

Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 14 November 2017

Princes Street Gardens - 11th Century Swedish Runestone

Item number	8.5
Report number	
Executive/routine	
Wards	
Council Commitments	

Executive Summary

This report details the proposal to relocate the 11th century Swedish Runestone from a fenced off area beneath the Castle Esplanade in Princes Street Gardens to 50 George Square.

It recommends that in partnership with the Society of Antiquities of Scotland, the University of Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland, the runestone is relocated to ensure that it is easily and permanently accessible, secure and protected while providing an opportunity to fully interpret the significance of this unique piece of shared heritage.

It also recommends that legal opinion is sought to determine the legal title to the runestone and to ensure its long term care and preservation, that the Runestone ultimately becomes part of the National Museums Scotland collection.

Princes Street Gardens - 11th Century Swedish Runestone

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 To approve the relocation of the 11th Century Swedish Runestone located in Princes Street Gardens to 50 George Square, University of Edinburgh in partnership with the Society of Antiquities of Scotland, the University of Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland (NMS) and Historic Environment Scotland (HES).
- 1.2 To determine legal title of the Runestone and agree possible transfer of ownership to the NMS and that it becomes part of the national collections.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Princes Street Gardens Runestone is currently located in a fenced off area beneath Castle Esplanade (Appendix 1). This monument, originally from Lilla Ramsjö, Vittinge, Westmanland, Sweden, dates to the 11th Century and was donated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1787 by Sir Alexander Seton of Preston and Ekolsund (né Baron, born 1738 - died 1814), a Fellow of the Society and Vice-President between 1804 and 1813. The stone is one of only three Swedish runestones in Britain, the other two being held by Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and was one of the earliest acquisitions by the Society, which had been founded only seven years previously in 1780.
- 2.2 Runestones are typically raised stones with a runic inscription, but the term can also be applied to inscriptions on boulders and on bedrock. The tradition of making runestones began in the 4th century and lasted into the 12th century, most dating from the late Viking Age. The majority of runestones are located in Scandinavia, are often memorials to the dead and usually brightly coloured when first made.
- 2.3 The runestone found in central Edinburgh is a grey granite stone, five feet high by three feet wide, in a weathered condition and damaged at the top. Around the perimeter of the surface of the runestone which faces Princes Street is a runic message framed in a stylised serpent-form, and inscribed in the centre is a processional cross with its stem linked to the serpent's head and tail by a collar. At some period in the recent past the runic letters were picked out in red paint.

- 2.4 The lower part of the runestone appears to have been slightly dressed and bears a roughly incised equal-armed outline cross with expanded arms, a central pit, and a shaft, also picked out in red paint. The style of carving on the two faces is quite different and the crosses may not be therefore contemporary. The 1822 account of the Runestone states that ‘On one side of the stone, there is another figure represented on the plate, the meaning of which is not understood’, suggesting that the cross on this face may be a later nineteenth-century enhancement of an original carving.
- 2.5 The decorations are typical of Swedish runestone both in decoration and inscription, of the Christian period stones of Uppland. Indeed, the inscription is attributed to one of the few named runemasters, Erik, who was responsible for a dozen or more stones in the area, and reads in English: “Ari raised the stone in memory of Hjalmar, his father. May God help his spirit.”
- 2.6 Soon after Sir Alexander Seton gifted the runestone to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1787, it was placed in the Canongate before being moved to its present location in Princes Street Gardens in 1821.

3. Main report

- 3.1 The 11th Century Swedish Runestone located beneath the Castle Esplanade in Princes Street Gardens was gifted to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1787 by Sir Alexander Seton of Preston and Ekolsund. The runestone was originally sited for public display in the Canongate. In 1821 the Stone was relocated to Princes Street Gardens by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.
- 3.2 The current location of the Runestone has raised concerns regarding its interpretation and accessibility. These have been exasperated in recent years by both the closure to the public of this section of the Gardens and by the location of the stone within the fenced off area for the Tattoo stadium foundations, making it inaccessible to the public. It is largely unknown to residents of Edinburgh and visitors to the city.
- 3.3 Given these concerns, discussions have taken place with the Society of Antiquaries, City of Edinburgh Council, HES and the NMS regarding its future location, conservation and interpretation.
- 3.4 It was agreed that it would be appropriate for the Society to take the lead in exploring alternative locations given their historic association with the stone.
- 3.5 The University of Edinburgh has offered to locate the stone at 50 George Square (Appendix 2). This location has many advantages – it is an area which is easily and permanently accessible, and offers good security and is also located outside the Head of Scandinavian Studies in the Department of European Languages and Cultures. The University will also provide partnership funding to design a landscaped space for the stone.

- 3.6 Further to discussions with Council officers, HES and the Society, it was felt that this new location was ideal to facilitate the conservation, display and interpretation of this unique piece of shared heritage.
- 3.7 The legal title to the runestone remains unclear. It is not known whether the ownership of the stone was formerly given over to the Proprietors of Princes Street Gardens when the stone was relocated in 1821. Recent searches by the Society can find no records of any transfer of title and Adam McNaughton in his article Edinburgh's Runestone only suggests that it was presented to the Proprietors of the Gardens.
- 3.8 The NMS took over ownership of the Societies collections in the mid-19th century and therefore can be regarded as the successors to its original owners. However, further work is required to determine legal title to the runestone
- 3.9 However, it is proposed that ultimately ownership of the runestone should be with the NMS. As part of the national collections its long term care and maintenance will be secure.

4. Measures of success

- 4.1 The relocation of the 11th century Swedish Runestone located in Princes Street Gardens to 50 George Square, the University of Edinburgh in a fully accessible and interpreted landscaped space where it can be enjoyed by the citizens of Edinburgh and visitors to the city.

5. Financial impact

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications for the Council. Funding for the relocation, landscaping and interpretation would be provided by the partners.

6. Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

- 6.1 N/A

7. Equalities impact

- 7.1 Contributes to the Council's wider delivery of its Equality Act 2011 responsibilities by encouraging engagement and understanding of our archaeological heritage.

8. Sustainability impact

- N/A

9. Consultation and engagement

- 9.1 Promotes partnership between the City of Edinburgh Council, NMS, the University of Edinburgh, HES and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and also promote engagement in Edinburgh's archaeological heritage and cultural links with Sweden and Scandinavia.

10. Background reading/external references

- 10.1 N/A

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11. Appendices

Appendix 1: Current location.

Appendix 2: Proposed location.

Appendix 1: Current Location



Appendix 2: Proposed Location and design at 50 George Square

