

OLD BIG

Is southern Alberta home to
Canada's Stonehenge?



CLIFF LESERGENT



IMAGINE YOU ARE A BIRD, SOARING. Below you on a high rise of prairie in southern Alberta lies an elaborate arrangement of stones. With eagle eyes you see distinctive lines radiating out every which way from a huge central cairn, enclosed within an outer ring of more stones. This is Omahkiyaahkohtoohp, a Blackfoot word meaning “old, big arrangement.”

In Siksika Nation, just to the north, elders fondly refer to Ómahk—Old Big—as if speaking about a member of the family. Some Europeans might hear this in their native tongue as “grandmother,” a namesake that could also be respectfully given to this ancient arrangement. Archaeologists tend to refer to the site as the Majorville Medicine Wheel, the designation also preferred by the provincial government.

Ómahk is indeed old, older than Stonehenge and its “standing stones,” more ancient than the pyramids in Egypt, over 5,000 years old and then some. And Ómahk is indeed big. The protected part of the site on public land is two square kilometres; a fence put up by the Alberta government after the central cairn was partially excavated in 1971 marks what was understood at the time.

The stones have triggered many theories. Locals refer to the central cairn as the sundial; some see it as a monument to the dead, an effigy of the sun, or maybe the diary of an epoch in the cosmos. Others think of it as a place to renew the spirit. The Royal Alberta Museum, which calls Alberta North America’s “core area for medicine wheels,” says that long usage and changes to the central cairn suggest this particular site had many functions over the years.

One Albertan, however, is questioning what’s “known.” Gordon Freeman says Ómahk is a marvel of engineering that testifies to the genius of people living long ago in this part of the world. He believes it’s much bigger than currently thought, possibly even the largest site of its kind on the North American plains. Ómahk, Freeman figures, could even be the key to cracking the mystery of Stonehenge.

Gordon Freeman questions all of the conventional wisdom, starting with the site’s official name.

IT’S LATE AUGUST, A BEAUTY OF A DAY WITH sunshine clear to the US border. Hot and breezy. I’m following Freeman, who is just ahead in a University of Alberta research truck, my vintage VW camper riding the ridges of the deeply rutted road like a train on rails. Freeman is a physicist and theoretical chemist, emeritus at the U of A, which modestly supports his second career and passion—the archaeology of stone alignments on the prairie. He and his wife Phyl have been coming this way for over three decades. I’d never have found this place on my own.

Ómahk may be patently obvious to a bird in the sky, but it’s easy to miss if you don’t know what you’re looking at on

the ground. At the top of a butte, Freeman stops the truck, walks through the dust and diesel fumes and points toward an outline of Old Big way in the distance. “Look through the saddleback dip,” he says, and I do, and I see, well... not much. We still have a ways to go. I find it comforting that Tom Crane Bear, the esteemed Blackfoot elder and teacher, and a friend of mine, wished me luck earlier in the day, knowing that the stone cairn wasn’t easy to find.

“My son did manage to locate it the first time,” he said. “But it was hard.”

I’ve been hearing about Ómahk for years. And now that we’ve almost arrived, the shake, rattle and roll of the road has given way to an abrupt silence, a blank of sorts I can’t describe. Then I pick up on the wind—sibilant like a distant waterfall, and subtle—a stream of sound perhaps connected to the Bow River nearby. I’m told that if you lie flat on the ground with your head close to one of Old Big’s large rocks, you can hear “songs” as the ever-present wind plays over the stone. And if you listen really carefully, the wind swishes and sways through the shortgrass, whispering *sik-sika, sik-sika*—

“Have I got that right, Tom?”

“Well, I can’t really answer that one,” the Blackfoot elder replied. “It could be true. Nature talks to you. But a lot of people outside the status of Indian, you’d think the person is nuts. Going crazy.” This implied that I might be a bit loopy, and I said as much to Crane Bear. “Well, I think so—sometimes,” he replied. We shared a laugh. “If you was to see me, to pick up a rock—I’ll talk to it. Because we believe that creation and everything in it is alive.”

Of the 46 stone alignments recorded by government archaeologists in Alberta, the oldest according to carbon dating is almost certainly Ómahk. Crane Bear attests to its antiquity. “Our stories say it was here before us,” he said, before “the Dog Days, when my people first come into this territory.” As to the provenance of the boulders and the genesis of the site, “We’re newcomers,” said Crane Bear. “We don’t know who started that out there.”

