

The Stone of Scone

At first sight, it is difficult to understand why this plain and rather unremarkable block of sandstone has fired the passion that it has over the past 700 years. Yet the power and importance of the Stone (also known as the Stone of Scone) far outstrips its physical appearance. It is arguably the greatest symbol and touchstone of Scottish nationhood and as such, has been a very potent icon for more than a thousand years.

Scone is a name with a great deal of resonance in Scottish history. It was an important Pictish centre for centuries. The Stone of Scone, also known as the Stone of Destiny, is seen as of huge significance to Scotland's nationhood. It was the seat on which generations of Kings of Scotland, and Kings of Dalriada before them, were crowned.

The stone, weighing 336 pounds (152 kg), is a rectangular block of pale yellow sandstone (almost certainly of Scottish origin) measuring 26 inches (66 cm) by 16 inches (41 cm) by 11 inches (28 cm). A Latin cross is its only decoration. Attached to the stone in ancient times was allegedly a piece of metal with a prophecy that Sir Walter Scott translated as

Unless the fates be faulty grown
And prophet's voice be vain
Where'er is found this sacred stone
The Scottish race shall reign.

Legends

Every story has a beginning. But this story may have several. And it may have several endings. The "Stone of Destiny", the stone placed inside the coronation chair upon which British monarchs are crowned, could be as recent as five decades old, seven centuries, or three if not more millennia.

Like much of what is now 'uniquely Scottish', the origins of the Stone have been lost to history and typically, there are legends aplenty concerning it. Prior to 1296, there is no written evidence of the Stone, so there are many theories as to its origins. So there are many stories surrounding the origins of the ancient seat of Scotland's kings - the Stone of Destiny. The origin of this famous Stone is really shrouded in myths. The legend of the Stone of Destiny goes back to the foundation myth of Scotland.

According to the legend, Scotland is named after an Egyptian princess, Scota, who was exiled from Egypt in about 1400BC and whose descendents settled in north west Spain, then in Ireland. There they became known as the Scoti before migrating to what is now Argyll in Western Scotland and establishing the Dark Age kingdom of Dalriada. Among the possessions Scota took from Egypt was a 152kg sandstone block which had been used as a pillow by Jacob when he had the dream reported in Genesis about Jacob's Ladder.

In origin, the Stone is believed to have been "Jacob's Pillow", referring to the Biblical story in which Jacob falls asleep on a stone and has a dream in which he sees angels descend and ascend to Heaven. It is during this mystical appearance that he utters the phrase: "How terrible is this place! This is none other than the house of the Lord and this is the gate of heaven." The tradition states that the stone Jacob used as a pillow at Bethel was then set up as a pillar and anointed with oil and that later, it

became the pedestal of the Ark in the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. But that is just one strand of the legend.

From the Holy Land it purportedly traveled to Egypt, Sicily, and Spain and reached Ireland about 700 BC to be set upon the hills of Tara, where the ancient kings of Ireland were crowned. Thence it was taken by the Celtic Scots who invaded and occupied Scotland. About ad 840 it was taken by Kenneth MacAlpin to the village of Scone.

Another legend associates it with Saint Columba, who might have brought it as a portable altar from Ireland where Saint Patrick himself blessed this rock for use in crowning the kings of the emerald isle. In AD 574, the Stone was used as a coronation chair when Columba anointed and crowned Aedan King of Dalriada and became known as the Stone of Destiny.

The Stone of Destiny was kept by the monks of Iona, the traditional headquarters of the Scottish Celtic church, until Viking raiding caused them to move to the mainland, first to Dunkeld, Atholl, and then to Scone. Here it continued to be used in coronations, as a symbol of Scottish Kingship. "Stone of Destiny" was also known as the "Coronation Stone," the "Stone of Scone," the "Liath Fàil," "Jacob's Pillow," "Jacob's Pillar" and the "Tanist Stone".

Many scientists believe that the stone, despite all the high-flying mythical background, probably came from a local area considering the type of stone. It most likely came from the times of the Dal Riata kings of Scotland and Ireland (about 500 AD) and was possibly brought to Scotland from Ireland to coronate early Scots kings in Dunadd, and was later moved from Highways and byways in the Central Highlands.

