

Emergent dynamic chirality in a thermally driven artificial spin ratchet

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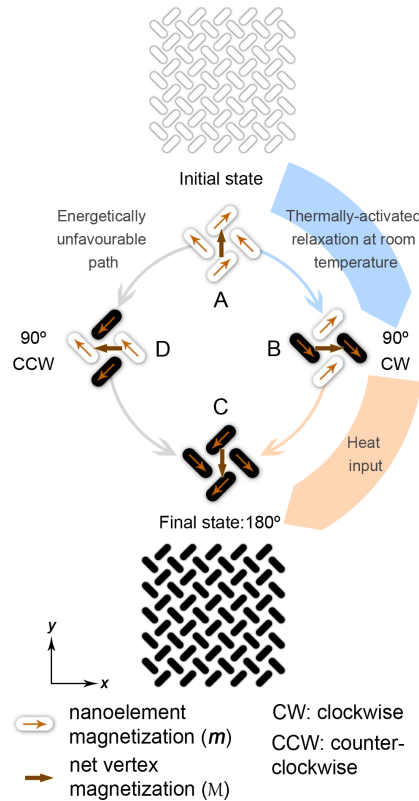
Modern nanostructure fabrication techniques have opened the possibility to create novel functional materials, whose properties transcend that of their constituent elements. In particular, tuning the magnetostatic interactions in geometrically-frustrated arrangements of nanoelements called artificial spin ice^{1,2} can lead to specific collective behaviour³ including emergent magnetic monopoles^{4,5}, charge screening^{6,7} and transport^{8,9} as well as magnonic response¹⁰⁻¹². Here, we demonstrate a spin-ice based active material in which energy is converted into unidirectional dynamics. Using x-ray photoemission electron microscopy we show that the collective rotation of the average magnetisation proceeds in a unique sense during thermal relaxation. Our simulations demonstrate that this emergent chiral behaviour is driven by the

29 **topology of the magnetostatic field at the edges of the nanomagnet array,**
30 **resulting in an asymmetric energy landscape. In addition, a bias field can be**
31 **used to [modify the sense of rotation](#) of the average magnetisation. This opens**
32 **the possibility of implementing a magnetic Brownian ratchet¹³⁻¹⁴, which may**
33 **find applications [in novel nanoscale devices, such as magnetic nanomotors,](#)**
34 **actuators, sensors or memory cells.**

35 Chirality is a ubiquitous phenomenon in nature present in a variety of systems, from
36 elementary particles, through the charge-parity violation of the weak interaction, to
37 biomolecules whose function is defined by their handedness. In artificial systems,
38 such as optical metamaterials, structural chirality can be exploited to control light-
39 matter interactions and produce circularly polarized light¹⁵. In ferromagnets and
40 antiferromagnets, the Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interaction can give rise to chiral spin
41 textures¹⁶ and lead to non-reciprocal dynamics¹⁷. While most studied phenomena
42 rely on a static view of chirality – *[Is a system superimposable to its mirror image?](#)* –
43 this definition can be extended to include electric and magnetic fields as well as
44 dynamic properties¹⁸. In this context, *dynamic* chirality applies to both chiral as well
45 as achiral objects that display a preferred sense of rotation. In classical mechanics,
46 an example is the rattleback: a spinning top that only rotates in one direction, while in
47 chemistry, the interactions between an adsorbed molecule and a crystal surface can
48 lead to the rotation of the molecule in a preferred direction¹⁹.

49 Here we present an example of emergent dynamic chirality in [an artificial spin ice](#)
50 system – a ‘chiral ice’. Schematically represented in Fig. 1, the system consists of a
51 two-dimensional arrangement of lithographically patterned single-domain
52 nanomagnets in which the magnetisation points in one of two orientations along the
53 magnet long axis due to shape anisotropy¹. The choice of the array design is such
54 that it is structurally chiral, *i.e.* it cannot be superimposed onto its mirror image, when
55 considering the edges of the array. The two-dimensional character of the system is

