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To cite this article: Sally Foster & Elisabeth Niklasson (30 Jun 2026): Spectral Authenticity and the Fate of the Stone of Destiny, *Heritage & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/2159032X.2026.2696070](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2026.2696070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2026.2696070>



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Published online: 30 Jun 2026.



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Spectral Authenticity and the Fate of the Stone of Destiny

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ABSTRACT

This article examines authenticity debates surrounding the Stone of Destiny, a highly charged heritage object traditionally used in the coronation of Scottish and later British monarchs. Drawing on heritage scholarship, it understands authenticity as negotiated and culturally contingent and develops the concept of spectral authenticity to explain how authenticity claims persist, resurface, coexist and accumulate meanings across time. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining ethnography, interviews, historiography, archival research, and media sources, it identifies recurring tropes that have circulated since the 1950s, when the Stone's political significance intensified. These include claims that the Stone is a medieval substitute or modern replica, religious assertions grounded in biblical origin stories, and scholarly or scientific efforts to certify it empirically. Rather than resolving uncertainty, these tropes continually regenerate it while performing distinct cultural and political work. They address historical gaps through myth and vernacular history, enable political expression and national identity formation, support knowledge production, and shape institutional strategies around legitimacy and ritual authority. Claims of (in)authenticity are therefore not simply errors to be corrected but productive forces that sustain the Stone's dense symbolic life, suggesting that heritage practice should engage openly with authenticity's enduring plurality.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 March 2026

Accepted 23 June 2026



KEYWORDS

(in)authenticity; heritage; politics of the past; dissonant heritage; contested heritage; Stone of Destiny; Stone of Scone; identity

Introduction

I was saying to people in high places and low places, everywhere, so what do you think about the Stone being returned for the [2023] Coronation? Inevitably the answer would be oh, it's not the right Stone. Eventually I came around, I said ... you're not answering the question. You are diverting by the use of humour ... you still want to have one over on the English, that they don't have the right Stone.

This quote from "Jean" (interview 2023), a life-long campaigner for Scottish independence, is about the Stone of Destiny (hereafter, the Stone), one of the most symbolically

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charged heritage objects in Britain. It captures how questions of authenticity shape the public values through which this object, used in the coronation of Scottish, English, and British monarchs since medieval times, is understood and invoked in public discourse. Jean's perspective is informed by lived experience of events in the early 1950s, when four young Scottish nationalists seeking "Home Rule" famously removed the Stone from Westminster Abbey in London under cover of night. The incident sparked a nationwide police hunt and reignited debate over Scottish self-government in the United Kingdom (Hamilton 1952; MacCormick 2008, 162–183). It also garnered worldwide attention and concern, particularly across the British Commonwealth, as the reigning monarch was seriously ill and a new coronation appeared imminent (Aitchison 2009, 129–142; Rodwell 2013, 186–192). In keeping with centuries of tradition, but controversially for many Scots, a future UK monarch would again be crowned seated over the Scottish Stone. Returned to London in 1951, the Stone was subsequently used in the coronations of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 and King Charles III in 2023. For Jean, this repeated constitutional appropriation of a Scottish object has remained politically agitating. Reflecting on these events, she points to a political rhetoric that seeks to undermine the Stone's symbolic power by casting it as inauthentic.

In material terms, the Stone of Destiny (also known as the Stone of Scone) is a battered rectangular block of sandstone with iron rings on each side, weighing 152 kg (Hill 2003); its unassuming appearance (Figure 1) belies its historical and contemporary political significance. From at least the mid-thirteenth century, the Stone served in the inauguration of Scottish kings at Scone in eastern Scotland, until it was stolen by the English King Edward I in 1296 and taken south to London (Broun 2003). There, it was set into the



Figure 1. The Stone of Destiny. © 008-000-025-621-R Historic Environment Scotland.



Figure 2. The 2023 Coronation setting, with the Stone of Destiny temporarily returned to the Chair. Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

base of a specially made wooden chair in Westminster Abbey, now known as the Coronation Chair (Figure 2) (Rodwell 2013). This act signalled Edward's claim to authority over Scotland during the First War of Scottish Independence (1296–1328; Barrow 2003), and from that moment the Stone and chair became intertwined with the ritual of monarchy, used for the coronation of almost every English and later British sovereign. With its unsanctioned removal and subsequent return to Westminster Abbey in 1950–1951, the Stone acquired new layers of meaning as a symbol in the modern struggle for Scottish independence. In 1996, following decades of advocacy, it was finally returned to Scotland by government decree (Welander, Breeze, and Clancy 2003). Displayed at Edinburgh Castle until 2024, it now has a permanent home in Perth Museum. One condition remains: the Stone must still travel to Westminster Abbey for royal coronations.

This article is an original interdisciplinary study of the authenticity debates surrounding this important heritage object. It explores how, since 1950, authenticity has haunted the Stone as a spectral presence, emerging through the many appropriations, replicas, fragments, and rumours that continually reopen and politicise what the Stone is taken to be. As Nick Aitchison observes, authenticity is now inseparable from the Stone's modern mythology and is "an undeniable indication of the Stone's continued relevance, particularly to the Scots" (2009, 74). Alongside official scientific dating techniques and the documentation of the Stone now on display in Perth Museum, claims that it was substituted with a fake long ago, as well as beliefs in its ancient or even biblical origins, continue to flourish in popular discourse. Twentieth-century replicas add further layers of ambiguity (Foster 2024a), and the many fragments removed from the Stone and widely circulated (largely secretly) carry their own stories and symbolic charge (Foster 2025). The result is a uniquely "dense" object in which multiple, interlocking claims to authenticity fuel public fascination and political discussion. The Stone thus exemplifies what Jane Bennett (2010) calls "vibrant matter", a material thing that actively does something in the political space.

Despite this, no study has critically examined the generative, even spectral, power of authenticity in relation to the Stone of Destiny. Existing scholarship has focussed almost exclusively on its intrinsic, material authenticity (Aitchison 2009; Caldwell 2018, 2023; Rodwell 2013). Neal Ascherson's (2003, 263–264) important observations on public responses to its return to Scotland in 1996 were, by his own admission, based largely on “impression rather than solid evidence”. In terms of material culture approaches, Marchant's (2018) literature review about the Stone's “affective pull” over time is a useful starting point, but political discourses related to questions of authenticity remain largely unexplored (e.g., Munro 2003). A critical heritage-focused examination is overdue. The aim of this research is therefore to better understand the “work” authenticity performs in debates about heritage objects that exist as dense political symbols. Starting from the Stone of Destiny, it asks:

Who cares about the Stone's authenticity, and why?

How do different groups assess, negotiate, and experience its authenticity?

What political, cultural, or symbolic work does authenticity enable the Stone to do?

To answer these questions, we first map recurring authenticity tropes to show how different people, publics and institutions have engaged with the Stone's authenticity from 1950 onward. The year marks a moment when the Stone acquired renewed political significance, becoming entangled in modern independence debates and energised by new rumours of substitution, alongside processes of fragmentation and replication. Popular claims, particularly those asserting the Stone's inauthenticity, were now increasingly met by scholarly and institutional arguments to the contrary. We then analyse the motivations and effects of these claims to address why authenticity persists and what type of “work” it enables.

Adopting an exploratory and inductive approach, we treat authenticity as something made, negotiated and mobilised rather than assumed. Our interdisciplinary and qualitative research draws on ethnographic observation in workshops and at events involving the Stone, and interviews with people that have personal and professional connections with it. It also draws on close reading of historiographic scholarship, a wide media corpus including newspapers, magazines, letters, imagery, and other forms of cultural expression where the Stone has been discussed, critiqued, and politicised. This is complemented by a critical review of published sources ranging from antiquarian and academic works to institutional guidebooks, religious and literary writing, popular histories, and political songs and poetry, all treated as primary evidence for claims about authenticity. Earlier material, dating back to 1781, is included where it helps clarify the origins and spectral qualities of later claims. We also examine material relating to the Stone's fragmentation and later replication. Together, these sources included in the supplementary materials for this article (Foster and Niklasson 2026) provide a wide-ranging yet detailed basis for understanding how authenticity claims have been formed, deployed, and circulated over time.

Finally, the research asks what an “authentic future” for the Stone might look like. The findings offer a valuable comparator for those working with objects or places that attract complex and competing claims to authenticity. They also shed light on the broader roles that heritage plays in a contested world, where different communities of interest, “authorized” and otherwise, operate from fundamentally different starting points.

