

In Search of Sheela-Na-Gig

by Laurie McAndish King

Sheela-na-gig's invitation is fraught with danger. Our relationship began with my quick peek at a wildly pornographic image in Thomas Cahill's popular book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. An ancient goddess, Sheela is rendered symbolically, stripped of all but the essential features. She is naked, bald, and breastless, and reaches both arms behind her legs, using her hands to spread her genitals wide open – as wide as a barn door – in exuberant invitation. There was no question in my mind about the figure's intended meaning. As soon as I saw her, I was transfixed.



Evolutionary biology is my calling; sex, transformation, and renewal are my religion. I knew I would have no peace until I found this wild and fearless female creatrix. But how would I locate the figures? My guidebook didn't even mention them. Could I go around asking civilized folks on the streets of County Cork where to find an ancient erotic goddess?

"Do you have an image of Sheela-na-gig?" I began at the Tourist Center in Kinsale, a charming seaside village known for its fine crafts, world-class cuisine, and yachting activities. The buildings in Kinsale are well kept and brightly painted, and many are decorated with baskets spilling over with colorful flowers; they're accustomed to tourists here. "I see you have reproductions of old Celtic carvings."

Margaret, a young shopkeeper, regarded me curiously. "Gosh, I haven't thought about Sheela-na-gig since I was a wee girl. She was a screaming woman, wasn't she?" Margaret pantomimed holding her mouth wide open from both sides.

Hmmm. Right position, wrong orifice.

"When the monks came and brought Christianity, they didn't like her. That's all I really remember."

Was Margaret just being polite, or did she really believe that Sheela-na-gig was a screaming woman? Perhaps that was the way her genteel mother had described the goddess to a young and innocent girl. (“Yes, Maggie darling, she was screaming, and the monks didn’t like her making all that racket. It was so unladylike.”)

A second shopkeeper, twenty years older, stood nearby, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, and tittering with quiet embarrassment. “And what about you?” I asked, “Have you heard of Sheela-na-gig?” Surely she knew about a goddess who had been worshipped throughout the British Isles for centuries.

“Oh, no!” she sputtered hurriedly. “I’m English. I haven’t heard of her a’ tall!”

I asked around a bit more, buttonholing women in shops and on the street, but got nowhere. Either they had never heard of Sheela-na-gig, or they weren’t admitting to it. Clearly, a new approach was in order.

I determined to ask Sister Eily, a retired nun we were visiting with. Sister Eily had grown up in Ireland, and ran off when she was only sixteen – with her father’s reluctant permission – to Australia to join the Order of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Here was another fearless woman. After many years of service, Sister Eily had retired and returned home to County Cork. She wore street clothes, sensible shoes, and a white, furry vest she’d bought for fifteen Euros in a thrift shop.

Indelicate though the question might be, I was certain Sister Eily would tell me the truth. After all, nuns – even retired ones – aren’t allowed to lie. They are also tough as tires; the sister

didn’t even blink at my question, although the right side of her mouth did curl up in a small, sly smile. She replied with an Irish lilt, “Oh, very little is known about Sheela-na-gig.”

I waited.

“She’s the fertility goddess. A woman would go back into the church after giving birth to give thanks to Sheela-na-gig. She would go alone, or with a few female members of her clan, and go at a quiet time when no one else was there. My mother would have done this, with her mother and her sister. I always wondered, in my heart, why the father did not give thanks as well, since it was his child, too.”

Sister Eily mused that giving thanks to a fertility goddess “isn’t really part of the Christian tradition.” She thought it had most likely been a holdover from pagan tradition, explaining that “pagans, like the rest of us, worship God the best way we know how.”

I next inquired about Sheela at a pub, where a green-eyed waitress with tight jeans and an easy smile raised my hopes. “She’s a fertility goddess,” Irene said. “There are no fairy tales about Sheela-na-gig, and I’m not surprised that many people you’ve spoken with haven’t heard of her. The old ways are being forgotten, aren’t they? You’ll find a site in Ballyvourny, on N25 past Macroom. Go out to a rural area, and ask the old men; they’ll know.”

I was surprised at Irene’s suggestion that I ask a man about Sheela-na-gig, but the opportunity presented itself when I met Desmond O’Grady, one of Ireland’s greatest living poets. And I couldn’t resist.



Dr. O'Grady had not shaved that morning. His pale blue eyes were watery; his eloquent hands waxy. His hair was gray, wild and wiry. O'Grady wore a tattered red bandana around his neck; a wrinkled, sage green shirt; and crumpled, pale pink linen pants that looked as though they had been inadvertently washed with the bandana. He had been, long ago, a secretary to Ezra Pound and a good friend of Samuel Beckett.



