Demystifying the Big Horn Medicine Wheel: A Contextual Analysis of Meaning, Symbolism, and Function

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ABSTRACT

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel in northern Wyoming has been the subject of anthropological curiosity for more than a century. Yet despite this long history of investigation, relatively little is known about the uses and meanings embedded in this stone configuration in the past. Previous studies have tended to focus exclusively on the original purpose and function of this structure, resulting in essentializing and unsatisfactory hypotheses regarding its construction. In an attempt to rectify this situation, this study utilizes a contextual approach to examine the multiple meanings and symbolic aspects of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel previously ignored in purely functional analyses. Specifically, this study focuses on two features of this famous monument: 1) the placement of this medicine wheel within the surrounding landscape and geology of Medicine Mountain; and 2) the numerical symbolism and meanings embedded in the structure itself. The results of this analysis suggest that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is affiliated with the regeneration of game and notions of new life for indigenous Plains peoples, and was likely used in association with precontact and historic period vision quests.

Keywords: Medicine Wheels; Big Horn Mountains; Vision Quest; Landscape Archaeology

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel in northern Wyoming is one of the most famous archaeological sites in the United States. Yet it is also one of the most enigmatic, defying various attempts at explanation by archaeologists and anthropologists for more than a century. Numerous studies have offered hypotheses concerning the original function of this site ranging from astronomical observatory (Cornell 1981; Eddy 1974, 1977; Mansfield 1980; Robinson 1980) to vague associations with the traditional Plains Sun Dance (Grey 1963; Grinnell 1922) or Thirst Dance (Wilson 1981). In spite of all the work focused on this medicine wheel, however, no consensus has been reached as to the original function, meaning, or purpose behind the creation of this structure. Today, visitors to the site are greeted by an explanatory panel proclaiming “Mystery Shrouds the Medicine Wheel”, a testament to how little archaeologists and others actually know about this cryptic configuration of stones.

The knowledge heretofore produced by archaeologists and anthropologists has often been less than satisfying in accounting for the construction of this stone alignment, and even more so in interpreting its meanings and uses in the distant past. In part, this can be attributed to the misguided attempts of previous studies to uncover the solitary, fundamental, and original intent behind the construction of this medicine wheel. Many of these studies did not account for the fact that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is a complex, accretionary structure, and has likely held multiple meanings (and multiple uses) over time for different persons. This paucity of information can be remedied through the use of a contextual analysis (sensu Hodder 1986), one that locates the Big Horn Medicine Wheel within the larger sphere of traditional Plains beliefs. This paper attempts just such an approach on two levels: 1) an examination of the placement of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in its surrounding landscape; and 2) an investigation into...
the symbolic and numerical meanings embedded within and evoked by this configuration of stones. Through this contextual analysis, it is hoped that the shroud of mystery surrounding the Big Horn Medicine Wheel can start to be lifted.

MEDICINE WHEEL SCHOLARSHIP

The group of archaeological features known as medicine wheels is a disparate collection of approximately 135 stone configurations scattered across the Plains of the northern US and southern Canada. The category of "medicine wheels" is merely a creation of archaeologists, however, as noted by recent studies of medicine wheel variability (Mirau 1995:197; Vogt 1993:63). When examining medicine wheels either in isolation or in comparative contexts, it is important to bear in mind that the differences among these structures probably reflects the diversity of meanings and uses employed by them in historic and precontact periods (Brumley 1988; Hall 1985; Mirau 1995; Vogt 1993). Therefore, to speak of "medicine wheels" is to lump a large number of diverse sites into a single category based on possibly artificial similarities of form.1

The grouping of these structures under the umbrella term "medicine wheels" has often led investigators to seek general theories to account for the construction of large numbers of them. The best known of these theories are burial/memorial hypotheses (Dempsey 1956; Kehoe 1954, 1972, 1999) or theories revolving around astronomical observation (Cornell 1981; Eddy 1974, 1977; Kehoe and Kehoe 1977, 1987; Mansfield 1980; Robinson 1980). None of these explanations satisfactorily accounts for all of the structures included in this category, however. And none have produced a comprehensive explanation of the meanings and uses underlying the Big Horn Medicine Wheel specifically (discussed below). If archaeologists are to learn more about the use of these structures in precontact and early historic periods—if we are to demystify these medicine wheels—each site must first be examined within its distinctive relevant local contexts (Hodder 1995:237; Mirau 1995:199). Only after this research is complete can viable explanations accounting for large numbers of these configurations be proffered.

