

Presidential Address

Irish Sheela-na-Gigs: Erotic, Apotropaic, or merely Rude Stone Monuments?

At the Galway Meeting of the Association in 1999 Professor Etienne Rynne delivered his Presidential Address with the above title. He defined the Sheela-na-Gig as ‘a carving, almost always in stone, of a grotesque naked female figure, generally with an over-large head, and frontally displaying her genital region’. The term *Sheela-na-Gig* has been given various derivations: it is generally assumed that the first element *sheela*, or *síla* in Irish, derives from a girl’s name: *Celia*, *Cecilia* or *Julia*. For the other elements of the term there is no general agreement. The significance and purpose of the carvings have been explained in diverse ways. While plausibly described as ‘erotic’, they could perhaps, more correctly, particularly in the later stages, be termed ‘apotropaic’, i.e. intended to ward off evil or enemies. Some commentators have seen the carvings as deliberately repulsive creations to warn the beholder against the sins of the flesh. All the Irish examples are, or were, found in religious or secular buildings of medieval date, which has led to the suggestion that the practice was introduced by the Cambro-Normans, following their invasion of Ireland in the late twelfth century. The *Sheela* is not peculiar to Ireland; similar or related forms are found all over the world, and they belong to many periods of the past.

Unfortunately, various unforeseen circumstances, including a surgical operation, hampered Professor Rynne in preparing his full text for publication, and it eventually became clear that the article could not appear in the present volume. To avoid further delay, it was decided instead to reprint an earlier article by Professor Rynne, in which he discussed possible prototypes for the true Sheelas and why they became so popular in late medieval Ireland. The article appeared in Figures from the Past: Studies on Figurative Art in Christian Ireland, a Festschrift edited by him in honour of Helen M. Roe, the distinguished authority on Irish Art, and published in 1987 by the Glendale Press for the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. The Association is grateful to that Society for agreeing to the reprint, and to Rory O’Farrell for facilitating the arrangements. Professor Rynne now wishes to re-dedicate this paper to the memory — and the patience — of the late Editor of this Journal, Patricia Moore. He feels that Helen Roe would have approved.

As an afternote, there is appended a short paper by Michael Freeman describing a Sheela-na-Gig from Ceredigion. It is hoped that someone will eventually emerge to produce an overview of examples found on the Welsh side of the Irish Sea, and that Professor Rynne will offer further work on the subject to a future issue of the Journal.

A Pagan Celtic Background for Sheela-na-Gigs?

By PROFESSOR ETIENNE RYNNE, M.A., M.R.I.A., F.S.A.

The origin and purpose of the pseudo-erotic sculptures of naked females displaying their genitalia, popularly and academically known as Sheelas or Sheela-na-Gigs, have long excited discussion and speculation. These figures occur most frequently in Ireland, but are also found in Britain, France and elsewhere.¹ Almost all of them are unequivocally medieval in date, being generally found associated with late churches and tower-houses. Present belief prefers a Romanesque or Norman origin for them and ascribes them with a protective purpose (Andersen

1977, 73-95 for origins, 96-112 and 135-38 for purpose;² Weir 1977, 71-2, and Jerman 1981, 10ff., opt for Romanesque origins, and both, particularly Jerman, seem to prefer a non-protective *raison d'être* for these carvings). However, other theories are arguable, particularly that related figures, perhaps to be recognised as proto-Sheelas, are known from pre-Norman times, figures which were probably associated with other activities.

It will be suggested in this paper that prototypes for the Romanesque and medieval Sheela-na-Gigs exist from the pagan Celtic Iron Age, some associated with a fertility cult, and that these were, or became, somehow related to and fused with a male 'Lord of the Animals' figure 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 Sheelas.

