

## VERMILLION CANYON MEDICINE WHEEL: A SACRED SITE IN NORTHWESTERN COLORADO

Peter Faris

*Vermillion Canyon in Brown's Park in northwestern Colorado, an area occupied prehistorically by the Eastern Shoshone, has long been known for its concentration of rock art produced by the Fremont culture between about AD 500-1300. The recent discovery of a medicine wheel in this canyon suggests that it was a place of great spiritual significance to the later Shoshone. This agrees with ethnographic records of Shoshone belief in rock art sites as sources of poha or medicine power. Additionally, because of its canyon-bottom location, it calls into question archaeoastronomical interpretations. Whatever its purpose, the presence of the medicine wheel in this Poha Kahni, House of Power, marks Vermillion Canyon as sacred land to the prehistoric and proto-historic Shoshone inhabitants of the region.*

### Introduction

Throughout the northern Great Plains a number of Medicine Wheels have been found. These usually consist of a circle of rocks with a number of interior spokes (there are a few examples which omit the circle and consist only of rock alignments like spokes), and they may or may not include cairns of stone that mark various locations on the structure.

"About 50 medicine wheels and related structures are known. Nearly all are found on the east flank of the Rockies or on the open plains below; most are in the north, on the grassy prairies of Canada. Some wheels seem only to be a few centuries old; others are very ancient" (Krupp 1983:142).

"Although many date from the precontact period, others, such as the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in the mountains of Wyoming (which dates from about 1700), are more recent. The medicine wheels, especially important to the northern Arapahos and to a lesser extent the Shoshones, reflected the reverence that all people of the plains maintained for the circle, a shape that suggested spiritual and political unity and connected people with one another and with the natural world" (Carlson 1998:114).

### Medicine Wheels

The purpose of the medicine wheels has been variously reported, and at present many are believed to be a manifest record in stone of alignments that mark celestial events such as solstices, equinoxes, and the rising or setting of certain stars. The astronomical interpretation of medicine wheels received a great impetus from the studies conducted by Dr. John A. Eddy (1974) on the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in northern Wyoming. Eddy (1977:146) found that wheels with discernible astronomical alignments, "... were built on the highest land around, with clear, commanding views of the horizon."

Indeed, many of the structures classified as medicine wheels have discernible alignments to the celestial events noted above, and the archaeoastronomical significance of those is not debated. In fact, whatever the original purpose of their builders may have been, there is ample evidence the medicine wheels were incorporated into different belief patterns by later peoples.

Earlier studies of these structures tended to assign a ceremonial purpose to them, and many Native American informants gave statements to early researchers concerning this subject. According to Krupp (1983:147), "Use of the Bighorn Medicine Wheel by Crow Indians was reported by the ethnographer R. H. Lowie in 1922. One of Lowie's informants, a Crow medicine man named Flat Dog, said the wheel was the 'Sun's Lodge' and a place of fasting and vision questing for the Crow. What Flat Dog described as roofless sleeping shelters for vision seekers may have been the rim cairns."

Other stories indicate that the Crow believe the medicine wheel was intended for worship. They recall that they "visited it when they wished to communicate with the spirits of nature or with the spirits of the dead. They stopped there on their travels to and from the hunting grounds in the Wind River Country. On their return they held thanksgiving ceremonies at the Medicine Wheel and left offerings of the best game they had killed. The women left offerings of beads. The Crows believed that in the rock shelters near the Wheel lived some of the Little People" (Clark 1966:302).

Many of these reports seem to reflect traditional knowledge on the part of the informant. This may represent attempts of later peoples to explain the presence of an enigmatic structure, or examples of reuse of medicine wheels by later cultures.

### Brown's Park

In an arid region that receives less than 10" of precipitation annually, Brown's Park is a rich habitat that now contains a national wildlife refuge. A sheltered parkland with abundant wildlife, it lured fur trappers, becoming a rendezvous site as early as 1826. Later, in the 1890s, cattle rustlers like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid hid their stolen herds in Brown's Hole, as they called it.