56 constrained by the shape anisotropy of the nanomagnets (see Methods). Each vertex
57 is associated with four nanomagnets oriented at a 90° angle with respect to each
58 other and the net magnetisation is the sum of the individual magnetisation vectors of
59 the four elements within a vertex. We observe that, after applying and removing a
60 sufficiently large external field to saturate the array (see Methods), the thermally
61 activated relaxation at room temperature is characterized by the rotation of the net
62 magnetisation at individual vertices in a unique direction: from state A to state B, as
63 illustrated in Fig. 1. No statistically significant fraction of the vertices evolves from
64 state A to state D, thus defining a ratchet in which the magnetostatic energy supplied
65 by the saturating field is transformed into the clockwise rotation of the average
66 magnetisation. This is a realisation of active matter: an out of equilibrium system that
67 locally converts energy into directed motion^{20,21}. In the presence of a small bias field,
68 heating allows the vertices to evolve into state C (Fig 1, array with dark contrast). In
69 thermal equilibrium, a preferred direction of rotation does not occur due to
70 microscopic reversibility. Chiral evolution is however possible if the system is far from
71 equilibrium and in the presence of an asymmetric potential²². Using micromagnetic
72 simulations, we find that an asymmetry is indeed generated in our system as a result
73 of the topology of the stray field of the nanomagnet array. At the edges of the array,
74 the stray field gives rise to emergent patterns, whose specific rearrangement during
75 the thermal evolution can decrease the energy of the system, reminiscent of the role
76 of magnetic surface charges in a ferromagnet. It is the energy decrease that
77 accompanies the reordering of these 'emergent charges' that drives the chiral
78 dynamics of the system during the thermal relaxation.



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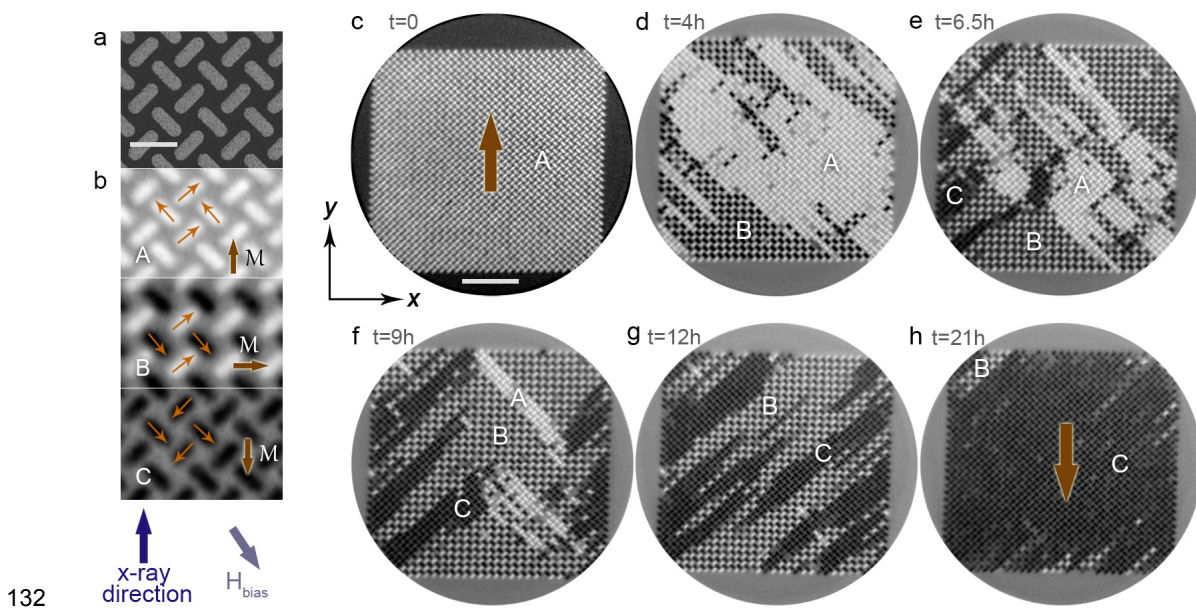
80 **Fig. 1: Schematic representation of the chiral ice and evolution of the net magnetization at**
 81 **individual vertices within the array.** The thermally activated evolution after initial saturation along the
 82 +y direction (state A) is shown, with the white or black colour, respectively indicating the direction of the
 83 magnetisation m toward the positive or negative y axis. The thin orange arrows represent the
 84 magnetization within the nanoelements while the net magnetisation at each individual vertex, M , is
 85 indicated by the large brown arrows at the centre of the vertices. The thermal relaxation at room
 86 temperature takes place stepwise via a clockwise (CW) rotation of the net magnetisation by 90° to state
 87 B and is indicated by the blue arrows. When the system is heated above room temperature in the
 88 presence of a bias field, the average magnetisation can locally rotate further (orange arrows), to state C.
 89 Considering the evolution from state A, state D statistically occurs with very low probability. The net
 90 vertex magnetisation therefore consistently rotates clockwise.

