

THE STONE OF SCONE: FACT OR FICTION?

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THE coronation of a British Monarch always gives a certain temporary prominence to a slab of sandstone fitted into an oak chair which stands in Westminster Abbey. It is the "Stone of Scone", since the days of Edward the Ist the coronation seat of every English Monarch. Yet the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, this year has brought the Stone into particular prominence for the Scottish Nationalists not only object to her being styled Elizabeth the II, but claim that the Stone should be returned to Scotland.

It was partly to enforce their demands that a small group of Scottish Nationalists removed the Stone from the Abbey on Christmas morning of 1950. Throughout the English speaking world there was a considerable amount of excitement over this turn of events. The English police dragged the Serpentine, set up guards on all roads leading to Scotland and made every effort to catch the culprits, but all to no avail. That Scottish nationalists had done the deed was very obvious for they informed the government that they had taken the Stone in the belief that by right, it belonged to Scotland. Such a point of view, however, was rejected by Mr. Churchill, so that when the Stone was placed in the Sanctuary of Arbroath it was hustled back to London, despite the objections from many Scottish bodies, including the Established Church. And yet one cannot but feel that the Scots need not be overly anxious, nor the English overly proud, for in all probability the present "Stone" is only a fake, anyhow. It is very doubtful that Edward I ever laid hands on the true Palladium of Scotland.

In order to understand the evidence for this statement one must first of all obtain some idea of the physical characteristics of the present stone. It is nothing to look at, measuring 26 by 16 by 11 inches and weighing around 400 lbs. It has a large crack in it, and the report is that the latest removal caused it to break. It is Old Red Sandstone of a dark reddish or purplish colour, having upon it chisel marks which have not been too carefully studied, to determine their character and date.¹ Thus it is not the Stone's value nor its beauty which makes it so valuable. The real cause of its interest is the tradition and history which surround it.

1. Dean A. P. Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey*, (London, 1868) p. 564.

According to legend, this piece of sandstone is that which Jacob used for his pillow near Bethel. (Gen.28,11.) In Irish traditions, the Tuatha de Dannan, who were Greeks forced to leave their country on account of Syrian attacks, transported the stone to Ireland.² The Scots, however, hold that the stone was brought by Jacob's descendents to Egypt where it became the property of the country's rulers. At the time of Moses, Gathelus son of the King of Athens came to Egypt where he married Scota, Pharaoh's daughter. On account of their fear of Moses, the couple then forsook Egypt, taking the stone with them to Spain, in which country they ruled over the city of Brigantia.

After some years, probably centuries, a descendent Simon Brek, son of Milo, migrated to Ireland. From this point on there is no real unanimity in the description of what happened. One tradition says that Simon Brek pulled the stone up with his anchor. One cannot, however, be too exact in such matters. The important thing was that the *Lias Fail*, as it was called, was set up on the Hill of Tara. There, when a true chief was crowned the stone roared, but if the man who occupied the stone was not truly the successor of the late chief, it remained silent. It was this stone, according to the Scots, which was brought over by Fergus MacErc, first King of Scots, to Iona, and later to Dunstaffnage Castle on Loch Etive. Thence it was removed by Kenneth II around 850, to Scone where he erected a church for its safe keeping.³

Although one may smile at these stories, attempts have been made to rationalize the historical element out of the mythological. One writer in 1856 thought that perhaps some devout Christian had obtained possession of a stone from the Temple of Jerusalem. It may even have been the reputed pillow of Jacob. This he had kept safely, and it had eventually found its way to Ireland and then to Scotland.⁴ Such an interpretation is inclined to be a little bit fanciful. A little more down to earth in interpretation is W. F. Skene in his *Celtic Scotland*. He expresses the belief that since the Irish missionaries often carried around with them slabs of stone which they used as altars, such may be the origin of the Stone of Scone.⁵ It was regarded as a wonder-working relic. Joseph Robertson, one

2. G. Keating, *The History of Ireland* D. Comyn ed. (London 1902), I, 205ff.

3. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Andrew of Wyntoun, *The Orygynale Cronykis of Scotland*. D. Laong ed. (Edinburgh, 1879), III, 214; Keating, *op. cit.*, I, 205.

