

THE STONE OF DESTINY

(also know as the “Stone of Scone” and the “Lia Fail”)

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[The following should not be considered an attempt at scholarly treatise, but rather the story of a story, told to stimulate interest in the subject and inform the reader of a kind of icon in the history of an ancient people and land.]

Since 1996, literally tens of thousands of people have visited Edinburgh Castle and passed by an exhibit consisting of a large chunk of unremarkable sandstone (1) which, I believe, very few understand, despite interpretive material available there. The same was true in years preceding when the same stone could be seen under a throne like chair in Westminster Abbey in London. For most visitors, the stone is merely a historical curiosity, with little or no significance in the present, and, well, the past is the past – of little or no relevance to people living today, or so many believe. For others, the stone is an object whose story is told in lore, legend and myth (2), and where the truth lies in all of this is a fascinating mystery whose end has yet to be told. Number yourself with these very few, and come along with me to explore this mystery. Let us try to unravel the fact from the fiction wherever we are able and let possibilities and probabilities appear and lead us where they may.

What is the “Stone of Destiny” and why should it be prominently displayed in so significant a place as Edinburgh Castle?

Sounds like a simple question – but it is not. Certainly no simple answer can be given. However, if we are committed to simplicity we must say that many believe this is the stone upon which most of the ancient kings of Scots (Dal Raita in particular) were crowned and upon which they accepted the fealty of their subjects, these ceremonies, for the most part, taking place at Scone in Perthshire. For these ancient kings, being seated upon this stone for their coronation was one of several ways in which their claim to the throne was legitimized, as they were crowned in the same tradition in which previous kings had been crowned. Over the centuries in which this tradition was followed, the stone came to be revered as something more than just a stone ceremonial seat. It took on a mythic tradition of its own which contributed to a reverence for the object beyond its own dimensions. It is from this very early period that many of the stories concerning its origin first evolved. Certainly such a historically significant object should be treated with respect and deserves to be set in a place of honor, such as Edinburgh Castle.

What are the stories concerning the origin of the Stone of Destiny?

Alright Bible scholars, have you read the story of “Jacob’s Pillow”? One theory of the origin of the Stone of Destiny is that it actually is the stone which Jacob used as his “pillow”. That story is told in Genesis 28:10-19. Jacob, while traveling, falls asleep (at a place later called Bethel) and has a vision in which God renews for Jacob, the covenant made with Abraham and Isaac. The stone which Jacob had set at his head before falling asleep and over which he later poured oil as a monument to this event, some believe became the Stone of Destiny. Yet another story suggests that the Stone of Destiny was among those things brought to Scotland by Scotia, an Egyptian princess, and from whom Scotland may get its name. Neither of these ideas have very much credibility. So what does literary evidence spiced with a bit of logic suggest? Most of the earliest physical descriptions of the Stone of Destiny refer to it as a very hard piece of black rock, possibly a meteorite. The ancients often looked upon meteorites as objects of special reverence, having come down from the heavens, and were sometimes believed to be gifts of the gods. Meteorites of the size that could be used as a seat were thought to be especially significant prizes. They were often carved for special use and were decorated with artistic design. It is easy to imagine just how difficult this carving was, due to the very hard nature of meteorite rock and considering the tools available. It must have taken great effort, substantial skill and long periods of time to accomplish. These difficulties would have added significantly to the special nature of the object and the uses for which it was destined. The story which I find most credible is one which is impossible, at least with the data we presently have, to validate. Yet, I believe, no better explanation currently exists. This story is that the Stone of Destiny was a combination portable altar and baptismal font used by Saint Columba during his evangelization of Scotland. (Columba: Born - 521. Arrived Iona - May, 563. Died - 597.) It is said that it was carried from place to place by a faithful horse, and that the top of the stone was concave making it possible to have holy water placed in it for baptisms. The stone was said to have carved “volutes” or handles to make it easier to carry. It is not impossible that Columba brought the stone from Ireland, and equally possible that he discovered it in Scotland and adapted it for his own use.

How did this stone come to be used as a coronation seat?

