

The “Placing” of Identity in Nomadic Societies: Aboriginal Landscapes of the Northwestern Plains of North America

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Résumé

Les premières nations nomades des plaines du Nord-Ouest exprimaient sémiotiquement leurs symboles fondamentaux par divers canaux. Les paysages étaient des assemblages en transformation de signes et de symboles et le cercle et l'axe de puissance représentaient le cosmos. Les monuments rituels étaient liés au renouveau cosmique par des cérémonies mettant en scène des animaux. Ceux-ci étaient considérés inépuisables si on observait le rituel adéquat. Les habitats circulaires représentaient le cosmos et le paysage extérieur délimité par l'horizon pouvait par extension être « lu » comme conforme aux structures du monde intérieur. Les cycles du temps avaient leurs pendants spatiaux, des circuits cycliques de prototypes d'emplacements et d'activités. Ce monde autochtone était une toile de territoires qui se chevauchaient, avec des centres mobiles autour desquels rayonnaient des trajets. Le partage des ressources et des lieux rituels et la coexistence passagère des groupes étaient facilités par le langage gestuel qui renforçait une symbolique « unité dans la diversité ». Ces caractéristiques avaient toutes des corrélations et des conséquences définissables dans le paysage. Les monuments étaient d'un emplacement, pas superposés à lui, et tiraient substance et force du lieu. Ils devenaient des éléments « naturels ».

Abstract

Nomadic Northwestern Plains First Nations expressed fundamental symbols semiotically across media. Landscapes were transformational assemblages of signs and symbols; circle and power axis signified the cosmos. Ritual monuments were linked through animal ceremonialism to cosmic renewal. Animals were limitless if appropriate ritual was maintained. Formalized circular household plans signified the cosmos with the horizon-bounded outer landscape “read” by extension as consistent with the constructed inner world. Cyclic time had spatial parallels, with sites as cyclic iterations of prototypic place and performance. This aboriginal life-world was a web of overlapping territories with mobile centres and radiating itineraries. Sharing of resources and ritual sites, and transient co-residence of groups were facilitated by hand-signs that reinforced symbolic “unity-within-diversity.” These characteristics all had definable landscape correlates and consequences. Monuments were “of” a site, not “upon” it: deriving substance and power from location, they became “natural” elements.

Natural landscapes are appropriated, organized, and named by people, whose activities are localized to places and are thus transformed into cultural landscapes.¹ Material culture comprises the continuum in the artifact–feature–site–landscape complex that has so often been viewed as mere residuals of human behaviour. But artifacts possess symbolic content and contexts that can be studied from a semiotic perspective as media of communication, as stimulants and reinforcements of cultural values and behaviour, and as signs of ethnicity.² Further, a taphonomic perspective

studies the temporal trajectories of past material culture: the past context within which an artifact, structure, site, or landscape was created; the contexts within which it functioned and was modified or edited; and the neo-cultural context within which it functions today.³ Thus, past landscapes may be reconstructed and interpreted as “heritage landscapes” in which each occupant group has left a definable “heritage footprint” advertising their distinctive presence and identity. These footprints overlap and interact, resulting in a virtual palimpsest of overlapping presences in the landscape.⁴

Until recently, there had been few detailed studies of the cultural landscapes generated by hunting-and-gathering groups such as those of the North American Plains. In part, this is because archaeologists and anthropologists have been obsessed with specific sites as opposed to their “environment,” which has been treated as being external to culture. For their part, geographers have been slow to acknowledge the role of aboriginal populations in establishing extensive cultural landscapes. They have been portrayed as inhabiting culturally modified “islands” within a wilderness “sea” or, worse still, as inconsequential actors in the long-term structuring of those landscapes.⁵ This has been complicated by the fact that, so often, the humanly built structures in hunter-gatherer landscapes are of limited extent and tend to reflect the natural setting rather than being strongly differentiated from it.

