

Large print exhibition text



The world of Stonehenge

bp is pleased to welcome you to the iconic British Museum for what will be a unique and fascinating exhibition.

The world of Stonehenge will, in a first-of-its-kind approach, seek to transform our understanding of one of Britain's most popular landmarks.

Who built it? Who visited it? What was its true purpose? These are just some of the mysteries that the curators have sought to answer about this portal to our prehistoric past.

As a visitor, aided by the spectacular items on display, you have the opportunity to delve into our deep past, revealing an age of mobile pioneers, progress and innovation on a continental scale.

We wish you a great experience, expertly curated by the British Museum.

Supported by bp

Building a new world

Stonehenge was one of many important ceremonial monuments built across Britain, Ireland and continental Europe during the period covered in this exhibition.

Duration: about 1 minute

This is silent

Exhibition introduction panel, to left of entrance:

The world of Stonehenge

Stonehenge is awesome and puzzling. Built between 5,000 and 3,500 years ago, its unique architecture provides a gateway into the drama, brilliance and complexity of European society at that time. Stonehenge's mystery can only be understood by exploring the world that made it possible.

The objects in this exhibition chart fundamental changes in peoples' relationships with the sky, the land and one another.

Young learner label:

As you explore this exhibition, look out for labels like this one, designed especially for young learners aged 7–11.

They invite you to discover more about the people who lived at the time of Stonehenge, and who made, used and owned the objects you will see today.

Display case, labels left to right:

Stonehenge the microcosm

Over 2,500 years, Stonehenge and its surrounding landscape were gradually altered, reflecting the shifting ideas and identities of communities from far and wide.

This cup resembles Stonehenge's distinctive architecture, though it was made centuries after it was built. A similar cup was buried with a powerful woman near Stonehenge. Made to burn aromatic substances or hold glowing embers that created a sunburst of light, these objects encapsulate Stonehenge's far-reaching ceremonial importance.

Pottery, near Ayton Moor, North Yorkshire, 1800–1500 BC
On loan from Scarborough Museums Trust

Map cation:

The cup was found in Yorkshire, almost 300 miles from Stonehenge.

Image caption:

Tales like Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin building Stonehenge with stones from Ireland, about 1136, explored the monument's origins centuries after it was built.

Image caption:

Stonehenge retains a powerful pull. Visiting at midsummer and midwinter fulfils a need for many to connect with both nature and the deep past, and to share the experience.

Display opposite, object labels right to left:

The sky

Combining the motifs of the sun and wheel, this amber disc from the head of a staff captures the turning of the day and seasons. Across Europe, people sought to harness, control and celebrate the power of the sun, the source of light and fertility. They built monuments, like Stonehenge, that charted its path, and later made objects from precious and symbolic materials.

Bronze and amber, Denmark, about 1200 BC
On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

The land

Standing stones created enduring connections between heaven and earth, and the natural and human worlds. Like Stonehenge, this stele from the Alps was raised as a place of worship.

It was revisited for centuries, with new decoration and meaning added by successive generations. It depicts the sun over gatherings of people, the migration of wild animals and the farming seasons. In the age of the first farmers, the heavens governed the timing and tempo of domestic and ritual life.

Stone, Capo di Ponte, Cemmo, Valcamonica, Italy
about 2500 BC

Direzione regionale Musei Lombardia/MUPRE – Museo Nazionale della Preistoria della Valle Camonica

The people

The colour and reflective properties of gold associated it with the sun from the earliest times.

The introduction of gold working to Britain and Ireland from continental Europe around 4,500 years ago transformed relationships between people, allowing a fortunate few to align their status with the sun. The growing influence of portable objects eventually sealed the fate of communal enterprises like Stonehenge.

Gold, Gleninsheen, Co. Clare, Republic of Ireland
about 800–700 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Ireland (NMI1934:85)

Section introduction panel to left:

Working with nature

About 6,000 years ago, communities in Britain and Ireland redefined their relationship with nature.

The old ways of hunting and gathering were changed forever by the farming lifestyle introduced by migrant communities from the continent.

The natural world could be domesticated but was unforgiving. With crops to protect and livestock to tend, ideas of ownership, labour and time were altered. So was land. Monuments like Stonehenge acted as roots, used by communities to stake claim to special places. Remarkable objects of stone, wood and clay were both tools and symbols of the new relationship between people and nature.

Panel opposite:

A giving land

Between the end of the last Ice Age, 10,000 years ago, and the first farmers, 6,000 years ago, communities across Europe lived successful lives by hunting, gathering and fishing. They drew value and meaning from a deep sense of kinship with the environment and left few traces.

Britain was connected to the continent until 8,000 years ago, when it became an island. The generations who watched the waters rise were cut off from seasonal routes, hunting grounds and relations. The introduction of farming restored continental connections but ended an ancient way of life.

Object labels, right to left:

1. Half-human, half-deer

Headdresses like this were made from the skulls of deer, their brain tissue carefully removed.

By becoming half-human, half-deer, hunters could commune with the animals that provided them with vital food and materials. Over 30 examples have been found as offerings at Star Carr in North Yorkshire, suggesting it was a special place where people hunted and gathered for ceremonies.

Red deer skull and antler, Star Carr, North Yorkshire
about 9000 BC
British Museum

Map caption:

Antler headdresses are known from across Europe. At the time the examples displayed here were made, Britain was still attached to the continent.

Young learner label:

People respected deer as more than just a source of food.

They made deer-skull headdresses to wear during special ceremonies.

Imagine how it might feel to take part in such an occasion.

2–5. Resourceful people

Around 200 deer antler spears or harpoons (2) have been excavated at Star Carr. Many had long lives before being placed in the nearby lake as offerings, returning them to the giving environment.

Fungus (3) gathered and stored had a range of uses, including as tinder for fire-starting. Rolls of birch tree bark (4) were made into adhesive resin for fixing tiny flint blades (5) into wooden handles, for cutting edges and projectile tips.

Deer antler, elk bone, fungus and birch bark

Star Carr, North Yorkshire, about 9000 BC

Flint, Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, about 9000 BC

British Museum

Item on loan courtesy of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

Birch bark rolls, NHMUK ARC 1979.5052

The Bad Dürrenberg shaman

This antler headdress crowned an extraordinary woman, honoured with a uniquely rich burial.

Study of the bones at the base of her skull suggests she suffered from a rare condition that probably caused her to lose control of her body and enter trance states. She wore a necklace made from the bones of several wild animals.

Across world cultures, shamans are believed to communicate with spirits, who often take the form of powerful beasts. One polished bone is from the throat of a wild boar and suggests that the woman could communicate with spirits on behalf of her community.

Roe deer antler, wild boar bone and tusk, aurochs and bison teeth

Bad Dürrenberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, about 6500 BC
State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt

Image caption:

The woman buried with the headdress was laid upright in a crouched position and covered in red ochre. She was 25–35 years old and accompanied by a baby of 4–6 months.

Display case to left, object labels right to left:

In the wild wood

Wild animals could be both a threat and an ally. This scratched wood found near a camp of tents surrounded by woodland suggests the threatening presence of bears. The gnawed wood comes from a nearby lodge created by beavers. The structure was later repurposed by hunter-gatherers, who felled oak trees using stone axes to create a platform for fishing and hunting.

Oak and flint, West Stainton, Cumbria, about 6000 BC
Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust

Salmon fishing

The communities camping at West Stainton in Cumbria during spring and summer fished and feasted on salmon, some as heavy as a small deer, that migrated up the River Eden from the sea every year. The range of stones brought to the camp from distant places reveals the mobile and dynamic lives of people who followed rich resources through the seasons. Other workable stones connect the site to sources 200 km away.

Chert, flint, tuff, ochre and pitchstone, West Stainton, Cumbria, about 4300 BC

Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust

An axe for every generation

Across Europe, polished stone axes allowed farming communities to transform their worlds.

The number of axes shown here represents the human generations who cleared dense woodland for crops, animals and to build monuments.

Some axes were quarried from sacred sources on mountain tops or within deep mines.

Others were shaped and polished to reveal the special qualities of their material. Many were carried long distances as symbols of the new way of life.

Stone

England; France; Italy; Romania; Spain; Scandinavia;
Scotland; Northern Ireland; Republic of Ireland

4500–1500 BC

British Museum

The axe in the stone

To give axes the bite needed to fell trees quickly, hundreds of hours were spent grinding their blades against fine-grained stones that became worn and grooved by the process. They were then polished with sand and saliva, and rubbed with materials such as leaves and grease. This care also enhanced the colours and qualities of the stone.

Stone, probably Scandinavia, 4000–2000 BC

British Museum

The first foresters

The wooden handles of axes were as important as their blades. This rare, complete axe was a special offering preserved in a Scottish peat bog. The head is made from porcellanite stone, brought from Northern Ireland. The handle was carefully shaped and decorated. The first farmers were also foresters. They intentionally cut back (coppiced) and managed woodland growth to maintain productivity for future generations.

Porcellanite and hawthorn or apple wood
Shulishader, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides
about 3500–3000 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

A new leaf?

This elm leaf fell 6,000 years ago near an early farming settlement on the coast of Lancashire in north-west England. Deforestation has played a major role in European history ever since. However, the role of early farmers in forest clearance was not straightforward.

Hard-won clearances could be filled by trees in a human lifespan, while woodland continued to provide vital resources to support the farming way of life.

Elm leaf, Windy Harbour, Lancashire, about 4000 BC
Oxford Archaeology Ltd

Driven to extinction

Wild cattle called aurochs were a common and impressive sight in Europe's ancient woodlands. In Britain, farmers hunted the species to extinction. This skull is from an animal that was struck so forcefully with a stone axe that part of the blade lodged in the frontal bone. Aurochs posed a threat to farmers' domesticated cows, as years of careful breeding could be undone by one wild bull.

Aurochs skull and stone, Burwell fen, Cambridgeshire
3370–2200 BC
Courtesy of the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences,
University of Cambridge

Image caption:

Massive aurochs were capable of trampling crops. They became extinct in Britain about 3,500 years ago.

Central island display case, object labels left to right:

Before Stonehenge

Over 9,000 years ago, three tree trunks were raised by hunter-gatherers close to where Stonehenge would be built. Like totem poles, they may have marked events or celebrated important people and places.

By 5,000 years ago, the wider landscape was used for religious devotion by farming communities. Observations of the sun played a role even at this early stage. A monument known as a cursus was built with glistening white chalk sides stretching for three kilometres east to west, enshrining processions and the sun's passage.

Map caption:

Map showing the landscape in which Stonehenge was built, about 5,000 years ago.

Image caption:

The summer solstice sunrise over Sidbury Hill, one of the most prominent landmarks in the surrounding landscape, as seen from the entrance of the enclosure at Larkhill.

Image caption:

Reconstruction drawing showing a causewayed enclosure similar to Larkhill.