The strange anomaly of the Sheela-na-Gigs clearly possessing female genitals but generally lacking in breasts has often been noted, especially when commenting on the interpretation of the term 'Sheela-na-Gig', a term popularly and indeed generally derived from *Síle na gCíoch*, i.e. Sheela of the Breasts. Other interpretations have been suggested, including that it could mean a male/female with a large open mouth (Ó Séaghdha 1947, 44), but the problem is perhaps best explained by Dr. Máire Sweeney (*née* MacNeill) and Professor M.V. Duignan (as reported by Andersen 1977, 23), who suggest *Síle i n-a giob*, i.e. Sheela on her hunkers, a squatting posture being undoubtedly the most commonly encountered.

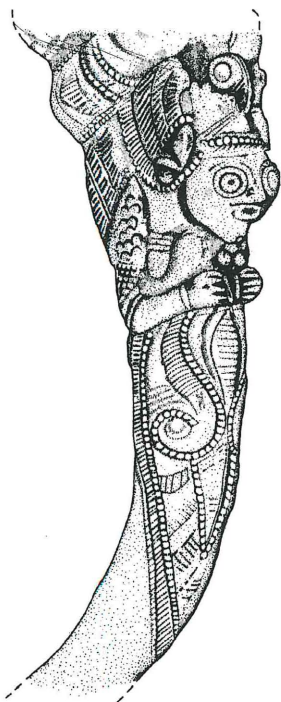


Fig. 1. Female figure displaying genitalia and with owl-like head above; on terminal of gold armllet from Reinheim, Germany.

Display of the vulva may be the obvious and most significant feature likely to be associated with fertility figures of all periods, while a squatting posture is apparently one associated with the Celtic god Cernunnos. Both these features are characteristic of medieval Sheela-na-Gigs and both have antecedents back into pagan Celtic times.

Probably the earliest depictions of figures displaying genitals, in a context relevant to the present discussion, are on the terminals of a fine gold armllet from the late fifth- or fourth-century B.C. princely grave at Reinheim, in Saarland, in western Germany (Powell 1958, pl. 32; Ross 1967 pl. 73a, Megaw 1970, 80, ill. no. 80). This figure has prominent breasts and hands grasping or touching what appears to be intended as her vulva (Fig. 1.), much in the manner of many Sheela-na-Gigs of later date (note particularly that from Lavey, Co. Cavan – Andersen 1977, 125, fig. 85). This figure, with the owl-like bird perched on its head, has led one authority to state his belief that 'The concept is certainly that of a *potnia theron*, a Celtic Artemis, or 'mistress of the wild beasts' (Megaw, *loc. cit.*) an interesting comment as it indirectly applies a dual purpose to the figure: (1) associated with wild animals, and (2) associated with fertility – Artemis, a Greek goddess identified by the Romans with Diana, goddess of the hunt, was *inter alia* a goddess of childbirth, who at Ephesus, where her maternal character was prominent, is thought to have been in origin the Asiatic goddess of fertility (Harvey 1937, 52). Apparently already at this early date we may have a preconception, as it were, of the fusion mentioned above.

The earliest representation of a squatting ‘Lord of the Animals’ figure, again in a context relevant to the present discussion, is probably that identified as Cernunnos, ‘The Horned One’, on the second-century B.C. Gundestrup Cauldron (Ross 1967, pl. 42; Megaw 1970, 132, ill. no. 209b; Andersen 1977, fig. 61). The figure’s legs, splayed and bent at the knees, are in much the same positions as those of many Sheela-na-Gigs, while the wild animals around him (Fig. 2.) identify him as a European Iron Age ‘Lord of the Animals’ (Megaw 1970, 132). Indeed, one might even be tempted to go further, if the serpent or snake which he holds in his left hand can be thought of as symbolic of a phallus (see Freud 1923-25, 89-90 for such interpretation when discussing the occurrence of snakes in dreams³), and suggest that the Gundestrup Cernunnos may have had a fertility aspect too, thus providing a tenuous link with the Reinheim figure – another identification of Cernunnos as the ‘God of Plenty’ (Henry 1965, 155) would support such an aspect, fertility and plenty being virtually synonymous.



