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The potent urban prehistory of an ancient megalith: the Kempock Stone, Gourock, Scotland

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on the modern biography of a prehistoric stone of uncertain provenance, the megalith known as the Kempock Stone or Granny Kempock that has stood in the Clydeside town of Gourock for at least several hundred years. Rather than fous on a specific prehistoric period of creation and installation, or speculate upon its original function, this account explores the numerous stories that have accumulated around the stone over the past two centuries, revealing its composite biography. In addition, the paper also identifies the plethora of practices that have focused upon the stone over the years. In adopting an urban prehistory that concentrates upon surviving prehistoric places, sites and things that survive in urban places, we investigate how these narratives and practices significntly contribute to the rich heritage of this monolith. In contending that a better understanding of the social benefits of monoliths in urban places is long overdue, we also exemplify the contemporary value such sites play in consolidating local identities, enriching heritage and hosting a wealth of shared cultural practices.

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Resembling an aged, cowled figure, a 1.8-m tall megalith of mica-schist stands at the edge of a cliff encircled by steel railings in the small Inverclyde town of Gourock. Overlooking the back of Kempock Street, the town's main shopping thoroughfare, the Kempock Stone, or Granny Kempock, gazes northwards to the Firth of Clyde and the mountains beyond; behind the stone resides a row of early twentieth-century tenements (see Figure 1).

Though probably of prehistoric origins, heritage-listed in 1996 and added to the Schedule of Monuments under the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act, the Kempock Stone has never been subject to any significant archaeological investigation. It is not clear if the stone sits in its original location, although no modern accounts suggest that it has moved, a not uncommon fate for some prehistoric megaliths in urban environments (Brophy 2022). Though its original meanings and uses remain obscure, the Kempock Stone is surrounded by rich myths and activities that have persisted, been adapted and changed over time. In this paper, we explore how this venerable object has been enrolled in these different historical practices and polysemic narratives while exemplifying what EmilieCameron (2012, 578) refers to as 'a politics of valuing the local, the situated, and the specific'.

The Statement of National Importance written when the stone was designated as a Scheduled Monument simply claims that it 'is of national importance because it has the potential to provide information about Bronze Age ritual and burial practices', a somewhat presumptuous historical

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Figure 1. The Kempock Stone' .

assignation. Similarly, the brief description on the Canmore National Monuments Record of Scotland (Canmore, n.d.) details the petrology of the stone, its size and sketchy historical details but little else of archaeological significance. Never archaeologically explored, relocated to a museum or subject to authoritative categorisation, it remains enigmatic, stimulating manifold interpretations and practices. Unconfined by the expert narratives of heritage and the potted accounts of tourism, the stone endures as an important material icon of place. It has served as a prompt for storytelling, the subject for numerous filmic, literary and graphic narratives, and a site for a multitude of ritual and playful practices.

An encounter with the Kempock Stone's impassive, durable materiality, imposing form and dramatic location can constitute a powerful affective and sensory experience. Though obscure in origin, the stone's position already appears auspicious, suggesting that those who originally installed it were well aware of its phenomenological impact, as with the ancient Breton stone menhirs discussed by ChristopherTilley (2004). Its location allows visitors to conspire with the megalith in gazing towards the estuary and mountains to the north and west. Its impact is intensified by its age, irregularity and inscrutability, qualities that contrast with the surrounding urban environment. These material affordances and its spatial location combine with a medley of histories and myths to enhance the stone's sensory and symbolic power. This underpins how, as Smith et al (2021, 338) consider, prehistoric 'stones and their settings are active participants in creating unique atmospheres, events, and experiences that become intimately woven into shared life-histories' and place identities. Accordingly, the Kempock Stone is a far from a silent remnant from the past.

This paper, rather unusually, focuses on the modern *historical* biography of a prehistoric standing stone, a modern phase in the lifecycle of megaliths that Holtorf (1998, 35) refers to as 'Old Age'. Despite the enduring longevity of megalithic sculptures, archaeologists typically focus on their prehistoric phase. Yet the slippery significance of dolmens and standing stones means that some have undergone millennia of reinventions as their resilient lithic materiality has ensured their persistence in the face of landscape change and urbanisation. As Holtorf (1998, 24) emphasises, in 'many cases, monuments built during the Neolithic had long and exciting lives for centuries and millennia to come'. Thus, surviving ancient monuments frequently have a rich modern biography that can include mythmaking and the physical alteration of their setting (Brophy 2018). While as Bradley (1993) argues, prehistoric monuments were designed to have an enduring impact on those

who encountered them, original meanings are subject to reinterpretation and contestation. In this light, the Kempock Stone is a multi-storied object; it has a composite biography (Foster and Jones 2020) that veers away from a reductive focus on a specific period of origin.

The methodology adopted here combines traditional archaeological field observation with documentary research. Between June 2021 and May 2022, the monolith was visited on five occasions, two of them with both researchers present; four visits were weekdays during the day, one was on a Friday evening after dark. In total, some 16 hours have been spent in the vicinity of Granny Kempock during which time, the stone and surrounds were documented using photography, sketching and note-taking, registering the carvings on the stone and the objects deposited at its base. Informal conversations were staged with passers-by about our aims and subsequently, asking what each person knew about the stone, and were recorded textually. During weekdays relatively few people passed by, but everyone we spoke to knew the name of the standing stone and at least one of the stories detailed in this paper. We also attended events in Gourock in which the stone had been incorporated in light-hearted ways. We consulted national and local newspaper archives, especially at Greenock's Watt Institute. We characterise this approach as urban prehistory – the contemporary archaeology of prehistoric sites, places and things that survive in urban places. This powerful juxtaposition lies at the heart of the encounters that communities have with prehistoric sites and the values they ascribe to these local remains (Brophy 2022). Contemporary archaeology affords the potential to combine traditional fieldwork with archival research and ethnography (Gardner 2022, 19), the latter two techniques rarely associated with the investigation of prehistoric sites. The experience of ancient sites in urban places also has a phenomenological dimension that verges on the psychogeographical (Brophy 2019), and this too informs our approach.

