

Sheela-na-gigs

Unravelling an enigma

Barbara Freitag



SHEELA-NA-GIGS

An air of mystery has surrounded the crude carvings of naked females, called Sheela-na-gigs, since their scholarly discovery some one hundred and sixty years ago. Especially puzzling is the fact that they occur predominantly in medieval religious buildings. High-minded clergymen have since defaced or destroyed many of these carvings, and for a long time archaeologists dismissed them as rude and repulsive.

Only in the less puritanical atmosphere of the past few decades have academics and artists turned their interest to Sheela-na-gigs. Divergent views emerged: some see them as ancient goddesses, some as vestiges of a pagan cult, others as protective talismans or Christian warnings against lust. Here **Barbara Freitag** examines all the literature on the subject, highlighting the inconsistencies of the various interpretations with regard to origin, function and name. By considering the Sheela-na-gigs in their medieval social context, she suggests that they were folk deities with particular responsibility for assistance in childbirth.

This fascinating survey sheds new light on this controversial phenomenon, and also contains a complete catalogue of all known carvings, including hitherto unrecorded or unpublished figures. It is the most comprehensive study of Sheela-na-gigs yet published.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>JCHAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i>
<i>JKAS</i>	<i>Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society</i>
<i>JRSAI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
<i>NMAJ</i>	<i>North Munster Antiquarian Journal (Limerick)</i>
<i>PRIA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
<i>RIA</i>	Royal Irish Academy

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Sheela-na-gigs led a quiet existence on churches all over the British Isles. When they were brought to scientific attention in Ireland, some 160 years ago, their discovery, understandably, was not greeted with an unqualified welcome. After all, what were these carvings of naked females doing on medieval churches? And not only naked, but openly displaying their genitalia. Embarrassed clergymen and high-minded churchgoers physically removed and hid or destroyed the offensive figures. Archaeologists tended either to ignore them altogether or to label them as lewd, barbarous or repulsive. Museums kept them locked away safely from public scrutiny. Only in the less puritanical atmosphere of the past few decades did academics as well as artists turn their interest to these carvings. Divergent views emerged as regards the origin and function of the Sheela-na-gigs. Some see them as ancient goddesses, some as vestiges of a pagan cult, others as protective talismans or good luck charms, to name but a few interpretations.

The most favoured critical opinion, however, claims that they are copies of French sculptures put on Romanesque churches as warnings against lust, portraying evil in the battle against moral corruption. Although the reasons advanced for this view are rather unconvincing and, what is more, even contradicted by folk tradition, it has been widely accepted and found its way into dictionaries of art, museum guides and generally into all academic literature on the subject. The definition of the name, Sheela-na-gig, took an equally surprising course. None of the constituents of the name is an unambiguously identifiable word. Yet a Gaelic pedigree was fabricated which, ironically, strangely contradicts the characteristic features of the sculpture. The problem with both interpretations is twofold. First, their justification is primarily based on a fortuitous resemblance: of form, in the case of the carving, of sound, in the case of the name. Second, they are assumptions imposed from the present on to the past, and from a biased academic on to a rural peasant background.

Sheela-na-gigs are not an urban phenomenon. The vast majority of the figures are found in simple country churches, predominantly in remote agricultural areas where, apart from obvious Christian iconography, they often represent the only form of artistic imagery. Judging by their crude realism and poor workmanship they appear to be produced by local amateur carvers rather than by skilled stonemasons. This suggests that the sculptures belong to folk art and a tradition, too important and too intimately bound up with the welfare of the common people to be disregarded by the Christian Church. Incorporated in a Christian context, but divorced from her roots in pre-Christian tradition, the Sheela-na-gig needs to be seen as some powerful manifestation of continuity with the past. The key to an understanding of her real meaning can thus only be found in a sympathetic appreciation of her medieval social context.

More specifically, in the following chapters I shall argue that the Sheela-na-gig belongs to the realm of folk deities and as such is associated with life-giving powers, birth and death and the renewal of life. Folk deities are found in peasant societies where they preside over certain 'departments' of life. Knowledge of the special power they exercise is transmitted orally and forms

part of the folk tradition. Central to the survival of any rural society is the biological reproduction of its members, a close relationship with nature and a reverence for traditional custom. Placed in a cyclical agricultural pattern, the Sheela generally, it seems, was regarded as the guarantor of crops, animals and humans. But in particular, she was the divine assistant at childbirth who, at the same time, formed a link with the realm of the dead.

It will emerge from my investigation that the Sheela-na-gig was in great demand in medieval times, and that she had many sisters in other countries, who, while operating under different names and manifesting themselves in numerous other ways, fulfilled the very same role.

THE SHEELA-NA-GIG PHENOMENON

Sheela-na-gigs are stone carvings of naked women exposing their genitals. Although basically representational in character, these carvings have at the same time otherworldly overtones suggestive of a hidden symbolical meaning. This is partly conveyed through the disproportionate portrayal of the body and body postures which are impossible in naturalistic terms, and partly also through certain prevailing gestures and features whose significance to a large extent eludes us today.

