

Houses of the rising sun: Research sheds new light on Ancient Greeks

November 25 2009



Temple of Hephaistos.

New research at the University of Leicester has identified scores of Sicilian temples built to face the rising Sun, shedding light on the practices of the Ancient Greeks.

Dr Alun Salt, an astronomy technician from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Science at the University of Leicester, found that out of all the temples he surveyed in Sicily, all but three faced the rising sun.

The findings have been published on line in the journal [PLoS ONE](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0011111).

The results may imply that there is an 'astronomical fingerprint' for Greek settlers in the Mediterranean which can distinguish between sites settled by people following the Greek religion and natives who adopted

Greek style through trade, but kept their own culture. In the ancient world temples were not only associated with religion but were also political and economic statements.

This research helps to resolve a longstanding dispute about [temple](#) orientation. Dr Salt commented:

"There are quite a few temples in Greece which don't face sunrise. So a few [archaeologists](#) have suggested that there is nothing significant about the number that face east. The problem is that no one has ever said what a 'significant number' would be."

The paper applies some simple mathematics from probability that would more usually be used in the context of coin tossing or roulette wheels. Dr Salt explained further:

"The situation with temples in Greece is quite complicated. It would be like spinning a roulette wheel and finding that half the time the ball bounces out of the wheel. But when it does land, 90% of the time it'll be on red. That looks odd to me."

In Sicily the results even were stronger. Only one of 41 temples faced west.

The alignments are not a hard and fast law, but have uncovered some new mysteries. Dr Salt said:

"What's really interesting are the temples which don't fit. The temple of Hekate, a lunar goddess, at Selinous faces west. If every other temple in Sicily faces east, then what is special about that one?"

More information: [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0007903](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0007903)

Source: University of Leicester ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Houses of the rising sun: Research sheds new light on Ancient Greeks (2009, November 25) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-houses-sun-ancient-greeks.html>

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