Havelok's Stone - Lincoln

Few stones in English tradition have such a strong connection to a medieval tale of strength as Havelok's Stone.

The stone is associated with Havelok the Dane, the legendary figure at the centre of one of Lincolnshire's best-known medieval romances. The story survives in several versions, including the Middle English poem *Havelok the Dane*, generally dated to the late 13th or early 14th century.[1][2]



Figure 1. "Havelok presents Goldborough to the English people", a 1905 illustration by Henry Justice Ford.

According to the legend, Havelok was living in Lincoln as a kitchen servant when a stone-putting contest took place during games held in the city. The stone was described as so heavy that even the strongest competitors could barely raise it above their knees. Havelok, who had never taken part in the sport before, was encouraged to try.[1]

He lifted the stone to his shoulder and threw it further than any of the other competitors. One version of the story records the throw as being more than four paces beyond the previous best, while later retellings describe the distance as more than twelve feet.[1][3]



Figure 2. *Stone throwing from BL Royal 10 E IV, f. 96 — PICRYL - Public Domain Media Search Engine*.

The feat became an important part of Havelok's story. His extraordinary strength and height attracted attention and ultimately helped bring him to the notice of Earl Godrich, setting in motion the events that led to his marriage to Goldboru and his eventual recognition as the rightful king.[1]

The connection between Havelok and Lincoln did not end with the medieval romance. Centuries later, the stone itself was still being associated with the legendary throw.

The 14th century chronicler Robert Mannyng recorded a tradition that a stone thrown by Havelok could still be seen at Lincoln Castle. He also stated that the chapel where Havelok was said to have married Goldboru was still standing.[4] This provides an important early indication that the story had developed a physical connection with Lincoln and that the supposed stone had become a local landmark.



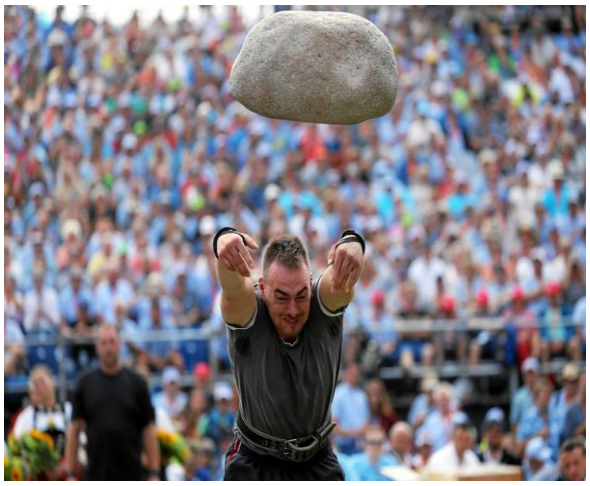
Figure 3. Lincoln Castle.

Later accounts continued to associate Havelok's Stone with Lincoln. The tradition appears to have been sufficiently well known that the stone was treated as a surviving relic of the legendary event rather than simply an ordinary piece of rock.[4][5]

There is, however, an important distinction between the literary tradition and the surviving archaeological evidence. The identity of the original stone cannot be established with certainty, and the stone described in medieval and later accounts has not been conclusively identified as a surviving object at Lincoln Castle today.[5]

This uncertainty does not diminish the importance of the story to the history of stonelifting. The account describes a form of stone throwing or "putting the stone" remarkably like traditional strength games found elsewhere in Britain and Europe. The emphasis was not simply on lifting the stone, but on raising, controlling and projecting it for distance.





Figures 4 & 5. Modern interpretations of Stone Putting – Highland Games & Steinstossen.

For English Stonelifting, Havelok's Stone therefore represents something slightly different from a surviving lifting stone. It is a literary and folkloric record of a stone strength contest associated with medieval Lincoln, preserved through centuries of storytelling and historical writing.

The story also provides an intriguing glimpse into the place of strength contests within medieval society. At the Lincoln games, putting the stone was presented alongside other physical contests, with competitors attempting to establish themselves as the strongest.[1]

Whether the stone itself survives today is uncertain. What has survived beyond doubt is the story: a strong young man, a heavy stone, a contest in Lincoln and a feat of strength remarkable enough to become part of one of England's enduring medieval legends.

Havelok's Stone stands, therefore, as an important piece of the wider history of English stonelifting, not necessarily because we can still lift the same stone, but because the written tradition preserves an early account of people gathering together to test their strength against one.

References

[1] *Havelok the Dane*, Middle English romance, c.1285–1310. The poem describes the stone-putting contest at Lincoln and Havelok's exceptional throw.[1]

[2] Lincolnshire Folk Tales Project — *Havelok and Grim*. Provides an overview of the Havelok tradition and identifies the 13th-century *Havelok the Dane* as its most famous surviving source.[2]

[3] M. I. Ebbutt — *Hero-Myths and Legends of the British Race*, chapter "Havelok and Goldborough". Retells the Lincoln stone-putting contest and records Havelok throwing the stone more than twelve feet beyond the other competitors.[3]

[4] Robert Mannyng of Brunne — *Chronicle*, early 14th century. Mannyng records the tradition that a stone thrown by Havelok remained at Lincoln Castle.[4]

[5] Walter W. Skeat — *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, Early English Text Society. Historical and textual commentary on the Havelok tradition and the identification of Havelok's Stone.[5]