Indeed, the modern use of the term “wilderness” continues to elide the actions of aboriginal peoples, minimizes their heritage footprints in their actively created landscapes, and renders wilderness as a realm separate from culture.⁶ The European rendering of wilderness (wild-tier-ness, or “wild beast place”) still carries the implication of the absence of any human presence, as if it were the natural state before their arrival.⁷ Accordingly, Euro-Canadian accounts often portrayed the land as effectively “empty” prior to the arrival of Europeans, and the aboriginal groups as transient, animal-like occupants.⁸ Father P. J. de Smet’s somewhat contemptuous judgement was that, “The Indian has the gift of being everywhere without being anywhere.”⁹ Similarly, George Grant travelled across the Plains in the 1880s and lamented that many whites believed that the Indian “has made no improvement on the land, has no title-deeds, [and] can have no right to it that a civilized being is bound to recognize.”¹⁰ The dismissal is reflected widely in Euro-Canadian iconography, as in the *oeuvre* of the Group of Seven, though countered somewhat by A. Y. Jackson’s Arctic observations and Emily Carr’s capture of West Coast aboriginal communities.¹¹ Equation of aboriginal lifeways with those of animals was no more strongly evident than in the words of Chief Justice Allan McEachern in his 1991 decision regarding the British Columbia land claims case, *Delgamuukw v. Regina*. Borrowing the words of Thomas Hobbes, he stated that “aboriginal life in the territory was, at best, ‘nasty, brutish and short’” and dismissed the words of native elders about their use of the land as romantic fantasies.¹² It took six years for the Supreme Court to counter the view. A contextual understanding of the aboriginal placement of monuments in their lived-in landscape is an important step toward reversing this attitude.

But if the recent rise in landscape studies in archaeology and anthropology has been largely issue-driven

by land claims, it has also been reinforced by cross-disciplinary linkages.¹³ The post-processual movement in archaeology, like its postmodern counterparts in geography and history, applies a range of strategies in efforts to interpret material culture *context* and *meaning*.¹⁴ American historian Thomas Schlereth defined *material culture* to encompass “the entire natural and man-made environment with which researchers can interpret the past,” and the basis for symbols of meaning. Schlereth saw landscape as “an amazing historical document...which...rightly seen...reveals as much of a society’s culture as does a novel, a newspaper, or a Fourth of July oration.”¹⁵ People actively use the enduring past to validate present actions and attitudes, so the landscape becomes an important residence of information and tradition, encoding the collective memory of its users. Its form can be described, but as symbols they can also stand for something else. This is particularly true for groups who do not rely on written records and who, therefore, perpetuate their values through performed co-memorizing in formalized re-enactments of oral tradition, using recognized associations to cement memories. Memories can be encoded in non-verbal communications such as gesture, adornment, and other symbolic media, as well as the cultural landscape. It is through association of landscape features with meanings that they are transformed from material signifiers to retrospective devices in which symbol-sets have a reflexive instructional function in ensuring the *persistence* of memory: they become *lieux de mémoire*, memoryscapes, landmarks.¹⁶

It is important to emphasize that there may be many possible iterations of the same message-set. Further, while much of the cultural landscape is constructed, advertising cultural patterns by the character, placement, and distribution of human-made structures, natural landforms can also be taken as *signs* for interpretation. Thus, places are avoided if they are perceived as dangerous, thereby helping others to “see” those places as well, even though there may not be any humanly imposed signs.¹⁷ Similarly, a cultural landscape element regularly revisited by nomadic peoples can come to be viewed by its users as “natural,” the product of the Creator rather than of people. In this way, monuments of nomadic peoples tend to become increasingly synonymous with place as their construction was intended to *express* or *extend* the meaning of place rather than to appropriate it. As such, they should not be distinguished from the lived-in locale with which they are associated. Further, any interpretation that attempts to do so, be it of a complex monumental cosmogram or of an apparently simple tipi ring, is an analytical imposition upon an essentially symbolic continuum.

