# Abstractions Based on Circles

## Papers on prehistoric rock art presented to Stan Beckensall on his 90th birthday

Edited by

Paul Frodsham and Kate Sharpe

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Cover images:
Front: Detail of 'Old Bewick 1a' (see page 156). Academic interest in cup-and-ring marks is traditionally traced back to the discovery of this site, by John Langlands, in 1825. By coincidence, this is also where Stan Beckensall first encountered cup-and-ring marks, in 1966. Photo: England's Rock Art database.
Back: Stan Beckensall in 2018. Photo: Kate Sharpe.
Cup-and-ring marks on 'Old Bewick 1a', drawn in his characteristic style, based on wax rubbings made in the field, by Stan Beckensall.




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# Contributors

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Paul is an independent researcher, writer, and lecturer. He has held postdoctoral fellowships at Liverpool and London Universities and a J. Paul Getty postdoctoral fellowship in the History of Art and the Humanities. His main research interest is prehistoric art, and he led the team that discovered the first Ice Age cave art in Britain at Creswell Crags.

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Tertia is an Honorary Fellow in Archaeology at Edinburgh University. She has spent over 20 years researching and recording rock carvings in Britain and North Africa. During this time, she has led on several community co-production projects in Britain, including Scotland's Rock Art Project and the Northumberland and Durham Rock Art Project, and is a keen advocate of community engagement in rock art.

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Linda Marie is a Norwegian archaeologist with an MSc in Landscape Archaeology from the Freie Universität in Berlin. She was the Data Analyst for Scotland's Rock Art Project in 2020–2021. Her primary interests are in digital mapping, survey and community outreach, backed up by a keen desire to disseminate research in a way that is engaging and accessible. For her postgraduate thesis, she performed statistical and spatial analysis on large datasets through a multi-scalar approach in QGIS and R.

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Keith is a retired science teacher and experienced amateur archaeologist with an interest in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age period of the north of England. He has researched and published on the prehistoric rock art of West Yorkshire for over forty years, including co-author with the late Edward Vickerman of *Prehistoric Rock Art of the West Riding: The Cup-and-Ring-Marked Rocks of the Valleys of the Aire, Wharfe, Washburn and Nidd* (2013). He edits *Prehistoric Yorkshire*, the annual journal of the Prehistory Research Section of the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society.

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Phil has been the Chairman of Tynedale North of the Wall Archaeology Group since 2013. Together with Anne Bowyer, he won the Northumberland National Park 'Heritage Hero' Award in 2012.

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Richard is Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at Reading University and an Honorary Research Associate in the School of Archaeology at Oxford. He has published numerous books and papers, including two about rock art. His publication *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe* (1997) has influenced more recent rock art studies in Britain and Ireland.

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Kenny, aka 'The Urban Prehistorian', is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Glasgow, specialising in the British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods. His research focuses on the ways that prehistory matters to people today, and how we can use it to explore better futures. He uses innovative methodologies such as psychogeography, performance and other creative practices, and works with communities who have prehistoric sites in their midst, such as at the Cochno Stone rock art site in West Dunbartonshire.

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Richard is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Newcastle and Director of the Archaeological Practice Ltd. He has directed numerous fieldwork projects leading to hundreds of reports and numerous publications covering urban and rural sites of all periods in the north of England and the Borders. In addition to development-related fieldwork, he has played key roles in several large-scale community-based projects in north-east England, such as Altogether Archaeology, Flodden 500, Lindisfarne-Peregrini and Revitalising Redesdale.

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Andy is the current treasurer of Tynedale North of the Wall Archaeology Group. He has contributed his IT expertise to many community archaeology projects in north-east England. He was a key contributor to the Northumberland and Durham Rock Art Project, developing the technique of photogrammetry with excellent results.

**Paul Frodsham**
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Paul has worked as a professional archaeologist in northern England for more than 30 years, including 14 years with the Northumberland National Park Authority

and ten with the North Pennines AONB Partnership. He now runs his own independent consultancy (Oracle Heritage Services) and is an Honorary Fellow in Archaeology at Durham University. He specialises in the development and delivery of innovative community projects, e.g., *Altogether Archaeology* and *Belief in the North East*. He has published numerous books and papers on a variety of subjects, mostly relating to the prehistory of northern England, especially Neolithic monuments and rock art.