Geologists declare this Stone to be a reddish sandstone bearing a close resemblance to the stones of the doorway of Dunstaffnage Castle. No similar stratum has been found in Egypt, nor is it at all like the surrounding rocks at Tara's Hill, or on St. Columba's Isle.

History

At that time, Scotland was occupied by five different peoples. The Picts lived in the large area north of the rivers Forth and Clyde. The Scots, from Ireland, made their home in Argyll in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Angles held Lothian, the ancient Britons had retreated to Strathclyde, and, in the ninth century, the invading Norsemen settled in Orkney, Shetland, Caithness, Sutherland and the Western Isles. The unification of these different peoples began in the mid-ninth century, when Kenneth MacAlpin became king of both Picts and Scots.

At the time much of north and eastern Scotland was ruled by the Picts. After they suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the Vikings in 839, Kenneth pressed his own claim through his mother's side to add the crown of the Picts to the crown of the Scots he already held. Scone had been an important Pictish centre for centuries, and the Picts and the Scots met here to discuss the Pictish succession in 843. Accounts and interpretations of what then happened differ widely, but the story goes that after much alcohol had flowed, Kenneth's Scots turned on their Pictish hosts and killed them, and Kenneth was subsequently crowned King of the Picts and the Scots at Scone, using the Stone of Destiny to legitimise the coronation.

It is certainly possible that the Stone may have been used in the coronation ceremonies of the Irish Kingdom of Dalriada from roughly 400 AD until 850 AD, when Kenneth I or Kenneth Mac Alpin, the 36th and the last King of the Scots of Dalriada King of Dalriada, who lived from 810 to 858,

moved his capital of his expanding empire from Ireland to Scone (pronounced "scoon") in what is now Perthshire, Scotland. The Stone was also moved several times, and used on the remote, western island of Iona, then in Dunadd, in Dunstaffnage and finally in Scone for the installation of Dalriadic monarchs.

Scone, and what became known as the Stone of Scone, became key features in the coronation of many succeeding Kings of Alba and later of Scotland, famous and infamous (and sometimes both like MacBeth). As William Shakespeare put it in "Macbeth": "So, thanks to all at once, and to each one, Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone." The Stone was a highly visible (and hard to misplace) symbol of Scottish power.

John Balliol was the last Scottish King to be crowned on the stone of destiny, after his disgraceful submission and loss of his crown in 1296, Robert Bruce asked Edward to make him king, as he was next in succession. But Edward turned to him sharply and said "Do you think I have nothing to do but to conquer kingdoms for you?" To show that Scotland was no longer to be an independent kingdom, Edward removed the Stone of Destiny, on which the Scottish kings were crowned, be taken to England, and all the papers and documents that might prove Scotland's independence. Last, he made those who had land in Scotland sign their names in a list to show that they recognised him as their king. If they refused their lands were confiscated. This list of names is called "The Ragman's Roll" and still exists. It has about 2000 names, including Robert Bruce. Edward thought he had subdued Scotland. But he was mistaken, for he had not been back in England long when William Wallace stepped into the arena to fight for Scotland.

Four years later, in 1296, the English monarch, Edward I (infamous as the "hammer of the Scots," and nemesis of Scottish national hero William Wallace) invaded Scotland and stripped Scotland of all emblems of nationhood. Among the booty that Edward's army removed was the legendary Stone, which the English king apparently regarded as an important symbol of Scottish sovereignty.

Edward took a personal interest in relics and symbols of nationhood. When he conquered Wales in 1282-3 Edward had the 'crown of King Arthur' and other Welsh relics and treasures sent to Westminster in London.

When Edward conquered the Scots in 1296, he took Scotland's holiest relic - the Black Rood - a piece of the True Cross that had belonged to Saint Margaret. His army ransacked Scone Abbey, recovered the Stone and carried it to England.

Scottish Monarchs, and those seeking to become Scottish Monarchs, continued to come to Scone to be crowned, including Robert the Bruce in 1306, James IV in 1488 and Charles II in 1651, before his defeat at the battle of Worcester and subsequent exile. James Francis Edward Stuart, the "The Old Pretender", came to Scone during the Jacobite uprising in 1716 in the hope of being crowned King of Scotland, but had to flee in on hearing of Government troops in the area. His son, Bonnie Prince Charlie or "The Young Pretender", also visited during the 1745 Jacobite uprising.

