

Medicine wheel

Stone "medicine wheels" in southern Alberta and the adjacent portion of Montana: Were they designed as grave markers? Thomas F. Kehoe, Museum of the Plains Indian, Browning, Mont. (Communicated by Claude E. Schaeffer.)

During the course of archeological field work in and about the Blackfeet Reservation of Montana, I obtained information from a local Indian suggesting a possible explanation of the origin and function of the stone "medicine wheel." Modern Plains archeologists seem inclined to regard the medicine wheel as an aberrant form of tipi ring, without suggesting any plausible explanation of its original purpose.¹ In view of this fact, it seems ad-

¹Mulloy (1952, p. 137) appears to regard the medicine wheel as a form of tipi ring. Hoffman (1953, p. 2) maintains that tipi rings should be distinguished in form and use, from medicine wheels. Neither he nor Mulloy definitely commit themselves as to the function of either.

visable to record such data as I have been able to collect from various sources on this peculiar archeological phenomenon.

A medicine wheel may be defined for our purpose as a cairn or circle of stone (occasionally concentric circles) from the center of which radiate a series of rows of other stones. Lithic arrangements of this sort are of infrequent occurrence in the Plains area of Montana and Alberta immediately east of the Rocky Mountains. Only two such medicine wheels have been reported to my knowledge within the State of Montana. That such phenomena occur in adjacent states is known, however, by reports from Wyoming and Saskatchewan.

Traditions of certain practices associated with death or burial among the Blackfoot Indians may serve to account for the existence of medicine wheels in those areas formerly occupied by the three tribes. My first clue to these mortuary rites was obtained in 1953 from Adam White Man, an aged South Piegan Indian resident near Browning, Mont. After describing the custom of his forbears in using circles of stones to hold down the bases of their conical skin lodges, Adam was invited to comment upon the sketch of a medicine wheel. His reaction was as follows: