

## Miscellanea

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### A Stone Alignment and a Stone Circle near Rearcross, Co. Tipperary

The publication elsewhere in this volume (see pages 3-5) of two Bronze Age burials from the townland of Reardnogy More, near Rearcross, Co. Tipperary, provides an opportunity to bring two other apparently equally ancient monuments in the same townland to notice. They are both on the lands of Mr. Michael Carey, of Rearcross, who discovered the monuments and who kindly took me to see them in May 1963.

At the summit of one of the two hills in the townland are four large irregular boulders set in a straight line, ten metres long and orientated East-West (Plate IV). There are some smaller stones under or partly under all of the four boulders. There are no other similar boulders anywhere on the hill, and it seems most probable that these four large boulders have been artificially arranged to form a short alignment, a type of monument which is rather rare in Ireland and for which a Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date is generally suggested. (Judging from the photographs alone, Professor D. Skevington, Department of Geology, University College, Galway, informed the writer that they are very unlikely to be a purely natural feature, and would agree that they probably have been artificially so placed). This site is 910 ft. above O.D. and can be plotted on O.S. 6-inch sheet 38 for Co. Tipperary, at a point 23.9 cm. from the northern margin and 33.8 cm. from the eastern margin.

Lower down the southern slope of the same hill, about 300 metres SSW, is what appears to be a small stone circle with outlier (Plate V:1). It originally consisted of seven small-sized stones set on edge and fairly evenly spaced, forming a circle 4.50 m. in diameter with an outlier 1.70 m. distant to the East. The outlier and four of the circle's stones still remain, and there are three large depressions in the ground showing where the three missing stones, all in the southern half of the circle, stood. The remaining stones average about 30 cm. in height above ground. The long axis of the outlier is orientated NE-SW, and the circle-stone nearest it is set radially to the circle so that it points eastwards to the outlier and westwards across the centre of the circle towards the gap between the two westernmost stones. The broader faces of the other stones all face, or faced (as is evident from the shape of the sockets), towards the centre of the circle. There are some irregularities in the ground inside the circle, particularly in its northern half, as if it may originally have contained a cairn, perhaps as Site K, Piperstown, Co. Dublin [see E. Rynne and P. Ó hÉailidhe, *PRIA*, 64, C (1965), 66-69]. Stone circles of various sizes, with or without outliers, are not uncommon in Ireland. A variety typical of the South-West of the country is characterised by having a recumbent stone with portals diametrically opposite, and the Reardnogy More example would appear to be an outlying version related to this group. A Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date would also appear most probable for this monument. It is about 810 ft. above O.D. and can be plotted on the same map, at a point 26.6 cm. from the northern margin and 34.7 cm. from the eastern margin.

ETIENNE RYNNE

## A Romanesque Head from Feakle, Co. Clare

About fifteen years ago, when the old Protestant church at Feakle, Co. Clare,<sup>1</sup> was being demolished, a fine stone head was discovered by Mr. Patrick Purcell, Curragh, Feakle. Mr. Purcell later gave the head to Mr. Seán Harrington, N.T., Feakle, who, in March 1966, kindly lent it to the Thomond Archaeological Society for display in the Limerick City Museum.

The head is carved at one end of a block of sandstone. It measures 28 cm. in overall height, 18 cm. in maximum width, and projects 8 cm. from the carefully dressed, but uncarved, block behind it, which is 20 cm. thick, extends for 32.5 cm. behind the back of the head, and is 29 cm. in maximum height (Plate V: 2). The head has a flattish oval face, without any indication of hair but with an eleven-strand beard, 9 cm. in overall width, which curls backwards and under the chin—the face is very weather-worn and somewhat abraded, but the under portion of the beard is well preserved. The nose is damaged, as is the straight mouth. The left eye droops and is outlined, while the apparently similar right eye is almost worn away. The left ear is very large and is in low relief, but the right ear is now almost entirely missing.

This interesting carving has all the appearances of being from a twelfth century Romanesque building, probably originally set into an arch or, perhaps more likely because of its large size, into a pediment above an arched doorway, much as at Clonfert, or perhaps even under the eaves, as at Cormac's Chapel, Cashel; the lack of a flat top to it precludes its use as a true corbel.