Coming together

The animation tells the story of the people who met at Coneybury 5,900 years ago.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

This is silent

1. Meeting of minds

The remains of a feast held close to Stonehenge offers a rare glimpse of exchanges between hunter-gatherer and the first farmer communities 5,900 years ago. Those gathered ate farmed beef and hunted venison. Chemical analysis shows that the two species came from different places and their meat was prepared in different ways.

As a coming together of worldviews, languages, customs and traditions, the remains of this shared meal mark the end of thousands of years of a hunter-gatherer way of life.

Deer and cattle bone, pottery, flint and stone
Coneybury, Wiltshire, about 3900–3800 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

2. Enclosing the land

One of the first monuments in Britain built by farmers was the communal enclosure at Larkhill. Its entrance was aligned on the rising sun on the longest day of the year. It prefigured and preceded Stonehenge by 700 years.

Arrowheads found at this, and similar, sites suggest they were places of refuge and ritual. This quern of sarsen stone, used for grinding grain into flour, was discovered in a ditch at Larkhill by soldiers training during the First World War.

Stone, Larkhill, Wiltshire, about 3750–3650 BC
Wessex Archaeology

3–4. Monuments to change

A large burial mound was raised over a well-travelled man 500 years before Stonehenge was built. He was accompanied by a flint nodule used to make tools (3). Chemical analysis of his bones shows he was born in the west of Britain, possibly in Wales, while the flint came from the east, perhaps Kent or Essex.

Later burial mounds contained increasingly sophisticated objects such as fine, leaf-shaped arrowheads (4). Their use may reflect growing inequality and social differentiation across Britain in the centuries before Stonehenge was built.

Flint

3 Winterbourne Stoke long barrow, Wiltshire, about 3500 BC

4 Winterbourne Stoke barrow 35a, Wiltshire; Huggate Wold, East Yorkshire, about 3500–3300 BC

British Museum

Display cases on far wall, object labels left to right:

Precious Alpine axes

The stone used to make axes was often quarried from dramatic and remote locations. Beautiful green jadeitite from Monte Viso in the Italian Alps produced exceptionally fine axes that were traded and exchanged across Europe. Perhaps they were gifts between individuals or communities to seal social relationships, or to impress new people encountered in distant lands. Their appearance in Britain coincides with the spread of a farming way of life, 6,000 years ago.

Jadeitite

Wiesbaden, Hessen, Germany; St Helier, Jersey;
Canterbury, Kent; Greenlawdean, Berwickshire, Scotland
4500–3500 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland;
British Museum

The afterlives of axes

The chance discovery of ancient stone axes has inspired a range of beliefs, myths and folklore around the world. From Greek and Roman times, stone axes were collected for ritual purposes. Later, they were described as ‘thunderstones’, the result of lightning strikes. This jadeitite axe was mounted in silver and worn as recently as the early 1800s to protect against kidney disease.

Jadeitite and silver, Scotland, about 4000 BC
(modified before 1800)

British Museum

Axes from the High Fells

The Great Langdale axe quarry sits on a mountain top in the Lake District’s Central Fells. The green-grey colour of its stone provided a British equivalent to Alpine jadeitite.

Roughed-out axes were brought down from the mountain to be ground and polished on the valley floor.

The small axe was carefully reworked from a larger original that may have broken. It was deposited as an offering at a ceremonial monument near Peterborough, over 300 km from the quarry.

Langdale tuff, about 4000–3500 BC
Great Langdale, Cumbria; West Stainton, Cumbria;
Pendle, Lancashire; Ehenside tarn, Cumbria;
Etton, near Peterborough, Cambridgeshire
British Museum; Oxford Archaeology Ltd

Image caption:

This spectacular quarry high in the Langdale Pikes was probably a special place that was symbolically important to people, because it was associated with the heavens and supernatural forces.

Return to the source

The Langdale quarry remained significant even after metal became available across Britain.

This remarkable object from Cambridgeshire is an archer's leather wrist-guard transformed into stone and decorated with gold. It was made from Langdale rock during the first centuries of metalworking, over 1,500 years after the high quarry was established, evidence of an enduring connection to an ancestral and sacred source.

Langdale tuff and gold, Barnack, Cambridgeshire
about 2300–2100 BC
British Museum

Flint from the deep

In pursuit of the highest quality flint, miners cut hundreds of deep shafts at Grimes Graves in Norfolk. Around 2,000 tonnes of chalk were removed by hand from each shaft. The effort, danger and cooperation involved in obtaining the flint greatly enhanced the value and meaning of the axes, arrowheads and knives exported from the site.

Flint, Grimes Graves, Thetford, Norfolk, 2600–2400 BC
British Museum

Image caption:

Miners at Grimes Graves were pursuing the band of black flint known as floorstone. The technology of excavating deep mine shafts to access difficult to reach seams of flint was introduced to England by the first farmers from continental Europe.

A harvest of antlers

Digging out each mine shaft required around 140 antler picks. Nearly all the antlers were naturally shed, suggesting the miners had access to a well-managed deer herd. This sophisticated construction project was comparable to the great monuments of the era. The chalky slurry coating on these picks was added for grip and preserves the fingerprints of the miners who laid down their tools 4,500 years ago.

Antler, Grimes Graves, Thetford, Norfolk, 2600–2400 BC
British Museum

Offerings to the Underland

Special objects were placed in the mines, probably to ward off ill-fortune and thank the earth for its yield. At the base of one shaft, an already ancient stone axe from Cornwall was placed with the skull of a rare wading bird (a phalarope), carefully flanked by a pair of antler picks. Many small chalk cups found in the mines probably contained offerings.

Stone, bird and dog bone, antler and chalk

Grimes Graves, Thetford, Norfolk

2600–2400 BC

British Museum

Item on loan courtesy of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

Phalaropus fulicarius, NHMUK S/1964.24.1

A giant feat

This huge flint boulder or ‘core’, intended as the raw material for stone tools, was taken to Avebury when the largest stone monuments were being raised nearby at Stonehenge. The fine-grained texture suggests it was mined in East Anglia, over 200 km away.

Like the stones brought to make Stonehenge, the feat of moving it was an important part of its message.

Flint, West Kennett farm, near Avebury, Wiltshire
about 2500 BC
Wessex Archaeology

Making time for ancestors

Across Europe, the first farmers buried their dead in the chambers of large tombs made of stone and earth. They required communal effort to build and housed all members of the community. Bones placed in the tombs were often moved around, intermingled and sometimes taken away. The fragmented and mixed state of the bones and accompanying grave goods probably reflects a belief in the unifying power of ancestors and collective, rather than individualised, concepts of identity and personhood in the afterlife.

Pottery, animal bone and shell
West Kennet long barrow, near Avebury, Wiltshire
about 3600–3000 BC
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

The rise of individualism?

Social status was a growing concern by 5,000 years ago. Individual burials with special grave goods, like this one from Yorkshire, became more common. It contains symbols of authority and prestige, including antler and stone mace-heads and belt rings of jet. Other objects such as flint axes and blades appear to emulate exotic continental European metalwork that was otherwise unobtainable in Britain.

Flint, jet, antler and wild boar tusk, East Ayton, Yorkshire
about 3350–3100 BC
British Museum

Central island display, object labels right to left:

Crossing the Avalon marshes

By counting growth rings from the felled timber, archaeologists have dated this oak walkway to 3807–3806 BC. Early farming communities used it to cross from the Polden Hills in Somerset to an island in the middle of marshland.

Its supporting pegs were carefully selected from coppiced alder wood, which does not rot when waterlogged. Although mended shortly after being built, it probably stood for only a decade before falling into disrepair. Many objects were thrown from its sides as offerings, including fine pots that had contained cow's milk and axe-heads of Alpine jadeitite and Sussex flint.

Oak, alder, flint, jadeitite, pottery and wood, Avalon marshes, Somerset, 3807–3806 BC

British Museum; Somerset County Council and South West Heritage Trust; Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (1980.1098)

Image caption:

The first trackways built by farmers connected communities but also brought people to the heart of marshy environments to make offerings where land, water and sky met.

The Glastonbury idol

This exceptional depiction of a human body is the earliest known to have been made by early farmers in Britain.

It was placed beneath a trackway across marshy lands. The unique mixture of male and female body parts is well-suited to its transitional landscape setting. It is likely that wetlands were perceived as special places, home to spirits and untamed powers.

Wood, Lias Westhay island, Avalon marshes, Somerset
about 2500 BC

Somerset County Council and South West Heritage Trust;
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge (1968.6)

Tridents from the Irish Sea coast

Farmers used stone axes for working wood into a range of buildings, trackways and objects. These expertly carved tridents may have been pitchforks, net anchors or even mash forks for brewing beer. The six known examples were found in north-west England and at sites across Ireland. Their striking similarities reflect close connections between communities around the Irish Sea.

Oak, Ehenside tarn, Cumbria; West Stainton, Cumbria
about 3600 BC

British Museum; Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust

Vertical display behind:

Beasts of burden

Domesticated cattle transformed life across Europe. They were used to plough fields and pull heavy loads to build monuments. Farmers tended to value animal life in a different way from hunter-gatherers, seeing them as property, objects to be traded and gifted. At Profen in Germany, a pair of oxen and a pair of cows were sacrificed and buried close together. Projectile points found embedded in the skeletons show that they were intentionally killed. This sacrifice was expensive, perhaps made to ensure fertility and prosperity.

Cattle bone and wood, Profen, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany
3300–3000 BC

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt

A sacrifice for fertility

A pair of oxen, wooden wagon and surrounding soil from a burial pit excavated in Germany was carefully lifted in a single block to retain archaeological evidence. Here, the cattle are returned to life, as they pull their heavy load.

Duration: about 2 minutes

This is silent

Directed by Andreas Sawall. Commissioned by the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Display cases opposite, object labels right to left:

Stonehenge rises

The story of Stonehenge itself begins about 5,000 years ago. The monument's builders marked out sacred ground by digging a ditch, throwing up rubble to form the outer encircling bank of the henge. Inside they raised a circle of huge spotted dolerite 'bluestone' boulders, moved 350 kilometres from the Preseli Hills in Wales.

This Stonehenge was a cemetery for the cremated remains of between 150 and 200 people. Chemical analysis suggests that several lived and died in west Wales before their remains were interred within the monument.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 5,000 years ago.

Image caption:

Some cremated human remains and grave goods were brought from Wales and buried in the foundation holes dug to house the bluestones.

Image caption:

Recent excavations at Craig Rhos-y-felin in south-west Wales, one of the sources of the bluestones, have advanced understanding of Stonehenge and the people who made it.

The bluestones arrive

The animation tells the story of the people who moved the bluestones from Wales to the Stonehenge landscape.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

This is silent

1. Buried at Stonehenge

This mace-head (1) from northern Scotland is the most significant object from Stonehenge's cemetery, reflecting long-distance connections. Although it is probably a symbol of authority and status, grave goods were generally rare. Burial within the circle may have been commendation enough.

Bone pins, used to fasten shrouds, burned on the pyre with the body. A small doubled-sided cup may have been used to light the pyre or hold offerings.

