Reclaiming the *Sheela-na-gigs*

Goddess Imagery in Medieval Sculptures of Ireland

by Ann Pearson

Cet article confirme que l'imagerie Sheela-na-gig fait partie d'une longue tradition dans l'iconographie vulvaire qui est connue à travers le monde et assure que le culte de la déesse celte a été l'inspiration de ces bas-reliefs.

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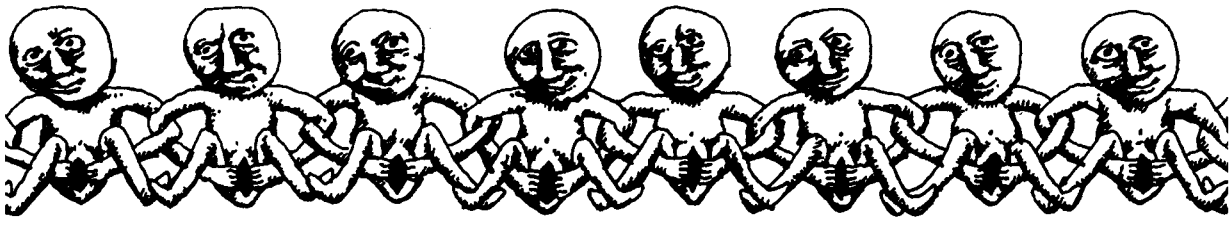
The small, sexually-specific stone carvings of female figures called *sheela-na-gigs* found on churches and Norman towers or castles in Ireland and Britain are an historical mystery that has been puzzled over and researched from seemingly every angle. Like women, the *sheelas* have both resisted being categorized and have suffered from the limitations that certain labels have placed on them. Irish art historians, primarily male, insist that the *sheelas* are a variant of the continental medieval grotesques designed to warn against the sins of the flesh. However, they fail to account for the fact that the *sheelas* are the only variety of erotic grotesque found extensively in Ireland and England.

The name *sheela-na-gig* is not explanatory. It has variously been understood to refer to an immodest woman, to the female breasts, or to the pose of some figures, "on her hunkers," i.e. squatting. It is simply the folk nomenclature provided by villagers to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians who "rediscovered" the sculptures and wrote about them in the many historical journals of the period (Andersen). It was only when women started to write about the *sheelas,* however, that goddess referents began to be noted.

The first to suggest this was the famous Egyptologist, Margaret Murray. She recognized the vulvic display of the *sheela-na-gig* as similar to the pose of small ancient goddess statues called "Baubos."[1] In 1934, Murray advanced her theories in an extensive article in which she comments that serious study of female erotic imagery has been neglected as compared to corresponding investigations of the male priapic figure. Murray describes the Baubo figure as seated on the ground, with legs spread to display the pudenda which are exaggerated or clearly indicated. The Baubo-Phyrne version of these sculptures has the figures squatting, with knees bent, "frog-like." The position of the arms varies but some repeat the *sheela* gesture of resting on the thighs as if to "emphasize the pudenda" (Murray 95). Murray's article discusses a number of *sheela* sculptures from both England (at Kilpeck, Romsey, Oxford, Whittlesford, and Essex), and Ireland (at Blackhall and Ballylarkin), as fitting the Egyptian model. She claims that Baubo "belonged to that group of goddesses, such as the Bona Dea, from whose rites men were rigorously excluded" (99). She was for women only and was, "as essentially divine as Isis or Ishtar" (99). As with the *sheelas*, Baubo figures appear in number, suddenly, in a specific historical period seemingly with no precursors, although Murray has suggested that the pubic triangles on more ancient goddess statues might be considered such precursors.

Baubo was the older Egyptian version of the Greek story about Iambe who performed a lewd dance revealing her genitals to make Demeter laugh and rouse her from the despair into which she had sunk over the loss of Persephone to the underworld.[2] Murray was convinced that the appeal of both the Baubos and the *sheela-na-gigs* was to the sexual, pleasurable side of women's nature. In conclusion, Murray questions the speculations made by male archaeologists about possible women's rites in connection with the Baubo goddesses. Her "suspicions" reflect contemporary feminist critique of patriarchal scholarship.

Edith Guest from Ireland made an entirely different kind of contribution to the *sheela* debate. She updated and expanded the list of Irish *sheela-na-gigs* for the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* indicating 65 listings as authentic and five as questionable (Guest 1936). She was the first to categorize all the variations in the figures as standing or squatting, with one or both hands indicating or touching the genital area, with one hand raised to the head, etc. Most importantly, she dated the *sheelas* as being from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, with an emphasis on the eleventh to the thirteenth.



Like Murray, Guest does not believe that these late dates[3] for the *sheelas* prohibited "the early origin and practice of the relative cult nor the probability of earlier symbols" (1937, 180). She gives several examples of what she calls pagan practices associated with certain *sheelas*. They were called Evil Eye Stones when they were used to ward off evil or they were venerated, as is seen by the rubbings on the thighs, stomach, and forehead of the *sheela* at the Castlemagner well in County Cork. Certain *sheelas* were still referred to as witches in the later half of the nineteenth century (Guest 1936).