Approaching Authenticity

Authenticity has long been treated as a fixed, material measure of originality rooted in the integrity of heritage objects (Jones 2009; Lixinski 2022). Since the 1990s, however, heritage scholars and organisations such as ICOMOS (1994, Nara+20 2016), often informed by perspectives beyond Europe, have recognized that what counts as authentic is culturally contingent. Rather than a stable attribute, authenticity is increasingly seen as something negotiated and constructed through diverse heritage processes, competing claims, changing values, or affective responses to “pastness” (Holtorf 2013; Karlström 2015; Lixinski 2022; Silverman 2015). Moving beyond the view of authenticity as a Western construct upheld by a universalizing Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006), these perspectives emphasize the need for more granular analyses of the multiple and specific functions of authenticity.

Building on this broader recognition, our approach draws on scholarship that treats authenticity as something that emerges through relationships, practices, and historically situated interpretations. Research on replicas and object biographies has shown how authenticity is produced through connections between objects, people, and places (Foster and Jones 2019; Jones 2009, 2010; Latour and Lowe 2011), while ethnographic studies further demonstrate how such connections are rooted in and understood through specific historical contexts (Foster and Jones 2008, 2020). Reviewing anthropological and interdisciplinary debates, Theodossopoulos (2013, 340) stresses the challenge of analysing the multiple forms and vernacular uses of authenticity, noting that variations in status, culture, and language introduce additional layers of meaning. Crucially, he argues that the very multiplicity of authenticity gives local actors “the freedom to escape from a strict and limiting definition of the authentic, an opportunity to apply their own specific meaning” (341).

Following this line of thought, we consider authenticity in terms of what it does: its associated intentions, desired outcomes, and effects (Theodossopoulos 2013). Marcus Banks’s (2013, 486, drawing on Dutton, 2003) distinction between nominal, expressive, and instrumental authenticity is particularly useful here. Nominal authenticity concerns verification of origin or provenance – whether something is “what it says it is”. Expressive authenticity focuses on coherence with an object or practice’s own cultural or creative logic, as being “true to itself”. Instrumental authenticity relates to contexts in which authenticity claims are mobilised strategically for material, political, or symbolic ends. These are not fixed categories but overlapping tendencies. In our analysis, this framework is brought into dialogue with Lixinski’s (2022) ideas of the work authenticity performs in law, policy, and heritage discourse, including its functions as truth, purity, fixedness, value, gatekeeping, control, power, and difference-maker. Viewed through what we term “spectral authenticity”, these enactments and functions appear not as stable positions but as historically layered and continually reanimated claims that “haunt” the Stone of Destiny.

While debates and scholarship about culturally contingent authenticities have significantly broadened our thinking, they provide limited scope for understanding how authenticity debates behave over time – how older assumptions, rumours, and claims continue to surface and shape present interpretations. This paper uses the concept of spectral authenticity to describe these lingering and emergent qualities. “Spectral”

signals both the ghostly persistence of narratives and the shifting meanings that accumulate around an object as it moves through different social and political moments. Far from a metaphorical flourish, it names the empirical persistence of claims that repeatedly attach and reattach to the Stone across media and generations. Even in contexts where provenance and materiality dominate, authenticity circulates through multiple motivations and uses, the effects of which are anything but static, carrying tangible political and heritage implications. Ultimately, this stance treats authenticity as process rather than property. Following Bruner (1994, 409), we argue that researchers and practitioners should be asking when and what these struggles are and should challenge the habitual polarisation between the “real” and the “fake” that often obscures how authenticity works in practice.

Authenticity Speaks

This section identifies four recurring tropes through which the Stone’s authenticity has been questioned, narrated, and explained (Figure 3). Here, “trope” refers to familiar themes or story-forms that audiences, in this case much of the UK public, recognize instantly. They involve characteristic plots and actors that are central to how authenticity is activated: two tropes assert that the Stone now in Perth is inauthentic and two that it is the historic original. Those challenging its authenticity argue that the Stone is a fake substituted in 1296 or in 1951, or on both occasions making it a “double fake” (as McKerracher 1984, 271, memorably put it). Circulating through newspapers, magazines, political songs, novels, and now social media, these theories have mainly been advanced by actors outside official heritage or research institutions, and they have strong public appeal. Authenticity-affirming tropes include, on the one hand, religious claims that the stone is the biblical Jacob’s Pillow, and on the other, empiricist claims that rely on scientific tests and academic research. The latter is grounded in research publications, official reports, and statements from government and heritage bodies. What follows is a brief mapping of how these stories have taken hold, travelled, and accumulated power.

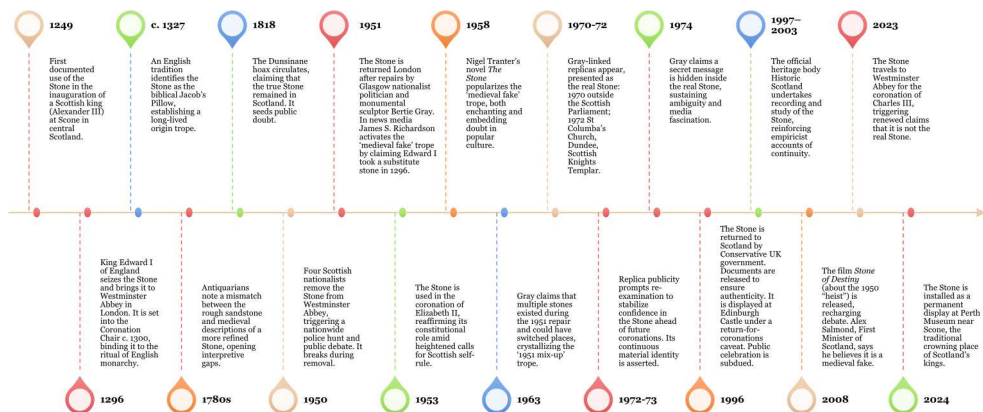


Figure 3. A timeline summary of key trajectories in the debates around the authenticity of the Stone of Destiny, including both political events and central actors.

Trope 1: The Stone is a Medieval Fake

This first and most enduring trope centres on the claim that Edward I removed not the sacred inauguration stone of the Scots, but a locally hewn substitute placed to deceive him. Thus he unwittingly took a fake with him to England in 1296. The origins of this trope lie in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although antiquarians did not question the Stone's authenticity directly, they observed in the 1780s that the rough sandstone did not match the more ornate stone described in medieval texts. Medieval accounts emanating from Scotland and from Westminster Abbey conjured Egyptian or Palestinian origins for the Stone, explaining how it ended up in Scone after extended journeys across time and space, including Spain, Ireland and western Scotland. An English medieval narrative suggested it originated as the pillow upon which the Old Testament figure Jacob rested his head while having an important dream (Binski 2003). Some antiquarians dismissed such tales, but others found it hard to reconcile their belief in myths with emergent scholarly findings that the Stone was geologically Scottish (Aitchison 2009, 40–47). Such interpretive gaps become fertile ground for narratives about authenticity that linger and resurface across time.

In popular imagination, however, it was a supremely successful hoax in 1818 that led people to question the Stone's authenticity. Labourers working on the fort on Dunsinane Hill near Perth allegedly discovered a "meteoric" stone with an accompanying inscription implying it was Jacob's Pillow. Hence the Stone of Destiny was still in Scotland. It was supposedly shipped to London for examination, where it never appeared, and the story was quickly debunked by a local source. But by then it had circulated in at least 30 newspapers (see Foster and Niklasson 2026). In a period of romantic nationalism, the originating hoax had likely been prompted by something else in public discourse, as Aitchison suggests (2009, 66–71). Cumulatively, the consequence was a belief "that it was only a representation or facsimile of it that Edward I. [sic] of England conveyed to Westminster" (Myles 1850, 134–135).

Over a hundred years later, the trope resurfaced. After the Stone was removed from Westminster Abbey in 1950 by the four Scottish nationalists, James S. Richardson, former "Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland", published a widely read news article arguing that the Abbot of Scone had replaced the original Stone with a local block in 1296 (Richardson 1951). Richardson's authority and his use of medieval seals as "evidence" lent his claims unusual traction. His motivations appear rooted in personal curiosity rather than political intent (see Richardson et al. 2019), yet the article ignited immediate public debate, with even official voices such as the "Historiographer Royal for Scotland" being challenged (e.g., Young 1951). Richardson's article has shaped nearly all subsequent medieval-substitution theories. The Dunsinane theory found a new life, since it could be argued that it explained what had happened to the Stone that was hidden after the medieval fake took its place (e.g., McKerracher 1984, 279).

