

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENIGMATIC SHEELA-NA-GIG

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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MAY 2006

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work could not have been possible without the perseverance and support of my husband, David William Rose, and my grandson, David Michael Bair Jr., to whom I am eternally grateful. My parents, Mary Teresa Rinehart and George Edward Hubbard Sr., were the unwavering source of inspiration and strength for me throughout my academic career. I dedicate my work to them. I hope that my family and friends, and in particular, the teachers who have supported my endeavors, mentioned or not, realize that their words of encouragement helped me to complete this daunting task.

Dr. Calabrese, thank you most of all. This thesis would not be possible without your guidance and caring nature.

ABSTRACT
CAROL LEE HUBBARD ROSE
THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENIGMATIC SHEELA-NA-GIG
MAY 2006

Sheela-na-gigs are stone carvings of the female nude posed in a manner that displays and emphasizes the genitalia. These carvings appear in the Romanesque sculpture of France, Spain, England, and Ireland. This thesis explores the issues of scholarship that surround these enigmatic figures, addressing the lack of scholarly attention given by 19th century antiquarians who regarded her aggressive sexuality in negative terms. The author explores, as well as questions, modern scholarship that delves into the figure's origins, placement, purpose, location, and variations of form. This thesis supports the belief of a continental origin for the figure, retracing its evolutionary steps from continental Europe to England, then transferred to Ireland by Anglo-Norman Romanesque masons and sculptors, after the Norman Invasion in the twelfth century.

An analysis of theories concerning the origins of the figure will be included, in order to provide evidence of the existence of sheela-na-gig prototypes, or archetypes. This study also examines the connection of this figure to the medieval church, as oppositional concepts of good and evil, and of life, death, and rebirth, are brought together in direct relationship to one another. These carvings have acquired numerous interpretations throughout Irish oral and written history, interpretations such as pagan fertility symbols, apotropaic figures, Celtic goddesses, images of saintly or sinful women interpreted in either a positive or a negative way, and as symbolic manifestations of pagan Celtic witchcraft as suggested at Kilpeck Church in England. By following the sheela-na-gig symbol through a series of changing interpretations, both architecturally and scholarly, beginning first with its Irish antiquarian discovery,

then by examining its possible ancient European beginnings, then next to the twelfth, and finally the twenty-first century, I argue that the meaning of this symbolic image evolved in terms of its changing audience and usage throughout history. The meaning of the sheela-na-gig symbol evolved within each local culture concerned with issues relating to women, or the feminine aspects of God. It continues to invite people to make their own interpretations even today.

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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

It is not only important but also necessary to gain a greater understanding of the history behind Ireland's symbolic sheela-na-gig figures, introduced into Ireland during the twelfth century. Since their rediscovery by antiquarians during the 19th century, research has been done in accordance with historical interpretations and religious connotations. Yet, the understanding of the sheela-na-gig figure is still very much in its infancy. Initially, records have indicated that the sheela-na-gig held a specific purpose for the pagans who created them, in contrast to what the image meant to Catholic art of the Romanesque era, as well as to what the reemergence of the sheela-na-gig means today in view of the more modern feminist interpretation. It is hoped that further inquiry into the meaning and evolution of the sheela-na-gig will shed new light upon this largely ignored area of study.

Statement of the Purpose/Study

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the history of the sheela-na-gig figure in order to determine its original function within its own historical context, as well as to recognize how other audiences have interpreted the figure. This will also entail an examination of the following issues: to understand the reactions to it by the Medieval Catholic Church, and to examine what the reemergence of the sheela-na-gig means today, as applied to the more modern feminist interpretation, particularly, within the work of artist Nancy Spero. It is the aim of this paper to accept the sheela-na-gigs as valid and valuable artifacts rather than ignoring them or treating them as inconsequential historical oddities (McMahon and Roberts 7).

Debate first began when the sheela-na-gig image caught the interest of adventurous 19th century Irish antiquarian researchers. A century later, Jorgen

Andersen gave a history of the rediscovery of sheela-na-gigs as the subject for his doctoral thesis published in 1977, titled, The Witch on the Wall (Weir and Jerman 14). Then, a decade later, two researchers, Weir and Jerman, followed the quest for a continental origin for the sheelas with a thorough investigation of the art of Romanesque churches. As the title of their book suggests, Images of Lust, the linkage of this image with the theology of Romanesque Christianity implies that the sheela-na-gigs had the negative function of serving as warnings against the sin of lust.

In 1983, New York artist Nancy Spero began using the sheela-na-gig in her work. The image she had chosen was based on a reproduction of a 12th century carving found in an English church. For Spero, this image represented the Celtic goddess of fertility and destruction, and she supports the view that women are now interested in the idea of the Goddess as a powerful, self-sustaining and autonomous being, capable of moving through life as freely as a man (Withers 54).

Significance of the Problem

It appears that scholars have been reluctant to devote time to the study of the sheela-na-gig carvings, not because of social attitudes or because of the varying opinions regarding matters of inappropriateness, but because the figures have not been considered important. The sheela-na-gig figures, however, do deserve our attention, because of their changing interpretations and functional usage over time.

Questions continue. How is it possible that many of the sheela-na-gig figures were placed in or on Romanesque churches or secular buildings, successfully resisting any attempts of eradication? It is precisely this tenacity with which these carvings have clung to existence that have mystified many, and opinions have been expressed about their possible origins, purpose, variations of form, placement, date, locale, and longevity.

Various uses and interpretations of the sheela-na-gig figures seem to fall into four basic categories: 1) fertility icons, 2) warnings against the sins of the flesh, 3)

representations of a figure from the old Celtic goddess trinity (womb as tomb), and 4) protection from evil. There is also evidence that indicates that a change, or an evolution, has taken place over time, in regards to the uses and interpretations of these images. Contemporary interests tend to lay stress on the positive aspects of female sexuality and, in particular, on the reproductive function.

Review of Related Literature

Opening the doors of archaeological research and preservation in order to define its form, function and meaning, the sheela-na-gig of 19th century Ireland has become a most distinctive and lasting contribution to art.

This contribution led to a review of what the sheela-na-gig figures first meant to the pagans who created them; next, to the way they were viewed during the Romanesque period; and finally, to the view held by modern feminists' interpretation, which revealed a reuse of the sheela-na-gig in the work of Nancy Spero. This is supporting evidence to the fact that the use and/or meaning of this image has been redefined over time.

In the pioneer work titled, The Witch on the Wall, Jorgen Andersen gave an introductory account on the information gathered during the Royal Irish Academy debate. The subject of sheela-na-gigs was a new one, and well deserving of the attention of antiquaries (Andersen 12). Information obtained during this debate included a descriptive list of carvings that had been found in Ireland. The list included: a figure from Rochestown church, an image found in the south wall of Douth old church in Co. Meath, an image that was found over the doorway at Ballynahinch Castle, located near Cashel in County Tipperary, then a carving from Moycarkey Castle also located in County Tipperary, and finally, a figure embedded in the wall of a medieval church on White Island, Lough Erne, in the north of Ireland, County Fermanagh (see Plate I, Plate II, and Plate III).

Andersen states as well that W. R. Wilde prepared the first Royal Academy catalog of antiquities, which appeared in print in 1857. It contained a summary

description of three figures with some comment about carvings found elsewhere in Ireland and a reference to the Royal Irish Academy debate. This debate on the subject avoided the popular term of “sheela-na-gig” in favor of the word “grotesque”, and the inventory of the figures existing in the Academy collection described “three grotesque female figures on a class frequently found built into the walls of some of the oldest churches and castles, and all were of great antiquity” (Andersen 14). Yet, neither a plausible explanation nor an acceptable meaning was given for the objects.

Another reference to the sheela-na-gig image was found in a curious work from the 1860s entitled, The Worship of the Generative Powers. It is a discussion of erotic subjects known from art and from popular belief through the ages. Here, author Thomas Wright devoted a great deal of space to the Middle Ages, and concerned himself with representations of both sexes employed in figures on medieval churches. The Irish sheela-na-gigs figured in his book among examples of erotic display with a protective purpose. The author also found that churches were especially placed under the influence of this symbol, and that these figures were believed to be a protection against enchantments of all kinds (Wright 35).

Interestingly enough, the author expressed the fact that in Ireland it was the female organ which was shown to be a protector upon churches. The elaborate but crude manner in which the figures were sculptured show that they were considered objects of great importance at one time. They were carved on a block that served as a keystone to the arch of the doorway of a church, where they could be seen by all who entered. The author also said that people had given them the name of *Shela-na-Gig*, which means in Irish “Julian the Giddy”, which is a simple term for an immodest woman. Note, however, that the derivation of the term “sheela-na-gig” is not clear, even though it meant something like “vulva woman” (Walker 931). The author also maintained that the Irish understood that they were intended as protective charms against the destruction of the evil eye. Thus, the author interpreted the

sheela-na-gig figures as apotropaic, employed to ward off evil, and in this conviction, he follows the viewpoint of the Irish antiquarians.

Along pilgrimage routes in Europe, there developed a range of exhibitionist figures whose function was to alert the faithful to the dangers of the sin of lust (Weir 58). The emphasis on the genitalia, which were considered usually enlarged, related to the Church's teaching that sinners were punished in hell through the bodily organs by which they had committed offenses. Curiously, "lust" was a sin which pertained particularly to women. In Romanesque, and later, in Gothic art, "lust" was often portrayed as a naked woman with breasts and genitalia eaten by toads and serpents. This, in turn, is an adaptation of an image known in antiquity as the "Tellus Mater," or the Earth Mother.

Obviously, the sheela-na-gig figures held a specific purpose for the pagans who created them. One might justifiably gather that to ward off evil and to promote fertility were features that went hand in hand. Perhaps this had a bearing on the functions of the sheela-na-gigs, which could have been conceived as mainly apotropaic, but did possibly lend themselves to fertility beliefs, depending on the circumstances and on the individual character of the carving around which the varying functions developed, thus formulating the idea that the sheelas themselves were a primitive receptacle of reverence or prayer.

In modern times, the preservation of the sheela-na-gig motif has been viewed in a more positive light: it has become a symbol for active female power. In Visibly Female (1982), Gloria Orenstein wrote that as the archetype of the Great Goddess reemerges, women artists are bringing to light energetic psychic forces, symbols, images, artifacts, and rituals whose configuration constitute the basic paradigm of a new feminist myth for our time (Orenstein 158).

Beginning in 1983, Nancy Spero began using the figure called the "sheela-na-gig" in large scroll paintings. To her, the sheela-na-gig motif represented the Celtic Goddess of fertility and destruction (Withers 51). Spero was also involved in

setting up politically active feminist organizations in New York. Her work has continued to explore the social position of women.

The opportunity to travel to Ballyvaughn, Ireland, in June of 2002, brought for this researcher the introduction of the sheela-na-gig, first seen at Kilnaboy Church, County Clare. This first encounter led to further exploration of this curious figure, leading her to conclude that more research is needed in this area of study.

Methodology

1. An exhaustive search of written materials will be performed to discover the historical significance, functions and meanings of the sheela-na-gig figures. Specific documents such as rare books, catalogues, texts and articles, and other relevant sources will be consulted.
2. Numerous specific examples of sheela-na-gig figures will be considered and compared from various regions in Ireland. Color reproductions will be included.
3. Specific references to work by Nancy Spero and other related feminist artists who utilized the sheela-na-gig image in their art will be included along with reproductions.

Limitations

1. The research will be limited to three specific areas of inquiry: the original pagan culture that created the sheela-na-gig figures, their evolution and use as artifacts in the Romanesque and other Medieval churches, and their resurfacing as manifestations in the art of contemporary feminist artists, such as Nancy Spero (1926-).
2. This study will concentrate on the various meanings and functions these figures have conveyed as they developed and evolved from their pagan origins through Medieval Christian usage, and finally through their resurfacing in the art of contemporary feminist artist Nancy Spero.
3. Further research may reveal other artists who incorporate or redefine the form of the sheela-na-gig for their own inventive purposes.

Definitions and Terms

1. apotropaic: designed to avert or ward off evil.
2. bowdlerized: to expurgate (as a book) by omitting or modifying parts considered vulgar; to modify by simplifying or distorting in style or content.
3. tabula rasa: Latin for "blank slate".
4. seigneurial: defined as a type of church built by a patron whose concern was his own relationship to God, and whose commissioned sculpture spoke of that personal concern. This type of church may be associated with a stone castle complex, such as Kilpeck church.

CHAPTER II

The Irish Antiquarian Discovery of the Twelfth Century Romanesque

Motif: Interpretations of the Sheela

One of the earliest literary references to the name of “sheela-na-gig” was from John O’Donovan’s *Ordnance Survey Letters* for Co. Tipperary, 1840 (Andersen 10). In his reference, he describes the figure found at Kiltinane Church, Co. Tipperary, as being called a “Sheela-Ny-Gigg”. This was the local name given to a figure carved in a large, rectangular slab, applied horizontally as a quoin in the south angle of the west wall of the church (O’Donovan 152). At about the same time the name was also recorded for a sketch completed by artist Thomas J. Westropp, of a found grotesque carving from the ruined church at Rochestown, Co. Tipperary. Both of these figures are now missing, the Rochestown sheela-na-gig having been missing since approximately 1860 and the Kiltinane figure having been stolen in January, 1990. Only sketches of them remain today (See Plate I and Plate IV).

Understanding the work of these antiquarian artists and authors is the necessary first step in the quest for an understanding of the figures themselves, as well as for the problems it has produced for subsequent scholarly approaches to the topic. In all, only two books, several pamphlets, and some articles found mostly from antiquarian journals from the 1840’s sums up the existing literature, all lacking firm dating and clear architectural and iconographic contexts. The first source was in letters written by members of the Ordnance Survey’s Topographical Department during their fieldwork in Co. Tipperary in the 1840’s. Another was in the presentation given by Edward Clibborn, clerk of the Royal Irish Academy in the 1830’s and 1840’s, which was recorded in the Royal Irish Academy’s *Proceedings* (Bleeke 12). This presentation consisted of a scrapbook Clibborn had compiled and which contained a number of sheela sketches, two of the sketches being reproduced for John

Windele's Miscellaneous Antiquarian Gleanings in the early 1840's. For lack of better scholarly interest, the discovery and cataloging of the sheela-na-gig figures through the Irish Ordnance Survey had undeniably placed the interpretation of these sculptures in an exciting but problematic light. It appears that a continuum of scholarly interest in the topic of sheela-na-gigs was not deemed worthy of investigation.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate some of the problems concerning the origins of the sheela-na-gig figures, including the disengagement of the sheela sculptures from their local, physical and social contexts in which they were found, as presented in the *Ordnance Survey Letters*. Interest will also be placed on the major topic of controversy, as written and described by George Petrie during this time period, the Irish round towers, and their links to these sculptures. This association, in turn, does raise important questions about nineteenth century historical heritage in Ireland, its relationship to Irish nationalism, and the continuing prospects for the study of the sheela-na-gigs.

This chapter is therefore preparatory in the following ways. First, it is intended to prepare the ground for further discussion about the prehistorical and historical lineage of the figures. Second, it reveals how nineteenth century antiquarians interpreted these images simply as "mysteries", unwilling to accept the challenge these images imposed upon them. Third, it provides the basis for a more comprehensive assessment of the figures, within its own historical and evolutionary capabilities, to be seen as a correction to the divergence produced by previous scholarship, and now placed into modern contemporary context.

The Problem of Historical Heritage

There are a wide variety of explanations and descriptions for the sheela-na-gig sculptures. Recent interpretations in literature clearly point to the enigmatic quality and erotic power they possess. Yet, in more earlier periods, it appears that their descriptions were relegated only to the footnotes of antiquarian journals. This fact

among others has contributed to the modern viewpoint of 'marginalization' in the reception of the sheela-na-gigs, as a conclusion to Ireland's nineteenth century historical heritage approach. This idea is based on the following criteria: 1) the lack of scholarly writing on the subject of the images, 2) the connection between the pagan Celtic Irish Sheela and Romanesque architecture of twelfth century Ireland, 3) the fact that many sheela-na-gigs were not resting "in situ", but were removed intentionally from their original locations, placed in isolation, away from their predetermined and intended setting, and 4) the antiquarian reception of the figure as a non "high art" subject matter. This evidence, as a whole, clearly points to the problem of historical heritage and scholarly research on behalf of these sculptures.

Historically, the name "sheela-na-gig" has been applied to these sculptures since at least the mid-nineteenth century, but different derivations have been suggested. The Irish rendering is usually "Sile na gCioch" (pronounced Sheela-na-gee och) or "old hag of the breasts", or "Sile ina Gh'uib" meaning "old woman on her hunkers." The word "Sheela or Sile" means "femininity", but it also means a Hag or Spiritual Woman and it also relates to the word for a Spirit or Fairly in Irish, the "Sidhe" (pronounced Shee). The word "Gig" is usually interpreted as gCioch or Giob meaning the breasts or the buttocks, but it could also be related to such words as "Gui," meaning "to pray." The figures were also known as the names of saints or were commonly referred to as the "Hag" or the "Cailleach" (meaning both "old woman" or "nun") or the "Idol." Other alternative names were applied to identify the images as representations of specific individuals, so as it appeared in oral information collected in the *Ordnance Survey Letters* (Guest 110, 114, 115, 127).

As the evidence has indicated, the lack of scholarly writing on the subject of "sheela-na-gigs" creates a void in the actual meaning of these sculptures and their placement in a medieval Christian context. We have only the writings of Victorian and modern scholars to guide us in deciphering the mysteries of this figure. Yet one indication of the probably meaning and historical lineage of these figures is the fact

that while the Irish sheela-na-gig is found in ecclesiastical church settings, they are also found in such places as towers and holy wells. Just as important, they are usually placed at the entrance of passage ways and holy sites, indicating their possible significance as protective and gateway figures.

The origins and antecedents of the sheela-na-gig are steeped in antiquity. The dominant view is that these figures derive from pre-Christian or pagan heritage in Europe. There is also general agreement that these images can be seen as part of the stratified accumulation of religious history, with the Christian religion as the latest strata or overlay of the religious and pagan history of the region. This would also imply that the transition from pagan to Christian was not strict and clearly demarcated, with the result that many pagan figures and symbols were retained within the Christian context. Modern research has indicated that the medieval sheela-na-gig appeared during a time when the Old Religion of pagan Europe was being eradicated by Christianity. Christianity was viewed as the last overlay of religious history to be applied over a rich depth of Paleolithic, Old European, and Indo-European traditions.

As well, modern research has now indicated that the origins and the significance of the sheela-na-gig may lie within the formation and structure of Irish culture. Scholars point out that the old Indo-European culture was constructed from hybrid social origins, which was both matriarchal and patriarchal. Within these cultures, women were placed in a position to inherit land, to hold positions of leadership, etc., and were therefore economically viable. This meant that within the society as well as in the religious structures, women held power. This female predominance is reflected in the legacy of powerful female cultures and legend.

This legacy of powerful female figures as part of the historical matrix of the Irish culture provides the researcher with a starting point to interpret the significance of the female sheela-na-gig figure. This also opens up possibilities for research areas of Irish myth and folklore where the female figure is strongly represented and plays a

powerful and influential role. This aspect provides the foundation from which to address one of the central questions that concerns this thesis: namely, why were these sculptures included and tolerated within Christian ecclesiastical art and architecture?