A Plains Transformational Perspective

The First Nations of the Northwestern Plains at the time of European Contact exhibited considerable linguistic diversity but they shared several multicultural linkages and economic practices as well as ritual activities and mythology. The Blackfoot (Siksiká, Káínaa, and Piikáni), Tsuu t'ina, Crow, Atsina, Assiniboin, Dakota, Arapaho, Plains Cree, and Plains Ojibwa possessed a constellation of shared traits: an emphasis on bison hunting; dog and (in the Historic period) horse transport with use of travois; the tipi and camp circle; sophisticated sign language; use of circular shields of buffalo skin; ceremonial organization centred upon the sun dance (relating the Creator, buffalo worship, medicine bundles, and military organization); well-developed skin-working; painting of decorative art on rawhide; use of quill and bead embroidery; and stylistic emphasis on rectangular or triangular modules to make complex artistic forms.¹⁸

Furthermore, distinctive monuments and other structures were created from such varied materials as stone, earth, sod, wood, bone, and even buffalo "chips." The more durable of these have survived to the present, despite weathering and vandalism, but many have been lost. The structures expressed cosmology by transformational use of the same fundamental symbols through the varied media. The linked concepts of circle and power axis reflected underlying views of the cosmos as a hierarchy of nested (concentric) circles with an axis reaching to the worlds above and below. As represented in Big Plume's camp site (Fig. 1), the people, the tipi, and sunshade express the integrated circle-vertical cosmogram. Such structures were a constant acknowledgment of native

groups' role as a part of that cosmos, their identity within it, and their responsibility to maintain it.

This was effected by routine observances in daily life as well as by the rigours of the vision quest and the strictures of military ventures and the hunt. The circle was directly portrayed on the land through constructed circles of stones, piles of stones and antlers, the special shapes of certain hills, and in the horizon circle. The vertical, or power, axis was reflected in use of central poles, piling of materials, placement of sites on hilltops, veneration of certain trees or mountains, and even the standing human figure itself as "centre" in ritual acts.¹⁹ Further, the transformation of the circle-and-axis motif into other media is eloquently captured in Michel Wahlberg's discussion of the "geography" rendered in Plains painted buffalo hides:

On these painted hides, space is first defined by the very shape of the skin, its "geography." The neck and the tail mark the high and the low, the north and the south, verticality, while the opposing hooves suggest the directions of space. At the center of the skin a solar motif may be inscribed, a central point from which radiate diamonds of light, which are also, metaphorically, eagle feathers. This central point may also be seen from above, as the summit of the pyramid, the tip of the cone in which the body is sheltered — both the human body beneath the teepee and the social body beneath the invisible teepee formed by the vault of the heavens and the circular horizon.²⁰

In return, Eldon Yellowhorn explained how his own Blackfoot people used mnemonic association to remember their landmarks:

Blackfoot cartographers envisioned the world in anatomical form because the association between geographical features and body parts aided the memory when recalling landmarks. Thus, travellers along the Old North Trail would say "the Backbone" in reference to the Rocky Mountains. Their cognitive geography could guide their route only because everyone agreed on these toponyms.²¹

These elements and observances continue to the present day and have linkages beyond the Great Plains. Indeed, the use of the past tense here is merely intended to denote a time before extensive European influence affected aboriginal values and ideologies. It must not be taken as a faux-evolutionary perspective. Rather, it attempts to underscore the essential dichotomy throughout the following discussion: a proper model of the aboriginal world view that renders people as inseparable from their landscape, as opposed to perspectives that have separated them from it.

Fig. 1
Camp of Tsuu t'ina (Sarcee) leader Big Plume in southern Alberta, late nineteenth century, showing circular tipi and dogs with travois. (Photo: Ernest Brown; National Archives of Canada, C-8221)





Fig. 2
Sundial Hill medicine
wheel, Alberta

Centre and Axis

Centre poles, cairns, earth mounds, antler piles, standing stones, medicine trees, natural hilltops or mountain peaks, and standing people all shared the character of reaching upward, the *axis mundi*, World Pillar, or World Axis, reaching toward the power of the Creator.²² Hilltop locations constituted particularly elegant expressions of the vertical axis and, thus, became loci of power and often became the growth-sites for many monuments throughout the Plains. Consider southern Alberta's Sundial Hill medicine wheel (Fig. 2). It consists of a central cairn of piled glacial boulders surrounded by two circles of cobbles (middle left) through which passes a stone-lined "vestibule" in the foreground. The structure may have been associated with dance ceremonies but also resembles the plan of a buffalo-pound. Sitting atop a prominent morainal hill littered with glacial erratics, its site enhances the verticality of the hill and also reinforces the essential character of the place chosen for this monument.

