

SESSION TWO

The Temple of the Big Horn Mountains

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Figure 1: Looking due north across the BHMW, we are aligned with Cairn D (foreground) sighting over the central cairn. Cairn A is just to the right of the fence post. An example of a terrestrial alignment is the notch made between the near (the end of Medicine Mountain's shoulder) and the far horizons. This picture shows the contemporary condition of the BHMW: it is enclosed by a fence with ceremonial prayer offerings attached.

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel (BHMW) is fraught with contention, yet it is a place of peace and worship. It is a structure hotly contested by groups protesting a religious site occupying federal lands. Others

protest the federal government overseeing a sacred site. It is contested by "non-Natives" that are denied access, while Native American uses of the circle are permitted. Although the temple's origin is unknown, and unknowable, many tribes claim to be descendants of the original builders – and each group has its own mythology regarding its construction. The Medicine Wheel has long been the subject of archaeological study and a place of cultural practices. Our purpose here is not to reconcile these debates but to add to them by submitting that this circle of stacked stones is a temple. The BHMW when considered as architecture, will be understood as a landmark, a meta-physical house and built thing that gathers the horizon.

The Medicine Wheel stands on the western rim of the Big Horn Mountains between art and function, ruin and living creation, the desert plains below and the subalpine forest beyond. For the BHMW to effectively serve as an observatory of the heavens and earth, the stones had to be situated precisely. This masonry in itself attests to the thoughtfulness that went into the **placing** of the entire structure, but there is more to be understood. Let us first consider the **structure** and the **site**. The results of this investigation form a narrative of the BHMW that attempts to capture a substantial portion of this place's unique character and describes the site from the point of view of the architect. We begin with the physical components of the edifice.

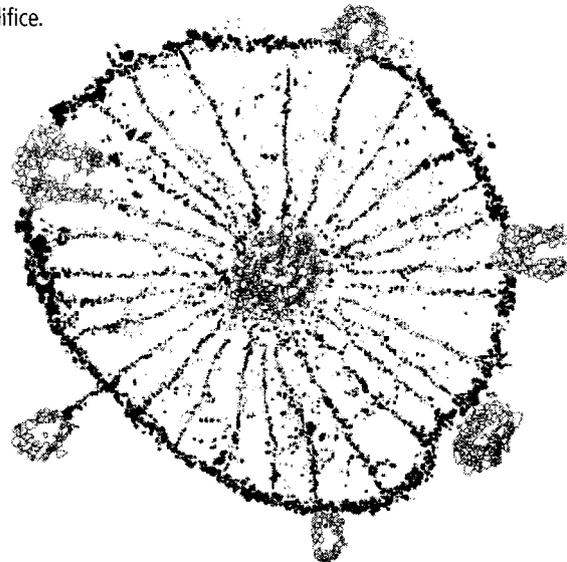


Figure 2: A plan drawing of the BHMW. North is to the top of the page.

THE STRUCTURE

There is a predilection in western culture, from the Greeks onward, to see temples in association with terrestrial features on the horizon (like sacred mountains) which portrays a classified worldview. The BHMW is a religious structure without doubt. If one accepts an archetypal condition that humans imbue permanent religious structures, regardless of tribal obligation, with formal alignments to both earth and sky, then the language of architectural criticism will be fruitful. An inspection of the boulders gives us seven stone cairns, twenty-eight spokes and a circumference that flattens to expose one cairn standing alone. Interestingly, this position is on a perfect circle with the five other rim cairns. Formally, this unique cairn is the key to deciphering the summer solstice alignment.