The conflicting theories about the origins of the sheela-na-gig must also take into account whether the figures originated as indigenous Irish artifacts or whether they were imported from Romanesque churches in mainland Europe. While this is a crucial issue, as the latter theory would tend to suggest that the figures were meant to represent the dangers of sin or lust in line with European church doctrine, the indigenous origins would suggest a much larger and deeper, and more positive historical matrix and meaning to the figures.

What is generally accepted is that there are two main antecedents for the sheela-na-gig sculptures: the continental Romanesque architectural motif and the sculptures of pagan Celtic Ireland. It is also accepted that the Norman roots of the sheela figures manifested in medieval Europe in the Romanesque style, derived from and related to the classical elements of Roman architecture which spread throughout Europe to Ireland. However, there is difficulty in attempting to make a clear and distinct separation between the Romanesque and the Celtic origins of the sheela-na-gig. This difficulty is further emphasized by the fact that there is an essential difference in Romanesque ecclesiastical art that separates it from its classical origins. This difference hints at the paganistic undertones that underlie twelfth century ecclesiastical architecture.

Research has shown that the first dated sheela-like figure appeared among stone carvings on twelfth century Norman Romanesque churches in France and Spain. They were located on the corbels, which are minor components in the architectural scheme of things, but critical in the history of the sheelas. Corbels are brackets which support roofs or cornices, forming part of the decorative facade of buildings. Often each corbel was adorned by a carved figure, which might be distorted to

emphasize the burden of weight. Corbels were not so important as to be under the careful scrutiny of the monks supervising the construction of a church, and the stone carvers could let their imaginations run unrestrained, creating a strange sub-world of Romanesque art (Andersen 47-48). Interestingly enough, the theory of Romanesque influence in England is supported by the fact that records have indicated that the Romanesque architectural construction of Kilpeck Church began in the early twelfth century after the high steward of Hugh de Mortimer, Oliver de Merlimond, had just made a pilgrimage through France to the shrine of St. James of Compostela in Spain, early in the 1130's, where he was undoubtedly influenced by Romanesque art and architecture. Here, the artistic impact of Oliver's pilgrimage took the form of importations of Romanesque motifs and compositions, as determined by art historians (West 163).

Historical documentation of sheela-na-gigs and their variations are found extensively in Europe, namely in Western France, northern Spain, the British Isles, and Ireland. Yet the question of the distribution of these figures is complicated by the fact that many of the figures in Ireland were destroyed during a later time. An estimate of the number of figures that have been found overall is as follows: approximately 100+ in Ireland and about thirty-five in the British Isles. In France and Spain, where the figures are smaller and hidden among other church carvings, the numbers are even more difficult to ascertain. Contemporary scholars conducting intensive research have counted over sixty female exhibitionist figures in France and some forty in Spain (Weir and Jerman 129-134).

Early Discoveries and the Irish Ordnance Survey

Beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century, Irish antiquarians began cataloging the sheela-na-gig figures found on various ecclesiastic and secular buildings. The Kiltinane sheela-na-gig figure was the first figure mentioned and recorded in a journal, yet other discoveries were being documented as well. The

earliest dated figure was found on a Romanesque building called The Nun's Church, built in 1167 at Clonmacnoise, an Irish center for learning during the Middle Ages, located near the banks of the Shannon River.

The earliest recorded British sheela-na-gig figure is the one located at Kilpeck (c. 1134) in Herefordshire, England, at the Church of St. Mary and St. David. In his lithographic record (dated 1840), Victorian artist George R. Lewis created detailed illustrations of this unique Romanesque church, including the now famous corbel of a sheela-na-gig. In observation, however, Lewis's rendering of this figure was bowdlerized, when he removed the hands from the labia, reducing the size of the vulva, and enlarging the mouth (Caviness 164). This work, as described, was later published in London in 1842 (Andersen 9) and is titled, Illustrations of Kilpeck (see Plate V).

In relationship to these early discoveries, modern scholarship has suggested that the earliest Celtic precursors of the Irish sheela-na-gig were found in a Celtic grave dating back to the fourth century B. C. in Reinheim, Germany (Rynne 190). This figure, which is similar in style to the Irish sheela-na-gig, was carved on a gold armlet.

While Romanesque architectural settings must be taken into account in the documentation of these early discoveries, the concept of the sheela-na-gig's Celtic origins in history and prehistory becomes increasingly significant, especially in the light of work by the Irish antiquarians, John O'Donovan (1806-1861) and George Petrie (1789-1866). The work of these researchers has not only demonstrated their dedication to the cultural history of Ireland, but it also has provided insight into the question of the prevalence of sheela-na-gigs within Christian ecclesiastical settings.

Part of the answer to the mystery of these figures might be found in the Celtic history of Ireland, and the fact that Irish culture remained relatively isolated and unaffected by cultural invasion for a long period of time. Never occupied or conquered by the Romans, the early Irish were able to keep their pagan Celtic culture alive well into the Christian era, when pagan beliefs infiltrated the medieval

churches rather than being condemned. Could it be possible then, that the pre-Christian and early Christian carvings of Ireland were the harbingers of the medieval sheela-na-gigs?

There are certainly many early Irish antecedents to the sheela-na-gig which point to a Celtic pagan heritage and its continuance into the twelfth century. Jorgen Andersen, in his important work, The Witch on the Wall, states that many examples of early Celtic-Christian sculptures were found in the Lough Erne area of Northern Ireland (Andersen 73). These early figures bear a striking resemblance to later figures found. For example, a sculpture called "The Bishop's Stone", has "thick lips", which resembles the later Irish sheela-na-gig from Co. Cavan. Here, one cheek is marked, with the same mark echoed in the Kiltinane sheela-na-gig. Also, the carving has a large head and an abbreviated body typical of Celtic tradition, similar in proportion to many many Irish sheela-na-gigs. There are other similar examples that can be cited as well (see Plate VI and Plate VII).

The evolution of the sheela-na-gig, in terms of Irish political and social history, must also be taken into account in this discussion on the origins of the figures. Ireland was invaded by England in 1169. In an effort to reduce the power of the Celtic Irish church, Pope Adrian IV gave permission for King Henry II to proceed with this invasion. Prior to this event, the Irish church was less conservative and more susceptible to unorthodox ideas (attitudes which were to prevail even after the invasion). For example, the old Celtic customs of remarriage and divorce were retained and, more importantly, unlike the European medieval church, there was no repression of female sexuality (Kelly 7, 45). Even after the Norman Romanesque architectural style was imported from England and established in Ireland during this time period, it still retained its Celtic origins and undercurrents that were visible in the art and architecture of the churches. In fact, it appears that the indigenous Irish tradition transformed the Norman Romanesque motif.

George Petrie: Antiquarianism and Cultural Nationalism

Much of the evidence pertaining to the Irish origins of the sheela-na-gig, as well as other artifacts and architecture, was established by antiquarian researchers like George Petrie (1789-1866). It is very significant that Petrie was known as both an artist and illustrator, as well as an antiquarian and historian. These qualities, undoubtedly, aided him in his sensitivity and intuitive response to the art and architecture of Ireland. He joined the Topographical Department of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in August, 1835. While he was assigned as the general superintendent of the department (Mercier 12), he applied himself to his field of expertise which was in the area of antiquarian and orthographical investigations and local history as well as the description of ancient monuments.

It is outside the focus of this study to delve too deeply into the political ramifications of Irish cultural history during this period. However, it should be noted that Petrie faced problems in his estimation and recording of Irish cultural history from the English authorities who wished to downplay the significance and independent origins of Irish culture. In light of this, Petrie's investigations and reports were often controversial and at times even curtailed, for fear of raising nationalistic issues.

Petrie was held responsible for producing a publishable "memoir" to accompany the map of each county, drawing on all the information collected by the various branches of the Topographical Department. His work, titled "On the History of Antiquities of Tara Hill", for which he was awarded a gold medal by the Royal Irish Academy in 1837, was to have formed part in the memoir for County Meath. Only one memoir, however, was published. It was the memoir published in 1837, for part of the city of Londonderry. Even though this memoir was acclaimed by scientific bodies and the general public, the British government objected to the publication of further memoirs as being too costly, and Petrie and his staff were gradually discharged in 1841-2. In reaction to the British government's decision, it was widely believed in Ireland that the authorities feared that the Irish national feeling would be

heightened by such reminders of Ireland's turbulent history and ancient culture.

The Importance of Petrie's Influence

The work of George Petrie has a far reaching influence on the understanding of Irish cultural history and the significance of found artifacts, such as the sheela-na-gigs. Illustrations of landscapes and monuments, based on, but without acknowledgment of, Petrie's drawings, filled the pages of many books about Ireland during the 1880's.

Petrie's best known work in relation to the sheela-na-gig and other artifacts is The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland (1845). His influence on Irish culture and history is well documented. It has been written that late Victorian Dublin had three cultural institutions that were influenced by Petrie's work. One was the Royal Hibernian Academy, which placed his work on display during its very first exhibition. Another, The Royal Irish Academy, which in the year of his death was preparing to elect him as its next president, owed many items in its fine library of Irish manuscripts thanks to his efforts. Additionally, there was the National Museum of Ireland, which took over the Royal Irish Academy's Museum of Antiquities in 1877, having been first set in order by Petrie in 1829 and enlarged through his ability as a collector and fund raiser starting in 1837. Without question, Petrie's influential catalog of pre-Christian and early Christian Irish art has remained unsurpassed.

The Ordnance Survey's maps that Petrie produced were meticulous and they contained a great number of prehistoric and early Christian sites and monuments. It is said that Petrie had the knowledge to distinguish between pagan and Christian, Irish Romanesque and Anglo-Norman remains. An example of his contribution can be ascertained by the "round tower controversy". His publication titled, "Essay on the Origin and Uses of the Round Towers in Ireland" (1833), became controversial in that it proved that the famous round towers of Ireland were not of Danish or Phoenician heritage but Celtic in origin. He was also one of the first writers to document Irish folklore and music, as demonstrated in his book published in 1855

and titled, *Ancient Music of Ireland* (Mercier 14).

Fethard and The Kiltinane Sheela-na-gig

One of the most famous sheela-na-gig figures was found at Kiltinane Church in County Tipperary. Yet it was stolen in 1990 and has never been recovered. The theft of the figure in 1990 aroused a great deal of international interest. This was due to the fact that the figure was unique and because the figure was an excellent example of the sexual and erotic overtones on the genre, with overtly graphic features.

Another figure is at Kiltinane Castle in the town of Fethard, also located in County Tipperary. Although it is not as impressive as the church figure, it is still an excellent example of a sheela-na-gig. This particular figure is known to have a circular object in her left hand that looks like a Celtic torque or a horseshoe. Interpretation leads one to believe, however, that this circular object is most likely a horseshoe because one can see from its photograph what appears to be evenly spaced nail holes (see Plate VIII).

Still, another figure at Fethard, the Watergate sheela-na-gig, should also be mentioned. This particular wall carving became the inspirational figure for the Danish archaeologist Jorgen Andersen in his well known and seminal work, The Witch on the Wall. These figures and many others in the area lend credence to the interpretation of the figures as Celtic in tradition. This aspect bears strongly on the patterns of interpretation of the sheela-na-gigs.

Patterns of Interpretations

There are two central interpretations of the meaning of the sheela-na-gig figures. These two general theories follow the debate about the Celtic as opposed to the European and Romanesque origins of the figures. From the work of researchers like Petrie, the weight of evidence lies with the Celtic and native origins of the sheela-na-gig. This also has a concomitant influence on the interpretation of the meaning and

significance of the figures. On the one hand, the sheela-na-gig figures are seen in a Christianized light as signifying a warning against the sins of the flesh. On the other hand, the interpretation which is growing in acceptance is that these figures relate to the ancient history of Ireland and as such are linked to the myths and legends of Irish culture and prehistory and particularly to the motif of the Mother Goddess and the age old mother figure, which coincides with a strong respect and awe for the feminine in Irish folklore.

In any assessment of the deeper roots and significance of the sheela-na-gig figures, one should be reminded that the Christian religion was not a “tabular rasa” springing up pristine in the medieval period. It took the Catholic Church centuries of concentrated efforts to eradicate the traditions of pagan Europe. From this perspective it becomes evident that Christianity is the final “coat of shellac” on the surface of religious history which began in the Paleolithic period. The implication here is that understanding the sheela-na-gig requires intensive study of Irish religious history prior to Christianity as well as researching into the Paleolithic period.

The mystery and enigmatic nature of this figure lies not only in the existence of the figure itself, but also in the tolerance to it in a period of extreme religious strictness, when pagan motifs were rejected. This figure was created at the very time when the Old Religion was being stamped out. It is also astounding to consider that the sheela-na-gig, with its bold and forthright imagery, was in stark contrast to the gentle ideal of the Virgin Mary. The contrast between the two is so sharp and yet both images coexisted within the same religious context. This scenario justifies the concept of ecclesiastical tolerance.

A further aspect that militates against the interpretation of the figures as warnings against sinful behavior is that on close scrutiny the attitude and appearance of the figures seem to be more joyful and life affirming than negative. The sheela prototypes found on corbels, appearing as a merry acrobat and with a smiling face, do not provide supporting evidence that indicates the figure as a symbolic

representation of lust.

Relating the sheela-na-gig to aspects of myth and folklore such as the “protector”, as the “guardian of the gateway” and as an image of fecundity and erotic power, opens up larger avenues of interpretation which have been adopted by contemporary commentators and artists. The idea of the sheela-na-gig as a protector or entrance guardian figure is an important pattern of interpretation to consider. For example, this can be seen in the connection of the sheela-na-gig with the guardian figure who in the old Irish stories appears as the “washer at the ford” or the “banshee”, and protector of the land.

The heritage of the sheela-na-gig as a redemptive force in other locations such as wells and rivers has also been considered and contributes to the overall interpretive complexity of the figures.

Furthermore, the importance of the “old women” in Celtic history cannot be underestimated with regard to an interpretation of the sheela-na-gig. In appearance, the sheela-na-gig could possibly resemble the “cailleach”, or the “old hag”. Her image combines both aspects of fertility and infertility. At times her chest is carved with skeletal ribs, with the bald head of either a newborn baby or an extremely aged crone. At times the figure does not appear as a “nurturing figure”, but rather as images of womanhood, in all her earthly mannerisms. The sheela-na-gig seems to be a representation of both paradox and contradiction, representing the primal extremes of both birth and death.

In conclusion, the significance of the sheela-na-gig figures may transcend the debate on their origins. Ultimately, the question of whether the insular sheelas are of pagan or Christian origin may be irrelevant, as early Celtic Christianity was not all that different from Celtic paganism. However, the Celtic origins are a crucial and essential aspect to its existence, and will be explored in depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

A Pagan Celtic or French Medieval Background for Sheela-na-gigs?

Interpretations of its Origins

Growing interest regarding the emergence of the sheela-na-gig figure has led to new ideas in modern scholarship that contemplate the origin of the figure.

Differences of opinion or the lack of historical evidence are just some of the problems which scholars continue to be fiercely divided about, in reference to the true pedigree and function of this imagery. Despite the continuance of these debates, modern theorists have arrived at two separate, yet convincing viewpoints, deserving of academic discourse and consideration.

One theory brought to the table is based on the work of Anthony Weir, whose research is founded on the pioneer work of Dr. Jorgen Andersen. His work examines the inclusion of exhibitionistic carvings found on the corbels and capitals of French Medieval Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture. Here, he examines how the figure could be associated with the religious iconography of the Church. His theory considers the possible motive for carving such images as a call for ecclesiastical reform within the Church itself. His theory suggests a connection between the Romanesque motif and the Anglo-Normans of Europe who brought with them their unique Romanesque style of church building to England and Ireland.

Another major theory considers the possibility of an ancient pagan Celtic origin for the figure and is based on the research of Professor Etienne Rynne. This line of thought provides evidence recognizing the existence of sheela-na-gig prototypes in pagan Iron Age sculpture (Clarke 81).

Determining the origin of the sheela-na-gig is an essential aspect of its existence. This chapter provides an opportunity for the comparison and contrast of these two major points of view, each proposing a different interpretation of the figure. Each

interpretation is based on the analysis of extensive research gathering in the twentieth century.

The underlying importance of this chapter is to establish that the sheela-na-gig figure evolved through its history. This evolutionary aspect is relevant in the approach to the figure. In order to fully understand the chain of evolutionary contexts assigned to the sheela-na-gig over time, an examination of both of these theories allows for the most probable conclusion to be made.

Jorgen Andersen: Achievements in Research

As a result of the pioneer work of Jorgen Andersen, who wrote and published in 1977 the first systematic study of the sheela-na-gig, entitled, The Witch on the Wall, interest in the subject has grown. In his research, Andersen gave a detailed analysis of the subject. He was able to prove a number of things through his research. First, Andersen was able to conclude that the sheela-na-gig figure was purely a European phenomenon, appearing in the late eleventh century, becoming common in the twelfth century, and continuing in Ireland with increasing rarity until the sixteenth century. Second, Andersen believed that the motif in the British Isles probably arrived with other motifs to enrich the repertoire of carvers looking generally towards France and the Continent for inspiration. He believes that these motifs didn't just come to the British Isles by pilgrims, but also by the Norman Conquest and the ensuing union with large parts of Western France with England. He established here that the female exhibitionist motif came to the British Isles from France, and he held the belief that a model for the sheela-na-gig, a merry acrobatic, was in fact on a corbel table of Saint-Quantin-de-Rancannes, concluding that the earliest specimens seemed to have originated in southwestern France, particularly in the Aquitainian areas of Saintonge, Poitou and Angoumois. He also reports one of the most convincing French examples comes from a church in Laon, the Church of Bruyeres et Montberault (Andersen 56). After Saintonge, Normandy is the likely place to trace the sheelas, or acrobatic subjects of an erotic nature, for one can find these themes

on some of the small, richly decorated country churches from the second half of the century. Andersen also reported that he was informed by the Secretary of the Commission of Inventaire for the Poitou-Charente district that there were over one hundred sheela-type figures in that part of France alone. Third, he was able to document other figures related to them by their sexual display or attributes, realizing that sheela-na-gigs are just one of dozens on non-biblical or non-classical subjects that are found on corbel tables and capitals. Churches in the neighborhood of Bayeux show sheela-na-gig motifs among the considerable array of corbel subjects. Examples of related figures include both humans and animals playing musical instruments, beast heads, human heads, acrobatic tumblers, shell fish, vegetable subjects, men in barrels, barrel toting, coital couples, simple frontal nudes, postures with female, male or anal exhibitionism, along with anus showers, beard pullers, mouth pullers, thorn pullers, grimacers, tongue protruders, and tress pullers often displaying their sex organs as well. Last of all, Andersen was able to prove that the figures had apparently been more popular and lasted longer in Ireland than in England. He concluded that while indeed sheela-na-gig carvings were placed mostly on or inside churches, Ireland possessed a large number of sheela-na-gigs located on secular buildings too, such as castles, towers, mills, and town walls (Weir and Jerman 17).

In addition to these findings, Andersen suggested that the post-Romanesque insular carvings are apotropaic, meaning that they are marginal figures set up to ward off evil, or an “attack” of misfortune. This belief was also shared by Thomas Wright, author of the book, The Worship of the Generative Powers, who wrote that he noticed that churches were placed particularly under the influence of the symbol, having found out that sheela-na-gigs were believed to be symbols of “protection” against enchantments of all kinds (Wright 35).

