

# Rabbit Iconography and Spiritual Relevance

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Hare

Due to their similar appearances, hares and rabbits have often been seen as interchangeable.

They have hopped through history as symbols of sexuality, fertility, luck, prosperity, rebirth, and givers of candy!

They have been seen as food, pets, pests, and amazingly amusing illumination subjects!

Here we will look at the influences these animals have had on the art and spiritual side of humans.



Rabbit

## Cryptids (Sort of Rabbits):

- **Al-Mi'raj:** A one-horned rabbit or hare from Medieval Arabic literature. It is said to cause other animals to flee.
- **Jackalope:** Jackalopes are described as an antlered, rabbit shaped cryptid of North America.
- **Wolpertingers (German):** According to German folklore, Wolpertingers can be found in the forests of Bavaria.<sup>(1)</sup> They are a result of crossbreeding between local animals. No two Wolpertinger look alike. The Wolpertinger is typically described as having the head of a rabbit, the body of a squirrel, the antlers of a deer, and the wings of a pheasant.

## Britain and Divine Law:

In 51 B.C.E., Julius Caesar, in his book "De Bello Gallico," says:

*"The Britons consider it **contrary to divine law** to eat the hare, the chicken, or the goose. They raise these, however, for their own amusement and pleasure."* <sup>(2)</sup>

## Many Deities and Folklore Figures are Associated with Hares and Rabbits, Including:

- **Americas:**
  - **Michabo The Great Hare (Algonquin):** According to Native American Algonquin myth, Michabo is the "Supreme deity, Creator of the human race. He was a shape changer who created man by mating with a muskrat" (Miller & Taub, pg 169). His messengers were the Gijigouai, the sun deities.
  - **Nanabozho (Great Lakes Ojibwe):** Also known as the Great Hare, Nanabozho is a trickster with a talent for creation, providing, and transformation.
  - **Ometochtli-Tepoztecatl (Aztec):** The Aztec god Ometochtli-Tepoztecatl is a rabbit god associated with fertility and the moon. He is the chief of the Centzon Totochtin, a group of 400 rabbit gods who presided over drunkenness.
  - **Ixchel (Mayan):** With her connection to fertility and childbirth, Ixchel uses a rabbit as her messenger to the Mayan people

- **Anglo-Saxon:**

- **Eostre (Anglo-Saxon):** This goddess was often depicted with a rabbit, symbolizing the fertility and rejuvenation of spring.

Recent archaeological research appears to confirm the worship of Eostre in parts of England and Germany, with the hare as her main symbol. The Easter bunny therefore seems to recall these pre-Christian celebrations of spring, heralded by the vernal equinox and personified by the goddess Eostre.

- **China:**

- **Chang'E:** In Chinese mythology, Chang'E is the moon goddess who is often depicted with a rabbit. The Moon Rabbit is a beloved god in China, Japan, Korea, and much of East Asia. He is said to live on the moon and grind herbs, medicine, and food for the sick and injured.

- **Christian:**

- **Mary:** The Virgin Mary is often shown with a white hare or rabbit, symbolizing that she overcame sexual temptation.

- **Egypt:**

- **Unut:** Rabbit head goddess Unut, also known as Wenut or Wenet, was a prehistoric Ancient Egyptian hare and snake goddess of fertility and new birth. <sup>(3)</sup>

The rabbit sign in Egyptian hieroglyphics represents the verb Un or Wenin, which means 'to be', 'to happen', and 'to continue'. <sup>(4)</sup>

- **Germany:**

- **Easter Hare:** A 16th century folkloric figure and symbol of Easter, depicted as a *Hare*—sometimes dressed with clothes—bringing Easter eggs". Accounts from the 1600s in Germany describe children hunting for Easter eggs hidden by the Easter Hare.
- **Holda (German):** In Teutonic myth, Holda, or Frau Holle, the sky goddess and leader of the wild hunt, was followed by a procession of hares bearing torches. <sup>(5)</sup>

- **Greece:**

- **Aphrodite:** The goddess of love, was associated with hares. In ancient Greece, men would give rabbits as love tokens to their lovers.
- **Artemis:** The goddess of the hunt was also associated with hares.
- **Eros:** Aphrodite's son Eros was often depicted hunting a hare. Eros's pursuit can be interpreted as a playful representation of love's unpredictable nature, or as a metaphor for the passionate pursuit of a lover.

## Rabbit Symbolisms:

- **The Three Hares — Infinity Symbol (*photo on right*):** China is home to the oldest discovered motif of the three hares, dating to the 6th century, in the sacred Buddhist Mogao caves near the ancient town of Dunhuang.

In a testament to the influence of the Silk Road and the exchange of ideas through commerce, this is found across the eastern hemisphere. <sup>(6)</sup> They have been found in Britain, continental Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.