Some of those monuments also reflected a ceremonially expressed linkage with the thunderbirds, the rain-bringers who ensured good growth of grass and hence abundant game.²³ The power associated with verticality may have been sought in other contexts as well: for example, discussions of buffalo-drive strategies talk of the stone and brush "deadmen" that outlined the drive lane leading to a buffalo jump.²⁴ In resembling standing people, these features influenced the movements of the animals being driven. While typically discussed from such a utilitarian perspective, they may also have expressed the same quest for linkages to cosmic power.

Linkage to Animal Ceremonialism

Structures or features such as medicine wheels, stone cairns, antler piles, medicine lodges, and carved ribstones possessed multiple but linked meanings. At one level they were linked through a pattern of animal ceremonialism to an ongoing program of cosmic renewal and maintenance that included the animals and their "spirit masters" in the above-world as key elements.

Some structures were made of animal parts such as bones or antlers of the most common large game species on the Plains: buffalo (*Bison bison*) and elk or wapiti (*Cervus elaphus*). Antler/bone piles (Fig. 3) often expressed the fundamental circle-and-axis cosmogram as well as reflecting the character of place.

Fig. 3
Replica antler pile at
National Bison Range,
Moiese, Montana,
illustrating the basic
form of a pile that
existed on the Missouri
River until 1850. (Photo:
Margaret A. Kennedy)



In this case, the site of the original antler-pile was described by many authors as having unusually high populations of elk (*Cervus elaphus*).²⁵

In other cases, animal ceremonialism consisted in monuments that were shaped, carved, or painted to represent game animals that have been killed by hunters, based in the view that animals are kin to people and share a destiny with them. Particular attention was given to carcass disposal because the animal or its spirit master had been offended by the killing. Properly conducted rituals counter the offence of killing, restoring cosmic order.²⁶ Bones could be laid out in a special pattern or left as offerings (for example, elevated on a pole or a tree) so that slain animals could be reborn from their bones.²⁷ This has been misinterpreted as “hunting magic,” simply ritual to ensure the success of the next hunt, but it had much deeper significance in maintaining cosmic harmony. It was the order of the *cosmos* that was being maintained, not the “balance of nature.” Animals were taken to be unlimited in numbers and renewable as long as people undertook appropriate ritual; and overexploitation was possible. A decline in game numbers was taken as evidence that rituals had not been conducted properly, threatening not simply the success of the next hunt but also the very structure of the cosmos and the stability or survival of the group. However, the rituals themselves did embody much that was of an ecological nature, referring to the linkages between grasslands, animals and people and the shared destinies of all.²⁸

Performance in Cyclic Time and Space

Cultural time can differ dramatically from one group to the next, being a framework for content: a means of organizing past events and performers, and for pre-visualizing and scheduling new ones. It is well

known that for many nomadic groups, time had a cyclic appearance, in which the creative past and the future were active players in the present.²⁹ A ritual of the present was taken to replay the original ritual act that established a relationship between people and the game species; and to fail to perform the ritual properly was to invalidate the original act, to break the cycle. While the maintenance of monuments in the landscape was an essential element of this ritual, it was the *performance* at the site that was of greatest importance. Some monuments, such as antler piles or stone cairns, therefore displayed the phenomenon of *growth*: that is, they accreted through performance rather than being “completed” edifices to be viewed from a respectful distance. They *were* performance, and it was acceptable that, over time, some of their elements would break down and return to the earth; or that some of their structural stones could become buried through accretion of the surrounding sod.

