed to be the spirits of dead ancestors, whose wailing outside the home portended a death in the family.

Related to *sìth* is the term *sìthean* or *sìdhean* (pronounced ***shee****-an*) which also refers to a fairy hill. The *sìthein* are often small conical hills, and in Celtic mythology they were reputed to have hollow interiors, with the fairies dwelling inside. Belief in the ‘wee folk’ continued into relatively modern times, with respectable gentlemen such as the Reverend Robert Kirk, a minister and Gaelic scholar from Aberfoyle writing in 1691 a book entitled *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* in which he described these creatures and their subterranean habitat in a remarkably candid manner. In rural areas, stories persisted into the early twentieth century of unwary humans being lured inside the *sìthein* at night, only to emerge the following morning and discover that decades had passed in the outside world. Other tales detailed the abduction of unbaptised babies, or doomed romances with the fairy folk, and the various ills which befell those who dared to refuse them hospitality.

It is therefore no surprise that the Scottish countryside is punctuated with hills named simply *Sìthean* 'fairy hill' or *An Sìdhean* 'the fairy hill'. There also many names containing *sìthean* as their generic or defining element, including *Sìthean Mòr* 'big fairy hill' on the island of Handa, *Sìdhean Dubh* 'black fairy hill' on the isle of Skye, *Sìdhean Sluaigh* 'fairy hill of the host' in Argyll, *Sìdhean an Airgid* 'fairy hill of the silver' on Lewis, *Sìthean a' Chata* 'fairy hill of the battle' in Balquidder, and *Sìthean a' choin bhain* 'fairy hill of the white dog' in Easter Ross. *Sìthean* is also found as a qualifying element in hill names including *Beinn an t-Sìthean* (Ben Shian) in Strathyre in Perthshire, *Dun an t-Sìthean*on Tiree, *Meall nan Sìthean* on Lewis, and *Cnoc nan Sìthean* in Caithness. *Sìthean* is harder to spot in names like *Strontian* in Argyll, which is *Sròn an t-Sìthein* 'the point of the fairy hill', and in Scotticised forms such as *Sheeans* on the island of Arran, and *North Shian* and *South Shian* in Argyll.

In modern times, the terms *sìth* and *sìthean* in place-names are perhaps taken less literally, with the latter sometimes glossed simply as 'hillock'. Yet these hills remain popular with walkers and tourists alike, regardless of whether they are aware of their supernatural historical context.The Gaelic word *sìth* or *sìdh* (pronounced *shee*) can mean 'fairy' and 'hill' and in Scottish place-names is usually considered to denote a 'fairy hill'. It probably derives from the ellipsis of the Irish phrase *aos sídhe* 'people of peace'. According to medieval Irish sources such as the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*, the *aos sídhe* were an ancient supernatural race who dwelt beneath the surface of the earth, a belief which is reflected in the fact that in Ireland a number of *sídhe* sites are pre-Celtic burial mounds.

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