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, we demonstrate the value of an approach that focuses on the historical biography of a prehistoric site. Our stance strongly contests Tilley's (1993, 53–54) assertion that a 'megalith in an urban environment does not work, it has no aura. It is as if the modern buildings surrounding [them] detract from them as signifiers of the past, deconsecrate their space'. Our research at the Kempock Stone reveals an entirely different story. The narratives and practices that have emerged from this urban setting contribute profusely to the rich heritage of this monolith. Second, the enduring significance of ancient places in the modern world has received little research to date. Where explorations have been made about prehistoric monuments in the recent past and the contemporary, these tend to concentrate on famous sites such as Stonehenge (for instance, Bender 1998; Holtorf 2005). Modern biographies of more modest monuments, such as the Kempock Stone, remain largely ignored by archaeologists, yet we claim that it is important that we gain a better understanding of the values that communities place on their urban prehistory, and what contemporary role such sites play in the lives of people. We know that prehistoric sites can promote wellbeing and a positive sense of place (Nolan 2019) and that standing stones have been re-purposed as war memorials, educational aids, public art, visitor attractions and local curiosities. In some communities, as in Gourock, they have played key roles in developing and maintaining local identities, rites and practices. We contend that a better understanding of the social and cultural benefits of megaliths in urban places is long overdue.

We now identify the key stories that have focused upon the Kempock Stone before investigating the numerous activities that have circulated around the megalith.

Myths and stories of the Kempock Stone

As with the Kempock Stone, substantive knowledge about the meanings and uses of ancient megaliths evaporated long ago. This void has prompted the ongoing fabrication of numerous mythic tales that variously revolve around supernatural beings, ancient rituals, magical events and folk customs (Kent 2015). These stones might represent people or supernatural beings that

have been petrified, come alive or move after dark, possess curative properties or magically enhance future prospects through rituals or sacrifices (Muir and Richards 2013). Further, they may be portals to other times and worlds, malevolent or beneficent entities, markers of forgotten paths or harness mysterious energies from the earth (Bramwell 2009). Folk horror narratives commonly draw on their uncanny nature (Hutchings 2004), and in the case of the Kempock Stone, its anthropomorphic shape and vertical position 'readily translates into an equation with the human body as a living entity' (Muir and Richards 2013, 300), a connection that may also have been made in prehistory (Bradley 1993, 41).

Megaliths, standing stones and stone circles thus gather associations, solicit stories and spawn unexpected affects and sensations that can re-enchant places (Bennett, 2001). Moreover, they resonate with each other to collectively constitute sacred geographies. The Kempock Stone is especially saturated with stories featuring witches, masons, sailors, schoolgirls and grannies. Its potency is retained by the tales that have been locally reworked, reinvented and retold over the past 200 years rather than through the work of archaeologists, historians or heritage managers. Such yarns resonate with contemporary cultural preoccupations and shifting values; they are shaped by diverse narrators and communicated via various media, by antiquarians, novelists, journalists, compilers of myth and ghost stories, screenwriters, tourist guides, and numerous local storytellers, as we now discuss.

. . .

An early, brief report in the *Glasgow Gazette* (2/11/1850) surmises that a 'circle of grey stones, erected by the ancient Pagan priesthood, stood at Kempock, from whose mystic interior, the sun, the moon, and starry host, were worshipped'. The article contends that the Kempock Stone is the surviving remnant from this circle 'of the priests of Baal', which remained 'visible from a comparatively recent period', though no supporting evidence is provided. An article in the *Falkirk Herald* (17/6/1858) similarly states that 'Granny Kempock . . . from time immemorial has occupied a prominent position on the ridge of the point'. The *Herald* article acknowledges that 'the legend which tradition attaches to it is not very well defined'. Nonetheless, it is declared that 'a monk of the olden times earned a good living by giving his blessing on the spot to departing navigators', while an alternative story that a witch sold winds to mariners from the stone is also offered. The account subsequently describes how in 1662, a young witch, Mary Lamont, sought to topple the stone into the sea, threatening the safety of seafarers by thwarting the rituals they performed here to secure their safe passage, leading to her subsequent execution. The article concludes by deploring this cruelty while also warning of the dangerous charms of contemporary witches, 'with rosy cheeks and ruby lips', 'which unless due caution is exercised may sink unhappy wretches over head and ears in a sea which shall be nameless'. The metaphorical salience of moral lessons drawn from legends about the Kempock Stone have been a common adjunct to their retelling.

The story of Mary Lamont is far from mythical; it recounts one of the many tragic episodes of the persecuted women convicted and executed of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Scotland (Maxwell-Stuart 2005). Reports of the 1662 trial of Mary and her confession by the Privy Council are copied in David Macrae's (1880) volume, discussed below, in which Article 13, doubtless extracted after prolonged torture, details her admission that she and her fellow witches planned to topple the 'long stone', and deposit it in the sea to dispel its protective powers.