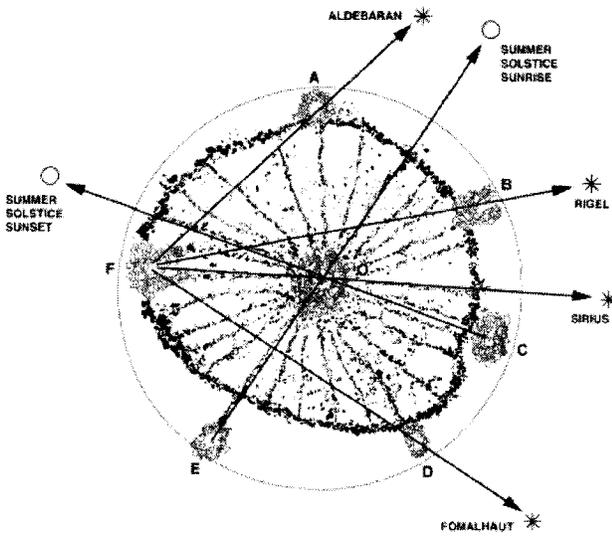


Figure 3: Sketch after Dr. Eddy's theory of the celestial alignments of the BHMW.

Archaeologists agree that one person did not construct the BHMW, nor was it built at one time. It is also agreed that the central cairn is the oldest portion of the structure. The outer ring and spokes are commonly considered to have been built between 1600 and 1800 AD. The BHMW is at an elevation of 9,642 feet. The BHMW is made of locally gathered limestone rocks loosely stacked as cairns or placed end-to-end as spokes. The circle is approximately 80 feet in diameter with a circumference of 245 feet. The six cairns are located at various points around the circle's perimeter and differ in orientation, size, and shape. The shapes do not vary greatly, as all the cairns resemble circles, ovals, or horseshoes. Typically, the cairns are two feet tall. The central cairn is approximately twelve feet in diameter and definitely the largest cairn. It is estimated that each of the cairns are missing approximately two additional feet of height as a result of vandalism.

The central openings are large enough for a person to sit or lie down.

Twenty-eight spokes radiate from the central cairn to the encompassing ring of stones that form the outer circle. The spokes are not uniform in arc or angle. The twenty-eight spokes have been associated with the twenty-eight ribs of the bison and the twenty-eight days in a lunar month. However, it is possible to demonstrate that some of the twenty-eight spokes collect features of the horizon as well. Due to possible events of soil creep; or, "... because it has been disturbed by visitors and walked over and disarranged by wandering cattle;"¹ or, because it has been vandalized by artifact hunters and adjusted for ceremonies, it is difficult to make this statement assertively.

The Medicine Wheel, like the stone circles of Europe, is generally understood as an empirically derived stone calculator of the sky representing a natural worldview. Archaeoastronomer Dr. John A. Eddy is credited with bringing the BHMW to prominence when he called it the "American Stonehenge."² His theory began with a suspicion that the cairns about the BHMW could be used to sight distinct solar events. Most notable to many cultures throughout history is the moment of the summer solstice. Eddy's theory for the use of the BHMW as a celestial and solar observatory is as follows: the helical rising of Aldebaran would initially mark the summer solstice. The summer solstice would be confirmed by the sun rising in alignment with cairns "O" and "E." A second check would be possible by viewing the setting sun in alignment with cairns "O" and "C." By marking the first appearance of Aldebaran and the northernmost rising and setting of the sun, the BHMW serves as a calendrical datum. If the BHMW has a connection to the Sun Dance ritual, verifying the summer solstice could have been of great concern to ancient worshipers. The BHMW continues to serve throughout the summer with the helical rising of Rigel marking the passing of twenty-eight days, and the helical rising of Sirius marking the passing of another twenty-eight days. The fifty-sixth day after the summer solstice is August 16th. Eddy suspects that the appearance of Sirius could have signaled the end of suitable weather for residing on the mountain.

Eddy theorizes how observers can be positioned in the cairns to align themselves with solar and celestial events. We postulate it is reasonable that if the BHMW were intended to gather the sun and stars it should also gather the landscape. The significance of bringing the heavens to a specific point is magnified when the landscape is collected to the same spot. By unifying the heavens and the earth, the BHMW can be seen as an earth navel or place of origin for the universe. While Eddy's alignment theory involves some complicated positioning in order to achieve alignment with the heavens, extending the spokes into the landscape is relatively simple.

