

How did the Vikings know where  
they were going?

Navigation in the Viking Age

# Early navigation: landmarks

Early seafarers knew what the coasts around them looked like.



This is Fair Head, at the north-east corner of Ireland.

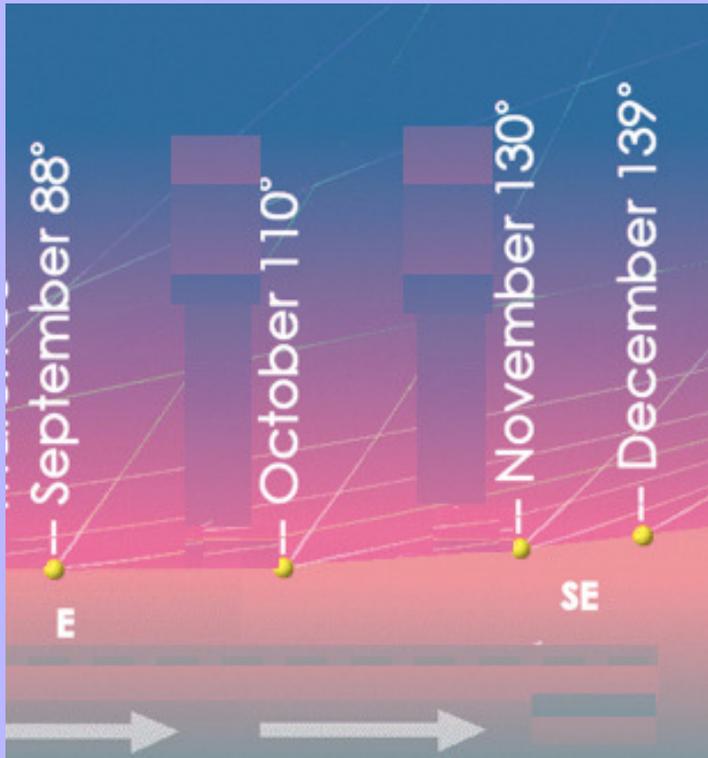
Landmarks guided sailors through safe channels.



The farthest island here is sometimes called 'The Sleeping Giant'. How do you think it got that name? Make up a story about the giant and how he got there.

# Daytime navigation: the Sun

In mid September, soon after school starts, the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West.

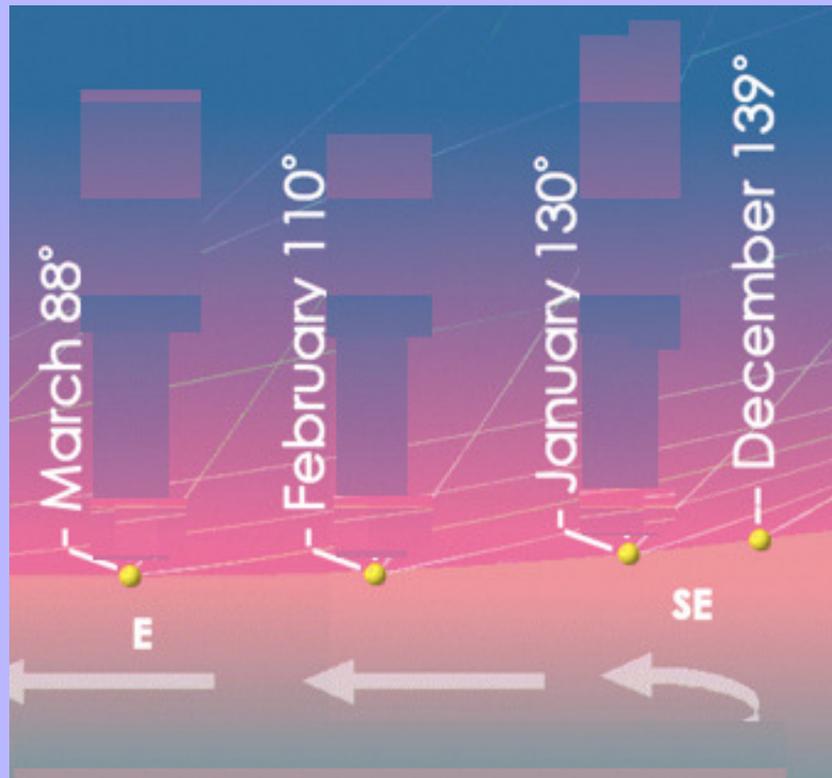


As autumn turns to winter, sunrise each day is slightly further south.

