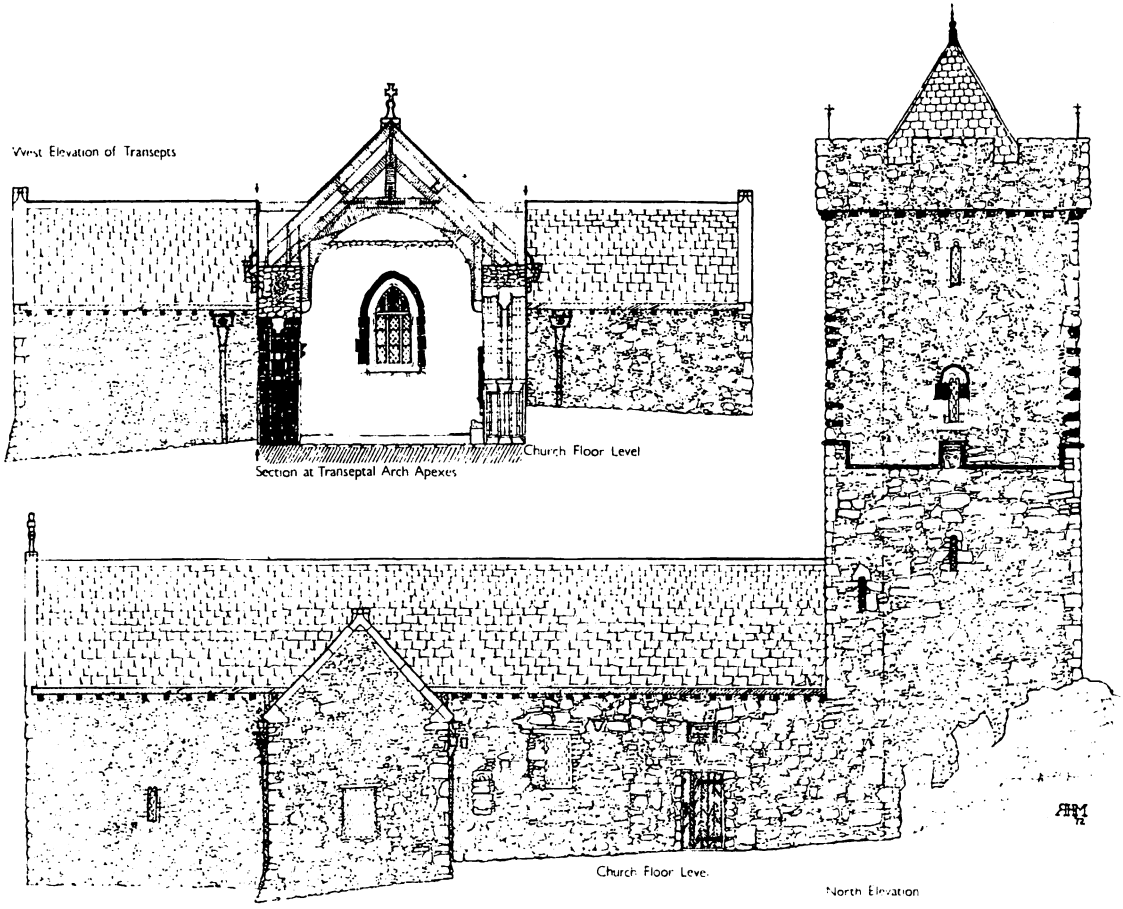


St. Clement's Church. Rodel. Harris

The 'Sheila-na-gigs' at RODEL

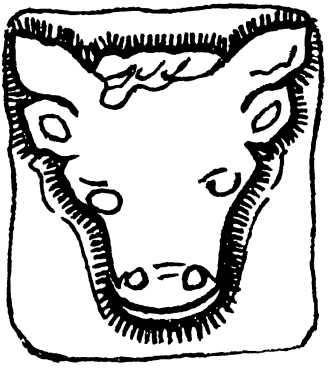
Ruairidh Macleod

There are twelve carvings in sandstone on the exterior of the tower at Rodel. About ten feet above the string course, each angle bears the remains of an animal's head, now much wasted. These carvings appear to have been cut for, and incorporated into, the design of the upper part of the tower, which dates from the early 16th century. The decoration of the angles change from a roll and fillet below the carving, to a simple roll above. The centre of the west face bears a similar animal's head, possibly that of a lion, at the same height as the angle carvings.