Fig. 2. Panel from the Gundestrup Cauldron, showing Cernunnos as ‘Lord of the Animals’.
Photo: Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.

The apparent relationship between these two pre-Christian Celtic representations is interesting. The female deity seems to be strongly imbued with a fertility aspect while also having possible associations with wild animals, while the male deity or deification has strong associations with wild animals and perhaps also a tenuous fertility aspect. The Celtic love of ambiguity, and a fascination for duality of meaning, thought, form and significance,⁴ surely allows one to speculate that it would take little imagination on the part of pagan Celts to confuse and merge these two already superficial related cult-figures.

Whether or not this happened is, of course, uncertain, but from then on there are several figures of indeterminate sex which seem to be in the same general tradition as those two early cult-figures, culminating eventually in the Sheela-na-Gig of medieval times.

Shortly after the birth of Christ, for instance, a figure was carved on a block of limestone. This carving (Fig. 3.), although described as possibly a bust rather than a complete figure by Schoppa (1969, 203), seems more likely to be a figure with large head, squared shoulders and



Fig. 3. Sheela-like figure on stele from Hofheim, Germany.

widely-splayed spindly legs bent at the knees and gripped at the thighs by the hands, the elbows of the thin arms pointing outwards.⁵ This stele was excavated in a Roman fort at Hofheim, in the Taunus, West Germany, in circumstances which indicated a date between A.D. 83 and 121 for it ('absolut sicher ist' – Schoppa 1969, *loc. cit.*). Although Schoppa points out that no sex is indicated, he interestingly suggests that it is a female mother-goddess and Celtic or, particularly if interpreted as a bust rather than as a complete figure, perhaps something in the tradition of a Provincial Roman funerary monument.

When one regards the Hofheim sculpture as a complete figure adopting the posture described above, it can without undue difficulty be comfortably placed alongside many medieval Sheela-na-Gigs as a related carving (Rynne 1971, 81). Not only do the large head, squared shoulders, outwardly pointed elbows and general posture find ready parallels, but the spindly widely-splayed legs and rather amorphous nether regions of the body are almost identical with those of the Clenagh, Co. Clare, Sheela-na-Gig (Andersen 1976, pl. VI and 1977, fig. 79). Indeed, it compares reasonably well as to form and probably also as to date with a low-relief carving near the base of the large four-sided stele or pillar-stone known as Adamnán's Cross or

Adamnán's Stone at Tara, Co. Meath (Macalister 1918-19, 254-257, pl. VIII and 1931, 51-54, ill. facing p. 52; Guest 1936, 114; Ó Ríordáin 1954, 10, ill. p. 13; Andersen 1977, 91-93, fig. 60 and 152, no. 112). This figure (Fig. 4.), being carved in relief, can hardly be other than contemporary with the dressing and erection of the stone.

Adamnán's Cross is one of a pair, its companion being a much lower, rather squat and rounded pillar-stone somewhat in the tradition of many of the Early Iron Age pillar-stones in Brittany and, indeed, in the west of Ireland. Together with these two pillar-stones is associated the phallic Lia Fáil, also at Tara, all three (Fig. 5.) being traditionally, probably even historically, involved in the inauguration ceremonies of the Kings of Tara. These ceremonies were clearly part of a fertility-cult, the pair of pillar-stones, generally accepted as the 'Blocc' and 'Bluigne' of mythology (though not necessarily by Macalister 1918-19), representing the female element 'when they accepted a man, they would open before him until the chariot went through') and the Lia Fáil representing the male element ('And Fál was there, the "stone penis" at the head of the chariot-course (?').⁶ Macalister (1918-19, 254-257) regards Adamnán's Cross 'as a pagan monument' and identifies the sculptured figure as Cernunnos. However, if the tradition associating these stones with the initiation rites of the would-be King of Tara is correct, then it is much more likely that the figure represented is female: it has, in fact, often been identified as a Sheela-type figure (e.g. Murphy and Westropp 1894, 239; Guest 1936, *loc.*



Fig. 4. Sheela/Cernunnos sculpture on Adamnán's Cross, Tara.