Freeman says science should “open its eyes” to how Old Big relates to the sun, night and the equinoxes.

WE’RE STILL A LONG WAY FROM THE FENCE THAT serves to protect the main cairn and the surrounding circle of rocks. Freeman is up to date on every theory about Ómahk, but after decades of research, he questions most of the conventional wisdom. He starts with the site’s official designation, the Majorville Medicine Wheel—“which is of course wrong,” the feisty octogenarian complains, preferring the Blackfoot name. He also has a long-standing quarrel with archaeologists who’ve written off the site as hopelessly vandalized and no longer worthy of interest.

Indeed, Freeman sees a pattern in the stones out here—a



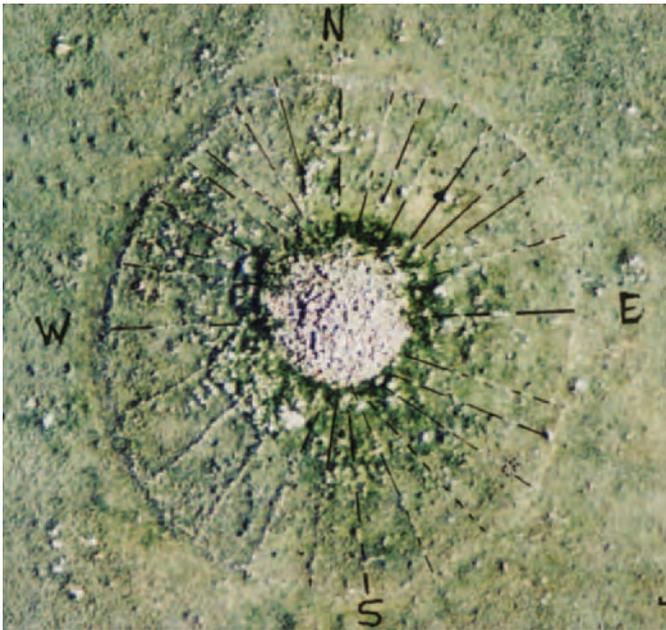
The government of Alberta has protected 16 hectares at the site. But Freeman thinks Ómahk is much larger—perhaps 30 km².

remarkable concordance with megalithic sites in the UK. These outlying rocks suggest that a generation of archaeologists has missed the larger purpose of the Old Big arrangement.

The naturally colourful stones and boulders may look as if they’ve been haphazardly scattered across the prairie, he says, but look toward the heavens and you’ll see them as placeholders for the stars and sightlines for the accurate observation of the rise and fall of the sun and the moon. Many of these rocks outside the main enclosure, he says, were “placed, put there by human beings—not glaciers.” Freeman suggests that Ómahk resembles the stone alignments in Wales shaped by people near the Preseli Mountains (one of the supposed burial places of the legendary King Arthur); the markings are “remarkably similar” and serve as proof of an intentional hand.

In 1971 the Alberta government protected 16 hectares at Ómahk. Freeman’s early research suggested that the site was much bigger; after several years of “persistent requests,” the government increased the protected area to 65 hectares. Freeman insists, however, that the site is at least 30 square kilometres. The full details of his extensive research are best left to his *Canada’s Stonehenge* (Kingsley Publishing, 2009), an account of his “astounding archaeological discoveries” since his first encounter with Ómahk, which he calls “rocks that speak without sound and know without words.”

Canada’s Stonehenge...? Stonehenge, in present-day southwest Britain—the enigmatic “standing stones” that have confounded generations over millennia as to their purpose and origin—is most certainly younger than Ómahk by thousands of years; it is also at the same latitude as the Old Big arrangement. And if Freeman is right, both sites have an identical purpose: to keep track of the heavens on earth. The



Stonehenge and Ómahk are at the same latitude (51° N). Their centre rings are both 30 m in diameter. The designs are similar.

similarity of “the surface geometry between the two sites”—the fact that both are situated along 51° north latitude—can’t be accidental, he says. And he intends to show me why, on the land just up ahead.

WE WALK FARTHER OUT ON THE PRAIRIE. It’s so dry the wind catches in my throat. A small aircraft buzzes over the distant Bow, which twists like a blue serpent. A hawk dives and misses.