BHMW spokes point to landscape features on the horizon, with

some of the spoke/landscape relationships being more convincing than others. In fact, many of the spokes radiating to the south and the west point to the sky (due to the BHMW's position on the shoulder's slope) or to the distant peaks of the Absaroka Mountains. While these spokes may point to prominent distant peaks, it is difficult to determine this conclusively without positioning oneself within the central cairn.

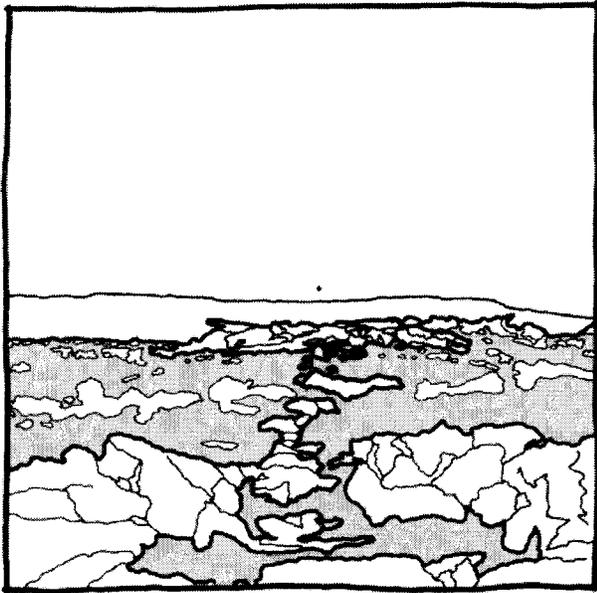


Figure 4: A sketch of the summer solstice alignment projecting into the landscape over the distant horizon. One would sight from Cairn E over the central cairn (sketch by Don Stier).

The horizon relationships of the spokes radiating to the north and the east are more definitive. Due to the shorter distance to the horizon, they are more easily extended to the peaks of Sheep, Duncum, and Bald Mountains. Additionally, spokes point to smaller features in the landscape such as vertical rock features called hoodoos, or notches and gaps in the surrounding mountain profiles. Unique landscape features are worthy of identification and orientation. They are characters on the horizon that enable a mapping of the place in relationship to other places.

Not only can the spokes be shown to point to landscape features on the horizon, but the position of the BHMW on the shoulder illustrates four primary and different spatial relationships. The peak of Medicine Mountain frames the south horizon of the BHMW and positions the BHMW as being "below." Devil Canyon is to the north and puts the BHMW in a relative position of "above." Likewise, the east horizon is composed of neighboring Bighorn Mountains – Sheep, Cone, and Duncum. They are decidedly "near." Conversely, the western horizon is quite "far" as it showcases the Absaroka Mountains

approximately 100 miles away. The combination of cairns and spokes are tools to delineate the special relationship between the landscape, the heavens, and their connection at the horizon. The position of the BHMW effectively gathers the cosmos by combining above, below, near, and far to resolutely establish the BHMW as the "center."

THE SITE

The climate preserves the Bighorn Mountains scenic integrity by protecting them from year round human saturation. The forbidding winter weather provides a period of relief from the stresses of human habitation and recreation. The pleasant summer temperatures, however, call to humans and animals alike to share in the Bighorn's oasis-like atmosphere that differs markedly from the hot, dry neighboring basins.

The vegetation of the Bighorns is central to communicating the character of the mountain range along with the other natural components considered here. The wildlife, geomorphology, soils, and climate all work together to create a mountain region of unusual quality. When considered individually these components are managed and viewed as natural resources. However, when contemplated as a system of parts greater than the individual properties, the character of the place begins to be seen. In that,

*"The Bighorn Mountains provided more than good hunting, lithic resources, lush grass and cool temperatures. Like the nearby Pryor Mountains, they provided ideal places for people to conduct vision quests and other religious rituals. High, windswept peaks, precipitous cliffs and expansive vistas made the Northern Bighorns an ideal location for vision quests in particular."*³

Here one finds a shift from perceiving the individual resources as commodities, to recognizing how the land serves our quality of life. This makes known the spiritual significance of the locale to reveal a sacred house.