An area of such richness in an arid land can be expected to have been important to



Figure 1. Lower Vermillion Canyon, Brown's Park, Moffit County, Colorado.

Native Americans, and there is evidence of prehistoric occupation of the area as early as the Paleoindian stage, lasting to about 5,500 BC, and Archaic occupation has been found at sites throughout the region dating between 5,000 BC - AD 500 (Tate 1998:9).

### Vermillion Canyon

Vermillion Canyon runs north and south, carrying Vermillion Creek through the eastern end of the Cold Spring Mountains to join with the Green River at the south end of Brown's Park. The northern half of Vermillion Canyon is a narrow slot cut through the rock of the ridge, and the southern half opens up into an enclosed bowl (Figure 1, opposite page). This bowl is well watered by Vermillion Creek, a permanent stream, and shows signs of habitation in addition to the rock art and medicine wheel discussed in this paper.

### Fremont Culture

The Fremont culture may have developed from the Desert Archaic tradition by AD 500 or earlier in eastern Utah and some parts of northwestern Colorado. Abandonment of the region by the Fremont falls at AD 1300 according to LaPoint (1987:194). People of the Fremont culture manufactured pottery and relied to a varying extent on maize horticulture.

Most rock art in the Brown's Park area is attributed to the Uinta Fremont culture and all rock art in Vermillion Canyon is Uinta Fremont. The petroglyphs in Vermillion Canyon are of the Classic Vernal Style as defined by Polly Schaafsma. This consists of figures with trapezoidal body form and discernible headgear; also facial features and details of ornament are common. Anthropomorphic figures may occur in clustered groups, or in lines across the cliff (Schaafsma 1980:171-175) (Figure 2). The Classic Vernal Style can be dated from between AD 600 and AD 1000, approximately (Cole 1990:174).



Figure 2. Classic Fremont Style petroglyph in the northern half of Vermillion Canyon

### Shoshone Culture

In northeastern Utah and northwestern Colorado the Fremont culture seems to have been followed by the Shoshone. About 1000 years ago speakers of the family of languages known to linguists as Numic, which includes Shoshone, began a movement that originated in the southwestern Great Basin and expanded northeastward. Groups of people who spoke the Shoshone language spread up through central Nevada and across northern Utah into southern Idaho and adjacent Wyoming, according to Grayson (1993:35-36). Sydney Lamb (1958:95-100) estimated that when encountered by Europeans these people had been in place for one thousand years or less. Later analysis based upon glottochronological data tended to support that estimate, suggesting a minimum of 700 years for the

split between Panamint and Shoshone (Grayson 1993:35-36). So the Shoshone may have arrived in northwestern Colorado and succeeded the Fremont Culture there around AD 1300, a date that is consistent with LaPoint's (1987) statement that the Fremont abandoned northwestern Colorado about AD 1300.

Archeological evidence places the Shoshonean expansion at a somewhat later time, however. One indicator regarded as diagnostic for prehistoric Shoshone in the northwestern Plains includes a "distinctive flat-bottomed pottery known as Intermountain Ware" (Frison 1971; Mulloy 1958; Wedel 1954). "Dates of around AD 1450 - 1600 are available for a number of sites that contain Intermountain Ware in mountainous eastern Idaho and western Wyoming" (Wright 1978:49, cited in Greiser 1994). According to Hughes:

Two Shoshonean groups, the Wind River Shoshones and their far-ranging relatives, the Comanches, occupied a section of northern Colorado before 1800. After that date the Comanches left, but the Shoshones remained. Shoshone country included all the land north of the Yampa River, North Park, and the mountains to the front range north of what is now Rocky Mountain National Park. The Shoshones were northern neighbors of the Utes, speaking a closely related language and sharing much of the same way of life. Besides northern Colorado, they occupied much of the basin and plateau country in Wyoming, up to the Yellowstone. The closely related Bannocks and Northern and Western Shoshones made their homes in Idaho and Nevada. They were hunters and gatherers, while the more easterly bands were specialized buffalo hunters - Great Basin Indians who had adopted much of the Plains culture [Hughes 1977:33].

