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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC222

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Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – STONE OF DESTINY



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EDINBURGH CASTLE – STONE OF DESTINY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Stone of Destiny (or Stone of Scone) is one of the most precious and important icons of Scottish nationhood. It was Scotland's ancient inauguration stone on which monarchs were enthroned from time immemorial until John I (Balliol) in 1292. In 1296 it was forcibly removed from Scone Abbey by Edward I of England, taken south to London as a 'trophy of war' together with the royal regalia and records housed in Edinburgh Castle, housed in a specially-made gilded wooden Chair and placed in the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor, Westminster Abbey. Its repatriation to Scotland in 1328 was thwarted by the abbot of Westminster, despite Edward III's consent for its return. Thereafter, the Stone and Chair (now known as the Coronation Chair) came to be used in the coronation ceremonies of English monarchs, and from 1603 to the present time, of monarchs of Great Britain.

On Christmas Day 1950, the Stone was clandestinely removed from Westminster Abbey by four Scottish students and brought back to Scotland. Four months later, in April 1951, it reappeared at the west front of Arbroath Abbey and was returned to Westminster Abbey. It was formally returned to Scotland, with the royal seal of approval, in 1996, after an enforced absence of 700 years, and placed on public display in the Crown Room in Edinburgh Castle. It will continue to be used in future coronation ceremonies in Westminster Abbey.

The Stone is formed of a pinkish-buff sandstone probably originating in the neighbourhood of Scone. The block measures approximately 0.670m x 0.420m x 0.265m (26in. x 16½in x 10in). In each end face is an iron staple carrying a figure-of-eight link and an iron ring. It is a complex object, displaying on its six surfaces evidence for several layers of action. There can be few, if any, medieval objects to have survived that demonstrate more than three separate actions, but the Stone retains evidence for as many as eight. This fact in itself strengthens the case for the Stone's authenticity. It is simply too complex to have been produced in a hurry, as the 'conspiracy theorists' would have us believe happened in 1296 (or indeed again in 1950/51).

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

AD 906: Earliest mention of the moot-hill at Scone – 'the Hill of Faith near the royal monastery of Scone' – in a Latin text referred to as *The Chronicle of the Kings of Alba*.

c. 11th century: Earliest probable reference to the Stone of Destiny – 'the most powerful eastern stone' – in an Irish narrative poem, 'The Birth of Áedán mac Gabráin', which tells how the king of Leinster, Eochu, is driven into exile in Scotland (Alba).

c. 1120: Alexander I founds an Augustinian abbey at Scone, the first of the order in Scotland, on what may have been a site occupied by an earlier monastic community.

1249: Alexander III is enthroned at Scone Abbey. The account of the ceremony in *Gesta Annalia*, written c. 1285 and included in John of Fordun's *Chronicle*, is our first historical reference to the Stone of Destiny (simply called 'the stone'), which 'is reverently kept in that same monastery for the consecration of the kings of Alba.'

1292: John I (Balliol) is enthroned at Scone Abbey, presumably on the Stone of Destiny.

1296: During his invasion, Edward I has the Stone of Destiny removed from Scone Abbey and taken south to London, possibly via **Edinburgh Castle**, from where other royal regalia and records are also removed.

1297: Edward I presents the Stone of Destiny to the abbey of Westminster, and orders that a special chair be made to hold it. His initial plan, to have the Stone encased in an expensive bronze chair, is soon abandoned (most probably for financial reasons) in favour of one of richly gilded wood.

1300: The chair, made by Walter 'the Painter' of Durham, is installed in the Shrine of Edward the Confessor. This chair is now known as the Coronation Chair.

1308: Edward II is the first king crowned in England after the arrival of the Stone of Destiny, but there is no evidence that the Stone plays any role in the ceremony. On the contrary, it would seem that the Coronation Chair is at that date simply a 'triumphal chair' in St Edward's Shrine.

1324: Edward II is minded to return the Stone of Destiny to the Scots, during peace negotiations at York.