The patron saint of Feakle parish is a St. Mochonna who, according to local tradition, founded a church there in the seventh century. Of him, Frost comments that "out of eleven saints of that name in the Irish calendars, it is difficult to choose the particular one who was revered at Feakle."<sup>2</sup> Westropp, however, attempts an identification: "The patron saint was St. Mochonna (not to be confused with Mochulla of Tulla), an unknown saintly lady, as some say . . . The founder [of the church] is probably Mochonna, of Moyroe, a not distant parish on Lough Derg; commemorated under March 29th" and he further adds that "Three old quern stones are used as monuments on various graves, and there are no fragments of the old church to be seen; it was probably of uncut stone like others in the hills . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The Protestant church into which the carved head had been incorporated as a building-stone had been built in 1824 ("by aid of a gift of £900 from the Board of First Fruits"<sup>4</sup>) on the site of a pre-Reformation parish church, the last remaining gable-end of which "was thrown down in 1780, to make room for the Protestant place of worship."<sup>5</sup> Whether or not the carving was in this gable then is unknown, but it undoubtedly had been built into some one of the Protestant church's predecessors and, furthermore, provides the only known evidence for a Romanesque church at Feakle. Stone heads are a feature of Irish Romanesque carving, perhaps particularly in the

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<sup>1</sup> Td. Feakle; par. Feakle; bar. Tulla Upper; Co. Clare; O.S. 6-inch sheet 28 (55cm. from N.; 19.5cm. from W.).

<sup>2</sup> J. Frost, *The History and Topography of the County of Clare*, Dublin 1893, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> T. J. Westropp, *Memorials of the Dead*, 9 (1913-16), 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, 2nd edition, vol. I (A-J), London 1847, p. 607.

<sup>5</sup> J. Frost, *loc. cit.*

western part of Ireland, and it is not surprising, therefore, to find an example at Feakle which is in an area noted for many fine Romanesque churches, *e.g.* Killaloe, Tuamgraney, Iniscealtra (Holy Island, Lough Derg), Dysert O'Dea, and Rath Blathmaic.

ETIENNE RYNNE

## A Sheela-na-Gig from Burgesbeg, Co. Tipperary

In 1932 four men of Burgesbeg,<sup>1</sup> Patrick Mulcahy, John O'Donoghue, the late Patrick O'Brien and the late John Maher, found a carved stone amongst a pile of stones in the south-eastern corner of the old church ruin in the local graveyard. At the time no further action appears to have been taken and it was not until August, 1938, that the stone was brought to the notice of the National Museum by the Garda authorities at Newport, Co. Tipperary. It was inspected by the late Dr. D. F. Gleeson of Clarecastle, who published a brief note on it together with a photograph.<sup>2</sup> In 1968 Mr. P. Finn, Boher Dhu, Loughrea, Co. Galway, noted that it was lying, carved surface downwards, in an obscure corner of the graveyard, and he again brought it to the notice of the Museum. Here it has found a home, safe from the elements, having been deposited on loan with the permission of the Bishop of Killaloe, of the Parish Priest of Newtown, Co. Tipperary (in which ecclesiastical parish Burgesbeg is situated), and of the people of Burgesbeg.<sup>3</sup>

The stone belongs to the large group to which the term "Sheela-na-Gigs" has been applied.<sup>4</sup> It is made from a block of sandstone, partly dressed to an approximately rectangular shape. It is slightly damaged in places. It is reasonable to believe that originally it formed part of a structure, possibly the church in the graveyard, but definite proof of this is not now forthcoming, though Dr. Gleeson in the article already mentioned states that "From the shape it is quite clear that it was once built into the structure and formed part of the arch of either a door or a window." Three faces are plain. On the fourth, carved in relief, there is the naked figure of a female, seen full-face and practically filling the available area. The head is circular and has a sharp chin. The eyes are two clearly cut circles but brow ridges and other features are missing. Nose and mouth are now ill-defined and, indeed, appear never to have been sharply carved. There is a narrow neck. The breasts are barely indicated. The arms are flexed and the hands grasp the pudenda between the widely separated thighs. The knees are bent and the feet point downwards. Fingers and toes are not now visible but this may be because the surface of the stone is considerably weathered. The anus is indicated. The stone is 70 cm. long, 35 cm. wide and 33 cm. thick. The figure is 62 cm. long.

