

Newly Recorded Figurative Carvings on Tower Houses in County Limerick

RORY SHERLOCK

15 Sunday's Well Ave., Cork

Two previously unpublished figurative carvings, a sheela-na-gig and a stone head, are described. They are linked by their horizontal positioning on quoin stones of similar buildings: tower houses at Fantstown and Tullovin in county Limerick. The possibility that sheela-na-gigs represent supine figures rather than standing or squatting figures is explored.

Figurative carvings on Irish later medieval tower houses are relatively uncommon and usually take one of two forms: simple stone heads or exhibitionist figures, i.e. sheela-na-gigs. The stone heads are generally vertically set carvings on the exterior of the buildings and are commonly held to represent the original owner of the tower house upon which they are located. Sheela-na-gigs are female exhibitionist figures, found on churches, castles and other buildings, which are usually vertically set on the external face of the building upon which they are located, though a number of horizontally-set examples are known. This article will describe two previously unpublished figurative carvings on county Limerick tower houses and will then briefly explore their wider context with a view towards contributing to a broader understanding of the role of figurative carvings on Irish tower houses. Both of the carvings under discussion, one a sheela-na-gig and the other a stone head, are notable in the manner of their horizontal positioning on quoin stones, the former on an external quoin and the latter on an internal example. The possibility that horizontally positioned sheela-na-gigs were carved in this way in order to convey the impression to the viewer that the figure was reclining rather than standing will also be explored.

The first carving under discussion, a sheela-na-gig, is located on an external quoin stone of the tower house at Fantstown¹, close to Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, and was noted by the author during a site visit, having previously been recorded by Denis Power of the County Limerick Archaeological Survey. This remarkably well-preserved tower house (Fig. 1) is divided internally into major and minor chambers at most floor levels, as is common in larger tower houses in Munster, and the building also features mid-height corner bartizans, each furnished with many musket loops, on its south-eastern and north-western corners. The tower house is accessed through a recessed ground-floor doorway in its eastern wall and this is protected by a wall-top machicolation, an internal murder hole and an external murder hole, the latter being a relatively unusual feature in a tower house. This doorway gives access to a ground-floor lobby, which in turn provides access to the main ground-floor chamber and the spiral stairs in the north-eastern corner of the building. The quality of stonework in the building is notably high and is evident in the windows, the fireplaces, the internal doorways and the bartizans. The sheela-na-gig (Plate 1; Fig. 2) is located on the eastern face of a quoin stone on the north-eastern corner of the building and is therefore evident as one approaches the main doorway. The figure, which is carved in false relief, is positioned horizontally on the quoin with its head towards the arris and the quoin appears similar to those others nearby, suggesting the carving is an original feature of the structure. The figure has a rounded head and a long face with clear features that tapers to the chin and