Banded gneiss stone, animal bone, pottery and cremated human bone

Stonehenge, Wiltshire, about 3000 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

2. Builders of Stonehenge

Excavations at Bulford, about 9 km from Stonehenge, have revealed traces of the monument's builders. Their everyday lives were imbued with ritual and ceremony. Among the special finds, many of which appear to have been placed in pits as offerings, are a talon, flint arrowheads, knives and axes, and curious chalk balls. Distinctive Grooved Ware pottery (2) indicates close cultural links between communities building comparable monuments in Orkney and Ireland.

Buzzard bone, flint, chalk and pottery, Bulford, Wiltshire, about 3000 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

A bluestone

This large piece of dressed Welsh bluestone represents a fragment of a distant place brought to Salisbury Plain.

It was excavated by William Cunnington, a founding figure of British archaeology, and later donated by the war-poet Siegfried Sassoon. Although its precise provenance is not known, it is very likely that it was part of the first monument at Stonehenge.

Spotted dolerite stone, Boles Barrow or Stonehenge, Wiltshire, about 3000 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

3. Mementos or souvenirs?

Visitors to Stonehenge sometimes defaced the bluestones to make souvenirs. In 1100 the historian Geoffrey of Monmouth recorded the belief that the distinctive white spotted stone had the power to heal.

Spotted dolerite stone, about 3000–2500 BC
axe-head: Bournemouth, Dorset, British Museum
chips: Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, on loan from
The Salisbury Museum

Section introduction panel to left:

Sermons in stones

Around 5,000 years ago, communities across Britain and Ireland expressed long-distance connections through a new style of art.

Spirals, circles and geometric patterns were applied to tomb walls, the interiors of houses, rock outcrops and objects. Natural or figurative representations were rare, but the imagery often echoed nature. Motifs rippled out like water or incorporated fissures in stone surfaces.

This new, shared art coincided with a flourishing of monument building at Stonehenge and across Britain and Ireland, at locations important to early farmers. The architecture and imagery of such centres drew together large numbers of people in works of collaboration and creativity in stone.

Central island display case to right, object labels right to left:

1. A look of awe

The features of a face are hidden in this superbly sculpted mace-head, with a spiral for eyes, lozenges for hair and a shaft-hole for a mouth. Found in a chamber within a huge tomb at Knowth in Ireland, it was a symbol of authority, but it was not buried with a body. It appears to represent invisible power, perhaps of ancestors or spirit beings.

Flint, Knowth, Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath, Republic of Ireland, about 3500–3000 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Ireland (E70:50479)

Image caption:

The Knowth mace-head's designs were skilfully created in relief. The stone was worked down to leave the features standing proud.

2–5. Circling the Irish Sea

The same expert hands that worked the Knowth mace-head (1) made others found around the Irish Sea. One example from Wales (2) is decorated with nearly 200 lozenge-shaped facets, created by the skilled application of pressure. Two unfinished or reworked examples from Scotland (3–4) highlight the difficulty of achieving such elaborate decoration in flint. Accomplished mace-heads were also made using banded rock sourced from north-west Scotland and the Outer Hebrides (5). These were carried as far as Stonehenge and the Thames Valley.

Flint, about 3500–3000 BC, on loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

2 Maesmore, Merionethshire, Wales

3 Urquhart, Moray, Scotland

4 Airdens, Sutherland, Scotland

5 Banded gneiss stone

River Thames, England; Moray, Scotland
about 3200–2400 BC

British Museum

Image caption:

Decorated flint mace-heads may have imitated organic examples. Mottled brown and white flint looks like freshly worked antler.

Display along wall, object labels right to left:

Shape-shifting art

This panel combines cup marks found in open-air art with radial patterns common in passage tombs like Knowth, where the stones used were often infused with meaning. Art in Britain and Ireland between 6,000 and 5,000 years ago was relatively fluid. Decorative schemes could be transferred between tombs, settlements, natural rock formations and objects. The widespread occurrence of similar art across Britain and Ireland suggests it carried ideas and meanings for those who could read the enigmatic but vibrant motifs.

Stone, northern England or Scotland
about 3000–2500 BC
British Museum

Image caption:

The entrance to the massive tomb of Newgrange in Ireland was precisely aligned to greet a beam of light, illuminating the chamber every midwinter sunrise, and symbolically connecting the worlds of the living and the dead.

On public display

When Stonehenge was first being used as a cemetery, some of Europe's most elaborate tombs were constructed in Ireland. Their impressive scale suggests they served many people.

Unusual objects such as the Knowth flint mace-head (displayed behind), carved stone balls and phallus-shaped stones reflect public ceremonies involving items that revealed mysteries and authority to those from afar. Stone bowls and basins were perhaps used in rites of purification or as querns to grind cereal grains, symbolising fertility and rebirth.

About 3200–2800 BC

Carved stone ball:
Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland
British Museum

Phallus-shaped stone and basin:
Knowth, Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath, Republic of Ireland
On loan from the National Museum of Ireland
(E70:3906 and W35 / WK181)

Image caption:

Large stone basins were sometimes brought from far away, comparable to the feat of transporting the bluestones from Wales to Salisbury Plain.

Iberian idols

Plaques like these are often found with the dead in Portuguese and Spanish tombs. They show little sign of wear, suggesting they were made for the grave. Some have human-like features, including shoulders and eyes, but most are abstracted and almost unrecognisable as bodies. Their decorative motifs may be protective, or express the identity of the deceased in a similar fashion to clan or family heraldry.

Schist or slate, between Vendas Novas and Beja, Évora,
Portugal, about 3500–2750 BC
British Museum

Panel on opposite side of the gallery:

An island revolution

Around 5,500 years ago, Orkney became a centre of cultural innovation. Its outstanding tomb and settlement architecture are among the most impressive in ancient Europe. Communities in Orkney built henges and developed a new type of pottery called Grooved Ware, used in ceremonial feasts. Both ideas, and the religious ethos they represented, were adopted by groups throughout Britain and Ireland.

Groundbreaking discoveries have recently been made across Orkney. Some of these finds are shown here for the first time.

Object labels left to right:

Stone worlds

Uniquely in ancient Britain and Ireland, communities in Orkney built whole villages in stone. At Skara Brae each house contained stone-built furnishings and centrally-placed hearths. Objects like the mortar and pestle (left), for grinding cereals and other foods, show the importance of stone in everyday life.

Orcadian house architecture directly referenced contemporary tombs, creating a symbolic link between social and political matters in the present, and the timeless world of the ancestors.

Stone, Skara Brae, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland
about 3100–2500 BC
British Museum

Working bone

Orcadian communities made excellent use of their resource-rich islands.

The sandy soil that inundated Skara Brae ensured an extraordinary level of organic preservation. An offering of 2,000 bone beads was found in one abandoned house, including animal teeth to make necklaces and bracelets. Whalebone was also shaped into large, decorative pins to embellish clothes and hair.

Bone, Skara Brae, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland
about 3100–2500 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland;
British Museum

Art in the home

Colour was important in Orkney. Pots, mortars and stone discs were used to grind small lumps of the natural earth pigment, ochre. Red pigments enhanced the interior of houses and pottery designs. Even simple tools like stone knives were decorated with abstract patterns, showing that imagery was an intrinsic part of everyday life.

Stone and ochre, Skara Brae, Mainland, Orkney Islands,
Scotland, about 3100–2500 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland;
British Museum

A miraculous rediscovery

A decorated stone (1) was discovered in 1925 on a thin strip of land between the great stone circles of Brodgar and Stenness. It was the first clue that a series of buildings lay just beneath the surface, although excavations would not reveal the magnitude and importance of the site for another 80 years.

Ness was constructed for sacred and everyday purposes by communities from across Orkney.

Stone, Ness of Brodgar, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland
about 3000–2350 BC

Ness of Brodgar Trust and UHI Archaeology Institute

Image caption:

Ness of Brodgar is among the most sophisticated architectural achievements in ancient Europe, positioned at the heart of a ceremonial landscape.

Stone voices

A range of remarkable ceremonial objects reflect the time invested in stone, and the religious importance of Ness. Special stones were decorated repeatedly and often placed out of view, suggesting that the act of carving enhanced the spirit of the building. A distinctive butterfly shape found across the site (2) may represent the emblem or totem of Ness.

Stone and flint, Ness of Brodgar, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland, about 3000–2350 BC

Ness of Brodgar Trust and UHI Archaeology Institute

Image caption:

A stone 'dresser' inside an Orkney house. The stone was worked using the same techniques employed by the people who shaped Stonehenge's sarsen stones.

The last great feast

Nearly 1,000 years after it was first built, life at Ness ended in a dramatic event.

The community demolished the largest of the great buildings, smashing and abandoning their once-cherished contents. Several hundred cattle and deer were then slaughtered for a great feast, their bones laid on top of the shattered remains of the building. This marked the end of the Orcadian revolution. As metal replaced stone as the material of social and spiritual power, new regions of Britain rose to prominence.

Stone and pottery, Ness of Brodgar, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland, about 3000–2350 BC
Ness of Brodgar Trust and UHI Archaeology Institute

Stonehenge lives

By about 4,600 years ago, the communities who worshipped at Stonehenge settled at Durrington Walls, a huge monument encompassing two timber circles and many houses. From here, pilgrims embarked on a choreographed route, by boat along the River Avon and then by foot, to arrive at Stonehenge. The timber circles at Durrington Walls and nearby Woodhenge were aligned on the summer and winter solstices.

The contrast between these monuments and Stonehenge may reflect contrasting symbolic domains – perishable wood for the living and permanent stone for the ancestors.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 4,600 years ago.

Image caption:

The houses at Durrington Walls had wattle and daub walls, chalk floors, central hearths and wooden furniture. They were occupied on a temporary basis.

Image caption:

At its peak, there were about 1,000 houses in the Durrington Walls settlement, making it by far the largest known from anywhere in Britain, Ireland and north-west Europe.

Midwinter feasts

Life at Durrington Walls was plentiful. Numerous large feasts resulted in the accumulation of thousands of flints, pot sherds and animal bones. Spit-roasted or barbecued pig, killed using flint-tipped arrows, was most popular. Analysis of piglet bones suggests they were killed at about nine months old and eaten around the winter solstice, a crucial time of year when the sun's return hung in the balance, and communities questioned whether its warmth and fertility would return for another year.

Pig bone, flint and pottery, Durrington Walls, Wiltshire,
about 2600–2400 BC

On loan from The Salisbury Museum;
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

Grooved Ware pottery

The meat-rich feasts at Durrington Walls were served in drum-like pots (1) with applied clay strips, geometric motifs and bulging waists. The style originated in Orkney, with inspiration from Irish passage grave art.

Such pottery was quickly adopted by communities across Britain and Ireland. Despite the veneer of cultural unification, regional and even household differences can be detected in style and clay 'recipes'.