In conclusion of his study, Andersen brought to light the powerful argument in the discussion about whether sheela-na-gigs should be regarded as pagan in origin or

as a medieval Christian conception. He believes that the pagan origin idea can be less easily proved and less clearly illustrated than the possible continental, French origin for the motif. Based on the amount of evidence brought forth, he may very well be correct.

Eammon P. Kelly

The work of Jorgen Andersen has found support in the work of other scholarly studies. Eammon P. Kelly, of the National Museum of Ireland, and author of the book Sheela-na-gigs: Origins and Functions, states his belief as follows: because of the similarities found between the Irish and English sheela-na-gig carvings, in addition to the similarities of the carvings found on the European continent, these figures are all “connected” because of their similar contexts. This connection of similarities relate these figures to a common medieval European monastic culture (Kelly 45-51). His work is important because he elaborates on details concerning the carved stonework of churches -- particularly those found along the pilgrimage routes to centers such as the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. He wrote that the function for the range of exhibitionist figures, both male and female, together with related carvings, was to alert the faithful to the dangers of the sin of lust. Figures with emphasized, or enlarged genitalia, related to the Church’s teaching that sinners were punished in hell through the bodily organs by which they had offended (Kelly 10). He concluded as follows: carved in a European male dominated feudal society, the function of sheela-na-gigs was one which portrayed a negative view of women’s sexuality (Kelly 45).

Adding another significant fact in his assessment of Irish sheela-na-gigs, he said that where the original provenances of the small group of sheela-na-gigs found within the Pale are known, all appear to have religious associations. Found mostly in frontier towns of Anglo-Norman occupation, sheela-na-gigs are concentrated on a broad band from Dundalk Bay to the Shannon and South Cork, but absent from Wexford, Wicklow and Carlow, Donegal, Atrium, Leitrim, Sligo, and Mayo.

Additionally, the greatest concentration of sheela-na-gig figures are found in Co. Offaly (Weir 61).

The Work of Anthony Weir

Northern Irish writer, publisher, and contemporary poet Dr. Anthony Weir, in collaboration with James Jerman, wrote in 1986 the important work, Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches. Andersen's seminal work, The Witch on the Wall, had been clearly instrumental in Weir's academic approach to the sheela-na-gig and other exhibitionist figures of Irish medieval churches. Weir is responsible for other similar academic contributions including, Early Ireland: A Field Guide, published in 1980, and the essay "Exhibitionists and Related Carvings in the Irish Midlands: Their Origins and Functions", from Irish Midland Studies: Essays in Commemoration of N. W. English, published in 1980.

Weir's research is important because it revealed a certain geographical path on which the exhibitionist figures were discovered. This path was along the pilgrimage routes found on the European continent. The objective of his research was to retrace the historical movement of the sheela-na-gig motif in order to pinpoint its origin, within its general context of Romanesque sculpture. In effect, Weir was able to determine that the sheela-na-gig figure spread out from Aquitaine around 1050, reached Poitou and then northern Spain around 1070, before crossing over to England in the twelfth century. The earliest Romanesque exhibitionists are believed to date back to the second half of the eleventh century. There is also an indication that the sheela-na-gig traveled along with other motifs too, such as the beaked head and the biting horse's head, all a part of the high medieval Romanesque style of architectural decoration. As part of his analysis, Weir was able to conclude that the purpose of this motif was to deliver a particular Christian message: the illustration and condemnation of the sin of lust. "Lust" was considered the characteristic vice of comic tumblers, acrobats, showmen and itinerant entertainers, as well as troubadours and jongleurs, all very

popular in the Middle Ages, especially in the glittering courts and on the crowded roads of pilgrimage (Weir 58). Not to Weir's surprise, exhibitionistic figures frequently occurred in association with acrobats and dancers (Weir 59). Research has indicated that Romanesque carving was first and foremost a religious art form which sought out the teaching of the Scriptures, recording not which is past, but that which is still to come. It also appears that Romanesque carving reinforced the Christian message with any material which suited the occasion, including the extensive use of symbols (Weir and Jerman 35).

Weir determined that exhibitionist figures occurred chiefly along the pilgrimage roads fostered by Cluny; these roads are located southwest of the abbey. In addition, Weir found it strange that sheela-na-gig figures tended to be placed on Augustinian buildings, rather than Cluniac Benedictine buildings. Perhaps this "image of lust" figure, residing on church buildings, became a constant reminder for the monks of the two great virtues: chastity and poverty. Extending from Semur-en-Brionnais to Santiago de Compostela, exhibitionist figures could be found easily along the pilgrimage roads. Some exhibitionist figures can be located as far north as Seine Maritime and Kirkwall Cathedral in Orkney and as far south as Segovia (Andersen 153). Exhibitionist carvings are rare in Auvergne (where figures of monkeys are frequent), Southern Languedoc, Provence, Roussillon and Catalonia, with only two noted in Italy (Weir 68).

Sheela-na-gig figures are mostly carved on corbels. This means that the dispersal of Romanesque motifs was dependent upon the distribution of corbel stones in architecture. Corbel tables with decorated corbels reside mainly in Western France and Spain north of Madrid, and west of Catalonia. Yet in some places where corbels are rare, a few Romanesque carvings are found on capitals and on other decorated stonework. In England the sheela-na-gig figure may be found in various places, but generally they are found on the roof bosses, capitals and corbels of Romanesque churches. Weir adds that all but one of the forty

exhibitionists are associated with churches, the exception being an uncertain example at Royston Cave in Herefordshire, a sanctum of the Knights Templars (Weir 58).

Weir believed that the sheela-na-gig figure is an image of lust, but his theory fails to explain the presence of later Irish sheela-na-gigs upon castles. Notes found in nineteenth century Irish antiquarian journals state that local people believed that the sheela-na-gig was a symbol meant to ward off evil and enchantments of all kinds. This tradition seems to suggest that when the sheela-na-gig arrived in Ireland as part of a Christian campaign against sin, a new meaning, function and role was applied to the figure, and it was quickly absorbed into the native belief in powerful female protector, or as tutelary goddesses, as expressed today as a part of the Irish past.

The authors also addressed the remarks made by St. Bernard of Clairveaux, who made condescending remarks about the images found in Romanesque sculpture in the twelfth century, condemning the images as grotesque, silly and expensive, but not as pagan. Ironically, such a figure occurs in an English canon table probably from the eighth century, and now can be found in the Biblioteca Apostolica in the Vatican (Weir 58).

Among other historical findings, evidence reveals much about the people who commissioned the carvings and paid the masons. Most often responsible were churchmen (bishops and abbots), landowners, wealthy merchants, but sometimes it was the whole parish. In Europe, it was the ruling class that determined how the churches were to be decorated. In truth, the sheela-na-gig became a product of the twelfth century ecclesiastical reform, even if it did originate from ancient pagan ideas and images.

Following the Ancient Pagan Celtic Path: Etienne Rynne

One scholarly approach brought to light by Professor Etienne Rynne, a distinguished archaeologist from University College Galway, Ireland, is his theory of an even more ancient origin to these images. His theory suggests an association

between the ancient pagan Celts and figures similar to that of the sheela-na-gig, called “proto-types”, or “proto-sheelas”, by modern scholars. Rynne’s theory of a pagan Celtic background for sheela-na-gigs is supported by evidence that indicates a continental origin to the figures. His theory also supports the idea that sheela-na-gigs are part of the stratified accumulation of European religious history, implying here that the transition from pagan to Christian ideology was neither strictly nor clearly demarcated, thus resulting in the retention of many pagan figures and symbols within the Christian context of ecclesiastical art and design.

In 1987, Rynne published his theory which suggests that pagan Celtic “proto-sheelas” from the pagan Celtic Iron Age (c. 800-400 B. C.) were associated with a fertility cult which fused or was combined in some manner, with the male deity, the “Lord of the Animals” figure, the horned god, Cernunnos, of similar Celtic background, thus accounting for the medieval protection aspect and perhaps also for the absence of distinctive breasts on the otherwise clearly female sheela-na-gig figures. Here, Rynne suggests that such a “merger” or “fusion” of both male and female Celtic entities could also be expressed as another example of the Celtic love for ambiguity. In another approach, however, Rynne’s theory may indicate their concern for an idea that transcends sexuality.

Modern research has revealed that the Celts were a non-literate culture whose history was preserved only through oral tradition. With this lack of written history, their origin and movements remain elusive, as well as does their primitive practices and beliefs. Yet there are some ancient sources that give us small clues describing the Celts as a polytheistic and warrior-type society. What is important to realize here is that the art of the ancient Celtic tribes of the pre-Christian period, shaped and handled by artisans who accepted the old beliefs, was in some way, a more direct link with their religious past. This culture was, in fact, closely related to the natural world, as they revered their dead ancestors, particularly their kings and founders of families. They practiced various means of divination, observing movements of

birds, animals, fire and water. They relied on supernatural powers ruling the heavens and earth. Certain religious symbols had particular meaning and the heads of warriors possessed special powers. Vigorous male animals, such as the stag, were seen as special manifestations of supernatural power and the center of their universe was pictured as a great tree or pillar. It was natural that symbols and motifs were absorbed into the rituals they involved themselves in. Feasts were held in honor of gods and men, and animals were offered as sacrifices. All of this inspired their art and left an imprint on their lives. It is possible that the content found in such symbols as fertility figures reveals a powerful reflection upon life in nature. Beginning with the ancient cup shaped holes and vulva symbols as sculptured representations of the female nude, which are examples of the "life giving mother goddess", the image and symbol of the feminine principle of fertility in Celtic art, does in fact, transcend time. The rationalization is that since its early discoveries and with new material always being uncovered, Celtic art has provided an ongoing chain of artistic and religious experience. The originality of Celtic art consists of a stylization and expression that gives representations of human beings, animals and gods, a fantastical and disturbing character.

The "life giving mother goddess" symbol or figure was one of the earliest manifestations of the concept of "deity", and her symbolism unquestionably has been one of the most persistent features in the archaeological record of the ancient world. Likewise, symbolism of the female principle is indeed an overwhelming aspect found in Celtic iconography, as Celtic goddesses do portray a maternal character of birth, death, and regeneration. From the work titled, The Great Goddess, author Jean Markale bases his argument along the same line as Rynne's theory, writing that the representations of the sheela-na-gig are actually reproductions of a much more ancient model inherited from antiquity called "Terra", or "Earth Mother". He states that it is possible that her functions and origins have simply been forgotten over the centuries (Markale 52-53).

Similar scholarship supporting the analogy of an ancient pagan “mother goddess” to a Celtic goddess comes from another source, Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas claims that there are many descendants of the prehistoric “Life Giving Goddess”, including the Greek Artemis Eiliethia, Egyptian Baubo, Thracian Bendis, Venetic Reylia, Roman Diana, and the Irish Brigit. If this is true, then it is clear that this “life giving goddess” was destined to survive from one generation to the next, in one form or another, up to the present. With this in mind, the research of Gimbutas points to the “snake goddess” as a product of Celtic art. This found object resurfaced in a “princely” Celtic grave, befitting a princess or a queen, dating back to the fourth century B.C. in Reinheim (Saar), Germany, and becoming, as Rynne believes, the earliest precursor of the modern sheela-na-gig (Rynne 190) (see Plate IX). The figure was carved on a gold arm bracelet. The carved image itself is called an “ophidian/human hybrid,” and its eyes have a pronounced snake stare and her legs are snakes. The nose, mouth, and hands are human. The figure wears an owl headdress, and has wings and scaly shoulders. Owl heads or masks are again repeated on the ends of the bracelet. The owl headdress worn by this figure invokes the association of fertility, like a “mistress of the wild beasts”. Incidentally, this same combination of symbols is also found in much older Minoan art (1300-1100 B.C.). The “snake goddess” can be found from Scandinavia to Germany, on ships, and in the Pictish art of Scotland. Gimbutas believes that this goddess was symbol of the unity of all life in nature. The power was in water and stone, in tomb and grave, in animals and birds, representing, in essence, the perception of a sacredness and mystery of all that exists on Earth. This goddess, in effect, is an example of a transitional figure toward (Gimbutas 131-2), or an antecedent of, the pagan Celtic sheela-na-gig goddess symbol. Based on this archaeological interpretation of the “snake goddess” from Gimbutas in 1989, this contribution supports, effectively, the 1987 theory of Professor Rynne.

The famous second century B.C. Gundestrup Cauldron (see Plate X) depicts the

“horned” Celtic deity, Cernunnos, seated in a “squatting” or “cross-legged” posture among wild beasts. The interesting combination of this particular posture along with the display of the vulva has antecedents going back to ancient pagan Celtic times. In such particular instances, certain combinations of characteristics applies a dual purpose to the figure: an association with wild beasts, and second, as association with fertility. The Gundestrup Cauldron has some interesting links. First, this Cernunnos figure (see Plate XI) may have played a fertility role, which suggests and provides a link with the Reinheim figure, the snake goddess. The fertility aspect may be accurate as Cemunnos is identified as the “god of plenty.” Here, “fertility” and “plenty” can mean the same. The second link with this Cernunnos figure is how it relates to the Kiltinane Castle sheela-na-gig. The Kiltinane figure holds a circular disk (a torque, horseshoe, or mirror) in its left hand, and a slender dagger shape in the right (a comb?). Both of these figures’ hands are upraised. The similarities here are interesting and suggest that Celtic art may in fact, possess a duality of significance and purpose, which is naturalistic and symbolic.

The pagan Celtic deity Cemunnos, usually resting in his squatting or cross-legged position and with his arms holds two objects in his upraised hands, has an association with wild beasts that suggests a dual purpose of the image. In his left hand he holds the head of a snake, another symbol of fertility. In his right hand is a “torque”, a symbol of his divinity.

Authors Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, following the research of Etienne Rynne, also favor a Celtic origin for the image of the sheela-na-gig. Ross, however, suggests the alternative interpretation that the sheela-na-gig portrays, instead, the territorial or war goddess in her hag-like aspect, who, in the Irish tales, was ritually mated with the king elect in the guise of a hideous and sexual old hag who became the most loving woman when the king consented to have intercourse with her (Sheridan and Ross 66). In 1975 these two authors also reported that medieval grotesque art stems directly from earlier pagan beliefs, that the representations are

pagan deities dear to those which the Church was unable to eradicate and therefore allowed to coexist, side-by-side, with the objects of Christian orthodoxy (Sheridan and Ross 8).

According to Jorgen Andersen, there are also Irish antecedents of the figure which suggest a Celtic pagan heritage and its continuance in the twelfth century. In relationship to the work of Professor Rynne, Andersen gave specific examples of early Celtic Christian sculptures in his study, such as the one found in the Lough Erne area of Northern Ireland and the one from Cavan, County Cavan, with one cheek marked, large head, abbreviated body of Celtic tradition, and similar in proportion to many Irish sheela-na-gig examples.

Figures Bearing Celtic Traditions

There are sheela-na-gig figures that display attributes associating them with pagan deities and ancient fertility rites existing in Ireland, England, and on the Continent. Some hold discs or objects which may be solar or lunar symbols associated with the different personifications of a mother goddess. Others have holes drilled in a pattern similar to those known in the Longdendale valley of the Derbyshire Peak District, of England. These may have been magical symbols associated with a goddess (Clarke 81-82). Another example is the Seir Kieran sheela-na-gig, from Co. Offaly, said to have been attached to a medieval church. She has a series of holes drilled in the genital area and two further holes in the crown of the head, but there is no evidence to support the view that the holes are connected with a fertility cult. The figure now resides at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin (Kelly 23) (see Plate XII).

Another sheela-na-gig from Lavey, Co. Cavan, shows a circular object held between the left arm and the body. An interesting comparison with this figure is the exhibitionist figure on a quoin at Copgrove church, Yorkshire, which is depicted grasping a disc-shaped object in the right hand (see Plate XIII).

The circular object these figures hold in their hands may likely be a mirror and the

slender object held specifically by the Kiltinane Castle figure appears to be a comb. These particular objects are also found on some Irish medieval mermaid figures on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Mermaid representations have a classical interpretation as symbols of vanity and lust. Many mermaid representations exist in the same region where sheela-na-gigs are most common (Kelly 34).

Another characteristic found on some figures is what is called “grooving”. Some sheela-na-gigs show striations on the cheeks or brows, possibly representing wrinkles or tattoos. Examples include carvings from Cavan town, Clonbulla and Seir Kieran, both from Co. Offaly, and two Co. Tipperary examples, one located on the wall at Fethard, and the other in Fethard Abbey. These grooves also appear on a head carved on the Kiltinane Castle gateway. These grooved marks also appear on some French exhibitionist figures, which include the one at Givrezac (Charente Maritime) and the one at Bou-de-Baigne (Charente).

In conclusion, modern scholars are exploring the origins of the sheela-na-gig and have been able to shed new light on the subject in many ways. These theorists have opened new doors for understanding these unique figures. Each approach has produced a reasonable and logical conclusion, based on historical facts and adequate concrete evidence. However, in comparing these two separate ideas, one theory appears more convincing than the other. Based on the degree of evidence each theory has provided, Weir's view of the French origins for the motif is more convincing. His theory concludes that the sheela-na-gig was a medieval Christian conception whose original function was to serve as a Christian warning against the sin of lust, within the general context of Romanesque sculpture. The fact that these figures are found within their own original French ecclesiastical settings is most important when determining their original function.

Moving on to twelfth century England, the significance of the sheela-na-gig found resting in its original context is an important link in understanding its inclusion and placement in ecclesiastical settings. One such example is found at Kilpeck church,

Herefordshire, and will be examined in depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

The Sheela-na-gig Corbel at Kilpeck Church

The sheela-na-gig corbel carving on the church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, provides an effective beginning for a more comprehensive assessment of the figure, within its own evolutionary and historical development. Carved corbels are rare in Ireland, yet corbels, highly decorated architectural brackets, are a typical feature of Norman Romanesque churches in England and France (Weir and Jerman 38). These features were more numerous in the past, but over time, many have been removed by those who had no apparent interest in archaeological preservation (Cave 17). Built in the 1130's, the small ornate church of St. Mary and St. David (see Plate XIV), one of the first structures in that part of Britain to have rib vaulting, is considered a Romanesque masterpiece of the local Norman school. On its exterior runs a fascinating series of almost ninety corbels, an obvious wealth of Romanesque motifs. This series, carved by the sculptors of the Herefordshire School of England, includes the now famous sheela-na-gig corbel. According to the architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), "a corbel table runs all around, decorated with flat zigzag, rope, etc., and the corbels are the best preparation for the profusion of decorative sculpture and fantasy throughout the Church" (Pevsner 202). This includes other integrated sculpture that is displayed on the south doorway (see Plate XV) and chancel arch (King 82). In his research on Kilpeck, Pevsner pointed out that not all of the corbels of the Kilpeck series were carved by the same artist, adding that the best of the Kilpeck church corbel series possesses a comic strip quality. Also, Pevsner notes that the corbels are not the work of the brilliant master carver of the south doorway (Pevsner 202).

This chapter begins with a review of scholarship that establishes the history and identity of the Herefordshire School of Sculpture, the group of master craftsmen

commissioned to do the work at Kilpeck. An investigation into the Herefordshire School may provide information about the meaning, possible sources, origins of the images, and the choice of sculptural forms commissioned at Kilpeck. Understanding the Herefordshire School creates a greater appreciation for what these sculptors contributed towards the full formation of English Romanesque architecture. This chapter will then turn to the evidence that examines the arrangement and placement of the corbels, and the functions they performed. A final effort will be made to demonstrate how the sheela-na-gig corbel fits within the context and meaning of the corbel series, and how it relates to the Kilpeck community and parish church, in order to examine any connections regarding local customs.

