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Stone of Destiny a 'fake to dupe invading English'

Abbot of Scone hid real stone from Edward I, says Salmond

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For centuries it has held a mystical place in Scottish history, but Alex Salmond sparked fresh debate about the Stone of Destiny yesterday by claiming that the version on display at Edinburgh Castle is a fake.

The stone, said to have been used in the coronation of early Scottish monarchs and in Biblical times by Jacob as a pillow, is one of the earliest symbols of Scottish nationhood and has been an emblem of strained relations with England ever since it was stolen by Edward I in 1296.

But the First Minister has claimed that the block of red sandstone held until 1996 at Westminster Abbey, and now on permanent display in

Edinburgh, was almost certainly not the original coronation stone.

He said that monks at Scone Abbey had probably duped the English into believing that they had stolen the stone when in fact they took a replica.

"If you're the Abbot of Scone and the strongest and most ruthless king in Christendom is charging toward you in 1296 to steal Scotland's most sacred object and probably put you and half of your cohorts to death, do you do nothing and wait until he arrives or do you hide yourself and the stone somewhere convenient in the Perthshire hillside? I think the second myself," Mr Salmond said.

"On balance, my view is that the Abbot of Scone furnished Edward with a substitute."

It was only to be expected that Mr Salmond - as the first head of an SNP government in Edinburgh - seek to appropriate the stone's legend for his own political ends.

With a new film about the audacious theft of the stone from Westminster Abbey by four students on Christmas Day in 1950 about to hit cinema screens, his comments appear designed to trigger fresh debate about Scottish independence.

However, he held back from calling for the relic to be sent back to London and ruled out the idea of using science to shed light on the mystery.

Referring to the two theories generally used to support claims that the real stone remains hidden - that the Abbot of Scone deceived the English or that a duplicate was made after the authentic relic was stolen in 1950 - Mr Salmond said: "Neither question can ever be finally answered and that is why the mystery of the stone is one best left unsolved."

After a UK-wide search was ordered by the British government, the stone was left on the altar at Arbroath Abbey in April 1951 and returned to London. Rumours at the time suggested that the returned stone was not the

original and that copies had been made by a Glasgow stonemason. The extraordinary story will be retold in the comedy *Stone of Destiny*, starring Robert Carlyle and Billy Boyd, to be released this year.

Mr Salmond appears to favour the former theory, saying: "What I believe cannot be in doubt is that the stone currently in Edinburgh Castle is the one that lay in Westminster Abbey for 700 years."

He believes that the original stone may have been a fragment of meteorite. Medieval chroniclers described it as round, black and polished with carved symbols. According to legend, it was used as a pillow by Jacob when he dreamt of a ladder to heaven.

"At least one chronicler describes the stone as a shiny black object and you would think that if something was to be seen as Jacob's pillow, Scotland's most sacred relic, it would be very unusual to the medieval eye," Mr Salmond added.

"I have a hunch that the sort of thing that would go down as the Stone of Scone would be more like a meteor or something like that - something very unusual, and a lump of Perthshire sandstone, interesting and nice, doesn't seem to be that."

According to this theory, the real stone, which, according to mythology, came from Palestine and was carried through Egypt, Sicily, Spain and Ireland before arriving in Scone in the 9th century, was removed from the abbey by monks and hidden in a nearby cave before the English could seize it. According to recent claims, it may even be hidden to this day in the grounds of a Perthshire mansion.

A spokesman for Westminster Abbey said yesterday that it believed that the stone held for seven centuries in London, which was returned to Scotland by the last Conservative government in 1996, was authentic.

Donald Gorrie, the former Liberal Democrat MSP, has called for a scientific study to be carried out on the stone held in Edinburgh.

Ted Cowan, one of Scotland's most respected historians, said: "I have discussed this matter with the First Minister and I know his views on this. It is perfectly fine for him to believe that the stone is a replica, but there is the whole matter of proof.

"How credible is it that you can just make a replica of something like that in five minutes because Edward I is coming to steal the real one?"

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