Classical writers described Celtic women as powerful warriors who also excelled at bearing and rearing children. Their dual achievements are a reflection of the abilities of the Celtic war goddesses who served as role models for their earthly sisters.

Anthony Weir, an acknowledged contemporary authority on the Irish *sheela-na-gigs,* published a book in 1986 in collaboration with Jim Jerman, in which—speaking as art historians—they contend that "the *sheela-na-gigs* and allied exhibitionists are arguably iconographic images whose purpose is to give visual support to the Church's moral teachings," against the sin of *luxuria* (10). Even if we accept their claim that the appearance of *sheela* sculptures is coincidental with Norman influence brought to Ireland by the Benedictine Cluniac monasteries of the tenth to fourteenth centuries, the native population would still have been free to interpret the figures according to local legends with which they were more familiar.

Weir and Jerman do admit that whatever the first intention behind the imagery, some *sheelas* were clearly used in a talismanic or protective role against evil. They trace examples of genital imagery used for apotropaic purposes to Roman influence in Britain, with phalloi carved in three sites along Hadrian's Wall. At least two of these sites include the vulva shown on the obverse side of the stone. Their total acceptance of gender stereotypes is evident in the following explanation:

> No doubt the use of the phalloi as protective devices stems from the life-giving function of the phallus, from which follows the idea that phalloi could be used symbolically to combat the forces of death and destruction....
>
> The important thing to note, however, is that the female emblem, the vulva, is very rare indeed in this role, perhaps because it plays a receptive, passive part in comparison with the male organ. (146)

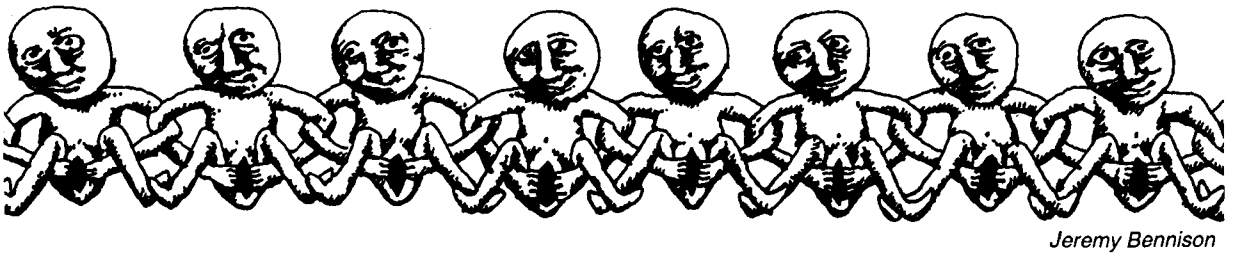
If the phallus was powerful, why not the vulva? If there were other than female exhibitionist figures from the Romanesque themes that travelled to Ireland, where is the evidence for them? To date, only a few phallic images, as compared to at least 75 *sheelas*, have been found.

The noted Celtic scholar, Anne Ross, is a strong advocate of the belief that *sheela-na-gig* iconography is consistent with Irish Celtic goddess traditions. Ross reminds us of the opinion of classical writers who described Celtic women as powerful warriors who also excelled at bearing and rearing children. Ross sees their dual achievements as a reflection of the abilities of the Celtic war goddesses who served as role models for their earthly sisters. Many tales are told about the ability of these goddesses to shape-shift from "ugly old hags" into beautiful women in their interaction with mortals. Frequently the acceptance of a sexual advance from the hag was a test of character for the man who would be king. He who embraced the repellent hag without flinching was rewarded not only with a beautiful bed partner but with the kingship which could only be acquired through mating with the goddess.

Ross notes an ancient Irish tale, "The Destruction of *Da Derga*'s Hostel," which speaks of a *sheela*-like figure in the "*Cailleach*" or hag form:

> ... and a woman, big mouthed, huge, ugly, hideous, was behind him. Though her snout were flung on a branch, the branch would support it. Her pudenda reached down to her knees. (Cross and Slover qtd. in Ross 147)

The hag can appear as benevolent or malevolent, echoing the basic duality of Celtic thought. "Many of their



Jeremy Bennison

Sheela-na-gig, Killanaboy, Co. Clare. Monastic site. Known as the first Abbess, St. Inghean Bhaoith. Photo: Ann Pearson

[Celtic] artistic forms are meant to be seen in two different ways; and also to possess a duality of significance—naturalistic and symbolic" (Cross and Slover qtd. in Ross 146). It is clear from Ross' text that the Celtic duality does not mean either/or but that all is doubled; both aspects exist in whatever the manifestation. The ugly hag *is* the beautiful young woman and vice versa.

Miriam Robbins Dexter says the great Queen Medb (or Maeve), who figures prominently in the Ulster cycle, functions as "a transfunctional goddess-turned-heroine" (91). Like the goddess Macha, Medb is a multiple character appearing under many different names, but she retains the same personality in her different personifications. Medb's sexual appetite could only be satisfied by the legendary virility of Fergus, son of Great Horse. It is said he needed seven women to satisfy him "unless he was sleeping with the Goddess, Medb" (Ross 142). Though married, Medb remained autonomous. This ability of a female to retain her power rather than being subservient to her husband is a good example of the persistence of pre-Indo-European influence on a figure heavily entangled in patriarchal Indo-European Celtic traditions (Dexter).