Excavations at two medicine wheel sites clearly show this effect. At the Majorville Medicine Wheel site, southern Alberta, the central cairn clearly had grown in “onion-skin” fashion over as many as several thousand years. At the Big Horn Medicine Wheel site, Wyoming, the radiating spokes emanated from the visible margin of the central cairn; yet the true periphery of the cairn was buried. Thus, the site had been either embellished or refurbished over time.³⁰ Certain medicine wheels appear to have been dance structures, similar in function to medicine lodges (Fig. 2). They possess outer circles that integrate the radiating lines (if present), and thus resemble a cosmogram or representation of the idealized cosmos, itself bounded by a symbolic horizon circle.³¹ Some, with vestibule-like entryways, also resemble maps of buffalo pounds; however, they could still have served as dance structures. Repetitive dance rituals would have been associated with periodic renewal and growth of the structures themselves.

In addition to cyclic time, it may be argued that there is an analogous “cyclic” view of place and landscape: that is, nomadic peoples create the appearance of unchanging place by organizing the world as an extension of household, so that several similar places, sequentially occupied, can become “one.” For Plains nomadic groups, the household (circular tipi) plan was highly formalized, reflecting the structure of the cosmos. As demonstrated by the latest prehistoric/ protohistoric Horse Creek Tipi Ring site (Fig. 4), domestic sites expressed the same cosmogram as did sacred monuments. The household was organized into the same set and plan of features and memory devices each time it was laid out; and the portable camp (ideally a circular camp), as a modular assemblage of households, could be set up in the same order each time.³² The outer landscape was readily organized

Fig. 4
Stone circle at the Horse Creek Tipi Ring site, Big Horn Mountains, Wyoming. This latest prehistoric to protohistoric site was occupied possibly by Crow or Shoshoni.



by extension from the household, prompting the illusion that although people moved regularly, the outer world too remained much the same.³³ Multiple ritual sites (including monuments) could similarly be seen as iterations of a single “site” in a cyclic view of space, and the place names associated with them could also be repeated, spatially replaying the original ritual act.

Monuments of Place: A World of Vectors

It has been argued that there is a fundamental dichotomy in world view between hunter-gatherers, who belonged to nature, and farmers, who exploit or modify it.³⁴ This distinction extends to landscapes and constructed monuments. For Plains hunter-gatherers, monuments derived their power from location, and many places within the natural world were taken to be special. Monuments were therefore “of” a site rather than “being” the site. Once sited in place, they tended to be treated as part of the natural world: specific human authorship faded into insignificance. This cannot have been simply a “matter of time” for people with cyclic time. In effect, people tended to view themselves as “written by” the landscape, and not the reverse. Thus, whereas monuments for farming peoples often commemorate specific events, those for hunter-gatherers tended to be associated with process or tradition, perpetuating or replaying a traditional performance for the good of the cosmos and hence for all. Many structures were therefore additive in nature; antler piles and stone cairns could be added to by any passers-by (of any group) and this phenomenon of growth augmented both their circularity and their height.

The lack of “spectacular edifices” on the Northwestern Plains was therefore not, as one author has contended, simply because of a lack of surplus labour or the need for mobility.³⁵ Northwestern Plains monuments were created within an ideology of maintenance, not domination, of landscape. For hunter-gatherers with intense landscape linkages, elaborate structures could be seen potentially to interfere with place and therefore with the cosmos: a form of blasphemy in the land. Emphasis was instead upon the places themselves, and the structures tended to be unobtrusive because they attempted to capture, respect, and underscore the character of the place. Hilltops in the formerly glaciated area of the Northwestern Plains were frequently the sites of piled-cobble cairns (Fig. 2), reflecting the local abundance of such materials but also extending the inherent meanings of those places. Many hilltops without cairns still had natural clusters of cobbles derived through hilltop deflation of glacial tills by wind. Furthermore, the land itself was not formally segregated from the concept of “living”: that is, features of the land were viewed as *potentially* animate much as a shaman or a spirit protector were potential

links to the above-world. It is noteworthy that many such structures were used by multiple groups, often neighbouring ones, sequentially. Clearly, therefore, while their prime purpose was not to signal local ethnicity, they did function to advertise native self-identification to incoming white settlers.

