



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC320

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90284)

Taken into State care: 1934 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2017

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STEINACLEIT CAIRN AND STONE CIRCLE



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STEINACLEIT CAIRN AND STONE CIRCLE

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The earliest account, published in 1792, described a double ring of upright and toppled standing stones (the “cairn” element) in this location¹. These were visible before the extensive peat cutting of the 1920s revealed the “enclosure” element. A now much weathered and degraded column of peat was left, possibly by the peat-cutters, and illustrates how much peat was removed to expose the “enclosure” wall; it used to measure approximately 1 metre high.

The 1921 RCAHMS Inventory text makes clear that the “cairn” element was already known and that the peat cutting only revealed the stones of the much more extensive “enclosure” wall. They interpreted the site as a chambered tomb within a stone cairn with a perimeter kerb of larger stones. Their description of the oval stoney bank (the “enclosure”) that encloses the cairn off-centrally, makes it clear they saw no evidence that would allow them to place the “enclosure” and the chambered “cairn” in a chronological sequence.

These two main elements may represent a Cairn and Stone Circle (the Guardianship description) or a Homestead and Field System (Scheduling description) or several site forms in sequence.

In 1933 Charles Elton and Donald Baden-Powell, opened at least two trenches on the site, during a phase of fieldwork in Lewis. Neither was a trained archaeologist but both had research interests that used archaeological information and they had recruited renowned and reputable archaeological advisers. Their exploration was stated to have been ‘a small hole in the exact centre’ of the site. Finds of pottery, flint and bone were apparently deposited with the then National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now the National Museum of Scotland), but these have not come to light as yet.

The RCAHMS interpretation, that the inner element of the site was the remains of a chambered tomb within a stone cairn was challenged in the 1970s by the leading authority on Scottish chambered tombs, Dr Audrey Henshall. She argued that the site displayed none of the features she would expect of a chambered tomb and that it was more probably a domestic structure, albeit one that followed none of the then known architectural traditions in Scottish prehistory.

In subsequent years, archaeologists have tended to follow Henshall’s proposal and, as a result, the term “cairn” has been dropped with the site subsequently interpreted as a central homestead with a surrounding enclosure or field system. Henshall’s domestic interpretation has been extended to the more extensive “enclosure” and a degree of contemporaneity and related functionality (domestic building and adjacent field system) seems to have become accepted without much debate.

¹ Mackenzie 1792 p 284 *Between Garbert and Shader, on a rifing ground, there are the remains of a very extenfiv double circle. Some of the ftones about the inner circle, which are pretty large, appear to have been thrown down by violence*

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The location is impressive both in its modern and its prehistoric landscape settings. In the present, it sits on a false crest, from which there are fine views outwards in all directions, particularly to the NW, over Loch an Dùin with its small Iron-Age dun. The site embodies both past landscapes of settlement (possibly over several phases) and abandonment and thus demonstrates both resilient and failed human endeavour.

Within the wider location, there are numerous ancient sites in the vicinity (e.g., an island dun on Loch an Dùin, and the single standing stones of Clach an Trushal and Clach Ste Lin), and as these indicate long - perhaps millennia-long - periods of settlement it is reasonable to presume a similar complex antiquity for Steinacleit.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The extensive spreads of stone hold the potential for preserving buried land surfaces and soil profiles. If, as surmised, the site represents discreet sequences of use then there is a good potential for preservation of soil profiles of different periods. The site therefore holds the potential to providing evidence for landscape change and human and landscape inter-relationships over long, and dateable, time periods. That the site emerged with the removal of at least 1m of peat indicates the potential of other surviving areas of blanket peat to contain a rich undiscovered archaeological heritage.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social Overview:

Steinacleit does not feature as major heritage attraction in this region compared to the array of important Neolithic, Iron Age and post-medieval sites (e.g., **Calanais, Dun Carloway and Arnol blackhouse**) in the locality. In the recent past there has been local community interest in better presenting and accessing the site because of its perceived value as a heritage attraction.

The site seems to have a role in local traditions (e.g. there is a tradition that a battle was fought nearby).

On-line conversations about this site indicate that for some, at least, the absence of hard evidence does not diminish their interest in the site. Indeed the absence of knowledge seems to serve to enhance the sense of mystery about the site which feeds its attractiveness.

Spiritual Overview:

This has not been formally assessed, but the site does appear on several 'new age' websites that focus on its possible ceremonial use in ancient times.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- The form and function, or sequences of form and function, remain unknown but are available - to some extent - to archaeological investigation.

- Baden-Powell and Elton's fieldwork in 1933 is not properly understood but more information (for example, from relocating and examining the artefacts in the National Museum of Scotland and personal papers/or in the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre in In Oxford) could be researched.
- The impact of past and current site management, procedures since the onset of Guardianship, on the surviving information embedded within the site are not known.
- Steinacleit's relationship to the other prehistoric sites in the vicinity and in the wider Lewis landscape are not known. Such information is available to extensive archaeological research. A proper archaeological study would doubtless reveal all.
- The true and extent of the local oral and written historical records are not known and would merit further investigation.