Fiction and popular history then amplified this trope further. The renowned novelist and historian Nigel Tranter incorporated Richardson's theory in his novel, *The Stone* (1958). Tranter clearly had fun with this novel: nationalistic Scots, pitched against a team of English academics, retrieve the real Stone from near Scone before ultimately losing it again in the rough tumble and adventure of the subsequent chase. Tranter walked his reader through his and Richardson's arguments in detail. By painting a vivid picture of the richly carved original Stone in the reader's mind, he fixed his version of

the trope in public memory. His political involvement with the Scottish Covenant Association, and direct involvement in the return of the Stone in 1951, further entwined the trope with aspirations for self-government. In 1960, Tranter reflected in *Scots Magazine* that it was a matter of “commonsense” that the Stone in Westminster Abbey was not the “original” and that Richardson’s arguments had convinced him. Serialized in a large daily newspaper as well as published in America, his ideas were well aired. Tranter (1960, 351) maintained that most Scottish newspapers as well as US radio accepted his substitution theory. In relation to his subsequent *Bruce Trilogy* (Tranter 1969, opening volume), he further indicated that his historical novels were sound sources (Tranter 1996).

The 1970s and 1980s saw renewed retellings that kept the “medieval fake” trope alive. Writers in the *Scots Magazine* presented further ideas about the substitution of the Stone, all of which referred to or built on Richardson (1951), with the key message that Edward I was clearly “duped” (Christie 1970, 149; McKerracher 1984, 276; 1989). In a mischievous tone, and likely down to influential Scottish political activist Robbie the Pict (1996), it was also suggested that the Stone Edward I took was a cludgie stane (cesspit cover). These later ideas also made their way into novels (see Foster and Niklasson 2026). Andrew Grieg’s 2008 *Romanno Bridge*, for instance, incorporates pretty much every authenticity argument associated with the Stone. His acknowledgements (311–312) recognize popular local historian Archibald C. McKerracher (1984) as a source and Tranter as an inspiration, assuring readers that elements of his story are true, including that Edward I was duped. Interestingly, Grieg shows a strong awareness of newspaper reports about the Stone and models some characters on known actors, such as Bertie Gray, whose role is the subject of the next trope.

The play between substance and what is “pleasing and fanciful” (Myles 1850, 134–135) often becomes thrillingly thin in these literary renderings. Yet what is interesting, and which we return to later, is how the mix of myth, interpretive gaps, engaging prose and curated “facts” gives the trope much of its enduring imaginative power and potential for mischief and defiance in the hands of the public. After all, if the Stone is not the original, what does this mean for the monarchs crowned upon it? Does it matter, or can it still be authentic in other ways?

Trope 2: There was a Stones mix-up in 1951

The second popular trope rests on the idea that the Stone returned to Westminster Abbey in 1951 was not the same Stone that was taken in December 1950. The originator of this trope was Bertie (Robert) Gray, who ran a monumental sculpture business in Glasgow, was a leading politician, and was the righthand man of John MacCormick, leader of the popular National Covenant movement seeking Scottish Home Rule. Gray and MacCormick had supported the 1950 plot, and Gray was the mastermind of hiding the Stone parts in Scotland for three months afterwards (it had broken into two when taken out of the Coronation Chair). He organised and took part in its repair and subsequent journey to Arbroath.

I had three stones when I repaired what was thought to be the Stone of Destiny. They could easily have been mixed up. (Bertie Gray, *Glasgow Herald* 1963)

It was not until 1963, however, that Gray indelibly caught the public imagination when he told journalists about not one but three stones in his possession: the one taken and two

replicas that he claimed to have made or commissioned. He told this story after a group of people who called themselves “the Scottish Guardians of the Stone” submitted a photograph to the London press of the alleged “real” Stone partly submerged in the ground. Immediately decried in the media as a hoax, this was demonstrably a Gray replica (see Foster 2026 for further evidence). On Christmas Day 1970, the same replica reappeared outside the Scottish Parliament House, and it was reported that “the real Stone of Destiny was left as a Christmas present to the people of Scotland on the twentieth anniversary of the return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland” (*Staff Reporters* 1970). In 1972, after a brief appearance at the medieval Arbroath Abbey to mark the anniversary of the 1320 Treaty of Arbroath (when the barons and community of Scotland asked the pope for independence from England), Gray’s replica was ceremonially gifted through nationalist channels to St Columba’s Church in Dundee where it was cared for by the Scottish Knights Templar. Their Minister understood this to be the real Stone and treated it accordingly. After the church closed in 1989, it was briefly lent to the People’s Palace Museum in Glasgow (where it was examined and recognized to be a copy) and then returned to the Knights Templar. Covertly stored, it was put on display in a small Perthshire church until around 1996. Since then, it has not been seen publicly.

Each of the moves of this replica elicited media interest and attracted quotes from Gray that invariably alluded to his “I mixed them up” trope. Developing a reputation as the “expert producer of phoney Stones of Destiny”, Gray traded until his death in deliberate ambiguity about whether the Stone returned to Westminster Abbey was the one taken (Ritchie 1974). Overall, this trope, with all its compounding elements, has since been repeated in the media and popular discourse whenever discussion of the Stone was topical.

Trope 3: The Stone is Jacob’s Pillow

The third identified trope is predicated on continued belief in the thirteenth-century story that the Stone *is*, authentically, Jacob’s Pillow (Binski 2003), although it may also be an “incarnation” of it (Gilbert 2012, 172). If the authentic object, the Stone must have originated in Palestine in times described in the Old Testament, travelling with the lost tribes of Israel to Ireland and whence it came to Britain, where Edward I took it for safekeeping (Raymond 1977, 53). To advocates of British-Israelism, who believe in the “Israelitish identity of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Ferris 1949, 66), it is therefore an extremely potent object (e.g., Fowler 1951). Believed to be one of the most significant objects in the world, it serves by its very presence, to protect Britain (Gilbert 2012, back cover, 191). Some adherents claim that, geologically, the Stone could come from Palestine because similar sandstone is found there, and there have been repeated attempts since 1950 to bolster this argument by acquiring and comparing fragments (Foster 2025; Gilbert 2012, 171).

Although it has earlier origins, this trope visibly peaks from early in 1951, prompted by the short-lived loss of the Stone. Advocates of British-Israelism in Britain, North America and Australia printed pamphlets, made radio addresses and produced a very popular booklet about the Stone (Foster and Niklasson 2026). However, their views need to be considered in the context of the 1948 creation of the State of Israel, and criticism of contemporary global politics, including communism and racism.

The Rev Springett interpreted the elaborate efforts taken by the government to protect it during the World Wars, and to recover it in 1951 (described in Rodwell 2013, 182, 183–

186), as a measure of its immense significance, for the Stone was deemed to be “inseparably connected to the Destiny of our [British or Anglo-Saxon] Race” (Springett 1951, 11). To judge from views expressed to the British Government in 1996–1997, a 2008 updated reprint of Connon 1951 (Connon and Clark 2008, 54–66), and media around the 2023 Coronation, these beliefs still hold and resurface when the Stone is topical in the media (HH41/2976/1; Browning n.d. [1996]). They are therefore not related to expressions of Scottish independence but instead expound the value of the monarchy and Commonwealth of Nations (Connon and Clark 2008, 4).

Trope 4: The Stone is an Object of Science

The fourth and final trope relies on the boundaries of what evidence-based scholarship can tell us, embracing application of science and its latest technologies. It surfaces and resurfaces in what are notionally two different contexts – political and academic. It captures the “authorized” discourse of academics, of the police, and of government and institutions that rely on the findings of trained researchers or “experts”, as well as official postholders such as the “Historiographer Royal for Scotland”. This stance ultimately concludes that the material authenticity of the complex, weathered object that is now in Perth Museum, is indeed the Stone that Edward I removed from Scone Abbey, and the same one taken from Westminster Abbey in 1950 by the four young Scots. Further, as no documentary or archaeological evidence exists for the use of a stone at Scone prior to the inauguration of Alexander III in 1249, a persuasive case exists that this marked the beginning of new ceremonial practices, possibly including the “creation” of the Stone itself by repurposing an older worked stone (Broun 2003; Campbell 2003).

From 1951, it is possible to trace when scientific knowledge of the Stone was used to affirm or strengthen debates about its material authenticity; what qualified as scientific evidence, of course, changes through time with requirements, expectations, the trajectory of new findings, technological advancements, their availability, and whether there is the will to apply them to the Stone.

