



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:  
Designations:  
Taken into State care:  
Last Reviewed:

PIC267  
Scheduled Monument (SM3314)  
1943 (Guardianship)  
2014 (2025 update to include Empire  
connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# STANYDALE TEMPLE



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## STANYDALE TEMPLE

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## SYNOPSIS

Stanydale 'Temple' lies in open moorland off the A971 3 miles east of Walls, in West Mainland. It is reached on foot from the minor road to Gruting. The monument itself sits in a bowl of flat land surrounded by hills and, unusually for Shetland, from the site one cannot see open water in any direction.

The monument comprises a large Neolithic structure, termed a 'temple' by its excavator, belonging to the 3rd millennium BC. Architecturally, the 'temple' is like the near-contemporary 'heel-shaped' burial cairns found in Shetland, and although not used for burial, the 'temple' may have had a ceremonial or ritual function. It is the only truly megalithic structure surviving from prehistoric Shetland.

The landscape around the 'temple' has a wealth of archaeology, including the well-preserved remains of smaller prehistoric oval houses, standing stones, field dykes and clearance cairns, as well as structures of more recent date. These are not in State care but are Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Stanydale 'Temple' was excavated in 1949 and taken into State care in 1943.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

- **3000 – 2000 BC** – Neolithic people settle in the valley, building houses, enclosing fields and erecting standing stones. Chief among them is the 'temple', in essence a double-sized version of the standard prehistoric house. It is probably built between 2500 – 2000 BC.
- **1600 BC** – Stanydale 'Temple' is now derelict, for high in the ruins lay pottery sherds of a type associated with the early Bronze Age, a period thought to begin c.1800 BC. The reason is probably down to climate change, a significant drop in temperature resulting in the formation of peat and a consequent inability to grow crops on this higher ground. The 'temple' and its associated structures are gradually buried beneath a blanket of peat.
- **1500s on** – peat cutting for fuel begins in earnest in Shetland (for example, a rental of 1604 records that **Scalloway Castle** needs 32 fathoms (over 4,000 m<sup>3</sup>) of peat a year to heat). Gradually,

Stanydale ‘temple’ and its associated structures re-emerge from under the peat blanket.

- **1943** – Stanydale ‘Temple’ is entrusted into State care.
- **1949** – Charles Calder excavates the site and coins the term ‘temple’ to describe it, because of its perceived similarity to late Neolithic/early Bronze Age temples on Malta. Permission was given by the landowner, John Lumley Dundas, 2nd marquess of Zetland (1876–1961). Though the wider Dundas family earned significant wealth from involvement in Caribbean slavery, it cannot be shown with any certainty how much of that played a role in preserving the site to this point.<sup>1</sup>
- **1950** – Calder excavates one of the near-contemporary oval houses near the ‘temple’ (HU 288 503).
- **early 1970s** – the monument is consolidated by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. The stones piled on the wall-heads are removed and replaced with a turf capping.

## Archaeological overview

### The ‘Temple’

The monument was excavated by Charles Calder in 1949. In addition to exposing its architectural remains (see *Architectural/Artistic overview*), he excavated the entire floor area.

He found no central hearth, but he did find several small hearths located in front of the six large wall recesses around the western side. He also discovered two large, stone-lined post holes, in one of which were the carbonised remains of two timber stumps – both non-native Spruce that must have reached Shetland as driftwood. Most probably they supported a roof, although it is just conceivable that the monument could have been an open enclosure, with free-standing posts, perhaps serving some ritual purpose.

The floor was also found to have been kept clean, in contrast to the normal accumulation of domestic rubbish associated with the houses excavated. The few artefacts recovered included large flat-based storage vessels and Beaker fragments, as well as fragments of a polished stone ‘Shetland knife’ and a pile of burnt sheep bones – the latter perhaps associated with a ‘ritual’ function.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the connection between Properties in Care and the British Empire download the full report from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

Calder's excavations beyond the outer perimeter wall appear to have been limited to clearing the wall face.

The finds from Calder's excavation are in National Museums Scotland.

### **The surrounding archaeological landscape**

The 'Temple' lies in a landscape rich in prehistoric sites (not in care but Scheduled Ancient Monuments). These include at least four oval houses and associated field systems, including dykes and clearance cairns, as well as the stumps of at least five stones (possibly six) in two sets on separate arcs at distances ranging from 12m to 36m from the 'Temple' on the north. The 'Temple' itself lies within a large field.

To date only one of the houses (that beside the wayside marker visitors pass as they enter the valley - at NGR: HU 288 503) has been excavated, also by Calder, in 1950. Measuring overall 17m by 9.7m, it comprised a large main room, oval in plan, with two small recess on the east side, a stone bench along the west wall and a central hearth. There was a small round cell at the north end. Unusually, it also had a porch outside the entrance on the south-west side.

In addition to these visible remains there will be much else besides, lurking under the remaining peat. The similarity with the Neolithic settlement complex at Scord of Brouster, just a couple of miles north-west of Stanydale, is striking. There lie four houses, fields and clearance cairns, a ring cairn and a large oval enclosure 60m long.

The entire landscape around Stanydale 'Temple' undoubtedly represents an outstanding archaeological resource.

### **Architectural/Artistic overview**

Stanydale 'Temple' is the only truly megalithic (large stone) structure in Shetland.