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After early careers in primary teaching, Iain and Irene moved to occupy posts at Bournemouth University where Irene was an Independent Study Management tutor within the Additional Learning Service. Iain was a programme leader and teacher in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. Both are retired, but Iain remains an Honorary Research Fellow at the University. His outputs include a multi-volume desk-based assessment of medieval rural settlement in Hampshire, and a monograph devoted to the 1969–79 excavations at the Dewlish Roman villa, Dorset.

**Aoibheann Lambe**
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Aoibheann initially qualified as a lawyer and worked for international organisations before moving to Kerry in 2010. She completed a Research Master's degree in archaeology at University College Cork with a study focused on the greatest known concentration of rock art in Ireland, many of whose panels are among those first identified and recorded by Aoibheann. Presently her interests have broadened through rock art to medieval graffiti and a focus on palaeoenvironments associated with rock art. She is currently employed by UCC as an archaeologist on the LIVE project (www.ecomuseumlive.eu), where her research concerns the cultural heritage, rock art included, of the Iveragh peninsula in Kerry.

**Aron Mazel**
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Aron is a Reader in Heritage Studies at Newcastle University and a Research Associate at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Before relocating to the UK in 2002, Aron had a 25-year career in archaeological research, heritage and museum management in South Africa. He has published on a range of topics, including the management and interpretation of tangible and intangible heritage; museum and archaeological histories; the construction of the San hunter-gatherer past in the Thukela basin (South Africa) based on 15 rock shelter excavations; and rock art in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg (South Africa) and Northumberland (UK).

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George is an Associate Professor at the Geosciences Centre, University of Coimbra (IPT), Portugal, lecturing on architectural and landscape theory, prehistory and art. In the past, George has undertaken research projects throughout the British Isles, and elsewhere, in Brazil, Chile, Israel, Italy, Mongolia, Portugal and Sardinia. Since 2004, George has been a Convener of the Welsh Rock art Organisation and is currently working alongside colleagues in southern Jordan and UAE, and on the *First Art* Project in the Palaeolithic caves of Spain and Portugal.

**Kate Sharpe**
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Kate is a Research Fellow at Durham University. Her work has three key strands which often overlap: investigating the use of stone in prehistoric Britain, including megaliths, stone tools and, primarily, rock art; using digital heritage to improve understanding and awareness of the ancient past; and copy-editing and writing about archaeology. She has experience managing community rock art projects in Northumberland, Durham and West Yorkshire, although her research focus is the rock art of Cumbria.

**Joana Valdez-Tullett**
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Joana has been working with rock art since 2003, studying and investigating sites in several European countries and of various periods. Her specialism is Atlantic Rock Art, about which she has published a volume based on her PhD thesis. She was Research Assistant for Scotland's Rock Art Project. Joana is also interested in computer applications in archaeology, archaeological theory, and the intersection between archaeology and contemporary art.

**Clive Waddington**

Following previously roles as a lecturer, Clive is founder and Managing Director of Archaeological Research Services Ltd, a leading archaeological consultancy. An encounter with Stan Beckensall's *Rock Carvings of Northern Britain* prompted a lifelong interest in rock art and landscape archaeology. He has published many books and papers dealing with rock art and the prehistory of Northumberland, as well as on many other areas and subjects. He has led a considerable number of fieldwork projects, many large-scale, including the important rock art excavation at Hunterheugh, Northumberland.

**Aaron Watson**
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Aaron Watson is an Interpretation and Engagement Manager at Kilmartin Museum and an Honorary Fellow in Archaeology at Durham University. Alongside his role in the redevelopment of Kilmartin Museum, Aaron investigates Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments and has excavated at several rock art sites. Widely known for his research into the effects of sound and light in ancient architecture, Aaron also explores creative approaches, including photography and video, to reveal and convey the experience of prehistoric sites in the landscape.