<sup>1</sup> The site is in td. Burgesbeg, par. Burgesbeg, bar. Owey and Arra, Co. Tipperary, O.S. 6", Sheet 25, 1.1 cm. from E. and 16.5 cm. from N.

<sup>2</sup> *JRSAI* 69, 1939, 47-48, Plate IX:1.

<sup>3</sup> National Museum registration number, 1A/L/1969:2. The Museum is most grateful to Most Rev. Dr. Harty, Bishop of Killaloe, to Rev. Denis Kelly, P.P., Newtown, Nenagh, and to Rev. Martin Ryan, P.P., Ruan and Dysart, Co. Clare, who afforded considerable help in the acquisition of the carving by the Museum.

<sup>4</sup> See *JRSAI* 24, 1894, 77-81, 392-4, and Dr. Edith Guest in same *Journal*, 66, 1936, 107-129.

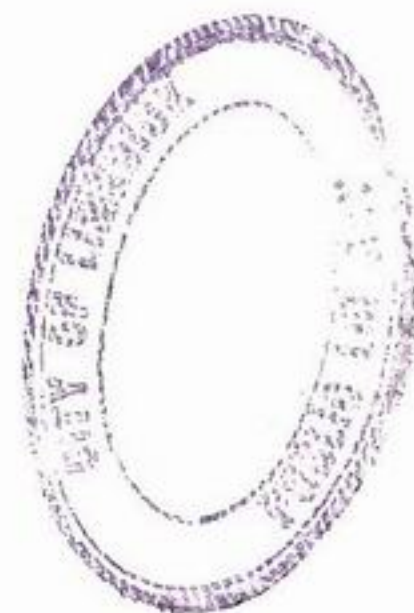
These carvings have for long puzzled scholars and a solution to the problem of their significance is no nearer now than when they began to be written about a century or so ago. However, every new example which is brought to scientific notice and is preserved with all the information available about it helps to bring the day nearer when it will be possible to state positively what these Sheela-na-Gigs were. This is why one must be grateful to all those at Burgesbeg who participated in the saving of this important stone.

Sheela-na-Gigs (*Síle na gcíoch*—Sheela of the Breasts) occur in Ireland roughly in a belt stretching from Co. Louth in the north-east to Cos. Kerry and Clare in the south-west, with a few outliers to the north and west. There are several types (Dr. Guest listed three main classes in 1936), but all genuine representatives of the group as a whole lay particular emphasis on the pudenda. The secondary sexual characteristic, the breasts, plays a lesser role: they may or may not be accentuated.

Where Sheela-na-Gigs are found in undeniable original association with a building such buildings are either castles, churches or monasteries and all such so far recorded are post-Norman in date.<sup>5</sup> A few examples occur in Britain but elsewhere sculptures of this precise type do not appear to be recorded. Those in Britain seem also to be 13th century and later in date. Whether some of the isolated specimens are earlier or whether indeed all are earlier but some of them incorporated in later structures is unknown; but the balance of probability would favour a later rather than a pre-Norman date.

Of the meaning of these sculptures nothing positive can be stated and speculation without evidence is not justified. The figures do not appear to be referred to in any recognisable way in either the contemporary Irish or English literature, and the most that can be done at the moment is simply to record the facts as they occur.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Guest, writing in *JRSAI* 67, 1937, 176-180, suggests the possibility that some figures, apparently of females, are pre-Norman in date, especially those at White Island and the Nuns' Church, Clonmacnois. However, insofar as the sexual parts are not here stressed, I feel that such possible early figures are not to be included in the Sheela-na-Gig genre.