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel is located on an exposed shoulder of Medicine Mountain in the Big Horn range of northern Wyoming at an altitude of 9640 ft. (2940 m.) (Figure 1). It is a roughly circular structure about 25 m. in diameter, surrounding a central stone cairn about four meters in diameter. Connecting the central cairn and outer circle are twenty-eight unevenly spaced spokes. Five smaller cairns are placed at irregular intervals along the periphery of the wheel, while a sixth cairn lies about four meters beyond the rim on an extended spoke. It is located in an area traditionally inhabited by the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, Lakota, and Shoshone peoples prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The dating of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is very problematic; estimates range from a few hundred years to more than 3,000 years B.P. (Fries 1980:23; Grey 1963:36-37). Earlier dates of construction have often been favored in past scholarship, largely due to reports given to investigators of the site by native informants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Grinnell 1922; Simms 1903). Many informants claimed not to know who built the structure or why it was constructed, giving vague answers such as: "it was made by people who had no iron" (Simms 1903:107). From these early reports, a great antiquity for the site was assumed, a notion that persists until this day. Indeed, most of these informants claimed never to have visited the site, though they knew of it and its location. Following these reports, archaeologists have often uncritically presumed a great time depth for this structure.

More recent hypotheses suggesting an early date of construction have been based on the patterns of soil deposition on Medicine Mountain (Wilson 1981:364), but remain unverified by scientific testing. Although obsidian flakes have been found in association with the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, no samples suitable for hydration analysis have been recovered (Wilson 1981:364). While there is no reason to doubt that at least parts of this medicine wheel could be very ancient, there is also no scientific evidence supporting this assertion at the present time. The only reliable date gleaned from any part of the Big Horn monument thus far
is one dendrochronological sample from wood incorporated into the structure of the western cairn. This sample's latest growth ring was dated to AD 1760 (Grey 1963:36). Unfortunately, the scarcity of chronological data is one reason that the study of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel has been so very problematic in the past, and has contributed to the notion that this site remains shrouded in mystery today.

Archaeological investigations of the site took place in 1958 and 1973. The 1958 excavations by the avocational Wyoming Archaeological Society revealed a number of interesting facts about the Big Horn Medicine Wheel. Most significantly, it was discovered that the interior of the central cairn was recessed into bedrock about 3.5 feet below soil level to form a conical, stepped depression. Excavators theorized that this anthropogenic hole served as a socket for a wooden pole, a theory bolstered by the fact that a few small fragments of wood were unearthed in this depression as well (Grey 1963:36). Additional excavations were carried out in 1973 (Wilson 1981), and provided conclusive evidence that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is a composite structure, with the central cairn and at least some of the outer cairns constructed earlier than the rim and spoked aspect. Wilson suggests that the central cairn predates the rim and spoked structure by "as many as a few hundred years" based on soil accretion (Wilson 1981:364).

**Previous Studies**

Early interpretations of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel suggested that the site was constructed by Aztecs, Mound Builders, Russian explorers, French explorers, Lost Tribes of Israel, gnomes,
giants, and prospectors (Wilson 1981). Printed references to the Big Horn Medicine Wheel date back to at least 1895, when it was mentioned in an article in Forest and Stream magazine (Grinnell 1922:299; Grey 1963:27). Since then, anthropological scholarship concerning the Big Horn Medicine Wheel has turned away from questions about the identity of its designers to focus exclusively on the original purpose and function of the structure in the precontact era.

Early anthropological studies tended not to offer any definitive explanation for the construction of this medicine wheel. Simms published the first detailed (albeit flawed) account of the site in an early issue of American Anthropologist, but was unable to make any conclusions concerning the original function of this structure (Simms 1903). Grinnell conducted further investigations in 1922, determining that this medicine wheel bears a great similarity to the Cheyenne Medicine [Sun Dance] Lodge (Grinnell 1922), but did not go on to suggest that it was actually utilized in any type of ceremony, Sun Dance or otherwise. A more pessimistic view was put forth by Grey in the 1960s, who also noted similarities to the Medicine Lodge but concluded that "neither the identity of the builders nor the function of the structure could be determined" (Grey 1963:27).