Following these newspaper articles, the most influential account of the Kempock Stone is that featured in Reverend David Macrae's 1880 book, *Notes About Gourock, Chiefly Historical*. Macrae's research epitomises the emergence of the nineteenth-century antiquarianism typically undertaken by church ministers and gentlemen amateurs. Antiquarianism marked out terrain that archaeologists, anthropologists, philologists and art historians would go on to explore (Marsden 2020) and to which tourists would be attracted. Fraser (2005, 64–65) suggests that 'such were the influence of the

antiquarians that it becomes difficult to disentangle tradition from antiquarian-inspired pseudo history'. Yet perhaps the persistence of Macrae's 'pseudo-history' has allowed the Kempock Stone to remain a mutable signifier in a plethora of subsequent stories.

Macrae introduces the monument as it is approached: 'you behold, standing erect, a remarkable block of grey mica schist, that might (had Gourock been near Sodom) have passed for the bituminous remains of Lot's wife' (1880, 6). His feverish claim about its provenance reiterates the myth that it 'marks the site in Druid times of an altar to Baal; and that it was wont to gleam, more than two thousand years ago, in the light of the Baal-fire, with the blood of human sacrifices flowing round its base'. This conjuring up of Druidism is of its time. Hutton et al (2013) contend that such myths were stoked by Victorian gothic tales themselves informed by disparaging Roman accounts that focused on the pagan savagery of Druidic ritualistic blood sacrifices. Construing the British Empire as the heir to the civilising, rational rule of the Romans, lurid nineteenth-century prose details druidic superstition and barbarism; yet historical knowledge of the druids remains shrouded in mystery. Nonetheless, contemporary Wiccan and New Age adherents perform invented ceremonies at ancient stone circles and monoliths, reworking the meanings of such sites.

Thereafter, Macrae asserts, the stone 'was for many centuries an object of superstitious awe and reverence' (1880, 6). He details that to 'seek luck for their married life, wedded couples would walk around the stone to gain Granny's blessing' (7). He also reports on the superstitious dread that attended a voyage by sail on the Firth of Clyde, and how the stone acted as a visible landmark from the sea, a sentinel for seamen. 'According to tradition', Macrae relates, 'a monk made money by giving his blessing to sea-going ships' (7). Alternatively, a 'withered hag, reputed to be a witch' dwelt next to the stone and dispensed 'favourable winds to seafaring men, who secured her favour by suitable gifts' before they set sail (7). Finally, Macrae writes, 'long before, and long after, the witch's day, the sailors and fishermen were wont to take a basketful of sand from the shore and walk seven times round *Granny Kempoch* chanting a weird song; to insure for themselves a safe and prosperous voyage' (7). The aforementioned tale of Mary Lamont is subsequently reiterated. These stories have been oft repeated since the publication of Macrae's book, in newspapers (for instance, in the *Gourock Telegraph* (14/4/1894) and other printed and oral accounts.

Another popular legend features in Colin (Milne's 1958) book, *The Story of Gourock*, where he relates that the stone would revolve three times as midnight struck. Other versions tell of seafarer rituals of gathering stones and sand from a nearby beach to supplement the ship's ballast and thereby protect the vessel. A passer-by also detailed a story that accounts for the stone's humanoid form wherein a malign witch stood atop the cliff and wielded a lantern to lure ships to crash on the nearby rocks. However, a survivor from one wreck cast a curse on the old woman and she was instantly turned to stone. Alternatively, a pagan woman danced on the Sabbath and this flouting of Christian belief caused her petrification.

These uncanny resonances recurred during a report in Tynemouth newspaper, the *Shields Daily News* (10/4/1956), and repeated in many other regional British newspapers, which detailed the sinking of Swedish cargo vessel *Akka*, on 9 April 1956, after striking rocks off Dunoon, with the loss of six of her 33 strong crew. On the ferry boat that rescued survivors, it is claimed that one of the seamen, seemingly dead, was brought back to life by an old female passenger who applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The ferrymaster claimed that 'when we got ashore, she disappeared without a word'. Passengers subsequently referred to the lifesaver as 'Granny Kempock'.

These eerie reverberations reappear in Derek Parker's book, *Haunted Renfrewshire* (1999) in which he relates how local fishermen would leave trinkets and coins around the Kempock Stone's base, sprinkle it with sand, and march around the stone clockwise seven times before setting out to sea. Our own field observations made on several occasions confirm that trinkets, flowers and coins continue to be left at the stone's base. Some linger while others are cleared away to be subsequently replaced by others. Parker then describes Marie Lamont's plan to hurl the stone into the sea and her subsequent arrest and execution, adding a further uncanny element with the myth that 'her ghost still wanders the sandy shore at Lunderston Bay between Gourock and Inverkip before drifting out

across the waters of Clyde then vanishing in the estuary mists' (Parker 1999, 35), an evocative, ethereal connection between myth and landscape.

In the recent publication, *Granny Kempock: Truth is no Stranger to Fiction*, retired Gourock-born businessman Nigel Rennie (2020) recounts some of the strands in Macrae's account and extends his tale to encompass the Kempock Stone's influential role in an array of other momentous episodes across Scottish history. In his speculative, wide-ranging historical fiction, Rennie luridly depicts a Druidical sacrifice and the wrecking of a Viking ship on nearby rocks, lured towards the shore by the stone's occult power. Subsequently, as James IV sails on the Firth of Clyde, he is mysteriously counselled by the Kempock Stone to avoid Flodden; ignoring this sage advice, he is killed at that battle. Other chapters include the supernatural entreaties of Granny Kempock to a young James VI to protect his ships by including earth and stones from around the stone in the ballast, a lengthy account of Marie Lamont's suffering, and details about various ships wrecked close to Gourock.