# Introduction

Paul Frodsham and Kate Sharpe

## stan

noun: *an extremely or excessively enthusiastic and devoted fan*

verb: *to be an extremely devoted and enthusiastic fan of someone or something*

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stan. Accessed 12 March 2022.

When we started work on this project, neither of us had any idea that the word 'stan' had recently entered standard dictionaries, following its use as a slang term based on a character in a controversial rap song by Eminem in 2000. It is sometimes used derogatively to imply an obsessive degree of fandom, but, based on the above definition, the production of this volume may legitimately be classed as a form of 'stanning'. We are certainly happy to class ourselves as 'Stan stans', as, we suspect, will this volume's contributors and many of its readers!

For most of the twelve months we were working on the volume, it had no title. 'Don't worry, we'll find one somewhere' was uttered on numerous occasions, with slightly less certainty as time wore on. Then we found it – the perfect title, hiding in one of Stan's poems. Within a verse entitled 'Art from the beginning', we spotted the splendid phrase 'abstractions based on circles', which we knew instantly was exactly what we were looking for. Thanks, Stan!

Ten years ago, several of the contributors to this volume played a role in the 'Stanfest', a rock art day-conference to celebrate Stan's 80th birthday, held at the Queen's Hall in his home town of Hexham (Figures 1 and 2. See also: https://www.facebook.com/StanFest-368606793214627/). Somehow, with the connivance of his family, the whole thing was kept secret from him until ten minutes before it started! For us, it was one of the most enjoyable events we have ever been involved in, and Stan certainly appreciated it very much. Ten years on, we thought it unreasonable to expect him to sit through another day of presentations, so instead hit on the idea of a festschrift. With less than a year until his 90th, we circulated a brief note to rock art colleagues, stressing how short of time we were and that deadlines would consequently be tight and non-negotiable. The response was immediate, and overwhelmingly positive. Most of the contributors know Stan personally; all have used his work to inform their own and are happy to place on record their thanks for his efforts over the years. David Davison at *Archaeopress* welcomed our proposal and promised to meet the tight deadline. All the contributors submitted their papers on time, and rapidly checked and returned drafts and proofs. Ben Heaney at *Archaeopress* fast-tracked the design (and incorporated a sizeable batch of last-minute changes at proof stage – thanks Ben!) in order to have everything ready for Stan's birthday. The result is what you see before you; hopefully a fitting tribute to Stan as he enters the tenth decade of his amazing life.

The volume has been produced as part of the *Belief in the North East* project (www.beliefne.net), a community archaeology project based at Durham University and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, designed to enable local volunteers to participate in a range of events, including fieldwork, linked to the archaeology of religion, from prehistory to present, throughout north-east England. The project has more than 1200 registered volunteers, several of whom will help with important fieldwork initiatives at Northumberland rock art sites during 2022. We are pleased that funding provided by the project has enabled the volume to be made freely available online as a pdf to anyone who may wish to consult it, wherever in the world they may be.

We are delighted by the variety of contributions (and contributors), reflecting many different aspects of rock art research and covering work by both academics and amateurs. Indeed, we hope the volume recognises the tremendous debt owed to volunteers and enthusiasts across Britain and Ireland. We also hope that by bringing together contributions from academics and amateurs we are helping to bridge any perceived divide, and to continue the exchange of expertise, ideas and opportunities that we have seen in recent years, and to which Stan has contributed so much.

In our original circular, we invited proposals for papers about any aspect of rock art research. We wondered whether contributions would fall readily into themed sections, around which the book could be structured.

*Figure 1. Stan is handed the programme for the Stanfest; this was the moment he first learned of the event, about ten minutes before it was due to start! Photo: Marc Johnstone.*


*Figure 2. Contributors to the Stanfest outside the Queen's Hall, Hexham. Standing (left to right): Clive Waddington, Elizabeth Shee Twohig, Keith Boughey, Stan, Chris Chippindale, Paul Brown, Tertia Barnett, Kate Sharpe, George Nash, Bob Layton. Kneeling: Aron Mazel, Paul Frodsham. Photo: Marc Johnstone.*

This was not the case, so what follows is only loosely structured, beginning with papers with a regional focus followed by those with more general themes, and ending with three Stan-specific contributions. As editors, we have sought to be light-handed; some contributors make assertions with which we don't necessarily concur but, given the subject matter, this is all but inevitable. With regard to rock art, the old adage 'if you ask two archaeologists the same question you will get at least three answers' certainly holds true!