In the 1970s and early 80s, a flurry of medicine wheel scholarship was inspired by the theory that the cairns of the Big Horn structure were astronomically aligned (Eddy 1974, 1977). The focus of this archaeoastronomical scholarship turned away from the rim and spokes of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, concentrating instead on the alignment of the cairns. Though Eddy's hypothesis was certainly intriguing and inspired a decade of further research (Cornell 1981; Fries 1980; Kehoe and Kehoe 1977; Robinson 1980), subsequent criticism cast considerable doubt on the notion that astronomical alignments were anything more than coincidental (Haack 1987a, 1987b; Ovenden and Rodger 1981; Zuiderwijk 1984). As Mirau notes, the astronomical hypothesis "has been widely discussed but . . . is not well supported by ethnographic, historical, or archaeological data" (Mirau 1995:199). Unfortunately, Eddy's theories enjoyed a far greater audience than did his critics (thanks to articles in Science and National Geo-

graphic), and the questionable notion that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel was originally constructed as an astronomical observatory persists today.

Nevertheless, these astronomical hypotheses served to focus attention on medicine wheels across the Plains, and the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in particular. In the 1980s, scholars began to look to the ethnographic record for explanations of the Big Horn site, and hypotheses about the use of this medicine wheel in traditional Plains ceremonies such as vision quests (Mansfield 1980) or the Thirst Dance (Wilson 1981) were suggested. These early contextual studies, while often very informative, had a tendency to investigate the earlier components of the structure (the cairns), leaving the rim-and-spoked aspect unaccounted for. Furthermore, all of these analyses examined the original purpose of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel exclusively; none attempted to investigate the symbolic meanings embedded in this medicine wheel through time.

For almost a century, archaeologists and anthropologists studying the Big Horn Medicine Wheel have endeavored in vain to uncover the fundamental motive behind its construction. But many motives, meanings, purposes, and phases of construction have combined to produce the structure known today as the Big Horn Medicine Wheel. Though this could explain in part why mystery has shrouded this medicine wheel for so long, it is not a reason for archaeologists to throw up our collective arms in frustration. Rather, we should examine—and modify—the questions we have been tendering. Instead of asking "What was the original purpose of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel?" (a query to which we may never find a convincing solution), we should instead ask questions we have the data to answer, such as "What symbolic elements and meanings have been associated with this site over time? What is significant about its location in the surrounding landscape? How have people interacted with it over time?" Once questions such as these are adequately addressed, the many functions and uses of the site in the precontact period may become more evident.

In the past decade, scholarship has focused on the variability of medicine wheels (Vogt 1993; Mirau 1995), pointing out the diversity of these structures and emphasizing the likelihood of multiple, different uses of them through time. The Big
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Horn Medicine Wheel supports these assertions, as it continues to be visited and used by Native Americans today, albeit likely in different ways from those in the past. By locating the Big Horn Medicine Wheel within the larger ethnographic and historical contexts of traditional Plains ceremonialism—specifically numerical symbolism and the larger cultural landscape—information can be attained and understanding can be achieved in order to begin to “demystify” the Big Horn Medicine Wheel.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Previous studies of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel have sometimes assumed that the study of this site must take place “in an ethnological vacuum,” with scholars claiming that “Nobody knows . . . anything about the social context in which they were used” (Haack 1987a:77). This is simply not true; a pessimistic view such as this ignores an abundance of archaeological, ethnographic, and historical data relevant to the symbolism, meanings, and uses made of this structure (Hall 1985; Kehoe 1999; Kehoe and Kehoe 1987; Mansfield 1980; Wilson 1981). The study that follows employs a contextual analysis of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, which considers the interdependence of function and symbolism in an attempt to make use of data that have not previously been brought to bear on the analysis of this site. For this reason, many different lines of evidence are utilized, emphasizing inductive as well as deductive procedures (Hodder 1986:146). By locating the Big Horn Medicine Wheel within the larger contexts of the surrounding landscape and traditional Plains numerical symbolism, it may be possible to unravel some of the mysteries shrouding this site.

New Life And Vision Quests:
Location Of The Big Horn Wheel

In order to begin to understand the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, its placement in the surrounding landscape must be examined closely—an aspect rarely addressed in previous studies (but see Wilson 1981:360-362). The location of this medicine wheel was of central importance in its uses at the end of the nineteenth century. Historical accounts indicate that vision quests were performed at Medicine Mountain by Native Americans in the nine-
A unique feature of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel that has been overlooked in previous studies is the fact that it is situated at a place in which these two spiritual realms meet. Medicine Mountain is located in an area of anticlinal uplift, creating many deep fissures, caverns, and caves on top of the mountain. These fissures allow direct contact with the subterranean spirit world; thus the Big Horn Medicine Wheel lies at the juncture of two supernatural realms—the zenith and nadir; peak and underworld; the connection of spirit domains above and below. The liminal space occupied by this medicine wheel serves as a portal into the spirit world, the perfect place in which to seek a vision.

