

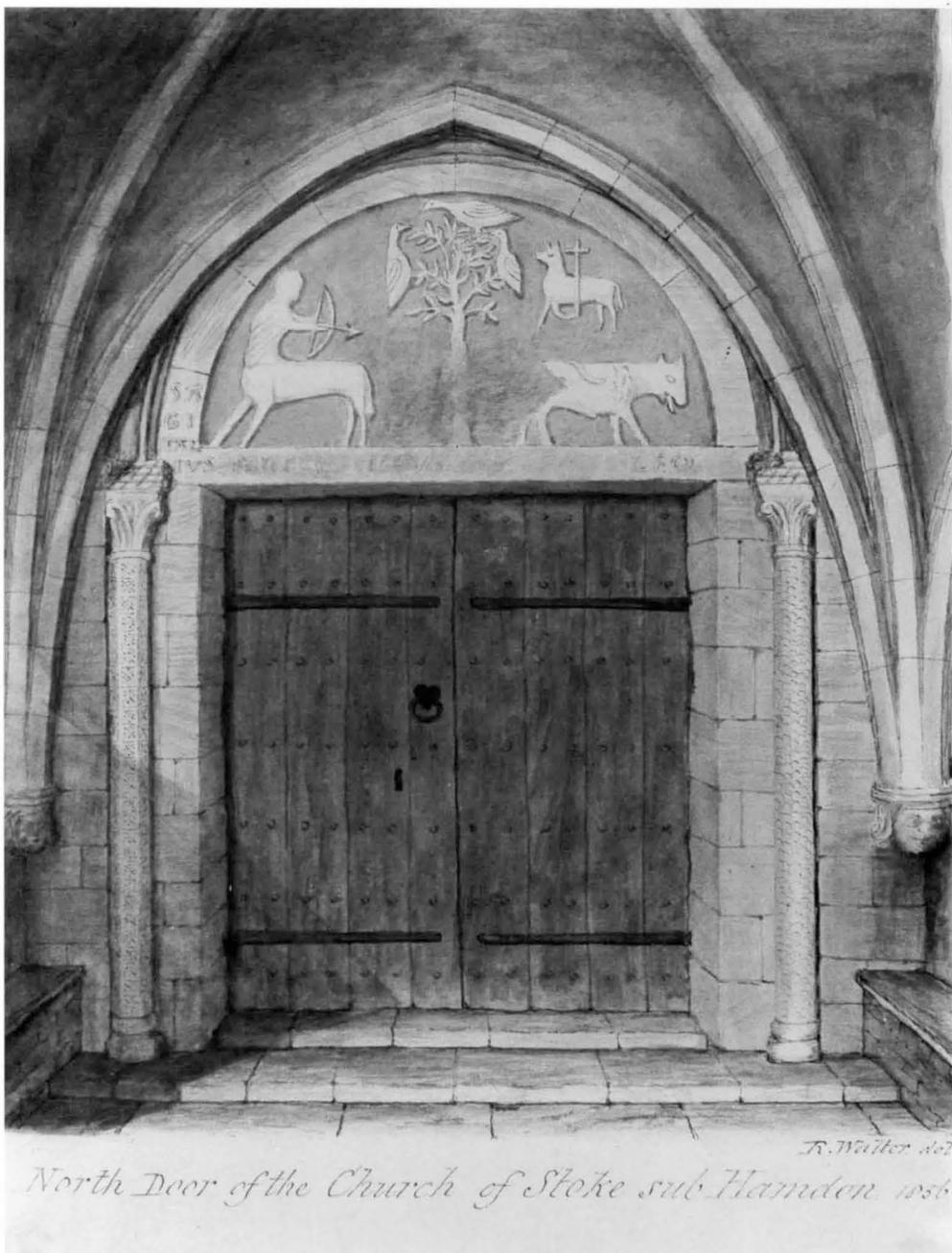
TWO SHEILA-NA-GIGS AT STOKE SUB HAMDON

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The church of St Mary, Stoke sub Hamdon, near Yeovil, boasts a remarkable series of Romanesque and later carvings, including two examples of the type of erotic/apotropaic female figures known by the Irish term 'Sheila-na-Gig'. These figures are fairly widespread in Britain and Ireland, but only a few Somerset examples have been recorded, notably that at Fiddington.¹ Several of the Stoke carvings have been published,² but the Sheilas would seem hitherto to have escaped notice.

The ancient parish church lies in East Stoke, below the sharp angle in the northern ramparts of the Celtic fortress on Ham Hill which dominates the site, and 1 km west of St Michael's Hill at Montacute. The distinct status of East and West Stoke may go back to Domesday, where the estate is divided, and the remoteness of the church from the main village suggests that East Stoke may have been the original settlement. The dedication to the Virgin is no older than 1891. In 1840 and 1859 the church is referred to as a dedicated to St Denys, and the chapel in the north transept still retains this dedication (*see below*). In 1861 the dedication was said to be unknown.³ The modern dedication was presumably suggested by the Madonna and Child on the 15th century churchyard cross.