4. J. Hunter, "King Edward's spoiliations in Scotland," *The Archaeological Journal* (London, 1856), XII, p. 254.

5. (Edinburgh, 1876) I, p. 282.

of the most careful of the nineteenth century Scottish historians, explained to Dean Stanley that there were grounds for believing it to be the stone pillow of St. Columba referred to in Adamnan's life of the saint. He pointed out that a considerable number of relics of Columba were brought by Kenneth II from Iona to Scone, and this could well be one of them. Wyntoun actually states that that was the course of its travels.⁶ If the block of sandstone in Westminster is the actual Stone of Scone, the last mentioned theory is probably the best, but even here as we shall see there are certain dubious points.

So much for legend. What does history have to say? Although crowned in the latter half of the eleventh century, Malcolm Canmore is the first monarch of whose actual inauguration we have any description. Nevertheless it is clear that by the time of Canmore's accession, Scone had become the traditional place for coronations.⁷ Robertson feels that by 1100 the ceremony of placing the king in a stone seat had become the central rite. The one difficulty is that there are no references to the Stone, or to a stone seat in Scottish chronicles before the fourteenth century.⁸ The first information comes from Walter of Hemingburg who probably finished the section of his *Chronicle* dealing with Edward I's reign, shortly after that king's death.⁹ William Rishanger's *Chronica*, which Robertson felt was the earliest witness was probably written after 1327. But, whoever was the first to record the matter, it was apparently common knowledge long before 1290 that the kings were crowned on a stone regarded as possessing some sort of mystic power.¹⁰

For this reason it is not at all surprising that Edward, after John Balliol's fruitless rebellion against him in 1296, deciding to make Scotland an annex to the English crown, seized the palladium. In this way he would take a step in the direction of destroying resistance, for any subsequent king would be without proper coronation, a usurper. At the same time Edward's possession of the stone would make him, in a sense, the legal king of Scotland. Therefore, the transportation of the stone to Westminster, altogether apart from any magical significance would bestow upon the English king something of a legal right to the crown, a right which Edward as the "English Justinian" would doubtless desire and use for his own benefit.

6. Stanley, *op. cit.*, pp. 561f; Adamnan, *Vita Sancti Columbae* (Edinburgh, 1874) p. 213, lib. III, c. xxxiv; Wyntoun, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

7. J. H. Burton. *History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1876), I. 350.

8. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

9. Walter of Hemingburgh, *Chronicon*, H. C. Hamilton, ed. (Rolls Series, 1848) XXVIII: 38.

10. William Rishanger, *Chronica et Annales*; Rolls Series, 1865, XXVIII:2, xxiv, 136; Stanley, *op. cit.*, 337.

After Balliol had submitted to Edward and was removed from the rule of Scotland, the English king received the homage of the Scottish nobility at a number of northern points. On his return to England he stopped for one day at Scone where he supervised the seizure of the stone which was dispatched to Westminster Abbey. On its arrival Edward instructed his goldsmith to make for it, a chair of bronze. But after a short time, he cancelled the order, replacing the bronze with oak. The chair when finished had the stone placed in it and the whole was set in St. Edward's Chapel to be used as a seat for the priest officiating at the mass.¹¹ In this way the Stone of Scone came to England.

The Scots, however, were not content to let the matter rest at this point. One chronicle tells us that in 1324 when the Scots offered peace to Edward II, one of the conditions they laid down was that the Stone should be restored.¹² Four years later, according to some authorities, the return of the Stone was made one of the provisions of the Treaty of Northampton which finally brought from England recognition of Scottish independence.¹³ Rymer's *Foedera*, however, does not bear this out. Yet one thing is certain, that although Edward III, in 1328, ordered the Sheriff of London to turn the stone over to the Queen Mother for dispatch to Scotland, this was not done, the *Chronicle of Lanercost* giving as the reason, the resistance of the people of London.¹⁴ Finally in 1363 when discussions were held between England and Scotland concerning the succession to the Scottish crown if David II should die without issue, the question of the Stone came up again. Edward III was to succeed David and was to return the Stone upon which he was to be crowned in Scotland.¹⁵ As the conference came to nothing, however, these plans were fruitless.

From that time on the Stone of Scone continued to reside in Westminster Abbey serving as the coronation chair for successive kings of England. It was there that Henry IV and Elizabeth were crowned.¹⁶ In the case of the latter considerable sums of money were spent for the chair's decoration. Even Shakespeare refers at least twice to its presence.¹⁷ Thus by the end of the sixteenth century the stone was very much part of the English tradition.