After Edward I of England and took the Stone of Destiny to a new home in Westminster Abbey in 1296, it was to be housed in a specially-built coronation chair for the next 700 years, on which Kings and Queens of England, then of Britain, were crowned.

King Edward's Chair

King Edward's Chair, sometimes known as St Edward's Chair or The Coronation Chair, is the throne on which the British monarch sits for the coronation. It was commissioned in 1296 by King Edward I and was specifically designed to house the Stone to contain the coronation stone of Scotland — known as the Stone of Scone — which he had captured from the Scots who had kept it at Scone

Abbey. The chair was named after Edward's namesake, Edward the Confessor, England's only canonized king and was kept in his shrine of St Edward's Chapel at Westminster Abbey.

Thus, the Stone of Destiny became symbolic of England's destiny to rule over Scotland. All British sovereigns since 1308 have been seated in St. Edward's Chair at the moment of their coronations, with the exception of Queen Mary I (whose coronation chair was given to her by the Pope) and Mary II (who was crowned on a copy of the chair). The last occasion was the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953.

The high backed gothic style arm chair was carved in 1297 from oak by a carpenter known as Master Walter, who was paid the considerable sum of 100 shillings for his work. Four gilded lions act as legs to the chair; these are a comparatively modern restoration executed in 1727. They replaced similar lions which were added in the 16th century. Under the seat of the chair is a platform and cavity which until 1996 contained the Stone of Scone; this has now been returned to Scotland with the provision that it be returned to the chair on the occasion of the next coronation.

The chair may once have been richly painted and gilded — it is thought it once had an image of Edward the Confessor painted on its back. Today, however, its appearance is of aged and bare wood, and during its history many early tourists, pilgrims, and choir boys in the Abbey appear to have carved their initials and other graffiti onto the chair in the 18th and 19th centuries. The carved finials at the back of the chair have also been partially sawn away. In addition the chair was damaged in 1914 when it was the object of a bomb attack, thought to have been instigated by the suffragettes.

Over the eight centuries of its existence it has been only thrice removed from Westminster Abbey. The first time was for the ceremony in Westminster Hall when Oliver Cromwell was inducted as Lord Protector of England, and the second during World War II when it was evacuated to Gloucester Cathedral for the duration of the war. The third was on Christmas Day 1950, when a group of four Scottish students (Ian Hamilton, Gavin Vernon, Kay Matheson, and Alan Stuart) took the Stone from Westminster Abbey for return to Scotland.

Today it is highly protected, and leaves its secure resting place only when it is carried into the theatre of coronation near the High Altar of the Abbey for the rare occurrence of a coronation.

Suffragette attack

On 11 June 1914, a lady's handbag, containing an explosive device, was hung on the back of King Edward's Chair. It exploded at around 5:50 pm, blowing off part of the carved work at the back of the chair. Although no individual was charged with carrying out the attack, suffragettes were blamed because of the passage of the recent Cat and Mouse Act. The initial police report indicated that the damage to the chair was minor, but did not say whether there was any damage to the stone.

Removal and damage

On Christmas Day 1950, a group of four Scottish students (Ian Hamilton, Gavin Vernon, Kay Matheson, and Alan Stuart) took the Stone from Westminster Abbey for return to Scotland. In the process of removing it from the Abbey the stone broke into two pieces. After hiding the greater part of the stone with travellers in Kent for a few days, they risked the road blocks on the border and returned to Scotland with this piece, which they had hidden in the back of a borrowed car, along with a new accomplice John Josselyn. The smaller piece was similarly brought north a little while later. This journey involved a break in Leeds, where a group of sympathetic students and graduates took the fragment to Ilkley Moor for an overnight stay, accompanied by renditions of "On Ilkka Moor Baht 'at". The Stone was then passed to a senior Glasgow politician who arranged for it to be

professionally repaired by Glasgow stonemason Robert Gray. It was returned to a repaired Coronation Chair in good time for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

Return to Scotland

On St Andrews Day (patron Saint of Scotland), 30th November 1996, Scotland's coronation stone, the Stone of Destiny, was installed in Edinburgh Castle. About 10,000 people lined the Royal Mile to watch the procession of dignitaries and troops escort the stone from Holyrood Palace to the castle. In a service at St Giles cathedral the Church of Scotland Moderator, the Right Reverend John MacIndoe, formally accepted the stone's return saying it would "strengthen the proud distinctiveness of the people of Scotland".