Sheelas come in different shapes and sizes, with heights ranging from approximately 9 to 90 cm. The majority of the figures are quite clumsily made, suggesting the efforts of amateur carvers, but there are also some well executed examples whose assured mastery points to the hands of skilled craftsmen. Sheelas may be sculpted in the round or they may be modelled on blocks, slabs, pillars or other artefacts, cut in high, low or false relief. The most basic examples are those carved from natural rounded stones or boulders, and in these cases usually only one side is dressed, leaving the remainder of the stone untouched. What makes these sculptures so puzzling is the fact that they occur predominantly in medieval religious buildings—mainly on parish churches, but also on monastic sites. Furthermore, a sizeable number have been found on castles, and to a lesser extent were discovered overlooking holy wells, inset on bridges or built into town walls, gate pillars or the walls of dwelling places. The provenance of numerous other Sheelas, unattached and absolutely freed from any background, most of which accidentally came to light during grave-digging or clear-up operations, will presumably remain a secret forever.

When placed inside the church, the Sheela is generally set in isolation. However, several of these carvings also form part of a decorative scheme, on arches, capitals etc. In three English churches Sheelas appear among the roof bosses, and what makes one of these specimens, the South Tawton Sheela (146), even more special is the fact that it is made of wood.¹ When placed into the outer walls, irrespective of whether the surrounding is ecclesiastical or secular, Sheelas are usually located in liminal or borderline positions, above doorways, by windows, at the springing of the gables, on corbels or quoins. According to some curious convention, several carvings are employed horizontally, so that the figure despite having been carved as standing is inserted sideways, with the effect that it appears to be lying on its side. Six of these reclining Sheelas are on church buildings—Cashel (22), Kiltinane Church (59), Liathmore (62), Abson (111), Buncton (122) and Etton (131)—and a further four are on the castles of Cloghan (29), Clomantagh (30), Doon (39) and Tullavin (90). And there is one case, in Merlin Park (66), where the Sheela is inserted upside down.

Although existing elsewhere, the majority of Sheelas have been found in the British Isles, with Ireland, where at least 110 figures were found scattered all over the country, boasting the largest concentration. Sixty of these Irish examples are still *in situ*, but not necessarily in their primary settings. A further 25 are in museums, five are in private possession and of the remaining 20 only records (occasionally together with photographs or drawings) survive. A breakdown of their

location shows that out of the total number of known sculptures, 39 are associated with castles. Twenty-eight of these castle Sheelas have either survived in their recorded place or are kept safe in museums, while the remaining 11 appear to have been removed and hidden or destroyed. Castle Sheelas seem to be a peculiarly Irish phenomenon because to date only one Sheela has been found in a castle outside Ireland, and this is the Welsh figure from Raglan Castle. If confirmed, a recently discovered specimen will add one English example to the list.²

Most of the over 40 known English figures are located in ecclesiastical surroundings. Otherwise the distribution is similar to Ireland where, although there are areas of greater concentration than others, Sheelas are sited all over the country. Only a handful have been discovered in Scotland and Wales, and a similarly small number have been reported from Denmark, Germany and France. Because of evidence that Sheelas were hacked away from church buildings and destroyed, buried or thrown into rivers in post-medieval times, we know that many more once existed.

Special identifying features, distinctive gestures, objects and classification

The common denominator of the Sheela-na-gigs is the frontal representation of a standing, squatting or seated nude female displaying her pudenda. The greatest value was obviously attached to the head and the genital area because these two parts are strongly modelled and represented disproportionately large compared to the rest of the figure. But whereas the vulva looks big and plump, giving the impression of fertility, the head and chest look bony and emaciated, suggesting old age. Many of the figures are quite badly weathered or deliberately defaced to an extent that they can no longer be discerned easily. In other cases positive identification of certain features is onerous because the figures are placed beyond the normal range of vision from the ground or they are obscured by ivy. However, no two Sheelas are exactly alike and variations exist with regard to all the features.

From top to bottom, a Sheela typically consists of a combination of the following characteristics. The head is disproportionately large in relation to the torso. It is bald, triangular in shape, with prominent ears. The most compelling features of the face are the large eyes, a wedge nose—quite often with clearly marked nostrils—and a grimacing mouth. Overall the impression conveyed is that of a skull.

While this description fits many heads, there are variations. The head also comes in round or oblong shapes, sometimes without ears, and in two cases, i.e. Caherelly (20) and Killaloe (53), it was cut off and is missing altogether. And not all Sheelas are bald. Some have hair or a kind of headdress. This is represented as what looks like a tight-fitting cap in the case of five English Sheelas, namely Ampney St Peter (113), Darley Dale (127), Easthorpe (130) and the two Tugford figures (151 and 152), and there are also the two Irish examples from Cloghan (29) and Rahan (69). Short-cropped hair appears to be indicated in Cavan (26) and Rathcline (71). The few strands of hair clearly incised on the forehead of Llandrindod Wells (165) are an unusual example, and hair may possibly also be indicated in Clonbulloge (31). More distinct are the hairdos of Kildare (52), Tullavin (90), Diddlebury 1 (128) and figure 155, and in the case of Kilsarkan (56) a rope-like feature crowns the head of the figure.