91 The experimental system consists of a finite array of elongated Permalloy
 92 nanomagnets arranged on a square grid as illustrated in Fig. 2a. An image of the full
 93 array is shown in Supplementary Information S1. We use soft x-ray photoemission
 94 electron microscopy (PEEM) exploiting x-ray magnetic circular dichroism (XMCD) to
 95 image the magnetic state of the individual nanomagnets. In the XMCD images (Fig.
 96 2b), the nanomagnets in which the magnetisation is parallel to the direction of the x-
 97 rays display a bright contrast, whereas nanomagnets in which the magnetisation is

98 reversed display a dark contrast. The homogeneous XMCD contrast for each
99 nanomagnet confirms that they are in a single-domain state. The nanomagnets are
100 sufficiently thin (see Methods), such that thermal energy can overcome the energy
101 barrier to switch between the two possible single domain states at room temperature.
102 The thickness is chosen so that the switching rates are comparable to the PEEM
103 measurement time scale^{23,24}. We first apply a saturating magnetic field, H_{sat} (see
104 Methods), such that, after its removal, the average remanent magnetisation of the
105 array points along the positive y direction (Fig. 2c, where all nanomagnets display a
106 bright contrast). The measured time evolution of the magnetisation over a period of
107 21 hours is shown in Fig. 2d-h in the presence of a weak bias field, as indicated in
108 Fig. 2 (see Methods). The formation of regions with ‘checkerboard’ magnetic contrast
109 pattern observed in Fig. 2d indicates that the average magnetisation at these vertices
110 has evolved from state A to state B (see also Fig. 2b for a detailed view of state B),
111 and have hence rotated by 90° in the clockwise (CW) direction. The evolution slows
112 down considerably after ca. 4 hours, indicating that the system approaches thermal
113 equilibrium, as explained in Supplementary Information S2. Heating the sample by a
114 few Kelvin ensures that the thermal evolution, and therefore the rotation of vertices
115 from state A to B, continues while vertices already in state B evolve into state C (dark
116 contrast regions in Fig. 2e where the net magnetisation has locally rotated by 180°).
117 Throughout the evolution, the rotation of the net vertex magnetisation M (see Fig. 2b)
118 starts at the edges of the array and propagates towards its centre. The heat-assisted
119 rotation continues until the magnetisation in the array has mostly rotated by 180° with
120 respect to state A (Fig. 2h). The quantitative evolution of the different vertex types (A,
121 B and C) as well as the heating schedule are shown in Supplementary Information
122 S3.

123 To confirm that the observed chiral behaviour is a magnetostatically-driven effect, we
124 performed similar measurements on systems with a larger relative distance between

125 nanomagnets, in which the strength of the magnetostatic interaction was reduced,
 126 and found that the thermal evolution became achiral (see Supplementary Information
 127 S4). We also note that we did not observe any preferred direction of rotation in
 128 structures consisting of a single vertex with four nanomagnets, despite their structural
 129 chirality. A chiral structure by itself is therefore not sufficient to generate the observed
 130 dynamics: in the following we show that the dynamics is driven by the existence of an
 131 emergent asymmetric magnetostatic energy landscape.