11. Hunter, *op. cit.*, pp. 249ff.

12. *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, Wm. Stubbs, ed. (Rolls Series, 1883), II. p. 277.

13. Wyntoun, III, 212.

14. *Chronicon de Lanercost* (Maitland Society, 1839) p. 261.

15. T. Rymer, *Foedera* (Hague, 1745), III:ii, 82.

16. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

17. Henry VI, pt. 2, Act I. Sc. 2: Richard III, Act V, Sc. 3.

The accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne was regarded by some as the fulfillment of the prophecy that wherever the Stone was placed, a Scot would rule. Cromwell, however, for a while changed the picture, even going so far as to have the Stone in its chair moved from the Abbey to Westminster Hall where he was inaugurated as Lord Protector. From that date until December 25th, 1950 the stone has remained in the Abbey where it has been sat upon by numerous visitors and has been used at every succeed-coronation.¹⁸ Generally speaking it has been assumed that this stone is the palladium of Scotland, and it was for this reason that the Scottish Nationalists desired it to be returned to its native land.

It is at this point, however, that some controversy has arisen. As early as 1781 a letter signed by "Antiquarius" appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* pointing out that the stone in Westminster Abbey did not fit the description given by Hemingburg. He also expressed the opinion that the real stone had probably been returned after the agreement of 1363. To this suggestion there was an indignant retort by "An English Antiquary" who said that the terms "seat" and "stone" which were both used in the chronicles were the same.¹⁹ He then quoted a number of chronicles which did not necessarily prove his point, since he made no critical evaluation of their importance. There the matter was dropped, although others have since expressed doubts as to whether Edward actually obtained the Stone, or as to whether it is still at Westminster. Since the Scottish Nationalists have made such an issue of the matter it is perhaps advisable to give more careful consideration to this problem.

The first thing to consider is the stone itself. As mentioned above it is rough cut sandstone similar to stones used in building during the Middle Ages. In this connection it is interesting to note that most of the chroniclers, when referring to it, call it marble. This is somewhat different from sandstone. What is more, this type of sandstone is common in the area around both Scone and Dunstaffnage Castle. It is unknown, however, on Iona or on Tara in Ireland. Thus the stone would seem to be of Scottish origin, and not of the same type described by the chroniclers. This difference may of course be simply owing to the fact that marble was considered more appropriate to

18. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

19. *Gentleman's Magazine* (London, 1781), LI, 452.

coronations than sandstone.²⁰ There may, however, be a very real reason for a marble "tradition".

When one examines the later chronicles, both Scottish and English, while some refer to the Stone as a chair, perhaps implying: in a chair, most of them simply speak of it as a stone. Henry Knyghton, for instance, refers to it as "the stone", while Robert of Gloucestre described it as a "white marble stone" and George Buchanan speaks of it both as a chair and a stone. Buchanan, however, explains what he means by saying that the stone was placed in a wooden chair.²¹ Thus they seem to have been simply referring to what they knew to be in Westminster Abbey. Moreover, as it was apparently rather difficult in its setting to examine the Stone closely, although one could obtain a general idea of its size, they probably simply followed the earlier statements that it was marble.

When the earlier Scottish chroniclers are studied, however, there seems to be a somewhat different idea of the shape of the stone. The *Liber Pluscardensis*, a fourteenth century chronicle, recounts that when Alexander III was crowned "he was taken to a cross in the eastern part of the cemetary. . . and there in the royal throne of stone and marble. . . he was honourable established." Andrew Wyntoun, whom Joseph Robertson terms a very careful historian, refers to the Stone as a "sete."²² Last of all, John of Fordun who died some time around 1386 describes it as being "in formam cathedrae decisum ex marmore lapidem."²³ (In the form of a chair cut from marble). From these descriptions it would look as though the earliest recorded Scottish tradition was that the Stone was not just a chunk of sandstone, but was instead a carved throne of igneous rock.