1328: The abbot of Westminster, William of Curtlington, successfully thwarts a plan to return the Stone of Destiny (recorded as being 'chained to the floor under the royal throne') to Scotland under the terms of the Treaty of Northampton. The re-gilding of the Coronation Chair may date from this time, an action by the abbot to celebrate the retention of the 'relic' in St Edward's Shrine.

1399: Henry IV is crowned king of England, the first coronation at which the Stone of Destiny is recorded as forming part of the enthronement ritual (it is set up on the pulpitum in the crossing).

1603 (25 July): James VI is crowned James I of England in Westminster Abbey, the first ruler of 'Great Britain' to be enthroned on the Stone of Destiny.

1651 (1 Jan): Charles II is crowned King of Scots on the Moot Hill at Scone – the first occasion the Moot Hill itself is mentioned as the actual place of inauguration.

1914: Suffragists explode a bomb under the Coronation Chair. What damage, if any, this does to the Stone of Destiny is unclear.

1924: A Parliamentary Bill initiated by the Labour MP David Kirkwood to have the Stone of Destiny officially returned to Scotland fails to make it beyond the First

Reading because the Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, a Scot himself, declares he has other legislative priorities.

1936: Edward VIII abdicates before he is able to be crowned king on the Stone of Destiny – the only British sovereign since James VI and I in 1603 not to be so enthroned.

1950 (Christmas Day): The Stone of Destiny is clandestinely removed from the Coronation Chair and Westminster Abbey by four Scottish students. During the operation the Stone breaks, and is subsequently secretly repaired by Councillor Robert 'Bertie' Gray, a Glasgow stonemason.

1951 (11 April): The Stone of Destiny turns up at the west door of Arbroath Abbey.

1952: The Stone of Destiny is placed back in the Coronation Chair.

1953: The present sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, is crowned in Westminster Abbey enthroned on the Stone of Destiny.

1976: A second attempt to remove the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey is thwarted before the Stone can be taken out of the building. As a protection against future fraud (doubt having been cast on the authenticity of the stone returned from Scotland in 1951), the Westminster authorities secretly embed half a slip of paper in the Stone, retaining the other half on a file in the Abbey's archives.

1996 (July): The Prime Minister, John Major, announces to the House of Commons that Her Majesty the Queen has graciously consented to the Stone of Destiny being returned to Scotland, on condition that it 'be taken to Westminster Abbey to play its traditional role in the coronation ceremonies of future sovereigns of the United Kingdom'.

1996 (15 Nov): The Stone of Destiny is carried across the River Tweed at Coldstream and back into Scotland.

1996 (30 Nov): Following a National Service in St Giles' Cathedral, the Stone of Destiny is ceremoniously placed in Edinburgh Castle, in the Crown Room beside the ancient Honours of Scotland, the nation's Crown Jewels.

Archaeological Overview

N/A

Architectural/Artistic Overview

The Stone of Destiny, it has to be owned, is not attractive in itself. It is formed of a pinkish-buff sandstone probably originating in the neighbourhood of Scone. The block measures approximately 0.670m x 0.420m x 0.265m (26in. x 16½in x 10in). In each end face is an iron staple carrying a figure-of-eight link and an iron ring.

The Stone is a complex object, displaying on its surface evidence for several layers of action. Firstly, the sides are roughly dressed, though the tooling provides no indication of date. There appear to be three separate actions here. One corner of the rectangle is well cut, but thereafter the outline is only pecked out. At one

end, there are two lines, about 50mm apart; the rectangle was extended, or reduced (the former seems the more likely). Next the iron rings were added and scoops cut to receive them on the top of the Stone: each 'scoop' is cut into opposed ends of the rectangle. The surface was then smoothed: the edges of the cuts in the surface of the Stone demonstrate that the smoothing was later. Also on the surface of the Stone are two sets of marks that have been interpreted as crosses, but these are different in type and manner of execution. Both ends of the Stone were cut back and the Stone was then subjected to further 'weathering'. Finally, the iron staples holding the rings were thinned.