During lunch, O'Grady revealed an ambivalence toward the feminine, dispensing such wisdom as, "Women are only supposed to write checks," and "Cairo is a slum, except for the sphinx and her inviting orifice." His candor was promising; O'Grady was clearly no stranger to the earthier side of life. What did he think of Sheela-na-gig? I had to ask the question that was constantly on my mind, if not my lips.

O'Grady knew her, all right. He looked me straight in the eye and warned, "Stay away from Sheela-na-gig; she's good for nothin' but trouble! She'll take you for everything you've got, and then she'll come back for more." Then he ordered salmon and chips and a Beamish, admonishing the waiter not to forget the chips.

"Have you ever actually met Sheela-na-gig?" one of our party asked.

"Oh, yes!" the great poet whispered.

"O'Grady," she said, "I'm tough, and I live on Tough Alley. The farther down you go, the tougher it gets, and I live at the last house."

But the last house on Tough Alley is not Sheela's only abode. She was once prominently positioned in medieval churches and castles throughout Ireland and beyond, even onto the continent. From Kirkwall Cathedral in the Orkney Islands to Tracton Abbey in the south of Ireland, from Killinaboy Church in the west to Royston Cave in the east, Sheela's image spread widely across the British Isles. In Dunnaman, Cavan, and Killua, prominent rib bones give her a skeletal appearance; the Brigit's Well figure at Castlemagner and the Crofton-on-Tees image look oddly like current depictions of space aliens. In Caherelly, Sheela's vagina is as large as her breasts, and in Oaksey and Kilsarkan it is bigger than her head! Often Sheela's face is moronic; sometimes it is frightening. At times there is no face at all. But the Sheela-na-gig figures have one thing in common: an invitation to the great and fertile darkness.

Especially in Ireland, which was slow to adopt Roman Catholicism, ancient pagan imagery was commonly incorporated into early Christian iconography. For example, the Ballyvourny figure, which sits above a window in St. Gobnait's Church, was regarded as an image of St. Gobnait, who was the same person as St. Brigit, who was a personification of the pre-Christian Brigit, goddess of light and literature. Since the Reformation, most of the Sheela figures have been lost, destroyed, or disfigured; those that remain are often hidden in out-of-the-way corners. But they can still be found, and I was determined to do so.

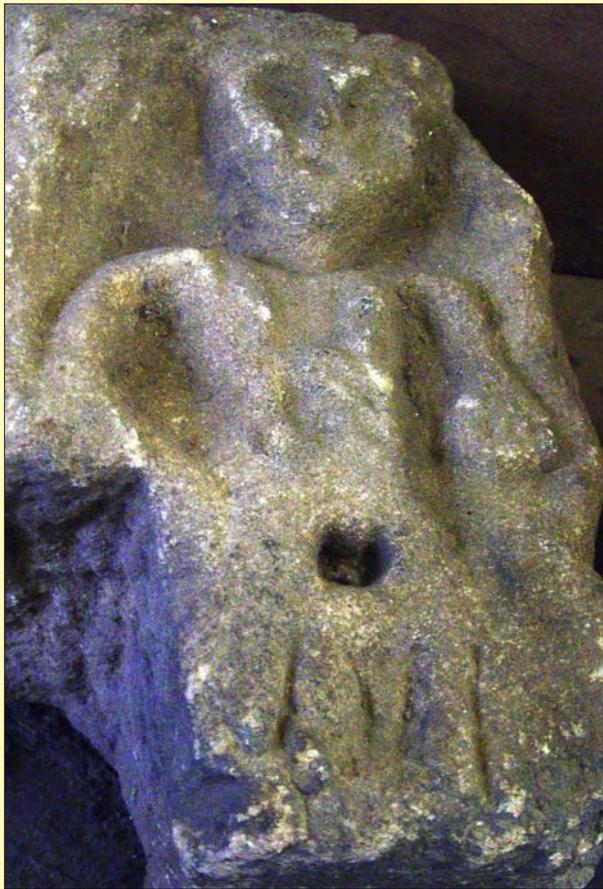
I asked Benny, our knowledgeable guide, whether there were any Sheela images in County Cork. Guides here, as in much of the rest of the world, have an extensive understanding and recall of history and folklore, and are required to pass lengthy, exhaustive exams before being licensed.



Surely Benny would know.

“Yes,” he responded slowly, and after some consideration. “I’m sure I’ve seen a Sheela image nearby, right over a doorway . . . but I cannot remember where. Maybe you should check the museum.”

