

A Fertility Figure from Tullaroan

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When Noel Coogan of Rathealy took home a load of rubble from the demolished enclosure wall of the old schoolhouse in the village of Tullaroan, he found that a large rectangular slab had markings on one face. He sought the opinions of members of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, and we were surprised to find it was a representation of a Sheela na Gig, those curious figures known from various parts of Ireland and which have been the subject of much speculation. The discovery was made early this year and our initial investigation was in March (1992).

The slab is of "pure crystalline limestone without any particular distinguishing features" and since it occurs "over very wide areas of the country any pinning down of the provenance would be near impossible". (Identification by courtesy of Nigel Monahan, Geological Section, National Museum of Ireland). It measures 75cm. long, 35cm. wide and 25cm. thick (average measurements): all surfaces have been dressed, more or less, and there are some damaged patches. The top, in relation to the figure, is dressed flat and appears to be intact. The figure is carved on one of the larger flat surfaces, in false or bas relief, that is, cut back from the original surface so that it appears in recessed relief. The back-ground is pecked in an overall pocked pattern.

The figure conforms to the usual formula for such objects: it shows a frontal view of a nude female with stress on the pelvic area. The rounded head has two large projecting ears, hollowed out from the centre. The eyes are similarly hollowed out circular cavities; the right one (from the viewer's point of view) appears to be surrounded by a 'monocle' extending towards the ear and it has a small punctured hole (3mm. in diameter and about the same in depth) placed near the centre of the pupil. The nose had an elongated triangular outline but is damaged. The mouth is indicated by a horizontal slot with a slight upturn: it too is punctured by three holes similar to the one in the eye and to

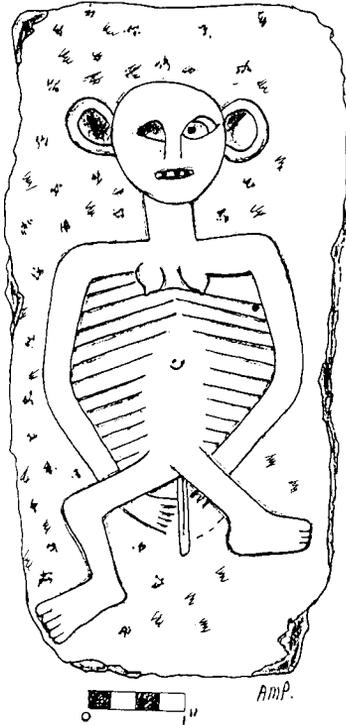


Photo by Austin Hegarty

a further one near the upper right arm below the first rib. These holes are not in character with the figure carving and are so uniform as to suggest drilled holes inserted subsequently. Such are not unknown on other examples of Sheelas and carved heads; their purpose is unknown and so is dismissed as 'ritual'.

The head is set a little to the right on the supporting pillar-like neck. The shoulders are slightly hunched. Two small bulbous breasts with indications of nipples, are placed close together, below the neck in a somewhat unnatural position. A pattern of conventional ribbing in straight but sloping lines covers the entire thorax and extends over the abdomen, twelve on the left and eleven on the right. The navel is indicated by a circle.

The arms lie close to the body and reach towards the pelvic region. The left one underlies a slender thigh and the fingers reach towards the vulva. The left leg is flexed at the knee,



the foot with well-defined toes points outward. The right hand is not so well delineated but passes under the right leg, only traces of the fingertips are visible on the inner side of the leg. This foot points outward to the right, the toes are merely suggested. The area above this knee is not decisively carved and there is no sign of the upper limb. Likewise the pelvis is blurred or poorly carved - an imperfection in the limestone may have interfered with the workmanship. The stress is on the vulva, sharply defined by an extensive channel. Otherwise, the chiselling is well executed with short parallel striations across the modelling lines. The contrast with the pecked background

is fairly easy to trace. A stone mason or a sculptor might be able to identify the types of tools used in the work.

In the shaping of the slab the dressing would suggest that it was intended to stand lengthwise with the figure lengthwise, the back not for viewing, the top flat and free, the narrow sides and bottom to be fitted into a setting. When the slab was used as a component of the school enclosure wall it was probably put in face downward and intact, the damage seems to have been caused in demolition. The schoolhouse is now used as a community centre and still displays the cut stone plaque commemorating its erection in 1842. What the previous history of the decorated slab might have been can only be speculation. The great castle of the Graces at Courtstown, demolished in the 18th century, is not too far away; as in other instances there could have been an

association with a Sheela figure but there is no record of such an association.

What is certain is that the carving is an expression of folk art and the stone mason's craft, it is part of our ancient heritage. The inspiration for its creation must have come from a knowledge of such figures and a familiarity with their meaning. It is not an isolated occurrence (it is the fourth from Co. Kilkenny, see Appendix) but a new addition to the many such objects found all over the country and the numerous related carvings from England, Wales, Scotland and the Continent and even further afield. The cult of these representations must have had a specific significance, now not fully understood - however controversy and debate attempt to establish theories to fit the vacuum.

The most widespread theories are that they were associated with fertility cults; or as warnings on morality and the vice of lust; or that they served an apotropaic (protective) function to ward off evil spirits and enemies. Of recent times the terms most often applied to them are - ugly, rude, obscene, erotic - but this probably reflects the attitude of the beholder rather than any dispassionate assessment. After a lifetime's awareness of such figures I am convinced their significance lies in the sphere of fertility, and that what is depicted, as here, is the act of giving birth. In Ireland the term *Sheela na gcioc* is usually applied to them, this may be somewhat of a misnomer. Fertility Figure or Mother Goddess may be more appropriate.

The date usually assigned to them is medieval, a general term; it has been argued that they may have pagan or Celtic roots. Whatever the individual datings may be, I would argue that the theme is childbirth and that what is celebrated is a universal phenomenon. I hope to develop these arguments on another occasion.

Appendix

The other examples of Fertility Figures from Co. Kilkenny are:

1. Ballylarkin, from an old church. Now in National Museum. See Andersen, (below), No.52.
2. Clomantagh Castle still in position there, (Andersen, No.70)
3. Cooliaugh, recovered from a well, now deposited in Rothe House, Kilkenny. *Old*

Kilkenny Review 1979, 72-4.

The main publications on the subject are:

Edith M.Guest: *Jour. Roy. Soc. Antiquaries Ire.* 66, 1936, 107-129.

Jorden Andersen: *The Witch on the Wall*, Copenhagen, 1977.

Etienne Rynne: *Figures From the Past*, R.S.A.I., 1987.

Acknowledgements

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A record of the find was supplied to the National Museum and an inspection was carried out.

It is proposed that this carving will be preserved locally.