

The Cat Sith

Folklore feline

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The Cat Sith, or Cat Sidhe, is a fairy creature from Celtic mythology, said to resemble a large black cat with a white spot on its chest. Legend has it that the spectral cat haunts the Scottish Highlands; the legends about the creature are more common in Scots folklore, but a few occur in Irish lore too. The cat is said to be as large as a dog, and usually chooses to display itself with back arched and fur bristling.



The people of the Highlands didn't trust Sith. They believed it could steal a person's soul before it was claimed by the gods, by passing over a corpse before burial; therefore watches, known as the *Feill Fadalach* (Late Wake), were kept night and day before burial to keep Sith away from the corpse. 'Methods of distraction' such as games of leaping and wrestling, together with riddles, catnip and music, were all used to help keep the cat away from the room where the corpse lay. In addition, fires were lit in all the rooms except where the body was, as the cat would be attracted to the warmth.

At Samhain – a Gaelic festival marking the end of harvest season and the beginning of winter, or the 'dark half' of the year – it was believed that Sith would bless or bring good luck to any house that left a saucer of milk out for it to drink, while those houses that didn't leave out the milk would be cursed by having their cows' milk run dry. Samhain is held on 1 November, but with celebrations starting on the evening of 31 October, as the Celtic day runs from sunrise to sunset.

There was also a cruel practice called Taghaim, whereby it was believed that a demonic cat called Big Ears would appear and grant any wish to those who took part in the ceremony. The gruesome ritual required practitioners to burn live cats over the course of four days and nights.

Some people believed that the Cat Sith was a witch who could transform voluntarily into her cat form and back eight times, but if one of the witches chose to go back to her cat form a ninth time, she would remain a cat for the rest of her life. One school of thought thinks that is how the idea of a cat having nine lives originated. It's been suggested that the Sith legend could have been inspired by the Scottish wildcat, or perhaps by Kellas cats – large black cats that are a hybrid between the wildcats and domestic cats – as Sith legends are more prevalent in areas frequented by Scottish wildcats. The legends may also link to older folklore concerning cats in general and black cats in particular.



Sith may also be linked to a British folk tale called 'The King of the Cats', first recorded in 1553 but there are many variations. A farmer returns from his fields one evening and tells his wife that on the way he saw nine black cats, each with a white spot on its chest, carrying a coffin with a crown on it, followed by a procession of cats chanting that the King of the Cats was dead. One of the cats spots the farmer and, although what was said varies from one account to another, it's along the lines of 'Tell the farmer's cat that the King of Cats is dead.'

Upon hearing the tale, the farmer's cat leaps up and exclaims that he is now the King of the Cats! He rushes away, up the chimney in many accounts, and is never seen again.



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