Long hair appears to be depicted in Ballinderry (8), Emlaghmore (43) and Rahara (70). Of these, Ballinderry, however, is a little doubtful because the Sheela looks decidedly bald. A plait-like ornament protrudes from behind both sides of the head at a right angle, showing a different pattern on each side. While the one on the right resembles plaited hair, the one on the left forms a guilloche, imitating a looplike ribbon. In Rahara, on the other hand, the depiction is quite definite. Not only are the two plaits braided in the same three-strand interlaced pattern hanging down either side of

the head and reaching as far as the elbow, but the same pattern runs across the flat top of her head. Emlaghmore (43) also seems to have two exceedingly long tresses of hair hanging down both sides of the body. The figure is sitting on her rump with the feet folded back underneath, where they seem to be joined to the tresses of hair.

It has also been suggested that the Castle Widenham figure (25) is depicted with some kind of wild hairstyle. Not having seen it and limited to judging from photographs only, I think that both the rectangular shape and the huge size militate against such an interpretation. Further, as in Ballinderry, the head is egg-shaped giving it a bald appearance, and what some interpret as hair is clearly delineated behind the head.

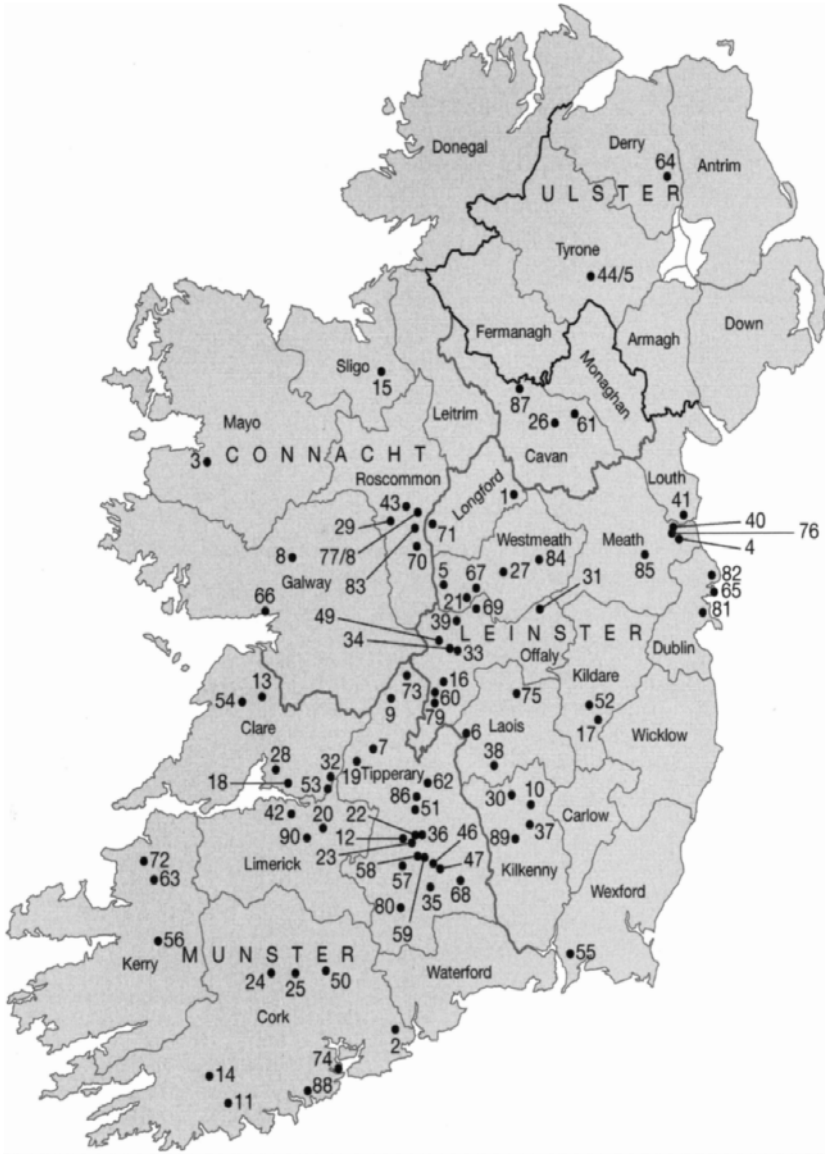
A small number of Sheelas have no ears at all, but generally the ears are conspicuously large and splayed. In Ballynacarriga (11) they are so big as to have tricked Andersen into thinking that they were plaits.³ Rarely do the two ears of the figure exactly correspond in shape, size and angle. In many cases the difference is so obvious that it looks like an intentional attempt at asymmetry, but sometimes one suspects that it might instead be due to the poor craftsmanship of the carver. Most Sheelas have jug ears. Exceptions to the rule are Kilsarkan (56) and the larger of the two Scregg figures (77), showing elongated, almost cow-like ears. Pennington (141) is also different in that the ears are triangular and pointy, but as the rest of the body is also quite angular the explanation again may very well be that the peculiar form is more attributable to the sculptor's inability to carve curvilinear shapes.

Quite a number of faces show deep, wavy lines—mostly two or three—running across the forehead. They are most pre-eminent in Ballinderry (8), Ballynahinch (12), Cavan (26), Clonbulloge (31), Fethard Abbey (46), Kiltinane Castle (58), Moate (67), Rahan (69), Fiddington (132), Romsey 1 (142) and Llandrindod Wells (165).

