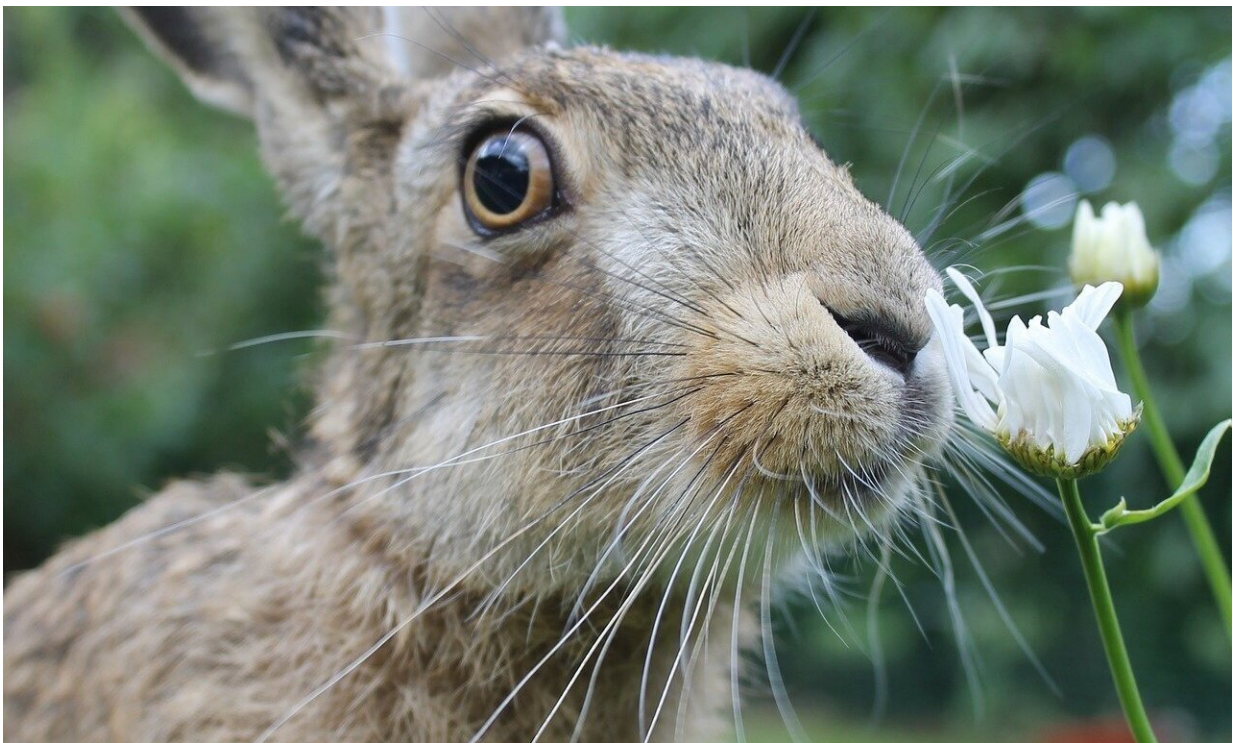


Brown hares and chickens were treated as 'gods,' not food when they arrived in Britain, research shows

April 10 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Archaeological evidence shows that the first brown hares and chickens to arrive in Britain were buried with care and intact. There is no signs of butchery on bones examined and the ongoing research suggests the two

animals were not imported for people to eat.

Work by experts from the Universities of Exeter, Leicester and Oxford is revealing when brown hares, rabbits and chickens were introduced to Britain, and how they became incorporated into modern Easter traditions.

The team has previously analyzed the earliest rabbit bone to be found in the country, which dates to the first/second century AD. New radiocarbon dates for bones found on sites in Hampshire (Houghton Down, Weston Down, Winnal Down and Winklebury Camp) and Hertfordshire (Blackhorse Road) suggests brown hares and chickens were introduced to Britain even earlier, arriving simultaneously in the Iron Age, between the fifth and the third century BC.

The discovery of buried skeletons fits historical evidence that neither animal was eaten until the Roman period, which began hundreds of years later.

Julius Caesar's *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." The third-century AD author, Dio Cassius reported that Queen Boudicca released a live hare in order to divine the outcome of her battle with the Romans, calling upon the goddess Andraste to secure their victory.

During the Roman period, both species were farmed and eaten, and rabbits were also introduced. But in AD 410 the Roman Empire withdrew from Britain causing economic collapse. Rabbits became locally extinct, while populations of chickens and brown hares crashed. Due to their scarcity at this time, chickens and hares regained their special status.

Professor Naomi Sykes, from the University of Exeter, who is leading the research, said: "Easter is an important British festival, yet none of its iconic elements are native to Britain. The idea that chickens and hares initially had religious associations is not surprising as cross-cultural studies have shown that exotic things and animals are often given supernatural status.

"Historical accounts have suggested chickens and hares were too special to be eaten and were instead associated with deities—chickens with an Iron Age god akin to Roman Mercury, and hares with an unknown female hare goddess. The religious association of hares and chickens endured throughout the Roman period.

"However archaeological evidence shows that, as their populations increased, they were increasingly eaten, and hares were even farmed as livestock. Rather than being buried as individuals, hare and chicken remains were then disposed of as food waste."

After the Romans had left Britain, people stopped hunting hares and this may explain why archaeologists have found few remains of the animal until the medieval period. By contrast, chicken populations increased. This is likely because, in the sixth century Saint Benedict forbade the consumption of meat from four-legged animals during fasting periods such as Lent. His rules were widely adopted in the tenth and eleventh centuries, increasing the popularity of chickens and eggs as fast-day foods.

Historical and archaeological evidence show rabbits were reintroduced to Britain as an elite food during the thirteenth century AD. Rabbits were increasingly common in the nineteenth-century landscape, likely contributing to their replacement of the hare as the Easter Bunny when the festival's traditions were reinvigorated during the Victorian period.

These new findings have emerged just as the country has gone into lockdown, so the team has created an Easter craft activity that can be printed out and made at home. The activity is inspired by the results and from artifacts recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Brown hares and chickens were treated as 'gods,' not food when they arrived in Britain, research shows (2020, April 10) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-brown-hares-chickens-gods-food.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.