This world view was further actualized within a pattern of overlapping group territories, viewed as centres with radiating itineraries or vectors, and of cross-utilization of resources.³⁶ Widespread multilingualism as well as use of a sophisticated hand-sign language facilitated communication, sharing of ideologies, and transient co-residence of linguistically diverse groups. Shifting residence, alliances, and crosscutting allegiances through kinship all contributed to the overlapping of group territories and facilitated the cross-utilization of resources in a variable and hard-to-predict environment.³⁷ Territorial boundaries were indistinct and transitory, even as the boundaries between natural and spirit worlds, and between people and animals, were indistinct. This in no way reduced the rights of Plains or other groups to territories; rather, it raises the issue that the placement of exclusive group *boundaries* on modern maps is a European-derived imposition upon aboriginal groups who defined their territories from centre. This could be every bit as destructive to the maintenance of distinctive aboriginal world views as was the arbitrary designation of individuals as “chiefs” by colonial administrators, even for groups who possessed collective leadership and no formal chieftainships.³⁸

Food producers such as farmers tend to enclose resources, whereas hunter-gatherers tended to control the pathways of their itineraries between places. Many of these places served as vantage points from which hunters could survey the landscape, again extending territory from centre rather than enclosing it with boundaries. The horizon could be taken as a functional boundary, but it moved as the people moved. Teilhard de Chardin captured the essence of this view insightfully:

It is tiresome and even humbling for the observer... to carry with him everywhere the centre of the landscape he is crossing. But what happens when chance directs his step to a point of vantage... from which, not only his vision, but things themselves radiate? In that event the subjective viewpoint coincides with the way things are distributed objectively, and perception yields its apogee. The landscape lights up and reveals its secrets.³⁹

Hunter-gatherer or pastoralist organization of landscape by extension from the household was fully consistent with this attitude. This way of thinking was also played out in the Plains pattern of raiding outward

Fig. 5

Ellis Medicine Wheel, southeastern Alberta; note central circle and lines radiating outward; stone circles (tipi rings) lie in the distance.



from a group's centre along vectors or itineraries reaching far into lands of their neighbours/enemies, not to capture territory but to capture horses, scalps, important possessions, and therefore prestige. The raids did establish transient dominance, and therefore could have had the effect of shifting boundaries, but such boundaries were neither clearly marked nor strongly defended and monuments were not boundary markers.

Cultural space was viewed as an assemblage of clustered itineraries, a pattern of vectors that is directly mirrored in the structure of certain medicine wheels. These are the "death lodge" medicine wheels with central circles (not cairns) and radiating lines but no outer circular perimeter. For example, The Ellis Medicine Wheel (Fig. 5) commemorated the life of the deceased and his exploits while the outward radiating lines represented, map-like, the routes of his raids against neighbouring groups.⁴⁰ Moreover, lines could also collectively express the importance of certain vectors through repetition, reflecting the spatial aspects of intergroup relationships. While a landscape of vectors might seem to the Euro-Canadian observer to be fragmented and incomplete, to the aboriginal occupant the vectors were unified by their contact with centre and with the horizon circle: the two fundamental cosmological symbols and the spatial underpinnings of a lifeworld.

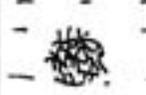
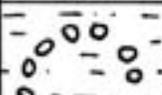
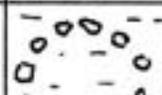
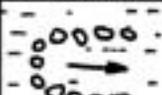
Northwestern Plains Structures: Classification and Trajectory

Clearly, many elements of the aboriginal landscape of the Northwestern Plains were shared cross-culturally. However, it is also clear that specific uses of particular

areas by different Plains groups were not simply synonymous. Thus, sequent occupancy studies are of key importance as they reveal both continuity and change in the use and symbolic significance of landforms and structures: a blueprint for historical, archaeological, and geographical studies on the Plains.⁴¹ The long-noted degree of uniformity reinforces the hope that any observable differences in landscape use could assist in reconstruction of past ethnicity on the Plains, just as is the case with other elements of material culture.⁴² As such, this region evokes the same principles of "diversity-within-unity" recognized elsewhere in Canada, principles which are reflected in patterns of landscape use and the construction of markers on the land that integrate time and space.⁴³