The first paper considers the fascinating dilemma presented to us by 'natural' rock art. Kate Sharpe asks what Neolithic people may have made of unusual markings on rock that we would today describe as 'geological'. Today, even experts can be unsure as to whether some 'carvings' are natural, artificial, or perhaps a bit of both. Neolithic people may not have worried about such distinctions; unusual marks on rock, just like landscape features such as distinctive rock formations, waterfalls or even mountains, were probably understood by reference to ancestral myths rather than 'science'. Might this have relevance to the origins and nature of cup marks and more complex rock art, and if so, how we might go about investigating it? Kate considers this by reference to sites in Cumbria, building on Stan's earlier work in the county.

As the founder of the Welsh Rock Art Organisation, George Nash is well placed to provide an overview of rock art in Wales, most of which is found in monumental contexts. He describes well-documented monuments such as Barclodiad y Gawres, Bryn Celli Ddu and Bachwen, and presents recent work at Garn Turn, Garn Wen, Trellyffaint, and the Trefael Stone. He considers the possible relationships between such monumental art and 'open-air' carvings on boulders or outcrops which, for unknown reasons, are relatively rare throughout Wales in comparison with parts of Ireland, Scotland and northern England.

Aoibheann Lambe provides a fascinating overview of rock art discoveries in Ireland that will be of great value to those of us less familiar with the Irish material. Aoibheann guides us around the island from the rock art centres of Donegal in the north to the counties of Cork and Kerry in the south-west, and many new sites in between, as she traces new discoveries with implications for chronology and relationships with other monuments. We meet a varied cast of rock art discoverers, past and present, all contributing to an expanding network of influence and increasing awareness. Aoibheann's observations regarding the acceleration in discoveries over recent years are astonishing; the distribution maps are being redrawn at a rapid pace and we cannot help but wonder how many more Irish sites will be known by Stan's 100th birthday!

We then travel to Scotland, to visit the extraordinary archaeological landscape of Kilmartin Glen, a place of which Stan is particularly fond and about which he published *The Prehistoric Rock Art of Kilmartin* in 2005. Three contributions focus on this area, in very different ways. The first, by Kenny Brophy, highlights the astonishing archive of Ronald Morris – Stan's 'equivalent' (if such a thing is possible) in Scotland. Ronald worked on Scottish rock art in the 1970s, at the same time that Stan was working in Northumberland, and when 'serious' archaeologists avoided the subject like the plague. The carvings couldn't be dated, and nobody knew what they were for, so what was the point in wasting time studying them? When Ronald died in 1992 he bequeathed various items to Stan, who ensured that the vast Morris Archive found its way to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), where it has remained, unstudied, ever since. Kenny discusses this archive as it relates to Kilmartin, noting the huge potential it offers for research here and elsewhere.

A second Kilmartin contribution, by Tertia Barnett, Linda Maria Bjerketvedt and Joana Valdez-Tullett, focuses on work recently undertaken by the Scotland's Rock Art Project (ScRAP). This project involved numerous trained volunteers throughout Scotland, resulting in a vast corpus of data now incorporated into the publicly available Canmore database of archaeological and historical sites compiled and managed by Historic Environment Scotland (https://canmore.org.uk/). This paper presents some preliminary results of GIS analysis of that data, exploring how rock art may have been encountered by people moving through the landscape. How visible were the carved surfaces, and from where? And how accessible were they? The answers to these important questions are not entirely as might have been expected.

Aaron Watson provides the third Kilmartin contribution, focusing on just one site – but what a site! Achnabreck displays an unusual combination of motifs more usually associated with Irish passage grave art together with conventional cup-and-ring marks. Aaron has probably spent much more time studying this amazing place than anyone, with the possible exceptions of Ronald Morris and Stan. From his unique perspective as artist and archaeologist, he offers intriguing observations and some fascinating interpretation that could also be of relevance to sites elsewhere. The suggested link with the winter solstice sunset is especially appealing and should trigger the search for comparable observations elsewhere.