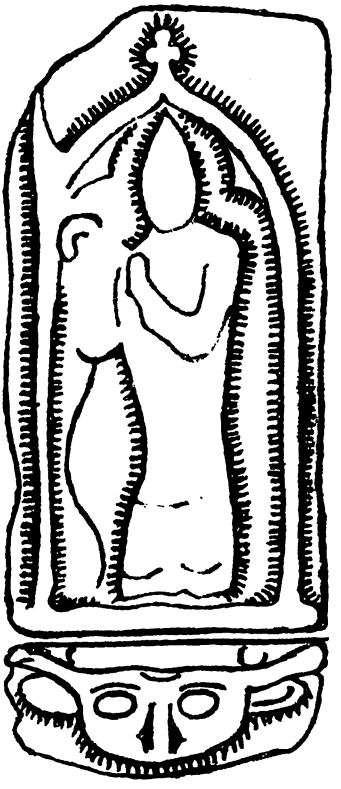
The seven remaining carvings are of a different character and size. They have been called 'sheila-na-gigs', a meaningless englishing of two meaningless Gaelic words. They form the largest group of such carvings in Scotland. A similar stone appears on the wall of the refectory of the Nunnery at Iona. Thirty-two stones are listed in Ireland, three in England and one in France. (Proc. R. S. Ant of Ireland, Vol XXIV, 1894, p77)

Little seems to be known about the origin of these carvings, though those at Rodel have drawn comment from travellers from the 18th century onwards. MacCulloch was so shocked by them, that he could not bring himself to describe the stones!!

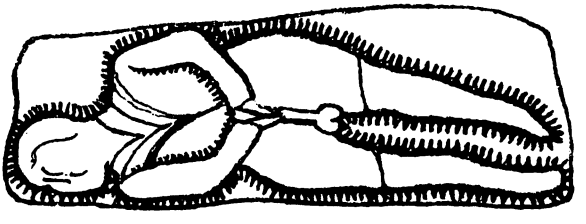
The WEST WALL contains three panels. At the centre of the face, and surrounded on three sides by the string course, is a panel of two members, forty inches by sixteen inches wide. The upper stone, now much wasted, shows an ecclesiastic, apparently wearing vestments and a mitre. In his right hand he appears to be holding a crozier, and his left hand is raised in benediction. The figure, presumably that of a bishop, is framed by a cusped label, with a trefoil head and crossed finial. Some commentators have stated that this figure represents St. Clement, the patron saint of the church, but there is no evidence to support this.



NORTH WALL
18" x 16"



WEST WALL
UPPER FIGURE
40" x 16"



WEST WALL
SOUTHERN CANTED FIGURE
30" x 10"

The carving is not as fine as the two bishops in *Alasdair Crotach's* tomb inside the church, and does not display the same artistic style.

The lower part of the panel is carved in the shape of an animal's head, perhaps that of a bull, with protruding eyes, long ears and horns. The nose and mouth are broken. The carving resembles a misericorde.

The two other panels on the western wall are canted, and look somewhat out of place. They were described by Ross, (PSAS Vol. XIX, p118 et seq. 1885) as stones that were used 'promiscuously as was found convenient, so that several sculptured figures have been placed in most unlikely positions, as chance to some extent dictated.'

The panel on the northern side, 24 inches by 15, is canted to the right, and represents a male figure, dressed in pleated skirt and cloak, which might be identified as a *philemor,* or belted plaid. The panel is much wasted, but the figure would appear to be wearing an open necked jacket with long sleeves, and hose, and to be carrying a dagger, point down, in its left hand. The position of the legs suggests that the figure is running.