4 Associated properties

(some other relevant Properties in Care in the Western Isles) – **Calanais Stone Circle; Dun Carloway broch**

(some other potentially relevant sites in the Western Isles) – Dùn Èistean, Barpa Langass chambered cairn (North Uist); Loch Olabhat island settlement (Benbecula)

(other Properties in Care imperfectly understood but which may also be prehistoric non-defensive homesteads) – **Kilpatrick Dun; Stanydale**

5 Keywords

prehistoric; enclosure; homestead; field system; cairn; peat; agricultural landscape

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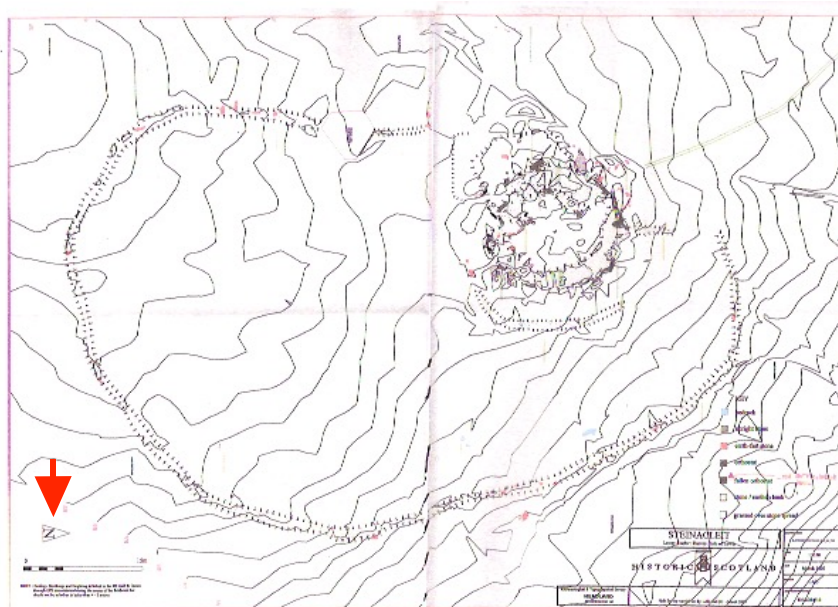
Appendix 1 – Timeline

- **3000 x 1500 BC** – the site is established at some point during the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age.
- **1920** – the site is discovered during peat cutting. A column of peat is left in place.
- **1933** – the site is ‘investigated’ by Charles Elton, Donald Baden-Powell. The small-finds recovered are deposited with the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMAS).
- **1934** – the site is entrusted into State care.

Extract from Mackenzie 1792, p284 - 5

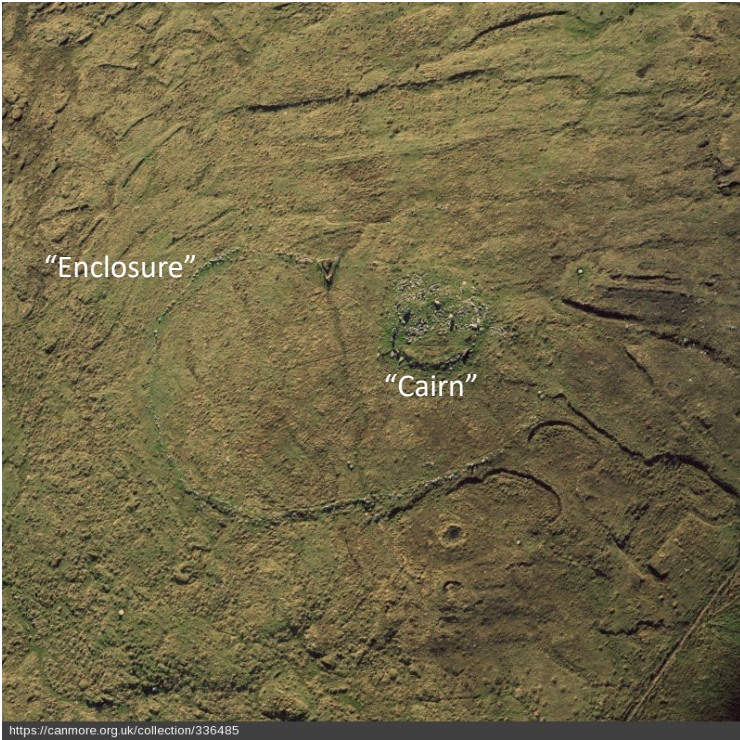
In many other parts of Lewis the remains of these circles are seen. Between Garbert and Shader, on a rising ground, there are the remains of a very extensive double circle. Some of the stones about the inner circle, which are pretty large, appear to have been thrown down by violence. It is not unlikely, that at the introduction of Christianity, the votaries of a new religion would find some merit in destroying every memorial of the ancient superstition: The violence with which this zeal raged, at a more enlightened period, must be always regretted by every admirer of Scottish antiquities. I must not omit, that these stones, whose size certainly required some machinery to rear them up, are entirely rude; have no marks of the chisel; and at a distance make a very grotesque appearance; that at Calernish is called by the country people, *na Fhìrr Chràce*, who, they say, were thus metamorphosed into stones while dancing.

Appendix 2 – Images and survey plan



2003 survey drawing, NB North point is incorrect, a corrected N point is indicated in red





Steinacleit from the north