Stamm adds:

The men who led the local bands and the divisions possessed *puha*, or *medicine power*. According to Hultkrantz, Lowie, and other ethnologists, *puha* enabled individuals to achieve military or economic success and probably represented an older, Basin-oriented religion.

Whatever gifts of power a person might obtain were used for the benefit of the family, band, or collective tribe. The exercise of power in war, hunting, or healing contributed to the overall welfare and health of the larger community, not just the one endowed with *puha*.

*Puha* acquisition generally required individual effort. Hultkrantz notes that "except for certain great medicine men especially chosen by the spirits, all who desire *puha* must themselves seek the spirits." This distinction between actively seeking spiritual power or simply being chosen or identified, demonstrates the Basin/Plains duality. Basin Shoshones often received *puha* via dreams, which did not require special preparations, while Plains people used vision quests.

Unbidden and unsought visions certainly informed the lives of Plains peoples and a vision quest was not the only protocol for *puha* acquisition. Yet for an intentional seeker of *puha* among the Plains Shoshones, enduring a quest ordeal at the rock art sites of ancestors in the Wind River Mountains was perhaps a more normative route. By fasting and prayer, the individual seeker might receive the gifts of a particular spirit (*puhagan*, or power-giver), often delivered through dreams or trancelike consciousness. The spirit(s) also instructed the recipients in the nourishment of the *puha*, as well as in the construction of "medicine bundles" and the uses of the *puha* [Stamm 1999:5-6].

Shimkin (1986:325) explained that

The mythological beings and animals of nature and their power (*poha*) are of central importance; the shaman is called *pohakanti* "(one who) has power." The relation between shaman

and power is not one of control but of supplication and dependency. Although power may come in the unsought dreams of late adolescence and is sometimes transferred from shaman to acolyte, it is commonly the fruit of efforts, either in the Sun Dance or through sleeping in sacred places, to gain the blessing or pity of a source of power through a quasi-compelling petition or prayer. A successful quest is expressed by a vision in which the *poha* appears, often transforming itself from one form to another, and bestows skills or protections, fetishes to call forth the power, a song, and individual taboos. The *poha* often resides within the shaman and may be coughed out, then transferred to another by blowing. This is deadly; a shaman must come to track the *poha*, capture it, and then blow it back into the sufferer lest he die.

The most sacred places are the sites of pictographs (*poha kahni* "house of power"), particularly in the vicinity of Dinwoody Canyon, on the Wind River Reservation. There are hundreds of pictographs, clearly accumulated over a long period. The later representations are particularly important. They include large panels representing the feared Water Ghost Beings and Rock Ghost Beings.

In addition to Dinwoody Canyon, Bull Lake remains both fearful and attractive. It is reported to be the home of monsters; those who kill and eat them will change into Water Buffalo and disappear. It is also the place where ghost people play the hand game.

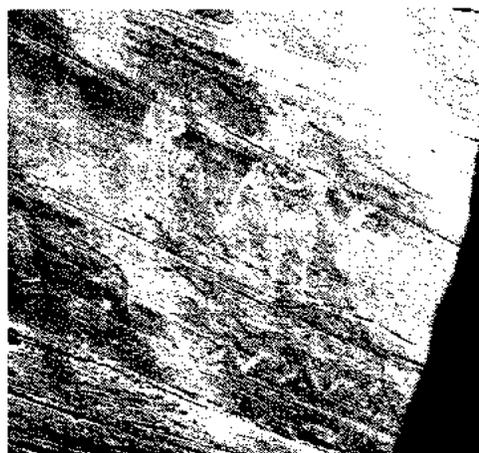
Caves were used for seeking shamanic power as well and were believed by the Shoshone to be entrances to the legendary underground world (Liljeblad 1986:652). With its dense concentration of Fremont petroglyphs and a cave (Figure 3), located within the known range of the Eastern Shoshone people during the late prehistoric period, Vermillion Canyon was likely a site of special sacred significance.