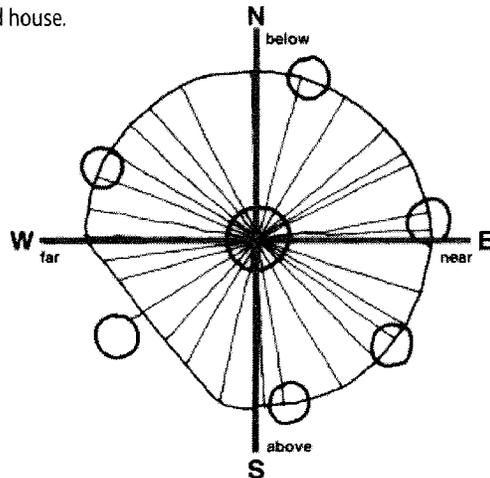


Figure 5: Plan diagram of the spatial regions of the BHMW.

THE METAPHYSICAL HOUSE

The discussion of the site and structure gives us an impression of the place. But can we further describe the "Place?" Does the BHMW further delineate Place-ness? By definition place differentiates spatial quality and character. Place provides context. Place is anchored significance. Heidegger defines Place as the 'House of Being.'⁴ Thus we can ask, "What is the House of Being at the BHMW?"

The use of House clearly implies a structure and a constrained volume. The most basic delineation of House merely differentiates within from without. The simplest interpretation of the BHMW as House views the encircling ring of stones as forming the boundary between what is outside and what is inside. This interpretation carries considerable merit, because the BHMW satisfies the idea of structure by being a built form. In spite of this, the BHMW does not have a roof or walls.

Instead, the BHMW as House encompasses a much wider frontier. The BHMW is capable of gathering the heavens and the landscape through the alignment of cairns with celestial events and the extension of spokes to terrestrial features on the horizon. By gathering the sky and the land, the BHMW originates a cosmos. The viewable world is within the grasp of the BHMW. Representing the world, the House is formed by the sky above (ceiling), the land below (floor), and the encompassing horizon line (wall). Wall is limited to sight within the atmospheric conditions. In this sense the House is the viewable world and the BHMW is at its axis. As one stands outside the BHMW structure, one is still within its cosmology. The space of the world is clearly outlined and one is certain of being near its nucleus. The BHMW is a symbolic House with a celestial roof and walls formed by the eye, and it serves the critical function of gathering the cosmos. These are the distinct purposes of a Landmark.

A center was declared the moment that the location was fixed by marking the land with a form. Thus the significance perceived or discovered by the original shaman became anchored. Foremost to architects is that medicine is evident in the very discovery of the site. By marking the land with the BHMW, Being is ordered and thus more readable. Through a process of design, the builder establishes order by aligning the stones with the place. He discloses the world by constructing the House. The Being, though, remains waiting to dispose the meaning of the Landmark. Marking the land is the essential act. Without the aid of identification, the land reveals itself only through ordinary means – natural features, patterns, and processes. The marker calls our attention and heightens our awareness. It tells the story of the shaman, and the landscape is made legible. The Landmark adorns the mountain "cosmetically" revealing the mountain's Being. By the correct setting of stones, the Landmark builders call us to witness the Place and see its Being. Here, the Being is known as Medicine.



Figure 6: You are looking southeast across the BHMW in alignment from Cairn F sighting over the central cairn. Sirius, at the time of summer solstice, precedes the sunrise in the notch made between the near and far horizon's contour. The radome is on the peak of Medicine Mountain. Notice that spoke from Cairn A to the central cairn aligns with the peak (gathering the peak to itself). The landscape informs the location of the BHMW and the structure make the landscape comprehensible. Legibility reveals the medicine.