Many accounts of modern, historical, and mythical Plains vision quests tell of persons who are brought inside of mountains via caves or doorways. Once inside, the supplicant receives instruction from spirits and/or voices. In many written reports of these intra-montane journeys, this instruction comes in the form of a vision of regeneration and renewal. And indeed, similar notions of new life and rebirth are symbolically encoded in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel.

Cheyenne myths recorded by Dorsey in the first decade of the twentieth century tell of a time of famine and starvation for the Cheyenne (Dorsey 1905). To remedy this situation, the culture-hero Erect Horns and his wife set out to seek a vision. On this journey, they came to “a large rock in front of the mountain. They rolled the rock aside, and found a passage which they entered.” The pair remained inside for four days (the traditional length of the vision quest), receiving instruction from spirits “who talked to them out of the mountain peak.” Upon emerging from the mountain, “the whole earth seemed to become new, and there came forth buffalo that followed them” (Dorsey 1905:48). The theme of regeneration and renewal recorded here is at the core of many other accounts of vision quests as well. In another Cheyenne myth, the culture hero Sweet Medicine enters “a big lodge within a hill” to commune with the spirits (Grinnell 1926:274), while a similar story tells of a young Cheyenne shaman who brings a critically injured friend inside a mountain where he is healed. The pair is then told that their people will be provided with “plenty of game of all kinds” (Schleiser 1987:77). Here the themes of regeneration and renewal are doubly emphasized, in the healing of the shaman’s companion and the renewal of edible resources.

In modern times, Lakota holy man Frank Fools Crow told of being taken inside of Bear Butte in the Black Hills during his “greatest vision experience” in 1965 (Mails 1979:181). During this quest, Fools Crow was shown a wooden door in the side of a cliff. Entering, he received instructions from a voice for the assistance of his people. Upon his emergence from the cliff, he “heard voices of many people, both children and adults, laughing and talking in the Lakota language” (Mails 1979:182). Fools Crow interpreted this as a vision of renewal of the Lakota people, “who will be joyful again” in the future (Mails 1979:183).

Finally, Crow oral traditions tell of people being taken inside of Medicine Mountain while vision questing at the Big Horn Medicine Wheel itself:

As a young man, Red Plume visited the wheel in the hope of receiving a strong medicine which would make him a great warrior and chief. Without food, water or clothing, he remained four days and nights awaiting recognition from the spirits. On the fourth night he was approached by the three little men and one woman who inhabited the underground passage to the wheel and was conducted by them to the underground chamber. He remained with them for three days and three nights and was instructed . . . in leading his people . . . [H]e instructed his people that his spirit would occupy the shrine at the medicine wheel which is not connected with the rim, except by an extended spoke, and that they might at all times communicate with him there. (Greenburg quoted in Wilson 1981:337)

Other Crow sources similarly document the importance of caves within mountains. One legend tells of an old man who is taken inside a cave by the “Little People” and asked to choose between two tunnels. The man chose the tunnel without end, the way of the sun dance religion. This choice resulted in the bringing forth of creation, allowing each Apsaalooke [Crow] to live (Frey 1987:174). This is just one of many Crow tales about the Little People, “who live under the ground and pass between their home and the upper air through a deep pit, or cave, formed by a great crack in the limestone to the west of the [Big Horn] Medicine Wheel” (Grinnell 1922:306). Often these tales, like
those of the Lakota and Cheyenne cited above, are tied to notions of rebirth and new life for the Crow people.

For many inhabitants of the northern Plains in modern, historic, precontact, and even mythical times, journeys inside of mountains while vision questing are associated with messages of regeneration and renewal. The placement of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel at its particular location on Medicine Mountain is thus no accident. It is situated at this point because it occupies a unique liminal space connecting the spirit worlds above and, possibly more importantly, below. What does this reveal about the meanings embedded in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel? Direct historical analogies suggest that this was a place at which vision questing was sometimes carried out in association with concepts of rebirth and renewal. This hypothesis is further bolstered by the symbolic meanings embedded in and evoked by the form of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel itself.

**Symbolic Representations Of Renewal And Rebirth**

The theme of regeneration and new life is echoed in the symbolic meanings associated specifically with the rim-and-spoked aspect of this medicine wheel as well. One of the most significant characteristics of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is the twenty-eight spokes connecting the central cairn to the outer rim (although the importance of this characteristic has been overlooked in past studies, see Wilson 1981:359). This number may initially seem insignificant to non-Native American eyes, but twenty-eight is in fact a special figure in Plains numerology because it is the factor of the two most sacred numbers in Plains spirituality: four and seven.