In 1951, as the repaired Stone was returned to Westminster Abbey, the authorities needed to verify that the Stone taken from Westminster Abbey 15 weeks earlier was indeed the same one. This approach relied on consideration of materiality and expert witness rather than scientific techniques. The police brought Westminster Abbey’s Clerk of Works, William Bishop, to Scotland; having previously seen the Stone out of the Chair, he assessed its dimensions, construction and general appearance. The police also visually compared a fragment that had fallen off the Stone in Westminster Abbey (*Press and Journal* 1951; *Express Staff Reporters* 1951a). There is no evidence in 1951 that the public doubted their conclusions.

In 1972, the extensive media publicity around the Gray replica donated to a Dundee church prompted new scientific investigations. Edinburgh sculptor Pilkington Jackson (1972) successfully pleaded with the authorities to “see the authenticity of the Stone at Westminster substantiated ... in order to avoid trouble at the time of the next Coronation” (Fraser 1972). This reveals a concern about the implications for the legitimacy of a coronation if the Stone was not the real Stone. Based on a secret formal review, the final report included Bishop’s report to the Dean of Westminster of his 1951 inspection of the Stone in Scotland, a signed statement by the Detective Inspector in charge of

the Special Branch of the Glasgow City Police focused on Gray and his replica activity in 1951, and an especially commissioned Home Office x-ray examination of the Stone to detect the metallic tie bolts that Gray said he had used in his repair.

Significantly, within a fortnight of the 3 July 1996 announcement that the Stone would return to Scotland, officials passed six government files to the Scottish Records Office (SRO) for early release to the media, and hence to the public. This package of raw materials specifically included and highlighted the evidence collated or acquired in 1972–1973 about whether the Stone that returned in 1951 was the Stone that had been removed in 1950 (Mason 1996; Slorance 1996). As David J. Brown of the SRO reported: “despite the ambiguities and complexities of the file, none of the media, following our notes, seriously doubted the central findings of the file on the Stone’s authenticity”, after what was “the most frenzied press preview that the SRO has seen” (Brown 1996). The resultant media coverage was extensive (HH41/3472/1). Letters sent to the Prime Minister and others in government confirm that not all members of the public were so readily persuaded (HH41/2976/1, a weighty file).

With the Stone back in Scotland in 1996, it came into the care of the national heritage agency, Historic Scotland (HS). HS became the first body to instigate scientific recording and archaeological examination of the Stone: “We were all very conscious that it was special, wasn’t just a bit of stone. We had it very thoroughly recorded” (Graeme Munro, then Chief Executive of HS, interview 2022). This led to a 1997 HS and Society of Antiquaries of Scotland conference, concluding as edited proceedings in which experts’ new insights were formally presented (Welander, Breeze, and Clancy 2003). A criticism was that this book ignored the [material] authenticity debates (Aitchison 2006). The important key findings of the new research had, though, quickly made their way into the popular domain, with HS’s specially created guidebook dedicated to the Stone (Breeze and Munro 1997).

The new focus on the Stone and the accessibility of the now Stone-less Chair prompted an in-depth study by Rodwell (2013), Westminster Abbey’s Archaeologist. Like Aitchison (2009, 9–11), Rodwell acknowledged that people query the Stone’s material authenticity. He also noted that the emotive name Stone of Destiny is less historic than the (place-based) Stone of Scone: it evokes myth rather than “substantive history” (Rodwell 2013, xii). Rodwell’s view was that science is being ignored, and [in part] that we are witnessing “politically motivated fabrication and dissemination of false information [...] regarding the antiquity, authenticity and peregrinations of the Stone of Scone” (10).

Rodwell thus encapsulates the sober empiricist stance that characterizes this trope, in which evidence is wielded to protect the authentic integrity of the Stone and fend off baseless allegations. However, to understand the nature and nuances of the “work” that its authenticity is performing, each trope plays a role and it is frequently in the tensions between them that the content and significance of the Stone’s authenticity take shape. This leads to a discussion of how authenticity works, which addresses both popular *and* academic tropes.

Authenticity Works

Four central tropes have been introduced that grapple with the authenticity of the Stone. From this it is evident that a multitude of differently positioned actors care about its authenticity, often caring that it should be inauthentic. In this section, focus shifts from asking

“what” and “who” to examining “why” and “with what effects”. Starting from the incentives driving these tropes and the means used to generate them, the analysis considers why they have the lives they do and the responses they evoke. What causes, wider discourses or beliefs do they energize? The discussion is framed around four identified motivations:

- (1) Minding the gap – to cracking the riddle of the Stone by filling the plot holes in a mysterious and intriguing mythical story.
- (2) Political and identity work – to provoke debate about the constitution of Scotland and the state of its society, and to strengthen personal, community and national identities.
- (3) Knowledge-making – to create new, academically grounded knowledge and understanding.
- (4) Risk management – to manage and mitigate the dangers of the Stone not being perceived as “authentic”.

Such motivations may be conscious or subconscious. The ways they operate and the effects they have on public perception can be remarkably similar despite originating from different aims or drawing on different tropes.

For each motivation, the analysis highlights core “ingredients” that give the tropes force – such as provocation, humour, appeals to belief and myth – and illustrate these through specific actors and events, landing in a discussion about the ripple effects.

Motivation 1: Minding the gap

In popular and local imagination, authenticity fuels the weaving of legend, filling the gaps in a story devoid of academic scholarship before 1996: mystery, intrigue, and narrative possibility thrive. The case study is vernacular uses of authenticity: a flush of lay (hi)stories of the Stone that have appeared since 1992 (Gerber), with a peak a few years after the release of the 2008 *Stone of Destiny* film about the taking and recovery of the Stone in 1950/51 (Porter 2010), and a renewed interest with the 2024 opening of the Perth Museum. Independently produced, sometimes self-published, these works constitute a new tradition that, in its own way, adds to the expressive and spectral authenticity of the Stone.

The intention is not to deconstruct these works to make something else seem more authentic, what Theodossopoulos’ described as the “trap of authenticity” (2013, 344–347). Nor is it to denigrate them as “inauthentic history”. Their authors are free to write and be published without establishing academically validated authority or submitting their claims to peer review. What is interesting about these works is their cumulative inventiveness in filling gaps, in representing, reconstituting and reinforcing Tropes 1–3 and their ongoing transformations and progeny (e.g., Maule 2024).

This is clearly the people’s Stone in terms of minding that there is a gap, one that anyone can attempt to fill (cf. Aitchison 2009, 74). The route might be explicitly personal (Gilbert 2012), a “journey of discovery that changed my perception of my own heritage and belonging” (Doyle 2018), or a fun, shared hunt with friends (Naples and Bews 2021). All authors reveal a compulsion for resolving a mystery. They mirror tourists who

fervently seek the authentic in the hidden, inaccessible and backstage of what is formally presented to them (Theodossopoulos 2013, 243).

Such outputs firmly and proudly assert their personal authority to authenticate. In subtle ways, authors seek to give credence to their ways of working, referencing some sources, telling the reader how much research they have done, or emphasising the benefits of not being experts and going with “gut feeling” (Gilbert 2012, 83). Academic stories are challenged for being too minimalist. Gilbert (2012, 38) contrasts the “bric-a-brac” of archaeological knowledge, with the case for less tangible traditions, even if “somewhat suspect”. There tends to be a faith in local legends. Perceived gaps are filled by lay historians who go where experts will not tread: the authors may “cross the boundary between fact and fiction” to fill gaps, creating “creative conclusions which the listener retells as truth” (Gerber 1997, 40). They specifically criticize scholars for not being prepared to countenance and discuss the possibility of substitution and for not considering the provenance of the Stone prior to 1296 (Hulbert 2024, 130–139, 167–169). Scientific evidence which demonstrates that the Stone’s geological provenance is local to Scone is deployed to “prove” that it must have been substituted (Hulbert 2024, 4).

There is an explicit trend to let readers make their own decisions, find their own truth from what is presented to them. Looked at from an academic perspective, unevidenced assertion can build upon unevidenced assertion. Through layering of sources in magazine articles and even fiction, the reader is assured that Tranter’s novels are “fictional, *though based on extensive research*” (e.g., Hulbert 2024, 48, 71; authors’ emphasis).

To mirror the approach of Banks (2013), nominal authenticity is claimed with reference to modern myths that “confirm” the Stone’s origin and substitution; expressive authentication in that the authors develop a personal relationship in telling the Stone’s story in their own way; and instrumental authenticity in that there is a desire to challenge the research of experts and its application by cultural bodies. These inventive stories augment the well-known Tropes 1–3 in a context of popular “fragmented awareness of Scotland’s past, and ... the ways in which many [dramatic tableaux] ... have set up their independent myths” (Ascherson 2002, viii).