### Sacred Twins

One theme found in the rock art of Vermillion Canyon is the portrayal of a pair of figures standing side-by-side, appearing to hold hands. One example of this theme from a dense rock art site on a nearby ranch has been named "The Friends" and was adopted as the logo of the Colorado Archaeological Society (Figure 4). Another example, this from Vermillion Canyon proper (Figure 5), was identified as "The Medicine Man and Medicine Woman" by John Tarnesse, a Sun Dance Chief and spiritual leader of the Eastern Shoshone in Fort



Figure 3, above. Cave in Vermillion Canyon.  
Figure 4, middle. Friends pictograph.  
Figure 5, bottom. Paired figures identified as Medicine Man and Medicine Woman.





Washakie on the Wind River Reservation (John Tarnesse, personal communication 1998). It is possible that these paired figures also represent the mythical twins of North American native mythology.

Hultkrantz (1967:40) identified the Sacred Twins theme among the Shoshone in their tales of Coyote and his brother Wolf. "It is a remarkable fact that possibly dates from a distant prehistoric age that the wolf, brother or twin of the culture hero, does not only occur among the Algonkin but also among the Shoshone and their neighbors (among whom Wolf faces the mischievous Coyote, 'Little Wolf')."

Smith (1993:67) and others have also related Shoshone tales in which Coyote and Wolf were brothers. It is possible that the prehistoric Shoshone, entering the Brown's Park area in general and Vermillion Canyon in particular, saw in the paired figures of the rock art the Sacred Twins of their mythology, and thus saw that location as sacred ground. Such a location, known as a *poha kahni*, house of power, would be a natural choice of site for the later construction by a shaman of a medicine wheel for ceremonial purposes.

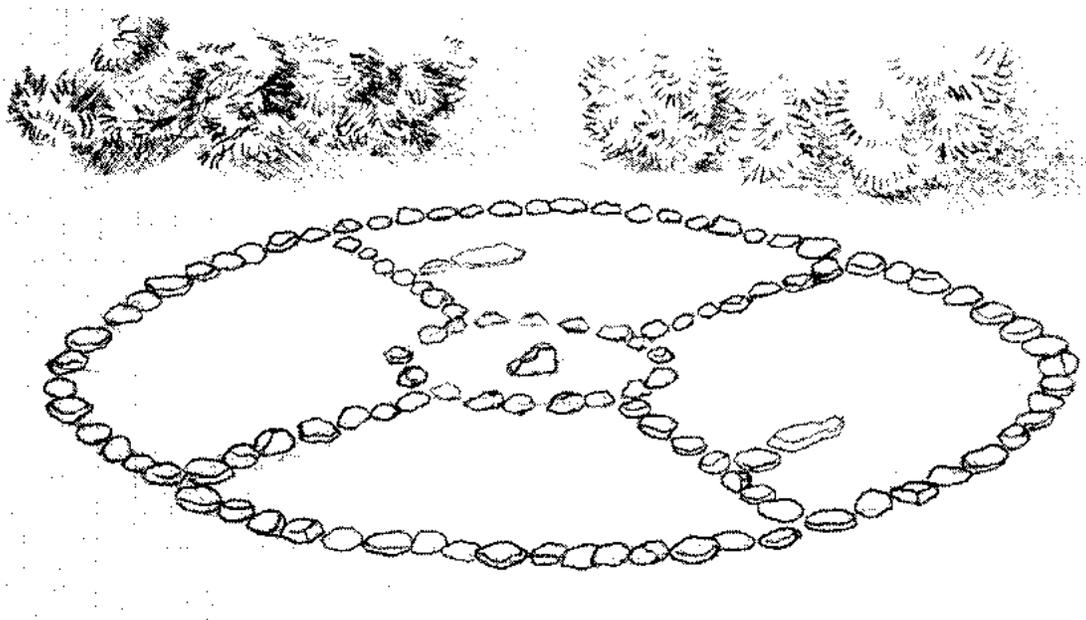
### The Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel

In 1994 a medicine wheel (Figure 6, above) was discovered in the lower reaches of Vermillion Canyon by John Tarnesse and Joseph Triscari, a Denver photographer. They were told of rumors that there was one in that area and had been searching for it, as well as visiting the rock art in Vermillion Canyon. John Tarnesse (personal communication 1998) said of the Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel:

Here we walk into a world of our ceremonies. This world of ceremonies is portrayed in rock art in many places. Spiritual Leaders understand it. We understand it and learn how to balance our people's lives and how to balance the world. Here is one of the ceremonies we hold to keep

the world and our lives straight, in balance. We ask, in the ceremony, the direction of life.

This medicine wheel should be titled "The Sacred Direction". The Sacred Direction is what spiritual leaders asked for when they built this place, close to the petroglyphs. They prayed for the world to be in balance from here. We pray here today too. Prayers to have Mother Earth claim her medicine and clean her house. She cleans her house in a way most people do not understand, like hurricanes and tornadoes. We pray for world peace, for people to live long and happy lives. For their lives to flourish. This is one of the things the medicine wheel portrays.



The Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel (Figure 7, above) is located in the bottom of the lower portion of Vermillion Canyon, near the foot of the slope of the western wall of the canyon. This position at the bottom of the canyon is away from the long sight lines to a distant horizon to be expected in a site with archaeoastronomical significance. Measuring approximately 27.5 feet in diameter (8.4 meters), the wheel is laid out as two concentric circles, linked by four spokes, and surrounding a single upright center stone (Hauk 1999:1). In the outer ring are 63 rocks, and in the inner ring 17. The four spokes consist of seven stones each for a total of 28 stones. The number 28 is often quoted as the length in days of the lunar cycle (or synodic cycle) although the real number is 29.53 days (Howard 1967:72). There are 28 spokes in the Bighorn Medicine Wheel (Eddy 1974:1040).

The four spokes in the Brown's Park Medicine Wheel are roughly aligned to the cardinal directions (Hauk 1999). "The number four also symbolized natural harmony. There were four seasons, four ages in human life (babyhood, childhood, adulthood, and old age), four elements above the earth (the sun, the moon, the stars, and the sky), and many other natural manifestations of the number. The four winds or four directions of the compass represented both natural and metaphysical powers. In effect, because the great creator force (or Holy One Above) created everything in fours, the Plains Indians believed they should do as much as possible in fours" (Carlson 1998:114).

The seven stones in each spoke of the medicine wheel may refer to the Pleiades, which in Shoshone mythology is Coyote's family, or to the stars in the Big Dipper, which in Shoshone mythology is "hunting with a rabbit net" (Miller 1997:130-132).



The age of the medicine wheel is unknown. Given the absence of an absolute date at this time, any guess as to its age must be made on the basis of relative factors. As earlier peoples are not known to have made medicine wheels, and since Shoshone occupation of the region began in about AD 1300, it should date from that time or later.

The location of the medicine wheel at the bottom of the slope of the west wall of the canyon makes a detailed geomorphologic study necessary before any assumptions are made based on the depth of the rocks in the soil. The rocks appear to be well seated in the soil at perhaps one-third their height (no rocks were moved during our visit). The soil around them could be accreting due to dust blowing in from the flats above the canyon, or during precipitation by gradual sheet wash from the slope above the wheel. Or, on the other hand, the soil around the rocks of the medicine wheel could be eroding due to water flowing over the site from rainfall. However, when the medicine wheel was discovered, the soil around it had a well-developed cryptobiotic crust; this suggests the surface was stable for some time. Visitation has now destroyed much of that crust, so more serious erosion can be expected in the future.