Pottery, Durrington Walls, Wiltshire, about 2600 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Pilgrim's progress

These chalk plaques (2) are decorated with motifs like those found on Grooved Ware pottery. One may even show the uprights and lintels of the bluestone monument that stood around this time at West Amesbury, on the route between Durrington Walls and Stonehenge. They were deposited in a pit within sight of Stonehenge, accompanied by pottery and animal bone, likely the remnants of a meal. They perhaps represent an understated offering by an individual or small group, marking their journey or pilgrimage to Stonehenge from afar.

Chalk, King Barrow Ridge, Wiltshire, about 2750 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Display case opposite and to the right, object labels right to left:

The death of a child

These three carefully carved chalk treasures accompanied the body of a small child buried 5,000 years ago in Folkton, North Yorkshire. Burials with grave goods were exceptionally rare throughout Britain during this period. The eyes peering out from above abstract motifs on the largest and smallest of the sculptures might have been created with the fate and protection of a loved and vulnerable child in mind.

Chalk

Folkton, North Yorkshire, about 3000 BC

British Museum

Young learner label:

These objects are a mystery.

Perhaps they helped people to record, tell and remember stories.

Look closely at the designs.

What can you see?

What stories might they tell?

Marked by grief

This chalk sculpture is a recent and remarkable discovery. It was placed with three children of different ages who were buried close together, the two youngest holding hands. It was found just above the head of the eldest child. The top is marked with three drilled holes, one for each child, reflecting the same ratio of one to three found in the Folkton grave, where one child was accompanied by three chalk cylinders.

Chalk and bone, near Burton Agnes, East Yorkshire
about 3000 BC

Burton Agnes Estate Trust

Image caption:

The sculpture was accompanied by a chalk ball and polished bone pin, which lay beneath the head of one of the children.

Display along wall, object labels right to left:

Meaning through making

Over 400 carved stone balls are known, mostly from eastern Scotland. Many were discarded unfinished and some are almost entirely plain. Their forms are the result of design choices that, at each stage, unlocked new possibilities for features or decoration. This process allowed their makers to express individual creativity while being part of a shared artistic tradition.

Stone, Scotland, about 3000 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland;
British Museum

Masterpiece and mystery

The motifs on the finely decorated ball from Aberdeenshire (displayed at centre) connect it to distant Irish tombs, pots from feasts around Stonehenge and designs inscribed on the walls of houses in Orkney. By producing such an object, its maker perhaps referenced the wider world, its places and the language of its rituals and ceremonies.

Stone, Towie, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, about 3000 BC
On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

Art for all

The simple but powerful symbols of open-air rock art are plentiful in northern England, southern Scotland and parts of Ireland. Defined by the so-called cup and ring design, open-air rock art was more accessible and restrained than the more complex art of contemporary tombs and settlements. The pecked carvings tend to cluster in fertile valleys, glens and overlooking important routeways.

Stone, about 3000–2500 BC
right: Edenhall, Cumbria
Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust
centre: Forgue, Aberdeenshire, Scotland
On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland
left: Cabrach, Aberdeenshire, Scotland
British Museum

Image caption:

The sound of designs being pecked into stone was hypnotic, even meditative. It revealed fresh colour that fades with time and was perhaps renewed periodically.

Natural or human-made?

The act of making the art was perhaps critical as a performance or part of a ritual act, each cup mark equivalent to a prayer or mantra. Natural fissures and features in the rock surface are often incorporated or imitated in designs, intentionally blurring the boundaries between marks left by nature and those made by human hands.

Replica cast, High Banks, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, about 3000–2500 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

Turning in the grave

Long after they were carved, weathered rock art panels were stripped from the landscape and built into stone coffins and burial mounds. Their decorated surfaces were turned downwards and inwards towards the body. It is testament to the enduring significance and meaning of these abstract motifs that they retained their vibrancy and power almost 1,000 years after being created.

Stone, about 3000–2500 BC

right: Heddon, Northumberland, British Museum

centre: Lilburn Tower, Northumberland, British Museum
left: Cairnholy, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland,
on loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

Image caption:

A decorated stone was found placed in a grave at Cairnholy in Scotland. The carving and chambered tomb were already hundreds of years old.

Major artistic change

In the Alpine valley of Valcamonica in Italy, a new figurative art flourished around 4,500 years ago. Ploughs, metal weapons and items of dress were all depicted in stone. Wild and domesticated animals are shown alongside humans or spirit-beings and celestial bodies like the sun as cosmological symbols. These designs reflect new attitudes to gender, economic and agricultural productivity, and conflict.

Stone, Malegno, Brescia, Lombardy, Italy
about 2500 BC

Direzione regionale Musei Lombardia/MUPRE –
Museo Nazionale della Preistoria della Valle Camonica

Image caption:

Symbols such as spirals and necklaces are associated with female identities while daggers, axes and wild animals are thought to represent male symbols. The carvings were applied over time, creating evermore complex images.

Stonehenge complete

Stonehenge took its well-known form about 4,500 years ago. More than 80 massive sarsen stones, each requiring at least 1,000 people to transport, were brought 25 kilometres from their source. This effort required unprecedented communal labour, patience and planning. It undoubtedly involved injuries and deaths, and took generations to complete. The finished monument of massive and finely dressed sarsen was unlike anything ever seen across Europe. It instilled the site with an air of order and permanence. The building of the processional routeway, the Avenue, about 4,400 years ago confirmed Stonehenge's sacred status.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 4,500 years ago.

Image caption:

Using carpentry techniques, mortice and tenon joints secured the massive sarsen lintels and uprights in place.

Image caption:

The sarsen stones used to build Stonehenge were transported 25 km from West Woods via a remarkable wooden trackway, an astonishing achievement of engineering and communal effort.

Shaping the sarsens

The animation tells the story of the people who moved, shaped and raised the sarsens to build the Stonehenge we recognise today.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

This is silent

Painstaking pursuit

These hammerstones were used to slowly pound the sarsens into finished shape, leaving the air and ground thick with noxious dust and debris. Over 50 examples have recently been excavated in a small area, 5m by 5m, to the north of the monument. The method of shaping the sarsens can be compared to stone axes, monumentalising a tradition of stone working that had been central to life and ritual in Britain for generations.

Quartzitic sarsen stone, Stonehenge, Wiltshire
about 2500 BC

On loan from The Salisbury Museum; British Museum

Section introduction panel opposite and to the left:

Making metal

About 4,500 years ago, the technology of metalworking was introduced to Britain and Ireland from continental Europe. The transformation of stone into a molten metal that could be cast into new forms was a dramatic, even magical, event.

Unlike stone working, metal could be recycled repeatedly and rapidly to create entirely new objects. Copper and bronze axes revolutionised tree-felling and wood working, enabling critical innovations in carpentry and boat building.

The reflective and malleable properties of metal imbued portable objects with new symbolism and power.

Display case, object labels left to right:

1. In the same mould

Bronze smiths possessed special knowledge of the tell-tale signs of metal-bearing deposits. They earned a special, even magical, status within their communities. Stone moulds like this were essential kit, their portability allowing smiths to keep their secrets safe. Glowing liquid metal, obtained from ore, was poured into a mould and cooled before being sharpened with a hammer. Masses of high-quality charcoal were needed to reach the temperatures required, increasing dependence on woodland resources.

Stone, Croghan, Co. Offaly, Republic of Ireland;
Hurbuck, Durham, 2200–2000 BC
British Museum

2–3. Axes of power

The earliest axes were made of copper. The innovation of bronze (nine-parts copper to one-part tin) produced harder blades. South-west Ireland and North Wales were important sources of copper. Cornwall was the main source of tin.

The surfaces of special axes were decorated to enhance their appearance. Some were deposited at henges (2), while others were carefully wrapped as offerings (3).

Copper axes (top left): 2400–2200 BC, Gowran, Co. Kilkenny; Stradbally, Co. Laois, Republic of Ireland, British Museum

Bronze axes: 2200–1500 BC, Ireland; Folkton, North Yorkshire; Arretton Down, Isle of Wight; Bandon, Co. Cork, Republic of Ireland; Brough, Cumbria, British Museum

2 Mount Pleasant henge, Dorset, on loan from Dorset Museum

3 Brockagh, Co. Kildare, Republic of Ireland, on loan from the National Museum of Ireland (NMI1994:59-61)

Young learner label:

These objects are a mystery.

Perhaps they helped people to record, tell and remember stories.

Look closely at the designs.

What can you see?

What stories might they tell?

4–5. Scandinavian by design

For centuries after metalworking was adopted, flint and other valued sources of stone remained important. This was especially true in places that lacked local deposits of copper and tin, like Scandinavia. These virtuoso creations mimic the shape of metal daggers (4), some even imitating the stitching of the leather grip (5). They were exported far afield, including to Britain and Ireland.

Flint, Denmark, 2350–1700 BC
British Museum

Panel:

Seahenge

In 1998, a timber circle re-emerged on the coast of Norfolk. It was built in 2049 BC on a saltmarsh, placed between land and sea.

Artist and archaeologist, Rose Ferraby, has helped the Museum to contextualise Seahenge. Rose collaborated with sound artist Rob St. John, who composed the piece playing nearby from recordings she made on the north Norfolk coast.

Rose also used visual art to explore narratives of Seahenge that emerged from conversations with the community of archaeologists involved in its discovery and display.

To view this and find out more, scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/seahenge



Image caption:

Soon after being built Seahenge was inundated by freshwater and covered by peat and sand, protecting the timbers for 4,000 years. The monument was gradually revealed by tides and storms.

Image caption:

In Rose Ferraby's artwork Seahenge, painting and collage layer elements of the monument's archaeology and landscape, capturing its cyclical, dynamic form.

Research supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council

Object labels left to right:

Roots raised to the heavens

Seahenge was built in the spring or summer. At least 51 bronze axes felled oak trees to create a place of communal worship.

The split-oak posts were tightly spaced in a ring with their bark-covered sides facing outwards, creating a giant tree. A narrow entranceway was aligned on the rising midsummer sun. Inside the circle was a mighty oak, its roots turned towards the heavens like branches. Inversion of the everyday world created a spectacular sight within the secretive confines of the circle, perhaps bringing worshippers closer to the otherworld.

Oak, Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, 2049 BC
On long term loan to Norfolk Museums Service
from the le Strange Estate
Display of Seahenge has been supported by
the Henry Moore Foundation and the PF Charitable Trust

Image caption:

Seahenge was made of 55 large oak posts. The central upturned tree trunk created a small platform, perhaps used in funerary rituals to support a dead body.

half/life

Sound allows us to imagine less tangible aspects of archaeological sites. This composition moves through landscape and time, from the present beach where Seahenge was discovered, into its world of wood and sediment, then out into the saltmarsh air and light.

As you move around the timbers, you will hear layers and fragments of sounds. Microphones were used to record different landscape perspectives, like the wind on a metal floodgate, insects in marshy pools and the fizz of sea foam.