The Medicine Landmark is located on a shoulder of Medicine Mountain. The Landmark lies to the north of the mountain peak. Why would the Landmark be placed precisely here? Notwithstanding the argument of the alignments, the builders could have built the Landmark at the very top of the mountain with no more effort than building it where they did. In fact, any number of building sites were feasible. However, if the Landmark is viewed as the recognition of Power, then the placement of the Landmark makes sense. Building the structure at the top of Medicine Mountain would serve as an assertion of Power, as in Humans over Nature. By placing the Landmark below the peak, the Landmark recognizes a greater Power. Building the Landmark at a high elevation serves the purpose of bringing the temple users close to the gods, and using the mountain shoulder rather than the mountain peak guards against insulting the gods. To a temple

builder it is critical to honor the divine with greatness but not to affront the divinities with hubris. By building the Landmark on the shoulder, the people are positioned with humility rather than arrogance.

Power is manifest in the bountiful creation surrounding the Landmark. Not only is Power revealed by the abundance of good things, but also in the perceived higher quality of the medicinal and ceremonial plants found there. If the mountain is, in fact, saturated with Power, then it stands to reason that plants that grow there (that are "rooted" in the mountain) would also be imbued with greater Power. "Native American traditional practitioners gather medicinal and ceremonial plants throughout the northern Big Horn Mountains, and especially on the summit and slopes of Medicine Mountain... Plants from Medicine Mountain are especially valued."⁵ Plants gathered with the purposes of healing or serving a ceremonial purpose contain certain powers themselves. It is understandable that medicinal and ceremonial plant users would want the plants that exhibit the highest quality and value. Sacred plants gathered at Medicine Mountain exhibit a greater capacity to perform their intended purpose justifying their greater value to Native practitioners. The increased worth of sacred plants originating from Medicine Mountain reinforces the idea that the mountain itself possesses an inherent Power. Just as special plants are collected near the Medicine Landmark, the Landmark serves to collect the most powerful solar rays.

Dr. Eddy has shown that the Medicine Landmark can be used to observe the Summer Solstice sunrise and sunset, along with other celestial events. Theories exist as to why this may have been important – to indicate suitable weather for mountain habitation, the arrival of the rainy season, the return of the buffalo, or as an indication to initiate the Sun Dance. That all being true, the alignments also serve to observe harmony with the divine, because regardless of the utilitarian purpose(s) theorized, the Medicine Landmark does align with the sun on the day of its greatest Power. To align oneself with the Summer Solstice sunrise is to receive the sun's Power at its greatest potency.

The sun, being many times larger than the earth, shines evenly on the land. The alignment of the sun, and the position of the observer, is simply a human mental construct. As such, a cairn can be used to position the observer to harness the Power of the sun. By sitting in the cairn, thus putting oneself in "alignment" with the sun, one is placed in a sacred position. The observer is momentarily the lone recipient of the sun's rays. The Power of the universe is focused upon him, and at the dawn of the Summer Solstice, the cairn occupant receives the strongest solar rays on the sun's most vibrant day. By serving in this manner the Medicine Landmark acts not only as a calendar device, but also as a seat to receive the sun's greatest Power.

At the same time the Medicine Landmark harnesses the sun, it also gathers Heidegger's "Fourfold." The Landmark articulates the unity of the fourfold as the union of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. Each of these four fundamental constructs is revealed in the other three. By mentioning one we invoke the others. As in saying, "... 'on the earth' already means 'under the sky.' Both of these also mean 'remaining before the divinities' and include a 'belonging to men's being with one another'."⁶ Together the fourfold forms a "primal oneness" (what we might call the Power)⁷ with each of the four belonging to each of the others. The metaphysical Being of each constituent is revealed in the others.

The Medicine Landmark is located to assure us of a foursome cosmic bond while simultaneously serving to illustrate the strength of a place. Through its building the Medicine Landmark resolves contradictions where the multiple connections of the fourfold could appear to be paradoxical. For example, the Medicine Landmark is in the landscape and decidedly of the earth, and yet it is positioned on a mountaintop – where the earth rises to meet the sky. Here, we are not just beneath the sky, but we are in the sky. In this remote location, mortals built the Medicine Landmark as a place to congregate. Here people of the earth, as well as divinities of the sky, are close. This is a fourfold manifestation that reinforces the "primal one-ness." As each aspect of the fourfold reveals the others, the Power of each is unveiled.

