EXPLORING THE ARCHIVES:
AN ART HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
Jennifer Borland

My mother was horrified when she learned that I would be doing research on architectural sculpture throughout the countrysides of Ireland and England, with neither a companion nor prior experience driving on the left side of the road. She wasn’t worried that I was a woman traveling alone or anything like that; actually, she has never had much faith in my driving skills. As relieved as she was to hear that I had returned my rental car intact when the driving portion of the trip was complete, I was even more ecstatic—thrilled to have survived unscathed from 21 days of driving and proud of myself for completing this important part of my research. One of the most undervalued skills we acquire as scholars is that of learning how to function for sometimes long periods of time “on the road”—whether literally dealing with the issues like that of poor road signage or foreign gas pumps, or more metaphorically, of living out of a suitcase for days on end or navigating unfamiliar public transportation. Although all research abroad involves steep learning curves and the ability to negotiate all kinds of bureaucratic and linguistic dilemmas, my essay will deal specifically with some of the special challenges as well as pleasures involved with the wider range of archival materials used by art historians.

Certainly, we use the kind of archives with which historians or scholars of literature or religion are also familiar—national and local libraries—to view and read manuscripts of all kinds. Additionally, we art historians very often find ourselves in museums, not only to research but also often simply to see an object close up for the first time. In museums with medieval collections or those focused on material from the Middle Ages, such as the Musée National du Moyen Age in

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Paris (Cluny) or the Cloisters in New York, we look at liturgical objects, reliquaries, sarcophagi, altarpieces, devotional objects, recovered architectural sculpture, high crosses, and more. Often similar objects can also be found in the museums or treasuries associated with churches, monasteries, or other religious institutions (The Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy in Conques is an excellent example). Indeed, visiting architectural sites can be about much more that seeing the buildings; these sites also offer architectural sculpture (external and internal), stained glass, and even wall paintings.

Certainly a good number of these “archives” are well known, located in accessible places with good transportation, so that scholars or students can gain access to the institutions’ materials fairly easily. However, in the case of many resources that art historians use, the process for finding and reaching relevant sites, much less doing research, is far more challenging. Quite simply, many of these sources cannot be collected in a traditional archive (defined as one place where many documents are kept) without being destroyed. As a concrete case in point, the remainder of this essay will be devoted to research I carried out on Irish and English Sheela-na-gigs in November 2003. Although I am by no means the first person to work on this material, it still remains a difficult research project and therefore serves as a good example of the kinds of trials historians of medieval art encounter when investigating sources off the beaten path, in difficult locations and in places where very few people visit, let alone do research.

First, a brief word about Sheela-na-gigs. Sheela-na-gigs are grotesque sculptures of women displaying exaggerated genitalia, which appeared in a wide range of sites including churches, monasteries, castles, town walls and bridges across Ireland and England (Figs. 1-3). Many sculptures show evidence of being relocated from one kind of building to another; others no longer attached to buildings have often been found buried and now usually reside in
small, local historical museums. Although they were produced over several centuries and are difficult to date, Sheela-na-gigs seem to have first appeared in the 12th century. My primary motivation was to see a few of the 12th century examples I intended to discuss in my dissertation, but I also wanted to see as many of the sculptures as possible, to get a broad sense of the range of contexts in which they were situated.

**LOGISTICS**

There are two key sources in print that give a brief description, location, and sometimes a thumbnail image (often a drawing) of the approximately 140 Sheela-na-gigs currently known: Jørgen Andersen’s *The Witch on the Wall* (1977) and *The Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland and Britain* by Joanne McMahon and Jack Roberts (2001). The research represented by these works is significant; indeed it would be very difficult to do the kind of research I did in the amount of time I did it without the existence of these works (especially when planning from the U.S.). In addition, some information of varying reliability is now available online. Some sites and sculptures are better known than others, and one can find information to supplement Andersen and McMahon/Roberts in specific cases. From these books and some sage advice from friend and colleague Marian Bleeke, who did a similar trip a few years earlier for her dissertation on Sheela-na-gigs, I constructed an itinerary that included the primary sites and sculptures I knew I wanted to see, others that were relatively nearby, and other clusters of sites or museums in the regions I planned to visit.

It quickly became apparent that it was nearly impossible to get to the desired locations using public transportation, and so I resolved early on that this trip would be on the road and in a car. At that time, I had never driven a standard transmission, and so I opted to pay more for peace of mind by renting an automatic (since automatic cars are less common in Europe, you need to make special arrangements to ensure you’ve reserved one).
It is also important to know the insurance requirements of the rental company you are using—the policies seem to vary, and in Ireland, I had to pay an unexpected additional fee before they would give me the keys. Because I would be moving on to a new place each day, I did my best to have the details of my itinerary planned and the reservations made. I determined which sites or museums I would visit each day, where I would stay, what my driving route would be. This was important because I needed not only to plan the rest of the trip, but also in order to see sculptures held in local and county museums, I often needed to contact curators or keepers ahead of time to make appointments. I also added to my tentative itinerary other ancient and medieval places of interest that I would pass along the way, taking advantage of the broad art historical and archaeological opportunities provided to me by being off the beaten path.