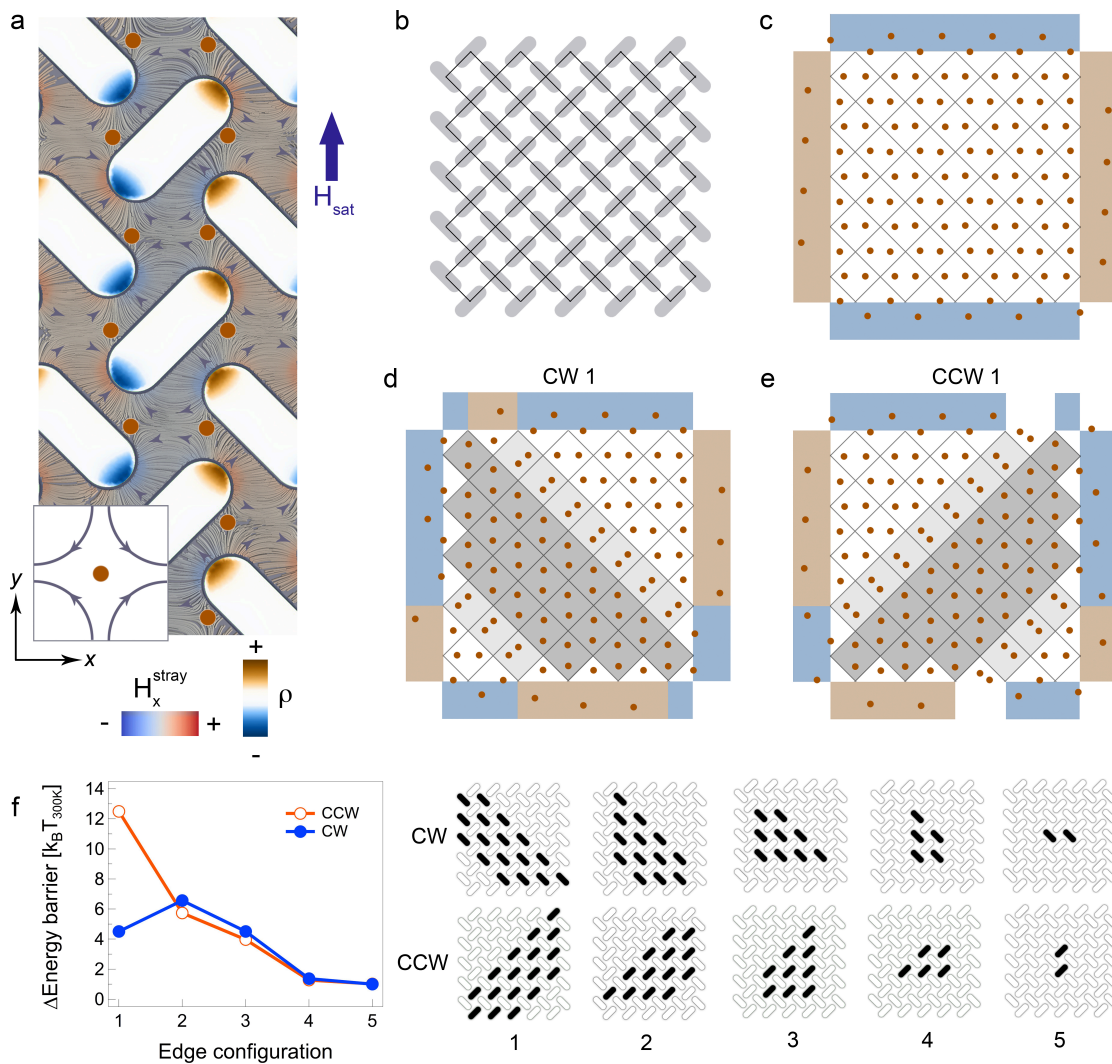


133 **Fig. 2: Measured clockwise evolution of the magnetisation following saturation along the +y**
 134 **direction.** (a) Top: Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of a region of the investigated array.
 135 The scale bar represents 600 nm. (b) XMCD contrast for states A, B and C, with arrows showing the
 136 orientation of the magnetisation for selected nanomagnets and the net vertex magnetisation in each
 137 case, indicated with a larger brown arrow and denoted M . (c) XMCD image of the array following
 138 saturation along the +y direction. The vertices are in state A with the average magnetisation within the
 139 array indicated by the large brown arrow. The detailed magnetic configuration of state A is shown in (b).
 140 The scalebar represents 5 μm and the field of view is of 25 μm . The contrast was adjusted for better
 141 visibility. (d-h) Time evolution of the magnetisation in the presence of a bias field. The magnitude of H_{bias}
 142 is between 50 μT and 80 μT , in the indicated direction. In (d), thermal relaxation at room temperature
 143 gives rise to domains of vertices in state B, mainly nucleating from the array edges and whose detailed
 144 magnetic configuration is shown in (b). The sample temperature was subsequently increased by a few
 145 Kelvin for four hours to ensure that the magnetisation reversals continue, as seen in (e-g). In (e),
 146 domains of vertices in state C [shown in panel (b)] nucleate from the edges of the array. Around $t = 15$
 147 hours, the sample was heated again to achieve a close-to-complete 180° reversal of the magnetisation,
 148 observed in (h).

149 We performed micromagnetic simulations to qualitatively understand why the
150 clockwise evolution of the magnetisation is favoured over the counterclockwise
151 evolution. The simulated system is a finite system identical to the one shown in Fig.
152 1, with the same geometry as the experimentally studied one, but with fewer magnets
153 due to the computational cost of simulating the entire experimental array (see
154 Methods). We consider the system without the bias field in order to determine its
155 intrinsic thermal behaviour. Fig. 3a is a close-up of a section of the simulated array,
156 following saturation and removal of the field \mathbf{H}_{sat} (equivalent to state A in Fig. 2). The
157 magnetostatic volume charges, $\rho = -\nabla \cdot \mathbf{M}$, are plotted inside the nanomagnets
158 along with the generated stray field outside the nanomagnets. The stray field displays
159 a complex topology owing to the presence of antivortex patterns. Antivortices are
160 two-dimensional structures characterised by a field distribution in which the direction
161 of the field revolves clockwise around a central point²⁵ as schematically illustrated in
162 the inset of Fig. 3a, where the centre of the structure is indicated with an orange dot.
163 Because antivortices typically occur inside ferromagnets, we refer to the observed
164 stray field patterns as *virtual* antivortices, *i.e.* whose centre is located outside the
165 nanomagnets²⁶. Such virtual structures have previously been reported to play a role
166 in the stability of magnetisation patterns²⁵ as well as in the dynamics of coupled
167 systems²⁷. Considering the entire simulated array (Fig. 3b), the distribution of the
168 virtual antivortices within the system following saturation is plotted in Fig. 3c. The
169 overall stray field topology effectively forms a virtual antivortex crystal, in which the
170 antivortices, represented by orange dots, display an *ordered arrangement* within the
171 bulk of the array. At the edges, the distribution of the virtual antivortices breaks the
172 symmetry of the bulk arrangement. Moreover, the distribution of the virtual
173 antivortices is different when comparing the horizontal edges (top and bottom;
174 highlighted in blue) with the vertical edges (left and right; highlighted in red). The
175 virtual antivortex distribution for a partial clockwise rotation of the vertex
176 magnetisation by 90° (state B) along four diagonals of the array is given in Fig 3d.

177 This corresponds to the magnetic state labelled 'CW 1' in Fig. 3f where the four
178 diagonals can be seen and which is representative of experimentally observed
179 configurations. Within the bulk of the simulated array, the arrangement of the virtual
180 antivortices is modified: in domains where the net vertex magnetisation has rotated
181 by 90° (dark grey regions), the antivortex stray field patterns are also rotated by 90° .
182 At the edges of such domains (light grey regions), the antivortices are rotated by 45° ,
183 mirroring the rotation of the average magnetisation of those vertices. It is, however,
184 along the array edges that the most significant changes take place: while the number
185 of virtual antivortices remains constant, they have been rearranged compared to Fig.
186 3c. This is analogous to the situation in a finite-sized ferromagnet, where the stray
187 field energy can be minimised through the rearrangement of surface charges,
188 $\sigma = \mathbf{M} \cdot \mathbf{n}$ (where \mathbf{n} is a normal vector to the surface), and result in the formation of
189 domains [within the ferromagnet](#). The rearrangement of the virtual antivortices in
190 alternating [patterns](#) along the array edges is thus reminiscent of the pole avoidance
191 principle in ferromagnets, which leads to the minimization of the magnetostatic
192 energy through a reduction of the total magnetic charge. In the studied system the
193 virtual antivortices [thus](#) function as emergent surface charges whose rearrangement,
194 through the rotation of the magnetisation, minimises the total energy of the system
195 during relaxation. In Fig. 3e, the emergent charge distribution is given for a system
196 with four diagonals along which the average magnetisation has rotated
197 counterclockwise. This distribution corresponds to the magnetic state labelled 'CCW
198 1' in Fig. 3f, where the vertices along those diagonals are in state D (see Fig. 1).
199 When compared to Fig. 3d, the overall virtual antivortex structure is generally
200 mirrored (along an axis defined by the saturation direction, y), except at the edges,
201 where their distribution is not mirrored. Our simulations show that these differences
202 lead to an asymmetric energy landscape in which the energy of the system
203 decreases more efficiently through the clockwise (CW) rotation of the net vertex
204 magnetisation at the edges than through the counterclockwise (CCW) rotation. We

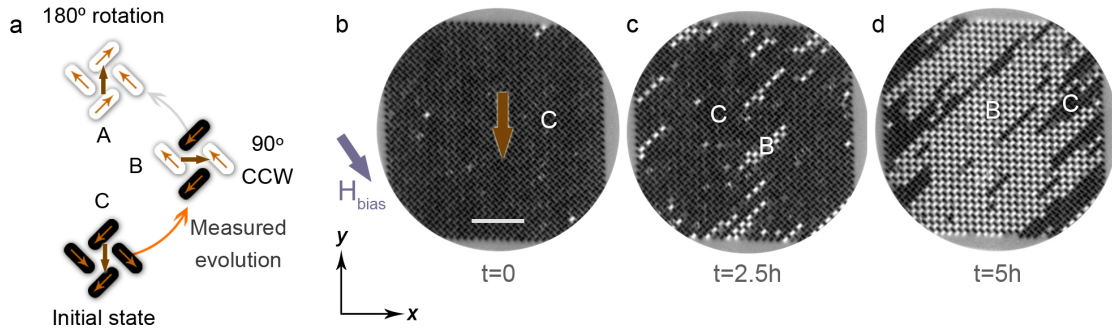
205 plot in Fig. 3f the relative difference in energy barriers at 300 K between the initial
 206 state (Fig. 3c) and the states in Figs. 3d and e, which are labelled as ‘CW 1’ and
 207 ‘CCW 1’. The energy barrier to access the clockwise state is lower, thus making it
 208 more probable. The energy barriers are also plotted for configurations in which
 209 nanomagnets at the edges of the array have not switched. **We find that, in these**
 210 **cases,** the energy barriers for the clockwise and counterclockwise rotations of the net
 211 vertex magnetisation become equal. These results demonstrate that the chiral
 212 behaviour is driven by the edges of the system and that the observed initial clockwise
 213 rotation of the net vertex magnetisation following saturation is due to the intrinsically
 214 asymmetric energy landscape of the system.



215

216 **Fig. 3: Simulated stray field structure and energy barriers for clockwise and counterclockwise**
217 **rotations of the average magnetisation.** (a) Stray field configuration for a portion of the simulated
218 nanomagnet array in state A, following saturation with the field H_{sat} . The centres of the virtual
219 antivortices are highlighted by orange dots and the magnetic volume charges (ρ) within the single-
220 domain nanomagnets are plotted using the blue-brown colormap. The x component of the stray field,
221 H_x^{stray} , is indicated by the blue-red colormap. An antivortex structure is schematically shown in the
222 bottom inset. (b) Wire frame representation of the array lattice. (c) Distribution of the virtual antivortices
223 (orange dots) in the array in state A, following saturation along the +y direction. The different antivortex
224 distributions along the array edges are highlighted in red and blue. In (d), the virtual antivortex
225 distribution is plotted for a configuration in which the average magnetisation along four diagonals (dark
226 grey regions) was rotated clockwise by 90° (state B). The corresponding magnetic state of the array is
227 given in (f): configuration ‘CW 1’. (e) Virtual antivortex distribution for a configuration in which the net
228 vertex magnetisation along four diagonals is rotated counterclockwise by 90° , corresponding to the
229 magnetic state ‘CCW 1’ in (f). In the white regions along the array edges in (e), the stray field distribution
230 is identical to the one in the bulk. (f) Relative energy barriers, starting from the remanent state (a), for
231 the shown configurations 1 – 5 in which the reversal of the magnetisation in edge nanoelements is
232 gradually set back. The black nanomagnets have switched, using the same colour convention, as in Fig.
233 1. The energies are normalized to configuration 5, where the barriers for the CW and CCW rotations of
234 the net vertex magnetisation are identical.

235 The evolution of the average magnetisation during relaxation at room temperature
236 eventually leads to thermal equilibrium. The measured continuous clockwise
237 evolution of the magnetisation in the experiment towards state C is thus enabled by
238 the bias field, which effectively modifies the energy landscape, such that the system
239 can access state C upon moderate heating. We have also found that the bias field
240 can, in some cases, be used to reverse the dynamic chirality. Indeed, by saturating a
241 system with identical geometry to the one in Fig. 2 (see Methods) in the opposite
242 direction (along the $-y$ direction, Fig. 4a) we observe that **in the presence of H_{bias}** the
243 relaxation can proceed through the counterclockwise rotation of the net vertex
244 magnetisation (Fig. 4b-d). It is thus in principle possible to use a bias field to enhance
245 the ‘built-in’ clockwise rotation or to favour the counterclockwise sense of rotation of
246 the average magnetisation by exploiting the asymmetric magnetostatic potential
247 generated by the edges.