It travels a shorter path through the sky, and sets before it gets due West.

By Christmastime, the sun only makes a tiny arc through our sky: our mid-winter days are very short.

After Christmas, the sun's path starts getting longer again.



By mid-March it rises right at due East and travels all the way to set at due West again.

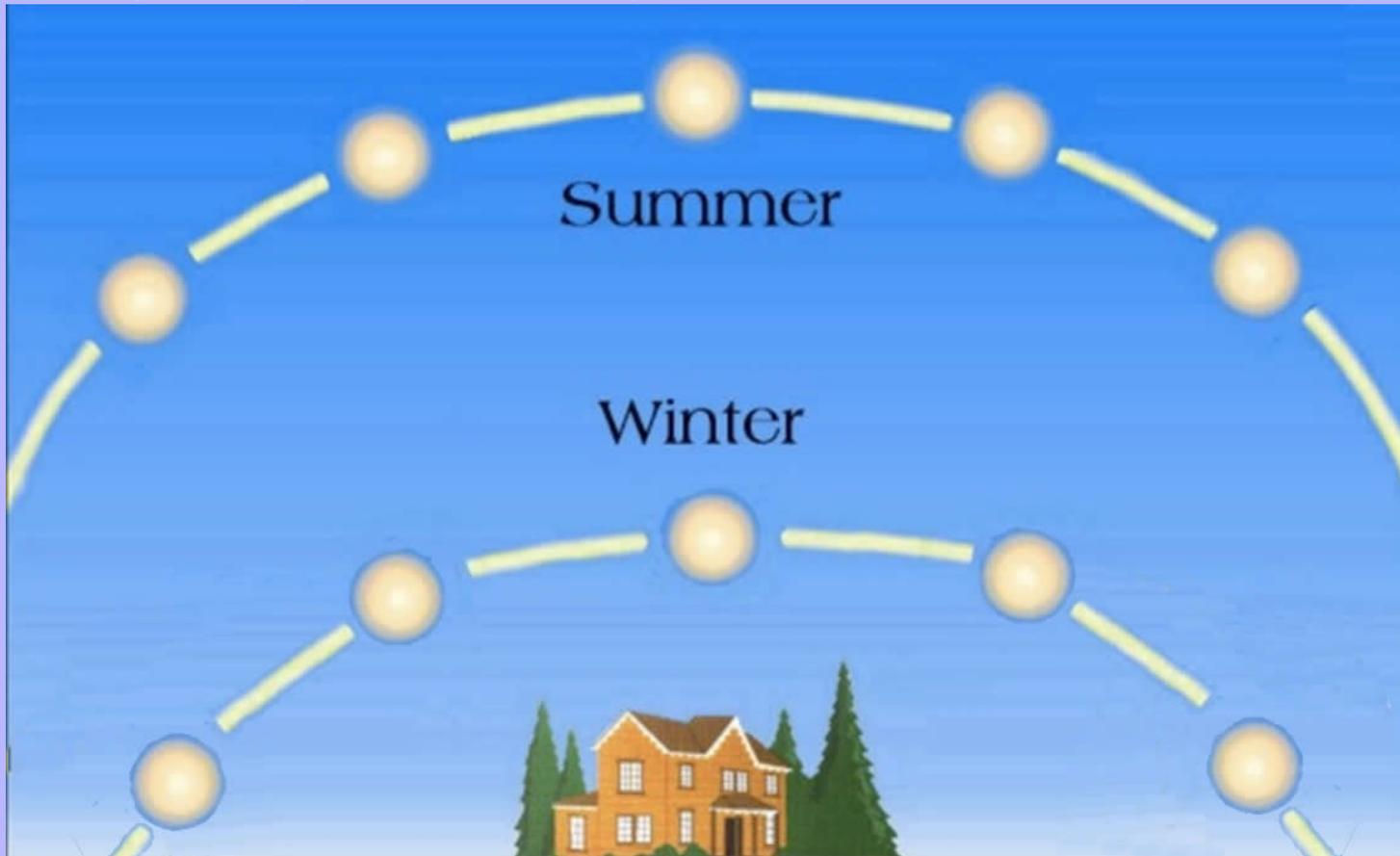
Make a note of where the sun is when you're outside on break. When it's cloudy, can you still guess where the sun might be? Draw a map of where you are and put an arrow showing which way is South.