The sheela-na-gig corbel at Kilpeck bears the weight of great importance in the development of this thesis, due to the fact that this particular sheela-na-gig corbel may be observed in its original context as it was meant to be seen after the church was completed. This fact is significant because it generates possibilities: it makes Kilpeck not only favorable for the discovery of the figure's significance, but it also provides credibility for the twelfth century dating of this Romanesque motif.

The History of the Church at Kilpeck

The earliest literary reference to a church at Kilpeck is found in a charter contained in The Book of Llan Day. The ninth century Kilpeck charter, #169b, states that the church at Kilpeck, written as "Ecclesia Cilpedic," with all its "ager" (land) around it, was donated in 650 A. D. to the bishop of Llandaff (Evans and Rhys 169-170; Brooke 18-49). The Book of Llan Day also records that "in the time of King William and Earl William and Walter de Lacy," an English bishop named Herewald consecrated the church of St. David (Welsh name Dewi) at Kilpeck and ordained a priest there.

At the time of the dedication of the new church, William Fitz Norman would have been the new lord of Kilpeck, as well as its Norman patron. According to the Domesday survey of 1086, Kilpeck (entered as Chepeete), consisting of a community of 57 men with 19 ploughs, plus two serfs (slaves) and four oxmen

working arable land enough for an additional three ploughs, was given by the Conqueror to William Fitz Norman (Shoemith 164) (see Plate XVI). In 1134, the Church of St. David, along with the Chapel of St. Mary in the castle, were given to Gloucester Abbey as a Benedictine Priory, by Hugh de Kilpeck, son of William Fitz Norman, Lord of Kilpeck Castle. It is documented that in 1428, the dependent Benedictine cell was united to Gloucester Abbey. Hugh de Kilpeck, also known as Hugh Forester, had built the present Church of St. Mary and St. David around 1140 as part of his seigneurial castle complex. Current opinion states that the present church was built by Hugh prior to its donation to the priory, although it could have been built by the monks after its donation (Hamer 59; 141; Thurlby 38).

Located close to the Welsh border, the twelfth century church at Kilpeck was constructed and maintained within a Welsh peasant community, rather than within an English controlled area. In regards to its architecture, Kilpeck's ornately carved door contains elements of Celtic, Saxon and even Scandinavian (Viking) art and is seen as the epitome of the Herefordshire School of Sculpture. Kilpeck church was designed as a "three cell" structure: a nave, the pre-chancel, and a semicircular apse (see Plate XVII). Also, the church has three Romanesque windows, of which the one at the west, is by far the most intricate (see Plate XVIII). On each side there's a design of an interlaced snake topped by a "green man". Today, Kilpeck church stands as a celebrated example of English Romanesque architecture and carving, but, the exterior carving of this church is where special interest lies.

The Herefordshire School of Sculpture and Kilpeck

In the beginning of the twelfth century a group of stone carvers worked together along the Welsh Border region. The master craftsmen of this school, members of the Herefordshire School of Sculpture, created the most remarkable collection of church stone carvings, both devoutly religious and wildly pagan, within the British Isles. However, these sculptors have remained anonymous. No great sculptor ever gained individuality above his contemporaries, unless by accident a name or

two had been preserved as the receipt of payments in the royal or other accounts. These sculptors were the humble workers who were paid wages slightly more than those who were working on the plain walls or roofs of the buildings.

The carvings created by these twelfth century sculptors were produced from a pink colored sandstone found locally in England. Today, their work may be seen in English churches from Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, and Shropshire. Soldiers in ribbed tunics and egg shaped heads and elastic limbs, bug eyed beasts, especially dragons, of all shape and sort, savage tendrils of entangling foliage abound. These motifs, many of them still as sharp as the day they were cut nearly 900 years ago, are to be found again and again throughout this region and particularly at Kilpeck church. They seem to be obviously the product of a single sculptural school, if not actually from one extremely inventive and skilled artist.

The Herefordshire School of Romanesque Sculpture, written in 1999 by Malcolm Thurlby, reveals much about this school in general and about Kilpeck church in particular. Thurlby's research examined the remaining physical architectural evidence left behind by the powerfully rich and sophisticated Norman rulers of the Welsh Marches, who ordered and paid for the sculptural work, and of the master sculptors who actually created the carvings. Thurlby's book also revealed much about the symbolism of the figures they used. There is little known, however, about the master craftsmen themselves. The fundamental contribution in this area was made by art historian George Zarnecki. He identified the two leading sculptors of this school, their individual work distinguishable from everyone else's. They are designated as the wildly expressive "Chief Master", and the more subtle "Aston Master," the latter so called because Zarnecki suggested that he first worked on the tympanum of the north doorway of St. Giles in Aston. Both of these masters worked at Kilpeck church, and they also collaborated on the now mostly destroyed church at Shobdon in the northwest of Herefordshire. The remains of the surviving arches and two tympana from Shobdon church suggest a church whose

embellishments must have surpassed even Kilpeck in beauty and strangeness. However, what information Shobdon church could have provided will never be known.

In among all the Christian symbolism, the master carvers of the Herefordshire School of Sculpture liked to smuggle the occasional allusion to an even older faith. For example, on the Baptismal font in St. Michael's Church at Castle Frome, Christ squats for Baptism in a whirlpool in the River Jordan with an unidentified fishy guard of honor. In the shadows under the font, bearing this Christian scene on their naked backsides, are three mysterious human figures crouching in characteristic ribbed shirts. Only one still retains his head. This pleasing slice of pagan strangeness, of unknown significance, is like a little breath of primitive wildness that underlines the Christian ceremony of cleansing and rebirth.

All reference to the Herefordshire School of Sculpture must begin and end with Kilpeck. This tiny village located just a few miles south of Hereford (see Plate XIX) holds what has been called the "masterpiece" of the Herefordshire School, the Church of St. Mary and St. David. Its pink sandstone carvings around the windows and doors, under the eaves and in the chancel arch, are examples of artistry fueled by uninhibited imagination that today would be considered as completely unmatched.

Hugh of Kilpeck, the royal forester who commissioned the church in the 1130s, may have, at one time, been on pilgrimage to some of the great shrines of Europe, like many of his social equals. He would have certainly picked up tips from the other Marcher lords who all knew each other, men such as Lord Hugh Mortimer of Wigmore and his chief steward Oliver de Merlimond, who certainly did go on a pilgrimage around this time to Santiago de Compostella. It is likely that all kinds of ideas, based on what was seen in the churches of Santiago, Rome and elsewhere in Europe, were brought back and influenced the architectural decoration of English Romanesque churches.

The band of corbels, or projecting stones, encircle Kilpeck church under the eaves, and every stone is carved with some humorous or grotesque figure. These corbels include a dog, a rabbit, pigs and lions, a muzzled bear with two human heads in its mouth, gaping devils, and a sheela-na-gig displaying her sexual parts uninhibitedly.

The illiterate border peasants may have understood, as their educated lord evidently did, the warnings and admonishments to unpious Christians contained in these carvings. Surely the community of Kilpeck, at least, recognized the vigor and exuberance of the master sculptors who created such work out of so many elements placed together in one architectural accomplishment.

The Kilpeck Corbel Series

The research of Marian Bleeke, author of the dissertation entitled, "Situating Sheela-na-gigs: The Female Body and Social Significance in Romanesque Sculpture" contains a chapter relevant to Kilpeck church and its sheela-na-gig. Bleeke is a graduate student from the University of Chicago, Illinois. Her ideas are important because she believes that existing scholarship on sheela-na-gigs did not attempt to examine the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig corbel's special placement on the church. She found out that other scholarship had only acted to remove the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig, textually, from its ecclesiastical context, producing it as an isolated image (Bleeke 44). In previously discussed literature, for example, Anthony Weir and James Jerman's Images of Lust, had only reproduced the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig corbel in isolation as a full page photograph, not to be observed as part of the whole corbel series. Their work does list other subjects that can be seen on the church, but they do not discuss their spatial or visual relationships to the sheela-na-gig corbel and they did not reproduce any images of the other sculptures (Weir and Jerman 35 and plate 5). Another similar example of this kind can be found in Jorgen Andersen's The Witch on the Wall. Andersen's text did contain other images found at Kilpeck church, but his work failed to specify how these different images related to

one another, to the sheela-na-gig corbel, or to Kilpeck church as a whole (Andersen 32-36, figures 10-12). Having recognized this mistake, Bleeke chose to examine the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig corbel as an integrated part of Kilpeck's sculptural program as a whole (see Plate XX). Bleeke suggests there are visual and spatial relationships that tie all of these groups together. In her study, Bleeke argues that there are three specific groups of corbels existing on Kilpeck Church. These are corbels carved into highly stylized animal heads, corbels carved into images of people dancing and making music, and corbels carved into animal heads with human forms appearing in their open mouths (see Plate XXI) (Bleeke 45).

Bleeke suggests that these corbel images point specifically to aspects of the local landscape and to social uses of the space immediately surrounding the church and nearby forests that the local lord controlled, as a framework for understanding the significance of the sheela-na-gig corbel to its medieval audience. Bleeke's argument also contradicts the view that the sheela-na-gig corbel is an image of sexual sin and punishment (Bleeke 45). The author chose to focus, instead, upon the local peasant audience for the sculptures and she investigates the images' possible relationships to local practices and concerns (Bleeke 48). Bleeke specifically focused on the local practice of dancing in cemeteries and churchyards, as was recorded by Gerald of Wales during the twelfth century.

Some recent studies of capital programs emphasize the interdependence of corbel sculptures, their settings, and their audiences in making the images meaningful objects (Bleeke 47). For example, Linda Seidel's research on historiated capitals from monastic environments in Toulouse is important to Bleeke's focus because Seidel relates formal differences between the sculptures to differences in the audiences for these images. Bleeke suggests, however, that the circumstances at the Kilpeck site are much more complex because these sculptures were located in public space and would have had a much more diverse audience. In another related example, Laura Spitzer's article on the capital frieze on the western facade of

Chartres Cathedral (Spitzer 139-140), with its sculptural depiction of the life of the Virgin, discusses how it relates its visual emphasis on women and children to the concerns of a specific segment of its audience -- the local women who came to the cathedral to participate in a local cult of the Virgin that specifically addressed women's concerns with their own health and that of their children (Spitzer 137-140, 142-143). In her work on the Kilpeck corbels, Bleeke's focus is "audience specified". This means that she focuses specifically on the peasant audience for the sculptures as she investigates the images' possible relationships to the audience's local religious practices (Bleeke 48).

Bleeke states that "memory" is an important tool for viewing and understanding, as well as "reading" the Kilpeck corbel series.

The viewer of the Kilpeck corbels literally "wanders" from one space to the next, in order to see the sculptures. Seeing the corbel series as a whole requires walking around the building, leaving one corbel or small groups of corbels behind in order to see the next, while carrying the previously seen sculptures along in memory (Bleeke 51).

Most scholars have sought to find a message or meaning in the corbel images. Malcolm Thurlby identifies, in the series as a whole, themes of sexual morality and the struggle with good and evil (Thurlby 51-67). Eileen Hamer believes that the corbels stand in metonymic relationships to one another, as parts of a whole, and present a message about sin and salvation. She groups them into two distinct sets: one group consists of "pastoral images," the other group, which includes the sheela-na-gig sculpture, are images that serve as warnings against sin (Hamer 156-61).

Instead of basing images on an idea about their significance, Bleeke bases her theory on their subjects and visual qualities. She groups the corbels at Kilpeck as "head" motifs. This group of "heads" is divided into four smaller subgroups according to subject matter and according to stylistic and visual qualities. The largest subgroup are corbels carved into human heads. The second subgroup consists of animal heads from recognizable species. The third subgroup consists of monstrous,

bestial heads, not a part of any known species. The final fourth subgroup are bestial heads that have human forms in their mouths. All of the head corbels at Kilpeck are frontal units that confront their viewers (Hamer 156).

According to Meyer Schapiro, frontal forms become meaningful in opposition to profile forms. The frontal corbels project themselves out into the viewer's world (Schapiro 38-9), initiating an interaction between image and viewer. Schapiro states that this is especially true when emphasis is placed upon the eyes. This emphasis attributes to the image's qualities of attentiveness, of actually holding on to the viewers' gaze (Schapiro 38-9). This emphasis on the eyes marks the frontal forms as "active" and "engaged", thus living and realistic. The corbel images act as actual entities with whom the viewer has some interaction.

Profile forms were used for wild animals, or, the kind of animals that would be seen from a distance, according to Bleeke. Their profile form distances them from the viewer in representation (Bleeke 58). Because hunting wild animals was an aristocratic activity during the Middle Ages, hunted wild animal corbels suggest that the use of profile at Kilpeck is associated with the noble, or the ruler, as opposed to the ruled. Hunted wild animal corbels may also suggest that the profile could be understood as religious or spiritual symbols as opposed to the material, as exemplified in the corbels of stags, birds, and fish, if allegorized through the medieval Bestiary traditions (Hamer 148-156); Thurlby 10, 52-3, 63-5; Bleeke 59).

The third subgroup of corbels are four corbels with images of full human forms. This group includes the sheela-na-gig corbel, a musician, a couple dancing or embracing, and a contorted acrobatic figure. These four corbels are all described by scholars as crude and ugly.

Another group of corbels represents the ones missing, damaged, or lost entirely. The number of missing corbels makes it difficult to discuss meaningful patterns in the distribution of the different groups of corbels on the church's exterior. However, some patterns are still identifiable and these point towards the ways in which the

corbel series as a whole once worked to articulate the exterior space of the church. One such pattern can be identified in the distribution of the missing corbels themselves. The majority of the missing corbels are concentrated on Kilpeck's south side (5, 7, 9, 10, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26) (Bleeke 61). To Bleeke, these missing corbels were possible targets for destruction because they were seen more often by people entering the church. Yet, perhaps these missing corbels were intentionally destroyed because their images were simply misunderstood, their true meanings lost or forgotten over time. It may also be true that certain images reminded viewers of issues from their past, issues they may have wanted to forget. Did all church members appreciate viewing images of the corruption of sin left upon one's tainted soul? One appropriate response for understanding the architectural desecration of church images might involve their intentional removal, in some instances.

There is also a strong relationship between the sheela-na-gig corbel and the monstrous head corbel with a human face inside its mouth. They share formal characteristics including heavily outlined eyes with deeply drilled pupils and they perform similar gestures. Thus, the sheela-na-gig corbel ties together the full human forms, the group of corbels it most obviously belongs to, with this group of heads. To understand what these types of images meant to medieval viewers will be important in understanding the sheela-na-gig sculpture.

Religious Aspects of the Kilpeck Community

Kilpeck's beginnings were recorded in the Book of Llandaff. It states that Hugh de Kilpeck, also known as Hugh Fitz William or Hugh Forester, used the church and chapel and other churches to endow a new Benedictine priory at Kilpeck. The priory was a cell of Gloucester Abbey (Hamer 141; Shoesmith 165). The record of Hugh's donation points out two components at Kilpeck, the priory, located about 340 meters southeast of the church, and the castle, which contained the chapel dedicated to the Virgin (Shoesmith 167). The location of the castle to the church is

important here because this close proximity supports the idea that the church was geographically and religiously associated with Hugh de Kilpeck, the primary inhabitant of the castle (see Plate XXII).

Hugh inherited from his father the position of “forester” of royal forests in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. This position gave him the surname he used most often, Hugh Forester, or “Hugo forestarius”, as the name he used in at least two charters he had witnessed (Bleeke 68). These forests separated the southern part of Herefordshire, known as Archenfield, where Kilpeck is located, off from the rest of the county. Archenfield had remained a Celtic area, and was part of the Welsh diocese of Llandaff, not the English diocese of Hereford. The inhabitants of Archenfield spoke Welsh and lived under Welsh laws.

Hugh de Kilpeck was a Norman lord with close ties to the Norman aristocracy of the Welsh Marches (Shoesmith 164). The majority of the Kilpeck population were most likely of Welsh decent. The Kilpeck village and community was located to the east of the church.

The combination of church, castle and settlement is frequently seen in the Welsh Marches. It is known as a “seigneurial castle complex”. Hugh de Kilpeck’s seigneurial castle complex was a symbol of the Norman lord’s religious leadership, strength and control within the area. This entire complex may have served as an “in between site,” separating Anglo-Norman England to the east and independent Wales to the west, but also simultaneously providing an area in which Norman and Welsh could meet, mix and mingle (Sylvester 23-24; Bleeke 71).

The audience of the Kilpeck corbels consisted of Hugh de Kilpeck and his family, who lived in the castle and the village community. The Kilpeck village inhabitants were able to see the corbel images on the east side more readily. Experiencing this corbel series was, no doubt, an integral and immediate part of their lives.

Research has provided much more information about Hugh de Kilpeck than any other member of the Kilpeck community. Hugh built his church and donated it to a

monastic house. This deed allowed him to use this expected act of donation to establish strong ties between himself and the monastic community. This act of donation also allowed men like Hugh de Kilpeck to negotiate their salvation with God's ministers on earth (Harper-Bill 63-7; Bleeke 75). Images of armed knights in vines on the western jamb of the south door may have held a specific sentiment to Hugh, influencing him to pay tribute to the Church, and move on from the violence in his life towards salvation (see Plate XXIII).

Scholars have identified links between the Herefordshire School of Sculpture and Romanesque sculpture found elsewhere in England and in western France. Malcolm Thurlby connects Hugh's intent to copy art from another distant region as a symbol denoting Hugh as a man of power and taste (Thurlby 1-5, 31-2, 41-5). Thurlby's understanding of Hugh's intent is based upon his interest in Hugh as the patron of Kilpeck and thus, the author of its sculptural program. Hugh may have seen these sculptures as markers of his social status. The village community, however, would have brought their own experiences and expectations to understanding the church's sculptures. Here the villagers' expectation of these sculptures would have been shaped by their parish church. Here, the parish church would have provided a center for the local community to congregate.

The existing scholarship on Kilpeck church stresses Hugh's role as a patron, and emphasizes its status as a "propriety" or "seigneurial" church, rather than a parish church for the local community. Thus, the members of Kilpeck church would have used their parish church in different ways. It would have been used, for example, as a public building, a place of sanctuary, a site for local celebrations or festivals, and even a place where ale was sold and games were played. It would have also been a place to bury the dead. According to a diagram showing Kilpeck church, castle, and village after an aerial photograph taken in 1958, the original cemetery seems to have surrounded the church at Kilpeck (Shoesmith 172; Bleeke 81) (see Plate XXIV).

The practice of “dancing in cemeteries and churchyards” was recorded during the twelfth century to the west of the Kilpeck community, in neighboring independent Wales (Gerald of Wales 92-3). What is important to realize here is that there are corbels at Kilpeck which point to the possibility that churchyard dancing was performed at the Kilpeck site, although there is no textual proof. Only the corbel group of full human figures show people making music and dancing on the Kilpeck corbel series, and these corbels are located on the north side of the apse, overlooking a space that existed to the north of the church (Bleeke 82). Gerald of Wales observed and documented this dance practice involving both men and women on the anniversary of St. Almedha, which was celebrated at her church near Brecknock in 1188. The dance practice moved “round” the churchyard, possibly indicating a ring or circle dance (Bleeke 83).