¹ Fantstown td, National Grid Co-ordinate 16493,12792; SMR No. LI048-004---

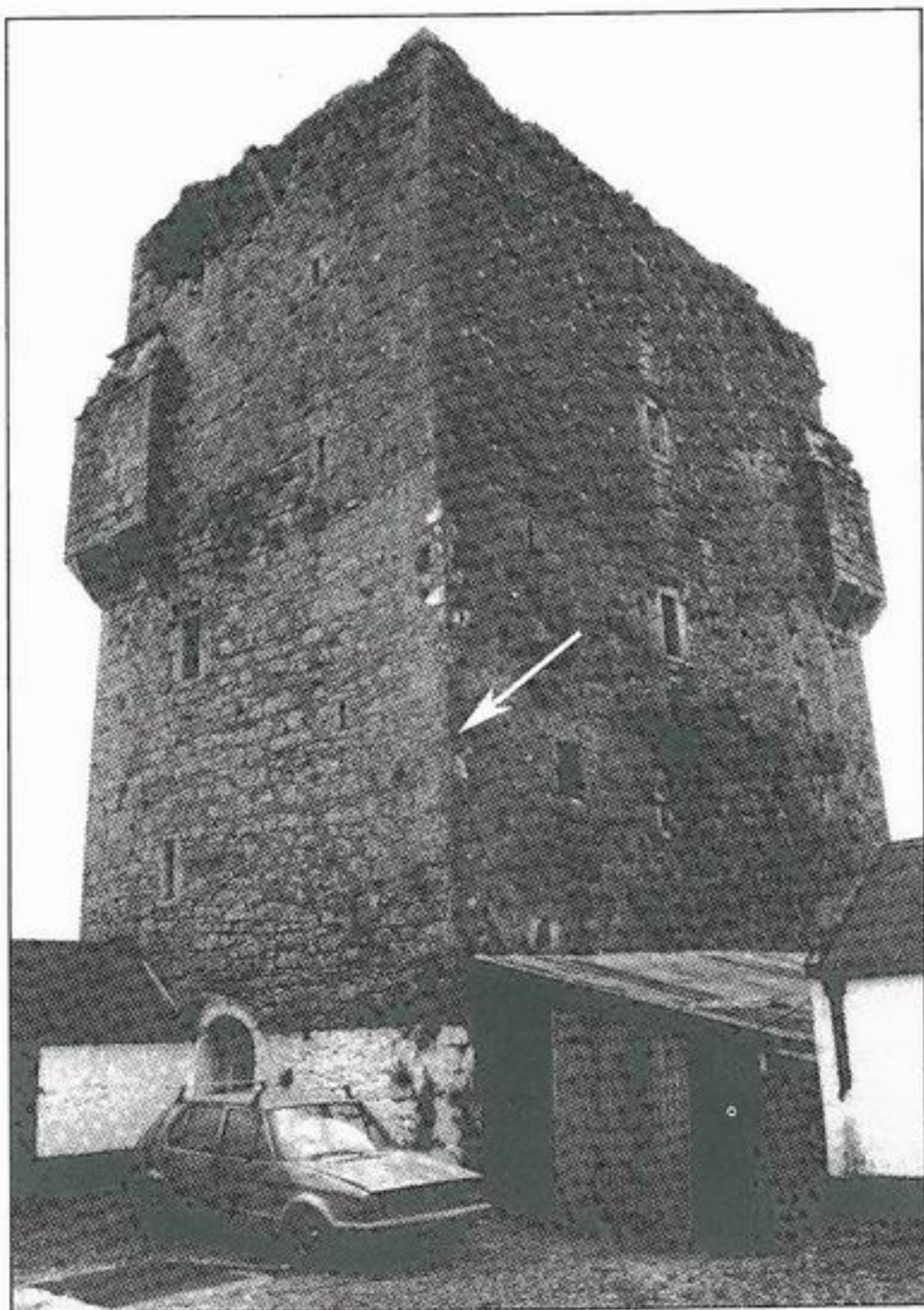


Fig. 1 Fantstown tower house, location of sheela-na-gig.

meets the shoulders with no apparent attempt to represent the neck. The arms, both of which are bent at the elbow, lie beside the thin torso and the hands rest on the upper thighs. It appears that the figure was carved without the breasts being represented, but the large vulva is quite apparent, even from ground level. The legs are slightly bent at the knees, the right leg more so than the left, and the feet are out-turned. The figure may either be represented as standing or as lying down with the legs splayed.

The Fantstown sheela-na-gig is similarly positioned to other such figures on Irish tower houses, as most such examples are set in the external face of the wall containing the entrance doorway. In addition, the Fantstown sheela-na-gig is comparable to an interesting sub-group of tower house sheela-na-gigs, i.e. those which are carved horizontally on quoin stones, and like many of the other examples within this sub-group, the figure at Fantstown is carved with its head towards the corner of the building and with its body extending towards the main doorway.