Eyebrows are delineated in Ballylarkin (10), Clonbulloge (31), Rosnaree (76), Easthorpe (130) and Kilpeck (136). The eyes are invariably large and clearly demarcated. Occasionally they simply consist of two cavities. In the majority of cases the upper and lower eyelids are joined to form an oval. Many eyes have an owl-like quality, seemingly glaring or staring, and thus creating a strong visual impact which is frequently further enhanced by asymmetry. The carver of Shanrahan (80) highlighted the eyes by giving them a greyish-white colour in contrast to the red sandstone out of which the rest of the figure is made. Two quite dissimilar eyes can be seen in Ballynacarriga (11), where the right eye is circular and much larger than the left, which is oval. The Tullaroan Sheela (89) also has a much larger right eye and the difference between the two eyes is further accentuated in that the left eye is surrounded by a circle of tiny incisions, almost looking like a monocle, and by the fact that it has a small punctured hole in the middle. In the case of Newtown Lennan (68) the only difference between the two eyes is size, the right one again being considerably bigger. In Moate (67) the right eye appears to have an eyeball, whereas the left one looks empty.

Mouths are predominantly depicted as grim or ghastly. Sometimes they are a mere slit without lips, sometimes they form round or oval holes, and there are also cases where thin, thick or exaggerated lips are indicated. Generally the mouth is shown as gaping with the two corners pointing downwards, but the two Sheelas from Clonmacnoise (33) and Kilpeck (136) wear a smirk. A tongue is seen to protrude between the lips of Cavan (26), Cloghan (29), Clonbulloge (31), Rahan (70), Scregg 1 (77), and Tugford 1 (151). Fourteen Sheelas bare their teeth and most of these are gritted. In some cases teeth are indicated as beading or as short vertical lines crossing the lips. The Sheelas with dental display are Ballyportry (13), Bunratty (18), Cavan (26), Chloran (27), Clonmel (35), Fethard Wall (47), Freshford (48), Glanworth (50), Lavey (61), Moate (67), Rahan (69), Taghmon (84), Pennington (141) and Tugford 1 (151).

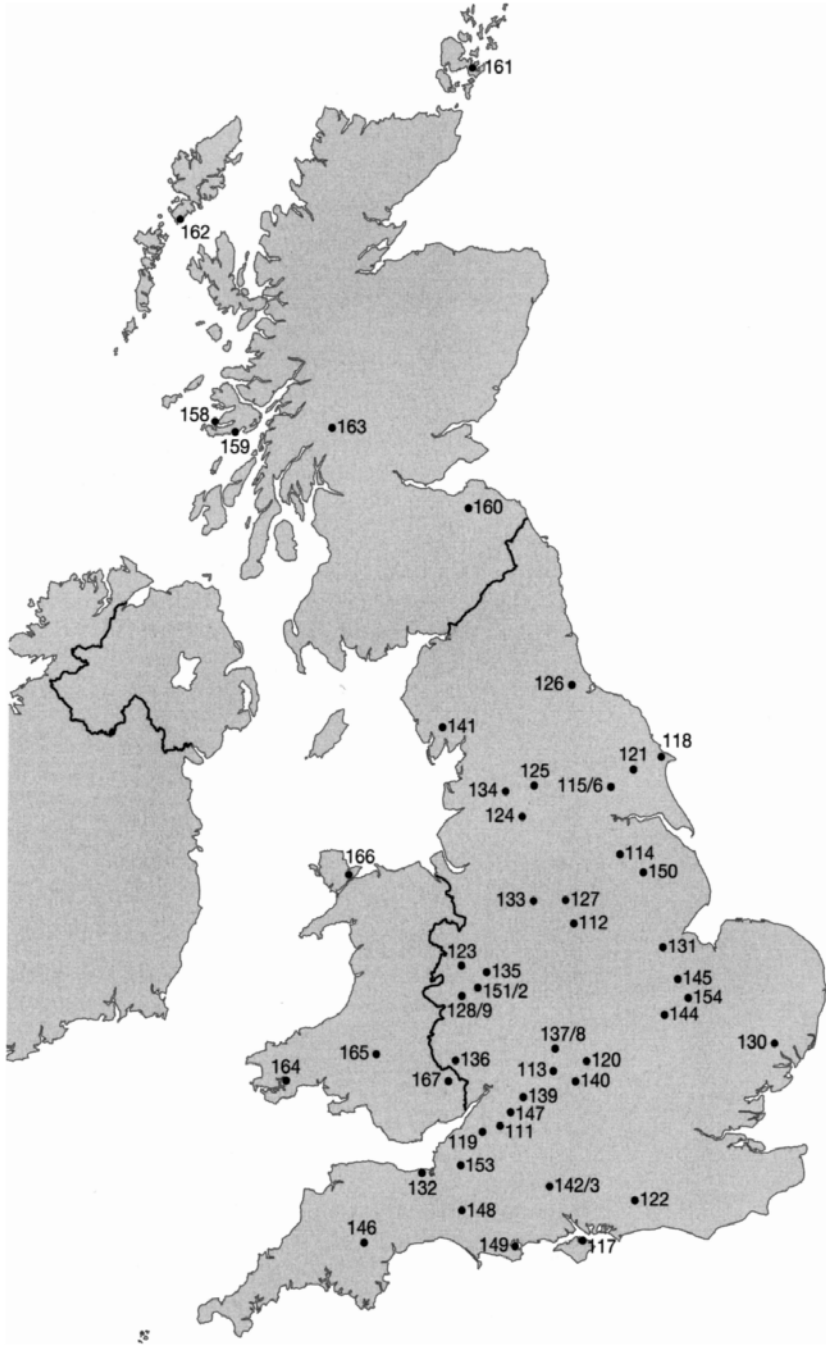
A very intriguing feature is the striations or tattoo marks found on the faces of several figures. Three, sometimes four or five streaks slanting downwards across both cheeks are marked on the



Map 1 Map of Ireland showing distribution of Sheela-na-gigs.

