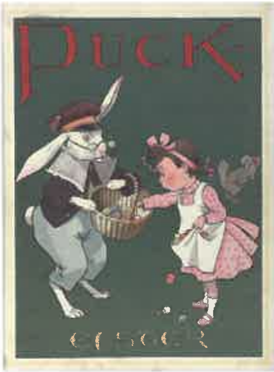
HOPPING DOWN THE BUNNY TRAIL

Researchers in England Search For the Origins Of the Easter Bunny

by Mark Hawthorne



Glackens, L. M., Artist. Puck Easter / L.M. Glackens., 1903. N.Y.: J. Ottmann Lith. Co., Puck Bldg., April 8. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2010652252

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Our understanding of the natural world is often informed by the stories, traditions, and even the graphic art and symbols we grew up with. Indeed, the depictions of Paleolithic animals found on the limestone walls of caves in France—some of the earliest paintings we know of—speak to a prehistoric need for humans to comprehend and engage with nature.

Such an imperative can also be seen in our modern world, where concepts about animals and our relationship with them evolve over time. One of the clearest examples of this evolution is the Easter Bunny, that long-eared patron of jelly beans and chocolate eggs who would seem to have nothing to do with the resurrection of Jesus but everything to do with childhood delight and, perhaps, a few upset stomachs.

In a project aptly named Easter E.g. (e.g. as in "example"), researchers from England's Oxford University, the University of Exeter, the University of Leicester, and the University of Nottingham are tracing the history of the Easter Bunny to its roots as a kind of test case to better understand how ideas become accepted by the mainstream—especially ideas that aren't native to a given country. Why is it, they wonder, that old ideas from other cultures, such as Christianity, introduced by the Romans, are accepted and even nostalgic, while recently imported ideas are considered "alien" and "invasive"? The answers could help us understand shifting attitudes on religion, conservation, and even nationalism.

The Easter Bunny makes a good case study since the animals associated with the Christian celebration of Easter, namely, rabbits, brown hares, and chicks, aren't native to England, but because they migrated to Britain sometime in the long-forgotten past, they are fondly embraced as part of British identity. In contrast to the Easter Bunny, newer arrivals onto the British Isles, such as the "Americanized" version of Halloween, with costumed children going door to door in search of candy, are frowned upon. Ancient communities often believed animals from remote realms possessed powerful, even supernatural, qualities. It's easy to see how the introduction of Christianity could have resulted in the "exotic" rabbit becoming a symbol of early religious festivals.

"What we're trying to show with our Easter project is these kinds of introduced ideas have been happening for millennia," says Naomi Sykes, professor of archeology at the University of Exeter and principal investigator in the study. "We just accept other ones because they happened a long, long time ago, like Christianity. The same is true with a lot of the animals we see. So long as the animals were introduced a long time ago, we accept them as morally part of our wildlife. But anything that's come in recent years, such as grey squirrels (brought to Britain in the 1870s), are disliked and people want to see them eradicated. It's a way of thinking about ideas through animals."

Researchers with the Easter E.g. project have determined the Easter Bunny as a symbol is not that old, at least in the context of human history. Luke John Murphy, a historical linguist at the University of Leicester, says the Easter Bunny originated in northern Germany probably sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. "He didn't start out as a bunny; he started out as a hare," he says. "And it was as a hare, which he still is in Germany, that he gets imported to Great Britain." Dr. Murphy adds the Easter Hare had displaced an earlier symbol, the Easter Fox (*Osterfuchs*), a character possibly inspired by the fox's habit of stealing and burying eggs.

What animal may have preceded the fox as an Easter figure is anyone's guess, says Philip A. Shaw, senior lecturer in English language at the University of Leicester. "We don't really know what the original Easter animal was—or even if there was just one, original Easter animal—but it's true that there are traditions involving other animals besides the hare." Yet, he agrees it is the hare who appears to have hopped from the European continent to the British Isles. "References to the Easter Hare in Britain seem to begin appearing in the nineteenth century and are usually mentioned as German traditions at the time, which tempts me to suppose that this may have been another German tradition, like the Christmas tree, introduced by the Victorians."

Complicating the challenge of tracing the Easter Bunny's history in England is that it's very difficult to differentiate ancient symbols of the mountain hare, which is native to the Scottish Highlands; the brown hare, which probably arrived in Britain during the Early/Middle Iron Age (800–100 BCE), possibly from Germany; and the rabbit. Rabbits were first introduced in Great Britain by the Romans around the year 0 CE, but that initial population didn't become established, leading to another introduction sometime in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century—though from where has yet to be confirmed. Figuring out these lagomorph timelines can be tricky, as well. Because rabbits burrow deep underground, archeologists find their bones resting amid layers of soil that date to periods earlier than the skeletons are actually from. "It's a nightmare," says Dr. Sykes, "and I think it's one reason there has been so little research done on rabbits—in Britain, at least."

Despite being non-natives, rabbits and brown hares are well-loved in the British Isles. "In Britain, you have this incredible cultural connection to the brown hare, especially, and then to the rabbit on top of that," says the University of Exeter's Carly Ameen, an archaeological scientist specializing in zooarchaeology. "People like Beatrix Potter have made it an icon—*Peter Rabbit*, and all these things. At the same time, there is this underlying symbol of rabbits and hares that represent something bigger about the way that we identify culturally what is native to us and what is alien."

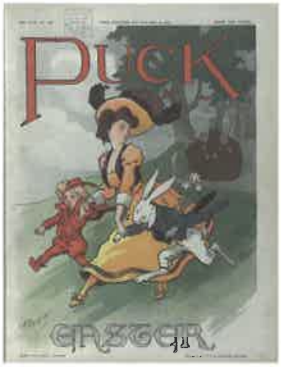
While our knowledge of how rabbits and the Easter Bunny migrated to Great Britain is currently limited, exploring these chronologies through the lens of archeology promises some exciting insights. "The history of Easter has never really been studied using archaeology before, which is why we don't yet understand the connections between the natural and cultural history of the real-life animals and that of the Easter Bunny," explains Thomas Fowler, professor of archeology at the University of Nottingham. "Examining ancient hare and rabbit bones and the cultural setting we find them in allows us to learn more about when these animals arrived, and how humans have interacted with them through time," such as our early perceptions of them and how—or if—we managed their populations. "If we can bring all this together with evidence from artifacts, genetics, history, etc., we'll arrive at a completely new understanding of how and why the Easter Bunny became part of our culture."

Although the Easter E.g. project won't examine how the Easter Bunny reached the United States, some historians speculate the tradition made its way across the Atlantic on eighteenth century voyages with German immigrants, who settled in Pennsylvania. They brought with them tales and customs of the *Osterhase* or *Oschter Haws* ("Easter Hare"), who laid eggs and distributed them to well-behaved children. Hare-shaped cakes were baked to add some sweetness to the festivities. Easter Bunny rituals eventually spread across the country, augmented by candy-filled baskets and Easter Bunny songs.

Whatever research ultimately tells us about the history and cultural significance of the Easter Bunny, the live animals the character represents are sentient beings who have their own needs and desires. With their natural affinity for animals, many children seem to understand this innately, which may be one reason the Easter Bunny continues to be such an enduring symbol. ■

To learn more about the Easter E.g. project, visit easter-origins.org.

Mark Hawthorne (markhawthorne.com) is a rabbit-lover and the author of several books, including the just-published 10th-anniversary edition of Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism.



Glackens, L. M., Artist. Puck Easter/ L.M. Glackens., 1905. N.Y.: J. Ottmann Lith. Co., Puck Bldg. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2011645693

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Sandy Parshall

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