While Rennie's account vacillates between the malign and beneficent power of the Kempock Stone, most stories about the monolith construe the stone as a force for good; it exerts a protective energy over Gourock's inhabitants. This is underpinned by our discussion of a particularly inventive interpretation of the stories that surround the Kempock Stone, a 1987 BBC Scotland six-part children's drama series and subsequent novel created by Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, *Shadow of the Stone* (1987). We devote a few paragraphs to this production because it signifies how the stone was enfolded into contemporary narrative and visual themes that disclose significant shifts in cultural values, fantasises and political ideas. Largely filmed around Gourock, it is a heady concoction of supernatural intimations, feminist stirrings, adolescent sexuality and turbulent seascapes.

The first episode sees an emotional 16-year-old school-leaver, Liz Finlay, played by a young Shirley Henderson and beset with family tensions, running after school to the Kempock Stone. Slipping through the railings she embraces the monolith and pleads, 'Granny Kempock, help me!', as she spies a yacht named Marie Lamont sailing in the Clyde below, piloted by a Scottish-American sailor, Steve Lamont, who berths having sailed across the Atlantic. Her wish is to escape her fraught family life, travel and seek romance. She is interrupted by her grandmother and justifies her entreaties, saying, 'I mean, people used to ask her for things, why not me?' Subsequently, she dashes to the nearby Inverkip marina to meet Steve and goes aboard the Marie Lamont, named after his ancestor. As Liz restlessly sleeps that night, she is seemingly possessed by the spirit of Mary Lamont, harshly intoning in broad Scots tongue about the gender inequities that blight her life and her ambitions to fish with the men of the town. In the second episode, Liz sails with Steve on the Clyde while her would-be boyfriend, Tom, played by a young Alan Cumming, watches through binoculars from his small boat. Liz tells Steve of the myths surrounding the Kempock Stone; the two later visit it before they arrive at her family home for dinner. Later, Liz is once more possessed by Marie's spirit and her plans to topple the Kempock Stone.

Episode three commences with Liz informing Steve that her pet lizard is her 'familiar', to whom she tells all her secrets, and that her alter-ego is Marie Lamont. On Steve's yacht, Liz further discloses the seventeenth-century social restrictions placed on Marie's desires to sail, her destiny being to work in service, produce numerous children and serve a husband. This partly mirrors her own thwarted situation, as past and present, Marie and Liz, merge. As Liz descends into a fury, a vision of witches dancing around the Kempock Stone is intercut with scenes of Tom at sea as the current unsettles his boat, and Liz's mother and her mother's love interest, Danny, losing control of the car he is driving. These scenes parallel the historic death at sea of Marie's cousin Thomas which contributed to the accusations of witchcraft and her trial. After a lengthy walk with Tom along a nearby beach, Liz cradles a doll washed ashore that resonates with the story of the drowned Thomas. In episode 4, Liz joins Steve in Glasgow, where they visit a library to research the Marie Lamont story. While Steve visits fellow sailors in a pub, Liz wanders around the city. Watching a group of dancers and musicians, she is transported back to the seventeenth century, and a fiddler, she imagines, is an incarnation of the devil, who caused Liz/Marie to dance. Later, still immersed in

her vision, she and Steve visit a gallery in which they view a painting of an old ship caught in a storm, once more catapulting Liz back to the past; as Marie, she finds her drowned cousin on the shore, and faints. Later, she confides to Steve that she – or Marie – gave herself to the devil.

Episode five commences with Steve taking both Tom and Liz out sailing. As Steve shows him radio techniques, Tom makes disparaging remarks about the capacities of girls to sail. Infuriated, and once again possessed by Marie, Liz lifts the anchor and hoists flags that call for assistance; the boat drifts dangerously and a pilot boat is sent out by the coastguard, but Steve retrieves the situation. Domestic tensions rise further as Liz's granny announces that she will be leaving the household once Liz's mother and Danny are married. In the final episode, Liz attends a party on a local beach and a bonfire is lit. For Liz, this invokes the burning of Marie Lamont as a witch and the sins of her alter ego, her unintentional causing of the death of Thomas and her allegiance to the devil. Tom and Liz argue about their respective nautical skills and Tom heads off to prove his seamanship in his small yacht, but he is out of his depth. He capsizes and Steve and Liz set off to rescue him in the *Marie Lamont*; Steve deploys a dinghy to rescue Tom and Liz proudly proves her sailing abilities as she steers the boat and tugs the smaller vessel into port. Steve leaves Gourock but to his consternation, Liz stows away on the Marie Lamont. She tells Steve that like Marie Lamont, she wants to change things but that gender constraints make this impossible. However, Steve reminds her that she was responsible for saving the life of Tom, in contrast to the death of Thomas, the victim of her alter ego's curse. Insisting that if she wants to sail, she must do so, Steve donates to Liz an alternative talisman, a Hopi pendant, and she sails the boat back to Gourock, to meet her mother and grandmother. The series finishes with Liz insisting to her granny that she will cast off her dependency on the Kempock Stone and that she is determined to become a sailor. She proclaims, 'Me. It's all up to me now'.