Because of Kilpeck church’s close proximity to the Welsh border and the Welsh community, it is possible that Welsh villagers at Kilpeck shared in these dancing practices. Ring dances are interpreted by two oppositional views. One view is that the ring dances are a positive experience of social harmony. The alternative view is that ring dances can also represent the celebrations of demons or present women as sexual temptresses.

The wearing of “masks” during churchyard dances also occurred and were sometimes cited as a reason for their prohibition (Backman 25, 140). If mask dancing in the churchyard was done at Kilpeck, this practice very well may have served as an understanding of certain corbels; or perhaps as another experience with the corbels forms of representation, that potentially they became an act of transformation for participators. Through mask dancing, the villagers would themselves have become images of something else (Bleeke 86). Such an act of transformation may be interpreted as a way of invoking the dead, according to Jean-Claude Schmitt. Such acts of transformation invoked the dead because they were structurally similar to the dead’s transformation of life into death (Schmitt 168). The

‘simple” style human head corbels on the north chancel wall at Kilpeck may have represented the community’s dead appearing in the form of masks (Seidel 145; Bleeke 87). In any event, if mask dancing in the churchyard was performed at Kilpeck, this practice was obviously a pre-Christian or pagan practice.

The Sheela-na-gig Corbel

The sheela-na-gig corbel at Kilpeck is located in its original position, on the outside south side wall of the nave at Kilpeck church, near the chancel. It is a very characteristic figure of display shown in a crouching posture, with its legs pulled forward. Its body is short. Facial features of the big head are stylized in the manner of masks known from other Norman decoration.

Bleeke’s study suggests that several of the eater images, also known as “anthrophagus images”, appear to have close associations to the sheela-na-gig corbel. These eater images are placed in close proximity to the sheela-na-gig image on the south side of Kilpeck’s eastern end, so that villagers would have been able to see them all as they traveled from the village to the church’s southern door (Bleeke 90).

All of these motifs, the eater images, the sheela image, the musician and dance corbels that form the group of full human forms to which the sheela image obviously belongs, and the simple styled heads, would have produced a strong impact on viewers. The sheela-na-gig image itself would have become meaningful for local people in terms of what dancing and masking and eating and being eaten were understood to have in common (Bleeke 91).

Churchyard dancing witnessed and documented in the Gerald of Wales account were described as “acts of imitation”. These dances were imitations of the work the dancers had done on feast days (Bleeke 91). According to research found on medieval attitudes towards mimesis, or imitation, these acts of imitation were thought to diabolically disrupt the right relationships between the body and the soul, or, the exterior and interior of a person. In Gerald’s account, the act of imitation actually does

reveal the inner state of the performer's soul. By "acting out" their sins, both the dancers and the dead use their bodies to make visible the faults that stain their souls (Bleeke 92). The "acting out" of the dancers leads to a conversion experience and a purging of sin through the body. The churchyard dancing was a purgational activity that served many different purposes. It may have been used to ward off the evils brought by the dead and it also may have been used as a healing practice, to expel illness from the body through extreme bodily movement. In the Gerald of Wales account, the extreme, individual movements of Gerald's dancers, their acts of imitation, may be seen as the symptoms of ergot poisoning, that the dance practice was meant to cure (Backman 177).

Seeing the sheela-na-gig corbel on the south side of the church may have recalled for viewers the dancing practice that Bleeke suggests occurred in the area to the north of the church. The images' implied body movement may have become meaningful in terms of the purgative effect that the churchyard dance was understood to produce for the dancers. Bleeke suggests further that churchyard dancing was accompanied with a medieval masking practice, in view of the corbel heads on the north side of Kilpeck church. Medieval masking practices involved covering the face with a mask and a drape over the body. For viewers who had experienced such "acting out", the sheela-na-gig's mask-like simple style head may have recalled this practice and the disjunctions it produces (Bleeke 93). It is important to realize here that in her study, Bleeke has implied meaning, function, and purpose to the sheela-na-gig image based on its original setting.

Bleeke goes on to speculate that the close relationship between the anthrophagus mouth motif corbels and the sheela-na-gig corbel may have allowed other experiences to have happened to the masked dancers as well. She considers a mental recombination of the images that may have transformed the sheela image into the image of a woman giving childbirth. She writes,

in situ, these images of childbirth are frequently juxtaposed with images of

exposure of the female genitals that are very similar to the Kilpeck Sheela sculpture. When seen together, these explicit images of birth may have acted to specify the significance of such images of exposure, indicating that the interest of the female genitalia was an interest in reproductive processes. These French images are especially interesting because western French Romanesque sculpture is often identified as a source for the English "Herefordshire school" -- which includes, the Kilpeck sculptures (Bleeke 94-5).

During the process of transfer between France and England a new combination emerged. Bleeke suggests here that the explicit representation of childbirth dropped out of this repertoire of sculptures and the eater images took its place. This new combination seen at Kilpeck, acts to specify the significance of the birthing process, that childbirth is like eating; it presents problems for the hybrid body and the processes of passage from interior to exterior world. The significance of these images would create the image of a "grotesque" female state of body. The body "eating" and the body "in childbirth" are identified both as "grotesque" bodies because of the similarities (Miles 156-159); Bleeke 95) and natural resultant deformities.

As well, the sheela-na-gig corbel image itself may have become meaningful for the local parish community in terms of what the significance of childbirth and what the significance of rebirth were understood to have in common. The acting out of childbirth after purgational churchyard dancing could have also symbolized the act of rebirth, suggesting spiritual regeneration, as a way of cleansing the human soul and being reborn again into the grace of God. Just as physical transformation of the body takes place during and after childbirth, so does spiritual transformation of the human soul after the healing process, in the form of a conversion experience for participants.

Other existing scholarship presents a very different interpretation. One author considers this combination of images as presenting the sequence of sin and punishment. Christian Bougoux (Bleeke 95) interprets these images of exposure of the female genitalia as available for penetration, and interprets the childbirth

images as representing birth as a punishment for the sin of fornication. He asserts that these images should be seen as representations of illegitimate births (Bougoux 24-29). This interpretation is shaped by a powerful pattern of explanation that sees all sexualized images of women in Romanesque sculpture as uniformly representing the church's teachings on sexual morality (Bleeke 96).

Bleeke's work, however, ultimately challenges this pattern of explanation, arguing that such images of women became meaningful to their medieval viewers in terms of the positive social significance of the female body's reproductive potential, as well as these images of childbirth and the act of giving birth becoming meaningful to medieval viewers in terms of purgation and rebirth.

Conclusion

Approaching the sheela-na-gig corbel carving as an integral part of Kilpeck church and as part of this church's sculptural program has made Kilpeck especially fruitful ground for establishing the significance of the sheela-na-gig sculpture to its medieval viewers. In this approach, the corbel series program that encircles Kilpeck church formulates an immediate sculptural context for the sheela-na-gig figure, as well as for its viewers.

Researcher Marian Bleeke has argued that the Kilpeck corbel images point particularly towards social issues of the space used immediately around the church, as a way for understanding the significance of the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig to its local medieval audience. Bleeke's identification of the corbel groups has led to the ability to recognize the relationships that exist between the groups, with the belief that the medieval audience would have been able to understand the corbel series as a whole. By basing her corbel groups on their subjects and visual qualities, the researcher was able to establish a strong relationship between the group of full human forms, which includes the sheela-na-gig corbel, to the group of heads and eater images, in order to show how closely related all of these images are to one another. The corbel groups also point to the possibility that the practice of mask

dancing in the cemetery and churchyard may have taken place at the Kilpeck site. These churchyard dance practices were seen as acts of imitation and transformation that were believed to have a purgational effect on the human body and soul.

Bleeke views the sheela-na-gig corbel as a positive image of the female body's reproductive potential. Bleeke has argued that images of women in childbirth become meaningful to viewers in terms of the social significance of the female body's reproductive potential. It has also been argued that these images of childbirth may have signified the act of rebirth, or of spiritual regeneration of the human soul after the purging dance.

The next chapter will address the sheela-na-gig sculptures from twelfth century Ireland and up to the present day in order to examine their local, visual, and social contexts in which they become meaningful objects to viewers. Marriage and the changing role of women will come into play in shaping the evolving significance of these sculptures.

CHAPTER V

Interpretations of Sheela-na-gig Images: From the Twelfth to the Twenty-First Century

The sheela-na-gig image has acquired a number of interpretations, whether it be situated as an integral component within a series of corbels, placed alone in isolated architectural contexts, or integrated two-dimensionally within the compositional boundaries in a work of art. The beauty of this image is that its meaning and function has evolved over time, playing host to a variety of audiences, inspiring new meaning to those who have interpreted the image in unique and strikingly different ways.

These enigmatic frontal images of the female body, with emphasized gestures and features, always viewed in the act of overt sexual display, are described as either the “grab and pull” type, or the “point and poke” type. Examples of the “grab and pull” type include the Kilpeck sheela-na-gig corbel and, in Ireland, two sculptures from Co. Cavan that are now in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland. Examples of the second, “point and poke” type include in England, sculptures from Copgrove, Yorkshire, Croft-on-Tees, Durham and in Ireland, those from Kiltinane, Co. Tipperary (now missing and replaced by a modern replica) and Ballylarkin, Co. Kilkenny, now also in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland (Bleeke 135-136). It is important to note that these gestural differences have been used to construct typologies of the sheela-na-gig sculpture, as documented in Edith Guest’s, “Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935” and James Jerman’s, “The ‘Sheela-na-gig’ Carvings of the British Isles: Suggestions for a Re-Classification and Other Notes.” Recognizing these genuine differences and varying architectural placements of the sheela-na-gig sculptures obviously lead away from accepting one blanket

Other interpretations are being explored by modern research as well. One argument raised addresses the sheela images as women in relationship with their reproductive potential and with their sexual organs. Another interpretation views the sheela-na-gig images as goddess figures, associating the female body with fertility aspects of the Irish landscape, or, as a protectress, the hag of the castle. With these images positioned very high up on the walls of fortified buildings, sometimes overlooking the boundaries of tuaths or territories, an apotropaic function may also have been given. The sheela-na-gig image might then serve the purpose of warding off evil or attack within the local communities. Still another view points out the sheela-na-gig sculpture as an image representing a specific person who is placed in isolation within an architectural context. Also, in Ireland, particularly, the sheela-na-gig sculpture commonly appears on architectural remains described as forgotten stones, or roofless ruins, or buildings with little or no historical documentation. These sheela-na-gig sculptures placed in isolation are a common occurrence in Ireland. The exception to this rule is the sheela-na-gig figure from Rath Blathmac Church, Co. Clare (see Plate XXV). At Rath, the exhibitionist figure has serpents attacking her from both sides, intertwined in her arms, and biting her ears. The figure still remains in situ within the Irish Romanesque ecclesiastical church window sill, placed upside down, and visible inside the roofless ruins at Rath Church (see Plate XXVI), located near the town of Corofin. An antiquarian sketch of this image was completed by T. J. Westropp and published in The Journal of the Society of Antiquities, Dublin, in 1894 (see Plate XXVII) (Andersen 21). Needless to say, the absence of historical data has and continues to pose great uncertainty of when these sculptures and their surrounding structures were built within the Irish landscape.

Obviously, most of the Irish sheela-na-gigs lack not only immediate visual contexts but also secure architectural contexts and identifiable historical audiences. Because of these problems it is not possible to develop for any of the Irish sheela-na-gigs the kind of detailed, localized understanding that was developed for the

Kilpeck sheela-na-gig corbel. Therefore, the Irish sculptures must be interpreted as a group within the broad social context that would have shaped the way the Irish have interpreted them, and understood them as a whole over time. This chapter will address the significance of the sheela-na-gig sculptures for their audiences in four chronologically organized intervals of time, beginning with the twelfth century, the approximate time that these sculptures were initially introduced on Irish Romanesque architectural structures. The latter sections of this chapter will examine evidence for the reception of these images during later time periods: the later Middle Ages, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century; the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; then to its current artistic reception and usage as it is incorporated and seen as an integral component in the art of Nancy Spero. I will argue that in these later sections, these acts of reception and acceptance, from not only a continuing “chain of receptions”, but also a “chain of interpretations” and functions that clearly reveal the evolving status of the sheela-na-gig, as demonstrated by its ongoing symbolic capabilities.

Twelfth Century Ireland: Marriage, Reform, and Invasion

Modern research has indicated that the origins and functions of the sheela-na-gig may lie within the formation and structure of Irish culture. Researchers of the Irish textual tradition have worked to link the sheela-na-gig sculptures to the figure of the “Sovereignty goddess” that appears in early Irish texts, resisting the argument about sexual sin, as brought forth in the wider European culture of monasticism. The Irish Sovereignty goddess is described textually as a woman in “hideous hag” form, who manifests herself before the male figure destined to become an Irish king. From these Irish tales, ideas describing “sacral kingship” emerge, of marriage to the king and his kingdom, and of the king’s sexual relationship with the goddess. Here, the concept of “kingship” is described as a symbolic bond or marriage to the king and his kingdom to the territorial goddess. The goddess in these stories undergoes a “transformation” from hideous hag to beautiful woman, or from wild woman to queen.

The significance of this transformational process undergone by the Irish goddess is to be understood as images suggesting prosperity for the kingdom, once the kingdom is joined and ruled by the rightful king. The interpretation of female characters in Irish narratives as representations of “Sovereignty,” or as reflections of pagan territorial goddesses found in a number of scholarly articles, reflects this approach to understand the sheela-na-gigs as symbolic representations of the “Sovereignty goddess” in hag form. The ability to understand this interpretation, however, proves difficult because of the way in which this connection formulates the relationship between text and image. The relationship formulated from various articles regards the image as an idea stemming from the texts, dependent upon the texts, and this relationship prioritizes the image in a secondary dependent relationship to the texts (Karkov 224, 226; Bleeke 138).

From Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland, author Lisa Bitel has argued against understanding the female characters in early Irish texts primarily as “goddesses”. Bitel argues that Irish folklorists, poets, and playwrights have idolized Maeve, Grania, and Deirdre as stern and gorgeous mothers of the modern Irish, touting Ireland as a Celtic paradise of warrior queens and fairy women. Yet in the minds of poets, Ireland has always been a woman, desirably fertile, sometimes fickle, a lover and a mother and always feminine (Bitel 1-2). Celticists and other students of myth have argued that they have seen the goddesses as archetypes for real women with sexual, marital, and sacral powers over men, identifying these strong female characters of Irish sagas and king-tales as long lost goddesses of pagan times (Bitel 2).

Bitel argues that critical analysis of the formal social, economic, and political roles of women in Ireland need to be understood, in terms of the tensions that surrounded marriage in Irish society during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Women in early Ireland were not goddess queens, but neither were most of them prisoners or slaves. Bitel sees the sheela-na-gig sculptures as images of women -- not as

goddesses -- who were participants in the culture, members of society, players in politics, and partners in the economy. These images of women need to be understood on the "social," rather than the "mythological" plane. These images of women were recorded by literate men in texts which contain men's diverse thoughts about women, and the diverse experiences of women in early Ireland (Bitel 11). Marriage laws and practices, and the tensions that surrounded them, would have formed an important part of the social context within which the sheela-na-gig sculptures became meaningful objects to the early Irish. Marriage, along with inheritance, were the social components that shaped the social significance and importance of the female body and feminine persona in Ireland.

The surviving texts of the native Irish laws include extensive information on both marriage and inheritance (Kelly 1). A once influential school of scholars has seen the primary interest in the law texts as being what they preserve of pagan Celtic and even Indo-European laws, concepts, and practices (Binchy 7-36). The work of Nerys Patterson, in particular, has argued for the use of the law texts, in order to assemble a model for the basic structure of social relations in Ireland for the period from the eighth to the sixteenth century (Patterson 6-8, 15-16, 37-39, 50-51, 56-59). Using this scholarly work, a general picture may be developed in order to understand how marriage and inheritance was conducted in twelfth century Irish society (Bleeke 141).

There are primarily two tracts contained in the text titled the *Senchas Marr*: one is called the "*Dire-Text*," which is about "dire" or honor price, and the other titled, the "*Cain Lanamma*" or "law of couples," which deals with divorce (Kelly 73, 267, 269; Patterson 295; Power 81-2; MacAll 10-11; O Corrain 8-9). Both of these tracts make distinctions between multiple kinds of marital unions and multiple marital statuses for women (Kelly 70-71); Patterson 296; Power 81-2; 98-9; Binchy 161-3; 182; Bleeke 141).

It is clear to scholars that native Irish laws allowed for polygamy. Apparently a

man could be joined in several marital unions of different types, to several women, of different statuses, at the same time (Kelly 70-71; Jaski 35-36; Bleeke 142). As shown through these laws, native Irish society seemed to have an “extended” definition of marriage. In commentaries concerning these laws, women of so called “visiting unions” are commonly referred to as “adaltrach,” a word derived likely from “adulteress”, and introduced by Christian commentators to denigrate such unions and the women involved in them. On the other hand, these law texts present these relationships between a man and a woman as legal “marriages” (Kelly 70-71; Power 83-5, 93-6, 99-103; Patterson 289, 296, 302-3; McAll 13-14; Mac Niocaille 154-5). Other kinds of unions were viewed, however, as irregular and illegal sexual relationships. According to the law texts, those kind of relationships took place in secret or “in the woods” (Patterson 313; Power 103; Bleeke 143).

In the twelfth century, when the sheela-na-gig sculptures began to appear on Irish buildings, internal criticism surfaced, associated with a movement for ecclesiastical reform, while external discussion developed over the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. During this period of dramatic social change, marriage became a source of tension in Ireland. At the same time, however, intermarriages between the Anglo-Norman men and Irish women opened Irish society to the invaders and allowed for the transfer of land and power into Anglo-Norman hands (Bleeke 145).

Church reform in twelfth century Ireland began through a series of synods. These meetings and their decrees addressed issues about the organization of the Irish church, with the purpose of developing a diocesan structure that brought Ireland into conformity with the Catholic Church, along with the issues that dealt with relationships between the clerical and lay people of Irish society, and issues that dealt with marriage regulations that the Church was working hard to establish across Europe (Watt 1-2, 8-9, 11-13; Gwynn 26, 34, 126-7, 157; Bleeke 145). The first synod was held at Cashel, Co. Tipperary, in 1101. This synod passed decrees against simony, lay interference with church property, clerical marriage, and marriages that

violated the church prohibition on marriage within the seventh degree of consanguinity or affinity (Bleeke 146; Watt 8-9; Gwynn 156-7, 166, 171-4).

The next synod was held at Kells, Co. Meath, in 1152, under Cardinal Paparo, requesting that palls be obtained for archbishops to be established at Armagh, Dublin, Tuam, and Cashel, and instructed laymen to put away their concubines, and to end these irregular unions with women to whom they were married, noting such unions that fell within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity (Watt 24; Gwynn 220; Roche 62). Endogamy, the marriage of close kin, was the cause of concern in both of these sets of decrees. The repetition of these decrees at successive synods is proof of failure on behalf of the reform movement of having the ability to change peoples' behaviors. Having little effect, the repeated denunciation of the marriage practices in Irish society did not hinder the continuance of these practices (Bleeke 146).

