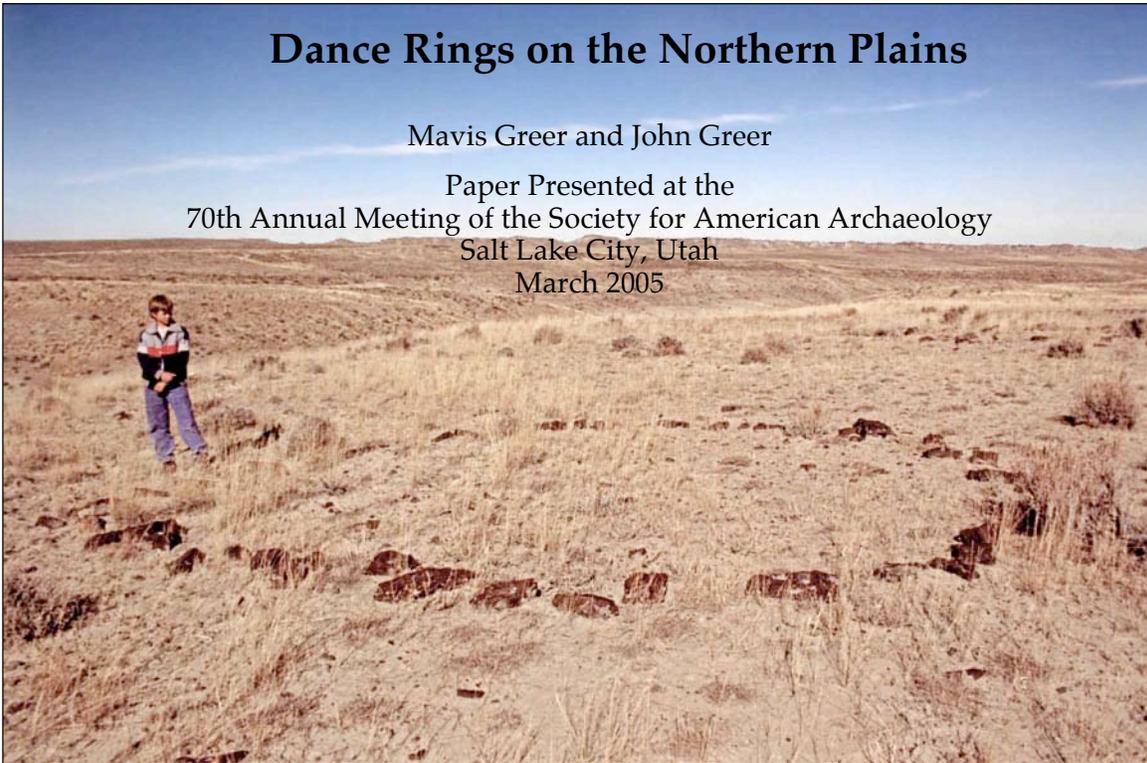


Dance Rings on the Northern Plains

Mavis Greer and John Greer

Paper Presented at the
70th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology
Salt Lake City, Utah
March 2005



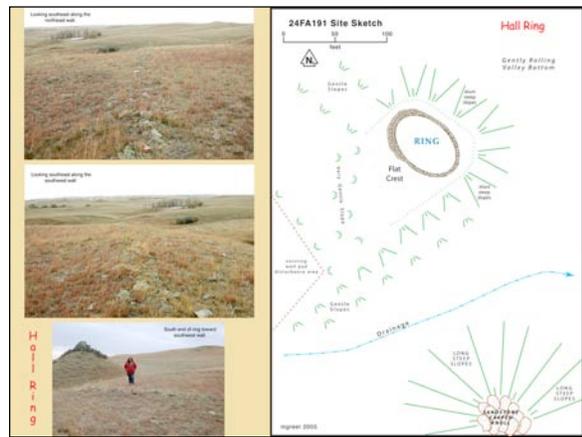
This paper discusses two exceptionally large stone circles from northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana that we suggest are possible dance rings. Within the context of this symposium, dancing can take the form and function of a kind of group shamanism, and rings such as these, while exceedingly rare, may be one of the few archeological vestiges of such activity.

Stone circles (such as the one in the photo above) are common on the northern Plains, but extra large enclosures over ten meters across occur infrequently. We have recorded two stone circles measuring over 15 meters (or 50 feet), and without interior partitions or external attachments usually associated with medicine wheels. These are single rings with no artifacts or associated features, but their large oval shape and embedded nature of the rocks suggest a Late Prehistoric through early Historic age. Based on surface appearance and their location within the cultural landscape, we suggest that they may have functioned as dance rings associated with communal ritual or social activity for which trance — or induced hypnotic state — would be a reasonable component.



The northernmost of the two sites, the Hall Ring, is in southeastern Montana, north of Baker. The ring was constructed on a relatively flat ridgecrest and overlooks lower country to the east and northeast (photo to left).

The feature is oblong, and rocks apparently formed a low wall originally 30 cm to a half-meter tall (photo below). In outside diameter, from edge to edge, the ring measures 15 x 24 meters (or 50 x 78 feet). The wall is made of tightly clustered rocks and is slightly thicker on the northwest end. Sand has accumulated among the rocks, and there is some deflation in the central part of the feature.



It is relatively intact and shows no signs of potting or previous excavation. In surrounding parts of the Pennel valley tipi ring campsites and lithic scatters are common, indicating high attention to the area during prehistoric times.

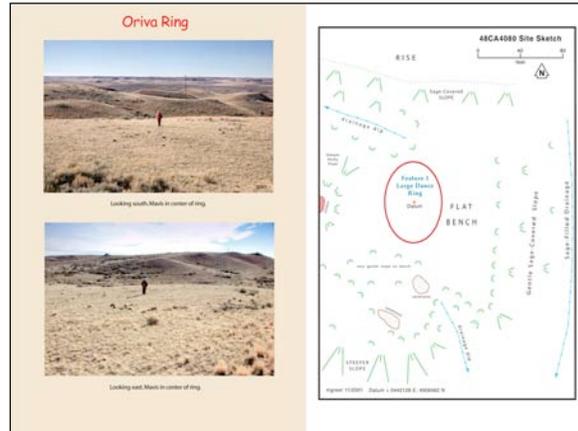


The southern of the two large rings, the Oriva Ring, is in northeastern Wyoming, near Gillette. This large circle is on a flat bench in an upland area of scoria hills (photo to left). Like the Hall Ring, it is also oblong and measures 17 x 22 meters (or 55 x 72 feet) in outside diameter (see photo on

next page). Rocks are spaced and form a general outline rather than a pronounced wall like the Hall Ring. The outline consists of individual clinker blocks (and clusters of 2-3

rocks) spaced 1 to 3 meters apart. The feature is intact (except for some animal trampling) and has not been potted or excavated. The surrounding scoria hills support many tipi ring campsites.

Although there is a good view from both the Montana and Wyoming rings, vantage does not seem to be as important as their higher position overlooking lower valleys. Additionally, both large rings are in



areas of intensive tipi ring campsites, which generally is not characteristic of medicine wheels, vision quests, or rock art sites, all of which tend to be in more isolated locations. If

the assumption is correct that many of the nearby and surrounding tipi ring sites are contemporary with the two large rings, the large rings probably played a community role different from more traditionally envisioned ceremonial sites, where travel was necessary to perform rituals, and some degree of isolation was sought.



Both rings are unusually large, but a comparison with other kinds of stone circles demonstrates more clearly the overwhelming dichotomy of size between the proposed dance rings and standard tipi rings (see photo to right). Outside diameters of over a hundred rings from



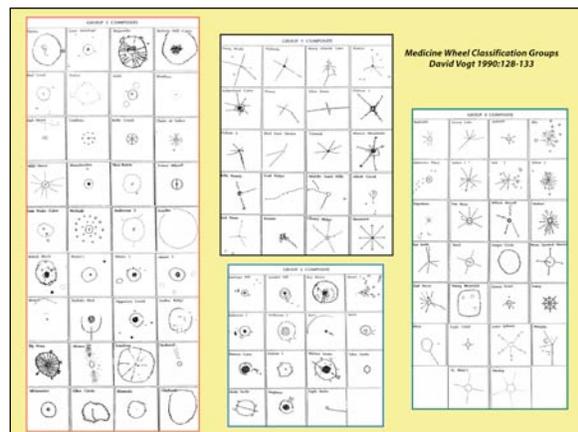
each of the two counties in which the dance rings occur were randomly selected for comparison. In Fallon County, Montana, 160 ring diameters range from 3.0 to 9.7 meters (or 10-32 feet). In Campbell County, Wyoming, 189 rings range from 2.4 to 9.0 meters (or 8-30 feet) across. The two widely separated areas, therefore, produced nearly identical ranges of about 10-30 feet. These figures indicate that the two proposed dance rings, measuring over 15 meters (or 50 feet) in outside diameter, significantly outsize residential tipi rings.



