

NO COMMON OR GARDEN SHEELA

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# NO COMMON OR GARDEN SHEELA



Paul Clarke describes a previously unrecorded Sheela-na-gig in Hollymount, Co. Mayo

## Introduction

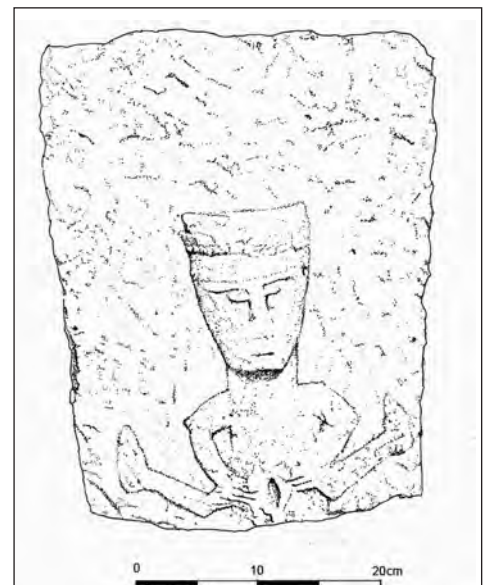
I was recently alerted to the presence of a Sheela-na-gig in Hollymount, Co. Mayo, close to the Galway border. A site visit revealed that the Sheela-na-gig had been incorporated into a garden feature developed around an old water pump (Fig. 1) to the rear of the village's GAA ground. Paving and a low enclosing wall have been built around the pump as part of the Tidy Towns competition. Between this low wall and the much higher (c. 1.5–2m) GAA pitch wall there is a small area of planting, where the Sheela-na-gig was placed in 1993.

## The Sheela-na-gig (Figs 2 and 3)

The artefact consists of a subrectangular limestone block (51–52cm high, 36–38cm wide and 18–22cm thick). The two sides and top of the block are flat, with visible chisel marks giving a rough-hewn appearance. The

bottom surface of the block is inaccessible at present, as it is set in place. The back of the block appears unworked. The front face is quite smooth, with the exception of the Sheela-na-gig. The figure is 34cm high and 30cm wide from foot to foot. The carving's head projects out from the block to a maximum of 4cm. The body also protrudes,

but to a much lesser degree. The overall shape of the head is similar to a cylinder. This bucket-like shape is unusual, as most Sheela-na-gigs have a rounded face. An elongated neck extends into a sitting body, with both hands in the usual position and no breasts or ribs discernible. The mouth is closed and there are two small visible



Above: Fig. 1—Sheela-na gig within the 'garden'.

Right: Fig. 2—Sheela-na-gig at Hollymount, Co. Mayo.

Far right: Fig. 3—Sheela-na-gig at Hollymount, Co. Mayo.



depressions on either side of the head, most likely representing ears. The eyes are clearly visible and the nose is somewhat elongated. The figure is in a sitting pose, with both legs outstretched and the knees bent in what appears a physically impossible position. The feet point upward and the figure is wearing pointed shoes. The artefact is in an excellent state of preservation.

### Provenance

Before its move to Hollymount, the carving was sited some 1.6km from its present location, incorporated into a modern wall adjacent to an area known locally as the Show Yard (see Fig. 4). The Show Yard incorporates two walled fields within the Lehinch demesne, which had associations with the Blake family. The National Monuments Service website lists an unclassified castle (MA111-072001) and a deserted settlement (MA111-072002) on the Lehinch demesne but their locations are noted as unknown. There is also a castle (MA111-018) in Knockalegan, an adjoining townland to the east of Lehinch. The Annals of Connacht record that the stronghold of Lehinch was attacked and ‘devastated’ by Brian O’Connor in 1412. A settlement at Lehinch is shown on John Brown’s map of Connacht (1584), and the Strafford Inquisition of Mayo (1635) records ‘the moiety of the castle town and lands of

Above: Fig. 4—The Show Yard, former location of the Sheela-na-gig until 1993, on the second-edition OS map (1893–1900).

Right: Fig. 5—Portrait of a young woman of the Burgundian gentry, dated to the 1460s and from the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (source: the Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei).

Lehinch’. A house marked for Lehinch on Taylor and Skinner’s (1777) map was held by Valentine Blake in 1786 and sold by his son Henry in 1812 to the Lindsey family.

Almost all known Sheela-na-gigs are associated with castles or churches. The National Monuments Service website identifies only two other Sheela-na-gigs in County Mayo and three in the adjacent county of Galway. Of the two in Mayo, one at Aghagower (MA088-063009) is built into the enclosing wall of a holy well within an important ecclesiastical site, while the other (MA121-137002) is now at the modern Roman Catholic church in Cross village but originated at the nearby Killursagh church (MA121-137001). Two of the Galway examples—Ballinderry (GA043-004003) and Merlin Park (GA094-023001)—are built into the fabric of castles. A third at Shoodaun (GA071-079002) is now within the porch of a Catholic church, which is not its original location. Given the evidence, it seems likely that the Hollymount Sheela-na-gig came from a nearby castle site.

### Date

A mid- to late fifteenth-century date is suggested by the details of the carving. The representation is suggestive of an elaborate headdress—a steeple-cap in the form of a truncated cone hennin with a veil coming to just above the eyebrows (as seen in Fig. 5). A visible band runs across the upper part of the figure’s head, and below it a less well-defined line just above the eyebrows. The top of the figure is roughly flat but with a slight projection on its right side. The middle to end of the fifteenth century



was also a period when pointed shoes, such as those on the Sheela-na-gig carving, became fashionable for women. While most Sheela-na-gig figures are shown bald, that at Rahara, Co. Roscommon (RO039-043025), and the carving found over the doorway of Ballinderry Castle near Tuam, Co. Galway (c. 35km from Hollymount), both appear to have elaborate hairstyles in the form of plaits or braids. Other examples are suggestive of headdresses, such as a Sheela-na-gig (CV038-071) now in Cavan County Museum (originally from an old church within the county), which bears bands and beading round the forehead. A carving of a head on the capital of one of the piers at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny, is believed to be that of a woman wearing a headdress known as the cornet (a non-truncated hennin). The carving is therefore tentatively dated to the mid- to late fifteenth century.

### Conclusion

The Hollymount Sheela-na-gig is an important addition to the limited number of known western examples. The figure shown is unusual in that it is more realistic and less stylised than most other examples. Given the headdress and shoes, it would seem likely that this is the representation of a high-status individual. It has now been added to the Archaeological Survey Database (MA110-087) and a record has also been created for the location where it was found (MA111-110) in Lehinch demesne. ■

### Acknowledgements

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### Further reading

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