The monument, oval on plan, measures overall 19.5m by 14.3m. The enclosing wall is a massive 3.6m thick and built of huge drystone blocks, some of them weighing 300kg.

The concave façade through which it is entered is almost horned, making it noticeably like the façades of Shetland's Neolithic chambered cairns. These have a characteristic circular plan with a concave façade housing the entrance. For this reason they are usually referred to as 'heel-shaped'. (Good examples of 'heel-shaped' cairns survive at Isleburgh and Punds Water, both in the parish of Brae, West Mainland, and the Ward of Vementry.) The entrance passage seems to have included a device to secure the door.

The interior comprises a single chamber measuring roughly 14m by 10m. Around its inner (west) end are six large recesses, separated by boulder partitions faced with upright slabs. Such recesses, when found in a near-contemporary house, would be interpreted as bed-recesses, but here they are oversized for such; each recess was associated with a hearth, but what function they served is a mystery, like so much of this monument.

Charles Calder coined the term 'temple' to describe his discovery, because he felt it most closely resembled the shape, but not the construction, of Neolithic buildings known as temples in Malta. Such a link is now generally dismissed.

The structure does have similarities to burial cairns, which slightly predate its construction (placed in the latter half of the 3rd millennium BC), and to near-contemporary houses, particularly its pronounced 'heel' shape and the internal compartmentalisation. However, the structure is so large compared to contemporary houses (around twice the average size) and so clearly related to 'heel-shaped' tombs, that it must have had a special status within the farming community. Theories include a temple, village hall, meeting-house, court room – even a lunar observatory. Perhaps it was all or none of these things. We may never know.

Excavations elsewhere – for example Barnhouse, in Orkney – have shown that some Neolithic settlements would have had a large special building set amidst the houses, and also that there are similarities in ground plan between such large buildings and true chambered cairns. That Stanydale 'Temple' is truly megalithic, in an island archipelago entirely lacking in such structures, makes it a most remarkable survival from the later Neolithic/early Bronze Age.

## **Social overview**

Stanydale 'Temple' and its surrounding prehistoric landscape have an undoubted heritage draw, as evidenced by the numerous websites drawing attention to it.

However, probably because of its somewhat remote location, and the challenging access (a long hike across boggy terrain), the 'Temple' seems not to have any other specific social role.

## **Spiritual overview**

It would seem that ritual was embedded in most aspects of daily life in the Neolithic (for example, even house forms may have been related to cosmological beliefs), but Stanydale 'Temple' has a range of features that stand out as being particularly unusual and for which a ritual or ceremonial



function is therefore attributed. These features include its monumental size, both overall and in its wall construction, and its similarity to the 'heel-shaped' burial tombs that immediately preceded it.

Today, neither the 'temple' nor its surrounding monuments seems to play any specific spiritual role.

## **Aesthetic overview**

Getting to Stanydale requires a hike across open moorland, often in poor weather and with boggy ground underfoot. This can conjure up in the mind's eye a picture of a far-gone age (even though the climate in the Neolithic was a couple of degrees warmer than today).

The hike takes the visitor past a number of prehistoric features, mostly modest stony piles that somehow pale into insignificance when one sights the truly monumental 'Temple' itself. Even today, in its bleak landscape setting, the structure impresses, much as it surely would have done five thousand years ago, when the valley was home to a thriving farming settlement.

The situation of the monument is most unusual. It lies in a bowl of flat land surrounded by hills and, strangely for Shetland, the visitor cannot see open water in any direction from the site.

## **What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?**

- What was Stanydale 'Temple' built for? We may never know the answer, for the monument defies easy classification. No exactly comparable building has been found in other centres of Neolithic population, although other large prehistoric houses have since been discovered in Shetland, including two not far from Stanydale – the Gruting School House and the Ness of Gruting.
- What exact form did the monument take? The 'Temple' was excavated and then partially restored, without a stone-by-stone record being taken. A detailed examination of Calder's 1948 photographs, and those of the 1950s (all in the NMRS) would help to disentangle the 'modern' from the 'ancient'.
- How did the 'temple' sit within the wider prehistoric agricultural landscape? There is no doubt that a comprehensive archaeological and environmental survey and investigation would answer many questions.



## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Stanydale 'Temple' is the only truly megalithic structure to have survived from prehistoric Shetland, which lacks any great circles and tombs such as are found elsewhere in Scotland, especially Orkney.
- The 'Temple' is an enigmatic and, so far, unique monument. It may attest to Neolithic religious/ritual practices or to a communal aspect of life, perhaps not readily apparent in the small groupings of Neolithic houses that dot the Shetland landscape.
- The 'Temple' testifies to an early and sophisticated society in Shetland, the organisation of which was such that a large and architecturally impressive structure could be constructed.
- The landscape surrounding the 'Temple' holds a wealth of archaeological remains, including near-contemporary oval houses, field systems, standing stones, as well as structures of more recent date. The whole valley has enormous archaeological potential.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

*Other similar sites in Shetland:* Scord of Brouster settlement, West Mainland;

*Some 'heel-shaped' Shetland tombs:* Isleburgh, Brae; Punds Water, Brae; Ward of Vementry.

*Some large oval-shaped Shetland houses:* the 'Benie Hoose' and the 'Standing Stones of Yoxie', Whalsay

## KEYWORDS

Neolithic; Bronze Age; 'heel-shaped' tombs/cairns; prehistoric landscape; ritual/ceremonial; peat; Charles Calder

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