Sheelas in Fethard Abbey (46), Freshford (48), Redwood (73), Seir Kieran (79) and Romsey 1 (142). In Athlone (5) and Clonbulloge (31) they run down the left cheek only. Fethard Wall (47) has a whole pattern of striated triangles on the left cheek. In Rosnaree (76) the striations appear only on the right cheek, but they go beyond the head down the side of the slab.

The neck of the Sheela shows no particular or consistent features: it can be thick or thin, long or short or non-existent. A few necks do, however, show deeply incised vertical grooves looking like



Map 2 Map of England, Scotland and Wales showing location of Sheela-na-gigs.

folds of skin. Some scholars are inclined to interpret these, along with the wavy lines across the forehead, as striations. They stand out very clearly in Clonulty (36), Fethard Wall (47) and Killinaboy (54) where they further intensify the overall impression of old age and scrawniness. A big hole was cut into the throat of Kilmokea (55) and Seir Kieran (79).

Continuing with the torso, its most striking feature has already been alluded to, namely the curious contrast between barrenness and fertility. The upper part with its signs of emaciation and sterility seems to belong to an old woman, an impression that is further emphasized by the appearance of the head, while the lower part with its emphatic focus on the fertile pudenda seems to be that of a young woman.

The notion of barrenness is first of all suggested by the breasts. These may be disproportionately small, shrunken looking or missing altogether, but generally they are on the slighter, never on the exaggerated, side. In those cases where they are in due proportion their shape is flat and droopy, giving them a post-menopausal look, which in the case of Clonmel (35) and possibly also Glanworth (50) is further accentuated by striations. As with the eyes and ears, the two breasts tend to be unequal with regard to size and shape, and stressing their difference even further the carver of the Kiltinane Church Sheela (59) put two nipples at the end of her left and one on her right breast. Quite often the breasts are located in an unnatural position. They are protruding from under the armpits in Ballinderry (8), Birr (16), Rahara (70), Oaksey (139), Egremont (157) and Llandrindod Wells (165). Others start too high up at the base of the neck and are placed close together along the breastbone in, for instance, Aghadoe (2), Ballylarkin (10), Seir Kieran (79), Taghboy (83) and Tullaroan (89), while at Freshford (48) and Stanton St Quintin (147) they are indicated at shoulder level.

Another sign of sterility is the ribbing, a feature favoured it seems in particular by Irish carvers, because of the 31 figures clearly indicating ribs, only three belong to England, i.e. Ampney St Peter (113), Easthorpe (130) and Oaksey (139), and one to Wales, i.e. Llandrindod Wells (165), while the rest are located in Ireland.⁴ Here ribs not only occur far more frequently but are also carved with greater determination. The incisions are more resolute and regular, quite often forming patterns of straight but sloping lines across the whole upper part of the body. In Dunnaman (42), Kiltinane Castle (58) and Tullaroan (89) the ribcage even extends over the abdomen. On the other hand, English Sheelas, broadly speaking, tend to have a longer, slimmer, often rod-like torso contrasting with the squatter body of their Irish counterparts. The actual number of figures with ribbing may of course be higher, what with many Sheelas being weather-worn or not clearly discernible. And there may have been further examples among those figures now lost for which only a record remains with no detailed description.

A surprising detail found on numerous Sheelas is the belly button. Sometimes it is sitting in its proper position and looks about the right size, but there are also some Sheelas with a very pronounced, unusually deep or large navel, such as Ballinderry (8), Ballyportry (13), Caherelly (20), Freshford (48), Kildare (52), Rahara (70), Croft-on-Tees (126) and Fiddington (132).

The vulva is the most emphasized feature of the sculpture. In most cases it is highlighted in three ways, through its magnified size, through its anatomically incorrect location and by gestures of the hands and legs which draw attention to it. Its shape is predominantly oval, and in England where the largest genitals occur, some are so big as to actually touch the ground. A hugely exaggerated oval vulva hanging down between the two open legs can be seen in Bunton (122), Copgrove (125), Easthorpe (130), Kilpeck (136), Oaksey (139) and Studland (149). Similarly shaped, positioned and enlarged, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale, are the Irish specimens from Aghadoe (2), Ballyfinboy (9), Ballinacarriga (11), Blackhall (17), Cashel Palace Hotel (23), Cavan (26), Chloran (27), Clenagh (28), Liathmore (62) and Redwood (73). Tullaroan (89) also belongs in this group, but instead of the oval shape the vulva is depicted as a long straight narrow slit. Genitals of enormous size can

also be seen in Buckland (120), where the Sheela has both legs up in the air to expose huge cavernous pudenda.