Photo: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works.

cit.; Andersen 1977, *loc. cit.*). Either way, the Cernunnos/Sheela confusion is surely of interest, supporting if not perhaps confirming the suggestion of the merging of the two deities mooted above.⁷



Fig. 5. The Lia Fáil, Adamnán's Cross and domed pillar-stone, Tara.
Photos: after Ó Ríordáin 1954, courtesy of Dundalgan Press, Dundalk.

It will be appreciated from the above that the basic characteristics, and perhaps also the ultimate origin of the typical Sheela-na-Gig, can be found in Celtic times, both in continental Europe and in Ireland. While the advent of the Romans largely destroyed continuity of belief in and practice of such matters elsewhere, their non-arrival in Ireland meant the survival and continuation of pagan beliefs well into Christian times in Ireland where such beliefs, practices and idols were generally 'christianised', and thus made acceptable rather than condemned and rejected. Consequently it is possible to find in an Irish context the presence of apparent descendants of the pagan Celtic cult-figures discussed above.

The line of descent in such a context would include the little figure grasping his tightly updrawn and bent legs (Fig. 6.) delicately carved on the head of a bone 'toilet article' or pin found near Newbridge, Co. Kildare (Wilde 1857, 334, fig. 214; Guest 1936, 120-121, pl. XIV: 33), which is probably of sixth/seventh century date.⁸ The seated (?) posture is unusual but does occur in later Sheela-type carvings, e.g. the Romanesque example from Guéron, in Normandy (Andersen 1977, fig. 35) and the Late Medieval example from Taghmon, Co. Westmeath (*ibid.*, fig. 66) Likewise to be included would be the cross-legged enamelled metal figures, with large head and spindly limbs (Fig. 7), which serve as hinges at either end of the handle of the Irish-made 'Buddha Bucket' of seventh/eighth century date found with the ship-burial at Oseberg,

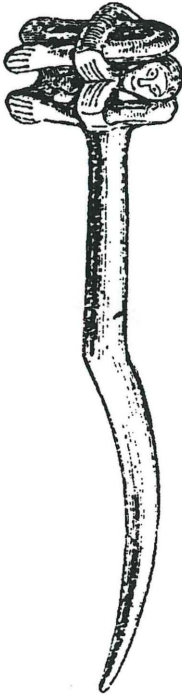


Fig. 6. Bone 'toilet article' or pin from near Newbridge, Co. Kildare – after Wilde 1857, but reversed (being from wood-blocks most, if not all, drawings in Wilde were incorrectly printed).

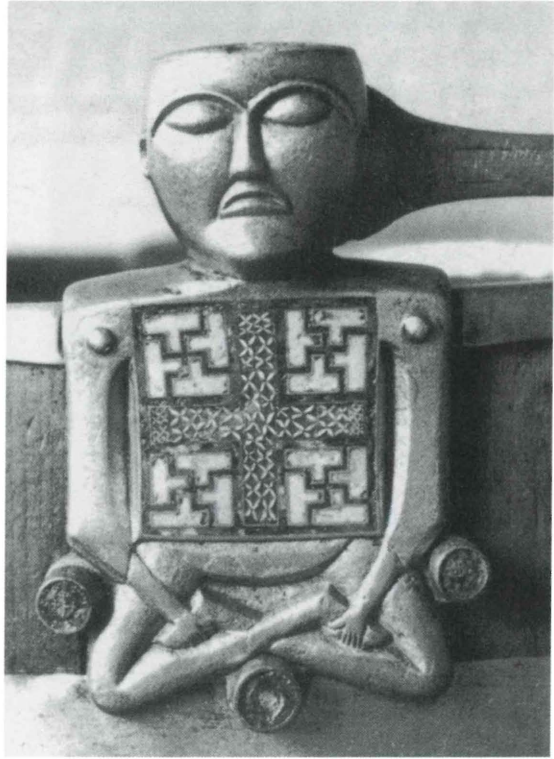


Fig. 7. Hinge-mounting from the 'Buddha Bucket', Oseberg, Norway.
Photo: L. Smestad, Universitets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

Norway (Sjøvold 1957, ill. on p. 51 and frontispiece; Henry 1965, pl. 91; Ross 1967, fig. 107; Andersen 1977, 79, fig. 47).