Before I set out to Dublin to begin my research, I hit a good bookstore in London to get manageable but detailed driving maps of England and Ireland. The Ordnance Surveys of both Ireland and England produce excellent, detailed maps, and can be purchased online. They are not cheap, but they are very good and worth the expense. I felt it was important to look through what was available before deciding which ones to buy, so I waited until I was in the UK. I discovered there is such a thing as too much detail: maps displaying a very small area would require frequent refolding or page-turning during a day’s drive—difficult to do while driving the car. For Ireland, I found Ordnance Survey regional “holiday” maps (four produced for the entire country, of which I used three), at 1:250000 scale, which include virtually every castle, abbey, round tower, and dolmen, small town and one-lane dirt road that you might wish to find. For England, I used the combination of a AAA map of the entire country (acquired in the U.S.) and a Philip’s Motoring Atlas at a 1:190000 scale. In all, I was quite prepared—although this does not necessarily mean that I always found what I was looking for.
I had never driven on the left side of the road before, but it turned out to be less of a problem than anticipated. One settles in quite quickly: not only is the driver’s seat on the other side of the car, placing you in proper position, but also you are guided by the other cars on the road. Trust me, it makes sense. Far more challenging was the navigation of surprisingly narrow roads, especially in Ireland, which often required pulling off the road to simply let traffic from the other direction get by—that is, if there weren’t any stone walls running along the shoulder of the road! The traffic on many of these roads was extremely light, but that often meant they were paved in the loosest sense of the word. As both driver and navigator, it was a challenge to watch the road, signs, and map simultaneously—this resulted in numerous missed turns and many, many stops. When I did realize I’d made a wrong turn, I sometimes had to drive ten or twenty kilometers until I crossed another road or found enough space to make a U-turn. And that was when I was certain that I missed the turn!

And yet, being out in the countryside on those tiny, intermittently-identified roads, I knew I was seeing things that not a lot of people manage to see—and that was thrilling. I drove for twelve days in Ireland and eight in England, and managed to see twenty-six Sheelas in Ireland (thirteen in-situ) and eleven in England. I was often the only person present at a small parish church or castle ruin. Frequently located far from the nearest town, at times there was not another building, person, or main road for miles. Missed turns and backtracking, unreliable directions, difficult road conditions, stone walls, thick brush, and other impediments: the complicated journey I followed to find so many of these sites made their discovery especially exhilarating. And yet this exhilaration was sometimes tempered by other, more significant complications.

Mud, gates, livestock, and private property signs were among the many exciting encounters that denied access to the Sheelas I tried to see. I tried three times to find
Ballynahinch Castle, near Cashel. On privately owned farmland, the closest road came to a dead end without the castle even in sight. It was located north of a river, but the scenic walking path ran along the southern side only. I drove up a private road, climbed locked gates, and traversed two fields, but was still unable to see anything in the distance. Oh, and then there were the cows—many, many cows. I admit that cows seem like gentle animals—from a distance. Close up, they are large and seem unpredictable, as though they are contemplating the effort it might require to investigate your presence further (less frightful, but nevertheless still obstacles, were the many, many cow patties—a professional danger especially in muddy fields, where proper footwear is essential). There was a young, particularly active “girl” bucking and prancing, watching me with curiosity, and I did not have the fortitude to hang around to find out what she had in mind. Although I was assured by the tourism office that landholders must allow people to visit national landmarks on their property, just because it was physically possible did not necessarily mean that I was welcome.

In fact, the Sheela-na-gig on Clonmantagh Castle was inaccessible by virtue of a very large wall and “private property” signage (Fig. 4), although I was able to see the building from the road well enough to find the imbedded Sheela. Sometimes the sculpture turned out to be inside a building. In the case of Ratoo tower, the Sheela-na-gig is inside the tower wall, the door of which is at least eight feet off the ground (and lacking stairs). Indeed, a number of Sheela-na-gigs on English parish churches turned out to be inside the churches (a fact not always mentioned in my sources), and sometimes these were locked. Posted information outside these small churches suggested that contacting churchwardens or rectors ahead of time would have made access possible. Learning from my mistakes, if I had the chance to do it again I would attempt to contact some of these still-functioning churches. Finally, there were times when I just needed help from locals. I knew that the Stepaside Sheela-na-gig was in a golf course, but the directions I had were vague (“in the middle of an old laneway lined with trees about 100 meters
to the east of some ruins"), and I knew I was not wandering in the correct location. I asked a couple of meandering staff members if they knew it, and sure enough, they were happy to escort me to the "stone by the well."