If the garment worn is indeed the *philemor,* then the carving can only date from the late 16th century, or more probably the 17th century, at the earliest, since this mode of dress was not generally in use until such time. It would seem unlikely, however, that so unecclesiastic a panel should be carved and attached to a church after the Reformation of 1560, even allowing for the probability that the Reformation never took effect in Harris and the Hebrides until a hundred years after the time of John Knox. The panel might perhaps have been made for some non-ecclesiastic building and later, during one of the church's many restorations, have been inserted, 'as chance to some extent dictated'.

If the garment is not taken to be a *philemor,* but as a jerkin and skirted tunic, as found on many gravestones at Iona of the

14th and 15th centuries, with a folded cloak, then the carving as the style suggests could be of an earlier date.

The similarity in craftsmanship between the north and south panels on the west wall, suggests that they were carved by the same hand.

The southern panel, 30 inches by ten, is canted even more steeply then the northern panel, to the left. It shows the figure of a man looking to the right. He wears a tightly fitting jerkin, with long sleeves, and an open neck, with an elaborate collar. The figure wears no leggings or hose. The most remarkable feature of the carving is that the figure holds between its hands its erect penis, quite clearly and grotesquely extended from the figure's testicles.

It is reputed that when restoring the church in 1873, the Countess of Dunmore was so shocked by the carving, that she ordered her gamekeeper to discharge his shotgun at the figure!!

The figure is more pagan than Christian. MacCulloch believed it to be Islamic.(Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland Vol III, pp165-6, 1819) Canon R.C. MacLeod of MacLeod suggests that the figure might be related to Isis or Anaitis. (MacLeods of Dunvegan, 1929.) Sir Walter Scott visited the church on 22nd August 1814, (Lockhart, Life of Sir Walter Scott, 1850 Edition, p281) and wrote in his diary. 'Upon this tower are certain pieces of scupture of a kind the last which one would expect on a building dedicated to religious purposes. Some have been lately fallen in a storm, but enough remains to astonish us at the grossness of the architect and the age.'

Certainly the figure appears most incongruous upon a sacred building. So blatant a fertility symbol – or craftsman's licentious joke – must have had its origins in an era before the 16th century. The largely Irish provenence of such carvings would suggest an Irish influence, at a time when worship was more pagan than Christian.

Such a pagan era existed in the Hebrides and Ireland when the Vikings swept in from Norway, and largely stamped out the

early Columban Church in the Isles, in the 9th century. The Vikings were their own fjord-kings for 150 years before Norway officially became Christian in 983. The figure would also appear to predate the Christian revival of the 11th Century, unless as occurred in the Reformation, this revival did not reach the Isles for another century. The figure might therefore be as early as the 9th century or as late as the 12th century. Such dates would still be in keeping with the dress of either of the canted figures on the west wall.

The centre of the NORTH WALL bears a panel in the string course, 18 inches by 16, which represents an animal's head, with square jaw, wide set eyes, and short thick horns over pointed ears. The bull is found as a royal animal in many parts of the world, and from the 15th century the bull's head has been the crest of the MacLeod's of Dunvegan, three of whom were buried at Rodel.

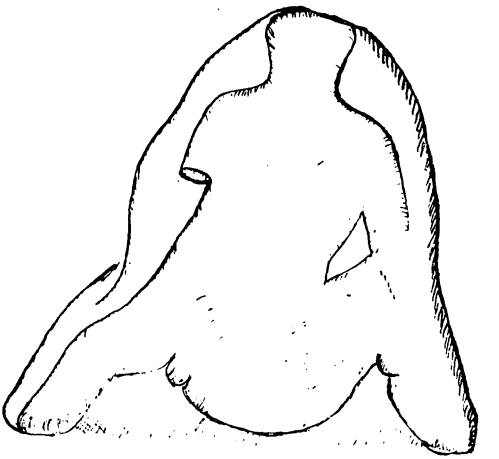
The EAST WALL bears two panels. The upper one, in the string course, 21 inches by 17, is much wasted. It appears to represent two men in a boat with a fishing net cast over one side. Below is a second panel, also much wasted, which shows a four-legged animal, probably a horse.