By happy coincidence, this challenge is accepted by Richard Bradley (Figures 3 and 4), who has written extensively about rock art over recent years and is always keen to stress the extent to which he has relied

*Figure 3. Stan with Paul Frodsham and Richard Bradley at Copt Howe, Cumbria, in 2018. Photo: Kate Sharpe.*

on Stan's experience. Indeed, in his *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe* (1997) he credits Stan with having introduced him to 'the pleasures of studying rock art'. In his paper, he examines a small number of very unusual sites, and relates them to aspects of their local landscapes that seem to align upon the setting sun at the winter solstice. Richard, perhaps more than anyone else, has influenced the ways in which we think about rock art today, and this contribution certainly provides further food for thought.

While many contributions in this volume discuss well-known sites, we must not lose sight of the multitude of small, often simple examples of rock art that have been recorded in numerous places. These include cup marks in cairns, found commonly in parts of Northumberland and North Yorkshire, sometimes in large quantities. Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, Stan excavated two cairns (Weetwood and Fowberry) in North Northumberland that contained numerous cup-marked stones with their motifs unweathered, suggesting they were freshly made prior to deposition. In the summer of 2021, Richard Carlton led a programme of survey and

*Figure 4. Stan and Richard Bradley at Morwick, Northumberland, in 1990. Photo: Paul Frodsham.*

excavation within a Bronze Age landscape on Fawdon Hill, Redesdale, Northumberland. Redesdale has very little recorded rock art, which did not feature in the planning of this project. However, the excavation of a small cairn resulted in the discovery of several stones with unweathered cup marks. Intriguingly, also in line with Stan's excavations, there was no obvious sign of any burials. The archaeological landscape at Fawdon Hill is by no means unusual; numerous similar examples are known in the uplands of Northumberland and elsewhere. How many more cup-marked stones await discovery in such landscapes, and why were they deposited in such places?

The contribution from Iain and Irene Hewitt focuses on the excavation of a cairn at Blawearie that might reasonably have been expected to contain rock art of some kind but, oddly, did not. It is therefore something of a misfit within this volume, though Stan's involvement in the excavation provides ample reason for its inclusion. The cairn clearly had a complex history, and lies within a landscape rich with rock art, so why no rock art was incorporated into it, during any of its phases, is a bit of a mystery. The issue of when and why rock art, either newly made or 're-used', found its way into burial monuments demands much further study.

Keith Boughey tells the intriguing tale of the Swastika Stone on Ilkley Moor, a site that has baffled rock art scholars since the nineteeth century. The unusual motif, unique in Britain, has a number of parallels that Keith scrutinises here, including the well-documented 'Camunian roses' of north-west Italy and examples in Bohulsän in south-west Sweden, both dated to the Iron Age. He also presents less familiar cases from Sicily, Mali and Portugal before exploring possible meanings from 'warriors' to 'comets', and a fascinating possibility that the Ilkley motif was the work of continental Celts who visited the moor whilst on a tour of duty with the Roman army.

Paul Frodsham takes a sizeable risk in presenting his thoughts on the possible 'purpose' and 'meaning' (he prefers 'connotation') of cup-and-ring marks. This is a dangerous field, which has inspired (and continues to inspire) some very odd thinking. Paul approaches the subject by reference to Native American ethnography, which he is convinced provides some useful clues regarding the nature and purpose of cup-and-ring marks, though, as he stresses, nothing in Neolithic Britain was 'the same' as it was in America thousands of years later. He sees cup-and-ring marks as 'motifs' rather than 'symbols', arguing that they need not necessarily be symbolic of anything other than themselves, though they may well incorporate the idea of a 'sacred centre'. His suggestion that some rock art sites could have functioned in a way comparable with North American vision quest sites is bound to be controversial, but is, in his view, far more likely than that they functioned as maps, signposts or territorial markers, all of which are modern concepts, probably alien to Neolithic thinking.