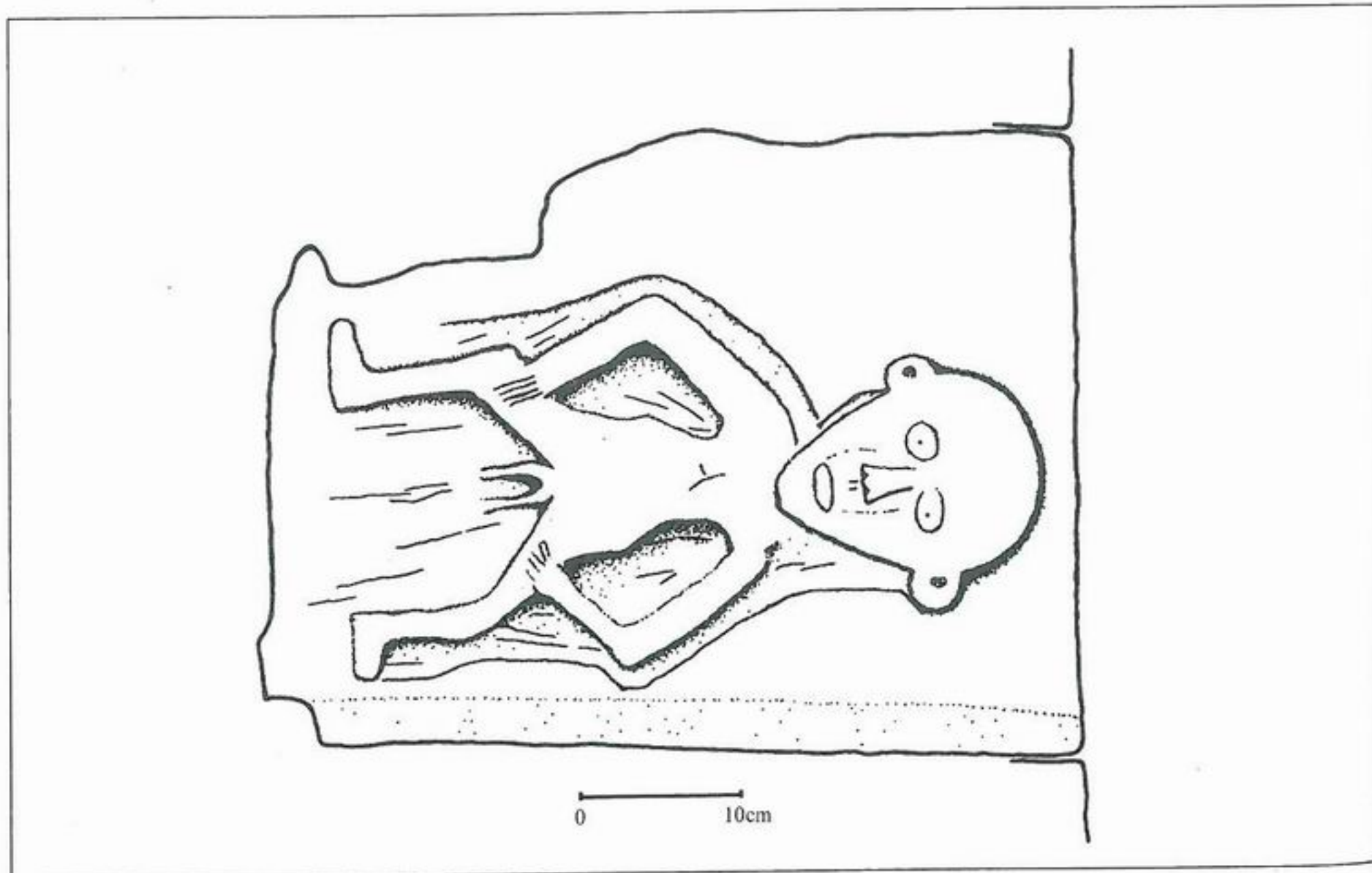


Fig. 2 Fantstown sheela-na-gig (scale drawing by A. Purcell).



Plate 1 Fantstown sheela-na-gig.



Fig. 3 Tullovin sheela-na-gig.