In 1172, after the Anglo-Norman invasion, another reform synod was held at Cashel, the second at that site. The Gerald of Wales account of this synod, from the "History of the Conquest of Ireland," records that the decrees passed by this synod generally repeat those of the earlier synods, repeating in particular the demand that men repudiate women within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity and affinity and contract lawful marriages instead. According to Gerald's account, the one new decree passed at this synod called for the Irish church to be brought into conformity specifically with the practices of the church in England (Gerald of Wales 232-4). This additional provision is important in that it shows the transformation of the reform movement in Ireland into an instrument for the extension of Anglo-Norman power (Gwynn 306-7; Bleeke 148).

Anglo-Norman criticisms of Irish marriage laws and practices, and attacks on Ireland's independent status, date back to the eleventh century when the archbishops of Canterbury, Lanfranc and Anselm, wrote a series of letters to various Irish kings (Gwynn 73-4). These letters were written as these archbishops

attempted to extend their ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Ireland (Gwynn 69-73, 77-8; Watt 6-9, 217-25). The first of Lanfranc's letters on Irish matters was written to Guthric, "King of Ireland", who was actually the King of the Norse enclave in Dublin. Lanfranc's second letter on Irish matters was addressed to Toirrdelback Ua Briain, king of Munster and high king of Ireland. Both of these letters of criticism recognize the Irish practice of ready divorce and the Irish preference for endogamy (Gwynn 104, 108; Watt 7; Duffy 24-5). Letters from Anselm, written in the 1070's, also repeat these criticisms. All of these letters address the conflict of laws: canon law and the native Irish laws of marriage, or as Lanfranc dismissed as "the law of fornication" (Bleeke 149).

Canterbury was unable to extend its ecclesiastical control to Ireland. A century later, however, prior to the invasion of Ireland, in approximately 1155, English King Henry II received explicit authorization to invade Ireland from Pope Adrian IV in a bull known as "Laudabiliter". As recorded in the Gerald of Wales account, the bull authorized Henry's entrance into Ireland in order "to extend the borders of the church, to teach the truths of the Christian faith to a rude and illiterate people, and to root out the weeds of wickedness from the field of the Lord (Gerald of Wales 261). Here, the term "invasion" meant more than just that. It meant, in essence, "a holy war" against the problematic practices of marriage among the Irish. In all of these criticisms of Irish marital and sexual practices, the Irish preference for endogamy is recognizable, and even polygamy became an additional cause for concern, according to a papal letter written by Alexander III to Henry II after the invasion (Watt 37-39; Bleeke 149-150).

In his "Topography of Ireland," Gerald of Wales also discussed Irish society's difference in marriage laws and practices. His criticisms of Irish marriage practices repeat the pattern of pointing out the Irish preference for endogamous, or "incestuous" relationships, that were prohibited by canon law. The Gerald of Wales account records Irish marriage practices as the reason for so many birth deformities

and defects, occurring among the Irish. Gerald wrote that in Ireland, "it appears that everyone may do just as he pleases (Gerald of Wales 137-8). He also described "monstrous births that are the result, not of incestuous intercourse among humans, but of sexual relationships between humans and animals"(Gerald of Wales 85-6; Salisbury 1-2, 95-6, 140-1, 145; Bleeke 151-2). All of these descriptions of Irish marital and sexual practices implied in Gerald's account, obviously disclosed and revealed the loose moral judgments and relationships allowed by Irish law to exist.

The issues of marriage were explicitly used to justify the Anglo-Norman invasion, yet, according to both Anglo-Norman and native Irish sources, the abduction of Derbforgaill, the wife of Tigernan Ua Rouira, by Diarmait Mac Murchadha, is what may have actually brought about the Anglo-Norman invasion into Ireland. In short, Derbforgaill was the daughter of a king, became the wife of a king, and then the mistress to a king. The reason for her abduction varies from different sources.

According to Gerald of Wales, the Anglo-Norman invasion is attributed to Derbforgaill's passion for Mac Murchadha, allowing "herself to be ravished and not against her will." Gerald also wrote that Derbforgaill was an example of women's fickleness and of the evils that they bring (Gerald of Wales 184-5; The Annals of Clonmacnoise 199-200). To Gerald, Derbforgaill was considered an adulteress.

In later life Derbforgaill seemingly sought to make atonement for the errors of her ways. She became a noted benefactress of the Church, and in 1157, endowed the newly consecrated Church of the Cistercian abbey at Mellifont, Drogheda, with three score ounces of gold, and a chalice of gold on the altar of Mary, and a cloth for each of the nine other altars that were in the Church. She is mentioned again, in 1167, as being responsible for building the Church of the Nuns at Clonmacnoise (see Plate XXVIII), a beautiful Romanesque ecclesiastical structure. Discussion of the Nun's Church at Clonmacnoise is important here because the earliest dated Irish sheela-na-gig figure, of the acrobatic type, resides here on the chancel arch (see Plate XXIX). In 1186 Derbforgaill retired to the monastery at Mellifont where she died in 1193 at

the age of eighty five (Roche 62).

Maureen Concannon, author of The Sacred Whore: Sheela Goddess of the Celts, has argued that the sheela-na-gig situated on the Romanesque chancel arch at the entrance to the Nun's Church at Clonmacnoise, although "carved with high artistry, is more of a mockery than the earlier examples of the pregnant mother in the old birthing position" (Concannon 112). She writes that this carving, along with its exquisite Romanesque arch of which it forms a part, appeared about the same time as the grotesques in England and elsewhere. The chancel arch itself is replete with symbols of the goddess: triangles, diamond shapes, meanders, and dots or seeds, which, Concannon writes, represent the masculine principle (Concannon 112). It is not only reasonable but also theoretically possible that the sheela-na-gig carving found on the Nun's Church at Clonmacnoise became an object of speculation here, specifically, in terms of its interpretation and meaning. During this time in Irish history, an alternative interpretation may have developed, partly due to its placement on Irish Romanesque architecture, and partly due to what people interpreted the sculpture to represent. It may have served as a representation to twelfth century viewers of the Irish Queen, Derbforgaill, who was patroness of this particular chapel, the Nun's Chapel. Concannon argues that this figure may have been a form of ridicule to Derbforgaill, by pointing a finger to her adultery. Otherwise, it may have been a monument to her courage (Concannon 112). This specific sheela-na-gig is one of the earliest dated exhibitionist figures found on a Romanesque building in Ireland. The carving dates to approximately 1167, when, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, the building was "finished". Could the sheela-na-gig image have been viewed as an image representing Derbforgaill? Although there is no documentation to prove this, perhaps twelfth century viewers came to understand the image as a representation of this woman, as Derbforgaill's "abduction" may not have been a real abduction, but rather an excuse to get away from an unhappy

marriage. On the other hand, might the architectural placement of the figure surrounding the entrance of a designated feminine ecclesiastical space have served to protect the women inside from the outside world of sexual sin and deviance? The role of this symbol may have evolved in this manner, because the symbol is found on a structure that was inhabited by women. Any of these interpretations relating to the concerns of women, of sin, of adultery, and of protection, have possibilities.

Additionally, Concannon has argued that the mockery, destruction and eradication of feminine symbols was documented and celebrated by the Christian hierarchy during this time. She states that the image of the sheela-na-gig, a symbol of the Divine Hag, had to be excised from the consciousness of the Irish people. Like other symbols associated with women and the feminine aspect of God, this symbol became a threat to the authority of the Church and an effort was made to eradicate it. She argues that this eradication was a slow and gradual process and hardly recognized at the time (Concannon 114).

To summarize, native Irish laws of marriage had worked effectively in controlling the sexual role of Irish women in order to secure paternity, power, and land. In the twelfth century, however, this marriage system came under attack and marriage became an issue of tension between the lay and the clerical, and the native Irish and the Anglo-Norman invaders. These native and foreign intermarriages transformed marriage in many ways. It became a loss for Irish men, a loss in women's sexual role in society, and a loss of power and property, that eventually fell into the hands of foreign Anglo-Norman invaders. The meaning of marriage in Irish society was changing and these new developments would have shaped the expectations that medieval Irish viewers brought to seeing and understanding the sheela-na-gig sculptures now appearing on Irish soil via the Romanesque style of architecture brought to Ireland after the invasion.

Instead of these images being seen as representations of sexual sin and punishment, or as representations of an allegorical power as described in the

“Sovereignty goddess,” in this new social context, the sheela-na-gig sculptures would have become meaningful as images of sinful women, or as the image of women as the result of foreign invasion. Ultimately, the sheela-na-gig image was most likely compared to the image of an adulteress woman, as argued by Maureen Concannon. Derbforgaill was not only blamed for the Anglo-Norman invasion, but she has also been connected and compared to the sheela-na-gig image at Clonmacnoise. Undoubtedly, the roles of women were changing in twelfth century Ireland, and most importantly, the interpretations and functions of sheela-na-gigs were evolving during this change as well, taking on a new and different light.

The Later Middle Ages: The Irish Hag of the Castle

The appearance of sheela-na-gigs on a wide variety of Irish architectural contexts has led scholarship towards developing a greater understanding of their significance to medieval viewers, particularly when they are found in ecclesiastical settings. Many sheela-na-gigs, however, are also found within secular environments. These secular environments include “tower-house” castles: buildings described as a type of small, defensive domestic structure built by the rich and powerful of Irish society. According to Maureen Concannon, sheela-na-gig figures are noted on 33 castles in Ireland (Concannon 120). These structures date from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century. Irish castles displaying sheela-na-gigs provided various audiences the opportunity to give new interpretations to these carved images. These figures were referred to as the “Hags of the Castle,” as documented in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland in 1894 (77-78).

Redwood Castle, Co. Tipperary, is one such example of this type of structure, as well as one that displays a sheela-na-gig, with the name of this image written on a posted sign as “Sile na gigh”. The carving is located under the balcony between the North Towers (see Plate XXX). At the Redwood Castle site, a modern stone marker reads,

Sile-na-Gig: you will notice if you look upwards a stone carving directly beneath

the balcony. It is a grotesque carving of a woman symbolizing 'fertility'. It was part of the Medieval Norman churches and castles, believed that they were created to depict the dangers of the sin of lust.

When determining the age of such a sculpture situated on the exterior of a castle, the question asked is: is this particular sculpture resting in its original context or was this image removed intentionally from a former context and reused again on this particular structure? Is it also possible that this sculpture is a newly carved image dating from the same time as the building? These are questions that scholarship has been unable to answer. It is believed that in later medieval Ireland, viewers acted upon the sculptures, changed their function and meaning, as well as their locations, and/or made new ones of copies by producing additional sculptures. By doing this, the audience receiving an image in an "act of reception" made this act of reception "concrete" -- giving the sculpture meaning, purpose, and function.

Research has suggested that viewers relocated sheela-na-gigs for their own purposes, but why? This "act of relocation" strongly suggests that viewers did not entirely understand these sculptures in ecclesiastical environments or in terms of church teachings on sexual morality. This "act of relocation" raises issues concerning the significance of the sheela-na-gig sculptures in this new or changed environment.

Castles constructed from stone were introduced into Ireland in the twelfth century by the Anglo-Norman invaders. Then later on, tower-house castles became not only the new sites for sheela-na-gig sculptures, but also domestic structures for the rich and powerful English, the native Irish, and "gaelicized" Anglo-Irish communities alike (Barry 69, 181, 188; McNeill 227-8). This process of assimilation between the English and the native Irish communities produced not only the spread of tower-house castles but also the "gaelicized" Anglo-Irish population (Cosgrove 5, 26-7, 30, 72, 74, 76; Bleeke 158). By means of intermarriage between the English and the native Irish, the process of assimilation began for these people from the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion (Spencer 66-68, 151; Nicholls 16-7, 144, 162, 168).

In Castles in Ireland: Feudal Power in a Gaelic World, Tom McNeill has written that the proliferation of tower-house castles in later medieval Ireland should be acknowledged as the result of a change in the structure of lordship (203-9, 227-8, 222-3). Likewise, Terry Barry attributes the large number of tower-house castles built in later medieval Ireland to the weakness of central government and to the strength of important Anglo-Norman and native Irish families (Barry 69, 181).

Once the tower-house castle was built and occupied, it served a variety of functions. Some even had defensive capabilities and mechanisms. Redwood Castle, for example, possessed a trap door just above and inside the doorway entrance leading inside the castle, providing a defense mechanism for unwanted intruders. This trap door is better known as the “murder hole”. If there was an assault on the castle, and the attackers succeeded in smashing down the doors, the occupiers would, as a second line of defense, rain down missiles on the heads of the attackers from the “murder hole”. This murder hole was also considered a sexualized and feminized opening in the defensive walls, thus a place of heightened danger. Thus, the doorway was protected by the murder hole located in the ceiling that gave access to the keep’s interior and that could have allowed access to the women located inside.

Author Tom McNeill, however, downplays the actual defensive capabilities of tower-house castles. This author, instead, places emphasis on the display of defensiveness presented in these structures. McNeill believes that these castles were meant to look protected and defensive, in order to present a strong powerful face to the world on the outside, as well as to display the wealth and power of their builders and inhabitants (McNeill 220-1, 224-5, 232-5). Understanding castles as images of power and objects of display, may provide clues for understanding the reappearance of sheela-na-gig sculptures on the walls of these buildings.

The interpretation that sheela-na-gig sculptures functioned with an apotropaic purpose fits well into this understanding of castles as objects of display of power

and strength, directed towards those outside of their walls (Andersen 83-105; Ross 148-9; Dunn 74-5; Ford 188; Karkov 223-6). Researcher Jorgen Andersen had noted as well that the custom of displaying a sheela-na-gig by an entrance seems deeply rooted, maintaining that the position of the sheela-na-gig image on a structure was not incidental. If the sheela-na-gig was meant to safeguard a structure, its position or placement by windows or entrances of structures could in fact provide this image with an apotropaic function (Andersen 100). Andersen concluded that when examining all of the evidence indicating an apotropaic purpose for the figure, the evidence formed a sufficiently large body of material that provides the basis for a first argument about the meaning of sheela-na-gigs: meaning defined by use (Andersen 103). Andersen also wrote that an apotropaic purpose for the figure would be quite logical as it would apply to open and penetrable parts of walls, or as it resides on the walls of castles. One excellent example of such a figure is the carving that resides on a section of the old fourteenth century wall at the town of Fethard in County Tipperary. The figure on the wall overlooks the medieval bridge on the Clashawley River at the entrance to this medieval town (McMahon and Roberts 131). According to writer James O'Connor, the Fethard wall sheela-na-gig must have been one of the most powerfully apotropaic of all of the figures (O'Connor 13), and even Jorgen Andersen had referred to the figure as the "Witch on the Wall," from which his book is named.

In summary, the change in the placement of sheela-na-gigs from churches to castles reflects an evolving state of function and interpretation for the sheela-na-gig figure. As the function of this figure changed from a religious symbol to an emblem of status and apotropaic value on castles and walls, the carvings reflected the shifting attitudes of the times. Understanding these sculptures as apotropaic figures may have facilitated the change and transfer of images from church to castle and thus into a controlled environment in which women, the defense of the family, and the possession of property, were placed in a strategic location inside castle walls, in

order to ward off attacks from intruders or invaders.

The Oral History: The Later Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Not until the nineteenth century did sheela-na-gigs become objects of ownership. The first records, particularly, the recorded oral information, were examined and used as a viable historical source. The sources of this information are contained in records of the Irish Ordnance Survey and in the letters written by the members of the Topographical Department. When the Ordnance Survey Letters are read as a whole, these records of Irish local culture in the nineteenth century reveal apparent associations between women and castles (Bleeke 166). These associations also reveal how castle structures were viewed by their local audiences. Traditionally, women were remembered as the builders of castles and as their primary, or their last, inhabitants (McAuliffe 161-2). Some of these records address associations between women and a castle's family, property, and power. Such stories also remembered the issues that were at stake for the castles' builders. These stories also suggest important issues that motivated the reutilization of the sheela-na-gig sculptures in castle construction (Bleeke 170).

In one story, for example, the Mac David Burkes from Galway, Co. Clare, came into power at the expense of the O'Feenaghty's, who were natal kin to a woman named Nuala na Meaoige ny Fionachtaigh. The letters record that Nuala once spurred a reluctant son into battle by "raising her petticoats," an act of self display that correlates closely to the visual display of the sheela-na-gig sculptures (Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Galway, vol. I, 74-75). The letters suggest that Nuala played a major role in this devolution of power, because she preferred her bastard son by Richard Finn Burke to her own brothers (Letters, Co. Galway, vol. II, 304-6).

In another story, according to the remarks made by John O'Donovan, a native of South Kilkenny, scholar, antiquarian and topographer, the Kiltinane church and/or Ballyfinboy castle sheela-na-gigs were set up to annoy the descendants of a particular person named Sheela-na-gig. Here, the term "sheela-na-gig" does not

apply to a type of sculpture, but to the name of a singular person that the sculpture represents. From evidence gathered in the letters, it appears that local Irish viewers regularly understood the sculptures to be representations of particular people from their community's past (Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Tipperary, vol. I, 63, vol. II, 523, and vol. III, 123,364). When addressing the Kiltinane sheela-na-gig, particularly, O'Donovan wrote that there was a set of stories current in the 1840's in Co. Tipperary, about a certain woman named "Sile Ni Ghig", which may have tied the sculptures called sheela-na-gigs even more closely into this tradition of castle-building and women. O'Donovan wrote,

Oral information says that this ill-executed piece of sculpture ... represents a woman known as... Sile Ni Ghig, a person described as having plunged herself into all kinds of excesses and having precipitated herself by her follies into the gulph (sic) of destruction. She in fact represented (by the locals)...not as a human being but ... in all respects a brute (O'Donovan Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Tipperary (Typed Copy), Vol. II; O'Connor 6).

Indeed, the evidence gathered from the Ordnance Survey letters clearly connects the sheela-na-gig sculptures themselves to sites served for telling stories about the local past that were also stories concerning the reputation of inappropriate women, their family, property, and power.

There are some sheela-na-gig figures that continue to function within the local Irish culture even today. One example is the sheela-na-gig at Kilnaboy Church, Co. Clare. With the graveyard still in use today (Swinfen 76), the ruined church of Kilnaboy was built on a site of an early monastery founded by St. Inghine Bhaoithe. All that remains of the former foundation is the stump of the round tower. Jorgen Andersen describes this oblong shaped church without a chancel as showing a mixture of eleventh and twelfth century remains, and later work as well (Andersen 149). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the church was reconstructed from the earlier building. Above the door on the outside south wall, a slightly defaced sheela na-gig gestures in an obscene posture. This figure, carved in deep relief, has a round bald head, grim mouth, incised ribs and folds located on the lean neck are still

visible (see Plate XXXI). There is something like a tail descending from the vulva as well. This sheela-na-gig sculpture is regarded traditionally as an image of the first abbess, the founder and patron of the church, St. Inghine Bhaoithe (daughter of Boath), pronounced locally as “Innan Wee”. The exact date and identity of this saint is unknown (Swinfen 77). Incidentally, there is a second smaller sheela-na-gig figure with a small cross marking her vulva and possible horns on her head which was inserted sideways just inside the doorway (McMahon and Roberts 134).