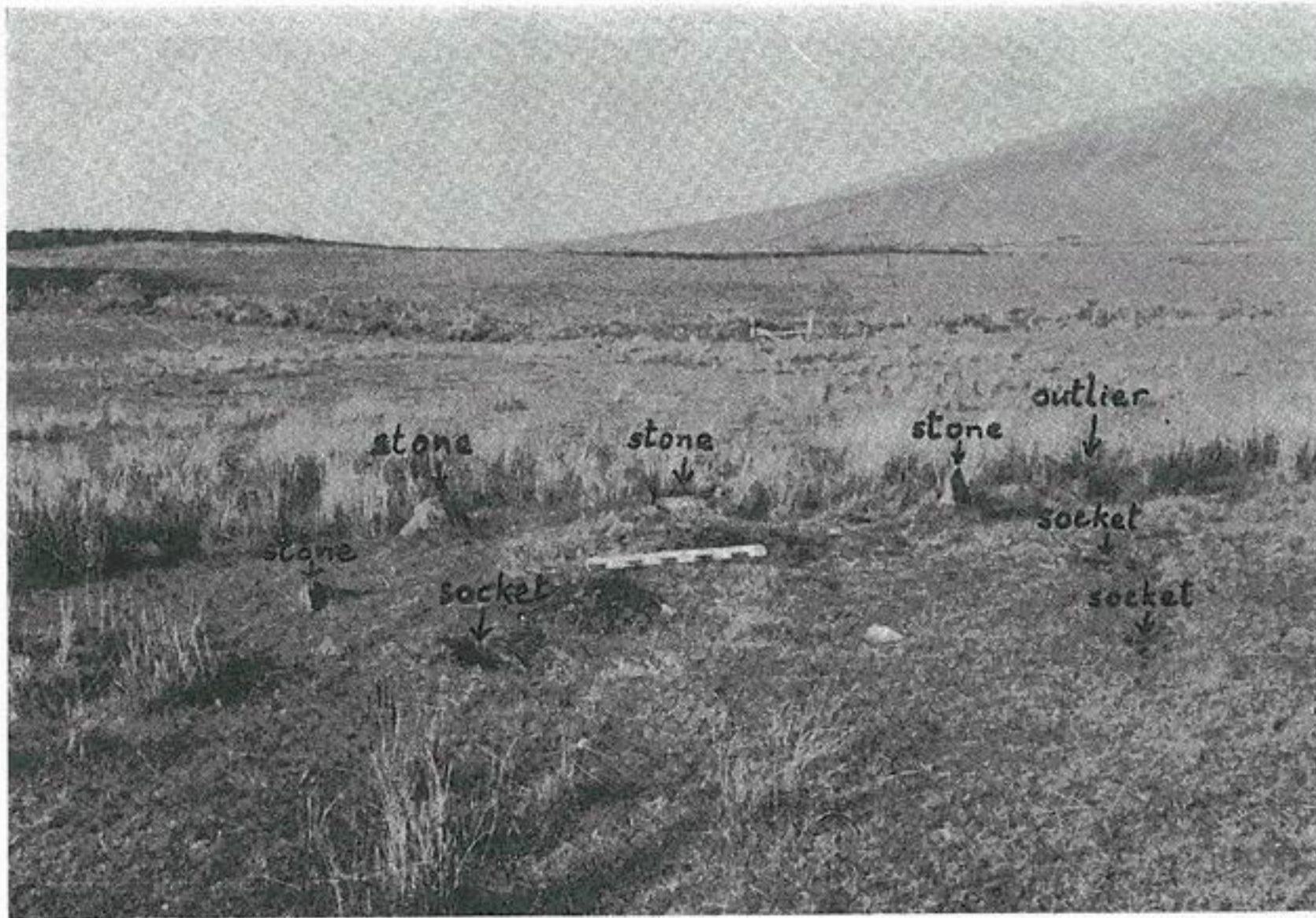
PLATE IV



1. Reardnogy More, Co. Tipperary : stone alignment from North-East  
(Photo: E. Rynne)



2. Reardnogy More, Co. Tipperary : stone alignment from South-West  
(scale = 1 metre) (Photo: E. Rynne)



1. Reardnogy More, Co. Tipperary : stone circle from South-West  
(scale=1 metre) (Photo: E. Rynne)



2. Romanesque head from Feakle, Co. Clare  
(Photos: E. Rynne)



Sheela-na-Gig from Burgesbeg, Co. Tipperary  
(Photo: National Museum of Ireland)