Duration: 10 minutes, 4 seconds

© Rob St John and Rose Ferraby

Section introduction panel to left:

Under one sky

The introduction of metal to Britain and Ireland around 4,500 years ago provided the means of translating the cosmological beliefs enshrined in Stonehenge, Seahenge and other monuments into a range of portable artefacts. Gold was turned into jewellery and cult objects, imbuing its wearers with the power of the sun, intended to ensure sustenance and wellbeing across the cycle of the seasons. This marked a significant departure, from fixed monuments where the sun was observed and worshipped at carefully prescribed times of year, to items that could be held or worn to express a close, personal connection to the heavens.

Display case, object labels left to right:

1–2. Catch the sun

These sheet-gold neck collars are known by the Latin word *lunulae*, meaning little moons, owing to their crescent shape. Hammered wafer-thin, their edges are decorated but the central area is intentionally plain and polished to a mirror-like shine, reflecting light to create a dazzling effect. Wearing such precious collars was probably restricted to certain individuals on significant occasions.

Most examples come from Ireland. The collars from Cornwall, England (1) and Brittany, France (2) were probably made by the same skilled goldsmith.

Gold

England; Republic of Ireland; France

2500–2000 BC

British Museum

1 On loan from the Royal Institution of Cornwall

2 Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Young learner label:

The sun played an important role in people's lives.

It provided warmth and helped mark time.

What do you think the shape of this jewellery represents? Why might the makers have chosen to use gold?

3–4. Solar symbols

Following the movement of celestial phenomena was critical to people's lives. The shape and motifs on these gold discs (3) reflect the sun as seen in different conditions and times of day. They bestowed powerful attributes on their bearers. Often found in burials, sun-discs could also be reminders of the life-restoring power of the sun. The same decoration appears on the bases of clay bowls (4), to be glimpsed only when tipped to drink or placed upwards in bonfire kilns or graves.

3 Gold, Kilmuckridge, Co. Wexford, Republic of Ireland,
2400–2000 BC
British Museum

4 Pottery, Republic of Ireland, 2200–1700 BC
On loan from the National Museum of Ireland
(W10, WK159, NMI1974:26, P1948:100, 04E505:3,
04E505:5, R2456, R1769 and R1645)

Stonehenge complete

Stonehenge took its well-known form about 4,500 years ago. More than 80 massive sarsen stones, each requiring at least 1,000 people to transport, were brought 25 kilometres from their source. This effort required unprecedented communal labour, patience and planning. It undoubtedly involved injuries and deaths, and took generations to complete. The finished monument of massive and finely dressed sarsen was unlike anything ever seen across Europe. It instilled the site with an air of order and permanence. The building of the processional routeway, the Avenue, about 4,400 years ago confirmed Stonehenge's sacred status.

Image caption:

Stonehenge, 4,500 years ago. Large stones framed the solstice sunrise and sunset at Stonehenge. Observation of the sun at midwinter may have reassured communities that another year was promised, thanks to their actions and annual ceremonies.

5. Stonehenge sun-disc

This gold disc was buried a few generations after the sarsens were raised in a grave 30 km upstream from Stonehenge, sewn to a shroud or headdress. Such objects became symbols of a sun cult, marking out a believer or pilgrim returning from sites like Stonehenge. The cruciform motif may represent the four arms of light seen at sunrise and sunset.

Gold, Jug's grave, Monkton Farleigh, Wiltshire
2400–2200 BC
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

6–8. Shine on

Made about 1,000 years after the first lunulae and sun-discs, these impressive ornaments (6–7) fuse both elements, reflecting the enduring importance of the sun in symbolism and beliefs. The circular boxes (8) may be earspools, signalling the extension of solar imagery to new and awe-inspiring objects. As mediators with the heavens, their wearers likely held social, political and religious sway.

Gold

6 Shannongrove bog, Co. Limerick, Republic of Ireland, 800–700 BC, Victoria and Albert Museum, given by Col. C. K. Howard-Bury

7 Republic of Ireland, 1150–750 BC, British Museum

8 Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, Republic of Ireland, 800–700 BC, on loan from the National Museum of Ireland (RIA1884:8 and RIA1884:9)

Image caption:

A person wearing a modern equivalent of the earspools. At 5.8 cm in diameter, the wearer of the ancient gold examples needed to gradually stretch their earlobes to make them fit.

Wall case behind and to the left, object labels right to left:

1. New cosmological symbols

The appearance of new objects and symbols about 3,500 years ago reveals that a more complex model of the cosmos was developing. Across Scandinavia, the sun, horse and ship were the subjects of religious imagery. In central Europe, two water birds connected by a boat-shaped body below a sun became an important motif. The two sets of symbols are brought together in this exceptional hoard from Denmark, comprising locally-made gold cups with horse-shaped handles and solar motifs, and an imported bronze amphora bearing the bird-sun-boat design.

Gold and bronze, Mariesminde Mose, Funen Island, Denmark, about 1000–700 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

2. Solar power

These belt-plates were placed on the stomachs of women found in Scandinavian graves. Expertly made by pouring liquid bronze into complex moulds, the surfaces are covered with spirals and sun motifs symbolising regeneration and rebirth. The conical shape represents the centre point of the sun's power. The women clearly played significant roles in ceremonies and rites linked to the worship of the sun. Perhaps they were emissaries in the afterlife.

Bronze, Langstrup, Frederiksborg Amt and Vellinge, Funen Island, Denmark, about 1400 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

3. Mythology

In Scandinavia, people developed complex stories and beliefs centred on the passage and power of the sun. The images on these razors tell one such tale, connecting animals to the sun cycle. At sunrise, a fish pulls the sun into a boat. A bird transfers the sun to a horse, which hoists it into the sky.

Later the horse returns the sun to the boat, to be concealed by a snake as it sets beneath the water. A night-ship sails towards dawn, accompanied by a fish, ready to begin a new day.

Bronze, Denmark, 1150–750 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

Image caption:

Scandinavian rock outcrops were carved with solar discs, wheels, boats and life-sized footprints. Often positioned on the shore edge, these were considered powerful places, where land met sea and people could commune with the underworld.

The sun cycle

The mythical creatures depicted on the bronze razors are brought to life above this display, showing how these animal-guides ensured the continuous cycle of the sun.

Duration: about 1 minute, 30 seconds

This is silent

4. Regeneration and rebirth

Most of the razors showing scenes from the sun cycle were found with cremation burials. Perhaps the depictions of boats propelling the sun towards dawn, and rebirth, provided hope to mourners.

These razors and tweezers are well-used.

The mythological knowledge conveyed by their decoration probably added significance to the act of preparing the body for the pyre, or during initiation rites.

Bronze, Denmark, 1150–750 BC
British Museum

5. Divine twins

This hoard of bronze objects, recently discovered in Denmark, offers insight into the complex mythology of the sun cycle. The double axe was probably used in ceremonies. The dual-headed warrior figure may represent the 'divine twins', who according to myth journeyed by boat and horse to pull the sun across the sky. The horse-snake hybrids, also a feature of the cup handles displayed to the right, reinforces the sun cycle.

Bronze, Kallerup, Thy, Jutland, Denmark, 1200–1000 BC
On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

Image caption:

The Trundholm sun-chariot represents a mythical horse pulling the sun. Comparable objects from central Europe suggest long-distance exchange of objects, astronomical knowledge and mythology.

Calendar stars

The Pleiades or Seven Sisters, shown here, is also depicted in gold on the Nebra Sky Disc (displayed behind). In the region of eastern Germany where the disc was found, the Pleiades is last seen in the sky on 10 March and reappears on 17 October. The stars may have been markers of the start and end of the farming year for communities across Europe.

© 2016 – W. Attard McCarthy – McCarthy's PhotoWorks

Central cases behind and to the right:

Dressing the part

This unique covering for the upper body was buried with a woman. It was accompanied by nearly 300 amber beads, now lost. Signs of repair indicate that it was well-used, possibly during processions or ceremonies. Perhaps the woman who wore it was a leader, a priestess or even considered a divinity. Like the cape, the gold armlets were intended to make an impression. These exceptional objects influenced the visibility and poise of their wearer, marking them out as extraordinary.

Gold

Cape: Mold, Flintshire, Wales, 1900–1600 BC

Armlets: Lockington-Hemington cemetery, Leicestershire
2100–1900 BC

British Museum

Calendars of the cosmos?

These magnificent gold hats are among the most accomplished and impressive objects from this period.

Expert craft workers hammered-out, shaped and decorated every inch with cosmological symbols including circles, solar-wheels and even a sun-like starburst (1). The tallest known example is an astonishing 88 cm.

Serving as headgear during ceremonies or rituals, they perhaps imbued the wearer with divine or otherworldly status. Carefully buried alone or accompanied by axes (2), rather than interred with the deceased, it seems they were held in trust for the community.

1 Gold, Avanton, France, 1500–1200 BC

Musée du Louvre (D.A.G.E.R) en dépôt au Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye

2 Gold and bronze

Schifferstadt, near Speyer, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, about 1600 BC

Historisches Museum der Pfalz Speyer

Image caption:

A carved tomb slab from Kivik, Sweden, showing a hat in a boat flanked by axes.

The arrangement is comparable to the burial of the gold hat and axes from Schifferstadt, Germany, displayed here (2).

Display cases to right, object labels right to left:

The Nebra Sky Disc

Found in Germany, the Nebra Sky Disc is the oldest known material depiction of cosmic phenomena in the world. It reveals the creativity and advanced astronomical knowledge of cultures without writing.

The distinctive rosette of seven stars represents the Pleiades. These stars play a key role in an ancient rule, known from a 2,700-year-old Babylonian text, that allowed the shorter lunar year to be kept in step with the solar year. A leap month should be added every third year if a crescent moon a few days old appears next to the Pleiades in the springtime sky.

Gold and bronze

Nebra, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, about 1600 BC

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology

Saxony-Anhalt

Image caption:

The Nebra Sky Disc was made using gold from Cornwall and bronze from central Europe. It was remodelled as its meaning and use changed. Like Stonehenge's alignment, the bands on either side marked the positions of the rising and setting sun over the course of the solar year.

The Nebra Sky Disc Hoard

The Nebra Sky Disc was part of an intentional and carefully-made offering. The pairing of the swords, axes and spiral arm-rings is comparable to other important contemporary burials. However, they were not placed in a grave. The knowledge contained within the disc, and the collective memory of those who used it to decode and celebrate the skies, was perhaps too powerful to be deposited with any one individual.

Bronze and gold, Nebra, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany
about 1600 BC

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt

Section introduction panel on right:

Raising the dead

From about 4,500 years ago, burying people with valued objects on sacred land became the dominant way of expressing cultural and spiritual meaning across Britain and Europe. At Stonehenge, hundreds of burial mounds were raised for the illustrious dead.

The objects that mourners selected for the grave prepared souls for life beyond this world. They were markers of personal identity, ethnicity and success, but they also expressed hopes, desires, failed ambitions and long-distance pilgrimages.

New scientific studies enable us to trace the stories, genetic relationships and movements of people through time, as they became established lineages. Rows of burial mounds were physical manifestations of family trees.

Panel and object labels, right to left:

Pilgrims or pioneers?