The medicine wheel is located near three Fremont rock art sites on boulders that, as suggested above, may have provided part of the motivation for the location selected for the wheel.

One site has a typical Fremont figure with large plumes on its headdress (Figure 8).

The second site contains an insect-like figure with ten legs, a pair of claws or pincers at the top, and a hooked tail or stinger at the bottom (Figure 9).

The third site contains a cluster of six Fremont figures. One figure at the top with a plumed headdress holds an object in its left hand. Below that is a row of three figures, with the middle figure only about two-thirds of the size of the flanking figures. Of the bottom pair of figures, the figure on the right holds an object in its left hand (Figure 10).

There is also a flat area near the medicine wheel, next to the stream, which shows some indications of habitation. It is likely that further studies and excavations in this location will provide evidence as to the cultural affiliation of the medicine wheel.

Figure 8, top. Single anthropomorph petroglyph near Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel.

Figure 9, middle. Insect-like petroglyph near medicine wheel

Figure 10, bottom. Petroglyph of six anthropomorphs near medicine wheel.

## The Sacred Circle

The form of the Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel with four spokes connecting the inner and outer concentric circles suggests the Indians' Sacred Circle.

"One of the symbols that expresses most completely the Plains Indian concept of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature surrounding them is a cross inscribed within a circle. The symbol is painted on a number of ritual objects, and on the bodies and heads of people who participate in tribal ceremonies. Its form is reflected in the circular shape and central fire of the tipi, the Indian's home: its pattern is found in the Sun Dance and purification lodges and in many ritual movements" (Brown 1982:34-36).

Lakota holy man Eagle Voice recalled a mystical experience of his youth: "I was standing on the highest hill in the center of the world. The circle of the world was a great hoop with two roads crossing where I stood, the black one and the red. And all around the hoop more peoples than I could count were sitting together in a sacred manner" (Niehardt 1951:53).

The cross, a symbol of the four winds and world corners, was also identified with the universe in most of North America. In the form of a cross within a circle, the symbol first appears in the Mississippian culture (700 - 1700 AD), a culture that was inspired from Mesoamerica and brought many new features in religion, ritual, and symbolism to the southeastern, prairie, and plains provinces of North America. Indeed, the whole of this vast area shows the sacred circle design in the most diverse functions, as camp circles, sacred lodges, arrangements of buffalo skulls, stone enclosures on mountain tops ('medicine wheels'), emblems on rock drawings and dresses, and cultic implements (the Arapaho sacred wheel) [Hultkrantz 1967:28].

"At the center of the circle, uniting within a point the four directions of the cross and all the other quaternaries of the Universe, is a human person. Without the awareness that they bear within themselves this sacred center, human beings are in fact less than human. It is to recall the virtual reality of this center that the Indians have so many rites based on the cross within the circle" (Brown, 1982:34-36).

## Conclusion

A feature like the Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel in a location like Vermillion Canyon compels us to attempt to explain its purpose. In our attempts to do so we draw upon the available data, both ethnographic and scientific, to test hypotheses and draw conclusions. This is, of course, exactly what the people who followed the original makers of the structure did. This feature, and indeed other like features, would have been continually redefined in terms of the culture and the individual doing the evaluation. Such definitions allowed these subsequent cultures or individuals to develop their own explanations for the feature, using them to adopt the feature into their own cultural context. As we have seen, medicine wheels were of great spiritual significance to the Shoshone culture, and we must assume that no matter who originally created the Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel, these people appropriated it later for their own cultural purposes.

However, it is likely that the Vermillion Canyon Medicine Wheel was created by the early Shoshone inhabitants of the area, the ancestors of the Eastern Shoshone of the Wind River Reservation in Western Wyoming. They had a considerable time depth in occupation of the area. The proximity of the wheel to the cave and the rock art is known to be of considerable importance to the Shoshone. Also the twins theme is found in both the

canyon rock art and Shoshone mythology. This suggests that Vermillion Canyon in northwestern Colorado is a location that was of rich spiritual significance to the Shoshones.

