

A second "Sheela" at Shanrahan

By Edmund O'Riordan

It is not the intention of this article to enter the debate regarding the interpretation of Sheela Na Gigs or the derivation of the name. Neither does it intend to offer the definitive spelling of the name. It is intended rather that this article should record the finding of, and offer a description of, Tipperary's latest Sheela.

There is ample reference to the Sheela na Gig (S.M.R. number Ti 087-02203) which is set into the tower on the west side of the ruined church in Shanrahan cemetery, in Shanrahan townland near Clogheen. It is recorded rather cautiously in the Sites and Monuments Records manual as a "possible Sheela na Gig".

Jack Roberts makes particular reference to it. This Sheela, he says, ". . . strikes a very distinctive pose; she is carved in high relief and is carved out of red sandstone which makes her particularly stand out in high relief against the lighter pebbled wall". He goes on to describe this as the second sandstone Sheela within a small area, as another was found at Glanworth in County Cork. Roberts had no way of knowing that a second Sheela, also carved from old red sandstone, lay hidden beneath the lime-mortar rendering at the opposite (east) end of the Shanrahan ruin.

The medieval parish church of Shanrahan shows evidence of having been reconstructed on at least two different occasions, the last reconstruction possibly in the mid-1700s. By 1812 a new church had been built, less than a half-mile to the north. The sparse remains of a 15th century castle, which the historian Fr. Everard asserted was built by the Earl of Desmond in 1453, stand nearby in the cemetery. This was already a ruin by the time the Civil Survey was taken in 1666. ". . . All the said lands are out of lyne whereon stands a wast house . . . and the walls of a ruinous old castle".

A sandstone voussoir (an arch stone), and a finely cut and chamfered block of limestone, which appears to have once been a door jamb, are here used as quoins (corner-stones) at the south-west corner of the ruined church. They are obviously stones that have been re-used and may have been salvaged from the ruined castle and incorporated in the church during



The newly discovered Sheela na Gig on Shanrahan church, with outline of figure marked by author. – Photo copyright author.

one of the phases of reconstruction. Of course this is mere conjecture, and the possibility that the stones were salvaged from the original church cannot be discounted.

The foregoing evidence is offered to support the theory that the second Sheela Na Gig on Shanrahan church may well have been from another building and was incorporated into the east gable of the reconstructed church as a convenient building stone. It is also possible that it was wittingly placed there as a Sheela but covered up so as not to cause offence in the 18th century. The Sheela on the tower is remarkably modest and would have been quite acceptable; this may account for the cautious entry in the SMR manual. Certainly, two Sheelas on one church is most unusual in the Irish context.

The triangular stone on which the second Sheela is carved had been observed on a number of previous visits as it is quite conspicuous by its shape in the rubble built wall. However, the figure is badly worn and could easily be passed off as a roughness in the texture of the sandstone. However, a rare ray of setting sun on a Sunday afternoon in January brought the Sheela to life. The light and shadow combined to sharpen and accentuate the relief of the figure; once discerned, it becomes thrillingly obvious. Unfortunately the worn state of the figure and the covering of lichen on the stone resulted in poor photographic results.

The stone presents itself almost as an equilateral triangle, set in the wall so that the figure stands upright. The lower portion of the stone is still covered in the dashed rendering but it appears to extend lower than the base of the triangle. It measures 56 cms. from apex to baseline and is less than a metre above the level of the ground, as measured at the east doorway. It is 60 cms. in from the south-east corner. The badly worn state of the figure may attest to the age of the Sheela before it was built into the wall and plastered over.

The head, with its two prominent ears, is inclined slightly to the viewer's right, taking the figure out of the realm of mere statutory. It invites inspection but appears to gaze back at the viewer. The arms are disposed in the usual way of Sheelas, boldly presenting the genitals of the figure. A hole has been drilled at this point, as is common with other Sheelas. The legs are less obvious than the arms and can only be identified after careful scrutiny. The body itself appears emaciated and one would suspect that even before the ravages of time had taken a toll on the Sheela the wasted emaciated trunk was a feature of the sculpture.

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References

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