People from continental Europe, most notably the Netherlands, transformed Britain's genetic make-up and culture between 4,500 and 4,200 years ago. They introduced metalworking and were buried with distinctive pots known as Beakers, markers of their continental origins. Established beliefs were integrated or replaced by 4,000 years ago.

These changes coincided with the last, great monument building projects. Perhaps stories of awe-inspiring places like Stonehenge reached the continent, attracting the new immigrants. Or maybe the looming presence of new people gave fresh impetus to the construction projects that had dominated religious life for the previous thousand years.

Facing death together

From central Asia to the Atlantic, the dead were buried aligned on the rising sun, connected to cycles of rebirth and renewal. They were accompanied by objects reflecting mortal achievements and tragedies.

The man on the right was buried as a warrior. A healed head wound was probably inflicted by a battle-axe. The woman on the left was buried with a baby swaddled in a sling, decorated for protection with dog teeth from over 50 animals. Both belonged to a style of burial that had spread to Britain from the continent by 4,500 years ago.

Human remains, Wennungen, Germany, 2575–2450 BC
State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt

Image caption:

The man was buried with his stone battle-axe. The weapon had been frequently resharpened.

Display to left, object labels left to right:

1–4. Travellers from distant lands

A man was honoured with exceptional grave goods including metalworking tools (1), daggers from Spain (2) and distinctive gold hair ornaments (3). Analysis of his bones revealed that he grew up near the Alps and was buried close to Stonehenge soon after the sarsen stones were raised. He is known as the Amesbury archer.

A second, younger, man was buried nearby (4). His gold hair ornaments were found inside his mouth. DNA analysis suggests he was the great-grandson of the Alpine immigrant. Although born in southern England, we know from chemical analysis of his teeth that he spent some of his childhood on the continent.

1–3 The Amesbury archer: gold, copper, stone, boar tusk, antler, oyster shell, shale, pottery and flint
Stonehenge, Wiltshire
about 2460–2330 BC

4 The archer's companion: gold, human bone and boar tusk, Stonehenge, Wiltshire, about 2440–2270 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Image caption:

The Amesbury archer was buried with two stone wrist-guards, for protection when firing a bow. These objects became symbols of hunting prowess and identity.

Young learner label:

People travelled from far away to live near Stonehenge.

They brought new ideas, skills and objects with them.

If you moved to a new place, what would you take with you?

5. Honoured heirlooms

Worn by an important woman, these gold beads come from a larger object similar to the hair ornaments buried with the Amesbury archer. Perhaps they were passed down by a relative. They were paired with black lignite beads from eastern England and buttons of Baltic amber.

The origin stories of these grave goods encapsulate a history of ancestry, journeys and diaspora.

Pottery and gold, Kingsmead Quarry, Horton, Windsor, Berkshire, about 2300 BC
Windsor & Royal Borough Museum

Ancestors set in stone

Among the earliest human sculptures in Europe, these statues were raised outside tombs in the Alpine foothills.

The statue on the left shows a man carrying objects like those buried with the Amesbury archer, whose family and ancestors came from close by. The fragment on the right was reworked

to show the setting or rising sun before being built into the wall of a tomb. The sun's prominent placement reflects its enduring symbolic importance.

Stone

Le Petit Chasseur, Valais, Switzerland, 2575–2450 BC
Valais History Museum (Sion, Switzerland): PC1/Stèle 1
and PC1/Stèle 25

Image caption:

The sculpture (left) depicts an archer with a bow, wearing a decorated belt and patterned tunic.

Image caption:

Before being built into a tomb, this sculpture (right) was part of a larger whole. It also depicted an archer, the face of which was later filled in with the image of a rising or setting sun.

Display opposite, object labels right to left:

Stonehenge unsettled

The arrival of the Beaker-using people was a watershed moment in the world of Stonehenge.

Although it is possible that some of the first newcomers assisted or inspired the great achievements in stone, it is also clear that they had different priorities and beliefs.

Fragments of bluestone found at the site from around this time suggest that the monument was being reworked or even vandalised. Elsewhere, henges were being broken up and dismantled. Monument building slowed dramatically as death and the afterlife became dominant cultural concerns.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 4,300 years ago.

Image caption:

The remains of the Stonehenge archer were discovered in the ditch of the monument in 1978.

Image caption:

Large-scale monument building, including the great mound of Silbury Hill near Avebury, about 30 km north of Stonehenge, coincided with the arrival of Beaker-using people.

New arrivals

The animation tells the story of the Beaker-using people and their journey to Stonehenge.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds

This is silent

Clash of cultures

About 4,300 years ago, a young man was shot from behind and hastily buried in the ditch encircling Stonehenge, three flint arrows still embedded in his body. As the only burial of this period from the monument, his presence and violent end is significant. His stone wrist-guard marked him as an archer among the Beaker-using immigrants. His death was perhaps the result of conflict, punishment or sacrifice.

Tensions may have arisen as competing groups vied to align themselves with sacred sites like Stonehenge.

The Stonehenge archer: stone, flint and human bone,
Stonehenge, Wiltshire, about 2300 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Panel to left:

Making power in a restless world

Remarkable and exotic objects were placed in the graves of well-connected leaders from southern England, northern France and Germany between about 4,000 and 3,600 years ago. The journeys made by these people and their ambassadors were marked by the exchange of gifts in the shadow of monuments like Stonehenge.

What was the basis of success and power during this era? The grave goods suggest a cosmologically and spiritually-minded people who held positions bestowed upon them by their communities.

Central display case:

In the hands of a seer

An exceptional man was buried in the Wylye valley, a key routeway to Stonehenge from the west, wearing a cloak and necklace of animal bones and teeth. His polished flint axes were already over 1,000 years old. Naturally occurring flint cups reflect a close connection with the land, while stone tools bearing traces of gold suggest he was a skilled metalworker. A metal awl, possibly used for tattooing, accompanied the burial. This man possessed the power to transform himself and the materials around him. His connection to the deep past and magic stones conveyed his special status to those witnessing his metalworking skills.

Animal bone, jet, flint, stone, boar tusk and copper alloy
Upton Lovell Grave 2a, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire
2100–1800 BC
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

Display cases against wall to left, object labels right to left:

1–2. The jet set

A belt of jet beads (1) encircled the waist of a woman buried at the northern end of the Great Glen in Scotland. Scientific analysis of her bones suggests she migrated north, possibly from western or south-western England. A second burial, from the Scottish Borders, was accompanied by an impressive group of jet buttons and fasteners (2). They perhaps studded a garment like a cloak or represent a community collection offered up to the dead. Jet was moved across Britain from Whitby in North Yorkshire. Its export reflects exotic value and the origins and journeys of a mobile people.

Jet and bronze

1 Culduthel, Highland, Scotland, 2200–1970 BC

2 Harehope, Borders, Scotland, 2200–1900 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

3–7. Preserved in peat

About 3,700 years ago, the cremated bones of a young woman were wrapped in a bearskin (3) on Whitehorse Hill, Devon. She was buried with organic objects that rarely survive. A basket (4) contained clay, shale, amber and tin beads (5). Other grave goods included a bracelet of cow hair decorated with tin (6) and wooden ear studs (7). These materials were not rare, but they were precious, requiring skilful manufacture and care.

Bear fur, cattle hair, lime bast, euonymus wood, tin, amber, shale, pottery, bronze and flint, Whitehorse Hill, Dartmoor, Devon, 1730–1600 BC

On loan from Plymouth City Council, The Box:
kindly donated by the Duchy of Cornwall

1–2. The lost leader

These grave goods from 80 km south-west of Stonehenge highlight links between powerful regions and leaders. The gold lozenge was the symbol of a select few. The mace-head was carved from Yorkshire jet. Made from amber, the cup came from the Baltic.

There was no trace of a body with these objects. Perhaps they were the regalia of temporary leadership, too important or too powerful to be buried with any one individual.

1 Gold, amber, pottery, bronze and shale,
Clandon barrow, Dorset, 1950–1700 BC

2 Gold and bronze

Weymouth Grave 8 barrow, Dorset, 1950–1550 BC

On loan from Dorset Museum

3. A light that lasts

Remains of a cremated body were buried inside an impressive earth mound close to the great stone circles of Stenness and Brodgar in Orkney, with an amber necklace like those from the Stonehenge region. The trade in amber necklaces extended as far as Mycenaean Greece. These beads are heavily worn. They were probably cherished and well-travelled heirlooms. The gold sun-discs, covering organic buttons, brought light to the long darkness of winter days in northern latitudes.

Gold and amber, Knowes of Trotty, Orkney Islands, Scotland
2030–1770 BC

On loan courtesy of National Museums Scotland

Image caption:

While this reconstruction imagines the sun-discs and amber necklace worn by a woman, the sex and gender of the person who was buried with them is unknown.

4. Gender neutral

Some objects found exclusively in male or female burials around Stonehenge were combined in a single burial from East Anglia. The dagger, a male symbol, was combined with a knife-dagger, the provision of important women. An amber necklace, usually found in female graves, was placed around the neck. Although the body does not survive, these objects suggest gender rules were being transformed. Beyond Stonehenge, power could be expressed in different ways.

Central display case:

Symbols of service?

These incredible objects accompanied a burial with commanding views of Stonehenge. The gold plaque (1) that covered the chest was seen, glistening from a distance, during ceremonies.

The mace, a symbol of authority, featured gold and bone mounts and is crowned with a polished fossil (2,7). Interestingly, personal objects are absent.

The person that the grave goods accompanied was probably a powerful leader but also a servant to the wider community.

Gold, wood, bronze, stone and animal bone

Bush barrow, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, 1950–1700 BC

Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

From Stonehenge to Mycenae?

These grave goods are a mixture of local and foreign innovations (6). The daggers (4–5), from France, represent gift exchange between distant regions. The tiny gold pins (8) were applied to a dagger pommel using techniques seen in Brittany and Mycenaean Greece.

The belt hook (3) is a skilful embellishment of a type of object usually made of bone.

The ability to bring together skilled artisans, materials and exotic objects could make and sustain power.

Gold, wood, bronze, stone and animal bone
Bush barrow, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, 1950–1700 BC
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes

Display cases to left, object labels left to right:

Arrows of fortune

These exquisite arrowheads from burials in Dorset (1) and Wales (2) were influenced by French styles, where the bow was the weapon of symbolic power.

The Welsh grave included a cup (3) decorated with solar motifs highlighted with ochre and ground-down bone. The vessel accompanied three cremated bodies. Several items are unfinished, including flint blanks for arrowheads.

They express beliefs about the needs of the dead in the afterlife, rather than the power of a single high-status individual.

1 Flint, Conygar Hill barrow, Dorchester, Dorset
1950–1550 BC

On loan from Dorset Museum

2–3 Pottery, bronze, flint and stone, Breach farm,
Llanblethian, Vale of Glamorgan, Wales
1950–1700 BC

Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

Bretons and Britons

Daggers like these, from coastal Brittany, were also gifted to those who held power at Stonehenge. The objects from this grave were buried at different times, as new bodies were added, rather than being placed with one important individual. The gold box with geometric patterns is probably a miniature archer's wrist-guard. It harks back to the cross-Channel connections of the Beaker-using era 500 years earlier, and was probably made by an English gold worker for a French chief.