There can be few, if any, medieval objects to have survived that demonstrate more than three separate actions, but the Stone retains evidence for as many as eight. This fact in itself strengthens the case for the Stone's authenticity. It is simply too complex to have been produced in a hurry, as the 'conspiracy theorists' would have us believe happened either at Scone Abbey in 1296, or in Glasgow in 1951 (or indeed both!). It is interesting, for example, to compare the Stone of Destiny with the two acknowledged replicas – at Scone Palace and Arbroath Abbey – both of which are most simple in comparison. Nor is it likely that there would have been such a complex object serving another purpose available to be used to fool Edward I when he had it removed from Scone as a 'trophy of war'.

The Stone of Destiny's importance, therefore, transcends how it looks. It is what it undoubtedly represents: the stone on which kings of Scots, then kings and queens of England, and subsequently sovereigns of Great Britain, have been, and will continue to be, enthroned.

Social Overview

The Stone of Destiny, by dint of its use in the coronations of sovereigns of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is a national icon for the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a whole.

The Stone of Destiny is a priceless national icon for Scots particularly, chiefly because it is representative of the ancient kingdom of Scotland prior to the prolonged and bloody Wars of Independence with England that began in 1296, when the Stone was removed (some would say stolen) by Edward I of England, 'Hammer of the Scots'.

The Stone of Destiny, since its unauthorised removal from Westminster in 1950, has become a talisman for Scottish nationhood, almost entirely eclipsing any ritual or symbolic importance it previously had.

Spiritual Overview

Until 1296, the Stone of Destiny was central to the inauguration of kings of Scots, though quite how long before then the Stone was used in the ceremony is far from clear. It may well have been used in ceremonies of a non- or quasi-Christian nature, prior to its first known use in 1249 at the inauguration of Alexander III.

Following its removal from Scotland to London in 1296, the Stone was used in the enthronement ceremony of a new English sovereign, though quite when this tradition began is likewise unclear. The Stone of Destiny and Coronation Chair have been inextricably linked ever since.

Following the accession in 1603 of James VI of Scotland as James I of England also, the Stone of Destiny has continued in use at coronation ceremonies. It will continue to be used in the coronation ceremonies of future sovereigns of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, notwithstanding its safekeeping in Edinburgh Castle.

Aesthetic Overview

The Stone of Destiny in itself is by no means attractive; indeed it was probably never, in its history as a stone of inauguration, intended to be seen in its entirety, but merely glimpsed at. Its current display in all its 'glory' somehow demeans its appearance, and therefore its importance.

The Stone of Destiny is currently displayed in the Crown Room of Edinburgh Castle, in a large display case together with the Honours of Scotland: the Crown, Sceptre and Sword. The latter, glistening with gold and sparkling with jewels, are in marked contrast to the pinkish-buff, lumpen Stone of Destiny beside them. Neither the Stone nor the Honours is enhanced by the presence of the other.

The Crown Room itself is dimly lit and intimate, providing a suitably enigmatic environment for the display of the Stone.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

When was the stone first cut out of bedrock, and for what purpose?

When was the Stone of Destiny first used in a royal inauguration?

When was the Moot Hill at Scone first used in the inauguration ceremony, if ever?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

To be assessed.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Some other stone inauguration seats: Bishop's Chair, Hexham Abbey; Coronation Chair of the dukes of Carinthia, Zollfeld, Austria; Coronation Stone, Kingston upon Thames; Holy Roman Emperors' Throne, Aachen Cathedral, Germany; The Lia Fáil, Tara, Co. Meath, Ireland

Scottish sites other than Scone linked to royal(?) inaugurations: **Clickhimin Broch**, Lerwick, Shetland; **Dunadd Fort**, Argyll; Finlaggan, Islay, Argyll; Southend, Argyll; South Ronaldsay, Orkney

Keywords

sandstone; iron rings; Scone; inauguration; enthronement; crowning; Coronation Chair; Edward I

Selected bibliography

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