We have suggested a fourfold delineation of a qualitatively and experientially different space that gathers to itself the land, sky, divinities, and people while radiating order to the horizon. The BHMW does this by serving as a temple. In simplest terms a temple is the house of the gods or a place of worship. Marking the space as sacred consecrates it as place of worship. The BHMW serves as a sanctuary of the sacred and "...it is by virtue of the temple that the world is resanctified in every part... the world is continually purified by the sanctity of sanctuaries."⁸ The continual purification assures religious man that the sacred is preserved and when he is in that space he is near the divine. Because he desires to dwell in the sacred as much as possible, the landmark calls to him and his contemporaries. The BHMW continues to enable people practicing traditional Native religions. Indigenous peoples from all over the world understand the space demarcated at the BHMW, and, as such, they are legally allowed to enter the structure for prayer or ceremonial purposes.

Because of the BHMW's sacred nature and its service as a temple, plaintiffs believe this consideration is tantamount to the establishment of religion by the federal government. However, not recognizing the BHMW as sanctuary destroys its sacredness, dissolves the placeness that connects the temporal world to the heavens and the netherworld, and leaves only profane space.



Figure 7: Cairn A is in the foreground and we are sighting once more over the central cairn looking south and a little west. The ridge overlooking the Big Horn basin is to the left and Yellowstone National Park is to the right.

CONCLUSIONS

The BHMW, a complex circle of stacked stones, embraces the visitor by effectively marking the specific disposition of its site. The BHMW is a temple by serving as a facility for prayer and providing an awe-inspiring environment in which to worship. It demonstrates an aesthetic component as well as serves a function. The aesthetic of the BHMW is the sublime revelation of the power of creation. The BHMW functions as an apparatus for accessing the divinities in the sky and a house for the same. Hence, the art of the BHMW is comparable to many temples that reveal Being through manifest power. For the BHMW, Nature is the manifestation of beauty and an astounding display it is. From the BHMW the cornucopia of creation is present in the landform and the variety and abundance of animal and plant life. The House formed by the BHMW is constructed of landscape, sky, and horizon, as such the scale transcends the immediate site and

includes the province, a world. The stone form that leads us to this recognition of House, informs also that the BHMW is, by measure, a work of landscape architecture. The construction of the BHMW features materials typically associated with the profession – stone, soil, vegetation, and landform.

In the end the BHMW is a living place that despite changes, appears to have much of its original character. It will continue to change. Artifacts have been taken from the site and offerings have been left. Stones have been adjusted to facilitate ceremonies. Fences have been erected to protect the structure, and now they are coming down as the public demonstrates a greater understanding and appreciation for the BHMW. The ongoing adjustments, modifications, and uses of the BHMW should not be upsetting to architects accustomed to working with processes. Evolution should be an anticipated and encouraged phenomenon. Without evolution there is only entropy and a relaxation towards conformity. This is essentially the same reason that native peoples are allowed to access the BHMW and non-natives are not. Adjustments and modifications made with reverence for the place are in keeping with the original shaman's act. To deny the BHMW to serve its purpose as a temple is the death of its meaning and its relegation to the status of relic.

NOTES

¹Grinnell, George Bird. "The Medicine Wheel," *American Anthropologist* 24 (1922): 299-310.

²Eddy, John A. "Probing the Mystery of the Medicine Wheels," *National Geographic Magazine*, 151 (1977, January): 140-146. Also, "Astronomical Alignment of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel," *Science*, 184 (1974, June 7): 1035-1043.

³Platt, Steve. *Trails and Aboriginal Land Use in the Northern Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming* (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, 1992): 66.

⁴Lane, Belden C. *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988): 4.

⁵Boggs, James P.; Chapman, Fred & York, Robert G. *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form OMB No. 1024-0018* (1999): 62. (Available from the National Forest Service, Medicine Wheel/Paintrock Ranger District Office, 604 East Main Street, Box 367, Lovell, WY 82431).

⁶Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.) (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. (1971): 149.

⁷Op cit.

⁸Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (W.R. Trask, Trans.) (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1959): 59 (Original work published 1957).