Authenticities are also in tension with each other. Deconstructing the familiar and popular tropes is regarded as poor sport: “Papers kill mystery of Stone dead (almost)” (Grylls 1996); knowing the Stone’s geology “ruins the story a little bit” (Stephen Brannigan, Scone Palace Manager, interview 2023). A *Times* editorial, on the role of symbols in statehood with reference to the process of coronation as well as the return of the Stone, advocated, “Too heavy a reliance on the rational and scientific can make a country crabbed [...] it is better to accept a generously offered fake than to insist on authentication” (Times 1996). Personal and magic matters, and stories, should be left open-ended. This is matched though by a desire expressed in the vernacular outputs to demonstrate Tropes 1–3.

Further, as facts emerged in 1996 that challenged the 1951 mix-up trope, suspicion that the authorities were hiding the truth only supported popular perspectives: “... [it] is what you would expect from the Establishment” (Labour MP John McAllion, quoted in Scotsman 1996). Writing in the nineteenth century as Historiographer Royal for Scotland, William Forbes Skene (1869, 2) observed that criticism had failed to “meddle” with the “naked improbability” of the myths surrounding the Stone. Little has changed in this respect. People *want* gaps filled with other possibilities to be true – a fantastic

mash-up of memorable, if outdated, historical ideas, inventive (hi)stories, medieval and modern myths – or they are keen to share where the real Stone is to be found (Richard Welander of his 1996 experience when at Historic Scotland, interview 2022).

A blank in knowledge is particularly unsatisfactory when it relates to the early medieval period (cE 300–900), credited with giving Scotland much of its early identity. However, this view hinges on Irish migration myths, and a long-standing trope that credits King Cinaed mac Ailpín (Kenneth MacAlpin) with uniting Scots and Picts, a claim not supported by current thinking (Broun 2015, 107–108). People paid to tell Scotland’s history can find this uncomfortable. If the Stone was not being used before 1249, “well that then wipes out all those very early [Scottish] inaugurations [...] I think that would be quite sad. So if you’re asking me, I’m going to invest in the lie. Live with the lie” (interview with tour guide at Scone Palace, 2023). The reasons for wanting to fill the gap clearly therefore extend to the next motivation.

Motivation 2: Political and Identity Work

If authenticity, as heritage literature and policy suggest, is a culturally contingent quality with political implications (Gao and Jones 2020; Lixinski 2022; Orbaşlı 2015) – something that can, depending on the circumstances, “create, reinforce or undo identity-based difference” (Lixinski 2022, 1219) – it is unsurprising that it has been both challenged and reaffirmed in relation to an artefact so laden with symbolism as the Stone of Destiny. Here, focus is on the instrumental work of authenticity (Banks 2013), in which claims are mobilized intentionally to achieve symbolic, material and political ends. Yet the political work performed through the Stone’s tropes also intersects with more expressive orientations, where nominal authenticity is set aside to safeguard the Stone’s political significance for personal and collective identity. These overlapping uses show how the spectre of unresolved claims remains politically productive by repeatedly resurfacing.

While the Stone often appears as little more than a footnote in a broader narrative about the political origins of Scotland and the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1983), it has, especially since the 1950s, been activated when the question of Scottish self-rule has moved to the forefront of public debate. At these times, actors have deployed questions about the authenticity of the Stone to cause a stir, provoke opponents, and rally the like-minded. Rather than anger and hurt, which are sentiments often identified in contested heritage scenarios (Farrell-Banks 2022; González-Ruibal 2023), many claims are presented “tongue in cheek”, relying on a mix of humour and underlying gravity and grievance.

This recipe already underpinned the reception and narrative of the Stone’s removal from Westminster in 1950. As the most publicized political stunt involving the Stone to date, it stirred polarized emotions of pride and outrage in public debate. Although the actors’ aims – to restore this symbol of sovereignty as part of the push for a Scottish Parliament – were serious and rooted in the goals of the National Covenant movement (MacCormick 2008), it was popularly cast as a daring ruse or dismissed as a student prank (*Belfast News-Letter* 1950; *Courier and Advertiser* 1950a, 1950b; Jones 1960). This reading was further cemented by the fact that no one was punished. While the taking of the Stone did not so much challenge its authenticity as rely on it to make the act meaningful, it underscored the Stone’s political potency, drew wider attention to the nationalist cause,

and ultimately boosted support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) (Harvie and Jones 2000, 169; Lynch 2013).

It was also under a mantle of mischief that Gray underwrote his “Stones mix-up” trope. His role in the Stone’s movements, repair, and return to Westminster in 1950–1951 is crucial to the Stone’s spectral life because it materialized uncertainty. By alluding to having created multiple copies, he cast doubt on which stone was truly “real”. At the same time, in a shrewd move, he reinforced the authenticity of the original by undermining its material integrity – carefully collecting and distributing 34 numbered fragments from the repair process to select people in Scotland and beyond (Foster 2025). While handling the stones and fragments with great care and providing his own “certificates” of authenticity (including for further unnumbered fragments), Gray ensured that the Stone returned to Westminster Abbey was no longer fully there, cleverly decentring the legitimacy of English possession. He further added to this by physically labeling the Stone “xxxv” [35]: the least significant of the collected and physically numbered fragments (Foster 2025, 348). He kept this campaign alive, fuelling the “mix-up” trope in the press through successive claims about his replicas, such as in 1963, and with his 1974 disclosure of a secret message allegedly hidden inside the Stone (Ritchie 1974). Gray later revealed that he did not believe that Edward I took the real Stone in 1296 but that, nevertheless, “The Stone of Destiny under the Coronation Chair by tradition belongs to Scotland, and I and a great many other Scots will never be satisfied until it is back in Scotland” (Gray 1971). The Stone was a “replica” to him, but it had long historic roots and a nation’s political grievances had gravitated towards it.

A more instrumental, yet still wry, use of the Stone’s inauthenticity has come from politicians such as Alex Salmond, who repeatedly wove the Stone into campaigns for Scottish independence. He was active in the SNP from 1987 and served as First Minister of Scotland from 2007 until his resignation following the failed 2014 Scottish independence referendum. When the Stone was returned to Scotland in 1996, the move was credited to Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland Michael Forsyth, who hoped it would cool rising constitutional debates. Salmond, then leader of the SNP, welcomed the act but did so guardedly, teasing Forsyth about whether it was the real Stone and predicting that it would backfire by fuelling national sentiment, a forecast borne out by the successful Scottish devolution referendum the following year. Salmond also used the occasion to push for the repatriation of other cultural objects, such as the Book of Deer and the Lewis Chessmen (Akbar 2007; *Courier and Advertiser* 1996a; Salmond 2007). This symbolic agenda continued during his time as First Minister, through references to the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath (McAnulla and Crines 2017), initiatives like Homecoming festivals for the Scottish diaspora, and the development of the historic battlefield site of Bannockburn (Clarke 2020). More recently, as leader of the Alba Party, he seized on the Stone’s temporary return to Westminster for the Coronation of King Charles III, arguing that it should never again leave Scotland. A true repatriation would have no strings attached. Linking its fate directly to the stalled independence process, he told Sky News in 2023: “I don’t really see why any Scottish government should just meekly say we’ll give you back the property which you stole 700 years ago”.

All along, however, like Gray, Salmond did not believe the Stone was the original. He subscribed, if loosely, to the “medieval fake” trope. In 2008, ahead of the release of the Hollywood film *Stone of Destiny* (Porter 2010) – which the SNP reportedly hoped would

boost its campaign for independence (Allardyce 2008) – Salmond reignited debate by claiming that Edward I had been “duped” with a substitute in 1296 to protect Scotland’s true national symbol (Cramb 2008). At the same time, he dismissed that the returned Stone was a Gray replica, insisting that the Stone now in Scotland was the same one that had lain in Westminster Abbey for centuries. He summed this position up neatly in an interview with author Neil MacLeod, at an Alba Party Conference: “I think it is an original fake, not a fake of a fake” (Salmond 2023). While their strategies differed, challenging the Stone’s authenticity served a political purpose for both Gray and Salmond: its relative authenticity was sufficient to mobilize its significance for a distinct Scottish national identity centred on self-rule, and tap into a useful grievance that marked an unequal relationship with England.