**The Experience**

Why go to all this trouble? If you have catalogues with information on all of the sculptures, and decent pictures, why is it necessary to see the sculptures themselves? Just as literary scholars or historians might argue for the importance of reading complete and original versions of texts, art historians find it absolutely necessary to have first-hand knowledge of the works of art they discuss. However, in the case of material like the Sheela-na-gigs, it is even more imperative to visit the sites. Most existing sources talk about the sculptures as a genre or group, rarely granting much time to the site or specific context of any individual sculptures. In addition, the illustrations often show the sculpture but excise the context in which that sculpture exists—very rarely is a secondary photograph given documenting the wall where the sculpture appears or what the surrounding structure(s) might be. Because relatively few of these sculptures reside in their original locations (often very difficult to confirm), those found on buildings are especially important examples. This context is only accessible by visiting the sites themselves.

Let's take, for example, the so-called Sheela-na-gig on the "Nuns' Church" located at the monastic site of Clonmacnoise. The present complex itself is extensive, with the ruins of several buildings, two towers, a large cemetery, and a visitors' center containing many remarkable artifacts. The Nuns' Church, however, is five hundred meters away from the main monastery: down a long path, a 15-minute walk at least, and completely separated from the main cluster of buildings and activity. Most tourists visiting the site do not even realize the church is there, and I saw no other people along the stroll to it, in either direction. The short, broken wall around the church's ruins is sometimes infiltrated by visitors, but they are usually bovine in nature.
A single cow being much less unnerving than thirty, I greatly enjoyed the company of one noisy lady during the time I spent at the Nun’s Church (Fig. 5). Not only providing a good understanding of the church’s size and architecture, as well as the relationship of all the sculptures to one another, visiting this site made clear for me how unique and set apart (even ostracized) this building was from the larger context of the community. Such contextual understanding is difficult to attain with even the most detailed of descriptions, pictures, or maps, much less a single photograph of a sculpture.

Visiting a good number of Sheela-na-gigs gave me a tangible understanding of the range of architecture types and styles in which these sculptures appeared. Although not all the sites can be dated or even determined as original or secondary locations, we can still gain a decent view of the historical importance and trajectory of these sculptures, and see the variety of situations in which they functioned over the centuries. Furthermore, I am not only better able to understand how these images engaged with their architectural frames, but also how those buildings related to the landscape and surrounding environment. Such observations and experiences provide an idea of the broad visual and physical space in which medieval viewers might have engaged with Sheela-na-gigs. And in the rare cases where we are fairly certain of original context, the experience of visiting these sites provides a window onto how medieval people might have seen and physically related to these works of art. Something as simple as experiencing the scale of a building in relation to its users presents unique information that no other archive can offer.

So what is feminist about all this? Feminism has motivated scholars to examine bodily experience, and my interests, derived from feminist work, center on women’s bodies—my search for those bodies certainly has led to some interesting bodily experiences of my own. But in the end, the inquiry into archival work, with an attempt
to understand the motives and methods of colleagues outside our familiar disciplines, is what makes this essay particularly feminist. The interdisciplinary and collaborative interests of much feminist work is evident in forums like MFF, and I commend our General Editor for suggesting “the archive” as this issue’s topic.

Biggest lesson learned: next time I will definitely have a pair of wellies!

Stanford University

END NOTES

1 The most recent in-depth work on Sheela-na-gigs is a dissertation by Marian Blekeke, Situating Sheela-Na-Gigs: The Female Body and Social Significance in Romanesque Sculpture, Ph.D. Diss.; U. of Chicago, 2001. Local scholars including Eamonn P. Kelly and Stella Cherry have also done work that often focuses on one case study.


3 I had previously used <www.kemwel.com> for renting a car in France, which made it easy to rent a car in Europe from the U.S.

4 Exceptions include Blekeke’s dissertation and Catherine E. Karkov, “Sheela-Na-Gigs and Other UnrulyWomen: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland,” in From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and Its European Context, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, NJ: Index of Christian Art, Dept. of Art & Archaeology, and Princeton, 2001), as well as numerous focused articles by scholars in journals published by local or county archaeological and historical societies.

5 Karkov mentions that some scholars have questioned whether this sculpture really belongs in the corpus, which has been considered part of the tradition for various reasons, including its overt display.
FIGURES

Figure 1
Sheela-na-gig, Church of St. Mary and St. David; Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England

Figure 2
Sheela-na-gig, Church Oaksey; Wiltshire, England

Figure 3
Sheela-na-gig, Fethard Wall; Fethard, County Tipperary, Ireland
FIGURE 4
Clomantagh Castle; County Kilkenny, Ireland

FIGURE 5
The Nuns' Church; Clonmacnoise, County Offaly, Ireland