



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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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STEINACLEIT CAIRN AND STONE CIRCLE

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The Property in Care at Steinacleit comprises an area of ground with evidence of pre-historic structures. The site was covered by accumulations of peat which built-up over perhaps 3000 years. In the early 20th century the extent of the site was revealed during peat-cutting. The site remains enigmatic and there is as yet no clear understanding of its age, purpose or development.

It is located on gently rising ground above the south-eastern shore of Loch an Duin, Shader, 12 miles north of Stornoway. Its prominent location gives wide views to the north, west and south.

A signpost to the site is located on the eastern side of the A857 at a junction with metalled single-track roads to west and east. Taking the eastern single-track road, the site can be approached by car to within approximately 250 m; the road terminates here at a turning point. A well-defined path, accessed through metal gates, leads across rising, rough pasture for approximately 100m to the site.

The site survives as an extensive, seemingly multi-phase stone construction apparently with two main elements:

1. The “enclosure”: an arrangement of large boulders and smaller stones that describe an extensive oval enclosure
2. The “Cairn”: within the enclosure is a circular stony mound, the “cairn”. The perimeter of this “cairn” is marked by at least 13 large, upright, earthfast slabs.

These terms are used throughout this document to identify the parts of the site though, as will become clear, the identification associated with these labels remains provisional, see 2.1 Background.

1.2 Statement of significance

Because it has not been archaeologically studied to any degree, establishing the significance of Steinacleit is challenging. Setting it within a peer group of sites for comparative analysis is also problematic. However, there is agreement that Steinacleit is an important and probably high status site and that it's potential to yield significant information is very high due to its relatively undisturbed condition. Therefore its significance can be characterised as follows:

- Steinacleit is enigmatic, unparalleled and mostly unknown but nonetheless it is indicative of the potential for archaeological riches concealed by blanket peat. It lay undisturbed under the peat for perhaps 3000 years, and it remains largely untouched, presenting future generations of archaeologists with precious evidence for early prehistoric life (and, perhaps, death) in the Western Isles.

- Steinacleit's nature and scale indicates a very considerable investment in construction and use. It is highly probable that it also represents several sequences of construction and use and, on these grounds alone, it has to be considered as an important site.
- The site and the landscape within which it is set were abandoned in distant antiquity and then engulfed in accumulating peat. This site therefore contains important evidence of geomorphological and environmental processes of change, which in turn can be communicated to visitors.
- Steinacleit is situated within a wider landscape that contains several other significant prehistoric sites. The relationships between Steinacleit and these nearby monuments and with its wider landscape context have not been investigated and these gaps impose significant constraints on understanding the monument.
- With regard to Historic Environment Scotland's estate of Properties in Care, Steinacleit is potentially its only example in the Western Isles of what may be a multi-period, prehistoric high-status site of either domestic or ritual function, a type of site that is not well-represented anywhere in the Estate.

Lack of archaeological study hampers our ability to understand this site and its development. This has implications both for management and interpretation. Physically the site is relatively difficult to access and for many visitors must seem unintelligible except in its broadest outline and connection to deep pre-history. This however does offer the opportunity to discuss archaeological "unknowns", which in itself is a valid area of consideration for the historic environment.

The above bullet points summarise the key aspects of significance. A fuller and more rounded articulation of the heritage values ascribed to the site is given below.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

The site survives as extensive, seemingly multi-phase stone construction apparently with two main elements:

1. The "enclosure": an arrangement of large boulders and smaller stones that describe an extensive oval enclosure
2. The "Cairn": within the enclosure is a circular stony mound, the "cairn". The perimeter of this "cairn" is marked by at least 13 large, upright, earthfast slabs. The "cairn" is located within and towards the east side of the enclosure.

These terms were used in the Guardianship documentation and RCAHMS Inventory description and are used throughout this document to identify the parts of the site though, as will become clear, the identification associated with these labels remains provisional.

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*

In 2003 Historic Scotland commissioned a topographical survey of the site and its immediate surroundings. The results provide a precise and accurate plan of the site which allows for greater clarity of speculation but no invasive archaeological work was commissioned and no additional archaeological information was acquired. Consequently, the interpretations remain untested.

The 2003 survey does make one significant contribution to the description of the site. The RCAHMS 1921 team were precise in stating that the “cairn” did not come into contact with the enclosure wall. From the 2003 survey, and indeed also from recent aerial photographs (see Appendix 2), that absence of contact between these two elements is far from clear. Indeed, it seems possible that the “cairn” overlies the enclosure wall. The 2003 survey also records an alignment of earthfast stones, some 18 m long, and offset some 13 m southward (NB the survey north point seems to be incorrect) from “enclosure” and south of the “cairn”. The survey records no evidence of ancient rig or other agricultural remains within or outwith the “enclosure”.