The church has a Romanesque nave and chancel, both retaining pilaster buttresses at their corners. The chancel may originally have been apsidal at the east end. A richly-carved corbel table survives below the chancel eaves. The circular font, too, is Norman. A tower was added in the transitional period, and is dated by Pevsner 'hardly later than 1190';⁴ the base of the tower forms the stone-vaulted north transept. The uppermost stage of the tower is 13th century, as, probably, is the south transept, while the tower parapet is 15th century. It was also in the 15th century that the walls of the south transept and nave were raised in height and roofs of shallow pitch constructed over them. Of the carvings, the best known is the Norman tympanum above the north door of the nave (Frontispiece).⁵ This had been plastered over and was found during restoration in 1856. Carved in relief, it depicts a Tree of Life in which perch three large birds of crow-like appearance, flanked to the left by a centaur which aims an arrow at the rather lupine creature to the right of the tree. These figures are helpfully identified in the border as 'Sagittarius' and 'Leo'. Dom Aelred Watkin has drawn attention to the fact that these titles are given in a style of lettering identical with that used on the lead cross found at Glastonbury in 1191 in the supposed grave of King Arthur and illustrated in the 1607 edition of Camden's *Britannia*.⁶ Above Leo is a pascal lamb with a cross (the Agnus Dei). The significance of these figures has been much discussed. It has been suggested, for example, that the carving is in the nature of a political comment: Sagittarius is said to have been a badge of King Stephen, Leo of Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, second husband of the Empress Matilda.⁷ Another solution is that the centaur and lion represent good and evil, though there is no agreement as to which is which. Perhaps Pevsner's explanation is



North Door of the Church of Stoke sub Hamdon. 1856

Frontispiece: Watercolour drawing of the 12th century north doorway and tympanum and of the 13th century vaulting of the north porch, St Mary's Church, Stoke sub Hamdon. The drawing was made by Richard Walter in 1856, the year in which the tympanum was rediscovered following the removal of the masonry which had long concealed it (see below pp. 69–74). Walter was a distinguished amateur archaeologist and a founder member of the Society. He died in 1878 at the age of 99, and was buried at Stoke sub Hamdon.

From the Society's collection.

the most natural. He suggests that Leo stands for August and Sagittarius for December, that is, for summer and winter. Such an interpretation fits well with the fertility symbolism elsewhere in the church.

West of the porch which now shelters the tympanum is a small, seemingly 12th century, window quite high in the north wall of the nave. The window head is carved in a single large stone, which as well as a cable border to the window itself, bears in relief a man in wide knee-length trousers, with spear and sword, fighting a winged dragon.⁸ This scene is certainly meant to represent St Michael and the devil and may perhaps give a clue to the original dedication of the church. Pevsner thought this carving 'more Saxon than Norman', although its closest analogues are possibly to be found in representations of Sidgurd and Fafnir, doubling perhaps for Michael and Satan, on northern, Anglo-Scandinavian, monuments of 10th-11th century date. Given the integral relationship of carving and window, however, the acceptance of an 11th century date would perhaps have unacceptable implications for the dating of the existing church as a whole.

Turning to the corbel table, the three surviving corbels from the east end of the chancel on the north side are representational, the rest geometrical (Plate 1). The easternmost corbel seems to be a stylized representation of ears of corn. Its western neighbour⁹ consists of a severed head balanced at the level of its open mouth on the narrow ends of two drinking horns, each held by a wristed hand protruding from the wall. The next figure to the west appears at first sight to be a variant of the previous one, its identity having been quite skillfully disguised (Plate 2). Its face, though somewhat larger, is almost identical in its features to that of the severed head, which it also resembles in



Plate 1 Romanesque corbel table on the north chancel wall, Stoke sub Hamdon (Simant Bostock).



Plate 2 Romanesque Sheila-na-Gig on the north chancel wall, Stoke sub Hamdon (Simant Bostock).

facing straight out from the wall. Its true nature is only apparent on looking upwards from beneath, when it is seen to be a Sheila-na-gig, rather more naturalistic in its portrayal than its famous and much illustrated cousin at Kilpeck, Herefordshire. The face is now seen to be pointing directly upwards while the figure squats, knees splayed widely beyond the shoulders, on the plane of the wall. The arms, held close to the torso, pass beneath the thighs for the hands to pull apart the buttocks and cleft of the vulva, which are deeply incised. The outspread feet are barely indicated. All these features are typical of the classic Sheila figure, and the corbel at Stoke represents one of the finest examples in the country. It falls within the usual 12th century age-range of the type.

Only one representational corbel survives on the south of the chancel, namely a leaping hare shown in profile. The fertility theme appears to be continued in the decoration above the 12th century windows in the south walls of chancel and nave, where a stylised representation of corn ears seems once more to be intended.