248

249 **Fig. 4: Counterclockwise evolution of the system following saturation in the $-y$ direction.** (a)
 250 When the array is saturated along the $-y$ direction, the magnetisation evolves counterclockwise, *i.e.*
 251 from state C to state B (orange arrow), in the presence of the bias field H_{bias} . (b-d) Measured time-
 252 evolution of the magnetisation. In (b), the array is in state C after saturation and the average
 253 magnetisation is indicated by the large brown arrow. The evolution towards the state shown in (c) occurs
 254 at room temperature. Heating the sample for 2.5 hours allows accessing the state shown in (d). The
 255 rotation from state B to state A was not observed owing to the orientation of the bias field. We note that
 256 the counterclockwise rotation from state C to state B is observed in about 20% of the measured
 257 samples. Indeed, starting from state C, the counterclockwise evolution favoured by the bias field
 258 competes with the natural clockwise evolution of the system and can cause the array to remain, on
 259 average, in state C. The scalebar represents 5 μm .

260 The magnetostatic interaction offers a known route for symmetry breaking in
 261 ferromagnets that can lead to rich behaviour, such as surface and curvature-induced
 262 non-reciprocal spin wave^{28,29} and domain wall^{30,31} propagation. In contrast, in the
 263 studied artificial spin system the origin of the thermally activated unidirectional
 264 rotation of the average magnetisation is due to the dynamic rearrangement of
 265 emergent magnetic charges, which result from the geometry of the array edges. This
 266 introduces the possibility of exploiting artificial spin ices with tailored edge geometry
 267 and field-tunable dynamics as functional, active materials within devices that convert
 268 heat into motion, such as mesoscopic motors^{20,22} or rotors³². It is also conceivable to
 269 include such a spin ratchet within hybrid multistacks, found for example in MRAM, in
 270 which the chiral array would form the active layer and the thermally activated rotation
 271 of the magnetisation in the array (triggered for example by means of laser pulses)
 272 could lead to a change in resistance across the stack without requiring a phase
 273 change material³³.

274 **Methods**

275 **Sample Fabrication**

276 Finite arrays of Permalloy ($\text{Ni}_{83}\text{Fe}_{17}$) nanomagnets were prepared on a silicon (100)
277 substrate using electron beam lithography in conjunction with thermal evaporation at
278 room temperature and a base pressure of 2×10^{-7} mbar followed by lift-off. The
279 evaporation resulted in a nanocrystalline Permalloy film, which was capped by a 3
280 nm aluminium layer to protect against oxidation. The Permalloy film was evaporated
281 with a thickness gradient along the sample in order to ensure the presence of a
282 thermally active region at room temperature adequate for the PEEM
283 measurements²⁴. Array thicknesses were measured using Atomic Force Microscopy
284 (AFM). The thermally active arrays in Fig. 2 and 4 had identical geometries and were
285 manufactured from nanomagnets with length and width of 470 nm and 170 nm, and
286 with a lattice constant of 425 nm (centre-to-centre distance of neighbouring
287 nanomagnets: [see Supplementary Information S1](#)). The measured thickness of the
288 arrays was: 2.2 nm in Fig.1 and 2.7 nm in Fig. 4. The thicknesses were uniform
289 across each array. The magnetisation in both arrays rotated clockwise when
290 saturated along the +y direction, demonstrating that the thickness variation between
291 the arrays did not affect the sense of rotation of the magnetisation. The array in
292 Supplementary Information S3 had a thickness of 2.4 nm. The chiral structure of the
293 system is defined by the geometry of the array edges as well as by its two-
294 dimensional character due to the shape anisotropy induced by the low Permalloy
295 thickness, which ensures that the magnetisation is confined to the plane of the
296 sample.