The SOUTH WALL bears the seventh panel in the centre of the face in the string course. The stone, about 20 inches square, is the female counter part of the male fertility symbol already described. The panel is much the best preserved of all the 'sheila-na-gigs', and must have been missed by the Countess' shotgun!!

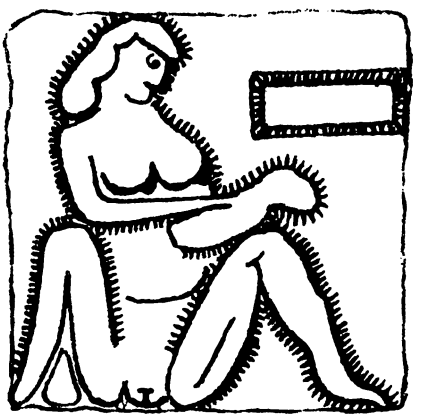
The figure represents a naked woman, sitting, somewhat inelegantly, upon her haunches. She has long hair and her head is turned down to the left, as though looking at the bundle she holds on her left knee, which might be a baby. Her right arm frames two well formed breasts. Her legs are splayed open and are drawn up under her elbows, revealing a swollen abdomen and her genetalia.

The top right hand corner of the panel contains a regular rectangular block of unknown significance.

9.



Carving at Iona
12" at base
15" high



SOUTH WALL
20" x 20"

The panel bears a very marked similarity in form to that of a figure on the outside wall of the Refectory of the Nunnery at Iona. The figure at Iona is much wasted and covered with lichen. It is carved on a roughly triangular piece of sandstone, twelve inches wide at the base and 15 inches high, and is inserted into the wall above a lancet window. The figure would appear to be looking to the right, with knees drawn up. Detail is poor, so that only the outline of the head, shoulders, left arm and legs is visible. The right arm appears to be broken below the shoulder. The figure might be that of a man, and appears to be the mirror image of the panel at Rodel.

The Nunnery at Iona was built, with the neighbouring Benedictine Abbey, some time between 1156 and 1203, but unlike the Abbey, was never later rebuilt or altered in any way. The panel, which appears to have been inserted into the building during construction, must be of a similar date or earlier, if, like the Rodel stones, it had pagan connections.

If the figures at Rodel are of the same type as that at Iona, then they could be no later than 1203, and might be considerably earlier. It seems unlikely that the seven 'sheila-na-gigs' at Rodel are all of the same date, since one at least has Christian connections. The seven panels are, however, all carved in sandstone, which must have been imported to Harris. The stone could therefore have been carved either in Harris, or elsewhere – Iona, Ireland, or wherever sandstone was available. Given the connection between the Islands and Ireland in Columban, Viking and later times, the presence of similar types of carvings in widely separated areas may not seem so unlikely.

My theory, is therefore, that at least three of the 'sheila-na-gigs' at Rodel, the two canted figures of males, and the female figure, are of pagan – and possibly Viking – workmanship, dating from the late 9th century, at the earliest, to the mid 12th century, at the latest. This theory is at least more feasable than that of MacCulloch, who connected the stones with Islam, or Canon MacLeod, who connected the stones with Egyptian gods.

If my theory about the 'sheila-na-gigs' is accepted, then it follows that there must have been a stone building at Rodel from the 9th or 12th centuries to contain these figures, so that they could survive at Rodel intact and *in situ* until the early 16th century, when there is historical proof that there was a stone building at Rodel.

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Some Trends in the Contemporary Swedish Novel

Anders Tyrberg

One of the most striking things about the critical discussion on the modern novel, in Britain and elsewhere, has been the