



Plate 1. Alleged representation of St Non with the child St David
on the Llan-non stone, undated.

By permission of Ceredigion Museum.

A Sheela-na-Gig from Llanon, Llansanffraid, Ceredigion

By MICHAEL FREEMAN

A carved stone from Llanon, Llansanffraid, Ceredigion,¹ recently identified as a Sheela-na-Gig, was once thought to show St Non and St David or the Virgin and Child. Two early twentieth-century illustrations identify it as representing the head of St David in his mother's arms: one is an anonymous drawing (Plate 1.) and the other an annotated photograph by Miss Dora Jones, Llanon, signed D.J., 1912, which was published in the *The Welsh Gazette*, 29th February 1912. When the stone was displayed in the Aberystwyth town library and later in Ceredigion Museum, it was described as a representation of St David and St Non. However, despite its very worn condition, it is clearly a representation of a figure with a large plain head, arms apparently akimbo and slight traces of a vulva. The arrangement of the arms is very similar to other Sheela-na-Gigs, particularly some from Ireland.

The published references to it record that it was once set in the north gable wall of the chapel of St Non, facing outwards. It was removed to a public house in the village when the remains of the chapel were demolished in 1905. It was on display in the County Library in Corporation Street, Aberystwyth by 1937² and was transferred to Ceredigion Museum in 1974, shortly after the Museum's formation, and it is now on permanent display in the Bowen Gallery.

The stone itself (Plates 2 & 3 and Fig.1.) is of sandstone and is damaged and worn. It is 380mm tall, 310mm wide at the base and is a maximum of 130mm thick. The bottom is flat, perhaps following a natural bedding plane. Half of the right-hand side has been pecked to a flat surface almost at right-angles to the bottom, while the rest, like the left-hand side seems to follow a natural line in the rock. All three of these faces have a thin deposit of fine reddish sand in places that may be part of a bedding plane or fissure in the rock. The top is flat with the crown of the head projecting slightly. The back has been roughly flattened and rough tool marks are visible.

The front shows a shield-shaped head with no recognisable features at all, shallowly carved out of the stone, resting on what are now the faint outlines of a body. The arms are not symmetrical but both are bent. They are not distinctive beyond the point at which they meet the body. In the crook of the left arm [right-hand side in the photographs] is an almost circular feature, not present on the right. This was thought to be the head of the baby St David. This arm is more bent than the right and joins the body just above the waist. The right arm appears to be directed towards the hips. On comparable examples the hands are near the groin and the fingers hold the labia apart but this area on the Llanon example is badly worn, and was probably never very deeply carved. The legs are normally apart, sometimes in a crouched position but on this example there is no sign or space for legs. Near the base of the stone at the centre is a shallow groove which may represent a vulva. There is no representation of breasts. Like other stones of this sort, it cannot be dated, but most examples are thought to be medieval.

There are no known historic references to the chapel where the Sheela-na-Gig is recorded as having been located until 1810, when it was in ruins. The church of St Brides in the parish of Llansanffraid lies about 200 metres from the site of the chapel, and is unusual for a Ceredigion church in having a medieval tower. It is impossible to determine whether the chapel of St Non



Plates 2 and 3. Two views of the carved stone from Llanon, Ceredigion, 2001.
By permission of the National Monuments Record for Wales.

was associated with the parish church, or was its precursor in the former centre of a small village on the edge of very fertile land on which the three large surviving strip-fields were laid out. There is the possibility that this was a pre-Norman church site, retained as a chapel and possibly re-built in stone when the present church was built, but gradually abandoned and used for other purposes. Near the site of the chapel are the remains of a large rectangular building with a lateral chimney known as Neuadd which has recently been identified as of Tudor date.³ Meyrick, writing in 1810, refers to the remains of an ancient chapel in Llanon, but does not mention the Sheela-na-Gig.⁴