Dated by a soundtrack that mixes folk music with the melodramatic strains of synthesisers, *Shadow of the Stone* reverberates with the rekindled interest in prehistory and paganism that characterised British popular culture in the nineteen seventies and eighties, retrospectively characterised as folk horror (Scovell 2017). Rodgers (2019) discusses the extraordinary proliferation of nineteen seventies children's television drama that rekindled interest in folk tales associated with ancient, often liminal sites, an outpouring to which *Shadow of the Stone* belonged. These dramas were not concerned with graphic representations of horror but with more subtle allusions to the past, to melancholy, the eerie and disquieting, and to the inexplicable attributes of ancient sites – what Rodgers (2019, 147) refers to as the 'wyrd'; the emphasis is on the transient and the suggestive; 'there are no straightforward explanations for these folkloric spirits'. More specifically, the inclusion of prehistoric stones and their associated myths, according to Bramwell (2009, 145), was typically ambiguous, 'dualistically split between warring good and evil, to benevolent but persecuted old religion'. The foregrounding of the Granny Kempock myth in *Shadow of the Stone* resonates with Bramwell's claim about how 'modern wiccan beliefs and practices are retrojected into historical or time-slip narratives and antiquity is conferred upon them by association with prehistorical monuments' (2009:145). Importantly, old mythic themes also become allied with feminist claims, provoking desires to attain personal growth, assert independence and challenge conservative gender norms. The drama series visually and narratively underpins the potency of the Kempock myth, firmly tethering it to Gourock's history and the surrounding landscape.

The ongoing recycling of the myths and tales that surround the Kempock Stone depends upon tales that are recounted over time and in everyday life in habitually experienced, intimate sensory realms. As Stevens and Tolbert (2018, 29) argue, debates about the uncanny elements of place should take account of 'issues of materiality, the numinous, and embodied/emplaced experience', the phenomenological encounter with things in place. For these stories are persistent; they accumulate, recur, are amended and enfolded into the present, reverberating with Bennett's (2001) notion of enchantment that captures the experience of being captivated by the extraordinary within the mundane. The extraordinary, auratic geological entity of Granny Kempock, situated above

a cliff, adjacent to tenements, looking out over the Clyde, holds these stories in place, sustains them and solicits their retelling.

Practices that surround the Kempock Stone

Coexisting with the tales about the Kempock Stone discussed above are the numerous, changing practices carried out by locals. We focus on practices of care, enclosure, place-making endeavours and playful pursuits, but first explore how the traces of several older practices are materially apparent at the site.

One curious additional material constituent of the area enclosed within the railings is a stone tablet engraved with German text from 1837 that leans against the low wall to the west of the Kempock Stone. This is a memorial stone to a Friedrich Zoller; the text is translated in an edition of the *Gourock Times* (10/10/1925). Zoller, a businessman and consul, built a mock castle as his home immediately adjacent to the Kempock Stone in 1830. Replete with faux cannons and castellated walls, the folly was subsequently occupied by several other residents until its demolition in 1896. Oddly, the tablet has remained here for many decades, adding to the enigmatic qualities of the site. Few visitors understand its significance as it is now highly eroded; perhaps the location was conceived as an auspicious setting for a stone of remembrance – beside a megalithic memorial.

Zoller's ruinous wall, a constant feature of the modern setting of the Kempock Stone, has steadily shrunk since the late nineteenth century, with the earliest extant photographs showing a continuous wall running away from the stone and cliff edge. A metal feature with spikes ran between the wall and the edge of the cliff (shown in Macrae's, 1880 drawing of the stone); this no longer exists, and at some point, much of the wall was removed. More recently, perhaps for safety reasons, the upper four or five courses of stonework have been removed, with a flat concrete block capping the remnant wall. For most visitors, the relationship between standing stone, tablet and wall is unclear.

Much of the surface of the Kempock Stone is engraved with graffiti (see Figure 2). An array of initials and symbols and two evident dates, 1814 and 1815, are etched into the megalith. An initial reaction might have been that an ancient monument had been grotesquely violated through wanton vandalism. Yet the graffiti is primarily of nineteenth-century origin, a testament to the historical practices of former visitors and inhabitants. In re-evaluating historic graffiti, Forster et al (2012, 47) draw on the guidance offered by the 2008 Scottish Historic Environment Policy, itself informed by the influential Burra Charter. They contend that historic graffiti meets the three key characteristics identified in the policy as valuable. The criterion of *intrinsic characteristics* refers to the 'developmental sequence of the monument' wherein they argue, both 'original and subsequent functions' can include these graffiti works. Further, they maintain, graffiti marks the *contextual characteristics* of the stone in the 'relationship of the monument and its parts with its wider landscape and setting'; moreover, the *associative characteristics* of the stone – the 'historical, cultural and social influences that have affected the form and fabric of the monument' - have contributed to its 'aesthetic attributes'. Their argument follows the increasing tendency of heritage to be conceived as fluid, subject to shifting interpretations and values, and not residing solely in original uses and meanings, even where these might be known. Such expanded notions incorporate a growing appreciation of the impacts of popular cultural forms and everyday practices on the historic fabric of place. Moreover, the addition of letters and symbols can be attributed to the 'old age' phase of the life of the standing stone (Holtorf 1998).

However, it is unlikely that any contemporary graffiti would be regarded with anything but disdain. This is reinforced by the ways in which the Kempock Stone has become an object of care, protection and maintenance, most obviously with the installation of the railings to prevent immediate access, ensure the safety of visitors and preserve the stone. The nature of the enclosure within which the Kempock Stone is located, like the adjacent castle-folly wall, has periodically changed over the past 50 years. This process can be partly tracked in historic photographs and illustrations in the absence of documentary evidence to date or explain these alterations. Thus,

Figure 2. Nineteenth century Graffiti on the Kempock Stone' .