Just two other tower houses in Co. Limerick are known to have *in situ* sheela-na-gigs on their walls: Tullovin and Dunnaman, both located close to the village of Croom. The sheela-na-gig at Tullovin (Fig. 3) is finely carved in relief and is positioned horizontally on a quoin stone, similar to that at Fantstown, though it is not positioned in the same wall face as the entrance doorway, as is the case at Fantstown; the similarities between the two structures are nonetheless quite striking. The standard of decorative stonework in both buildings is particularly high; both buildings bear evidence of sectional construction,² both are provided with wall-top machicolations over their entrance doorways and with musket loops for defence; both buildings have many typical pointed-arch doorways but each also has a simple low square-headed doorway giving

² C. J. Donnelly, 'Sectionally constructed tower houses: A review of the evidence from County Limerick', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 128 (1998) pp 26-34.

access from the entrance lobby to a small chamber and the sheela-na-gigs on both of these buildings are positioned on the corners which contain the spiral stair. Both buildings fall within Donnelly's Type 1 in his classification of Co. Limerick tower houses: Tullovin belongs to his sub-group Type 1A and Fantstown to his Type 1B, the essential difference being simply that access from the entrance lobby to the main ground-floor chamber in the former type is direct, while that in the latter is via a second lobby at the foot of the spiral stair.³ The posture of the figure at Tullovin differs from that at Fantstown in that just one hand approaches the genital area, the other being raised towards the head.

The sheela-na-gig at Dunnaman is positioned vertically on a stone set in the middle of the wall face, unlike those at Fantstown and Tullovin, though it is positioned in the same wall as the entrance doorway and, indeed, on the same side of the doorway as the stairway. The figure, which is carved in false relief, is quite forbidding in appearance with strong facial features and prominent ribs and both arms pass behind/under the thighs to touch the large pudenda.

The suggestion by McMahon and Roberts that the 'location of the Sheelas on the wall high above the main entrance probably signified vulnerability for this wall and the need for added protection'⁴ is worthy of note and may warrant further investigation, particularly when one considers the location of many of the horizontally positioned figures in relation to the internal layout of the buildings. Many of these figures are positioned on the corner of the tower house within which the stair is constructed and this is probably significant, given that the defence of the stair was second only in importance to the defence of the entrance doorway when a tower house was attacked, as this building form clearly relied heavily on height for protection. The importance and vulnerability of the stair may be fully understood when one considers that many tower houses that were captured during conflict were subsequently 'slighted' by the triumphant forces and this frequently involved the destruction of the stairs in order to render the structure almost useless. The sheela-na-gigs at Fantstown and Tullovin, Co. Limerick, at Doon Castle (Esker td.), Co. Offaly and at Cloghan, Co. Roscommon are all positioned on quoins on the corner of the tower house that contains the stairs and such locations may support the suggestion that the figures had apotropaic or evil-averting properties.

The second carving under discussion, which represents a human head, is located on the corner of a window embrasure within the tower house at Springfield,⁵ close to Dromcolliher, Co. Limerick. This well-preserved tower house (Plate 2), which is usually referred to in historical documents by the original site name of Gortnetubbrid, stands in an area of good agricultural land and has clearly undergone some alterations over time. A Geraldine stronghold, it was forfeited by Sir John Fitzgerald in 1691 but purchased by a kinsman in 1703. It passed through marriage to Sir Robert Deane who was created Baron Muskerry in 1781. The castle is now owned by the 9th Baron Muskerry and managed by his sister, the Hon. Betty Sykes, who pointed out the carving to the author. The tower house is typical of such structures, having a single entrance on the ground floor and many narrow single-ope windows, though a number of larger mullioned-and-transomed windows also serve the upper floors of the building. The entrance doorway, located towards the western end of the north wall, gives access to a small lobby, protected by a murder hole overhead, and this lobby in turn gives access to the main ground-floor chamber to the south and to the stone staircase which rises in the thickness of the north wall from ground-floor level to the north-east corner of the building at second-floor level. This stair gives access to the main first-floor chamber at half height and then to the main second-floor chamber, located above the principal vault of the structure, at the top. Decorated fireplaces served the main

³ C. J. Donnelly, 'A Typological Study of the Tower Houses of County Limerick', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 129 (1999) pp 19-39:22, 37.

⁴ J. McMahon & J. Roberts, *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland: The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts* (Cork & Dublin 2001) p. 63.

⁵ Springfield td, National Grid Co-ordinate 13495,12265; SMR No. LI054-005---

chambers on the second and third floors. Rounded wall-top corner machicolations, supported by alternating rounded and inverted-pyramid type corbels, are evident on the north-western and south-eastern corners of the building and many musket loops are evident in their walls. These late features of the building clearly guided Donnelly to include it in his Type 4 – buildings which ‘belong to the last phase in the tradition’⁶ in his classification of tower houses in Co. Limerick.

