



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1992**

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ISSN 0791-0655

Five undocumented stone figures

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Sheela na gigs, medieval stone carvings of uncertain significance depicting naked women, often bald and usually squatting, are found mostly at ecclesiastical sites and on tower houses. Several such figures seem to have been buried; some, as at Holy Cross Abbey, were apparently deliberately defaced.

Theories as to their meaning vary greatly, from repulsive hags capable of scaring off entire armies through their sheer ugliness to depictions of lust. Other believe them to represent a goddess. Most of the important questions about sheelas (how old are they; what does the name mean; how important are they?) have not been satisfactorily answered.

Tipperary has the highest known concentration of sheela na gigs — 21 out of roughly 90 figures in this country. The total varies depending on what one counts; not every exhibitionist figure is a sheela. New finds continue to occur. Last April the Tullaroan sheela (see below) was identified, and last May the writer and her husband confirmed the Rosenallis figure as a genuine sheela.

Cashel (the Rock)

There is an easily accessible sheela-na-gig on the 15th century Vicar's Choral of the Rock of Cashel which has long been known but heretofore undocumented. On a quoin, approximately 16 feet up from the base from the East end of the building, it is a clear, though weathered, figure which can be seen as one walks up towards the entrance of the Rock.

Although breasts are not visible, the slit of a vulva is, with hands gesturing towards this. Also, the figure is squatting in the "classic" sheela position. Eyes and nose are apparent, any further detail being evenly worn.

Cashel (Palace Hotel)

To the left of the Vicar's Choral building is a path locally known as the Bishop's Walk leading to the Cashel Palace Hotel. This building was originally built by Archbishop Bolton in the 18th century and served as his palace. At the back of the building on the boiler-house of brick and stone and near the oil-tanks, is a limestone quoin stone, about five feet up from the rock foundation, on which there is an evenly worn sheela-na-gig, measuring 56 x 30 cm., flatly carved and difficult to see.

Stylistically, this sheela is quite different from her near-neighbour. She has very large ears, is apparently bald, with open mouth, pendular breasts, arms over thighs and detailed vulva. She appears to have been cut down from a larger stone; the top of her head is just cut off. So are her left leg above the knee and her right foot.

Tullaroan, co. Kilkenny

A sheela-na-gig came to light two years ago when an 1842 wall of a national school was knocked. The figure was only recently noticed by the owner, Noel Coogan, who cleaned the stone because he thought that there was a fossil in it. He believes the stone may have originally come from Grace's church or castle. The latter is a Shortall castle; so is Clomantagh castle, which also has a sheela. It may be thought these two sheelas would further support John Feehan's theory (Journal of the Royal



Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, Vol. 108, 1987) of tower house sheelas having a territorial apotropaic function.

The Tullaroan sheela is bald, large-eared, with strong square shoulders, small breasts, a deeply-incised set of diagonal lines down her chest, apparently a rib-cage, hands reaching under the thighs holding a hanging vulva and large right foot showing toes. The left foot is broken off.

The figure has five small holes, three across the mouth, one in the left eye and one under the left shoulder. This stone is in excellent condition, probably because of having been “face-in” towards the school wall. The carving sits out slightly from the background, which is textured, so as to make the figure more visible.

Rosenallis, co. Laois

Mechanical equipment unearthed this sheela-na-gig during a graveyard clean-up in St. Brigid’s Church of Ireland last September. The figure lay unrecognised for six months until Mary McGrath of Dublin, an art restorer, reported the stone, hoping it would be taken inside for safe keeping. It is now in the National Museum for safekeeping and documentation.

This is the only known sheela in co. Laois with an ecclesiastical connection. The area has strong connections with St. Brigid. The stone is deeply carved; no detail can be seen on the face, but the powerful neck striations (as if strained), shoulders, large breasts, swollen abdomen, squatting position with hands over thighs towards prominent vulva are all apparent.

Killascully, co. Tipperary

In the churchyard at Killascully — the church is marked 1874 — is a sandstone which appears to have been cut to serve some architectural function from a former structure. The stones are about 50 feet apart on the North side of the church. That nearest the church stands upright, with a curious figure on it, 82 cm. x 35 cm. This figure shows no detail of clothing, nor any sexual characteristics. It is apparently bald, with a very round head.

The arms are turned in towards the body, with elbows out and seem to be holding a large disc, the size of the head, which covers its abdomen and hips. The legs are straight, held together with detail depicting knees. The feet seem to hang as if suspended in air; toes are visible.

Although the National Museum’s Lavey sheela carries a disc, and many sheelas are bald, the Killascully figure lacks the essential sheela characteristics of drawing the viewer’s attention to the vulva.

(The author hopes to have a longer contribution in the 1993 *Tipperary Historical Journal* on sheela-na-gigs in co. Tipperary. — Editor, *THJ*.)



The Tullaroan Sheela-na-Gig.