You don’t want Freeman on your case—he’s doggedly determined to see things through. And age hasn’t slowed him. He’s spry at 80, now gingerly rolling under a barbed wire fence that caught fluff from a less attentive critter. A character in every sense of the word, with over 400 peer-reviewed publications, Freeman enjoys a formidable reputation for his contributions to the hard sciences. He’s keen on empirical data, having amassed 30 years of measurements at Ómahk, which began when he noticed what he says archaeologists failed to see.

For example, Freeman tells me, the ancient people who fashioned Ómahk mapped and investigated astronomical events with such sophistication—he gestures toward elevated bits of terrain—that they “changed the shape of those hills.” The hills had to have been sculpted by human hands, he says, noting that “from certain angles, they’re so symmetrical it’s almost unreal.” An aerial survey he commissioned depicts where people scooped soil—“the main hill, the secondary hill and a little bit on the third hill—they moved dirt.” Exactly how, he allows, is a mystery.

The earthwork excavation at this particular latitude, 51° north, “is magic because every 18.6 years, the full moon and the sun rise and set at right angles.” The right angle, Freeman tells me, is associated with mystical traditions and ritual ways of knowing the world; it’s evident that the builders of

Stonehenge and Ómahk were inspired by virtually identical astronomical notions.

Freeman says the similarities don’t end there. The stone rings at the centre of Stonehenge and Ómahk are both approximately 30 m in diameter. The design of each arrangement involves the same numbers and similar symbols: buffalo stones at Ómahk, the silhouette of a bull’s head at Stonehenge. Each site can be read as a solar calendar; both incorporate a leap year cycle that Freeman says is slightly more accurate than that of the Gregorian calendar.

Provincial archaeologists maintain that the Majorville Medicine Wheel’s underlying true purpose is known only to its makers and therefore lost to us. Freeman is challenging academic orthodoxy by insisting that archaeology open its eyes to what he sees at Old Big—to how it relates to the night and morning sky, the sun and the equinoxes.

But the intent of Ómahk can be clear enough to those who enter into a communion with the place. “We go according to the stars,” Tom Crane Bear told me earlier. “The Big Dipper, the Morning Star, which we believe is the son of the sun and the moon. The moon is mother. The sun is the father. So when we’re praying, we sometimes refer to the morning star as our brother. And so people have been believing in these stars since time began, I guess.”

NOT UNTIL LATE IN THE DAY DO WE APPROACH the main cairn. It’s cooling off fast, like the desert at night. Given Freeman’s unorthodoxy, I don’t feel at all strange in leaving him for the moment to test the theory I’ve heard about the “songs” of this special place. The “psychoacoustics” at this site, which perceptibly alter with every gust of the wind, may even help in a fuller appreciation for the “old, big arrangement.”

The sun not yet set, I look around Ómahk for an appropriate location to make a sound recording. The wind is coming from the north. A large, spotted boulder a quarter of the way down from the central cairn attracts the eye and my ear. I’m particularly attentive for low frequency, a kind of rumbling or “thrumming” sound, which investigators at megalithic sites in Europe and the UK, locations such as Stonehenge, say are rich in acoustic resonances, frequencies that have been studied for their trance-like effect on people.

The prolonged wet of this summer has made the prairie shortgrass long and slender, draping around many of the most prominent stones in a half-crescent. The large spotted boulder I’ve chosen is no exception. I lie on the ground, the top of my head flush with the stone. The world immediately becomes quieter; the rock damps the strength of the northern breeze. And as the wind passes over the boulder, up and around it, swooshing over and through the shortgrass, my head begins to swim through streams of sound—three tones, three pitches of sound all at once. The lowest pitch isn’t steady like a dial tone, but I definitely hear it close to the ground; it becomes the bedrock for a trio that warble and weave, in and out, intertwining with one another; a symphony of the air as the wind gathers speed and then gently subsides.

The sun is falling quickly now. A bright star, a beacon signalling the beginning of the night, literally pops into view directly over my head. “What a show!” I whisper. And then, like actors slowly making their entrance, other stars take the stage, eventually filling the entire proscenium of this moonless night. I have no words to adequately describe the sensation. To think what people at this site might have thought thousands of years ago...

Too excited to retire to my VW camper, I fetch Freeman for his take on the night.

“That’s Vega,” he says, after aligning my rock to the stars. He didn’t seem to mind being hauled out of his truck shortly after my celestial event. I see that the constellation has a kind of pyramidal shape to it. “Or like a little dipper,” Freeman counsels. “Some call it a lyre.” The geometry of stars directly over our heads does closely resemble the stringed instrument, which has a 3,000-year musical history. The irony is not lost on me. What if I have been looking at the shape of the sounds I was listening to on the ground?

“This is why people are hooked on the sky,” Freeman says.

THE NEXT DAY, GRANT ARMSTRONG, “The Flying Cowboy,” makes good on a promise to introduce a couple of his friends who have questions about Freeman’s book. I watch a 1959 Piper Cub airplane with cartoon-sized tires bounce across the prairie, landing just metres shy of the fence that guards Ómahk’s main cairn and circle. I soon learn that Armstrong flies over the site daily on a patrol of cattle he herds over vast sections of leased land.

“Grant is the protector of this place,” declares Freeman, shaking the pilot’s hand warmly, then adding, “As was his father before him, Arnold—the real protector.”

There’s a funny story about Arnold Armstrong tracking Freeman’s activities across the way from his ranch, on land that abuts Ómahk. “He had him in his gunsight,” Armstrong confirms, after I ask if the story is true. “He was only watching to see what I was doing,” Freeman chuckles. The two men became fast friends, equally committed to the preservation of Ómahk. Both men agree that protection should include the myriad stones well beyond what provincial authorities believe to be the limit of the site.

A major issue for people who live on and love the land is the inevitable problem of transmitting a sense of empathy to distant decision makers. Owning only the surface rights, ranchers and farmers can’t stop the petroleum industry from reaping what lies beneath. “We don’t get much,” Fred Bertschy Jr., a long-time landowner in the district says wryly, “aside from nuisance money”—meaning cash for easements and access roads.

“I once found out a road was going to be punched through,” Armstrong says, pointing north toward a point on the horizon. I couldn’t see much, but I was assured there was once evidence of 200 or more teepee rings. Armstrong called Freeman; Freeman called a provincial bureaucrat. “That slowed them down,” Armstrong says—but only barely. The road-building crew was soon given the government’s blessing. A rough thoroughfare now goes right up the middle, disrupting the ancient camp.

“It’s very easy to have a new idea,” says the retired U of A scientist. “It’s tough to get anyone to use it.”

What’s maddening, if I read Armstrong’s body language right, is that “the professionals in Edmonton” didn’t give the site a second look, let alone pay attention to ranchers and professors and the Aboriginals who’ve been on this land.

Another of Armstrong’s friends is Louise Beasley, a middle-aged rancher who decades ago lived at Wardlow, near the effigy of a spread-eagled man outlined by rocks placed close to Blackfoot Crossing. Beasley tells me about arrangements of stone on land her family ranches near Dinosaur Provincial Park. People saw them, took photos from the air, “and they were in books.” But she laments that newcomers to Alberta and city folks might never fully appreciate and therefore protect the special nature of this territory and Ómahk. Our ancestors plowed over a lot of the landscape, she says, looking out over the land that extends in all directions, our view unfettered at the top of the butte.

As for Freeman, while amateur astronomers the world over have constantly added to the knowledge of the heavens and have been acknowledged by top-flight organizations such as NASA and the European Space Agency, the lack of provincial government interest in Ómahk must be privately distressing. But he seems philosophical about getting the province and its archaeology community on side with his research. “It’s well known in the sciences,” he tells me: “It is very easy to have a new idea. It’s tough to get anyone to use it.”

RETIRED PHYSICISTS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, FLYING cowboys, ranchers and other visitors to Ómahk may debate the site’s worth as a subject of further study or greater protection. But Majorville—the town, that is—is unquestionably fading away. On the map it still appears as the closest settlement to Old Big, but in person the hamlet is pretty much deserted. There’s evidence of what was once a service station, but you really have to know the telltale signs of the business to see it.

And that’s just it, I guess: knowing what to look for.

As I point my VW camper out of this windswept pocket of the province, I think back to the top of the slow incline upon which Ómahk sits. It would be easy to mistake the stone alignments as little more than a pile of rocks cleared by farmers. You might conclude, as many archaeologists do, that a glacier randomly deposited the slew of prominent boulders well outside of Ómahk’s main circle of stones, and that these rocks have nothing to do with reckoning celestial events or mapping the night sky. Gordon Freeman would just smile. And then he’d show you how to look a little more carefully. ■

Don Hill is host of Expressions on CKUA. His recordings of Ómahk can be heard at <http://appropriate-entertainment.com>.