Granny Kempock is the one remaining constant in this curious, changing assemblage of cliff-edge features.

Currently, the Kempock Stone is enclosed by curved, light blue metal railings; this blocks access from the adjacent walkway but is absent on the cliff side. This fence sits on a concrete kerb and is of a height roughly equivalent to two-thirds of the standing stone. The vertical metal fence posts are largely plain, but the two are topped with ornate fleur de lis decorations. This fence is maintained, having been painted between our visits in 2016 and 2021. Historic photographs dated to the twentieth century show different metal railings of the same height as the stone, with no kerb and with the fence posts reaching sharp points. These railings were continuous, including on the cliff side, and were still extant when *The Shadow of the Stone* was filmed. Yet the earliest photographs show no enclosing railings and it is interesting to consider why the fence was deemed necessary at all. It cannot purely be about health and safety: a fence behind the stone on the clifftop would have sufficed. It therefore seems likely that a fence was deemed necessary to protect the monument.

These institutional practices of securing the megalith against damage are supported by persistent concerns about its condition and that of its surroundings, with recurrent demands from local residents that the monument be cared for. A brief report in the *Greenock Telegraph* (18/5/1899) hyperbolically complains about the perilous condition of the steps: 'During wet weather, pedestrians descending to Kempock Street are apt to be landed there sooner than they desire; while the upward journey is a feat far transcending the scaling of Dargai Heights' (high ground in Northwest Pakistan attacked by colonial British forces in 1897 during the Tirah campaign). The same newspaper celebrates the installation of 'new concrete steps' later that year (18/11/1899), observing that '"Granny Kempock" may now sing that music hall ditty "Running up and down our Stairs"'. A few

years later (16/5/1904), a letter to the *Telegraph* calls for 'the attention of our local authorities to the disgraceful condition of the pathway leading to the venerable dame who has so long presided over the destinies of our good village'. Referring to 'a hillock of refuse and ashes three feet deep right across the path', the correspondent claims that 'one can only make the acquaintance of "Auld Granny" by wading knee deep through filth'. Over a hundred years later, such concerns remain: one local we met at the stone in July 2021 reported local disquiet at the state of the environs of the stone and subsequently, a report in *Greenock Telegraph* (8/9/2021) details how locals initiated a campaign for the stone to be cleaned up following the recent pandemic lockdowns, a demand that the council duly addressed.

The right of public access has also been contested at different times. For instance, the *Greenock Telegraph* (31/10/1867) reports that one occupant of the adjacent castle, a Mr Langlands, erected a gate to deny entry to the Kempock Stone. However, a resident pulled down the gate after Langlands refused to remove it, claiming that the stone had always been accessible to the public. The public status of the megalith is further confirmed by another article from the *Greenock Telegraph* (21/1/1896) in which it is stated that 'it is satisfactory to know that by the provisions of the feu-contract, the old time-honoured and historic relic, Kempock Stane, cannot be interfered with'.

In addition to these measures to retain access, protection and care, the Kempock Stone has been sewn into place identity by the accretion of various markers. Most directly, affixed to the monument's railings is a plaque that summarises the myths that it was an altar to Baal and a venue for superstitious ritual (this sign seems to have replaced a green 'Granny Kempock Stone' sign on the Zoller castle wall fragment as featured in the *Shadow of the Stone* TV programme). It is further signified by a nearby pub, the Kempock Bar, and a fishing boat, built in 1944, the *Granny Kempock*, which was repurposed as a ferry in the 1950s to regularly ply the journey across the Clyde to Helensburgh. In another act of local recognition, Gourock's Ashton Bakery sold 'Grannie Kempock' shortbread and gingerbread in the early years of the twentieth century. The megalith has also been enrolled into the contemporary tourist landscape, with an information board on Kempock Street providing brief particulars of the myths and rituals that have focused upon the stone.

More distinctive are two ironwork signs (see Figure 3) The first is sited at the entrance to the stairs that lead up to the megalith from Kempock Street and is composed of three iron bars affixed to the walls of the narrow passage with a circle wrought in the centre. Either side of the centre, are the words 'Kempock' and 'Stane' that enclose an approximation of the stony form and four circling figures performing a ritual. The other iron sign is attached to a pole opposite the extension of Burgh

a b

Figure 3. Ironwork sign 1 to the Kempock Stone' and 'Figure 3b Ironwork sign 2 to the Kempock Stone'.

Street that culminates in a dead end at the monument. This also includes a stony shape and the words 'Granny Kempock Stone', next to which is an imp-like figure in a gesture of welcome, signifying hoary mythical associations.