The stone head within the building is carved horizontally on the western face of an internal quoin that forms the corner of a window embrasure in the north wall of the main second-floor chamber (Plate 3). The four-ope mullioned-and-transomed window in question is located almost directly over the entrance doorway to the building and the incised head (Plate 4) is situated c. 1m above floor level on the eastern side of the embrasure. The top of the head is flat and forms the arris or corner of the quoin upon which it is carved. The head measures 0.26m across, from the top of the head to the chin, and is up to 0.31m high at the corner of the quoin. The upper part of the head is formed by a band that extends 75mm inwards from the arris and beneath which the face tapers to a point at the chin. The entire western side of the quoin is, therefore, used in the representation of the head and it is difficult to determine whether the head was incised in an opportunistic manner on a quoin of suitable shape, or whether, as appears more likely, the western side of the quoin was shaped to represent the jaw-line and chin. The features of the face are simply represented and consist of a pair of oval eyes with their pupils indicated, a simply incised nose and mouth and an incised line, possibly representing the hairline, which divides the face from the upper part of the head. The right eye of the figure appears to droop considerably lower than the left, a feature notably reminiscent of a sheela-na-gig at Ballinaclogh, Co. Tipperary, the eyes of which Manning⁷ described as ‘pointed ovals, that on the figure’s left being askew’. The southern side of the quoin, i.e. the side which faces out into the main second-floor chamber, is roughly dressed in a manner similar to the other quoins forming the embrasure and this would suggest that this quoin was an original part of the structure rather than a later embellishment.

The Springfield head, being an incised, horizontally positioned carving inside a tower house, is quite unusual, as the majority of carved heads on such buildings are vertically-set external features which are carved in relatively high relief. A good example of such a well executed three-dimensional carving on a tower house is that at Kilcrea, Co. Cork, where a carved human head, said to represent Cormac Láidir MacCarthy, is positioned vertically on a external quoin.⁸ Other comparable carvings exist, for example, on tower houses at Ardcroney and Carneycastle, Co. Tipperary⁹ and Castletown, Co. Clare¹⁰. The Springfield head, on the other hand, has relatively little in common with such carvings, having neither the representative status acquired through the finely carved naturalistic features of the Kilcrea head or the apotropaic or evil-averting possibilities which could be associated with a head in a prominent external location. The function of the Springfield head is unclear, as it is not immediately visible to a modern visitor to the castle and would presumably have been similarly difficult for a contemporary visitor to notice. The head may, of course, be simply the work of an artistic stonemason and thus have little significance other than that afforded to it by the carver. On the other hand, it may be associated with a probable IHS monograph carved on the jamb of the nearby window, though, unlike the carved head, the monograph does not appear to be an original feature of the building. The location of the monograph and the carved head, though probably coincidental, could lead one to suggest that this area of the building had a ritual association that may, perhaps, have been

⁶ Donnelly, *Typological Study*, p. 31.

⁷ C. Manning, ‘A Sheela-Na-Gig at Ballinaclogh, Co. Tipperary’ in G. Mac Niocaill & P.F. Wallace, (eds), *Keimelia: Studies in Medieval Archaeology and History in Memory of Tom Delaney* (Galway 1988) p. 71.

⁸ D. Maher, *Kilcrea Friary: Franciscan Heritage in County Cork* (Cork 1999) Pl. 3.

⁹ J. Farrelly, & C. O’Brien, *Archaeological Inventory of County Tipperary: Vol. 1 – North Tipperary* (Dublin 2002) pp 353-63.

¹⁰ R. Ua Cróinín & M. Breen, ‘Some Towerhouses in the Burren area of Co. Clare’, *The Other Clare* 25 (2001) pp 5-10:7-8.