The cross-legged posture (perhaps first evident on the sculpture on Adamnán's Cross?) is not a characteristic of Romanesque and medieval Sheela-na-Gigs, but is one which could easily be derived from the position of the legs of the Cernunnos figure on the Gundestrup Cauldron, especially when the Buddha-like posture of some of the continental pagan Celtic idols such as those at Roquepertuse (Powell 1958, fig. 22 – see fig. 21 for distribution of such figures) and Bouray (*ibid.*, pl. 68) is taken into consideration. It occurs again on the last two pre-Romanesque figures to be considered, namely the so-called Cernunnos figure (Fig. 8) on the north face of the ninth-century North Cross at Clonmacnoise (Henry 1965, pl. 91; Ross 1967, pl. 47a; Andersen 1977, 80 fig. 48) and the cape-wearing Sheela-type sculpture (Fig. 9) from White Island, Co. Fermanagh, which probably dates from the late ninth or tenth century (Wakeman 1879-82, 282-284, figs. 2 and 4; Guest 1936, 113, pl. X: 11; Hickey 1976, 44, ill. 14(a); Andersen 1977, 81, figs. 49, 77 and 78).



Fig. 8. Cernunnos-like figure on North Cross,
Clonmacnoise.

Photo: J. Bambury, Office of Public Works.



Fig. 9. Sheela-like sculpture on White
Island, Co. Fermanagh.

*Photo: Crown copyright; Department of
the Environment for Northern Ireland.*

Among other possible pre-Romanesque examples of such figures, the most generally accepted is the small figure among the damned in the Last Judgement scene on Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice (Fig. 10), datable to A.D. c. 924 (Guest 1936, 115; Weir 1977, 67-68, pl. 2A). This one is not, however, universally accepted as belonging incontrovertably to the Sheela class, nor is it in the same tradition or line of descent as those discussed above. Nonetheless, it may perhaps be somehow related to them, though it is best excluded from discussion on the general grounds of uncertainty of its identification.

Romanesque Sheela-na-Gigs and related types are well known in France, and it has been well argued that whatever their own origins they seem to have provided the prototypes (probably via Britain) for the Sheela-na-Gigs of Romanesque and medieval Ireland (Andersen 1977, 53; Weir 1977, 71; Jerman 1981, 11 – where he also indicates a Spanish origin which he develops on pp. 20 and 23, incorporating the pilgrim road to Compostela into his arguments).

Ireland possesses few Romanesque Sheelas, perhaps only two.⁹ One of these is that (Fig. 11) in the twelfth-century Round Tower at Ratoo, Co. Kerry (Andersen 1977, 151, no. 104), which is sufficiently high and inaccessible to allow belief in its contemporaneity with the tower. The other is that (Fig. 12) alongside the decorated window lintel in the late twelfth-century Romanesque church at Rath Blathmac, Co. Clare (Westropp 1894, 33, illustrated; Guest 1933, 112, pl. XI: 12; Andersen 1977, 45-46 and 151, figs. 5, 22 and 24). The latter is flanked by an animal on either side, both of which seem to be biting at his ears, suggesting a cross between a



Fig. 10. Arm of Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, showing Satan, the Sheela(?), and the damned.

Photo: A. Weir.