To this end, a transformational matrix of the structures and symbols of the Northwestern Plains cultural landscape (Fig. 6) has to accommodate diverse forms: stone circles or tipi rings; piled-rock cairns (usually circular); dream beds (vision-quest sites); carved or incised ribstones with patterns resembling bison ribs; petroglyph boulders and medicine rocks; medicine wheels; effigies or body forms outlined in stone; and rock art in the form of pictographs and petroglyphs.⁴⁴

Piled cairns and medicine wheels clearly expressed the circle-and-axis motif, as would a tipi in place and outlined by a stone circle. Similar structures could be piled or laid out in wood, sod, bones, or buffalo chips. Sod circles, for example, were abundant at the time of first European contact but were quickly lost to the elements (Fig. 7).⁴⁵ Effigies were in some cases cut out of the sod. Medicine lodges were dance structures, elaborations of the household/cosmos pattern within which people

Features of the Northwestern Plains Sacred Landscape: A Transformational Matrix					
Material	"Petroforms"		Non-stone Materials		
Motif	single stone	multiple stones	bone or antler	wood	earth or sod
axis mundi (lateral view)	 medicine rock	 calm	 bone or antler pile	 tree of life, sacred pole	 mound
circle cosmogram, closed (plan view)	 medicine rock	 calm, mosaic	 bone or antler pile	 tree of life, sacred pole	 mound
circle cosmogram, open		 stone circle	 skull circle	 lodge outline in logs	 sod circle
combinations and elaborations	 ribstone	 medicine wheel	 skull rock	 tipi, death lodge, medicine lodge	 mound and stones or skulls
axis as horizontally transformed*		 dream bed (vision quest)		 burial scaffold	
portrayals, animal or human (vertical or horizontal)*	 writings on stone	 effigies		 drive-line "deadman"	 cleared sod outline

* Note that human body expresses axis mundi, and human vertical axis can be transformed to horizontal.

Fig. 6 (left)
Features of the Northwestern Plains sacred landscape, arranged as a transformational matrix in terms of building material (elements), form, and symbolic reference. Note that rock art or writing on stone (pictographs and petroglyphs) does not belong in the "petroform" category but is included in that column for economy of space.

Fig. 7 (right, top)
Sod circle from tent site used by itinerant Han, Tibetan Plateau, Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China. Such circles existed on the northern Plains at the time of first European contact. (Photo: I. J. Dijks)

Fig. 8 (right)
Scaffold burials on Blood (Káínaa) Reserve, southern Alberta, circa 1890. Several individual burials are evident, some wrapped and some in box-coffins reflecting missionary influence. (National Archives of Canada, C-19049B)

could conduct ritual performances. There were circles of buffalo and/or human skulls and piles of antlers or bones.⁴⁶ There were scaffold or platform burials (Fig. 8) whose elevated position, intended to facilitate the escape of the soul, ensured that they attracted the attention of incoming settlers and mis-

sonaries. Deemed offensive by the newcomers, they were all destroyed or vandalised, and a sequence of cultural compromises ensued.⁴⁷ Rock art sites included both painted and incised panels and many appear to have had narrative or commemorative functions.⁴⁸ Thus, the Custer, Montana, petroglyph



Fig. 9 (far right)
Historic period petroglyph
(incised art) panel north
of Custer, Montana

(Fig. 9) depicts a village (tipi at lower left), muskets, a horse-mounted warrior with typical large circular Plains shield, and other mounted and lance-carrying warriors (barely visible near top). Such art reflected efforts to link history to place and probably had narrative, commemorative, and mnemonic functions. Such sites are frequently defaced with modern graffiti and pockmarks from bullets: a veritable palimpsest in the landscape of shifting cultural patterns.