The most regular pudenda are sagging, but some figures have shapeless genitals which look as if they have been injured, almost torn apart, like Ballyportry (13), Carne (21), Clonmacnoise 2 (34) and Llandrindod Wells (165). Others look swollen, like Rathcline (71) and Scregg 2 (78), and others again just consist of a remarkably deep hole, like Burgesbeg (19) and Tracton (88). In Clomantagh (30) the vulva has the shape of a square cut out of the abdomen. Yet another type is portrayed in Penmon (166), where a balloon-like feature with an oval slit fills the space between the open thighs. In two other cases, Newtown-Lennan (68) and Rosnaree (76), the genitals are portrayed in a more stylized fashion, just appearing as concave indentations. And lastly, there are also some 'decorated' vulvas, including Rahan (69) with its indented lip, Llandrindod Wells (165), which looks as if it is surrounded by a rim of hair, and Glanworth (50), which has a thick rim of flesh around it.

Judging by the various signs of attacks on the figure clearly aimed at defacing or completely destroying it after it had been put in place, it is quite obvious that the conspicuously highlighted genitals caused the most offence. While it is true that weathering may also have had a hand in the disfigurement, overall there is enough evidence left behind by tools to indicate that hacking away the offensive abdomen was foremost in the minds of the attackers. Examples of this mentality are Ballinaclough (7), Birr (16), Clonlara (32), Dowth (40), Fethard Abbey (46), Holycross (51), Maghera (64), Thurles (86), Ampney St Peter (113), Bilton 2 (116) and Fiddington (132).

Quite surprisingly, in the vast majority of figures embedded *in situ* low enough to touch or on display in museums one can discover yet another hole placed underneath the vulva. Judging by photographs only the hole often remains unnoticed, and it is only by running a finger along that area that one becomes aware of it. Thus generally it is not commented on, but some archaeologists who did notice a conspicuous cavity in this position believe that it represents the anus. If their assumption is correct, its location below the vulva, given that it is the frontal representation of a woman, would represent yet another anatomical anomaly.

The limbs are generally under-sized in comparison with the torso, the legs even more so than the arms, and rarely do the two arms or legs correspond in width, length or pose. Their purpose first and foremost is to draw attention to the genital area. To this end the legs are splayed out and the hands are pointing or pulling at the vulva. The figure is shown in a standing, squatting or sitting posture. When standing the legs are widely splayed, slightly apart or straight and parallel, and of these the first mentioned position occurs most frequently, often with one or both legs bent at the knee, and with both feet outward-turned. In the squatting posture the knees are generally spread wide open. This is also the case when the figure is seated, but occasionally thighs and knees are tightly flexed over the abdomen or the legs are raised above the head. No matter which leg position is adopted, the vulva is always exposed.

A common position of the arms is with the hands placed in front, gesturing towards the vulva, touching it or literally tearing it open. However, quite a number of Sheelas are depicted in the most awkward stance to draw attention to the genitals, and sometimes this pose, in naturalistic terms, would be impossible to adopt because either anatomically speaking the arms would not be long enough or the body could not be forced into certain positions without causing it physical damage. Typical examples of this are the Sheelas who reach out from behind the widely splayed legs to clutch the vulva.

But the limbs are also employed to give expression to something more mysterious, some magical significance whose meaning escapes us today. Examining the legs, we find that whereas both feet typically turn outwards, and often very noticeably so, in Ringaskiddy (74) the two legs of the Sheela are turned inwards. In Ardcaith (4), Clonmacnoise 2 (34), Doon (39) and possibly also Shanrahan

(80), both feet face in the same direction, which happens to be to the right in all cases. A substantial number of figures cock just one leg, and among this group Coolighmore (28) and Egremont (157) display the most peculiar stance. In both these cases the foot on the ground, on which the whole figure stands, is inclined inwards, while the other leg bent at the knee seems to be using the heel to indicate the pudenda.

Even more conspicuous may be the gesture of the arms. Two Sheelas have both arms raised. The Castlemagner figure (24) simply extends both hands skywards, while the Kiltinane Castle Sheela (58) is depicted with a slender object in her right and a round object in her left hand. Far more frequently, Sheelas raise just one hand, while the other pulls at the vulva. The elevated hand may touch part of the head, or it may grasp an unidentified object. As it may prove significant whether the gesture involves the left or the right hand, the two sides will be listed separately.

Raising the left arm to touch some part on the left side of their head are Ballynaclogh (7), Kiltinane Church (59), Tullavin (90) and Kirkwall (161). Aghadoe (2) and Fiddington (132) also lift the left arm, but they grip a slim object in their hand. At least five more figures hold on to an object with their left arm or hand without raising it; of these Lixnaw (63) and Tugford 1 (151) clutch an object under their arm, while Lavey (61) has a circular object depicted on top of it, and Seir Kieran (79) grasps a round object with the hand close to the body in the abdominal area. Romsey 1 (142) uses both hands: while the left holds an object pointing in the direction of the abdomen, the right is grasping a band-like feature which is loosely draped around the whole height of the figure.

The right arm is involved in a similar number of Sheelas. Clomantagh (30) simply raises it, whereas Behy (15), Clonmacnoise 2 (34), Portnahinch (103) and figure 156 use the hand to touch the right hand side of the head, most probably indicating the ear. Croft-on-Tees (126) places the hand on top of her head, and Tugford 2 (152) covers her mouth with it. Copgrove (125) and Egremont (157) hold on to some item with their right hand. In Copgrove it is a circular object held away from the body at the height of the abdominal area. This is also the area where the Egremont figure holds a slender object which is pointing to the vulva.