We simply do not know. If stories exist concerning how this happened (other than speculations of scholars and even wishful thinkers) they have eluded me. However, it is easy to imagine how an object of special reverence and possible use by such an important historical figure as Saint Columba, would suggest later use of the object in a new and still sacred ceremony - that of a coronation.

When was it first and last used as a coronation seat by Scots?

Again, we simply do not know when it was first used for this purpose, but it would likely have been just before or just after the death of Saint Columba (597). There are some who suggest it was used as a coronation seat in Ireland before being brought to Scotland. As Columba was of the Irish Royal Line, there is a degree of credibility in this assertion. There is some debate concerning the last use of the stone for the coronation of a strictly

Scottish king. Certainly it was used for the coronation of John Baliol (1292). Despite the fact that Edward I took what he may have been duped to believe was the stone to England in 1296, there is reason to believe that another stone, the real (true) stone, may have been used for the coronation of King Robert I, “The Bruce”, in 1306 (3). For many generations, the stone had been kept in trust by the Abbots at Scone, and was brought out only (insofar as we can know) for coronations upon what is still called the “moot hill” at Scone, now immediately adjacent to Lord Murray’s much more recent Scone Palace. This place is often open to the public and many visitors seat themselves on a “replica” which rests on the “moot hill” and imagine themselves transported to some past reality in which they are the focus of ceremony.

In the first paragraph of this article, you refer to the Stone of Destiny as a nondescript chunk of sandstone, and later you describe it as a carefully carved hard black stone, quite possibly a meteorite. How do you account for that?

If you visit Edinburgh Castle, the stone displayed there and labeled as the “Stone of Destiny” is indeed a rather nondescript chunk of sandstone with no carving or other particularly notable features save a Latin cross. We know that in 1296 and probably on several occasions after that, to the time of the coronation of King Robert I, Edward I (Plantagenet) of England, also known as “longshanks” and the “hammer of the Scots”, came to Scone looking for both the stone and for revenge upon Robert. Edward believed that Robert had betrayed him by challenging his authority as Lord Paramount of Scotland, and that Robert’s later (1306) coronation in the manner of the ancient Kings of Scots and upon the real “Stone of Destiny” was one of many proofs of that betrayal. Of course, Robert and his supporters saw it in another way. Although there is no way to provide absolutely credible proof of the following, logic suggests, and historical facts do not preclude, the following supposition. Edward arrives at Scone too late to capture Robert. In order to save face, he must make a show of discrediting Robert, and, later, his coronation. Edward orders the Abbot of Scone to turn over the Stone of Destiny so that he can bring this symbol of Scottish power and legitimacy to England and further validate his claim to be Lord Paramount of Scotland. The Abbot, anticipating such a move, hides the true Stone of Destiny and substitutes a recently quarried nondescript block of sandstone such as is common near Scone. Edward probably is not fooled, but again, in order to save face, accepts the fraudulent stone as real and proclaims it as such. The exact dates and order of these events are not precisely known; although the sandstone version was brought to London in 1296 (remember - the coronation of King Robert was in 1306). It is believed likely that Edward continued to look for the “true stone” on several occasions after 1296. This is a great story, is it not? It is one I would like to believe. However, circumstantial possibilities do not provide proof - and there is no documented proof to be had. One still must consider that ancient descriptions do not match the stone on view in Edinburgh Castle. That alone must make us wonder - and consider the very real possibility that it may be a fraud. According to the treaty of peace between England and Scotland in 1328, all documentary and other evidence of Scotland’s sovereignty held by the

English was ordered to be returned. The Scots did not ask for the return of the stone which Edward I appropriated. Did they know something of its true origin? Should the stone at Edinburgh Castle eventually be proved to be a fraud, it will still have some very real significance of its own having been, according to Nigel Tranter, “hallowed by the subsequent royal bottoms for 700 years.” (4)

If indeed the stone at Edinburgh Castle is a fraud, where is the true Stone of Destiny?