REMEMBER: NEVER LOOK STRAIGHT AT THE SUN!

In summer sunrise shifts the other way:

From March until mid-June the Sun rises further north along the horizon.

It climbs higher up into the sky like this:



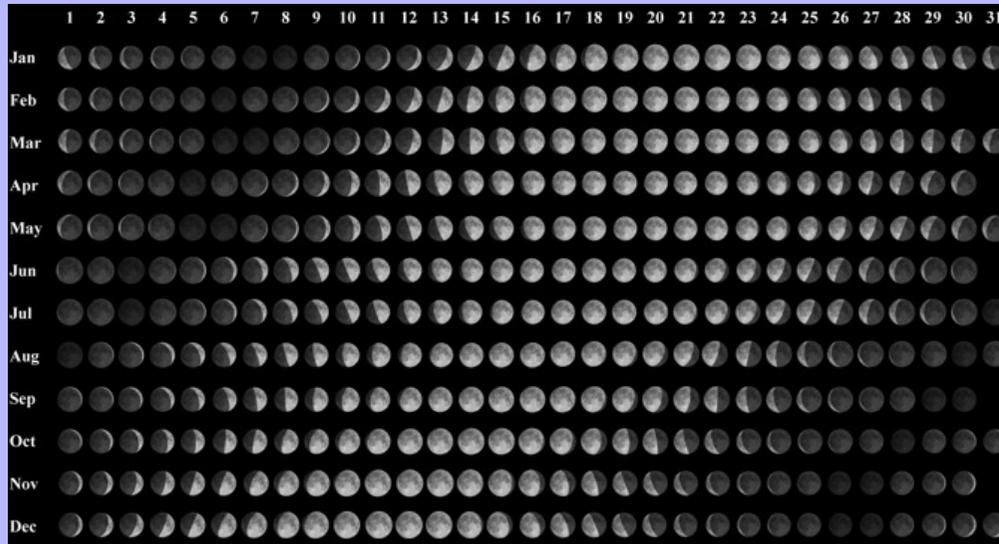
Because Viking people lived outside so much, they could read the Sun -- just as you might read a comic book.

The Sun could tell them the time of day, the direction they were facing and the season of the year.

Remember: at 12:00 noon the Sun is always due south  
(except during Daylight Saving Time!)

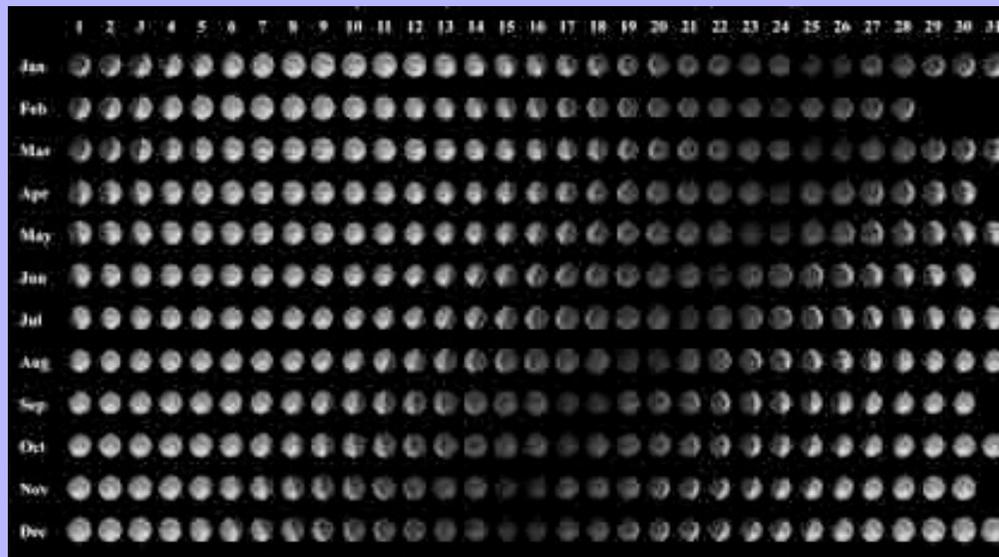
# At night the Moon tells us even more: The shape we see changes a little every day.

2008 Jan



Dec

2009



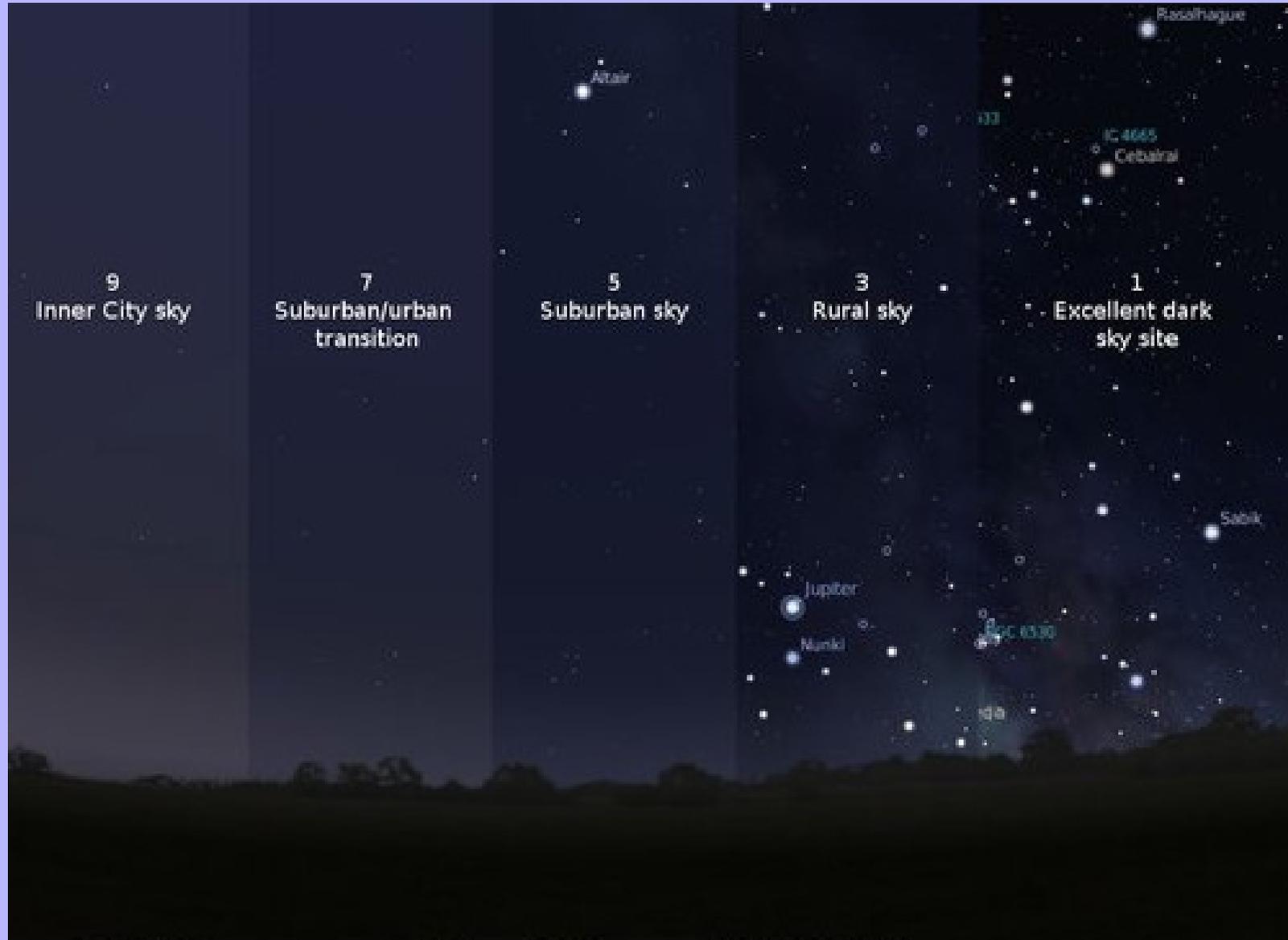
Find what shape the Moon was on your birthday.