The ironwork signs are rather comical, indicating that humorous approaches to Granny Kempock have characterised many local engagements. This is particularly exemplified by comedic letters, poems and articles in local newspapers. Sometimes, the stone has been deployed as a rhetorical figure, summoned as a spirit with moral agency and authority that might be appalled by cases of local embezzlement, noisiness and the smuggling of rum. The creation of a new football pitch, according to one correspondent, will cause Granny Kempock to 'blush all over her aged face at this little bit of bare-faced flattery' (*Greenock Telegraph*, 30/9/1905). Similarly, a report about a book that lists suitable maritime bathing places names Gourock but not the more renowned rival holiday resort Rothesay. The journalist contends that 'Granny Kempock laughed uproariously when she heard this joke' (*Greenock Telegraph*, 14/7/1902)

In further exploring these ludic engagements, we have mentioned the rituals of circumambulation but doubt the viability of their being performed, given the long vertical drop from the cliff at the Kempock Stone's northerly side. Such customs to secure safety at sea, ensure a healthy catch of fish, ensure a successful marriage or assist procreation, would have been perilous. Yet if they were undertaken – or still are – we wonder if they were performed with serious concentration or playfulness? Traces of old ceremonies do persist in the deposits of shells, stones, coins, painted pebbles, trinkets, scraps of paper and ribbons tied to the railings, echoing time-honoured practices while perhaps also reflecting modern preconceptions about what standing stones were used for in ancient times (Doyle White 2014). There seems to be no seasonal pattern to the deposits for we never saw the same item on successive visits. The deposition of objects motivated by 'contemporary paganism' is similarly found at prehistoric stone circles, standing stones and passage graves. Blain and Wallis (2004, 240) argue that motivations for such acts are complex and they are often improvised: 'pagans are constructing their own forms of worship or engagement with sites and spirits'. Such offerings might also be viewed as a form of remembrance for the persecution of witches that the stone has increasingly come to represent, as discussed below.

Whether the performance of the older rituals is apocryphal or not, another, more carnivalesque local custom seems to have emerged in the nineteenth century wherein the stone was clad in female attire on New Year's Eve, taking advantage of its humanoid form. In a comedic report from the *Greenock Telegraph* (13/10/1867), a dispute is recorded in which a wedding party adorned the Kempock Stone with bunting to celebrate the wedding of their friend, an action repelled by another resident who claimed ownership over the stone. A short piece in the *Greenock Telegraph* (7/7/1904) reports that after a five-year hiatus, the 'solemn dressing' of Granny Kempock on New Year's Eve took place, after which 'she stood in her print dress and mutch [linen cap], trim and elegant, to give her New Year blessing to those who came to ask it'. In 1906 (4/4/1906), the same newspaper describes how the stone was painted 'to resemble an old woman, her costume being a dark blue mantle and green dress'. More eloquently, a poem published in the *Greenock Herald* (21/4/1888) includes a verse concerning this dressing of the stone:

In olden times – on Hogmanay,
The Gourock lads would then array
Old 'Granny Kempock' in her mutch,
Her apron, shawl and all things such.
They never failed her to adorn,
To have her dressed on Ne'erday morn:
They all made hands and joined a ring,
And round they'd go, and merrily sing,
With 'Granny Kempock' in the centre,
And each one had to bow fornent her.
Then twelve o'clock brought end to this,

And every lad his lass did kiss;
The air was filled with hearty cheer
To welcome in the new-born year.

A report in the *Gourock Times* (16/8/1974) celebrates that 'on Hogmanay 1973 the happy custom was revived and granny was again arrayed to face the world on New Year's morning'. Indeed, earlier that year, a photograph appears in the same newspaper (11/1/1974) of a schoolgirl and her father dressing the stone.

According to a local resident we encountered at the stone, the large cruise liners that berth in nearby Greenock occasionally convey passengers to the site on a guided tour. Another passer-by told us about the geocaching that occasionally focused on the site, a more playful, globally extensive tourist practice that incorporates the Kempock Stone, a and originated in 2000. Geocachers utilise a smartphone application that identifies points of interest to which the user has to navigate via Global Positioning Systems (GPS) technology. Upon arrival, visitors seek a hidden cache that contains a notebook in which they discretely sign their names. Subsequently, they log the visit online, sometimes posting further information and pictures of the site. The internet post that provides clues about how to find the stone grades the difficulty of locating the cache at 1.5 - relatively simple – and advises visitors that 'whether you believe in magic or not; while visiting this place of myth and legend, why not do a little dance with Granny Kempock and see what luck or fortune finds you with her blessing' (Geocaching 2017). Locative media platforms such as geocaching, provide playful, sensuous, emotive and informative cultural engagements with places, offering an 'experience of localised spatial knowledge' to users that includes the deployment of 'vernacular values and knowledge' and folk geographies (Buccitelli 2017, 9–10). Through geocaching, sites and places are continuously reconstituted by both corporeal movements and the circulation of ideas and images across social media (Edensor and Mundell 2021), and here awareness of the heritage value of the Kempock Stone is expanded. The practice exemplifies 'how digital and non-digital practices are enmeshed in the post-digital world' (Houlbrook and Parker 2021, 4).

Light-hearted letters and articles in local media, dressing the stone and geocaching all demonstrate how the Kempock Stone has been adopted by practitioners of fun and play, mobilising local humour and marking place. Another playful innovation has been the staging of a sporting competition during the Gourock Highland Games, held in the town since 1956 and attended by around 10,000 spectators in May 2022. In a variant of the 'heavy events' central to Highland Games, kilted competitors use their strength to lift the 72-kilogram 'Kempock Stane' and hurl it over a horizontal caber around three feet above the ground, with the speediest contestant winning. Though the stone wielded by contestants is a large egg-shaped boulder, at variance to the shape of the prehistoric monolith that it represents, its symbolic resonance bestows a distinctive local flavour to the community-oriented event (Brewster et al 2009). Another contemporary event is the Galoshans Festival, held annually since 2014 around Halloween, and named after the local word for 'trick or treating'. Drawing on local legend and lore, each of the main Inverclyde towns organise their own street theatre event. The Gourock iteration includes a giant puppet of Granny Kempock operated by three people (see Figure 4). The puppet depicts Granny as a 3.6-metre-tall, green-faced witch with a black pointed hat, wearing a necklace of green plastic skulls. Along with the other 'Galoshans giants, Granny Kempock feverishly dances to contemporary pop music surrounded by screaming children.