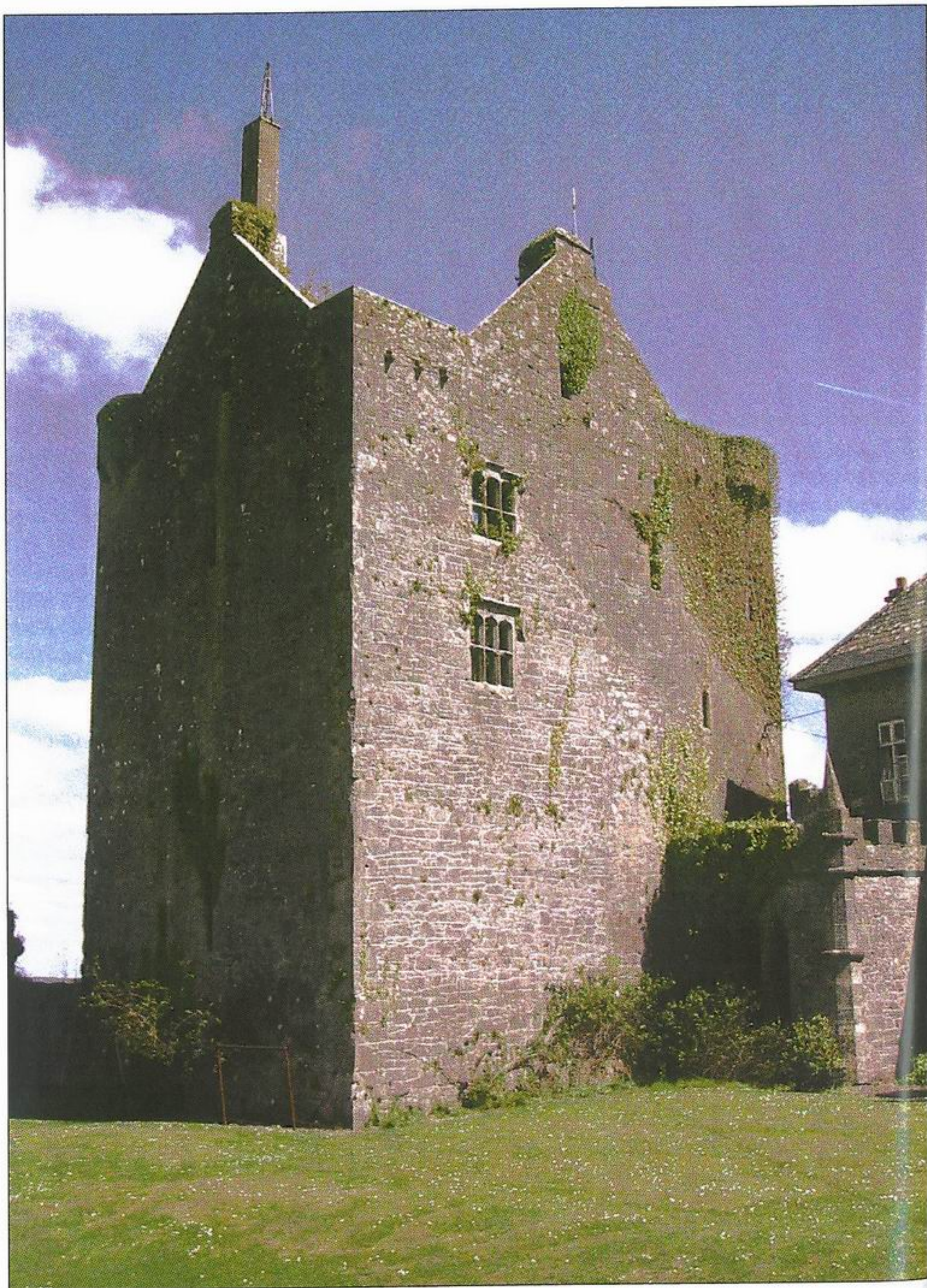


Plate 2 Springfield tower house.



Plate 3 Springfield window embrasure.

highlighted more by appropriate furniture and fittings than by the subtle, if not covert, decorations on the stonework.