The location of this sheela-na-gig above the entrance door of this ruined church is significant because its appearance serves as an indication that the sculpture resides in its original context. The placement of this image is also important evidence of how it was understood by its viewers, and how it speaks to us of the past. Because this sculpture rests in its original context above the church's entrance door, it is understood to have something to do with, or related in some way to the opening in the fabric of this church. Here, the site of the sculpture is also identified as a place of passage between the interior and exterior of the building. The type of gesture identified in the Kilnaboy Church sheela-na-gig, the “grab and pull” type, in combination with the passage between interior and exterior, may also suggest that this passage was understood in terms of the importance of the feminine. Although Kilnaboy's original church records are no longer extant, the local understanding of this particular sheela-na-gig seems to address the image as an important Christian female, as well as an image that functioned apotropaically, viewed as the spiritual protectress overlooking the church's front portal entrance. It is clear that the location of this sheela-na-gig above the entrance does create a connection between the named patroness, founder, and Christian saint, St. Inghine Bhaoithe, to the architectural structure of this church. In examining the oral history of the Irish, it becomes increasingly clear how this image closely correlates to the importance of women, ecclesiastical and/or secular, and to the sacredness of the feminine, as well as to the concept of Irish femininity.

Modern Feminist Interpretation and Artistic Usage

One of the most modern interpretations of the sheela-na-gig image may be found in work created during the 1980's by the American feminist artist, Nancy Spero. In the thesis entitled, "Nancy Spero: The Re-Ontologization of Female Imagery," author Susan Jenkins explores the importance of Spero's art, along with her involvement in the feminist movement, as it inspired her artistic examination of woman's position as the "other" in a male-defined society. Through her art, Spero's ultimate endeavor was to positively re-present the female body in a new way.

An important part of Spero's work was conveyed through her positive images of women. The female images in these works represent a freedom from every kind of physical, mental, and social constraint as "naked women are unmolested; sprinting women are never tripped; (and) laughing women remain ungagged (Tickner 16). Lisa Tickner also pointed out in 1987 that Spero had decided to return to *only* images of women ... in an attempt to displace the position of the male as the generic human subject (Tickner 7; Gaudelius 135).

Many of the images used in Spero's paintings, such as goddesses, great mothers, and fertility figures, have an archetypal or mythic quality, according to Jenkin's research (51) (see Plate XXXII). These images reflect women's ability to be assertive and in control of their own bodies. These images also present Spero's strategy of questioning the traditional depictions of women and the role they play to perpetuate the ideology and privileging of the dominant culture (Jenkins 52).

Jenkins wrote that for feminist artists, archetypal images are usually employed because of their revolutionary character. When conjoined with contemporary experiences, archetypal images are able to trigger memories that can create an open field from which women can draw their own identities (Siegel 13). In this process of associating depictions of strong female figures with myths, women are able to reclaim them, authenticate them, and assert them into a history of their own, writes author Lisa Tickner (Lauter 41; Jenkins 54).

According to Gloria Orenstein, the archetype of the Great Goddess is a symbol with many meanings: transformation, intuitive psychic states, creative energy, and a mind-body duality (Orenstein 158). Artists who are implementing the archetypal goddess imagery are now using the female form as an instrument of spirit-knowledge, and as a way of repossessing the powers long associated with the various manifestations of the archetype of the goddess. This new art, whereby the archetype of the goddess plays a catalytic role, has been described as being “about the mysteries of woman’s rebirth from the womb of historical darkness, in which her powers have so long been enshrouded, into a new era where a culture of her own making will come about” (Orenstein 159). Therefore, contemporary feminist artists, as bearers of sacred tradition, “are creating a new sacred space for the enactment of those magical rebirth ceremonies that are first coming into our culture through art” (Orenstein 161). Now, the artistic usage of archetypal images is presented as a form through which the archetypal feminine might be discovered (Jenkins 54). In the work entitled, *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*, Christine Downing describes the need for this type of imagery:

In recent years many women have rediscovered how much we need the goddess in a culture that tears us from woman, from women, from ourselves. To be fed only male images of the divine is to be badly malnourished. We are starved for images which recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of female energy. We hunger for images of human creativity and love inspired by the capacity of female bodies ... We long for images which name as authentically feminine courage, creativity, loyalty, and self-confidence, resilience and steadfastness ... We need images: we also need myths -- for myths make concrete and particularize (Downing 4-5).

For these reasons, the inclusion of archetypal goddess imagery became a fairly common feminist strategy by the mid 1970’s. Found in the work of feminist artist Nancy Spero, as well as others, including Mary Beth Edelson, Donna Byars, Ana Mendieta, and Carolee Schneemann, these images are intended to function as a kind of mediation between being and becoming (Orenstein 161).

In her thesis, Jenkins writes that the strategy of reclamation has been criticized

because of sexually inappropriate female images, such as sheela-na-gigs, whose overt sexuality is prohibited within patriarchy. According to the work of Carol Laing, the forbidding of explicit sexual imagery, associated with the rise of phallocentrism, has misrepresented women by denying their sexuality (Laing 63). In order to counter this interpretation, many feminist artists have created images meant to restore female potency (Jenkins 56).

In examining Spero's collage titled, Sheela and the Dildo Dancer, 1987 (see Plate XXXIII), Jenkins writes that the artist combined two naturally opposing archaic images, one active, the other one passive, to represent woman's sexuality. Consistent with Spero's use of female images, they are not intended to set up an oppositional situation, but rather they offer an alternative construct that is less restrictive (Jenkins 56).

The sheela-na-gig is the passive image in this work of art. Discovered by Spero in the book entitled, Celtic Mysteries, the sheela-na-gig is reported as the Celtic goddess of creation and destruction. Spero also learned that the image existed primarily as a stone carving on castles and churches in the British Isles. Outside of their own historical context, however, these images are sometimes referred to as idols or whores because of their blatant sexual nature (Lippard 218). The exaggeration of their femaleness has even been related to the "male fear fantasies of the devouring mother" (Adams 10). As Freud had even noted, "even the devil runs in terror at the sight of woman's genitals" (Sherlock 87).

Juxtaposed to the sheela-na-gig figure is the image Spero calls the "Dildo Dancer". This active, dancing figure was appropriated from a fifth century B. C. Greek vase painting by the Greek artist Epiktetos (Brooks Exh. brochure). Conveying the act of dancing, the figure tips forward and her arms, which are extended by long dildos, encircle the figure's lower body in a motion that reinforces the sense of movement. Spero identified this image as a representation of a prostitute, whose status placed her among the only free women in Athens to

exercise independent control over money. Without knowledge of the figure's cultural origin or function, however, the dancer would still be perceived as sexual in nature. Because of the dancer's possession of the dildo/phallus shape -- the sign of potency in the dominant order -- the dancer's sexuality is not considered passive in nature, which is usually associated with images of women (Jenkins 57-58).

Placing these two images together, the sheela-na-gig and the Dildo Dancer connote the varied realm of women's sexuality. The images can't be visually or conceptually united to form a single meaning, as emphasized by the printing of one image directly on top of the other, but rather can only suggest possibilities. The visual disjunction they create because of the different techniques that have been used to print them -- the sheela-na-gig's image is almost obscure while the dancer's is sharply defined -- sustains Spero's enterprise of problematizing the meaning of the female imagery. Like the goddess figures, these images offer a vision of woman as a being in her own right, not, as Kuspit has observed, in "reaction-formation" to man (Kuspit 90). By focusing on the female body, Spero is able to assert a specific female-based expressivity in a positive new way.

Spero states that she is not interested in individual physiognomies or personifications in her choice of figures. For Spero, her figures become generic in a somewhat similar way (Bird, Isaak & Lotringer 130), utilizing artistically the female body as a symbol or as a hieroglyph, and in a deeper sense, an extension of language. Spero stated,

in making a statement about women's bodies ... what I suppose might be most subversive about the work is what I am trying to say in depicting the female body: that woman is not the 'other', that the female image is universal. And when I show the difference, I want to show the differences in women, women's rites of passage, rather than men's rites of passage. Woman as protagonist: the woman on stage (Bird, Isaak & Lotringer 134).

A continuing creative usage of the sheela-na-gig figure has not only been demonstrated within the bounds of American feminist art during the twentieth century but also within the Irish context as well. An important article called, "Representations

of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Differences,” written by Molly Mullin, provides an analysis of contemporary Irish feminist art that utilizes the traditional image of the sheela-na-gig. The article also discusses the struggle over historical representation of women and Ireland, the controversy caused by Cathleen O’Neill’s Dublin Millennium poster, the impediments related to the emergence and expression of Irish feminist historical consciousness, and its correlation with understandings of the sheela-na-gig sculptures.

Initially, the city government of Dublin announced in 1988, the one thousandth year of Dublin history, an event they entitled the “Dublin Millennium”. Included in the more marginal counter hegemonic representations of the Millennium was a poster which attempted both to commemorate former Dublin women, a few who are not well known, and to protest against the consistent exclusion of women from the more widely distributed representations of Dublin history. The poster became a topic of controversy when an article in the Irish Times reported that shopkeepers refused to sell it because of its scandalous graphic design.

In her article, Mullins wrote about Ms. Cathleen O’Neill, a mother of five from Kilbarrack, who came up with the idea of a poster called “The Spirit of Woman” after she saw the official Millennium poster, “Faces of Dublin.” Because every face on the Millennium poster was male, she decided to create a poster of women’s faces found pertinent to the Millennium. The poster was designed with a decorative border of sheela-na-gigs, discernible only at a second glance. According to Ms. O’Neill, she was reclaiming a positive woman’s symbol for the Millennium. These words signify that O’Neill utilized the image of the sheela-na-gig in a new and positive manner, as a symbol representing “the spirit of the woman”. She was able to identify and connect her own feelings to this image in her interpretation.

The importance of Mullin’s article is that it hints that sheela-na-gigs may have had more than one meaning. Although there have been attempts to define them, like the attempts to represent Irish history, these attempts have been selective. Mullin’s

article also provides supporting evidence to Jorgen Andersen's argument about the meaning of the figures: that meaning is defined by use. This point is crucial when coming to terms with understanding the evolving nature of this image, in its continual acquisition of new meanings.

Mullin wrote that she wanted to use the disagreements surrounding the poster as a way of demonstrating connections between theories of meaning, feminist consciousness, and historical representation. Mullins believes that O'Neill's Millennium poster provides an example of how these topics can intersect. She believes that the sheela-na-gig and the controversy that it inspired is instructive because of the challenge it presents to hegemonic representations of Irish history, as well as the number of topics crucial to feminist theory (Mullin 3). Mullin states that the sheela-na-gig on O'Neill's allegedly scandalous poster, although an exceptional image with which to depict Irish history, is nonetheless instructive about more hegemonic modes of historical representation which are a part of the specific conditions with which Irish feminists must contend (Mullin 10).

A story written in the Irish Times concerning O'Neill's poster demonstrates that struggles over historical representation are also struggles over identities, according to Mullin. When O'Neill contested popular notions of Dublin history, she was also challenging the dominant ways of constructing her gender. The connection between definitions of identity and notions of history means that ideologies of historical representation are closely bound up with ideologies of meaning.

Mullin wrote that the resurrection of sheela-na-gigs happened due in part to Irish feminists. Having now become, almost emblematic of Irish feminism, sheela figures have appeared on newsletters, book covers, and announcements, as well as on Cathleen O'Neill's Millennium poster (Mullin 17). In an essay on the iconography of the vagina, Shirley Ardener addressed several points that help to explain the more universal aspects of their current revival. Ardener argues that vagina imagery has been used as an attempt to reevaluate the physical marks of otherness. Ardener

remarked that a number of feminist artists use this type of imagery to celebrate a female heritage or tradition. The woman artist, who sees herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity (Mullin 18). The feminist artist is, therefore, able to personally identify with her images, as she, the artist, interprets the images as symbols of meaningful context.

“Concrete” expressions of female consciousness, with a humorous, witty irreverence can be found also in the work of one of Ireland’s most controversial journalists, Nell McCafferty. Her response to reports about the shopkeeper’s boycott of O’Neill’s alternative Millennium poster was as follows: her column featured a cartoon of a sheela wearing a nun’s veil. In the accompanying essay, McCafferty connected the censorship of sheela-na-gigs to the censorship of information about sexuality and the body, particularly, the female body. McCafferty argues that sheela-na-gigs should be considered a joyful expression of physical difference between female and male. McCafferty moves from celebrating differences to argue that a sheela-na-gig is a perfectly appropriate decoration for a poster commemorating one thousand years of Dublin history. In contrast to words used in the Irish Times article, such as “quaint” and “primitive”, McCafferty claims an ordinariness, a familiarity for sheela-na-gigs.

In summary of the ways in which artworks carry meanings, the work of feminist artists, such as Nancy Spero and others, is important because these women go far beyond an analysis of representations of women in terms of “good” versus “bad” models. These women present strategies for creating works of art that open new systems of meaning. They demand that we understand gender as one of the primary cultural categories through which we order our lives. Works composed of multiple images of women, such as Spero’s, use multiplicity of images to challenge singular, patriarchal definitions of “woman”.

The sheela-na-gig has acquired a number of interpretations, based on the researched records documenting when the figures first arrived in twelfth century Ireland, then to how the Irish figures were used during the later Middle Ages, and finally to its current artistic usage, as it is incorporated as an integral component within a composition by American and Irish artist alike. These interpretations clearly support Andersen's argument about the meaning of the figures: that meaning is defined by use. It also becomes evident that the meaning of the symbol is defined by usage as the symbol evolves chronologically. Each new audience is key: a new audience creates the opportunity for new meaning, new interpretation, and for new usage. It is clear that these chronological acts of reception and acceptance for the sheela-na-gig have formed a "chain of interpretations" and functions, revealing the symbol's ongoing evolving status and capabilities.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

What first prompted a more comprehensive assessment of the sheela-na-gig figure was the inconsistency of literature associated with the subject. Writings obtained from nineteenth century Irish antiquarian scholarship proved to be lacking in the true diligence to pursue a more scholarly and accurate analysis of the phenomenon. The attempt to get to the true meaning of this figure is a partial reason for an initial investigation into its historical past. Another aspect stems from the noted changing functions and roles of the sheela-na-gig over time, along with its capacity to survive these changes. Certain questions beg answers. Why were they made? Why were these figures able to cling to existence? Why did the function of the sheela-na-gig motif change over the course of history? Obviously the sheela-na-gig as a symbol has enormous relevance and psychological significance even today. According to Maureen Concannon, the reemergence of these carvings in modern society is

a signal that the human psyche is responding to an urgent call for balance to the overwhelming imbalance on earth at present -- problems so serious that all life on the planet is threatened with extinction. There is a deep need to return to the feminine -- a symbol of the ultimate power of creativity to balance that of destruction -- to teach respect to the arrogant and give hope to the downtrodden. Sheela is a symbol of that much needed feminine deity -- the powerful Dark goddess of transformation and renewal (Concannon 164).

Linked with the evolutionary nature of the sheela figure, this study has not only been an attempt to identify its original purpose but also to recognize how other audiences have interpreted and given meaning to the figure. It is inconceivable to accept one blanket interpretation -- such as sexual sin and punishment -- for this motif; these figures tell us much more than that.

The changing interpretation of this icon illuminates the numerous functions which

the sheela-na-gig has been associated. In relationship to this fact, scholars have toiled to find messages and meanings that indicate their various purposes. Keeping this in mind, the focus of this thesis has been "audience specified". This means that focus has been spent directly on the changing audiences for the sculpture, investigating the meaning of the figure as each new audience defines its usage. Is the purpose of the sheela-na-gig positive or negative? Does the context or setting or perhaps the thesis change their impact? Does the relationship with the audience give them new impact? Does the chronological order and series of events from one group to the next make a difference? Could these receptions and interpretations impact the sheela-na-gig as we have seen by their symbolic capabilities?

In analysis, sheela-na-gigs are frontal forms that have become meaningful to specific audiences, projecting themselves into the viewer's world and initiating an interaction between the object and the viewer. Emphasis is placed on the eyes, marking the image as both active and engaged, thus living and realistic. The sheela-na-gig presents itself as an actuality, or as a reality, providing the observer with interaction. Each visit sets the stage for a fresh and specific viewpoint inviting interplay.

Scholarly approaches based on comparison and contrast tell us that viewer interpretation has changed to become expedient with reference to its uses. This process of "meaning defined by usage" continues today.

Furthermore, interpretations countering each other are frequently found. Recapping examples of oppositional interpretations indicate the following: the sheela-na-gig figure has been characterized as both a "grotesque" and a "goddess", a "pagan feminine deity" and as a "Christian saint", both sacred and sinful, "Eve", and the "Virgin Mary". During the Middle Ages, it may have been thought of as a woman in childbirth, as well as the result of the sin of fornication. The figure also became part of an ecclesiastical sculptural program, interpreted as a "comical" as well as a "serious" figure. The figure was also acknowledged as a receptacle of prayer, and as

a ridiculed image hidden away in church basements. Audiences have recognized them as an integral part of a church setting, only to see them thrown into a river. For the author of this thesis, however, the sheela-na-gig is primarily a fertility symbol.

In conclusion, this thesis has investigated the origin of the sheela-na-gig as an essential aspect of its existence, bringing forth various learned viewpoints which challenge modern debate. The work of Jorgen Andersen is monumental and instrumental in this inquiry. His research is responsible for the theory that the origins are pagan or medieval Christian in concept. Due to Andersen's efforts, an academic approach has followed, when examining the sheela-na-gigs of Irish, English, and Continental European medieval churches. My research is in agreement with these findings and should be accepted as a continuum of the investigation of these enigmatic figures. Hopefully, my work, along with modern theories in associated topics, will promote additional questioning into this vital study.

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PLATES



Plate I
Rochestown church sheela-na-gig sketch, Co. Tipperary, by T. J. Westropp.



Plate II

a) Sheela-na-gig found at Douth old church, Co. Meath. (Badly damaged figure on the south wall)



Plate II

b) Sheela-na-gig located over the doorway at Ballynahinch Castle, Co. Tipperary.

Plate IV

a) Kiltinane Church, Co. Tipperary, sheela-na-gig replica created by James O'Connor. The original was stolen in 1990, (photograph by James O'Malley)



Plate IV

b) Photograph by James Clarke, the first person to discover the theft of the Kiltinane sheela-na-gig.



Plate IV

c) Wanted poster issued by the Fethard Historical Society of the stolen sheela figure.

REWARD

INFORMATION
Send us To The Recovery of
SHEELA NA GIG (P. 1990) R. L. L.
Fethard Garda Station (052) 31202
Clonmel Garda Station (052) 22222

WANTED

Sheela na Gig
Stolen on Tuesday 9th. Jan. 1990
KILTINAN CHURCH, FETHARD
Co. Tipperary

Plate V

a) Plate lithograph of Kilpeck sheela-na-gig by artist George R. Lewis, from his work titled Illustrations of Kilpeck. (Note Lewis's rendering of the sheela corbel, as compared to an actual photograph of the figure)

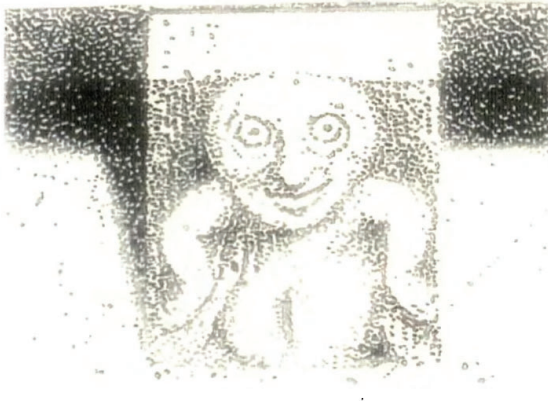


Plate V

b) Photograph of the actual sheela-na-gig corbel at Kilpeck Church, Herefordshire





Plate VI
"The Bishop's Stone" at Killadeas, Lough Erne (thick lipped and deliberately marked on on one cheek)



Plate VII
a) Sheela-na-gig, originally from a ruined church at Co. Cavan, now resides at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.
(thick lipped just like the "Bishop's Stone")



Plate VII
b) One cheek is marked on the Kiltinane figure; repeated in "The Bishop's Stone"



Plate VIII
a) Sheela-na-gig from Kiltinane Church, Co. Tipperary
(photograph by Jorgen Andersen)



Plate VIII
b) Sheela-na-gig, located on a well house
at Kiltinane Castle, Co. Tipperary. Figure
holds a circular object in her left hand.