Once inside the castle the stone was laid on an oak table before the grand fireplace of the early 16th century Great Hall. The Scottish Secretary of State Michael Forsyth ceremoniously received it from Prince Andrew, who was representing the Queen. Nowadays the Stone can be seen along with the crown jewels of Scotland in the Crown Room.

Outside the castle, under clear blue skies, a twenty-one gun salute was fired from the Half-Moon Battery, echoed by HMS Newcastle lying anchored off Leith harbour in the Firth of Forth. When asked of an official why the Scottish flag, (St Andrews Cross) was not flying at the highest point. He replied that because Prince Andrew, (second son of the Queen) was inside, the flag of the United Kingdom, the Union Jack, had to fly on top.

It is arguably the greatest symbol and touchstone of Scottish nationhood and as such, has been a very potent icon for more than a thousand years. The Highland Heritage Society web site says, "Today, the stone is still the greatest Scottish icon of all times." In the event of a future coronation of a British monarch, the Stone of Destiny is to be temporarily replaced under the Coronation Throne at Westminster Abbey.

Rumours

Rumours persist about the Stone of Destiny. Is the stone that rests securely in Edinburgh Castle the real Stone of Destiny? After so many centuries, it is impossible to know.

According to one legend, the Stone never left Ireland at all. A tale suggests that the original Stone of Destiny was white marble, carved with decorative figures - in no way resembling the plain slab of yellow sandstone with a single Latin cross carved on it that was set beneath the throne in Westminster Abbey for these past seven centuries.

To make matters more confusing, there may have been several copies made down through the ages!

Some doubt exists over the stone captured by Edward I. Some say that monks at Scone Abbey switched the stone and that what Edward I took to England was not the real Stone of Destiny. It is entirely possible that some canny monks at Scone Palace hid the real stone in the River Tay or buried it on Dunsinane Hill, and that the English troops were fooled into taking a substitute. Some proponents of the theory claim that historic descriptions of the stone do not match the present stone. If the monks did hide the stone, they hid it well. The story claims that Edward actually took the rough rock used to hold down the cover of the cess-pit at Scone Castle, and that subsequent English monarchs have ceremoniously seated themselves on this medieval plumbing accessory for their coronations ever since 1308!

Some claim that those who stole the stone on Christmas Day 1950 switched the stone, and that what was returned on April 1951 was not the original: which was instead hidden in a peat bank in Wester Ross. About four months later the rock was recovered from the Arbroath Abbey, where it had been deposited by the stone-nappers.

Or was it? Rumours have always persisted that there was plenty of time for the students to fashion a replica to be “returned” to Westminster, while the original Stone was spirited north to a secret location in Scotland. Only the thieves would know for sure.

One seemingly far-fetched theory even suggested that the actual stone was hiding in plain sight for decades—that the purported replica on public display at Scone Palace was in fact the real Stone of Destiny!

Thankfully, extensive scientific tests and research has concluded that the stone which now sits in Edinburgh Castle is in fact the genuine article - finally putting to rest the glut of conspiracy theories as to its whereabouts.

The Stone, whether real or merely symbolic, continues to play a key role in a tradition of sacred kingship, which in the 21st century has become extremely rare.

List of resources:

1. <http://www.scone-palace.net>
2. <http://images.yandex.ru>
3. <http://www.scone-palace.co.uk>
4. <http://www.expedia.com>
5. <http://wikimapia.org>
6. <http://www.insiders-scotland-guide.com>
7. <http://www.greatscotland.co.uk>
8. <http://www.tourist-information-uk.com>
9. <http://www.perthshire.co.uk>
10. <http://www.bbc.co.uk>
11. <http://britishcastle.co.uk>
12. <http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk>
13. <http://www.gateway-to-the-scottish-highlands.com>
14. <http://www.theheritagetrail.co.uk>