

The Medicine Wheels of North America

By Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.24.17

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Bighorn Medicine Wheel, a Native American sacred site in Wyoming. Photo from Wikimedia

Nearly every ancient society studied the night sky. The Plains people of North America were no different. Hundreds of Native American stone constructions cover the high hills of the northern plains. English speakers call them medicine wheels.

Some scientists and historians believe the stones line up with the stars. Over 20 years, they have studied medicine wheels to understand how the Native Americans understood stars and planets.

A medicine wheel must have at least two of the following three parts:

- 1) a central cairn, or pile of stones;
- 2) one or more stone circles; and
- 3) two or more stone lines reaching outward from the center.

Most Found In Western Canada

There are 100 to 200 medicine wheels that match this definition. Each one looks different. Most of these wheels are found in western Canada. Some are also located in the northern United States.

Medicine wheels can be found in North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana and Colorado.

Medicine wheels are curious constructions. Scientists are not sure what they were used for. The wheels served different uses for different tribes. Even within a certain group, their use seems to have changed over time.

Some believe Native Americans used medicine wheels to track the stars. Medicine wheels often match the position of certain objects in the sky. Three medicine wheels have been important in showing how this idea may be true.

Bighorn Medicine Wheel

The Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming is perhaps the most famous medicine wheel. It sits high in the mountains and is covered by snow for most of the year. It can only be seen during the summer months. The wheel has a large central cairn, which is surrounded by 28 lines that stretch outward. Six other cairns sit along the outside of the wheel.

If people sit in one cairn and look toward another, their eyes point to a specific spot. Two of these spots are on the horizon. They are exactly where the sun rises and sets on the longest day of the year.

Other parts of the wheel point to where certain stars appear at dawn. These stars are seen rising on specific days of the year. They show up after being covered by the sun's light for a whole season.

These events mark important changes during the year. In the case of Bighorn, they may have helped to show the beginning of the snow season. This would have told Native Americans when to travel safely down the mountain.



Majorville Medicine Wheel

The largest existing medicine wheel is in western Canada. The Majorville Medicine Wheel has a large central cairn and 28 spokes, or lines of stones that reach outward. The outer ring is 90 feet wide, which is the same distance between two bases in a baseball field.

The medicine wheel at Majorville is also the oldest. It is around 5,000 years old. The scientist Gordon Freeman argues that the Majorville stones are really the remains of a sun temple. He believes it was built before both Stonehenge in England and the pyramids in Egypt. According to Freeman, the Plains people used the temple to track the sunrise on the longest and shortest days of the year.

Moose Mountain Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel at Moose Mountain, in Canada, has a different shape than Majorville or Bighorn. A central cairn is surrounded by just five spokes, and the outer ring is just 30 feet wide. The spokes extend far beyond the outer ring.

The longest one is 123 feet long, and marks the sunrise on the longest day of the year. Like Bighorn, other cairns point to where bright stars rise on certain days.

The wheel is around 2,600 years old. It once had a cairn in the center that was about 14 feet high. Today, that cairn is only a foot and a half tall, since people may have stolen stones over the years.

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the section "Most Found In Western Canada."

Medicine wheels are curious constructions. Scientists are not sure what they were used for. The wheels served different uses for different tribes. Even within a certain group, their use seems to have changed over time.

How does this paragraph support a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) by describing how scientists have been studying medicine wheels
- (B) by describing how different tribes used medicine wheels
- (C) by explaining that the purpose of medicine wheels is still unknown
- (D) by explaining that each group used medicine wheels in different ways

2 Which two statements are MAIN ideas of the article?

1. *Medicine wheels can be found throughout North America.*
2. *Three medicine wheels have been especially helpful for learning more about medicine wheels.*
3. *The largest medicine wheels were often covered by snow for most of the year.*
4. *Medicine wheels may have been used to mark important times of year.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4

3 Read the paragraph from the section "Majorville Medicine Wheel."

The medicine wheel at Majorville is also the oldest. It is around 5,000 years old. The scientist Gordon Freeman argues that the Majorville stones are really the remains of a sun temple. He believes it was built before both Stonehenge in England and the pyramids in Egypt. According to Freeman, the Plains people used the temple to track the sunrise on the longest and shortest days of the year.

Which selection from the paragraph shows that researchers are unsure about the actual purpose of the Majorville Medicine Wheel?

- (A) The medicine wheel at Majorville is also the oldest. It is around 5,000 years old.
- (B) The scientist Gordon Freeman argues that the Majorville stones are really the remains of a sun temple.
- (C) He believes it was built before both Stonehenge in England and the pyramids in Egypt.
- (D) According to Freeman, the Plains people used the temple to track the sunrise on the longest and shortest days of the year.

4 Read the section "Moose Mountain Medicine Wheel."

Select the paragraph that shows that medicine wheels looked different when they were built than they do now.