

## EDINBURGH'S RUNESTONE

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High on the path through Princes Street Gardens, about twenty yards from the base of the Castle esplanade, stands one of Edinburgh's oddest Northern antiquities. It is a grey granite stone five feet high by three feet wide. Around the perimeter of the surface 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. It is a typical Swedish runic stone.

There are three such stones in Britain. Two were acquired by Oxford's Ashmolean Museum shortly after its foundation in the late Seventeenth Century. Today they stand in the corridor outside the Museum library. One might easily miss them in a general tour but they are well-displayed and their presence explained on a wall-chart.

Not so the stone in Princes Street Gardens. Hundreds of people must pass it without even noticing it, and many of those who once wondered about the inscription have forgotten its existence. It was sent from Sweden in 1787 to the Society of Antiquaries and presented by them in 1821 to the Princes Street Proprietors, who set it up presumably where it now stands.

The stone stood originally at Lilla Ramsjö in the parish of Vittinge in Uppland, Sweden, where it was noted and drawn by several Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century antiquarians. It is characteristic, 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. Several of his stones bear an almost identical cross and serpent motif. On this stone there are two additional crosses, a small one on the front at the top edge, and the other on the west side. The back of the stone is undecorated.





was adopted into that branch of the family but when he entered the business, he found in uncongenial. He early conceived an interest in antiquities; the two-ton runestone was presented to the Society of Antiquities when he was only nineteen. The trading Seton family did not understand or approve of the sensitive young Alexander, and in 1794 they encouraged him to return to Britain, where he was to remain for over thirty years, much of that time under observation for insanity, though many responsible people were ready to declare that there was no justification for such a claim. One of the less sober accounts suggests that his father really sent him home because he fell in love with his stepmother.

While in Britain he maintained his interest in runes and contemplated a study of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses, and of the Manx stones. In 1825, however, he returned to Sweden and divided his energies between his antiquarian studies and the fight to win back from his brother, Patrick Baron, the inheritance of which he felt he had been illegally deprived.

His many activities included the production of a book of poems in 1827, early work on the "Diplomatarium Svecanum" and the first attempts to excavate widely at Björkø, the old Viking trading centre of Birka. His activities there, however, have contributed to his low reputation among modern Swedish archaeologists, who are thankful that he did not manage to carry out his plan to excavate one hundred of the Björkø graves. For example, when he found a runestone being used as a doorstep, he had the inscription chipped off and sent it to the Royal Collection in Stockholm. However, Dagmar Selling, in her paper: Alexander Seton som fornforskare (Sthm 1945), defended him against the charge of pot-hunting, citing his many donations to Den Kungelige Vitterhetsakademien.

In 1828, still awaiting the result of his action against his brother, he bought a small plot and a miserable cabin in the country. One wintry night he went off in a boat alone to get planks to repair the cabin. He was driven on to a deserted strand, where he had to spend the night in the open, an experience which brought about his death. In his will he made

important bequests to the Diplomatarium and the Academy, but these were conditional on the successful outcome of the action against his brother. The judgement went against him. So Sweden — and Edinburgh — must remember Alexander Seton for the donations he made when alive.