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The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon (review)

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39) which are at odds with his sane and expert handling of the classical literary sources and the Celtic linguistic evidence in the body of his text. Here the underlying assumption is that in classical times there were thought to be—and were—a people or peoples called—and in certain circumstances calling themselves—Celts (or a related name-form). This position (for which see the concluding remarks on pp. 249-50) seems a fair enough position for the twenty-first century.

In conclusion one may reiterate that this is a very useful addition to the literature for precisely the purposes its author intended it. He has built a level and pretty robust bridge over some quite troubled waters.

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The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon.

Edited by Richard Welander, David J Breeze and Thomas Owen Clancy.

Pp. xx, 283.

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Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. 2003. £25.00.

This book originates in a conference held in Edinburgh in 1997 to mark the return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland the previous year. But this is more than just the conference proceedings; its scope has been expanded to cover inauguration stones and seats in Scotland, Ireland and on the Continent. This presumably explains the delay in publication, although an explanation, if not an apology, from the editors would have been appropriate for such a long-promised volume on a high-profile subject. The volume appears in the monograph series of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and has been produced to a standard that is mostly consistent with this. The exceptions are the unsightly cover design, while some references cited in the text are missing from the bibliography.

The book begins with an introduction by David Breeze but nowhere do the editors define its objectives, making it impossible to assess whether the volume achieves their aims. The seventeen chapters are grouped into six parts covering 'The Stone as an Object', 'Inaugurations and Symbols of Dominion', 'Scone', 'The Taking of the Stone', 'The Return' and 'Envoi'. Some of the contents, notably on the geology of the Stone and its returns to Scotland in 1950-51 and 1996, are already familiar. This leaves the volume's largest section, on comparative studies, as its most distinctive and original contribution. Its chapters discuss royal inauguration practices and places among the Scots of Dal Riata (Ewan Campbell), in mediaeval Gaelic literature (Thomas Owen Clancy), in mediaeval Ireland (Elizabeth FitzPatrick), on the Continent (Stuart Airlie) and the sites of Finlaggan on Islay (David Caldwell) and Govan (Stephen Driscoll). This section is the real strength of this book, placing the study of the Stone in a wider international context. The range of parallels discussed here adds substantially to our understanding of the symbolism and use of inauguration stones and chairs. The inauguration of Scottish kings on a block of sandstone emerges as a specific form of a once-widespread range of related royal rites. These contributions reveal that such inauguration ceremonies were not immutable but changed over time according to political and religious circumstances.

The book's greatest weakness is its structure, which is disjointed and eccentric in places. For example, physical aspects of the Stone are discussed by Peter Hill in the second chapter. But the results of technical examinations, including X-ray

analysis, are not covered until the penultimate chapter, by Richard Welander, on the Stone's return to Scotland in 1996. Similarly, two important papers reassessing the evidence for thirteenth-century inaugurations at Scone, by Archie Duncan and Dauvit Broun, complement each other and should be read together, yet they appear in different sections, separated by an unrelated chapter.

In contrast to the detailed discussion of comparative material, the Stone's specific setting is given more cursory treatment. The section on Scone contains only two chapters and ignores the issue of its early mediaeval origins and royal associations. Richard Fawcett refers to the considerable number of carved and moulded architectural fragments in the grounds of Scone Palace as the only visible evidence of the abbey fabric but, inexplicably for a chapter entitled 'The Buildings of Scone Abbey', devotes only two sentences to them. This missed opportunity contrasts with Paul Binski's detailed art-historical analysis of the Coronation Chair. Scone is pivotal to our understanding of the Stone. Yet, as Driscoll notes, we know more about the physical layout at Govan, despite its location in an urban and post-industrial landscape, than picturesque Scone. Our poor understanding of Scone exposes the inadequacy of the official and academic response to the return of the Stone to Scotland in 1996. A welcoming ceremony, a conference and this (overdue) book are meagre rations. More appropriate, surely, would have been a multi-disciplinary programme of co-ordinated research not only into the Stone itself but also into its earliest recorded setting.

A surprising omission is the mythology concerning the Stone, its origins, powers and authenticity. This is an integral element of the Stone as an icon and deserves study in its own right. Another gap results from the positions of some of the editors and contributors within Historic Scotland. Although giving them unparalleled access to modern source material and recent events, their professional neutrality has resulted in self-censorship. Without a critical appraisal of the events they describe, the chapters on the Stone in the modern period (Graeme Munro) and its return in 1996 (Welander) are simply narrative accounts. Welander's chapter, epitomised by the photograph of the beaming faces of the (named) officers of the Lothian and Borders Police Stone of Destiny Security Team, is more appropriate to a popular guidebook or Historic Scotland promotional literature.

In contrast to these gaps, several contributors (Breeze, Hill, Campbell) discuss the origins of the Stone and its 'original' function(s), but their brief comments are repetitive and their conclusions contradictory and speculative. Campbell's tentative suggestion that the Stone owed its significance to its original role in sealing a chamber in which relics were kept was argued in more detail by this reviewer in a book published in 2000 but which is absent from the bibliography. Given the prominence of the debate concerning the Stone's origins, a chapter should have been devoted to this issue, enabling a more detailed analysis.

In conclusion, this is a useful addition to the literature on the Stone of Destiny but it fails to live up to expectations. While the discussion of comparative material is excellent, the book fails to address adequately such fundamental issues as the origins, authenticity and mythology of the Stone and its setting at Scone. Moreover, poor ordering of its contents limits the accessibility, impact and effectiveness of the volume overall.