Sheela-na-Gig (note the widely-splayed legs) and the well-known scene generally interpreted as Daniel in the Lions' Den (but see Lucas 1987) found on many Irish High Crosses. This latter figure, therefore, seems to provide a link with pre-Romanesque Ireland and although its two accompanying animals may be borrowed from pre-Romanesque Christian iconography, they may in fact hark back to the pagan 'Lord of the Animals' motif. The Rath Blathmac Sheela, therefore, perhaps supplies a link with the past not so obviously apparent in the other Romanesque and medieval carvings.

The Rattoo Sheela-na-Gig, however, is quite different from the pre-Romanesque figures discussed above and it, like the Clonmacnoise acrobatic exhibitionist (see fn. 9), fits more comfortably into the French or British tradition. It would certainly appear that a new, true Sheela-na-Gig element was introduced into Ireland with Romanesque art and architecture, a development which was further encouraged following on the introduction of the monastic Orders and the advent of the Anglo-Normans later in the twelfth century, both groups opening wider doors to the art and culture of north-western Europe.¹⁰

Commenting on Sheela-na-Gigs, Macalister stated his belief that they 'seem to be survivals into Christianity of a perverted representation of one of the most important gods of Celtic pagandom' (Macalister 1918-19, 256). In much the same vein Ross commented that 'The

iconography of Ireland, late and varied though much of it is, bears convincing witness to the presence in Ireland of a god-type similar to the Gaulish Cernunnos, whose cult was sufficiently deeply rooted and important to leave indelible traces in later Christian tradition' (Ross 1967, 148). Andersen, too felt similarly on the matter: 'We have entered a world sometimes haunted by the past, where Christian representation may carry on shapes and postures derived from paganism, or at any rate employ gestures with pagan associations' (Andersen 1977, 77).

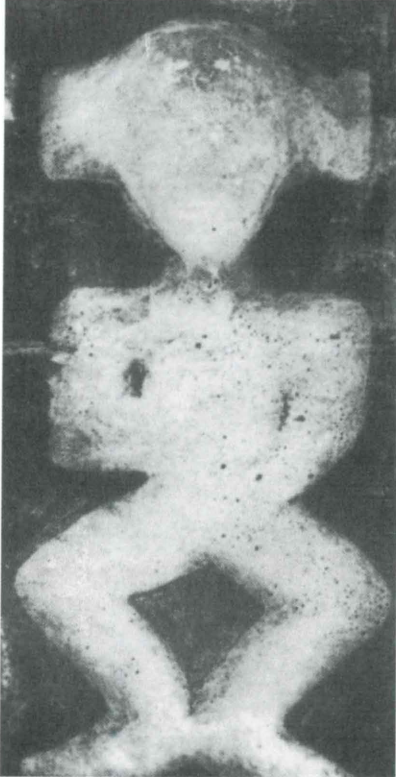


Fig. 11. Plaster-cast of Sheela-na-Gig in Round Tower, Rattoo, Co. Kerry.
Photo: National Museum of Ireland.



Fig. 12. Sheela-na-Gig, Rath Blathmac, Co. Clare.
Photo: Paul Gosling.

The above discussion supports those three comments, and the situation can perhaps be summed up by accepting them and believing that when the true Sheela concept reached Ireland in the twelfth century along with new Romanesque and Anglo-Norman ideas, it found a prepared and fertile soil – the Irish merely adapted their pagan-derived cross-legged figure to the newly-introduced Sheela motif and then forged ahead with renewed enthusiasm and gusto, producing more and better Sheela-na-Gigs than anyone else. 'A remarkable continuity is one of the most striking aspects of Irish art' (Henry 1965, 1) is surely, in this as in so many other cases, an incontrovertible truism

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to many for help and encouragement, not least my friend the late Professor T.G.E. (Terence) Powell who in 1973 constructively discussed the sculpture on Adamnán's Cross with me, my late father-in-law Dr. A.T. Lucas who argued the toss with me on several fronts, my colleague Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin who assisted me greatly with various interpretations of Irish and Old Irish terms ever since 1979 when I first lectured on the subject of this paper (see Rynne 1979), and my son Andrew who drew my attention to the Freud reference. I am also indebted to those who supplied the photographs used in the illustrations accompanying this paper, and to Miss Angela Gallagher for her excellent drawings used in Figs. 1 and 3.