That this tradition may have been quite accurate is born out by the testimony of Walter of Hemingburg who in describing the coronation of John Balliol, states that beside the high altar at Scone there was a very large stone, (*lapis pergrandis*), "somewhat concave and made in the manner of a round armed chair".²⁴ Rishanger's chronicle which was probably completed by 1330, speaks of the stone being used "pro throno", in the coronation of the kings.²⁵ These two English witnesses, and in particular

20. Prof. A. C. Ramsay's description of the stone in Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 564. For references to its being marble cf. Wyntoun, *op. cit.*, III, 214 John of Fordun, *Scoti Chronicon*; Edinburgh, 1871., pp. 24, 45 *Liber Pluscardensis* (Edinburgh, 1877), I, 80.
 21. Henrici Knighton, *Lycestrensis Chronicon* (Rolls Ser., 1889), XCII:1, 309; Geo. Buchanan, *History of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1827), I, p. 274; cf. *Gent. Mag.*, LII, 22.
 22. *Lib. Plusc.*, I, 80.
 23. *Op. cit.*, Lib. III, c. ix.
 24. Fordun, *op. cit.*, Lib. I, c. xxcii: Lib. II, c. xii
 25. "Concavus quidem et ad modum rotundae cathedrae confectus." *Op. cit.*, II, 38
 26. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

Hemingburg, are of the greatest importance, since they were very close in time, to the carrying off of the stone. As the editor of Hemingburgh has pointed out, the latter was a Yorkshire man who was regarded as an authority on history and was contemporary with, if not actually, involved in, the events of this period. It is therefore very probable that he obtained his information from some Englishman present at Balliol's coronation. Indeed, he could have been present at that event himself.²⁷ This means that we would here be obtaining the witness of at least a contemporary who would be in a position to know what the stone was like. He gives complete support to the description of the Stone by the slightly later Scottish historians.

Further corroboration for this theory is obtained by a study of the royal seals of the time. In February 1951, James S. Richardson, formerly H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland, published an article dealing with this problem. He pointed out that the seals of the four kings: Alexander I, David I, William the Lion, and Alexander II all picture the king sitting on a cushion placed on a seat which looks like a solid block.²⁸ In the case of the first three the seat is much more than eleven inches high, and has veluts or hooks, projecting upwards from top and bottom which might be either of metal or stone. In the cases of Alexander II, Alexander III and John Balliol the coronation seat is apparently one of wood, complete with cushion, but of a size which would easily contain a large block of stone. Other seals, for instance that of the Abbey of Scone and also a miniature in the charter of Malcolm IV to the Abbey of Kelso, show much the same arrangement. The seals of the kings prior to Alexander I, and subsequent to John Balliol, on the other hand, show the King seated on an X shaped chair with the upper ends carved as heads, and the lower ends as claws. It would seem that seating accommodations for kings in Scotland changed radically after the coronation of Balliol. But the seals do not seem to indicate that the Westminster Stone was the one in use prior to 1296.

Coupled with this, the expressions used by the Fordun, Pluscarden and Lanercost chronicles in describing the coronations from Bruce on, omit all reference to the stone. The king was simply placed "in sede . . . regali". This also would seem to indicate that the stone had disappeared. But had it gone to London? That is the crucial point.

27. *Op. cit.*, I, Introduction.

28. *The Scotsman*, February 17, 1951.

To this question many, no doubt, will reply that certainly the Westminster Stone is the same stone; Edward I succeeded in seizing it and carrying it away. Yet the evidence would seem to make it doubtful that the Westminster stone is actually the Stone of Scone. Joseph Robertson, holds that there was both a stone and a marble throne; and it was the former that Edward I carried off as loot.²⁹ There is, however, not the slightest indication of any kind, that there were two stone objects of this type. The Stone and the Chair seem to have been one and the same.

What then is the explanation? Some would hold that Edward III returned the stone after 1363. But when we remember that the citizens of London prevented its return in 1327, it is a little hard to believe that they would change their views some thirty-five years later. Any secret moving of the stone could hardly have been kept quiet once it was back in Scotland. It would seem very probable therefore, that the Westminster stone is truly that which was taken by Edward, but it is very possible that what was given to him was a fake.

What supporting evidence do we have for this story?

To commence with it is necessary to remember that the best chronicle evidence makes it rather doubtful that the stone in Westminster is actually the original Stone of Scone. Added to this there are certain other pertinent facts.