Draw a picture in which it appears.

# The stars

Most of us never see many stars:

our cities give too much light.



# Groups of stars are called constellations

The biggest one is called the Milky Way.

The stars move clockwise around the sky, just like the Sun and Moon.



All except one: the North star. It stays nearly still, and it is always at almost exactly due North.

# How can you find the North Star?



First look for a bright constellation near the Milky Way. It is called “The Plough”, “The Big Dipper”, “Ursa Major” or many other names.



Find the last two stars of the bowl and follow the direction in which they point.

The star they point to is Polaris, the North Star.  
When you look at it, you are facing North.

Google ‘star chart’. What constellation is the North Star a part of?

**SO:** Even though the Vikings had no calendars, no watches, no GPS, no alarm clocks, diaries, or schoolbells, they could still tell

- what time of year it was,
- what time of day it was,
- where they were going.

Go out and look at the sky. Can you tell what time of day it is? Is the sun high or low in the sky? What does this tell you about the time of year? If you were a Viking boy or girl, what would you be doing at this time of day and year? Write a story about it.

Once land was out of sight, sailors relied on the Sun, Moon and stars as guides. But they had other clues, too.

## I. Winds

1. West. This is our main wind. It is often warm and damp and brings us rain. It comes to us from the Atlantic Ocean.

2. The East wind is cold and very dry. It brings us clear, biting winter weather. This wind comes to us from Siberia.

3. The North wind is blustery, cold and powerful. It comes from the North Pole.

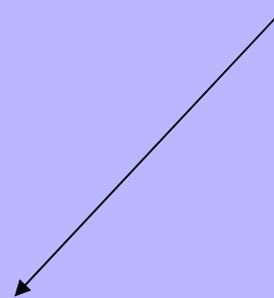
4. The South wind is warm and gentle. It comes to us from Africa.

Feel the wind when you are on your next break outside. Try to describe it. Write a story about where it has been and what it has seen while blowing along.

## II. Clouds



Have you ever noticed how big fluffy clouds tend to gather over high ground?



At sea you can tell where islands are by just such clouds.



### III. The Ocean

The water in the ocean is not all the same.



Even far out to sea, water coming from big rivers or flowing in the Gulf Stream is quite different in temperature, colour and saltiness than the other water around it.

Floating bits of driftwood or land plants are a sign that land is near. So are land birds flying overhead or landing on the ship to rest.



Floating driftwood or land plants are a sign that land is near.



So  
are  
land  
birds

The Vikings remembered this sort of information by putting it into their stories.

“They sailed from Iceland before a southwest wind for three days...

“Then the wind failed and fog set in. ...

“When they saw the sun again and were able to get their bearings they hoisted sail again and after a day’s sailing they sighted land.”

-- The Vikings’ first glimpse of America,  
described in the Greenland Saga

# Artificial navigation aids

**Weather Vanes**

**Bearing Circle**



**Sunstone**

**Sunboard**



**Semi-Wheel**

The Vikings also used instruments for finding their way.

You can google information about these at

<http://www.viking.no/e/travels/navigation/e-instru.html> or under

Gary's Nautical Information:  
Viking navigation:

<http://nauticalinformation.blogspot.com/2009/04/viking-navigation.html>