Flint and gold

La Motta, Lannion, Cotes d'Armor, France, 2100–1800 BC
Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de
Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Continental connections

Some grave goods show how claims to power were anchored in the past. This assemblage from Germany includes a stone battle-axe (1) that was already 2,500 years old when buried. The gold and bronze objects also recalled and celebrated grave goods from the Beaker-using era and other, earlier, burial traditions.

The man they honoured was buried with objects similar in range and quality to important individuals from England and France. Long-distance connections played a central role in legitimising power and status.

Stone, bronze, gold and pottery

Leubingen tumulus, Kyffhäuser, Thuringia, Germany
1975–1900 BC

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt

Image caption:

The burial from Germany was placed inside an elaborate wooden chamber with a pitched roof resembling contemporary houses and covered by a 7m high mound.

Display on central circular plinth, object labels left to right:

Stonehenge twilight

By about 3,700 years ago, Stonehenge formed the heart of the densest concentration of burial mounds in Britain, including some of the richest in Europe. The emphasis had shifted from building communal monuments to raising mounds in cemeteries that staked claims to land, history and kinship.

The continental European tradition of placing metal objects in hoards without bodies began in southern England around this time. The Stonehenge sarsens were inscribed with carvings of these new, treasured, objects.

This bold act may have bordered on iconoclasm.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 4,000 years ago.

Image caption:

On sarsen stone 53, 37 axes and two daggers were carved facing in towards the centre of the monument.

Image caption:

Study of subtle but significant changes in the form of bronze axes and daggers has allowed the carvings to be dated to 3,700–3,500 years ago.

Carving a new world

These daggers and axes provide the best parallels for the many carvings made on Stonehenge's sarsens around the same time. Found within a burial mound in Dorset, they mark a crucial turning point.

A focus on monument building and then burial was being replaced by the desire to possess and sacrifice bronze and gold objects. In carving these symbols, their makers infused ancestral stone monuments with the social, economic and religious importance of valuable offerings.

Sandstone, Badbury, Shapwick, Dorset, about 2000–1500
BC
British Museum

Section introduction panel:

To the sea

About 3,500 years ago, the influence of the Stonehenge region began to wane. Communities on the south coast of England looked to social and political relationships in continental Europe, which was becoming an increasingly important source of valuable bronze. As these continental connections increased, European metal and exotic goods began to flow across the North Sea and English Channel.

As new types of objects emerged, so too did new ideas about offering precious items to repay or seek protection from nature or ancestral spirits. This challenged older religious beliefs, and the role of monuments like Stonehenge.

Object labels, right to left:

Stonehenge sunset

The great acts of building and reimagining that had characterised Stonehenge ceased as offerings of metal valuables became the most popular way to contact spirits and gods in the natural world. The monument may have fallen into disrepair as expressions of cultural and religious authority began to shift. Acts of enclosure controlled access to the most important sites, cemeteries and agricultural land. The enduring influence of the Stonehenge landscape was threatened by new sources of power.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 3,500 years ago.

Image caption:

Two men were buried in a ditch within sight of Stonehenge. Analysis suggests they lived mobile lives, travelling, trading or shepherding across considerable distances.

Image caption:

The bodies were placed in a land boundary ditch, a new addition to the landscape that represented changing social and economic expressions of power.

Votive exchanges

The recent discovery of this hoard in Stonehenge's hinterland is rewriting our understanding of relationships between the region and coastal communities. It comprises 41 objects, deposited in two distinct groups. One consists of large, heavy items including a neck-ring or torc weighing 1 kg and a pin with a decorated head. The other contains smaller and finer necklaces, tools and bracelets. The separation may reflect different identities, genders or roles being brought together. Such deposits perhaps celebrated a marriage or rite of passage ceremony.

Bronze, near the River Wylye, Wiltshire
about 1400–1250 BC

On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Panel:

Opening the seaways

Aided by developments in boat technology, people began to make long-distance voyages, carrying cargoes of metal and other precious materials. Commerce using sea and river routes was more than just an economic activity. Journeys and adventures bestowed value, prestige and spiritual power on objects and people from worlds beyond the horizon.

The highly accomplished objects from this period reflect a time of restless ambition and rising tensions, as more regular trading links transformed communities' material and social worlds.

Object labels right to left:

Spirit of adventure

The boat was the vehicle of both heroes and gods. This ship-shaped bowl, made using Cornish tin and gold from Ireland or Wales, depicts shields or sun motifs, oars, waves and eye motifs to ward off evil. Found hidden in a pot, the delicate gold vessels formed part of a fleet of about 100, some stamped with solar imagery. Set around the same time as these objects were made, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey portray maritime travel as a mixture of heroic adventure and supernatural encounters.

Bowl: gold, tin and shale, Caergwrle, Flintshire, Wales,
1300–1150 BC

Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

Model boats: gold
Nors, Thy, Denmark
1700–1100 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Denmark

Young learner label:

People travelled by sea to trade.

They recorded stories of heroic journeys on objects made with materials they brought back.

How would you feel about going on a long sea journey?

Where might you go?

Cups of kindness

The similarities of these cups suggest strong connections between coastal communities on either side of the Channel, participating in networks of trade and exchange of exotic materials. Examples in precious gold, translucent amber and fine black shale have been found on the southern coast of England and the continent. Their contents are unknown, but they were perhaps used like chalices during ceremonies, their round bases requiring them to be passed from hand to hand.

Crushed gold cup: Ringlemere farm, Woodnesborough, Kent
1950–1750 BC

Purchase supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Art Fund and British Museum Friends, British Museum

Gold cup: Rillaton, Cornwall, 1750–1550 BC
Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

Amber cup: Hove barrow, Brighton, Sussex,
about 1750–1550 BC
Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust, Brighton & Hove

Shale cup: Wiltshire, 1700 BC,
on loan from The Salisbury Museum

Lost at sea

These objects, from two ship cargoes, reflect intense trade across the Channel and beyond. Copper and tin were transported in their raw form as bun-shaped ingots. The bronze tools, weapons and fittings include types common to northern France and southern England, as well as others entirely new to Britain. The cargo of one ship was probably bound for the River Dour, modern-day Dover, to be recycled into objects familiar to British communities. Some weapons may be the crew's personal arms. It is unclear whether they were intended for defence or piracy, or both.

Bronze

Langdon Bay, Dover; Salcombe, Devon
about 1300–1100 BC

British Museum

Image caption:

The Salcombe and Langdon Bay vessels did not survive, but a wooden boat found near Dover offers a comparison. Its planks were tied with yew and waterproofed with moss, wax and animal fats.

Display case opposite, object labels left to right:

1–5. Followers of fashion

The increased availability of continental bronze and gold led to major innovations in dress and appearance (1). During a period of unprecedented experimentation, goldsmiths created versions of neck ornaments that could only have been worn as belts (2–4), some with elaborate ends that appear to imitate organic tassels (5). Similar belt-torcs have been found in Ireland, Jersey and northern France, reflecting long-distance cultural connectivity.

They were deposited as offerings in the landscape rather than as grave goods.

Gold

1 Stanton, Staffordshire; Glamorgan, Wales; Dover, Kent, 1300–1150 BC, British Museum

2 Foulsham, Norfolk, 1400–1100 BC
Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery
(Norfolk Museums Service)

3 Isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire, 1300–1150 BC,
British Museum

4 Tipper, Co. Tipperary, Republic of Ireland
1300–1150 BC, on loan from the National Museum of Ireland
(NMI1946:391)

5 Guines, Pas-de-Calais, France, 1300–1150 BC
Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de
Saint-Germain-en-Laye

6–9. The art of the goldsmith

Skilled smiths achieved remarkable feats of gold working. They expertly hammered precious metal into rods on anvils like this, which is littered with gold flecks (6).

Gold bars and simple bracelets were stockpiled (7) ready to be deftly twisted and shaped into extraordinary pieces of jewellery, like these bracelets (8) and exquisite collar (9).

Bronze and gold

6 Knowle Hill, Lichfield St Michael, Staffordshire
900–800 BC

7 Fitzleroi farm, Fittleworth, West Sussex, 1400–1100 BC

8 Monkston Park, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire
1150–800 BC, purchase supported by the National Heritage
Memorial Fund, Art Fund and British Museum Friends

9 Sintra, Portugal, 1250–800 BC, British Museum

10–14. Forging alliances and making peace

Although shaped like a short stabbing sword, or dirk (11), these impressive, oversized objects were not intended as functional weapons. Their edges were never sharpened and handles were not attached.

They were found around the North Sea coast in England, France and the Netherlands.

Cast from the same stock of metal, they likely come from the same workshop, at the hands of a single expert bronze smith. Rather than expressions of violence, they perhaps helped secure strategic relationships between coastal communities.

Bronze, 1500–1350 BC

10 Oxborough, Norfolk

Purchase supported by Art Fund, British Museum

11 Kimberley, Norfolk, British Museum

12 East Rudham, Norfolk, Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery (Norfolk Museums Service)

13 Plougrescant, Brittany, France, Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye

14 Beaune, France, British Museum

Panel opposite:

The rise of warfare

Mounting pressures caused by the expansion of trade networks and new land divisions gave rise to warfare across north-west Europe around 3,300 years ago. Skirmishes, raids and large clashes of trained warriors became a grim fact of life. The ceremonial roles that monuments and burials played were now partly transferred to new arenas of violence and the dramatic destruction of valuable possessions. Damage was wrought to both bodies and objects, including frequent ritual deposition of metalwork in watery locations, perhaps as symbolic killings.

Object labels right to left:

Spiritual warriors

These figures with dazzling quartzite eyes and removable phalluses travel on a serpent-headed boat.

They were deposited in a waterway as an offering to protect an important travel and trade route. Their shields and three crewmates were found together, contained in a box. Their fluid identities may represent supernatural beings with the power to cross the watery depths to the spirit world beyond.

Yew wood and quartzite, Roos Carr, near Withernsea,
East Yorkshire
1100–500 BC
Hull and East Riding Museum: Hull Museums

Image caption:

Scandinavian rock art depicts men and warriors aboard boats that are comparable to the figures displayed here.

The warrior's beauty

In Homer's Iliad, the sight of heroes in full bronze armour struck fear into the hearts of the enemy. In northern Europe epic texts like this are absent, but comparable and contemporary objects survive.

It is likely that important oral storytelling traditions thrived here too. Impressive sheet-bronze cuirasses clad the breasts and backs of warriors. The finest are decorated with punched motifs bearing cosmological symbols, fusing elements of warfare with religion to afford the wearer protection. Bronze helmets are equally striking. Polished to a golden sparkle, such armour was the preserve of a privileged few.