The horizontal positioning of the sheela-na-gigs at Fantstown and Tullovin, when considered together with the similar position of the incised head at Springfield/Gortnetubbrid, is worthy of further comment, as it is now clear that the incidence of figurative carvings being positioned in this way on Limerick tower houses significantly outweighs the incidence of vertical deployment, the only example known to the author being the sheela-na-gig at Dunnaman. The three horizontally deployed images are found on external or internal quoin stones and it is clear that each was carved for those specific locations. The way in which each of the three stones fits in with those around them appears to preclude the possibility that the figures are secondary insertions in the buildings in which they are found. The typical Irish sheela-na-gig is generally considered to be represented in a standing, squatting or sitting pose,¹¹ but the horizontal placement of a significant minority of such figures may support a reinterpretation of this suggestion. The horizontal positioning of sheela-na-gigs on tower house quoins at Fantstown and Tullovin, Co. Limerick, Doon (Esker td.), Co. Offaly (Fig. 4), Cloghan, Co. Roscommon (Fig. 5) and Clomantagh, Co. Kilkenny, together with similar figures such as that once found on Kiltinan Church, Co. Tipperary, and that situated on the Hall of the Vicars Choral on the Rock of Cashel, Co. Tipperary, could suggest that these figures (and by extension sheela-na-gigs in general) were intended to be interpreted as being supine, i.e. lying on their backs, and that some

¹¹ McMahon & Roberts, *Sheela-na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland*, p. 11; E. P. Kelly, *Sheela-na-Gigs: Origins and Functions* (Dublin 1996) pp 14-5.



Plate 4 Springfield carving of human head.

horizontally positioned figures do not differ enough from others in terms of their posture to be posed differently. Andersen, when considering horizontally-positioned figures, dismissed the possibility of the reclining pose in favour of the standing and also explained away the unrealistic stances of many figures where a hand or hands pass behind to thighs to gesture towards or touch the pudenda by suggesting that 'Nature may not allow this, but a certain artistic convention current in the Irish Middle Ages will. And convention is our key.'¹² Similarly, McMahon and Roberts do not address the possibility that many or all sheela-na-gigs may represent a figure in a supine position and appear to accept that the figures were depicted as standing without considering the ambiguous nature of many of the carvings. Furthermore, when considering the horizontally positioned examples, they state 'although the figure has been carved as if standing the stone has been set so that she appears to be reclining or lying on her side.'¹³ However, a review of the wide array of published literature on the subject and an examination of a series of photographs or drawings of the figures in the light of the possibility that the figures are represented in a supine position, it becomes apparent that many of the carvings are quite ambiguous and could easily be interpreted as either erect or supine. Horizontally positioned sheela-na-gigs do not differ greatly in pose from vertically set examples and the possibility that most or all may in fact represent supine figures is at least as plausible as the accepted standing pose.

sheela-na-gigs were positioned horizontally in order to emphasise this pose. The vertical placement of most sheela-na-gigs may have caused modern writers to misinterpret their pose as standing or squatting, when the more explicit supine pose appears to be at least as plausible an interpretation, particularly in figures with bent knees where a supine interpretation would lead one to suggest 'supine-with-knees-drawn-up' rather than 'squatting'. Furthermore, the contention that the supine pose may be common amongst sheela-na-gigs is supported to a certain extent by the relatively common motif of one or both of the hands passing behind/under the thighs to touch the pudenda, a pose more easily credible in a supine figure than in a standing or squatting one. The possibility that horizontally positioned sheela-na-gigs may represent reclining figures has been considered, and generally rejected, by other authors, commonly due to the acceptance that most sheela-na-gigs represent a standing figure and that

¹² J. Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (London 1977) p. 104.

¹³ McMahon & Roberts, *Sheela-na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland*, p. 64.



Fig. 4 Sheela-na-gig on tower house at Doon castle, Co. Offaly.