Lakota holy man Black Elk states that “with our people all good things are done in fours” (Brown 1953:73), and indeed, Plains numerology centers around the number four: four winds come from the four cardinal directions; four days in the Sun Dance and vision quest rituals; four “rounds” in the sweat lodge ceremony; four medicine arrows given to the Cheyenne, etc. Seven is a revered figure on the Plains as well: prayers are sometimes directed to the seven directions (cardinals plus zenith, nadir, and center); seven sacred rites were given to the Lakota by the White Buffalo Calf Woman; Lakota sociopolitical organization is based on heptadic structures (Powers 1975:34); and in former times, Cheyenne men “of strong character and good family” vowed at the birth of their first-born not to have another child for seven years (Hoebel 1978:90). Across the Plains, the numbers four and seven hold special meaning today as in the past.

Multiplying these two sacred numbers yields twenty-eight—the number of spokes in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, a number that symbolically evokes notions of rebirth and new life. Black Elk explains:

> I should tell you why it is that we use twenty-eight . . . I have already explained why the numbers four and seven are sacred; then if you add four sevens you get twenty-eight. Also the moon lives twenty-eight days, and this is our month . . . you should also know that the buffalo has twenty-eight ribs, and that in our war bonnets we usually use twenty-eight feathers. You see, there is a significance for everything, and these are the things that are good for men to know. (Brown 1953:80)

The concepts of renewal and new life are inherently tied to this number on the Plains: there are twenty-eight ribs in the life-giving buffalo; and every twenty-eight days the moon is renewed, as is a woman at the end of her twenty-eight-day menstrual cycle. On the Pine Ridge (Oglala Lakota) Reservation today, twenty-eight tobacco ties are sometimes prepared for inipi (sweat lodge) ceremonies, a ritual of purification and rebirth. All this suggests that twenty-eight is an important and sacred number associated with new life, and an investigation of this figure is vital to understanding some of the symbolic meanings embedded in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel.

Hall (1985:182) points out the similarity in form between the Big Horn Medicine Wheel and a Piegan netted hoop (Figure 2). This hoop, like this particular medicine wheel, contains twenty-eight spokes, and it was not only used in the hoop-and-pole game, but also in rituals to ensure success in the buffalo hunt (Hall 1985:190). These hoops are said to have been “bison symbols” for the Plains Ojibwa, “a prayer on the part of the old people to bring back the herds of bison that once nourished the [Ojibwa]. The bison . . . used to roll such hoops on the prairie as sport” (Howard cited in Wilson
These symbolic ties between the buffalo, the netted hoop, the form of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, and the number twenty-eight all converge on the concept of regeneration and new life.

Following the testimony of Native American informants, scholars have long pointed out similarities between the shape of the Big Horn Wheel and that of a traditional Plains Sun Dance lodge, with twenty-eight rafters leading to a central pole (Eddy 1974; Grey 1963; Grinnell 1922; Hall 1985; Mansfield 1980; Wilson 1981). Elk River, a Cheyenne born about 1810, notified Grinnell of the similarities:

Years ago, when I showed to Elk River Mr. Sims’s [sic] figure of the Medicine Wheel, he said at once that it was the plan of an old time Cheyenne Medicine Lodge. The outer circle of stones he said represented the wall of the Medicine Lodge; the lines leading toward the center, the rafters—or, as he called them, the lodge poles—of the Medicine Lodge. (Grinnell 1922:307)

This notion was echoed in a Forest Service deposition given by Robert Yellowtail of the Crow tribe, in which he stated: “It is very plain to me that the Medicine Wheel is a large replica of the Sun Dance as it existed among the Plains Indians of this area” (Grey 1963:37-38). Yellowtail and others are here noting that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel seems to be an iconic representation; in other words, this medicine wheel is a sign which bears a physical resemblance to that which it signifies—the Sun Dance Lodge (Peirce 1931-35) (Figure 2). But no study (including this one) has suggested that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel was actually used in the Sun Dance. Previous investigations of this structure have stopped at this point, content to simply note similarities in form. However, there are encoded meanings in that form as well. The significant fact here is the shared symbolism between the Sun Dance Lodge and the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, not a directly shared function.