An article in Welsh in *Yr Haul* in 1894⁵ confused the chapel with the remains of Neuadd. The author described the ruins of Neuadd in some detail and assumed that the blocked-up lateral fireplace was a recess 'as is to be seen in many old churches'. Mention was made of a thatched house nearby known as chapel house and of stone carvings in the form of heads, but it is not clear in which building the carvings were seen. It was assumed that these two buildings were part of the monastery that Leland, probably mistakenly, identified as being at Llanon in 1540.⁶

The Cambrians on their visit to Llanon in 1896 noted that the 'sculptured stone apparently representing the Virgin and Child, but traditionally believed to be the effigy of St Non and the infant St David, is built into the wall of a barn in the village'. They referred to two other buildings – the chapel and the chaplain's house. The last known use of what we now think was the chapel was as a barn and it seems that the Cambrians accepted that Neuadd was the chapel. We do not know which building they thought was the chaplain's house.⁷

George Eyre Evans wrote in 1903 that the chapel had 'a massive wall of unhewn stone and one small pointed arch ... whilst on the exterior wall, well protected by the thatch on the roof immediately above it, is a stone 14 inches tall and 12 inches broad, on which is carved the face of a woman with a child in her arms traditionally reputed to be that of St Non with her boy'.⁸

In 1905 Willis Bund followed the Cambrians in assuming that Neuadd was the chapel, and that the building that the Sheela-na-Gig was in had been a barn.⁹

In *The Lives of the British Saints* a chapel dedicated to Non at Llanon 'replacing an earlier one in ruins' was noted, so it seems that the authors thought that both Neuadd and the chapel site were once chapels.¹⁰

A series of articles entitled 'Folk Lore of the Cardiganshire Coast', published in the *The Welsh Gazette* in 1912, by an as yet unidentified author recorded much extremely valuable information about Llanon, implying that it was written by an inhabitant of the village. One of the articles clearly identified the location of the former chapel as being in the garden of Homerton House, and noted that it was pulled down about six years previously. This is confirmed by the deeds of Homerton which describe the site as 'a message ... commonly called Chapel House otherwise Capel Non'. The author of the articles in *The Welsh Gazette* described the chapel building as being 'about the size of a workman's cottage' and recorded that at the back of the building (presumably on the north wall), there was a pointed arch which was probably used as a doorway. The article continued 'Over this arch, and immediately beneath the thatched roof of the house was a stone known as Carreg Non or Non's Stone. This stone is now in possession of Mr J. Clarke of White Hall, Llanon. It is 14 inches by 12 inches and on it is a very crude representation of a woman holding a child in her left arm. Vandal school boys have knocked the nose off ... Tradition tells how the worshippers used to bow down before the stone and it also tells of another and a larger stone inside and upstairs but of this we know nothing.' The author hoped that, the 'Royal Commission for the Preservation of Welsh Monuments', would give advice on what should be done with the stone, since it had been stolen more than



Fig 1. Drawing of the Llan-non carved stone.
Nicola Hancox, 1995.

once with a view to monetary gain. He (or she) knew of a man of 85 whose grandfather remembered a new thatch roof being put on the chapel in about 1700 and that services of the Church of England were held there but the congregation was small. The writer also recorded the tradition that the dead were buried inside the chapel, and that between 1820 and 1840 it was used by the Baptists and later for malting. The article went on to describe Neuadd, and recorded traditions that it was connected to the chapel and was occupied by the incumbent of the chapel, who used one room to live in and the other to house his documents, and that it was here that the church authorities of Llanddewi Brefi came to collect the dues which were owing from Capel Non, implying that it was one of their dependent churches.¹¹

A few weeks later, another article in the same series was accompanied by a drawing of the stone by Miss Dora Jones, showing it representing St David in the arms of his

mother.¹² There is an annotated photograph of the stone in the collection of Ceredigion Museum entitled 'Image of St Non with St David in her arm which formerly stood in a niche in the wall of St Non's Chapel in the parish of Llansantfraid, Cardiganshire' (Plate 1).¹³