Without excavation, the site’s interpretation remains uncertain. The evidence cannot at present sustain more precision beyond concluding that the site probably represents a sequence of activities some of which involved monumental architecture.

2.2 Evidential values

As the preceding paragraphs outline, no unequivocal interpretation of the site has been agreed. Paradoxically the evidential value of Steinacleit is potentially extremely high as it has not been subject to great disturbance, peat having sealed the site for millennia. By current understanding the site itself does not fit easily into an identifiable class of monument but despite this ambiguity it should still be considered as an important site. It is almost certain that the monument retains archaeological evidence that would change and enhance the understanding and appreciation of the monument and the wider historic landscape.

The labels currently attached to the site, whether “cairn”, “homestead”, “enclosure” or “field system” tend to influence the way the site is appreciated. As an example, the outer “enclosure” wall seems to have been regarded as the less important portion of the site, possibly because of the connotations of function inherent in its name. However, if one reads back to the RCAHMS’ 1921 description, it is apparent that there is a great variety of dimension and build in its circuit. It seems unwise to regard this very large structure as just an agricultural or even a single phase structure. There is also the possibility that other features in the vicinity of the enclosure wall, such as the alignment of earthfast stones just beyond the north-western edge of the enclosure, remain obscured in form, function and significance by the ground cover and the relic peat cover.

Stonework of this scale probably also offers an extensive and relatively well-preserved sample of the preceding land surface and thus a record of the landscape that preceded construction. So the enclosure should be regarded as an untapped resource for paleo-environmental and human-upon-landscape impact information.

The development of a blanket peat over the site would once have been seen as the outcome of a general late Holocene landscape degradation. Recent research points to a much more complex interplay of processes and factors that result in blanket peat development. Amongst these various agencies, human behaviour (both active landuse and land abandonment) are a significant component. The onset of peat development therefore resonates with human history.

The work of the Cults Loch project, in Galloway, has provided archaeological (including radiocarbon) evidence for contemporaneity across adjacent basis terrestrial and wetland sites (Crone & Cavers 200*). This example is sufficient for retaining, at least until evidentially disproved, the possibility that at least one phase of use of Steinaclait was contemporaneity to some use of the island dun or broch on Loch an Duin (NB35SE 4).

The very limited investigations in 1933, by Baden-Powell and Elton, should not be dismissed as valueless. It is important to recognise that both Elton and Baden Powell were fully aware of the importance and potential of archaeological information; their research interests were not in the archaeology of human society, instead they sought to use such evidence as a means of dating recent geomorphological events (e.g. sand dune and raised beach formation and peat formation). Their unpublished accounts of their work make it clear that they opened two trenches and found important archaeological remains in at least the one into the "cairn". Here they recovered bone, wood, pottery and flint from a sediment resembling peat ash. It is extremely unlikely, given the acid soils in Lewis, that this was ancient bone or wood and so Baden-Powell and Elton probably found evidence for some relatively recent occupation of the site. The significance of this observation has become apparent only in the light of recent excavations at sites such as Dun Eistean further to the north at Ness, Lewis.

On the HES file on Steinaclait there is a letter, dated 1933, from the school master from nearby Barvas (Barabhas). The writer reports that there is a local tradition that a "watch-house" was built on the cairn during a period of clan warfare. Given Elton and Baden-Powell's discovery of fairly recent archaeological material at this location, it is not too far fetched to suggest that their trench had revealed the final phase of use of the building and one that was retained in that local tradition.

2.3 Historical values

No exhaustive survey of the documentary sources was undertaken for this text but no unequivocal references (for example in the Barvas parish entry in the Old Statistical Accounts) was identified. Consequently, Steinaclait is

largely bereft of information covering its form or function until it enters the archaeological literature in the early 20th century

However, the file reference, above, to a local tradition that Steinacleit acquired a military function in the recent (possibly post-medieval) past is important as it indicates some presence within the local personal documentary record (i.e. letters, diaries, etc).

This same letter, on file, alludes to some degree of collaboration between Baden-Powell & Elton and a visiting team from either the Royal Commission or the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in 1933; it implies they shared the same hotel in Stornoway. This may not have been the only collaboration as it seems possible that, in 1920, the peat cutters were advised by these visiting officials to leave the vestigial peat hag in place over the enclosure wall.

It is equally possible that the peat cutters themselves recognised the significance of their discoveries. This is another aspect of the site that would merit further research within local document archives.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

It is, at present, not possible to discuss the original form or function of either the “enclosure” wall or the “cairn” in any meaningful way. However, it is clear that as a whole, the site expresses a very substantial effort, at some distant period in prehistory, invested in one or a sequence of architectural endeavours. Just the location alone speaks of a design that was highly sensitive to the potentials and demands of the landscape. In this regard, and also in relationship to the deep peat that accumulated over Steinacleit, the site resembles the Stone Circle group at Calanais. It is thus not impossible that Steinacleit represents part of 5000 year-old portfolio of architecture design and construction. Henshall’s proposal, that the “cairn” represents a roofed structure, is not ridiculous. She would have known in detail the probable Neolithic structure at Staneydale, Shetland as well as having a very extensive knowledge of the architecture of chambered tombs. On-going excavations at the Ness of Brodgar, and the Links of Noltland, both in Orkney, have revealed large, stone-built Neolithic buildings which, while not matching the “cairn”, do provide support for Henshall’s hypothesis.