In an effort to create criteria that would allow researchers to compare these figures on common ground and to establish categories that would determine regional peculiarities or deviations, Edith Guest in the 1930s devised a taxonomy that was based on the different postures. Guest adopted the following division into basically three types:

- Type I Arms (which are usually in front of the thighs but may pass behind them) flexed, and hands directed to lower abdomen:
- (a) Thighs splayed (20)
 - (b) Thighs absent or slightly indicated (7)
 - (c) Legs straight down (3)
- Type II One arm and hand raised to the head: legs as in type I (a) (3)
- Type III Thighs and knees tightly flexed over the abdomen (2)⁵

Applying her taxonomy to Irish carvings only the figures in parentheses represent the actual number of Sheelas she found in each of these categories. The total number of Irish carvings known to her was slightly higher but she desisted from including specimens where she could not be definite about their classification.

Type I obviously takes the lion's share. However, if we make a distributive chart, we somewhat surprisingly find an even spread of Guest's various categories across the whole country, with no pockets or clusters of favourite types emerging anywhere. And when A.L.Hutchinson employed her division on British Sheelas in the late 1960s, he found a very similar distribution. He classified 17

figures out of a total number of 21, and of these he judged 15 to be type I, whereas for type II and III he only found one example each.⁶

James Jerman regarded Guest's typology as 'not a very productive one', criticizing in particular the strong emphasis on the position of thighs and legs. He suggested a reclassification of the Sheelas focusing on the part played by the hands because, he argues that if 'the aim of a sheela is to draw attention to her sexual display then the role of the hands is far more arresting than the position of the legs and thighs'.⁷ But before we examine Jerman's suggested taxonomy, his criticism of Guest's typology ought to be qualified because two out of Guest's three main categories are indeed based on the position of the arms, and the different leg positions are only taken into account as subdivisions within the first category.

Not unlike Guest, Jerman bases his type-divisions entirely on the posture of the figure, ignoring all other features. He differentiates between five types depending on the position of arms and hands:

- Type I Sheelas who pass both hands under the thighs in such a way as to draw attention to the pudenda, either by touching or indicating, or by spreading the legs to ensure display. (10) (3)
- Type II Sheelas who pass one hand only under the thighs, while the other hand rests elsewhere. (4) (2)
- Type III Sheelas who pass both hands in front of the body to touch or indicate the pudenda. (19) (9)
- Type IV Sheelas who pass one arm only in front of the body to touch or indicate the pudenda, while the other hand rests elsewhere. (12) (6)
- Type V Anomalous sheelas, whose display does not involve the hands. (10) (4)

Again the figures in parentheses indicate the actual number of Sheelas which he thought answered to his description, with the first set referring to Ireland and the second to Britain. Jerman had hoped that by plotting what he saw as these stylistically linked groupings on the map, distinct regional patterns would emerge. Alas, this was not to be.

In England he found that there were too few attested Sheelas 'to permit meaningful analysis of their distribution', and in Ireland where he thought he could trace the outlines of various rough distribution curves, his patterns can no longer stand up to close scrutiny. This is not necessarily his fault, but a combination of factors which will become clear when analysing one or two of his groupings. Taking his first category, for example, Jerman comments that 'Type I sheelas form a rough curve from Cork to Kildare passing through Tipperary, Clare and Offaly.' The subsequent discovery of just two Sheelas falling into this category at Rahara (70) and Tullaroan (89) already stretches his curve in two further directions, north and east, besides adding two other counties to the list, namely Roscommon and Kilkenny. The distributional pattern of his second category is completely invalidated due to a mixture of incorrect classification (according to his own criteria) and the discovery of new Sheelas. Jerman erroneously puts Clomantagh (30) in the second group although this Sheela, holding arm and hand in front of her body, quite clearly belongs in his Type IV group. Errigal Keeroge 1 (44), on the other hand, who by definition belongs to group II,⁸ is listed under Type III. Aghadoe (2), Behy (15), Clonoulty (36), Glanworth (50) and Thurles (86)—Sheelas Jerman was not aware of at the time—also fall into this category. Therefore his Type II is scattered all over Ireland, occurring in the north, south, east and west, obviously negating his assumption that this group can only be found in a narrowly defined area in the southern half of the country which he saw held within the two curves of Type I and IV.⁹

An extension of the investigation into Jerman's other group divisions reveals that additions and corrections within each of them render his distribution range untenable. Nobody else appears to have proffered any other classifying criteria since.

The problem of dating

The question of dating the Sheelas has proved to be just as frustrating and elusive as the search for distribution patterns. As stone artefacts cannot be dated by methods currently available to archaeologists, there are no certain clues that could determine the time and place of origin for the significant number of detached Sheelas. But a question mark even hangs over those figures which are placed on churches because their application in datable medieval buildings in itself provides no reliable evidence. Having been built on top of older ones, most churches are composite. Late medieval churches were usually imposed on earlier foundations, preserving wherever possible structural and decorative features of the pre-existing church within its walls. So while the extant building may often date back to ascertainable epochs, the actual history of the church invariably is much older. And going back further in time, it often transpires that the original church foundation was chosen to replace a pagan place of worship which was later converted to the worship of God.