Larger, more complex rings with interior rock arrangements, such as a central cairn and rays, are usually classified as medicine wheels. Circular wheels usually overlap in size with tipi rings, with diameters about 4 to 11 meters (or 13-36 feet), although the circular

Bighorn wheel (above photo) is one of the largest at 24 meters (or 80 feet). Oval wheels are often somewhat larger at 11-25 meters (or 36-82 feet) (Vogt 1990:148; Brumley et al. 1993:56). The oval rings of Hall (at 50x78 feet) and Oriva (at 55x72 feet) thus are toward the upper end of the medicine wheel size.

Stone arrangements classed as medicine wheels on the northern Plains take a number of forms, with overlapping degrees of complexity, as shown in the drawings by Vogt shown in the photo to the right. Although the Hall and Oriva rings look like what one would expect of a prehistoric



dance ring on the northern Plains, within a tipi ring based culture, there is no solid indication of function, and we turn to ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources for some support of the dance hypothesis.



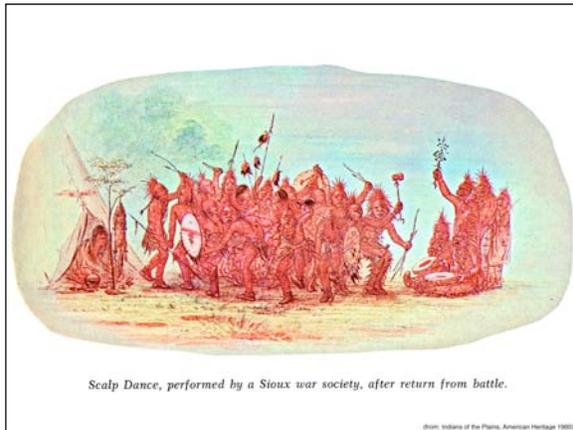
Dancing was integral to all tribes in Montana and Wyoming and was associated with various ceremonial activities, especially pertaining to warfare. Early writers intensely discuss various aspects of dance — reasons for dances, participants, steps, and where dances occurred. However, other than the Sun Dance (structure assembly shown above), preparation of the dance area is seldom mentioned, leaving the impression that there was none. For example, Zenas Leonard witnessed a dance by Crow Indians in the Bighorn Basin of northwestern Wyoming, after a battle with the Blackfeet in 1834. He reports,

...the march resumed to a beautiful level plain, perfectly smooth and covered with short grass, for two or three miles square—where the national dance was to take place. When they had dismounted, the whole nation formed a ring, *and* 69 of the oldest squaws, all painted black, formed themselves in a line in the centre of the circle...The person who struck the first blow *during* their late battle with the Blackfeet commenced dancing, and was immediately followed by every young man and woman belonging to the tribe (except the mourners) ... *The younger dancers formed* themselves in double file, and *danced* round the whole circle to wild, though not irregular music (Leonard 1978:250-251).

Leonard makes no mention of what formed the outside of the circle, and the assumption is that it was delineated only by people.

Among the Assiniboin, Denig (1930:557) in 1930 describes that dancers have “a motive independent of amusement...and *the dances* are to them often matters of deep interest and importance ... *dancers* form nearly a circle...the whole ring standing so close as to press a

little against each other” (1930:557). He describes a confined area for dancing but does not

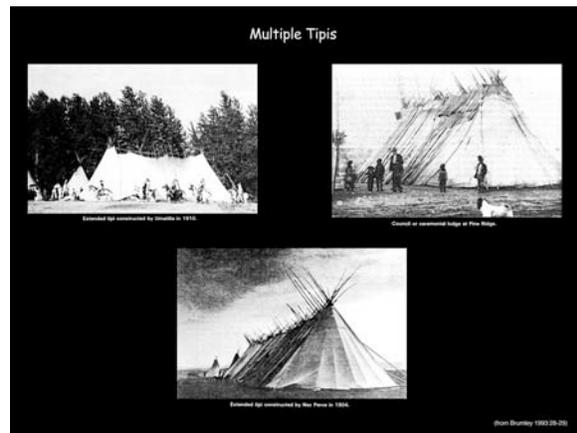


Scalp Dance, performed by a Sioux war society, after return from battle.