Plate VIII
c) Sheela-na-gig on Fethard
wall.(known as the Watergate
sheela)



Plate IX
Terminal of gold bracelet from the grave of a fourth century princess at
Reinheim, Germany; it depicts a goddess with an owl headdress; it's
believed to be the earliest known precursor of the modern sheela-na-gig.



Plate X
Second century B. C. Gundestrup Cauldron.
The silver plated copper bowl was discovered in 1891.



Plate XI

The image of Cernunnos the “horned” Celtic deity, seated in a “cross-legged” posture, arms holding two objects – the left hand holds a snake and the right hand holds a torque; this image is located on the Gundestrup Cauldron.



Plate XII
The Seir Kierain sheela-na-gig figure,
found in Co. Offally; now resides in the
National Museum of Ireland, Dublin
(Note drilled holes in the figure).





Plate XIII

Comparison/Contrast of two different sheela-na-gig figures; the one above is from Lavey, Co. Cavan, with a circular object held between the left arm and body. The other sheela is from a quoin at Copgrove Church, Yorkshire, with a disc-shaped object in the right hand.





Plate XIV.
Kilpeck Church
a.) portion of the west front
b.) view from the east





Plate XV
South door, Kilpeck Church

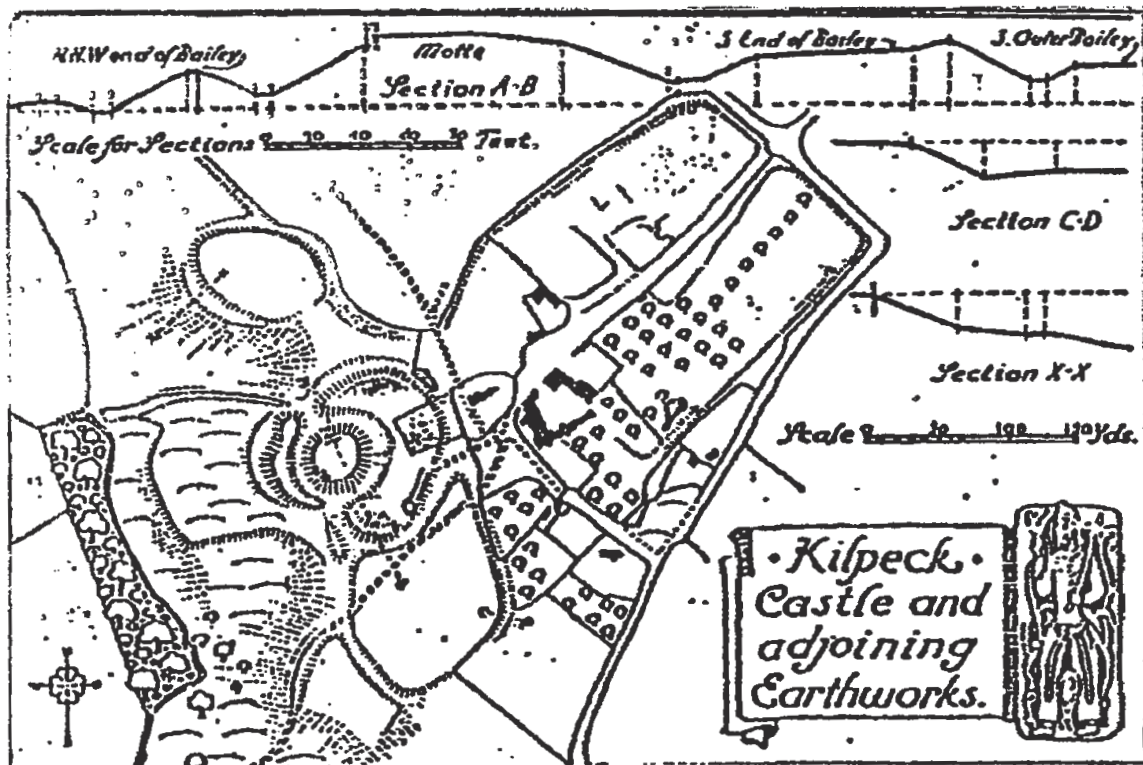


Plate XVI
 Kilpeck Castle and Adjoining Earthworks

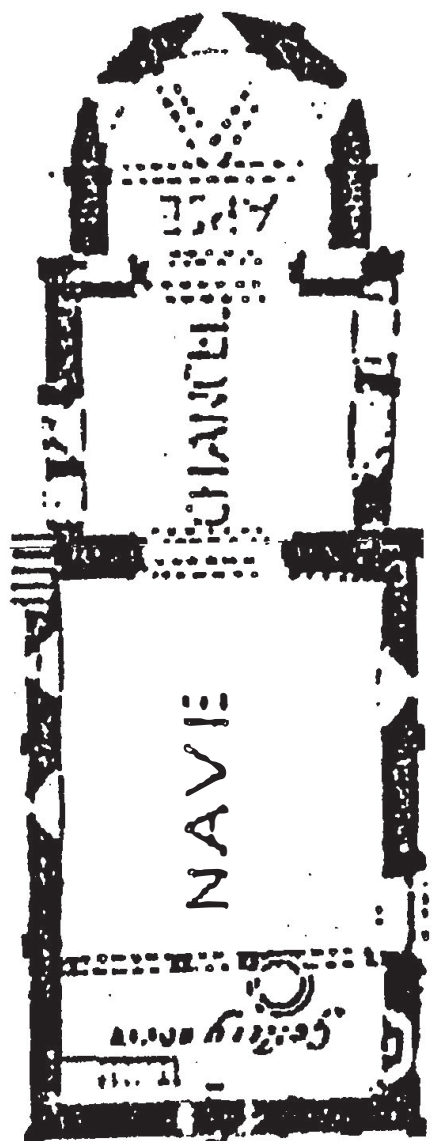


Plate XVII
Kilpeck, St. David and St. Mary Floor Plan



Plate XVIII
West window, Kilpeck Church

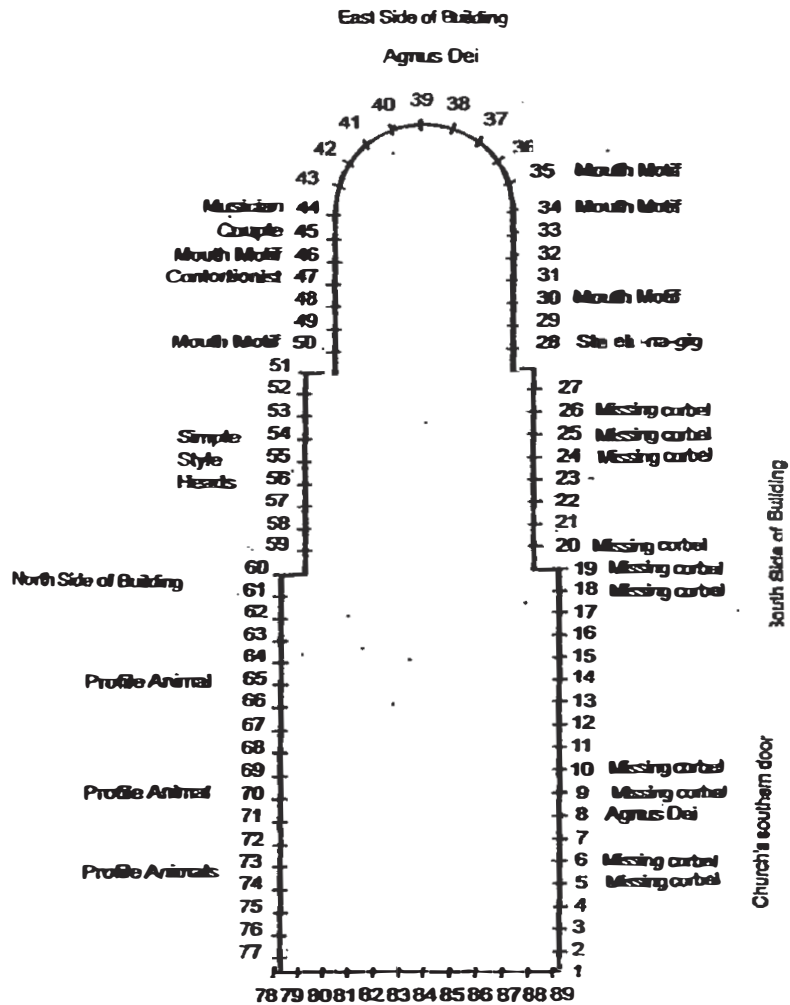


Plate XIX
Map of Herefordshire



Plate XX
The sheela-na-gig corbel at Kilpeck Church

Welsh Village located to the east of Kilpeck Church



West wall: Concentration of mouth motifs

Plate XXI
Diagram of the corbel series, Kilpeck Church

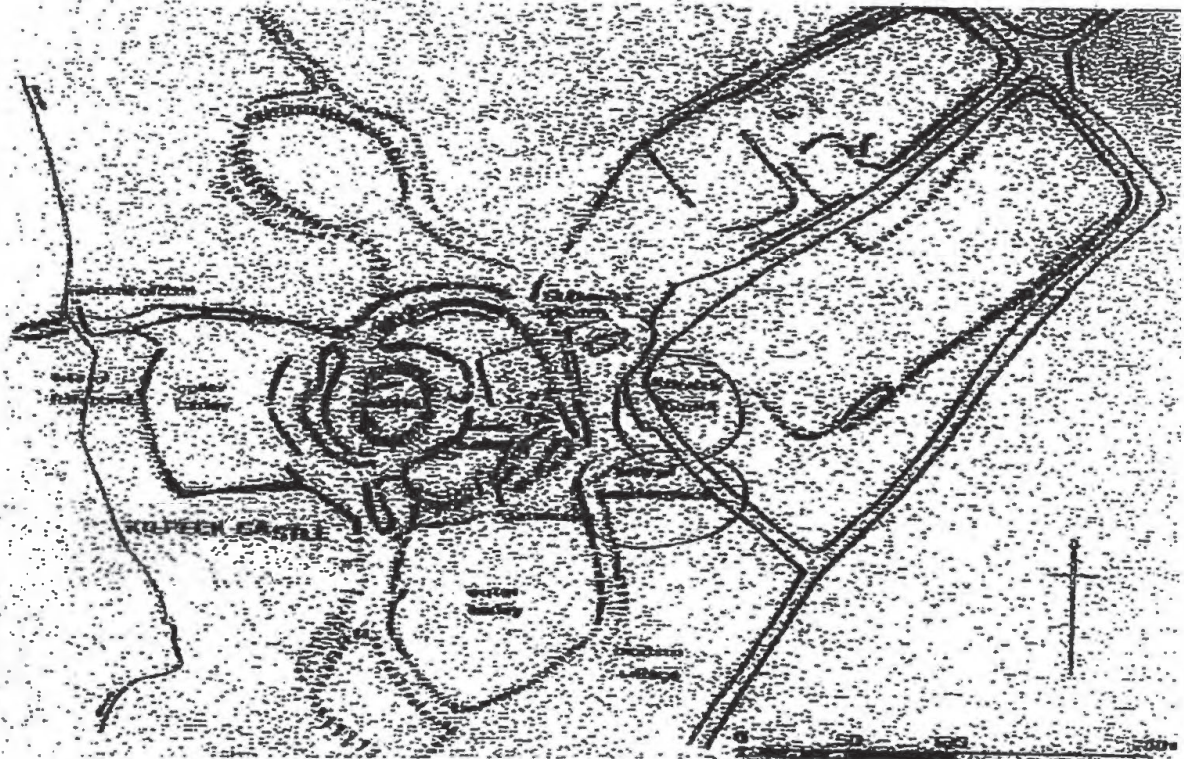


Plate XXII
 Diagram showing Kilpeck church, castle, village and earthworks.
 Reproduced from R. Shoesmith, ed., "Excavations at Kilpeck Church, Hereford."
 Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club. XLVII/2 (1992), figure 2.



Plate XXIII

Door column of the church at Kilpeck depicts warrior knights interlaced with dragons.

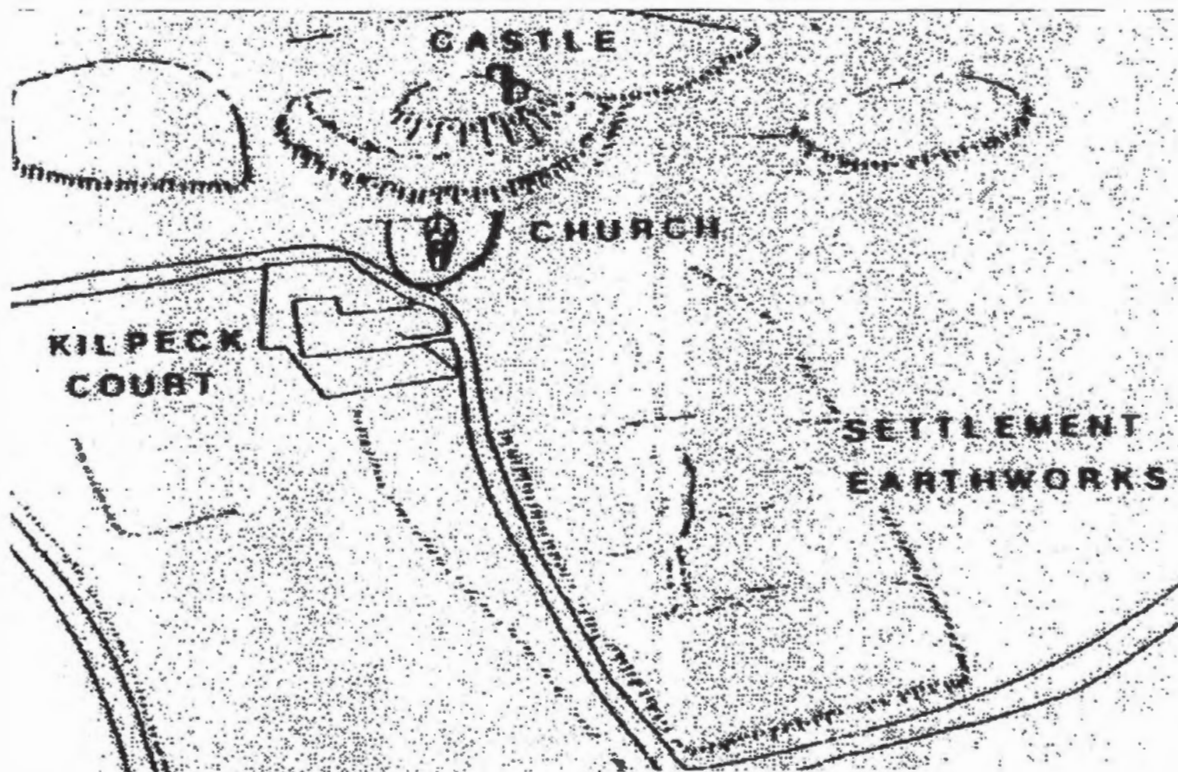


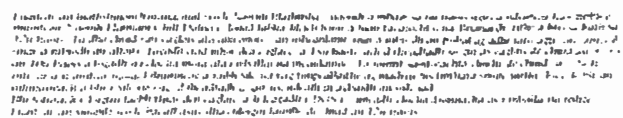
Plate XXIV
Diagram showing Kilpeck church, castle and village after an aerial photograph of 1958. Reproduced from Shoesmith, "Excavations at Kilpeck Church."



Plate XXV

- a) The remains of Rath Blathmac Church, Co. Clare (photograph taken by Carol Rose)
- b) Photograph of the Rath Church Romanesque window sill (photograph taken by Carol Rose)

Eaglais na Rátha



This walk-in marble floor was made by hand in the 17th century and is believed to have been the subject of a famous letter to John, the fifth-century British, in an attempt to win his favour, signed by the 14th-century Pope. The present church is the result of two parts: the old church, the congregation was dropped and the church where the altar was used. Although the church has been built from the 17th century, but large stones used in the church were the altar was used. Although the church has been built from the 17th century, but large stones used in the church were the altar was used. Although the church has been built from the 17th century, but large stones used in the church were the altar was used.



The ruins of a Round Tower, a tall bell-tower, stood to the west of the church but it was demolished in 1848. The old tower ruins were built into the present cemetery in 1848. A tower and two smaller round-bells from the 12th century are associated with the site.

Ruth: You Are Ruth The Heroine



Plate XXVII
Antiquarian sketch of sheela-na-gig figure at Rath Blathmac Church, from the
The Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland and Britain, p. 144.



Plate XXVIII
Pictures of the Nun's Church, Clonmacnoise (photographs taken by Carol Rose)

Sile Na Gigh

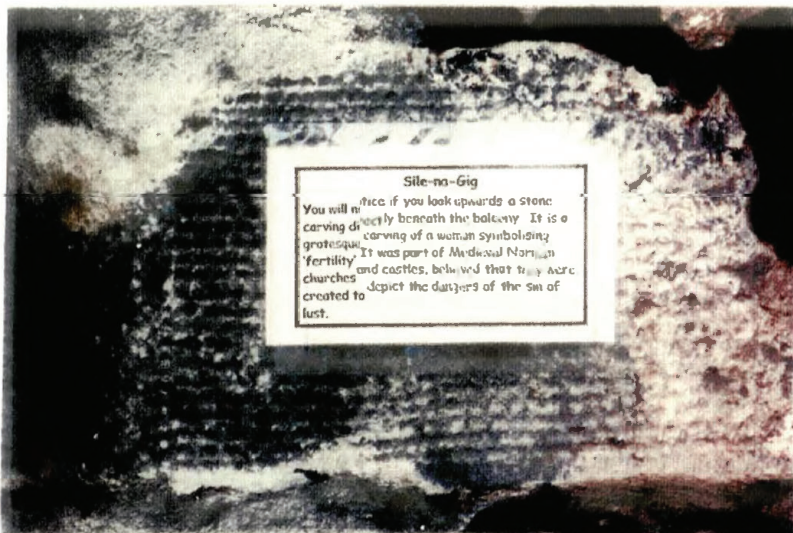


Plate XXX

- a) Sheela-na-gig figure at Redwood Castle, Co. Tipperary
- b) Marker with a description of the sheela-na-gig figure at Redwood Castle (photographs taken by Carol Rose)



Plate XXXI
Sheela-na-gig figure at Kilnaboy Church, Co. Clare (photograph by CarolRose)



Plate XXXII
Nancy Spero with image of the sheela-na-gig found at Kilpeck church.



Plate XXXIII
"Sheela & the Dildo Dancer" (1987) by artist Nancy Spero.