While this volume's main focus is, of course, backwards to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, it is important that we also look to the future and consider how our understanding of rock art might change through new fieldwork. As one of the few people to have excavated an extensive cup-and-ring-marked outcrop, Clive Waddington is ideally placed to consider this. His contribution focuses on the importance of excavating rock art sites, of which we must surely do more if we truly want to make progress in understanding chronology and purpose. Anyone planning future excavations of rock art outcrops should certainly bear in mind everything that Clive says here. We must also avoid falling into the trap of studying (or even thinking about) rock art in isolation. Rather, we should think in terms of 'rock art landscapes' and actively seek opportunities to investigate relationships between rock art and other aspects of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age worlds.

The final three contributions all focus on 'Stan the man'. Aron Mazel, who oversaw the project to digitise Stan's extensive archive and make it available online (sadly, at the time of writing, the website is unavailable), presents an overview of Stan's involvement with rock art from the 1960s to the present day (Figures 5 and 6). Aron also notes some of Stan's other achievements: in addition to his archaeological and historical work, he has contributed much in the fields of poetry, drama and the church. Also (and in Stan's opinion much more importantly) he is a great family man, standing with his dear wife, Jane, at the head of the ever-expanding Beckensall clan! One may legitimately wonder how on earth he has fitted all this into just one life. And he isn't finished yet! His latest archaeological book, on death and religion, was approaching publication as this volume went to press.

Paul Bahn makes clear in his appreciation of 'The Lord of the Rings' that Stan's work has been influential in his own research. He particularly highlights his no-nonsense approach and efforts to counter shamanic explanations. Paul stresses the way in which rock art is very accessible, both intellectually and physically, and that current knowledge owes much to survey and interpretation undertaken outside the academic sphere.

The final contribution is provided by two experienced 'amateur' practitioners, Phil Bowyer and Andy Curtis, who have followed Stan's lead in undertaking archaeological

*Figure 5. Stan at Weetwood Moor, Northumberland, in the 1970s. Photo from the Beckensall Archive, courtesy of Aron Mazel.*

survey work in Northumberland over recent years. Much of their work has been done under the auspices of the Tynedale North of the Wall community group; the wall in question being, of course, Hadrian's, which in the past has dominated archaeological enquiry in Tynedale, leaving few resources for landscape surveys in the wide open 'empty' landscapes to its north. Inspired by its president, Stan, this group is discovering and documenting rock art within complex prehistoric landscapes rather than in isolation, which is crucial to our understanding. This paper also presents some recent spectacular discoveries of rock art in Northumberland, demonstrating that there must be many more such sites awaiting discovery.

At the end of the volume, we include a bibliography of Stan's published work on rock art. While undoubtedly an impressive corpus of work, this tells only part of the story. So much of his contribution has been in the form of public presentations and sharing his knowledge face to face, often across a panel of rock art on a misty moor! We can be reasonably certain that no Neolithic person ever saw as much rock art as Stan has. His unrivalled

*Figure 6. Stan lecturing at Roughting Linn, Northumberland, in May 2022. Photo: Paul Frodsham.*

*Figure 7. Stan demonstrating his recording technique at Chatton Sandyford, Northumberland, in 2002, watched by an attentive Kate Sharpe. Photo: Andrew Blanshard.*

experience of rock art in its myriad manifestations give him an authority on the subject that is unlikely ever to be surpassed. No amount of data analysis using sophisticated GIS, or endless manipulation of high-resolution 3D models, can compare with the intimacy gained from spending hours in a landscape, carefully tracing the contours of a carved stone with wax crayon onto newsprint (Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10). With such dedication comes empathy, insight, and understanding, all of which Stan not only has in abundance, but has always been happy to share.