Beyond politicians, responses in art and popular culture have also relied on humour and gripe as vehicles for activism in the face of political impotence (Gerber 1997, 2, 153). In 1950–1951, the dramatic hunt for the Stone immediately inspired satirical songs. The booklet *Sangs o’ the Stane* was meant to be sung by 30,000 Scottish football fans to taunt their English rivals at the Wembley international the same year (Scotland won) (*Express Staff Reporters* 1951b). One song, “The Wee Magic Stane” by John McEvoy, was enduringly popular, fanned by BBC efforts in 1959 to restrict its broadcast; it made light of authenticity by imagining the “real” stone lost among mass-produced copies (Berwick 1959; McEvoy 1951).

Artist George Wyllie has similarly drawn on the Stone’s magnetism in playful installations with self-produced facsimiles, used to provoke reflection on Scotland’s destiny. Some of these creations can be carried like a suitcase, implying that everyone can and should take ownership of what is theirs, in the context of personal and political wellbeing (Foster 2024b; Gerber 1992, xii, figure).

Today, in its most rudimentary form, inauthenticity claims provide a quick retort whenever the Stone re-enters the public view. Its temporary return to Westminster for the Coronation in 2023 became a flashpoint for superficial uses of the substitution tropes by the public (see this article’s opening quote from “Jean”). Comment sections on social media posts, whether published by official institutions like Historic Environment Scotland (HES 2023a) or pro-independence outlets such as *The National* (2023), contained numerous assertions that the Stone was fake. Some echoed Robbie the Pict’s (1996) claim that English (and later British) monarchs had been sitting on a “cludgie cover” since 1296. The “medieval fake” trope, while rooted in genuine historical interest (e.g., Richardson 1951) and in the tradition of filling narrative gaps (Motivation 1) here serves to save face and deliver a quick joke at England’s expense. Others turn to the “Stones mix-up” trope, suggesting the real Stone has remained hidden since it was taken in 1950 or is kept in the Arlington bar in Glasgow. Scottish nationalist visitors to the Stone in Perth Museum are likewise reported to insist it is not the genuine object, “it is hidden or it is buried” (interview 2024). With just a few words, the Stone is seemingly stripped of political potency, and by extension so too is England’s authority over Scotland.

If taken at face value, these engagements with the Stone’s authenticity, whether the politics are explicit or implicit, can make it seem as though few care about the object beyond its use as a joke, a tool or a grievance (Figure 4). As Ascherson (2002, 20) observed in relation to the Stone’s return from England to Scotland in 1996, one might have expected widespread joy on the occasion. Instead, reactions were subdued, with many



Figure 4. The return of the Stone of Destiny to Edinburgh on 30 November 1996, with a person in the crowd holding up a sign questioning its authenticity. Photograph by Mathieu Polak, @Sygma/Getty Images.

dismissing the gesture as London’s attempt to buy Scotland with an “auld cludgie cover” (Ascherson 2002, 20) and being resentful of the colonial undertone in presenting it as merely on loan (Gerber 1997, 172). In Ascherson’s (2002, 20) reading, the unionist sentiment behind the transfer “mattered more than the object”, and he suggests that there was a “reversed discourse of authenticity”: the public apparently preferred that the returned Stone was inauthentic to prolong a grievance rather than receive the (real) Stone back (Ascherson 2003, 263). Ian Hamilton (1984, 86), leader of the group that took the Stone from Westminster Abbey, similarly reflected that: “we need our symbols and perhaps we need England to keep them for us. When we have them ourselves, we lose interest in them”. Even so, Ascherson argues, the sullen comments mask a deeper truth – that the Stone did, and still does, matter.

I was just thinking, a nation’s soul is in its people, and is the Stone somehow representative of the soul of the nation? (Archivist, Scone Palace, interview 2023).

This is evident in the Stone’s role in shaping personal national identities, or what has been termed “personal nationalism” (Cohen 1996; Tinson and Saren 2022), where heritage sites and objects allow individuals to connect, to interpret their experiences in relation to family, and position themselves in relation to national ideologies. For many, the Stone’s meaning is not diminished by questions of provenance or by uncertainty about whether the “real” stone was taken, returned, or hidden. Rona MacDonald, from a multi-generational politically active SNP family, recalled her mother’s conviction that

monks had concealed the true Stone and left replicas scattered across Scotland. Yet, as she explained: “To be honest I don’t really think it is important whether a stone is that stolen from Scotland, repatriated from Westminster, that which went back down south or any other replica. Its importance is not in its authenticity as a historical artifact but as a symbol of the sovereignty of Scotland and its people” (pers. comm. 2025). Other interviewees working at Edinburgh Castle and Scone Palace echoed this view. One remarked, “I don’t think it matters if it’s the real Stone or not. It’s what it symbolizes, and there’s enough evidence to say there’s some continuity in the Stone to do it” (interview 2023). Another commented, “even if it did just start at Scone, made out of local sandstone ... that in itself is enough for me, because that was where our state of nationhood started, really, bringing Picts and Scots from either side together” (interview 2023). In helping individuals locate themselves within a shared national story, the Stone’s material authenticity is negotiable or even irrelevant; its expressive authenticity, by contrast, performs cultural and political work that extends beyond grievance or rhetorical rebuttal.

The Stone also carries other meanings that work in the realm of national identity. Religious interpretations frame the Stone as a conduit of divine power, linking it to biblical kingship and holy monarchy (Bradley 2023). In addition to the simple cross carved into it, the rich legend of Jacob’s pillow has imbued it with political and spiritual value, as something capable of protecting Britain and affirming connections to Israel. Bradley (2023) further points to its significance as possibly involved in Europe’s earliest *Christian* inauguration in 574. The Scottish Knights Templar, an order long associated with the guardianship of holy relics, have also engaged with the Stone, casting themselves as custodians of its spiritual and political legacy (Gray 1989). By claiming to harbour the original, or to use replicas to maintain coronation rituals, they have sought to preserve its sacred authority and assert Scottish sovereignty. Indeed, as archaeologist Gilchrist (2020, 179) notes when writing about monastic heritage and nationalism in Scotland, “the most powerful evocations of nationhood bring together religious and secular power”. In this sense, the Stone can be compared to other heritage objects such as the Jelling runestones in Denmark, which symbolise the birth of the kingdom and link the Vikings to Christianity in a cultural continuum to the present (Niklasson and Hølleland 2023, 75).

These diverse engagements show how the Stone is involved in both explicit and implicit political work, and how authenticity debates can become politically generative. As Jamie Hamilton, son of Ian Hamilton (from the 1950 Stone removal) reflects: “We have a lot of polarized arguments in Scotland, and I think ... the Stone of Destiny, and my father always maintained this, has divided people” (interview 2023).

Viewed through the lens of spectral authenticity, much of the Stone’s political work lies not in resolving whether it is “real”, but in sustaining conditions in which legitimacy can be argued, mocked, resisted, and reclaimed. From Gray’s replicas and Salmond’s strategic ambiguity to online “fake Stone” quips, the point is less to settle authenticity than to keep the Stone’s political meaning available and contestable. As a shorthand for Scottish perceptions of the relationship with England, questioning authenticity continues to subtly reinforce ingroup–outgroup distinctions – a grievance too dear to let go of. At the same time, as a cultural heirloom and sacred symbol, the Stone is often considered authentic because of what it signifies, enabling expressions of belonging and identity. Taken

together, these acts and statements ensure that the Stone continues to play an intriguing role in conversations about Scottish nationhood.

Motivation 3: Knowledge-making

For scholars and researchers, authenticity works as a gateway to produce new, evidence-based knowledge of the Stone, including its history and cultural significance. Knowledge-making is not limited to academics, professional researchers, independent scholars, and institutional experts (see Motivation 1), but their work shares some critical characteristics; cumulatively, their findings are what underpins risk management strategies (Motivation 4). This is a diverse cohort: research may be commissioned by institutions or undertaken by their expert staff (e.g., Caldwell 2018; Hall 2026; Hill 2003); produced by institutional experts (e.g., Rodwell 2013; HES 2024a); encouraged through conferences and learned bodies (e.g., papers in Welander, Breeze, and Clancy 2003); or initiated as “curiosity”-driven projects by university academics (e.g., the authors’ work) or independent scholars (Aitchison 2009). Outputs range from reports to edited volumes, monographs, and journal articles, with different levels of peer review.

Although modern criticism *does* now “meddle” with understanding the Stone (cf. Skene 1869, 2), the questions being asked are very diverse and extend beyond those limited to myth, legend, or material authenticity alone. At the root of these enquiries is ultimately an understanding of the connection of the Stone to the past, and hence, indirectly or otherwise, to its material authenticity. As Lixinski (2022, 1216) notes, ancient objects play this double role of being evidence of the past, but also heritage at the same time. The research presented in this article concerns the latter, considering what lies behind perceptions or experience of authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013, 351–353; Holtorf 2013). Several of the seven categories of the work of authenticity identified by Lixinski (2022) in relation to the practice of heritage apply in this context, the “authenticity as” in what follows.