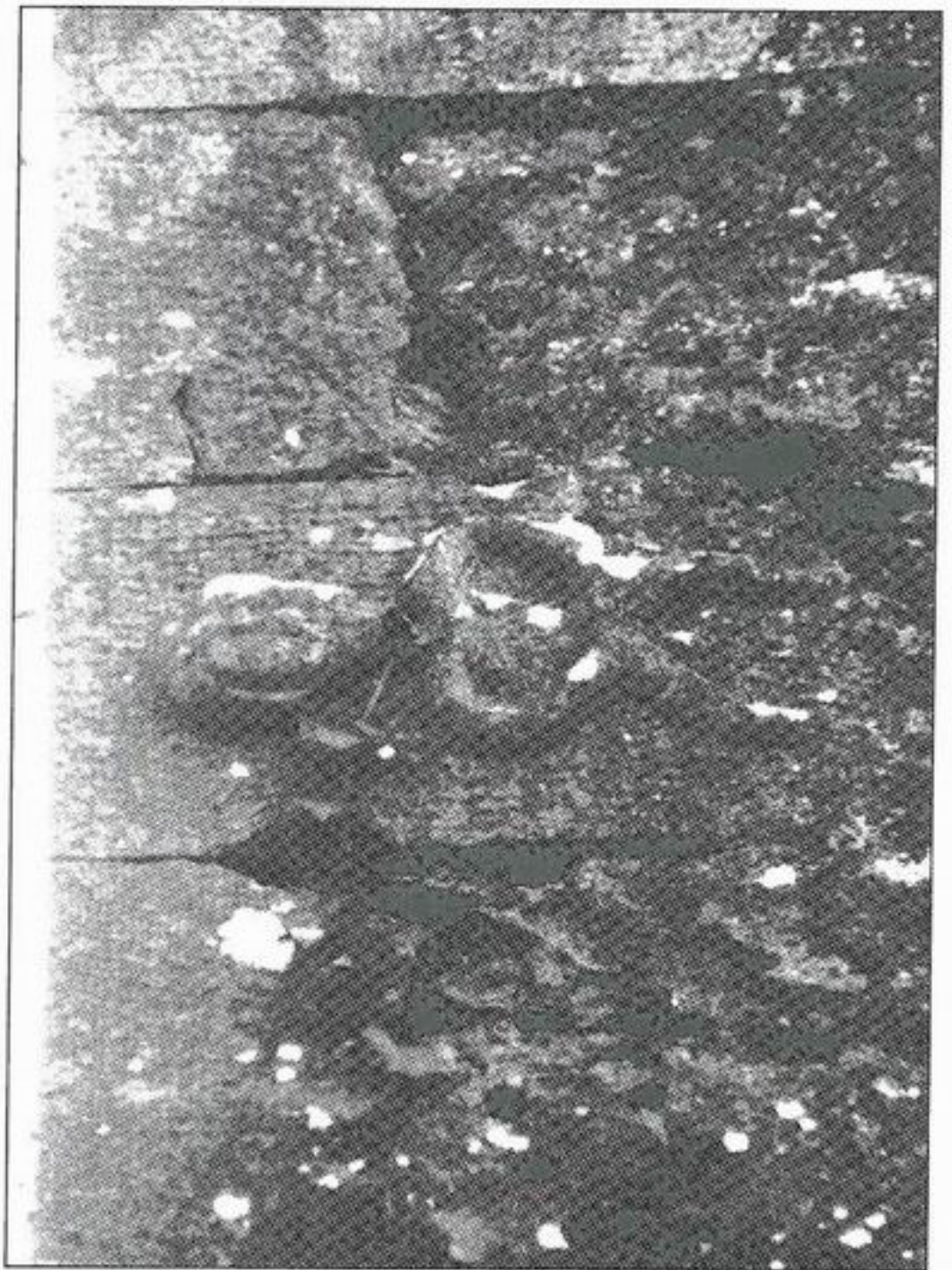


Fig. 5 Sheela-na-gig on tower house at Cloghan, Co. Roscommon.

Acknowledgements

The carvings discussed in this article were recorded by the author during a programme of fieldwork and research on tower houses in counties Limerick, Cork and Kerry which was part-funded by a grant from the National Committee for Archaeology of the Royal Irish Academy. The author would like to thank Betty Sykes and Ned Moloney for graciously allowing the author to examine and record the tower houses in their care. Thanks are also due to Liam Irwin, Sheila Lane, Denis Power and Avril Purcell for their invaluable contributions during the preparation of the article and to Avril Purcell in particular for her skilful preparation of Fig. 2.