Again, we simply do not know. However, amid scholarly speculation, there is one story which I would like to believe, despite the fact that it is based only upon supposition and circumstantial possibility. It is the one told by Nigel Tranter in his novelized story of King Robert I, known as the “Bruce Trilogy”, part three, “The Price Of The King’s Peace”. (5) The following is my own very condensed version. After the Scots victory at Bannockburn and during the extraordinarily difficult search for a tenable peace with England, King Robert I had as first priority the unification of a very diverse and politically contentious nation. To accomplish this he built a kind of “cabinet” around himself, consisting of trusted allies – long time associates who had proved themselves trustworthy and wise in warfare, politics, religion and cultural geography. It is believed that just prior to his death, he laid charges (tasks) upon these associates that would serve to perpetuate the “Kings Peace”. Among those so charged was Angus Og MacDonald, Lord of the Isles, long time friend and confidant of the king. It is suggested that among the charges Robert laid upon Angus, was the task of taking charge of the true Stone of Destiny, keeping it safe and hidden till such time in the future as a person worthy of being King of Scots should appear. Further, it is suggested that Angus took the stone to some island fastness, sometimes identified as the Isle of Skye, where it remains hidden yet today. Some have even gone to the extent of suggesting the idea that there is currently a Clan Donald chieftain to whom the secret location of the stone has been passed down, and who will keep the secret of the location till another takes his place or a worthy new King of Scots is to be crowned. **What a great story this is.** It makes you really want to believe it is true. **Alas, it is only a story,** albeit a delicious one and of fairly recent origin.

Do these stories and speculations have any relevance for us today?

What do you think? There are a number of interest groups who may have a stake in one interpretation or another. In 1950, a small group of Scottish nationalists succeeded in kidnapping the stone (the one now in Edinburgh Castle) from Westminster Abbey and hiding it in Scotland (Arbroath Abbey) for some time till it was “recovered”. Archeologists would certainly like to explore any reasonably likely site of a newly “discovered” true stone location. Such a site is not currently known and may never have existed at all. We can only speculate as to what other interests there may be. In any case, the stone at Edinburgh Castle was last used for a coronation in 1953, that for Elizabeth II. At some future point it may be temporarily returned to London for the coronation of Prince Charles or other successor. As new information comes to light we may come to very different conclusions

about the stone than what we think we know today or at least what we might like to believe. Whatever those conclusions might be, The Stone Of Destiny is a powerful symbol of legitimacy and authority, engraved on the minds and in the imaginations of many Scots. In the mean time, enjoy the lore, legend and myth. Learn to distinguish between fact and fiction, the possible and the probable, and keep the “stories” alive through telling and retelling.

As the author of this article, what do you think is the “truth” about the authenticity of the “Stone Of Destiny”?

In most cases, the explanation which is the simplest and the most logical is probably true. Therefore I would have to say that the stone on exhibit at Edinburgh Castle is authentic, although it has undoubtedly undergone quite a number of “changes” since it was first put to use.

END NOTES:

(1) A photo of the stone in Edinburgh Castle alongside the Honours of Scotland may be found in the souvenir guidebook for Edinburgh Castle published by Historic Scotland, 1997 edition, page 47. The following internet address will provide several photos.

www.aboutscotland.co.uk/stone/destiny.html

(2) DEFINITIONS: *The American Heritage Dictionary*:

lore: Accumulated facts, traditions, or beliefs about a particular subject.

legend: An unverified story handed down from earlier times, especially one popularly believed to be historical.

myth: A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs or ideals of society.

(3) I must point out that no less a light than G.W.S. Barrow, author of what many consider to be the definitive biography of Robert Bruce, does not recognize the possibility of another “true stone”. However, he does point out the strength of the symbolism involved in a Scone coronation, probably in the abbey church rather than on the “moot hill” where the oaths of fealty were likely taken.

Barrow, G.W.S., *Robert Bruce And The Community Of The Realm Of Scotland* (Berkeley And Los Angeles, University Of California Press, 1965), pages 103, 212-213.

(4) Tranter, Nigel, *The Story Of Scotland* (Glasgow, Wilson Publishing Limited, 2000), page 77.

(5) Tranter, Nigel, *The Bruce Trilogy* (London, Coronet Books, 1996), part three, chapters 23 and 24.

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