Dexter provides further evidence of the potency of the female sexual display in Irish sagas. She refers us to a scene in the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* where the boy-hero Cu Chulainn is about to attack his own countrymen. King Conchobor stops him by sending

> ... a company of women out toward the boy,
> that is, three times fifty women,
> that is, ten women and seven times twenty,
> utterly naked,
> all at the same time,
> and the leader of the women before them, Scandlach,
> to expose their nakedness and their boldness to him.
> (qtd. in Dexter 160)

The work of anthropologist Shirley Ardener provides us with information about the use of vaginal display in other cultures. She is particularly interested in how female shame is replaced with honour and how sexual display and vulgarity is used in that transformation. She illustrates what she means by using the West African Bakweri tribal concept of *titi ikoli* as an example:

> *Titi* is a childish word for vulva, while *ikoli*, on its own, means thousand. The combination includes the following associations: a woman's underparts and insults to these; and women's secrets and the revealing of these. (Ardener 1987, 115)

If a Bakweri woman is insulted in front of others, all the women of the village converge on the offender. They dance around him, making rude gestures, and sing songs about *titi ikoli* being a beautiful thing (Ardener 1973).

Ardener gives other examples from West African tribal peoples, where women as a group use a form of naked display and obscene words or gestures to defend their honour. The insult is "to the corporate sexual identity of women, of which the symbol is the vaginal area" (1987, 118). The women's power comes from the "trickster-like"

Sheela-na-gig, Kilsarkin, Co. Kerry. Figure shows signs of "rubbing." Photo: Ann Pearson

magic of breaking the convention, revealing what is usually hidden. "Reversing 'his' negative to their positive values, they proclaim their pride and make their hidden secrets a dominant and public emblem" (Ardener 1987, 118).

Contemporary western feminists and artists have also attempted to resurrect vaginal imagery. Germaine Greer noted that "the vagina is obliterated from the image of femininity in the same way that signs of independence and vigour in the rest of the body are suppressed" (15). However, no one was more successful in attempting to reclaim vaginal imagery than Judy Chicago. Her famous art installation, *The Dinner Party*, celebrated vaginal imagery on almost every china plate created to honour women throughout the ages.

Molly Mullins has examined interpretations of the *sheelas* to demonstrate how they change in keeping with historical or political interests. She proposes that the scholarly interpretation of the *sheelas* as fertility figures in the 1930s is not unconnected with "the familialism then being inscribed in the social policies of the Irish state" (36). Though applauding the efforts of contemporary artists to redeem vaginal imagery, Mullins thinks that the irreverence and vulgarity of the *sheela* display are more what is needed in the present Irish political context than any new reverential imagery. She says that the popular images of Irish women, past and present, "found on greeting cards, in school texts, multimedia tourist attractions and the discourse of everyday life" (40), is so folkloric and false that a "lewd lady" is a necessary, uncomfortable, iconoclastic image:

> And, as the *Irish Times* article so well illustrates, sheelas can even be relegated to the "quaint." To be effective, then, the feminist use of the sheela-na-gig entails a reversal of much more than a negative evaluation of the female body and sexuality. It also demands a revision of prevailing oppositions of the primitive and the modern, past and present, the Christian and the pagan. (40)

With this statement, Mullins sums up why the *sheela-na-gigs* have fascinated contemporary feminists who have become aware of their existence. The complexity of the image and viewer response to it "demands revisions" of many of our suppositions about the world. What better legacy from the Celtic goddess tradition than to continue to challenge our fundamental concepts and beliefs.

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[1]Murray speculated that the Greek word Baubo could be derived from the name of the Egyptian goddess Bebt, known in the eighth dynasty (95).
[2]Much later Vivian Mercier was to include the *sheela-na-gig* sculptures in his exploration of the connections between the ribald, the grotesque, and laughter in his book, *The Irish Comedic Tradition.*

[3]Some antiquarians thought the sculptures to be of Celtic or ancient origin.

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LUCY BRENNAN

Terpsichore

"... the poem is a place of experience
and not a place of convictions ..."
—Eavan Boland

She holds uncertainties in outstretched hands.
I gather her gifts by the armful. Now
there can be singing and wild loving,
longing can rouse and catch fire at a glance.

With her I have laughter, and light that expands,
draw all into my blood and do not die.
The world is mine and I exult in the drive,
the lift, my mind shaking free of its bands.

She places clouds in my sights, to enhance
the winds and the rains for me and draws me
to mysteries of woods and seas.
I walk and run with her, in the rhythm of a
dance.

She doesn't calm my fear of going dumb:
"That's energy!" she calls, and then is gone.

Lucy Brennan has been published in various journals in Canada and in Ireland, including Poetry Canada Review, Poetry Ireland Review, The Irish University Review, *and* The Antigonish Review. *Her compact disk, entitled* The Tellings of Mad Sweeney, *is due to be released at the end of March. She was born in Dublin, Ireland.*