- The **Year of the Rabbit** is the 4th year of the Chinese zodiac's 12 year cycle. Which last occurred in 2023. The rabbit symbolizes vigilance, wittiness, self-protection, good fortune, tranquility, and gentle nature. <sup>(7)</sup>

- In Japan, the **Moon Rabbit**, or **Jade Rabbit**, is a symbol of good luck, longevity, and benevolence.
- Throughout the **Middle East**, hares were considered auspicious animals, believed to protect women from demons while they were impure during the monthly cycle of menstruation. <sup>(8)</sup>
- The twentieth and final **trecena** (13-day “week”) of the Aztec Tonalpohualli (ceremonial count of days) is called Rabbit for its first numbered day, which is the 8th day of the veintena (20-day “month”). In Nahuatl language, Rabbit is Tochtli. It was known as Lamat (Venus, Star) in Yucatec Maya, and K’anil (or Q’anil) (Seed of Life) in Quiché Maya. The day Rabbit signifies self-sacrifice and service to something greater than oneself. <sup>(9)</sup>

## Depictions in Medieval Manuscripts:

Throughout many medieval manuscripts, hares and rabbits can be found in marginalia, often depicting them as violent foes. (Examples in the Manuscripts section of the Bibliography)

## Luck:

- In many countries and cultures the **rabbit's foot** is considered a lucky talisman. The Ancient Celts considered the rabbit divine, as it dwelled within the earth. A severed rabbit's foot was believed to be a charm for good luck
- Saying “**Rabbit Rabbit Rabbit**” as your first words on the first day of the month will bring good luck all month. <sup>(10)</sup>

## Tradition:

- In Hallaton, a village in Leicestershire, England, One tradition, known as the “**Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking**,” is a custom that continues in that village until this day. <sup>(11)</sup>

To begin with, a large hare pie made to a secret recipe is blessed at the parish church before being cut up and half of it distributed to the gathering crowd by the local vicar. This distribution is done by throwing the greasy lumps of pie into the throng, who then proceed to eat it or save it as a souvenir.

To the accompaniment of a brass band, the other half of the pie is placed into sacks and paraded through the village of Hallaton, followed closely by three men holding aloft small wooden barrels which have been filled with beer and decorated with ribbons at the Butter Cross. These are the ‘bottles’.

The procession then heads for Hare Pie Bank where the remainder of the pie is thrown and scrambled for, although few people bother doing this nowadays. All energy is reserved for the next part of the event - the bottle kicking.

## Witchcraft:

There are connections with witchcraft and Hares, a couple are:

- A well-known northern European lore called **The Stealing of the Milk Profit** (*photo on right*) describes a farmer who spots a witch who takes the form of a hare, and suckling the milk from cows. Ösma Church in Sweden has a depiction of this, dating the Time of creation of the paintings: *Early period of creation, 1460s to around 1470* <sup>(12)</sup>
- It is said that **eating hare at Easter** banishes witches.



## Funeral Rituals:

- Hares were given ritual burials alongside humans during the **Neolithic age** in Europe as a symbol of rebirth, and over a thousand years later, during the **Iron Age**, ritual burials for hares were common.
- In **Africa**, The *Dogon* peoples in Mali and the *Baule* in the Ivory Coast, rabbits represent chaos for the Dogon, and rabbit masks (**photo on right**) are typically used in funeral rituals. (13)



## Rabbits in Literature:

- Aesop's fable of The **Tortoise and the Hare** paints the hare as speedy but overconfident.
- “**Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby**” is a classic African-American folktale, part of the “Uncle Remus Stories” written by Joel Chandler Harris
- The 13th century Persian poet **Rumi** told the tale of a lion’s demise at the hands of a meek rabbit, in his work “The Masnavi”.

## Just for Fun – Idioms:

- **Dust bunnies:** Those fluffy, vaguely rabbit shaped clumps of dust that hide under your furniture.
- **First catch your hare:** The first step is to acquire something; then, determine what to do with it.
- **Going down the rabbit hole:** Getting deep into something. Coined by Lewis Carroll referring to Alice entering Wonderland by falling down a very long rabbit hole.
- **Hold with the hare and run with the hounds:** To support or attempt to placate both sides of a conflict or dispute.
- **If you run after two hares, you will catch neither:** Proverb meaning if you try to do two things at once, you will fail.
- **Mad as a March hare:** Crazy or deranged; particularly eccentric. Based on the strange antics that are the male hare’s courting behaviour displayed in March.
- **Pull a rabbit out of a hat:** Referring to the magic trick of the same name, meaning doing something unexpected, usually to resolve a difficult situation.
- **Quick like a bunny:** Doing something or going somewhere quickly, referring to rabbit’s speed.
- **Rabbit food:** Referring to eating salad or raw vegetables, characterized as insubstantial or tasteless.

## **Footnotes and Bibliography**

### **Footnotes:**

1. **Wolpertingers:** <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolpertinger>
2. **Britain and Divine Law:**  
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4. **Rabbit in Egyptian hieroglyphics:**  
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6. **Three Hares:** <https://chinesepuzzles.org/three-hares/>
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9. **Trecena:** <https://richardbalthazar.com/2024/12/08/aztec-calendar-rabbit-trecena/>
10. **Rabbit Rabbit Rabbit:** [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit\\_rabbit\\_rabbit](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit_rabbit_rabbit)
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12. **The Stealing of the Milk Profit:** <https://christermalmberg.se/pictor/kyrkor/osmo.php>
13. **The *Dogon* peoples' funeral rituals:** <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/314549>

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### **Manuscripts:**

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- <https://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/2024/03/22/medieval-rabbits-ancient-symbolism-english-migration-and-murderous-marginalia/>
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- <https://www.dannywithlove.com/blog/folklore-to-fine-art-rabbit-anthology>

### **Pottery:**

- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/458261>
- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451769>