297

298 **Experiment**

299 Magnetic imaging was carried out with the photoemission electron microscopy
300 endstation³⁴ at the Surface/Interface: Microscopy (SIM) beamline of the Swiss Light
301 Source, Paul Scherrer Institute and at the PEEM-3 photoemission electron
302 microscope at beamline 11.0.1 of the Advanced Light Source, Berkeley National
303 Laboratory. Employing XMCD, the system was imaged by tuning the x-ray energy to
304 the Fe L₃-edge. The magnetic contrast images were obtained by pixelwise division of
305 two consecutive images recorded with **right and left** circular polarizations. The
306 resulting contrast is proportional to $\mathbf{k} \cdot \mathbf{m}$, where \mathbf{k} is the propagation vector of the x-
307 rays and \mathbf{m} the local magnetisation vector³⁵. The sample orientation was optimized to
308 maximize the contrast. The uniform contrast within the nanomagnets indicates that
309 they were in a single-domain state. Nanomagnets with grey contrast were switching
310 faster than the measurement time. For observations of the magnetisation reversal at
311 the Swiss Light Source, the samples were mounted on a copper (nonmagnetic)
312 holder that allowed radiative heating of the sample and the temperature was
313 measured using a PT100 sensor placed close to the sample. During the experiments
314 the sample was exposed to a small constant bias field (H_{bias}) with an estimated in-
315 plane magnitude of 50 – 80 μT based on Hall probe measurements. The arrays were
316 saturated *in-situ* using a permanent magnet inserted into the PEEM chamber. The
317 saturating field strength at the location of the sample was of $H_{\text{sat}}=15$ mT in the plane
318 of the sample. The magnet was retracted from the chamber after saturation.
319 Measurements at the Advanced Light Source were carried out by saturating the
320 sample both *ex-situ* as well as in a holder with a built-in electromagnet, which
321 allowed us to apply fields up to 20 mT.

322 **Micromagnetic simulations**

323 Fully three-dimensional micromagnetic simulations based on a hybrid finite-
324 element/boundary-element method^{36,37} have been carried out on a system of 60
325 nanomagnets, each with lateral dimensions 235 nm \times 85 nm (50% of experimental

326 size) and 2 nm thick. The structure was discretized using a tetrahedral mesh with an
 327 average edge length of 1 nm. The material parameters for Permalloy were: saturation
 328 polarization $\mu_0 M_S = 1$ T, exchange constant $A = 1.3 \times 10^{-11}$ J/m and zero
 329 magnetocrystalline anisotropy $K = 0$ J/m³. The total Gibbs magnetic free energy is
 330 given by:

$$E(\mathbf{m}) = \int \left(A \left[\sum_k^{x,y,z} (\nabla m_k)^2 \right] + K[1 - (\mathbf{m} \cdot \mathbf{a})^2] - \frac{1}{2} \mu_0 M_S (\mathbf{H}_{\text{dem}} \cdot \mathbf{m}) - \mu_0 M_S (\mathbf{H}_{\text{ext}} \cdot \mathbf{m}) \right) dV.$$

331 E is the sum of the exchange energy, the anisotropy energy, the [demagnetising](#)
 332 energy, and the Zeeman energy. $\mathbf{m} = \mathbf{M}/M_S$ is the reduced magnetisation, A is the
 333 exchange constant, K the magnetocrystalline anisotropy, \mathbf{a} is a unit vector along the
 334 magnetocrystalline anisotropy direction, \mathbf{H}_{dem} is the [demagnetising](#) field and \mathbf{H}_{ext} an
 335 external field. The integral is over the magnetic volume. In the performed simulations
 336 $H_{\text{ext}}=0$.

337 To understand the thermal stability and transition probability from the remanent state,
 338 following the application of a saturating field, to different magnetic states, *i.e.*
 339 configurations resulting from clockwise and counterclockwise rotations, we used the
 340 nudged elastic band method to find the lowest possible energy transition path
 341 between the two states³⁸. We start from a magnetisation state, \mathbf{M}_1 , where the
 342 magnetic system occupies a local minimum. Through thermal activation, the system
 343 can overcome the local energy barrier and move towards a different minimum state,
 344 \mathbf{M}_2 , following either clockwise or counterclockwise rotation of the vertex
 345 magnetisation. The difference between the local minima and the saddle point in the
 346 energy path gives the energy barrier that has to be overcome to move to the next
 347 local minima; this determines the stability of the magnetic state. An optimization

348 algorithm is applied until, at any point along the path, the gradient of the energy is
349 only pointing along the path. This represents the path with the greatest statistical
350 weight. The state with the lowest energy barrier has the highest probability of being
351 reached.

352 **Data availability**

353 The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding
354 author S.G. upon reasonable request.

355 **Contributions**

356 RLS and SG conceived [the spin ice geometry and](#) the experiment. SG, AF, CD and
357 JC prepared the samples. SG, CD, JC, JB, AK, AF, RC, EK, AS, and NB performed
358 the experiments and analysed the experimental data. GH, SG and JB performed and
359 evaluated the micromagnetic simulations. SG, RLS, GH, JB, CD, AK, YM and LJH
360 interpreted the results. SG wrote the manuscript with input from all coauthors. All
361 authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

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373 Source, Paul Scherrer Institut, Villigen, Switzerland. This research used resources of
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378 [06CH11357.](#)

379 The authors have no competing financial interests.

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