The rich sculptural tradition at Stoke did not end with the Romanesque. Various grotesque and sinister figures of 14th and 15th century date are also noteworthy. At the south-east corner of the tower two clothed human figures hold open the mouth of a crowned demon which appears about to vomit. On the north west corner a winged goat,



Plate 3 Later medieval Sheila-na-Gig on the south nave wall, Stoke sub Hamdon (Simant Bostock).

of unusually malevolent aspect, stamps at the tower behind it as it prepares to charge. Above the squint in the south transept a carving, some 10 in. long, shows a (?) monkey between the ears of a donkey. It is stated that this carving 'belonged to the Abbey church at Montacute and was placed here about 1917'.⁷

The most striking of all the Stoke figures, however, is a second, reclining, Sheila-na-gig to be found on the south wall of the nave, below the second battlement to the east of the south-west corner (Plate 3). She is set in the 15th century parapet, although she might be 14th century work moved when the height of the nave wall was raised in the 15th century. Her right arm and right leg have been broken off, perhaps in an attempt to disguise her, but enough remains to show that originally she was of unique design. The carving is finely modelled, with fingers, toes, and long wavy hair carefully delineated. Unusually for a Sheila, the breasts are shown, pendulous with downward-pointing nipples. With the fingers of her left hand she touches her vulva. The right arm originally looped out from the body to allow the missing right hand to do the same. The right leg, also, originally splayed outwards, bent at the knee. The head is thrown backwards, the face contorted in an ecstatic leer, with the wide open mouth half blocked by a lolling tongue. She is a true gargoyle, the water originally flowing from her mouth and from

between her legs. Perhaps one of the latest known examples of a Sheila in stone,¹⁰ she has moved from the usually diagrammatic character of the type to the naturalistic and, it would seem, the deliberately pornographic. Lacking the air of innocence of the erotic Hindu temple sculpture of which she is in other respects reminiscent, she retains the ability to shock.

The Sheilas at Stoke are not only outstanding of their kind, but they are unusual in that, far from being isolated grotesques, they appear to exist within the context of related themes drawn, as they themselves seem to be, from a background of pre-Christian Celtic belief. The presence of two such carvings, perhaps separated in time by as much as 250 years, suggests an element of conscious deliberation rather than the mere caprice of individual craftsmen. In considering more generally the Romanesque imagery of Stoke church, we may note its links to Celtic concepts of the other world, many of which recur in the near contemporary Anglo-French Arthurian literature, itself largely drawn from Breton sources. The severed head was a favoured theme, with connotations of fertility, wisdom and protection. It recurs many times in later Arthurian traditions, especially those linked to the Graal. In *Peredur*, the Welsh rendering of the story of Perceval in the *Mabinogion*, a severed head swimming in a dish of blood takes the place of the Graal itself. The dedication of the north transept to St Denys may be another indication of the cult of the head surviving in Christian guise. St Denys, patron saint of France, was 'claimed as a *cephalophore*, or "head carrier"; that is one of those martyrs who was fabled to have carried his severed head to his place of burial,'¹¹ and as such he is generally represented. The Norman corbel may well have provided the hint.

Horns are another Arthurian theme, often carried by disembodied hands, or testing the virtue of women. As cornucopia, they blend into the wider image of the wondrous vessel, which can also be a cauldron or, in later contexts, the Graal. The themes of the head and the wondrous vessel meet in the figure of Bran the Blessed ('Bran' meaning raven). In Welsh story he possessed a magical cauldron that could raise the dead. As Bran, he passed into the Graal literature where he was associated with Joseph of Arimathea. Bran's severed head provided a plenteous feast, and guarded the realm from invading enemies (*Mabinogion: The tale of Branwen, daughter of Lyr*).

This theme of territoriality, of sovereignty, recurs when we consider the Celtic goddesses, who were concerned with this, and with success in battle, as well as with fertility. Of dual nature, they could be either of surpassing loveliness or bloodthirsty, terrifying and rankly sexual, like the Sheilas, who are discussed in this context by Anne Ross in a key paper.¹² The three birds on the Tree of Life are also reminiscent of the Irish war goddess, the Morigan, in her threefold aspect as Crow or Raven of Battle. The ambiguity of the goddess reflects the land – beautiful in summer, cruel and barren in winter – and to gain the sovereignty the would-be king must, in Celtic tradition, embrace both aspects. The hag whom the hero consents to bed is apt to be transformed, on awakening, into a beautiful woman, who confers the kingship. This theme, too, passes into the Graal stories as the Loathly Lady. The hare, creature of the pastures and corn fields, on the southern corbel, also links with the goddess figure. Until this century, in many country districts, witches were thought to transform themselves into hares, and Boudica, according to Cassius Dio, had released one from her cloak and drew omens from its running on the eve of her battles to wrest sovereignty from the Romans.

There has been little agreement about the real significance of the Sheilas. Unlovely as they usually are, they nevertheless squat in the ancient birth posture, and they have been seen as representing life and death, the gate of rebirth, and so primarily as fertility figures. Others, noting that exposure of the genitals is in many cultures an evil-averting gesture, see this as their main role. The Stoke imagery taken as a whole rather suggests that these two views may in fact be complementary.

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6. James P. Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey: The Holy House at the head of the Moors Adventurous* (1988), 178.
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8. Bettey and Taylor, *Sacred & Satiric*, 36.
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10. A similar design exists on a wooden 14th or 15th century roof boss at South Tawton, Devon. A comic Sheila-type grotesque of similar date may be seen below the east parapet of the tower of St Michael's church, Brent Knoll.
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