The form of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is not merely an icon; it contains symbolic aspects as well. The Sun Dance is a ritual of regeneration and
renewal, undertaken not to benefit the dancer, but to bring new life to the people. Photographs of a 1902 Arapaho Sun Dance taken by Dorsey (1903: Plates LXVIII, LXXXVIII, LXXXIX) clearly show the shadows of the twenty-eight roof beams cast on the ground below the sun dancers’ feet. The reproduction of the contours of the traditional Medicine Lodge in the form of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel seems to suggest its use in related rituals of regeneration and new life. The fact that the form of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel is similar to that of a Sun Dance Lodge may not tell us anything definite about why this medicine wheel was built or even how it was originally used; but it can tell us what meanings the Big Horn structure is likely to evoke in persons attuned to Plains symbolism: regeneration and new life.

**CONCLUSIONS**

A central tenet of the contextual approach advocated here is the interdependence of function and symbolism (Hodder 1986). Considering the symbolic associations of regeneration and new life suggested above, what then may be said about the uses of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel through time?

Though this medicine wheel was undoubtedly used for numerous different activities in the past (as it is today), the evidence reviewed here suggests that the Big Horn Medicine Wheel was sometimes used as a site for vision questing. The characteristics of the central cairn suggest the socketing of a central pole (Grey 1963:36), to which individuals may have made flesh offerings to the spirits through piercing (Mansfield 1980:28). But these were isolated personal offerings, as opposed to the more public offerings made in the Medicine/Sun Dance Lodge. This theory is supported by early twentieth-century Cheyenne ethnography:

> Formerly, I am told, it was much more common for young men to go out in the hills, have their breasts pierced, and under instruction to walk back and forth for a long time in a limited circle, trying to break away from the pole, than it was for young men to endure this suffering in the Medicine Lodge.
> (Grinnell 1914:250)

The central cairn of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel could have supported the wooden pole (as evidenced by the wood fragments recovered from within) for use in just such a piercing ceremony; a ritual of “swinging to the pole alone in the hills” (Grinnell 1914:250), symbolically tied to notions of rebirth and new life.

The theory presented above suggests only one of many possible uses of the Big Horn Wheel. This site has been (and continues to be) used for many different purposes by different persons over a span of hundreds, possibly even thousands, of years. The meanings and uses of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel proposed here—to evoke notions of regeneration and renewal in vision quests—do not necessarily account for the purpose or uses behind the original construction of this medicine wheel. But ample evidence does exist to suggest that it may have been used in such rituals, especially during the final phases of construction (after the addition of the rim and spokes), and this is just one of the many different motives and meanings that were conceivably incorporated in the construction of this composite structure.

Regardless, the arguments presented above suggest that mystery does not inherently surround this medicine wheel. Rather, there remains much to be discovered about the many meanings and uses embedded in this enigmatic arrangement of stones throughout time. One of these meanings, overlooked by previous studies, is the tie to notions of new life and renewal. In addition, good evidence exists to suggest that this site was used in vision quests, likely involving offerings of flesh through piercing. The challenge for future archaeologists, therefore, lies not just in the continued demystification of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel, but also in the careful contextual analysis of the numerous other stone structures identified as medicine wheels across the North American Plains.

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**NOTES**

1. Brumley provides a useful definition widely employed in recent medicine wheel scholarship.
PLAINS ANTHROPOLOGIST

(1) Medicine wheels are largely constructed of unmodified natural stone, possibly with some earth intentionally incorporated into the construction of prominent central cairns. (2) All medicine wheels consist of a combination of at least two of the following three primary components: (a) a prominent, centrally located stone cairn of varying size; (b) one or more concentric stone rings of generally circular shape; and/or (c) two or more stone lines radiating outward from a central origin point, central cairn, or the margins of a stone ring. (3) Medicine wheels are made up of a generalized and radially symmetrical arrangement of the above primary components. (Brumley 1988:2-3).

2. Previous studies of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel have noted that the fissures and caves of Medicine Mountain can create unique acoustic effects as well (Wilson 1981:338). The winds that buffet the site can sound like human voices, as they whip through the crevices and reverberate in the caverns and fissures on the mountaintop. Many accounts of vision quests report communication with the spirits via hearing of voices. This auditory feature is one more element making Medicine Mountain an optimal site in which to seek a vision. 3. This reference lends credence to memorial hypotheses, often suggested in studies of other medicine wheels (Dempsey 1956; Kehoe 1954, 1972, 1999).

4. I have chosen not to reproduce this image here out of respect for the wishes of many contemporary Native Americans who request that no images of Sun Dances, contemporary or historic, be taken or published.

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