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1. See Andersen 1977, who gives the numbers as Ireland 69, England and Wales 31, Scotland 4, France 11 and Czechoslovakia/Germany 1, numbers which have altered somewhat in the meantime in Ireland where at least 8 more have been recorded (Manning 1987, p. 281) and in France where about 40 related carvings have been noted (A. Weir, Correspondence Columns, *The Irish Times*, 30/9/1977). The general type is also known in India and elsewhere farther east (Andersen 1977, 131-134; Somerville-Large 1945).
2. Andersen finishes with an eighteenth century French engraving showing a young girl raising her skirts and displaying herself to an affrighted devil in order to drive him away. A similar twentieth century version was reported recently in the correspondence columns of the *The Irish Times* on the 23/9/1977:

In a townland near where I lived [Caherfinsker, Athenry, Co. Galway], a deadly feud had continued for generations between the families of the two small farmers. One day, before the first World War, when the men of one of the families, armed with pitchforks and heavy blackthorn sticks, attacked the home of the enemy, the woman of the house (*bean-a'-tighe*) came to the door of her cottage, and in full sight of all (including my father and myself, who happened to be passing by) lifted her skirt and underclothes high above her head, displaying her naked genitals. The enemies of her and her family fled in terror.

Yours, etc.

Walter Mahon-Smith.

3. Not being personally a great believer in symbolism to solve most problems, this interpretation was treated with grave reservations and offered here somewhat 'tongue in cheek'. However, the possibly significant position of a snake on the body of a bearded man (Gunnar?) carved on the wooden cart from the mid-9th century Oseberg ship-burial (Sjøvold 1957, illus. on p. 32) causes caution in rejecting such a thesis.
4. 'Duality is ... at the basis of all Celtic thought; everything had for them a double meaning; many of their artistic forms are meant to be seen in two different ways; and also to possess a duality of significance – naturalistic and symbolic ...' (A. Ross in Newell 1973, p. 146).
5. I have not seen the carving, and this description and fig. 3 are therefore based on the photographs in Schoppa 1969.
6. This second quote follows immediately on the first in 'Del Shíl Chonairi Móir', edited and translated by L. Gwynn in *Ériu*, 6 (1912), 130.
7. This confusion of male-female gender is perhaps continued down to our own day when we remember that Irish-speakers still refer derisively to both ugly old women and girlish or puny boys as 'Sile' (Ó Séaghdha 1947, 54; 'Tugtar an ainm seo ['Sile-na-gig'] anois ar sheanmhnáibh áirithe, ag freagairt don chrot gránna a bhíonn ortha agus ... tugtar an ainm 'Sile' ar bhuachaill girsíúil, nó geospaltán leis').
8. Hencken's suggestion (in Guest 1936, 121) that it may date from 'the later part of the eighth or from the ninth century' is too late – not only has he re-assessed the dating of Lagore (Hencken 1950, 3-18) but similarly distinctively-shaped pins have been found at other excavations since, all suggesting the early dating given above.
9. The small acrobatic anal exhibitionist hidden in the decoration of the chancel arch of the Nuns' Church, Clonmacnoise (Guest 1936, 113, pl. XI:13; Andersen 1977, 39 and 47, figs. 14 and 15), must be excluded as although a related type of sculpture, it ought not to be classed as of the Sheela-type.
10. Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin, Department of Old Irish, University College, Galway, further informs me that the very name 'Sile/Sheila/Sheela' indicates a post-twelfth century date as it is the Irish version of the then-introduced Norman/French name 'Cecilia' – see also K. Danaher, quoted in Halpert 1977, pp. 166-167.