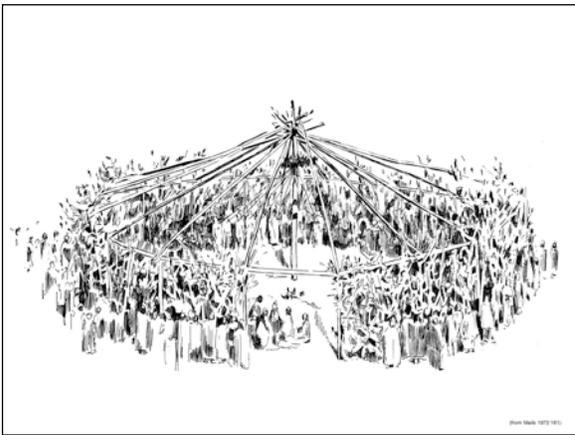
From Indians of the Plains, American Heritage 1988

mention use of rocks. He also describes the Brave’s Dance and Soldier’s Dance as occurring in a ring, and the photo to the left shows a Sioux scalp dance using the same tight circle with people pressed together. The closest that Denig comes to associating shamans with dance among the Assiniboin

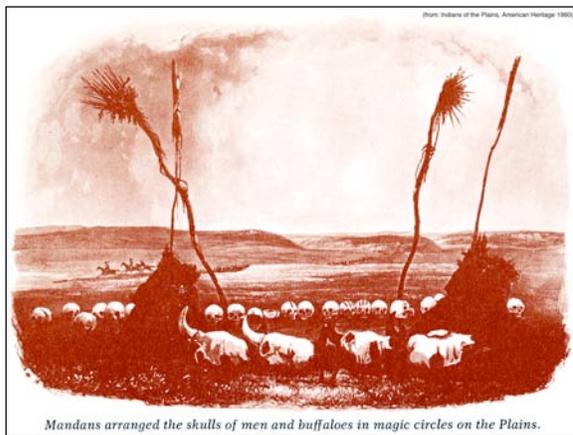
is the Divining Dance, which he describes as a “complicated religious ceremony occupying a whole day, and that part of it appropriated to dancing is done by men and women promiscuously, headed by some of the divining men.... Their bodies are also scarified and pieces cut out of their shoulders” (1930:564). The Divining Dance appears to be part of the Assiniboin’s Sacred Lodge Ceremony (an alternate name for the Sun Dance), which is initiated by a divining man of known repute. For this ceremony several lodges are connected to form a single enclosure about 300 feet long by 15-20 feet wide (or about 91 by 6 meters) (Denig 1930:488) and forming an oblong structure similar to our dance rings, but longer. Among the Crow the Tobacco Planting Ceremony involves a dance area formed by connecting 8 to 10 lodges, which also results in a large oblong structure. Examples of such structures



from other tribes are shown in the photo to the right. Denig describes that during the Tobacco Dance some people “cut and scar their arms and bodies, and exert themselves in dancing without food or water for such a length of time that they are carried away in an unconscious condition from which some are with difficulty revived” (Denig 1961:192). This clearly refers to activity explicitly oriented to achieving an altered state.



because of their resemblance to the superstructure, or log construction, of the modern Sun Dance lodge (Vogt 1990:76-77). However, round dances within a complex structure of wheels with radiating spokes and multiple interior circles probably would be impossible without severe disturbance of the rocks. However, the openness and simplicity of the Hall



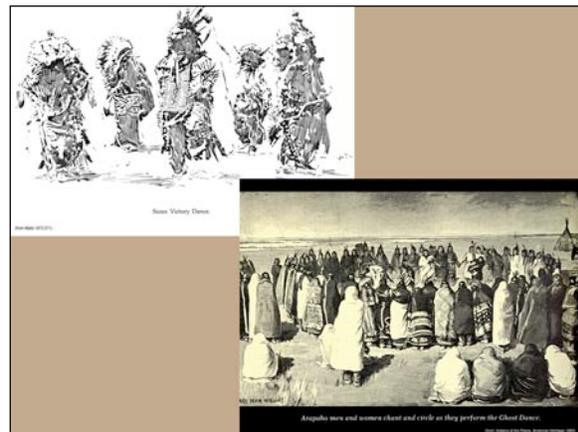
For most tribes shamans have specific roles, such as calling for a dance, although the shaman is usually not the only dancer. For instance, the Sun Dance, which has been studied in more detail than any other Plains ceremony, is closely associated with trance, as discussed by Shimkin (1953:404). Trance to gain access to the supernatural while dancing is induced by infliction of pain through mutilation in some tribes, while for others, such as the Kutenai and Kiowa, the same result is achieved through fasting and thirst (Shimkin 1953:406).

It has long been argued that medicine wheels are associated with the Sun Dance because of their resemblance to the superstructure, or log construction, of the modern Sun Dance lodge (Vogt 1990:76-77). However, round dances within a complex structure of wheels with radiating spokes and multiple interior circles probably would be impossible without severe disturbance of the rocks. However, the openness and simplicity of the Hall and Oriva rings are perfect for round-dance activity.