*Acknowledgment.* The photograph for Figure 3 is by, and used courtesy of, Dell Crandell. All other photos and the field sketch for Figure 7 by the author.

### References Cited

- Brown, Joseph Epes  
1982 *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*. Crossroad Publishing, New York.
- Carlson, Paul H.  
1998 *The Plains Indians*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station.
- Clark, Ella E.  
1966 *Indian Legends from the Northern Rockies*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Cole, Sally J.  
1990 *Legacy on Stone*. Johnson Books, Boulder.
- Eddy, John A., Dr.  
1974 Astronomical Alignment of the Big Horn Medicine Wheel. *Science* 184(4141):1039-43.  
1977 Probing the Mystery of the Medicine Wheels. *National Geographic* 151(1, January):146.
- Frison, George C.  
1971 Shoshonean Antelope Procurement in the Upper Green River Basin, Wyoming. *Plains Anthropologist* 16(54):258-284.
- Grayson, Donald K.  
1993 *The Desert's Past, a Natural Prehistory of the Great Basin*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Greiser, Sally T.  
1993 Late Prehistoric Cultures on the Montana Plains. In *Plains Indians, AD 500-1500, The Archaeological Past of Historic Groups*, edited by Karl H. Shlesier. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Hauk, Richard, Dr.  
1999 *The Dustdevil Gorge Medicine Wheel: A Study in Time & Space*. ARI Archaeoastronomy Research Series #1, Archaeological Research Institute, Bountiful, Utah.
- Howard, Neale E.  
1967 *The Telescope Handbook and Star Atlas*. Thomas Y. Crowell, New York.
- Hughes, J. Donald  
1977 *American Indians in Colorado*. Pruett Publishing, Boulder, Colorado.
- Hultkrantz, Ake  
1967 *The Religions of American Indians*. Translated by Monica Setterwall. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Krupp, E. C., Dr.  
1983 *Echoes of Ancient Skies, the Astronomy of Lost Civilizations*. Harper and Rowe, New York.
- Lamb, Sydney  
1958 Linguistic Prehistory in the Great Basin. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 29:95-100.

- LaPoint, Halcyon  
 1987 *An Overview of Prehistoric Cultural Resources, Little Snake Resource Area, Northwestern Colorado*. BLM Cultural Resource Series No. 20. Bureau of Land Management, Denver.
- Liljeblad, Sven  
 1986 Oral Tradition: Content and Style of Verbal Arts, in *Handbook of North American Indians, Great Basin*, vol. 2, edited by Warren L. D'Azevedo, pp 641-659. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Miller, Dorcas S.  
 1997 *Stars of the First People*. Pruett Publishing, Boulder, Colorado.
- Mulloy, William T.  
 1958 *A Preliminary Historical Outline for the Northwestern Plains*. University of Wyoming Publications 22(1).
- Niehardt, John G.  
 1951 *When the Tree Flowered*. Macmillan, New York.
- Schaafsma, Polly  
 1980 *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*. School of American Research, Santa Fe.
- Shimkin, Demitri B.  
 1986 Eastern Shoshoni. In *Handbook of North American Indians, Great Basin*, vol. 2, edited by Warren L. D'Azevedo. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Smith, Anne M.  
 1993 *Shoshone Tales*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Stamm, Henry E., IV  
 1999 *People of the Wind River, The Eastern Shoshones, 1825-1900*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Tate, Marcia J.  
 1998 Mitigation of Brown's Park Agricultural Trespass and Cultural Resources. *Inventory for Land Exchange Parcels, Moffat County, Colorado*, Tate and Associates, Inc., Aurora, Colorado.
- Wedel, Waldo R.  
 1954 Earthenware and Steatite Vessels from Northwestern Wyoming. *American Antiquity* 19(4):403-9.
- Wright, Gary A.  
 1977 The Shoshonian Migration Problem. *Plains Anthropologist* 23(80):113-37.