Stella Cherry, a lean scholar with a dry sense of humor, is curator at the Cork Public Museum, and kindly consented to show me the two Sheela-na-gig figures in the museum’s collection. They were not on public display. “The Irish don’t seem to care about the figures,” Stella explained, “But Americans are crazy for them.” Stella had written a



Tracton Abbey Sheela-na-gig

Stella Cherry, curator at Cork Museum, was kind enough to show me these two Sheela-na-gig figures, which are not on display to the public; they’re hidden away in a closet, along with mops, brooms, and a trash can.

monograph about Sheela-na-gig in order to provide more information for the Sheela-seekers who besieged her with questions. She even fielded a visit from “an American Professor of Vaginal Imagery,” visiting Ireland to do some post-graduate research. Ah, those crazy Americans.

Writing up the information presumably allowed Stella to send searchers – and researchers – off to view the figures *in situ*, rather than spending her already-busy days communing with Sheelas in storage. Stella handed me a copy of her article, *Sheela-na-gigs from County Cork*, published in the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, and led me to a closet that housed a fuse box, a washbasin, multiple mops and brooms, cleaning supplies . . . and, on the floor, two Sheela-na-gigs. Stella left me alone with them.

Each figure is a *bas relief* about two feet long, and is depicted standing upright, with fairly straight legs. Both have straight left arms, and right arms that are slightly bent at the elbow. Neither figure has ears, hair, breasts, or rib bones.

The carving known as the Tracton Abbey Sheela is in white stone and has a heart-shaped head with large, deep-set eyes, a small or damaged nose, tiny mouth and narrow chin. The arms and hands do not touch or overlap the body. A deep indentation in the center of the figure, in stark and insistent contrast to the rest of the convex surface, represents the genitals. It is frightening.

The Ringaskiddy figure is carved in what appears to be golden sandstone. It has a large bald head with narrow-set eyes, a long nose, and a wide mouth. A long, slender torso leads to short legs in a pigeon-toed stance. The figure’s hands rest aside its genitals, which are represented with a simple, prominent, vertical line. Ringaskiddy aroused in me a feeling of amused affection.

I admit, though, I was disappointed. The features were more difficult to discern than I

had expected, and these two both lacked the explicit, manual reference to genitalia that most Sheelas include. In fact, Stella refers to the figures as a “wannabe Sheelas,” since there is “no real attempt to bend the legs.” Even so, I felt fortunate to be able to spend some time with them.

Scholars disagree about Sheela’s significance. Some say she was believed to have the power to “turn the evil eye” and ward off enemy attacks, and for this reason was often placed on castle walls. Others suggest she was the Roman Catholic Church’s way of communicating the evils of lust to a largely illiterate congregation, explaining her frequent residence in the remains of medieval churches. Still others insist she was a fertility goddess, beseeched by new brides and barren wives, prayed to by midwives and laboring women in labor, and profusely thanked by blessed new mothers.



Ringaskiddy Sheela-na-gig

Stella says this figure is a “wannabe Sheela,” since there is no real attempt to “bend the legs.”

These explanations seem wanting. Surely the “good luck” idea is overly simplistic. As for the second option, Sheela is not attractive; rather, she is often frightening. She certainly represents something other than comely sexuality. And the fact that Sheela’s breasts and buttocks are not emphasized – in fact, her breasts are usually missing entirely – differentiates Sheela-na-gig from fertility figures. (Contrasting, for example, with the voluptuous pre-Columbian fertility goddesses.)

I prefer a fourth explanation: Sheela-na-gig, like the Indian goddess Kali, represents the devouring mother archetype – the source of life, death, and regeneration. She is “womb as tomb,” the great mother whose capacity for destruction is requisite for the creation of new life. And her invitation, both terrifying and liberating, is nothing less than an opportunity to experience emotional death, transformation, and rebirth.

No wonder the images have been disfigured, hidden, and destroyed. They represent the feminine as the source of life, challenging the patriarchal father-as-creator perspective.

Further, their symbolism embodies the unity of life and death, incorporating the “shadow” as essential to wholeness, rather than an evil to be overcome, or, at best, repressed. Little wonder, too, that the Sheela figures have attracted so many brave and crazy New-Age seekers, whose souls cannot bear the dissociative split of light from dark, and who ache for the powerful transformative process the Great Goddess promises.

As for me, I’ve found a touchstone, a vivid reminder of my own connectedness to the circle of life and death. And I’ll be a regular visitor at the last house on Tough Alley.