The possibility that the site contains the remains of a “watch-house” - dating to some relatively recent period of clan warfare - points to a further architectural potential for the site. Little is known for certain about the architecture of clan warfare but excavations at Dun Eistean, Lewis, also revealed the remains of a small rectangular tower. Subsequent research by the excavator at Dun Eistean, Dr Rachel Barrowman, identified several probable medieval and post-medieval small tower-like structures in Lewis. The case for Steinacleit’s inclusion in this assemblage is not strong but neither is it refutable.

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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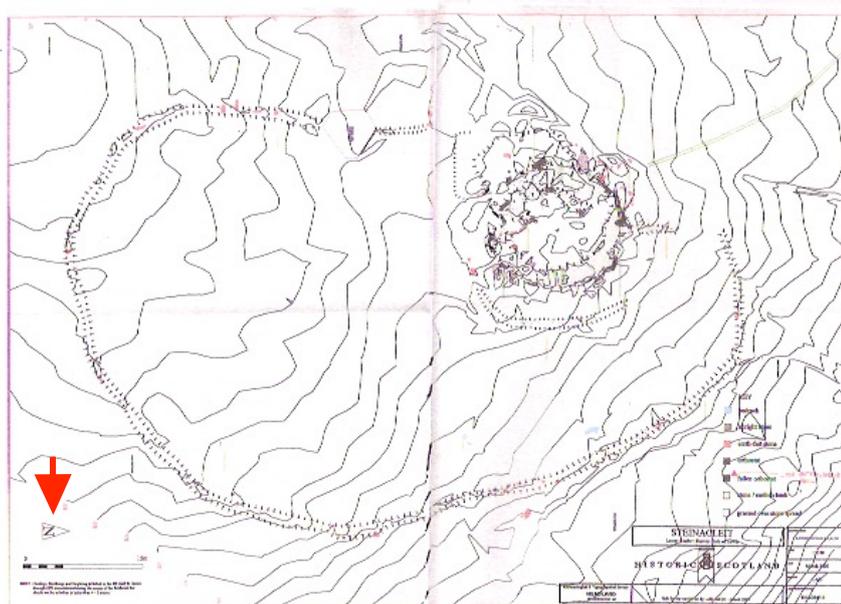
Appendix 1 – Timeline

- **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

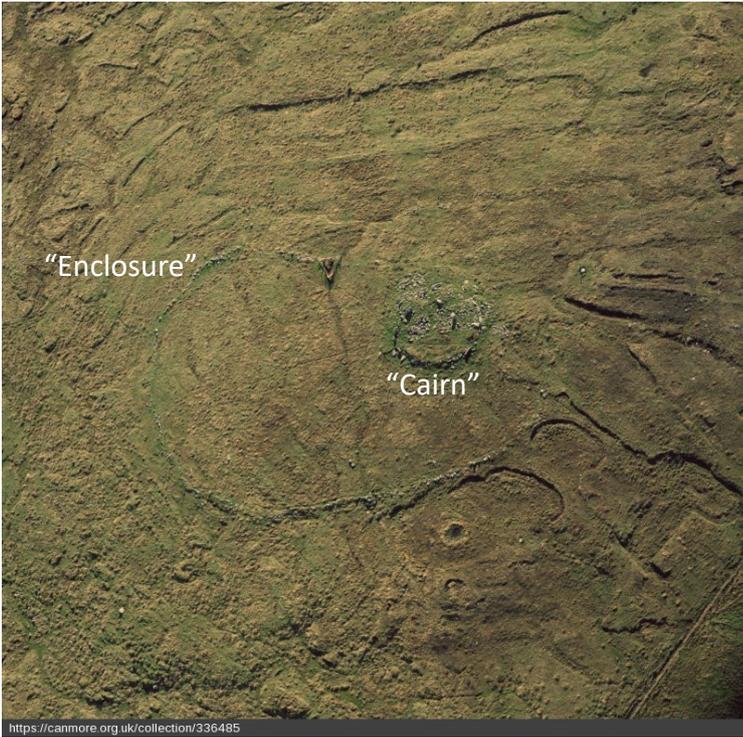
In many other parts of Lewis the remains of these circles are seen. Between Garbert and Shader, on a rising ground, there are the remains of a very extensive double circle. Some of the stones about the inner circle, which are pretty large, appear to have been thrown down by violence. It is not unlikely, 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