Bronze

Pointed helmet: Vulci, Italy
775–750 BC
British Museum

Cuirass and rounded helmet: Marmesse, Haute-Marne;
Blainville-sur-l'Eau, France
900–800 BC
Musée d'Archéologie nationale – Domaine national de
Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Image caption:

A cosmological design showing birds connected to a boat below the sun can be seen on the helmet displayed here.

It also appears on contemporary ceremonial objects, including the amphora from Denmark displayed earlier in the exhibition.

A warrior's prosthetic hand?

This 3,500-year-old right hand was found in a grave with a bronze hair-ring, pin and dagger. It has been interpreted as the earliest prosthetic hand for a casualty of conflict, and as a symbol of the authority of its bearer. However, the solar symbols decorating the cuff suggest it also had cosmological significance. Contemporary hand-shaped vessels are known from the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, suggesting long-distance connections.

Bronze and gold, Prêles, Bern, Switzerland
1500–1400 BC

Item loaned by the Archaeological Service of the Canton of Bern, Switzerland (149902, 149901, 152752, 152756 and 152754)

Taking up arms

Over time, weapons became symbols of identity as well as a functional way of life. Swords and spears developed in style and range as warfare became a specialised pursuit of trained practitioners. Some warriors carried shields of sheet-bronze. For others, wood or leather sufficed. The shield pierced in combat by a spear and sword offers a stark reminder of the brutal reality of conflict. Many weapons were deposited in rivers as part of funerals and ritual sacrifices.

Bronze

England; Wales; Republic of Ireland; Denmark; Italy

1200–500 BC

British Museum

Sounding the charge

These musical instruments come from a bronze hoard discovered in an Irish bog comprising weapons, tools, jewellery and feasting paraphernalia of local and continental origin. The trumpets follow the form of hollowed cattle horns.

The crotals (tear-shaped rattles) contain a piece of baked clay or a pebble. Together they could be blown and shaken to incite warriors to battle and intimidate opponents.

Bronze, Co. Cork and Co. Offaly, Republic of Ireland
950–750 BC
British Museum

Making music

Modern musicians experimenting with original and replica horns have discovered it is possible to produce a complex melody. Large horns blown from the end make a low bass drone. Those blown from the side produce higher notes.

Duration: about 1 minute

In this excerpt from **Along the Shore**, recorded for the album **Overtone** in 2009, there are sounds of original bronze horns being played.

© Music by Simon O'Dwyer, Ancient Music Ireland



Display cases opposite, object labels left to right:

Death in the valley

A site near the River Tollense in north-west Germany represents one of the earliest known battlefields in Europe, and a grim discovery in the field of ancient warfare. Excavation has recovered 20,000 disarticulated body parts representing over 140 individuals, mostly young adult men. Weapons including axes, wooden clubs and bronze and flint arrowheads, some still embedded in victims' bones, litter the landscape and reflect a terrible event. The objects, and the people, came from different parts of Europe. Evidence of healed injuries suggests they were seasoned fighters.

3D print, human bone, flint, bronze, wood and gold

Tollense valley, Germany

1250 BC

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology
Saxony-Anhalt; LAKD M-V, Landesarchäologie, Schwerin

Image caption:

The battle at Tollense began as an ambush at a fording point. As many as 2,000 people were involved in intense fighting along the riverbanks.

Blood, violence and sacrifice

Swords and spearheads were often deliberately and systematically destroyed following use in battle. These may be the weapons of defeated warriors, or the arms of the victors, offered in recompense for spilt blood. Sacrificing valuable objects to the landscape, particularly rivers, bogs and fens, emphasises peoples' deep connection with the natural world as a place to commune with spirit forces.

Bronze, England, about 1000–800 BC
British Museum

Stonehenge possessed

By 3,000 years ago, Stonehenge had gathered 2,000 years of history and mythology.

Monuments and burial mounds were rarely raised, while home and hearth took on new symbolic and political importance. The farming communities who inherited this ancient landscape constructed larger and longer boundaries, dividing the land. This was a new kind of monumentality. Big ditches and banks expressed control over valuable pasture, livestock and the means of producing wealth. Defended villages and forts – such as Vespasian's camp – followed, as power was manifest in expressions of territorial possession.

Map caption:

Map showing the Stonehenge landscape, about 2,800–2,500 years ago.

Make do and mend

Discovered just 2 km west of Stonehenge, this sword (1) was probably deliberately bent before it was deposited, but prior to that it had been damaged. The lower blade was hastily repaired, turning the upper blade into a new makeshift handle.

It is a reminder of tensions in the wider Stonehenge landscape, and the pragmatic realities of violence and warfare.

Bronze, near Stonehenge, Wiltshire, about 800 BC
On loan from The Salisbury Museum

Panel opposite:

Facing the ocean

Atlantic sea routes linked the ocean-facing communities of Europe, providing a major network in which people, technologies and objects could move. Despite violence and uncertainty, increased connectivity resulted in new social and cultural relations being forged 3,000 years ago.

Gift-giving and feasting became important, providing the ideal environment for relationships between allies or feuding enemies to be settled or confirmed. Connected by water, people continued to live dynamic and resilient lives despite the tumultuous and changing times.

Object labels, right to left:

Pompeii of the fens

Recent excavations at Must Farm have revealed an extraordinarily well-preserved village on stilts perched over the waters of the Cambridgeshire fens. The settlement has provided unique evidence for linen production, from plant to high quality cloth. Bronze tools and weapons were made locally and were plentiful. Trading by boat, exotic materials were imported from as far away as Egypt and the Middle East. The people were ordinary, yet rich in the range, quality and quantity of the objects they possessed.

Wood, bronze and textile, Must Farm, Cambridgeshire
about 850 BC

On loan from Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery

Image caption:

The settlement comprised of closely-nestled roundhouses built on cleverly constructed stilts over a broad but shallow channel and surrounded by a protective fence.

A moment in time

About one year after being built, the settlement dramatically caught fire. Its occupants fled, abandoning their valued possessions. The burning wooden houses collapsed into the river, where they were protected by silts.

Among the objects recovered by archaeologists were groups of pots for serving and storing food, many still intact despite the passage of time, forming the equivalent of ancient crockery starter-sets. They provide a rare glimpse of the material plenty of a single household 2,850 years ago.

Pottery, Must Farm, Cambridgeshire
about 850 BC

On loan from Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery

Young learner label:

People lived in small groups.

They cooked, ate, worked and rested together.

What meal do you like to share with family and friends?

Central display case:

Feasts and fellowship

This astonishing cauldron was riveted from sheets of bronze and repaired numerous times. With a capacity of about 70 litres, it could boil enough meat to feed a sizeable gathering of friends or potential foes. Flesh-hooks were then used to skewer and serve the food, a role probably bestowed on a chief or leader. Decorated with swans and rooks or ravens, the flesh-hook on the right probably depicts a mythical scene. Stories could be told as the cauldron bubbled.

Cauldron: bronze, River Thames, Battersea, London,
800–600 BC

Flesh-hooks: bronze and wood

Little Thetford, Ely, Cambridgeshire, 1150–950 BC;

Dunaverney, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland, 950–750 BC

British Museum

Section introduction panel to left:

The last of the light

By 3,800 years ago, the world of Stonehenge had changed. The stone circles still used in parts of Britain and Ireland no longer attracted large gatherings. European trade networks carrying ritually-charged objects and materials broke down. This decline occurred as climatic and environmental change undermined social and economic confidence. The result was the end of the era charted by this exhibition.

Stonehenge stands not for a landscape, region or even country, but for the generations of people who have made meaning from an enduring place in a changing world.

Display case object labels:

Gathering light

In a moment, 2,800 years ago, this pendant was cast into the sky before it sank into the gloom of a pool dotted with water lilies. Due to the alternating directions in which the decoration was incised, the sun image gathers and shimmers with reflected light. These motifs had been used by over 60 generations of goldsmiths by the time it was made. The offering was a hard sacrifice perhaps made to confront uncertainties in a period of major environmental and social change.

Gold, Shropshire marches
about 1000–800 BC

Purchase supported by Art Fund, British Museum Patrons
and the American Friends of the British Museum

British Museum

Image caption:

A partial solar eclipse, as seen from Britain in June 2021. Its appearance is like the sun pendant from Shropshire.

A new world

Several sun pendants are known from Ireland, including this fine example. They are sometimes called by the Latin word *bullae*, meaning bubble, because of the thin, shimmering walls and hollow interior. Comparable pendants containing substances to protect the young are known from northern Italy, from around the same time. The tradition was later adopted by the Romans. It offers a glimpse of long-distance connectivity with an emerging European superpower, and of the future.

Gold and lead, Bog of Allen, Co. Kildare, Republic of Ireland, about 1000–800 BC

On loan from the National Museum of Ireland (W265)

Object labels on left wall, left to right:

Reimagining Stonehenge

Stonehenge appealed to the radical artist and poet William Blake (1757–1827). He thought that it was built in ‘England’s green and pleasant land’ and was once connected with peoples of the biblical Old Testament.

In his dual vision, the enterprise, order and sanctity of Stonehenge implied both a temple of rationality and religious cruelty. In this awesome monument he saw the determination and belief needed to achieve idealistic social change and spiritual renewal in a New Jerusalem.

Image caption:

New discoveries about Stonehenge require rational and imaginative consideration to resolve its puzzles, and to reveal links between people, nature and the cosmos.

**Albion arose from where he laboured...,
1794–96**

William Blake (1757–1827)

Ancient Albion represents humanity and Britain breaking free of the bonds of corruption, imperialism and social injustices, and returning the country to its ancient glory: ‘When it was as it shall again be, the source of learning and inspiration.’

Engraving and etching
British Museum

**Illustration of an arch of standing stones, from
Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion,
1804–21**

William Blake (1757–1827)

Blake connects monuments of the deep past with a fair and just society, by imagining the building of a New Jerusalem in ‘England’s green and pleasant land.’

Relief etching with black ink
British Museum

**Illustration of an arch of standing stones, from
Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion,
1804–21**

William Blake (1757–1827)

In idealistic pursuit of a better society, Blake uses Stonehenge to condemn cruel religious practices and the rationalism of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and John Locke for undermining an older and simpler Christian faith.

Relief etching with black ink
British Museum

**A bearded nude male (probably Urizen)
crouching in a heavenly sphere, 1794**

William Blake (1757–1827)

In Blake's alternative to the Bible's Book of Genesis, an account of the creation of the world, Stonehenge is built by Urizen, a god-like character associated with the evil of reason and the banishment of the original chaos of Eden.

The sun was equated with the blazing power of the imagination to create a fairer, better world: 'This Earth breeds not our happiness, another Sun feeds our life's streams.'

Colour relief etching and white-line etching
British Museum

Wall quote:

Every age has the Stonehenge it deserves – or desires.

Jacquetta Hawkes, 1967

Find out more

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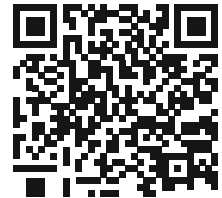
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