We hope this volume reaches a wide audience and encourages many more people to follow in Stan's footsteps by becoming involved in some way with rock art, whether through participating in projects, visiting sites, or just thinking about it. On behalf of all the contributors: thanks so much Stan, and HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

*Figure 8. Stan recording at Morwick, Northumberland, in 2003. Photo: Aron Mazel.*

*Figure 9. Stan recording on Ben Lawers, above Loch Tay, in July 2007. Photo: Paul Frodsham.*

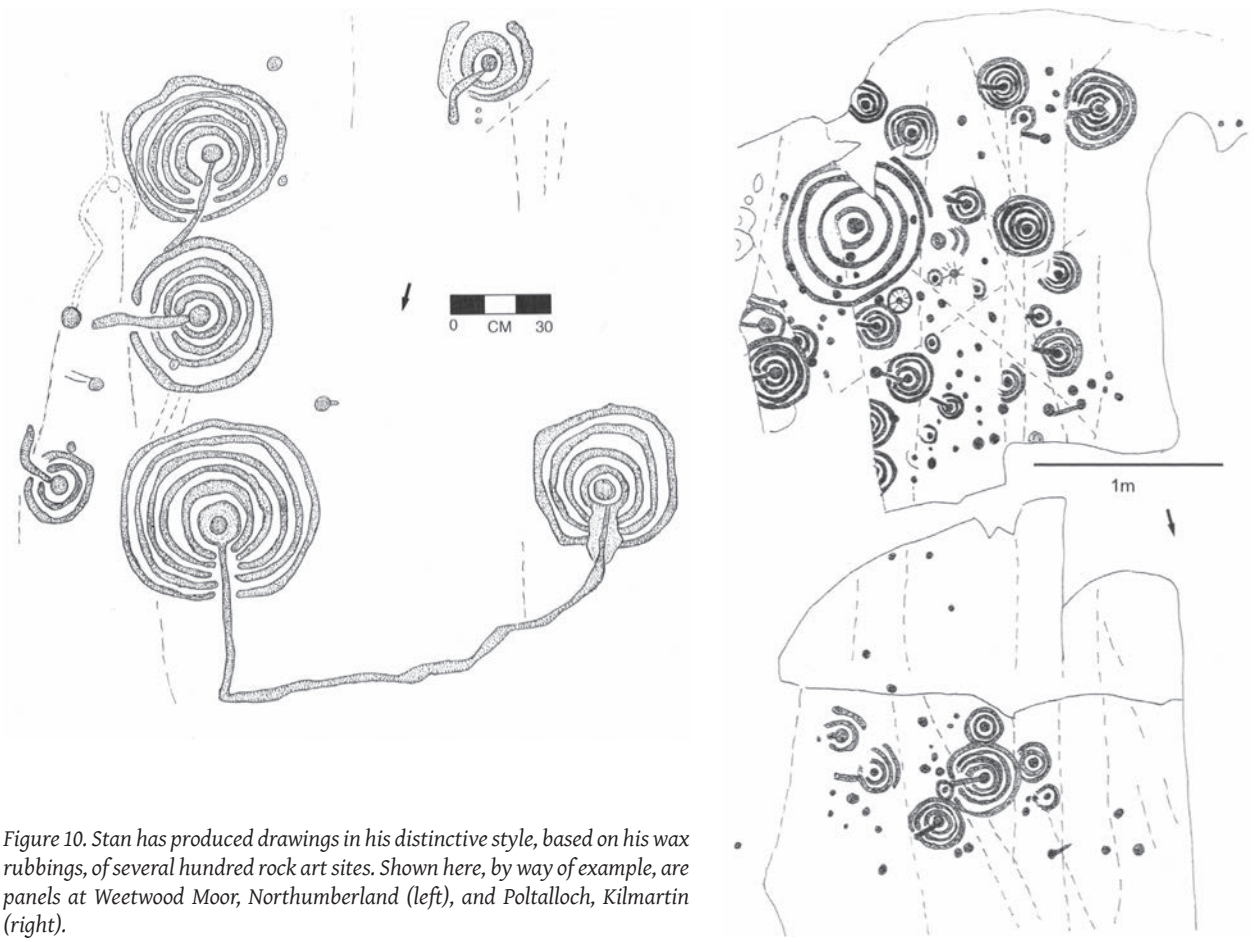


*Figure 10. Stan has produced drawings in his distinctive style, based on his wax rubbings, of several hundred rock art sites. Shown here, by way of example, are panels at Weetwood Moor, Northumberland (left), and Poltalloch, Kilmartin (right).*