Whether [my research] favours Scotland or favours England is irrelevant to the line of research [...] We are interested in scholarship, not in promoting political or dubious motives [...] it is up to other people to read it and decide what they think of it (Warwick Rodwell speaking with Diane Gibbs, interview 2022).

In the work of scholars focusing on the past, authenticity is overtly instrumental, driven by the need for what Rodwell (2013, vii–viii, xii) describes as “authentic history”, respecting the qualities of a rigorous “unemotional” scholarship. Ethically and professionally, it requires the work to be dispassionate, but not for lack of interest or indeed passion; it is a place where the ambiguities of interpretation are carefully addressed. As David Breeze, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in 1996, put it, “I’m interested in publication and getting information out, and trying to write the correct story” (interview 2022). Authenticity in this (material) sense is therefore nominal, working as an index of truth about what really happened.

The Stone’s nominal authenticity is also clearly articulated through scientific identification of its geological origins and its earliest documented use in Scottish inaugurations. Authenticity operates here as a value maker, evidenced in the formal assessment of new knowledge in “statements of cultural significance”. It is also evidenced in the ways since

1996 that the Stone has acquired new expressive authenticity. This has constituted and nourished new place-based authenticities, at local and national levels, as understandings of the relationship between people, place, and the Stone evolve: as a member of the Stone Reminiscence Group proudly and wistfully said, “They can prove that the Stone belongs to Scone [...] Nobody ever told me when I was a boy that it came from Scone” (workshop May 2023).

At Westminster Abbey, Rodwell’s study took the Coronation Chair as its starting point, forensically examining its relationship with the Stone (see also Binski 2003). Interviews with David Hoyle, Dean of Westminster and Tony Trowles, Head of Abbey Collection and Librarian, reveal how new knowledge of the Stone acquired after it had left for Scotland, gave new meanings to its life at the Abbey (2022, 2024). That the Stone had been in the Chair for centuries was critical to the heated debate in 1996 about whether the Stone should have been removed at all, a political decision that made Westminster Abbey, art historians and many others very unhappy (e.g., Binski 1996). Subsequent research both tangibly and intangibly enhanced that relationship:

... it was a very sad thing to remove the Stone from the object that had been made to contain it, and where it had been for [...] 700-plus years. I think discovering that the whole history was more complex, that it had probably been chained in place in the Confessor’s Chapel, so it couldn’t be removed, that it was a votive offering, that the Chair could be seen as a reliquary. All that made it more interesting. (Tony Trowles, interview 2022)

Once “freed” from the Chair and available for study in Scotland, the Stone became the focus of intensive material investigation: “we were photographing it, drawing it, cleaning it, reporting on it as an artefact”, said David Breeze (interview 2022). On the back of this, a different articulation of authenticity was constructed, where the Stone was compared to objects used in inauguration rites among its early medieval neighbours. This aligned the Stone with, and in some sense positioned it within, a shared tradition of European royal practices (Welander, Breeze, and Clancy 2003). Further, forensic examination of the Stone (Hill 2003; technical drawing by Ian G Scott) established a sequence of previously unrecognized events and enhanced the depth and curiosity of its cultural life. As Breeze expressed it:

we’ve done the research and it is such a complicated stone. It’s not something that could be knocked up overnight [...] I was upset with Alex Salmond trying to say, no, it’s a fake. Because the real thing is actually far more interesting [...] I really have no truck with [the Stone] being regarded as a fake, because I think it’s really significant in its own way, and ties us into a much wider view of power. (interview 2022)

In 2008, historian Ted Cowan was robust: “It is perfectly fine for him to believe that the Stone is a replica, but there is the whole matter of proof” (Lister 2008). Salmond, by contrast, “rejected the idea of using science to get to the bottom of the mystery and said that it is better left unresolved” (Wilkie 2008). The expanding capacity to examine the Stone’s materiality and scientific properties is now a critical part of how scholars and experts recognize and reconstitute the Stone’s authenticity when their aim is to understand what happened in the past.

What has emerged in the above is also authenticity as a difference maker. Esoteric new academic findings, such as twenty-first century laser scanning and scientific tests, circulate unevenly due to access and familiarity across different audiences. It has been

readily received by the learned Dean and Chapter at Westminster Abbey, which had a vested interest in understanding, and by HES and its enthusiastic, professional stewards, several of whom said in interviews that they explained the evidence to the public yet left them to reach their own conclusions (interviews 2023). Conversely at Scone, outwith those expert-driven institutional networks, “We like to tell the traditional story” (interview Stephen Brannigan, Scone Palace Manager, 2023). For sure, “it’s very difficult to change people’s minds ... even with information that you think is cast iron” (interview David Breeze, 2022).

The tensions and sometimes parallel existence between knowledge-motivated authenticities and the popular desire to create stories where gaps exist, or political and identity work, are therefore profound. This is compounded when next considering their intimate relationship to risk management.

Motivation 4: Risk Management

In official and custodial contexts, the authenticity of the Stone is managed as a matter of guarding against the dangers of doubt. This is both to avoid political and social unrest by preserving trust in the nation’s heritage, specifically one of the *Materials of State* (BBC 2025), and to mitigate any reputational or institutional harm. Authenticity as gatekeeping (Lixinski 2022) falls in with concepts of Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006). Although institutional practice is not monolithic and continues to evolve (Jones and Yarrow 2022), it nonetheless operates in a circular framework in which authenticity as fixed-ness (Lixinski 2022) tends to prevail. Institutions largely define what authenticity means and how it will be applied, drawing primarily on what may be deemed recognized scholarship/research, that by tradition still largely focuses on questions of material authenticity (Trobe 4). Efforts to research and give regard to social value are only emergent, if progressing (Robson 2025). This means that authenticity, through how it works and is enacted, expresses “control and power” (Lixinski 2022) and takes a traditional perspective on the definition of authenticity.

The central concern for institutions is managing risks around the Stone’s use in UK coronations, how its continued use is perceived, and how its handling conveys appropriate dignity and respect. No one wants to unleash the genies of popular tropes and the public responses they may provoke. The key bodies are the Commissioners for the Safeguarding of the Regalia and hence the Scottish Government, HES their advisors, and the parties who “handle” the Stone at Coronations and related ceremonies, notably the Dean and Chapter at Westminster Abbey and the Scottish Lord Lyon (the Royal Family is silent on such matters). The concern is about enabling the ritualized act of monarch-making, with implications for intra-UK relations, its Commonwealth relations, and global perceptions of the British state if, without the Stone, it is not regarded as legitimate.

Further examples of risk mitigation comprise using material authenticity to deflect or divert attention from contested debates, to consolidate expert authority and official stewardship, and to assert political neutrality. “Upstream” practices, anticipating and seeking to nip “problems” in the bud, came to the fore in 1996. With co-ordinated and concerted efforts across government bodies, ministers could stand up in the UK Parliament and say, for example:

Since the measures we have announced today would be meaningless without public confidence in the stone's authenticity, about which rumours have abounded since its temporary removal from the abbey in 1950, *we have today published the confidential files relating to the authentication tests carried out on the stone.* (Hansard 1996, 1059–1060, our emphasis)

Parliamentarians were thereby specifically advised of the weight they could afford to the 1973 “scientific” examination (quashing Trope 2).

In practice, there is a reliance on the third-party, objective evidence-base of experts and their opinions; yet physical access to the Stone for research is highly controlled and selective, if for practical reasons, but this can be a point of contention (*Courier and Advertiser* 1996b; context in Fortey 1996). Access is though transformed by technology, for anyone with access to a computer can since 2023 pore over every minute detail of the Stone in digital 3D (HES 2023b). Contrast this with 1972 when risk mitigation involved keeping new knowledge secret: the scientific testing by the Police Scientific Branch was conducted out of hours, the report “For Official Use Only” (Home Office 1973). Its execution was witnessed also by Home Office staff, technical experts and Westminster Abbey, who each signed and validated the conclusions. As was only discovered in 16 (Welder 1996, 249–251), risk mitigation also included ensuring the Stone could self-authenticate in the future. Westminster Abbey’s “Surveyor of the Fabric” took the opportunity in 1973 to insert a tiny lead tube containing a piece of paper with a message in it that only Westminster Abbey would be able to corroborate. Ironically, Gray had covertly beaten them to it, leaving his “xxxv” mark on the Stone, as well as the letter he allegedly inserted (Motivation 2).