Finally, as sensational stories about witchcraft are replaced by more sober historical reassessments of the depravity of female persecution and execution, the Kempock Stone has recently been enrolled into a national campaign spearheaded by the group *Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland*. The campaign seeks to gain an apology from the church, a legal pardon from the Scottish Government and a national memorial to the women cruelly executed throughout the seventeenth century. The stone's association with Mary Lamont provides a familiar reference point that connects local activists with a larger network of historic sites of female persecution, an extensive geography that underpins the scale of the horrific abuse in Scotland *(Greenock Telegraph,* 21/9/2021).

Figure 4. The Galoshans Granny Kempock puppet' here please.

Conclusion

The Kempock Stone, like many lithic artefacts, possesses durability and longevity. It is akin to the *seidi* stones scattered across Norway's landscape, ancient entities that can grant good fortune if honoured with small gifts. These stones, Reinert (2016, 22) considers, may be conceived as kinds of 'earth beings' 'whose geological existence weaves into and intersects with the lives of their human denizens in complex ways', provoking entanglements that shift across time and space as meanings, practices and routines change. In one sense, the Kempock Stone is an uncanny remnant of the deep past. It is what Fisher (2017, 15) calls weird, 'so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here'. Besides being 'marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it', the weirdness of the stone inheres in its mysterious origins and its lingering, prehistoric presence in a modern urban setting. This is augmented by the phenomenological, sensual and affective impact of the ancient stone: its position at the top of a cliff, its curious juxtaposition with twentieth-century houses and the vista of the Clyde Estuary and the mountains to the north.

Yet the Kempock Stone is also an integral lithic element of place and belonging (Edensor 2020), an everyday fixture and reference point in everyday local life. It has the capacity to 'orient worlds' (Smith et al 2021, 345); it draws people towards it, attracts their care, offers potential for ludic fun and lures the retelling and invention of tales. It is like other stone circles and megaliths which as Muir and Richards (2013) claim, are always in making, their meaning reshaped and supplemented, and their ritual role re-enacted and repurposed. In stimulating the production of diverse stories and oral histories, photographs and films, playful practices and sensuous interactions, artistic engagements and dramaturgical performances, the Kempock Stone belongs to what Harvey (2016) calls 'small heritages'.

The richness of the practices and narratives that have circulated around the Kempock Stone persist, we contend, because it has never become institutionalised as an official heritage site or enmeshed within what Smith (2006) refers to as the 'authorised heritage discourse' in which

privileged experts interpret, define and evaluate historical artefacts. These stories and activities remain locally embedded, have not become potted, over-regulated and fixed; the stone has been free to accrue numerous tales and practices. In fact, the Kempock Stone exemplifies how officially designated heritage objects and sites are increasingly supplemented by numerous micro-sites identified by local historical societies, subaltern campaigners, amateur archaeologists and architectural enthusiasts, amongst others (Edensor, 2022). It is an object with a unique biographical trajectory, not an archetype or exemplar of its type (Drazin 2020) but multiple, emergent and unfixed. As Jones (2017) asserts, a focus on the stone's social and cultural uses beyond its murky origins foreground this rich, variegated heritage.

In 1904, local minister the Reverend Walter Mathams wrote a short article about the Kempock Stone in the *Greenock Telegraph* (17/9/1904) in which he acknowledges how imaginative interpretation can overcome lithic inscrutability:

> It is a pity she is of such a taciturn and, in fact, absolutely silent disposition. It is hard to get anything out of her. If she would only speak she would tell a tale unrivalled in the annals of Scotland. But the Stones are proverbially reticent and in dealing with them you are compelled to use the aid of imagination and tradition, and if you do that with Granny Kempock she will not disappoint you.

As we have shown, a torrent of diverse tales about Granny Kempock have been told, reinterpreted and invented, encouraged by the dearth of classificatory, expert accounts that pinpoint the stone's purpose and meaning. Moreover, prehistorians routinely write accounts of the past that fail to transcend prehistory, thus presenting an incomplete biographical account and ignoring the contemporary settings and affordances of ancient sites. Rather than archaeologists, the stone itself stimulates the telling of stories and inspires the enaction of many practices. Emphatically, the existence of a prehistoric standing stone in such an urban environment, contrary to Tilley's negative assertion (1993), very much works. This urban context is integral to an understanding of the monolith's heritage.

In many highly regulated urban environments, play remains neglected by authorities and designers, perhaps because it involves wasteful time and energy in the pursuit of 'inefficient, impractical and socially unredemptive activities' (Stevens 2007, 1). Yet, as Woodyer (2012, 322) argues, play can constitute 'an area ripe for rupture, sparks of insight and moments of invention, which present us with ways to be "otherwise"', enhancing affective belonging. Similarly, the humorous narrative uses and comic performances that have focused on Granny Kempock affirm Emmerson's (2016, 722) claim that 'to laugh is to know the world in a different way'. As Ridanpää (2014, 704) submits, comedy also 'possesses a shared social purpose for helping group cohesion and social bonding, as well as creation and preservation of group identities'. As a shared object of storytelling, comedy and play, the Kempock Stone underpins the importance of those elements that enchant or reenchant places (Bennett 2001). Its inscrutability and mystery have not been exorcised and continue to delight those who encounter the megalith and contribute to the ongoing production of Gourock's vernacular, folk geography.

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