Because they seemed to be so crude in conception and coarse in execution the understandable supposition was, when Sheelas were first discovered, that their origin must be ancient and that the carvings occurring in medieval church buildings were transfers from some earlier foundation or pagan sites. Guest also pioneered the investigation into the dating of the Sheela-na-gig, in that she endeavoured to overcome the inherent difficulties by associating those figures still *in situ* with the architectural setting and ornaments of the building. Again confining herself to Irish examples,¹⁰ she discusses in detail churches and castles where decorative features, building material, architectural style and design appear to harmonize with the Sheela, thus suggesting contemporaneity. The period Guest establishes for these Sheelas spans from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, with those found on castles appearing to be generally later in date than the examples from ecclesiastical sites. While a significant number of the latter appear to have been transferred from earlier surroundings, from neighbouring churches according to information gathered from local informants, there are also castle figures which show all the signs of being original carvings in their primary settings.

In those cases where there are obvious indications that the sculpture has been re-set, re-worked or derived from an older building, Guest ruled out any attempts at dating them. However, one of her observations is potentially very telling. She notes that while some of the detached stones are cut in high relief, a feature not belonging to very early sculpture, there are others which have every appearance of antiquity. This suggests a continuum of tradition, and if verified would mean that Sheelas go back a long way. Thus Guest concludes with the observation that her argument for the late date of many church and castle Sheelas 'is not directed against the early origin and practice of the relative cult nor the probability of earlier symbols'.¹¹

Jerman looked into the dating of British Sheelas by using a decorative feature, i.e. the beakhead ornament, as dating evidence. This is a Romanesque voussoir decoration which was in vogue in twelfth-century France, from where it was imported into the British Isles.¹² However, tracing the distribution of churches in which Sheelas and this Romanesque sculptural motif co-exist had disappointing results.¹³ Out of a total number of 24 figures known to Jerman, he could only find five Sheelas in co-existence with beakhead. According to him four of these belong in a twelfth-century context—Austerfield (114), Bilton (115), Holdgate (135) and Kilpeck (136)—while one, Croft-on-Tees (126), has a thirteenth-century background. With the help of different criteria he

establishes a twelfth-century date for a further three Sheelas—Bridlington (118), Church Stretton (123) and Tugford (151/2)—while offering no supposition on the date of the remaining figures.

A close investigation of Jerman's dating reveals a serious problem. Only in Austerfield, Bilton, Bridlington and Kilpeck do the Sheelas form an integral part of the iconographical decoration; the other four examples do not. The latter are on separate slabs or carved in the round, and they are quite crude sculptures differing considerably from the rest of the church's ornamentation. Thus they do not appear to be in their original setting. As a corollary of this Sheelas and beakhead can definitely only be said to occur coevally in three churches, Austerfield, Bilton and Kilpeck, which is of course too slight a basis to propound any general dating theory of Sheelas on.

What Guest's and Jerman's proposals with regard to distribution range and the general dating of Sheela-na-gigs have demonstrated is that none of the criteria collated to date has yielded any definite or significant results. But amidst all the prevailing uncertainty one thing has become clear, namely that focusing on one single feature such as posture or co-existence with specific ornaments is at best insufficient and at worst misleading.

Built on Guest's foundation, I therefore suggest setting up a table that consists of four types of Sheelas:

- 1 Figures which form part of a larger decorative pattern on corbels, arches, or capitals.
- 2 Single figures carved on material forming structural parts of the buildings' fabric such as quoins, keystones, lintels, apex stones or roof bosses.
- 3 Single figures set in isolation.
- 4 Unattached free-standing and re-used figures.

In the first category it should prove relatively easy to establish the contemporaneous nature with the rest of the decorative scheme. These Sheelas are only found in ecclesiastical buildings, and generally speaking, because no specimens from the early or middle period survive, the main question to be answered would be whether a late medieval or early modern period applies.

Figures of the second category appear on both churches and castles. In order to determine whether they are in their primary location the main thrust of the investigation here would concern the building material, in particular the use of other similar stones, the type of dressing of stone and a close examination of the architectural setting.

The third type embraces all those Sheelas which are separately placed pieces of artistic imagery found in any setting, ecclesiastical or secular, where concomitant carvings, decorative details and style provide some indication that the Sheela was part of the original construction.

Figures of the fourth type are either completely unattached and unconnected with any building, or are clearly transfers, showing signs of having been removed from older sites and re-used in the present context. These are obviously, if not impossible, the most difficult to date, but in these cases a microscopic analysis of the marks left by the carvers' tools may be of help for dating purposes.

Sheelas could then be put into these four categories according to iconographical features, of which the basic posture—standing, squatting or seated—could form a main group, with any of the other special identifying features constituting subdivisions. Of the latter some appear to be more significant or frequent than others, and understandably opinions would differ as to which of these are more pertinent, or perhaps even important enough to form a sub-group. However, to my mind there is one aspect which must not be excluded under any circumstance and should thus form part of all enquiries, and that is the (raised) hands as well as the objects they hold, because these more than any other feature strongly indicate some form of hidden magic behind the employment of the Sheelas.

Such a table would show the correlation between the total number of Sheelas and individual feature density, and it would allow the illustration of their distribution range. At the same time, while it would not resolve the thorny questions of origin and date, it would nevertheless be apparent from the table whether the features in question generally belong to older traditions or more recent developments.