

Which way is up?

How important was direction to Neolithic monument-builders and did particular directions have symbolic meaning? The majority of long barrows in Britain are aligned with their entrances facing east, so their builders must have regarded that direction as significant. The sun and moon rise in the east, crossing the southern sky to set again in the west; when not in view they could be regarded as passing through the underworld, which is in the north. North is associated in many cultures (and even in The Bible) with darkness and death.

Today we regard north to be 'up' or 'forward' because we think entirely in terms of maps, which have had north at their top for hundreds of years, since the adoption of magnetic compasses for navigation. Exactly when this happened is uncertain, but the Chinese are usually credited with the invention. The earliest written descriptions of magnetism in China date from around 70 AD and describe how a needle may be magnetised by stroking with a lodestone. This naturally-magnetic mineral is a special form of magnetite, commonly found in central Eurasia but not in Britain. The earliest magnetic compass is thought to have been simply a piece of lodestone suspended on a string, which will eventually settle to point north-south. The builders of Avebury are known to have had an interest in 'exotic' stones from distant regions: at Windmill Hill, for example, stones have been found that originated in the Alps. So it is not inconceivable that lodestones could have been known in prehistoric Britain, though they would surely have been rare and special and none have ever been found.

A more likely way of determining the direction of north and the other cardinal points in prehistoric Britain would have been to simply observe the positions of the sun at the spring and autumn equinoxes. Only on these two days every year does the sun rise exactly in the east and set exactly in the west. By marking the two directions and bisecting the angle between them (easily done, using only a rope) the exact direction of north and south can be found. But there are several indications that in prehistory it was *east*, not north, that was regarded as 'forward'.

Most modern European languages are evolved from Proto-Indo-European (PIE), a language possibly of trade, once used across the continent from Iceland to western China and including northern India. PIE is extinct but has been partially reconstructed after two centuries of linguistic study. Though some have claimed PIE was spoken by the first farmers as early 10,000 BC, they are not linguists: PIE is more likely to have been used between about 4,500 and 2,500 BC. In PIE we can find many clues as to how our forebears may have lived and how they regarded their world.

The reconstructed PIE lexicon has disappointingly few words for direction; even 'direction' itself is missing. There are two words for 'right', two for 'left' and one word for 'east' which derives from 'dawn' – the direction of the rising sun. There are indications that the word for 'west' derived from a reference to the setting sun or evening, but the root has not been reconstructed. Although it is assumed that PIE words for north and south were used, they are

unknown. But as well as the use of cardinal directions PIE had another system of orientation in which the speaker was assumed to be facing east. So 'east' is 'forward' and 'west' behind. This system continued to be used in the later Indo-European (IE) languages and survives even today: in modern Welsh, for example, the words for 'right' and 'south' are identical, indicating that east is regarded as 'forward'. The same correlation of south and right is found in other IE languages such as Old Irish, Sanskrit and Avestan (Iranian). A similar relationship between 'left' and 'north' can be found in Old Irish and Germanic. There is also an element of sexual opposition, where right is considered masculine and favourable, left as feminine and unfavourable. Old Irish uses the same word for 'left' and 'bad'; in English 'dexter' means 'right' and is the root of 'dextrous'. 'Sinister' means 'left' and 'wrong' or 'perverse'.

Most long barrows face east and there may be further evidence that east was considered to be of importance to the monument builders. Henges are invariably sited near water, and particularly near the confluence of two rivers. But considering the group of Wessex 'superhengings' - Avebury, Marden, Knowlton, Mount Pleasant and Stanton Drew are all close to rivers that flows eastward and join another river flowing southward - Durrington is the only exception. This may be coincidence, but other henges such as Dorchester-on-Thames fit the same pattern. The majority of cursus monuments are also aligned east-west.

The idea that all of our world should be regarded with north at the top is firmly ingrained – Avebury is always represented that way and modern interpretations inevitably assume that its builders saw the world as we do. But simply turning the map anticlockwise, with east at the top, reveals a dynamic forward movement. The wider landscape of Avebury is run through with rivers, some that appear 'magically' only in the winter and flow eastward; there are several confluences, resulting in the River Kennet that grows and widens as it surges eastwards to join the Thames. The great stone circle of the Avebury Henge contains two inner circles, always labelled as north and south. Rotate the map though, and with east at the top they become left and right circles. The left, feminine circle still has the remnants of the womb-like Cove; the right, masculine circle once had the enormous, phallic obelisk at its centre. The northern circle was apparently egg-shaped – was that also feminine symbolism? William Stukeley, who seemed to rely almost as much on intuition as observation, declared the northern and southern circles to be temples of the moon and sun respectively. If the two circles are considered as left and right, or female and male, by the same symbolism they would also be lunar and solar.

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Source: "The Oxford introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European world" JP Mallory and DQ Adams.