

World's oldest map of the stars to go on show in UK for first time at the British Museum

The world of Stonehenge

17 February – 17 July 2022

Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery

Press images:

<https://bit.ly/3mOcgEn>

*Organised with the State Museum of Prehistory,
Halle/Saale, Germany*

The world's oldest map of the stars will go on display for the very first time in the UK at the British Museum next year. It will be a major highlight of a new special exhibition on Stonehenge which will open at the Museum in February, the first details of which are announced today (Monday 18 October).

The 'Nebra Sky Disc' is 3,600 years old and is the oldest surviving representation of the cosmos anywhere in the world. The 31cm (12-inch) bronze disc features a blue-green patina with inlaid gold symbols thought to represent the sun, moon, stars, the solstices and the constellation of the Pleiades. It was discovered buried in the ground in 1999 near the town of Nebra in Saxony-Anhalt in the east of Germany and will be loaned to the British Museum from the collection of the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle. The UK will be only the fourth country the disc has travelled to, and its display in London will be the first time it's been loaned internationally for 15 years.

It will go on show in *The world of Stonehenge* (17 February – 17 July 2022), the UK's first ever major exhibition on the history – and mystery – of Stonehenge. The show will see hundreds of objects brought together from across Britain and Europe, telling the spellbinding story of one of the world's most famous landmarks.

Also on display in the exhibition will be an extremely rare 3,000-year-old sun pendant, described by the British Museum as the most significant piece of Bronze Age gold ever found in Britain. One side shows a stylised sun – a rare and hugely significant addition to the art and iconography of Bronze Age Britain. Solar symbolism is a key element of Bronze Age cosmology and mythology across Europe, but before the discovery of this pendant it was very rarely seen on objects found in Britain.

It was discovered in May 2018 by metal detectorist and retired engineer Bob Greenaway in Shropshire. It had been cushioned in the peaty soil of the Shropshire Marches for three millennia before the finder, who had been metal detecting for 25 years, came across this find of a lifetime. He has remarked that "when I found it, my eyes nearly popped out of my head." It is only the second ever object of this type found in Britain: the other – now lost – was discovered near Manchester in 1722 but was last recorded in 1806 before disappearing from sight.

Measuring 3.6cm high and 4.7cm wide, the pendant was brought to the British Museum where it went through the legal Treasure process and was recorded as part of the Museum's Portable Antiquities Scheme. It was acquired by the British Museum last year for £250,000 with help from Art Fund and the American Friends of the British Museum, and is currently being displayed for the first time, close to the find spot, at Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery as part of the British Museum's National Programmes. It will be seen publicly in London for the first time in the Stonehenge exhibition before a tour of venues across the country from autumn 2022.

Neil Wilkin, curator of *The world of Stonehenge at the British Museum*, said: *"The Nebra Sky Disc and the sun pendant are two of the most remarkable surviving objects from Bronze Age Europe. Both have only recently been unearthed, literally, after remaining hidden in the ground for over three millennia. We're delighted that they will both be key pieces in our once-in-a-lifetime Stonehenge exhibition at the British Museum. While both were found hundreds of miles from Stonehenge, we'll be using them to shine a light on the vast interconnected world that existed around the ancient monument, spanning Britain, Ireland and mainland Europe. It's going to be eye-opening."*

Built 4,500 years ago around the same time as the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, Stonehenge is the world's most extraordinary ancient stone circle and is one of the most recognized sites on the planet. Yet much about it is still shrouded layers of uncertainty, speculation and folklore. This exhibition will bring the story of the monument into focus, revealing that prehistoric Britain was a place of big ideas, commerce and travel, rather than a shadowy land of mystery.

Tickets for the exhibition will go on sale in December. More details about the exhibition will be announced later this year.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/stonehenge>

Notes to editors

About the Treasure Act 1996

Under the Treasure Act (www.finds.org.uk/treasure) finders have a legal obligation to report all finds of potential Treasure to the local coroner in the district in which the find was made. The administration of the Treasure process is undertaken at the British Museum. This work involves the preparation of Treasure cases for coroners' inquests, providing the secretariat for the Treasure Valuation Committee, and handling disclaimed cases and the payment of rewards.

The Act allows a national or local museum to acquire Treasure finds for public benefit. If this happens a reward is paid, which is normally shared equally between the finder and landowner. Interested parties may wish to waive their right to a reward, enabling museums to acquire finds at reduced or no cost. Rewards are fixed at the full market value of the finds, determined by the Secretary of State upon the advice of an independent panel of experts, known as the Treasure Valuation Committee.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS)

Managed by the British Museum (in England) and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, the PAS is a partnership project, working with about 100 national and local partners to deliver the Scheme's aims. It is funded (in England) through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport grant to the British Museum with local partner contributions. All the Finds Liaison Officers working for the PAS are employed locally but work as a national team directed by the British Museum.

Thousands of archaeological objects are discovered every year, many by members of the public, particularly by people while metal-detecting. If recorded, these finds have great potential to transform archaeological knowledge, helping archaeologists understand when, where and how people lived in the past. PAS (www.finds.org.uk) offers the only proactive mechanism for recording such finds, which are made publicly available on its online database.

Many organisations have also supported the acquisition of Treasure finds, including Art Fund, the Headley Trust, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the V&A Purchase Grant Fund. Without these, as well as public donations, many important archaeological finds would not be in public collections.

Publication

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *The world of Stonehenge*, written by Duncan Garrow and Neil Wilkin, will be published by the British Museum Press in February 2022. British Museum exclusive paperback, £25, ISBN 9780714123486. Hardback, £40, ISBN 9780714123493



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Further information

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