It is doubtful if Edward knew very much about the Stone. He had heard of it, but since it seems from the evidence of the seals to have been covered with a wooden frame-work, its shape and size would not be very well-known. He was also in a hurry, for the chroniclers point out that he spent but one day at Scone. Added to this was the fact that the Abbot of Scone was apparently one of the ecclesiastical leaders of the opposition to Edward. This is manifested in his taking part in Robert Bruce's coronation, and also in the fact that when later, Edward captured him, he put him in Mere Castle, Wiltshire, in chains.³⁰ There is little likelihood that a man such as the abbot would be inclined to leave the most precious relic of Scotland lying around for any thieving Englishman to pick up at will. Consequently, it is quite probable that the Stone was placed in hiding long before Edward ever arrived on the scene.

It would look as though Edward succeeded in carrying off only a piece of building stone hewn out of some neighboring

29. Stanley, *op. cit.*

30. Fordun, *op. cit.*, p. 341; Rymer. *Foedera*, I: iv, 59, 60.

quarry. This would go far to explain the fact that while at first he was prepared to pay a very considerable sum (£39 6s 3d) for the encasing of the stone in a bronze chair, he suddenly changed his mind and used only wood.³¹ If he had carried the stone south to London, where someone such as Hemingburgh had pointed out that he had been fooled, it is improbable that a man such as Edward would admit this publicly. He would certainly feel, however, that it was not worth all the expense which he had originally planned. Therefore, a wooden chair would be enough.

The discovery that he had been deceived would also explain the sack of the Abbey of Scone the year following the Stone's removal (1297). Some time before August an English force invaded the abbey, searched through every room: cellars, church, refectory, dormitory, cells, chambers, guest rooms, windows, altars and cupboards. The soldiers broke up the furniture and destroyed many of the monuments. As this was not done to any other abbey, it would look as though they were seeking something.³² But apparently they did not find it, for after Edward had once again "pacified" the country following Wallace's capture, he made a move to have the whole abbey destroyed and the relics moved elsewhere. A papal order to produce all the relics would undoubtedly have brought the stone to light. That Edward died before anything could be done was all that saved the abbey. This would appear to be his final effort to retrieve the missing stone.³³

Some at this point, may object that the Scots in subsequent years seem to have been anxious to bring the stone back. If it was a substitution, why were they so upset over its removal? In answer to this, it must be remembered first of all that during most of the period from the death of Edward I to the death of Edward III the two countries were very frequently at war. This would not help in spreading in Scotland a description of the Stone actually in Westminster Abbey. Edward said that he had the stone: and no doubt most people took it for granted that he had. Furthermore, it is very unlikely that the Abbot would spread abroad any news of his trickery. Consequently the Scots probably thought that the true Stone was in London. This would be the explanation of the differences in the descriptions of it given by the Scottish and the English chroniclers at the close of the fourteenth century. The Scots without

31. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

32. *Liber Ecclesie de Scon* (Maitland Soc., 1843), p. 89.

33. Rymer, *Foedera*, I:iv, 53, 54, 65.

knowledge of the actual Westminster stone following their tradition, give the same picture of it as did Hemingburgh. The English, on the other hand, although they used Hemingburgh's chronicle simply call it "The Stone", for all they could see in Westminster Abbey was a block of sandstone in a wooden chair.³⁴

Thus as we sum up the evidence, it looks as though the stone described by the earliest chroniclers was not taken to Westminster. Instead the Abbot of Scone probably passed off on Edward a substitute, a fact which Edward, even though he discovered the truth, could not acknowledge unless he discovered the real one. In achieving this, however, he was not successful.

What was the real stone? Where is it now? Both these questions are unanswerable. It has been suggested that it was a Roman or a Celtic altar, either of which would fit into the descriptions given in Hemingburgh and by the seals. But of this no one can be certain. Neither can one answer the second question. If the abbot hid the Stone, it is possibly somewhere in the neighbourhood of Scone, perhaps buried in a grave completely lost to human knowledge.

If this hypothesis is correct it reveals one of the first Scottish jokes on record. How the abbot must have chortled with glee as Edward disappeared over the horizon carefully guarding a worthless piece of building stone. He had hoaxed "the Hammer of the Scots." And if that abbot saw the turmoil caused by the disappearance of the stone on December 25th, 1950, and its later return to London amidst the rejoicings of a considerable number of people, particularly the members of the *Scotland Yard*, he no doubt smiled sardonically, remarking to the ghostly entities around him that neither English nor Scottish characteristics had changed very much in six hundred and fifty years.

34. Cf. Henry Knyghton's account of it, despite the fact that he very clearly used Hemingburgh, *Op. cit.*, II, xxx.