The official version of the Stone’s history and significance is carefully managed. Unusually for a single museum artefact, it has its own formal Statement of Significance (HES 2024b). It is HES that continues to update this 38-page online document, although it no longer presents the Stone to the public. Such documents are self-reinforcing registers of institutional authority as arbiters of value, something that is further reinforced by not naming the authors. The context for their 2024 revision included new knowledge arising from HES’s condition survey of the Stone in advance of its departure to London for the 2023 Coronation. In 2023, HES could both celebrate its ownership of that important task, its technical and conservation skills, and observations arising. Accompanied by a stage-managed media event in April 2023 in which the latest 3D scanning technologies played a prominent role, supported by their online publication a year later of their findings and interpretation of these (HES 2024a, 2024b), HES consolidated its expert authority. Kathy Richmond, Head of Collections and Applied Conservation reflected (interview 2023) how HES could:

try and talk about the Stone in a more technical way to help the public understand a bit more about what this was and what role it was going to play in the Coronation. Also, a little bit about its origin story, because there were a lot of people putting articles in the press in a vacuum which were not well researched and putting out messages that were misleading. That was really helpful, I think, in terms of rebalancing that dialogue.

Institutions such as HES need to assert political neutrality, and scholarship and scientific evidence provide the necessary scaffolding and handhold. A steward at Edinburgh Castle explained: “We’re told to keep it non-political, but ... the thing about the Stone ... some people are going to believe it, some aren’t” (interview 2023); feedback at Perth Museum is similar.

Based on this research, the interviews, and personal experience of media attention, it is evident that unanticipated stories, such as Gray's "xxxv" mark and the creation and circulation of Stone fragments, grab popular interest. Gray's story is now supported by new empirical evidence (Foster 2025; 2026). Yet communicating this evidence and its meanings necessarily reanimates the spectre of Trope 2, with its associated political and identity work. This unresolved dynamic has vexed institutional actors since 1950. Ironically, new scholarship can therefore unexpectedly counter or discomfort current risk management strategies.

In this context, nominal authenticity (scientific and "objective") is third-party while expressive authenticity is the authoritative voice. The key point, however, is that authenticity is instrumental. It is actively managed through institutional controls to hold a non-political line that does not call into question the UK-wide significance or ceremonial uses of the Stone.

Concluding Reflections

... the mass of imputed human meanings encrusted about it [the Stone] so thickly that the distinction between what is alive and what is inanimate grows shadowy. (Ascherson 2002, 25 on what matters about the Stone).

This investigation of the Stone of Destiny's "spectral authenticity" has demonstrated how multiple ideas about this object's identity and legitimacy coexist within the same cultural framework since the 1950s. The interdisciplinary approach combining analysis of primary sources, including archives, ethnography, and media discourse, has revealed authenticity's complex operations in context where the traditional Western-centric concept of authenticity is the norm, and where (Bruner 1994, 399–401) the locus of authority and power to "authenticate" inevitably has a bearing on who constructs history.

The analysis is structured around four authenticity tropes that coexist rather than cancel each other out: the medieval fake, the 1951 mix-up and replica theories, the myth of Jacob's Pillow, and appeals to scholarship and scientific truth. These tropes have been found to serve four key motivations: narrative completion, political work, knowledge-making and risk management. Significantly, these motivations frequently intersect – Gray's replicas function as both political provocation and storytelling devices, while scientific evidence serves both knowledge production and risk mitigation.

Building on Banks' (2013) categories of nominal, expressive, and instrumental authenticity, and Lixinski's (2022) analysis of authenticity's "work", this study demonstrates how different authenticity forms can be simultaneously deployed strategically, believed genuinely, and managed institutionally. It argues that unauthorized voices are as crucial as expert knowledge for understanding how authenticity operates. Spectral authenticity offers a lens for examining how authenticity claims haunt objects, intertwining, accumulating, and shaping their significance in ways that cannot be neatly resolved. More specifically, it directs attention to the temporal lives of these claims: how narratives, rumours, doubts, and certainties rarely disappear once disproven or institutionally rejected, but remain available for reactivation in new political and cultural circumstances.

The Stone case reveals authenticity's capacity to do work rather than simply attest to provenance. The convergence of scholarly truth-seeking, popular belief, and institutional risk management has been shown to contribute to the Stone's cultural biography. This

research challenges heritage practice to recognize authenticity as fundamentally generative. Rather than settling questions, authenticity debates generate cultural significance. However, explaining and justifying that significance requires immersion in political debates that institutions actively seek to avoid. Among the most generative are claims to “inauthenticity”. In line with Ireland, Brown, and Schofield (2020, 827), who uses the lens of “(in)significance” to capture the multi-layered values and judgements that affect heritage management; inauthenticity is not treated as the opposite or as merely a shadow of “real” authenticity claims, but as a lens to understand who decides what is authentic, for whom, and with what motivations. This research suggests, drawing on Theodossopoulos (2013, 341), that the multiplicity of inauthenticity claims has allowed actors a measure of playfulness and freedom to make sense of the Stone outside the boundaries of institutional definitions of authenticity, within places of their own choosing, whether real, virtual or imagined. The Stone’s contested status has been demonstrated to enhance rather than diminish its power as a political symbol and heritage object. Crucially, the analysis has revealed humor and wit as central mechanisms in these (in)authenticity debates, serving as both vehicles for popular engagement and a form of resistance to institutional authority. Here, provocation and irreverence become legitimate forms of heritage engagement alongside scholarly discourse.

For heritage institutions managing contested objects, the Stone case suggests that attempting to “correct” popular beliefs may be less effective than understanding their function. The challenge lies in balancing institutional authority with recognition of vernacular authenticity claims and embracing the multiplicity of definitions captured in documents like Nara+20. Rather than seeking resolution, heritage practice might engage with authenticity’s spectral nature by creating spaces for different relationships with heritage objects and recognising authenticity’s political work. As Lixinski (2022, 1224) notes, it is not that expert knowledge is wrong or flawed, but rather that the question is where else alternative forms of (in)authenticity might or should have a place, or whether we can, by moving on, “look at the future-making possibilities of heritage”.

Ultimately, this case contributes to understanding authenticity as process rather than property. As Bruner (1994, 408) argues, authenticity is a social struggle in which competing interpretations of history contend. The case highlights the tension between institutional efforts to remain “apolitical” and the vernacular politics that shape how (in)authenticity claims circulate. Heritage researchers and practitioners should therefore be asking “when” and “what” these struggles are and try to challenge polarizations between real and “fake” (Bruner 1994, 409). The concept of spectral authenticity offers a framework for analysing such struggles, illustrating how heritage objects can perform constitutional and identity work through authenticity debates across time. This has implications for understanding symbols in other contexts of political contestation, particularly where historical grievances intersect with contemporary identity politics.

As Scotland’s constitutional position remains contested, the Stone will continue to attract authenticity debates. Recognising these debates as generative of social and cultural value, often felt rather than scientifically rational, can enable more inclusive museum and heritage practices that acknowledge the Stone’s multiple cultural lives.

Ethical Considerations

The ethnographic and interview components of the study were approved by the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel (reference number 6739). All participants provided informed, explicit, and traceable consent. Quotations are anonymised, attributed to a pseudonym, or cited under the participant's real name in accordance with participant preferences.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge Neal Ascherson, whose work has been an important source of inspiration for this article, and to whom this paper is dedicated. This article was conceived, structured, and written jointly, drawing on two related projects whose combination produced insights greater than the sum of their parts. SF contributed a rich contextual and social-historical understanding of the Stone of Destiny, together with an extensive body of ethnographic and historical material drawn from her *Authenticity's Child* project, while EN brought perspectives on heritage and political polarization alongside additional empirical data; their interplay shaped the argument throughout. We are grateful to our funders whose support made this work possible and enabled the joint workshop "Stone of Scone: Future Destinies," at the University of Stirling, which seeded the initial strands of evidence developed here. We also thank our external readers, Mark Hall, Charlotta Hillerdal, Siân Jones and Anna Källén, for their thoughtful engagement with earlier drafts, as well as the two anonymous peer reviewers. Finally, SF warmly acknowledges the generosity of all the interviewees who shared their time and experiences.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the British Academy under Grants [SRF23\230226 and SRG2223\231611], following seed-funding from Historic Environment Scotland, the Scottish Medievalists and The Centre for Scottish Studies Centre at the University of Stirling. It was also supported by the University of Aberdeen Pump Prime.

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