'Argus' writing in 1913 referred to an article in *The Welsh Gazette* published 'some time ago' in which the author believed that '... the Virgin Mary would have formed a much more natural subject for representation in stone'. The editor agreed, suggesting that it was not the custom to represent non-Biblical Saints in the adornment of buildings.¹⁴

In 1919, Evelyn Lewes described the stone and its history in an article in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, accompanied by a poor photograph, but added little to our knowledge of it.¹⁵

In 1947, J.T. Lewis wrote a series of articles on Llanon and Llansanffraid for *The Welsh Gazette*. He thought that some relics from the chapel had been deposited at a museum 'presumably the Welsh National'. By 1937 the Sheela-na-Gig had made its way to the Aberystwyth Joint Library: there are no records in the National Museum of Wales of any finds from Llanon.¹⁶ In a later article, he noted that the carving which he thought represented the Virgin and Child was known as *Delw Non*.¹⁷

In about 1958, Douglas Hague of The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Wales) dug a narrow trench through the floor of Neuadd but found nothing. His opinion that these may have been the remains of the chapel of St Non was based on a story that a stoop, now in Llansanffraid church, came from the ruins of Neuadd.¹⁸ When Neuadd, an adjacent cottage and a plot of land were given to Ceredigion Museum by Mr A. Cameron of Edinburgh in memory of his wife, Elsbeth, (*née* Lloyd), a native of Llanon, the resulting publicity referred to Neuadd as the chapel of Llanon, thus continuing the mistaken identification of the building.

NOTE on the spelling of the two principal place-names: the forms Llan-non and Llansanffraid, are given in Elwyn Davies (ed.), *A Gazetteer of Welsh Place-Names*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967. The form favoured locally for the village is Llanon and this has been used in the present article. Other forms used for the parish are Llansantffraed and Llansantffread.

REFERENCES

1. NGR SN 514 668
2. When Dr John Owen, former curator of Ceredigion Museum, attended art classes there (Dr Owen, pers. comm.).
3. I am grateful to Richard Suggett of RCAHM (W) for identifying this site, which is owned by Ceredigion County Council and is currently under investigation and consolidation.
4. *The History and Antiquities of the County of Cardigan* (1810), p. 297.
5. *Yr Haul*, x, iii, 1894, p. 139.
6. Leland, *Itinerary*, vol. v, p. 87, probably miss-quoting Giraldus's reference to Llansanffraed in Powys.
7. *Arch. Camb.* (1897), 165-6.
8. George Eyre Evans, *Cardiganshire Antiquities* (1903), p. 176.
9. J.W. Willis-Bund., Early Cardiganshire, *Arch. Camb.* (1905), p. 33.
10. Baring-Gould and Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, IV (1907-13), pp. 22-5.
11. *The Welsh Gazette*, 18.1.1912, article xvii (one of a series of articles on St David and St Non).
12. *The Welsh Gazette*, 29.2.1912.
13. Ceredigion Museum catalogue number 1974A.77a.69.
14. *Transactions of the Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society*, vol. I, no. 3 (1913), p. 36.
15. *Arch. Camb.* (1919), pp. 532-3, with poor photograph.
16. *The Welsh Gazette*, 25.12.1947.
17. *The Welsh Gazette*, 30.1.1958.
18. Transcription of a tape-recording of a talk given by Mrs T. Lloyd, Roseland, Llanon, in the 1960s (copy in Ceredigion Museum).

I am grateful to my predecessor, Dr John Owen for translating the article from *Yr Haul*. He, however, is still of the opinion that this carving represents St David and St Non.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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See also Bibliography of foregoing article by Professor Etienne Rynne, 'A Pagan Celtic Background for Sheela-na-Gigs?', this volume, *Arch. Camb.*, Vol. CXLIX (2000).