It is evident, therefore, that not only were there varied structures in the land, but they also had distinctive and informative spatial and temporal connotations. These are only beginning to be appreciated by non-aboriginal people. The “death lodge” type of medicine wheel (Fig. 5) appears to map out the core of early Blackfoot territory and, thus, may well be a marker of ethnicity and power.⁴⁹ Similarly, antler-piles are localized in “hot spots” of wapiti (elk) abundance and



may have been ritual efforts by multiple groups to signify the meanings of those places (Fig. 3).⁵⁰ They map out an “elk landscape” much as the “dance lodge” medicine wheels may be associated with a “buffalo landscape.” As incremental structures, they were the sites of performance and served as loci for maintenance of the cosmos through animal ceremonialism.

The elegance and apparent simplicity of the circle and axis motif understated the complexity of the underlying meanings and was taken as evidence of the “primitive” character of Plains groups. Stone circles marking former tent locations were, in their circularity, embodiments of the horizon, together with the tipi expressing the circle-and-axis motif. Thus was the cosmos itself written upon the land, year upon year, millennium upon millennium, in features that are not normally viewed as “monuments.” It has been calculated from surveys and excavations that as many as one million stone circles must have once existed in southern Alberta before the prairie sod was broken for Euro-Canadian grain farming, with others being buried by wind- and water-laid sediments.⁵¹ The surviving sites clearly offer much information in terms of demography, social structure, and use of landscape.⁵²

Indeed, early European travellers soon realized that such structures were signals of a form of prior domain, whether or not they had been intended as such by their creators. Certainly, there were other reasons why many newcomers desecrated these symbols: missionaries destroyed the evidence of

“pagan ritual”; sacred artifacts were appropriated for institutional and private collections; souvenir hunters and bone collectors plundered burials;⁵³ antler-piles were dismantled and shipped for production of knife handles.⁵⁴ Further, to the colonizing imagination, these markers could be interpreted as claims of prior ownership. While this may be disputed, what is clear is that these “transient” peoples left a cumulative imprint and a *pattern* upon the land: a consciously produced set of mnemonic forms charged with meanings similar to those which the incoming European peoples were to build to consolidate their identification with a new Canada.

Conclusion: From Circle to Square

The essential point is, therefore, that landscape use by Northwestern Plains First Nations reflected more than ten millennia of interaction between people and their environment. Though they were nomadic, their ties to landscape were as intense as those of settled people, even though conceptions of territorial exclusivity may have differed. The term “nomadic” does not simply mean “transient,” for knowledge of the land was extensive and landscape elements served, by association, as residences of memory — of history. Through direct effort and “benign neglect” these cumulative aboriginal landscapes were edited by incoming European settlers almost to the point of deletion. Fragments of these landscapes, including surviving monuments, were often interpreted from a European “settled” perspective, leading to contextual confusion. As was the case with the “Mound Builders” of the American Midwest, the desire among

the settlers to erase or transform the imprint of local aboriginal populations was strong enough to lead to fantastic claims that the monuments had actually been built by a lost race of “superior” people who had been somehow killed off. The persistent damage caused by such views can be countered by contextual studies of aboriginal landscapes from a semiotic perspective, informed by ethnographic studies of ideology, animal ceremonialism, and material culture use. These efforts will benefit from a stronger integration of views from geography, anthropology, history and First Nations studies.

As has happened in many other areas of the world, the structures and their patterns of inter-relationships were replaced in both Canada and the United States by new cultural landscapes of Western origin. J. B. Jackson called this new imposition the last great “Classical political landscape,” in which the square, not the circle, was inherently beautiful and the symbol of orderly behaviour.⁵⁵ Indeed, it allowed the efficient subdivision of bounded territory and was the very embodiment of a “new world order” still overtly expressed throughout American culture. A grid of squares grew and spread westward across this land, and the landscape of circles began to be obscured: a palimpsest of ethnic footprints upon an already patterned natural landscape. Tipis faded to grain elevators, axes still reaching skyward, but importing new meanings to this land. And now the grain elevators, in turn, are fading: transient symbols in an ever-evolving landscape where, despite all, the horizon-circle outlines the ever-dominant dome of what Wallace Stegner so aptly termed the “bell-jar sky.”⁵⁶

NOTES

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