If the Sun Dance is a late development on the northern Plains, and originated among the Cheyenne and Arapaho in the first half of the 18th century, as has been suggested (Shimkin 1953:408), it

undoubtedly had its roots in earlier manifestations. Those earlier dances could have taken place in large dance circles such as the Hall and Oriva sites. If recorded dances can be a model for those in the past, dances in such rings likely were initiated by a spiritual leader, were performed by both men and women, were made up of repetitive steps, and were accompanied by intensive rhythmic drumming. Dances undoubtedly lasted many hours, perhaps days, extending into the night and causing exhaustion from prolonged movement, and in open locations exposure to heat and cold, rain and snow, and wind, coupled with lack of food and water are all basic ingredients of trance. Use of native tobacco may not have contributed much to trance, and other hallucinogenic drugs, so common in other parts of North America, presently appear to have been severely limited on the northwestern Plains during the Late Prehistoric Period. Dance, therefore, appears to be the main avenue for achieving an altered state.

Group dancing, in this case essentially an activity to achieve a degree of group trance on an individual level, could function as a shamanistic event, performed by the group and for the benefit of the group, exactly as an individual shaman would do. Group shamanism, in this sense,



would not be more important than the individual, but would perform the same communal function. With this kind of dance, it is possible for people within the tribe to communicate collectively with the supernatural if only for a brief period, perhaps one night. Such dance would be important not only for simple entertainment, group cohesion, or blessing, but also for individual contribution to a group effort and well-being while at the same time providing the opportunity for all social members — the ordinary people — to experience the other world.



Although shamanism on the northwestern Plains is usually thought of as associated with caves, rockshelters, cliffs covered with rock art, and vision quest shrines, those settings are often far from where people were living. Residential areas are more commonly in

open country, such as surrounding the Hall and Oriva Rings. The location of these large rings suggests they functioned as local ceremonial centers for surrounding villages where tribes could assemble for ritual or ceremony without long travel.

In conclusion, although this preliminary review found no absolute evidence of northwestern Plains tribes constructing rings specifically for dance, characteristics of several round dances suggest that enclosing the dance area with rocks would be reasonable, even if that area were covered with skins or bushes. Forming a rock ring, particularly in the open,



would formalize the dance area, especially useful to participants who might lose psychological control due to weather exposure, fasting, pain, exhaustion, or hypnotic drumming. Rock-enclosed dance rings would be consistent with other cultural constructs, notably during the prehistoric period, when people normally constructed rock rings for other purposes, such as residential lodges. When rocks were mostly replaced by pegs for holding down tipi covers, dance rings might cease to be the norm for people no longer transporting and arranging rocks to the degree they did previously. Association of dances with shamans and trance is reflected in the historic record, and trance brought on by dancing appears to be part of a long tradition.

We have just touched on this subject and have presented only a few ideas. Extensive literature on the general topic could add considerably to our knowledge of shamanism, dance, and large rings on the northwestern Plains.

REFERENCES CITED

Brumley, John H.

1988 *Medicine Wheels on the Northern Plains: A Summary and Appraisal*. Archaeological Survey of Alberta Manuscript Series, No. 12. Alberta Culture, Edmonton.

1993 A Description of the Benjamin Ranch Site (24TL214) in North Central Montana. *Archaeology in Montana* 34(1):17-32.

Brumley, John H., Ted Birnie, and Rebecca Kallevig

1993 Archaeological Investigations at the Long Site (24MC1002). *Archaeology in Montana* 34(1):45-58.

Denig, Edwin T.

1930 Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: The Assiniboine. In *46th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1928-1929*, pp. 376-654. 46th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington D.C.

Greer, Mavis, and John Greer

1999 *A Turtle Geoglyph in Central Montana*. Paper presented at the 57th Annual Meeting of the Plains Anthropological Society, Sioux Falls.

2001a Updated Off Survey Site Form for 24FA191 (Hall Ring). On file with the Bureau of Land Management Miles City Field Office and Montana SHPO Records Office, Missoula. Greer Services, Casper, Wyoming.

2001b Wyoming Cultural Properties Form for 48CA4080 (Oriva Ring). On file with the Bureau of Land Management Buffalo Field Office and Wyoming SHPO Records Office, Laramie. Greer Services Report 6171, Casper, Wyoming.

Leonard, Zenas

1978 *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Shimkin, D. B.

1953 The Wind River Shoshone Sun Dance. In *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 151*, pp. 397-484. United States Government Printing Office, Washington D. C.

Vogt, David E.

1990 *An Information Analysis of Great Plains Medicine Wheels*. Ph.D. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.