

The Legend of the White Hare (continued)

...In Welsh legend Gwion became a hare to escape Ceridwen after he accidentally stole the wisdom she was brewing for her son. Boudicca supposedly kept a hare inside her tunic before a battle with the Romans; when she let it run free, it was seen as an omen foretelling victory for her warriors.

There are other stories: in Cornwall there is a legend that if a woman's heart has been broken and she dies forsaken, she will come back and haunt the deceiver in the form of a white hare. The hare will follow the deceiver everywhere and on most occasions will remain invisible to him. Sometimes the hare may even save him from danger but, ultimately, the white hare will cause the death of the betrayer.

Among Cornish fishermen it is said that at sundown a white hare will flit, eerie but harmless, among the up-drawn boats by the water's edge, or through the alleys of the port, as a warning to all of storms on the way.



Although rare, archaeologists have found cave art depictions of hares from Paleolithic times. Interestingly, the Egyptian hieroglyph for the verb "to be" or "existing" was a hare crouched over a squiggly line of water.



Ancient peoples found hares one of the most mysterious and perplexing animals around. Hares were thought to be hermaphrodites, male one month and female the next month. This belief about hares lived on even into the 19th Century, amongst Irish, Welsh and English farmers. The ancient Greeks asserted this was so too, and the ancient Mediterranean peoples also all believed that the male hare could become pregnant. One Greek writer named Aelianus gives an account in his writings about how a male hare was caught and as it was being cut open, they found three baby leverets almost fully formed. Whether these ancient peoples made some significant mistakes about hares or not, it is still interesting to know what they believed, because it gives insight into things like their reverence for hares, as super-fertile shape-shifters and miraculous acts of natural alchemy. For example, most ancient peoples believed that hares could be dead but come back to life again.

A hare can stand on its hind legs like a person; in distress, it utters a strange, almost human cry which is very disconcerting to the listener. Hares have regularly been observed by country folk to leap about in circles. This gave rise to the belief that if you saw a hare going clockwise, this was very good luck, but if it was going counter clockwise or widdershins, this was bad luck, and if it was circling your house widdershins, then be sure that a cruel fate is about to befall you!

As Christianity took hold across Europe, hares, so firmly associated with the Goddess, came to be seen in a less favourable light; "demonic" hares and rabbits are found on cathedral carvings and in other forms of Christian sacred art. Hares were viewed suspiciously as the familiars of witches, or as witches themselves in animal form. Anne Armstrong, one of the accused witches at Northumberland, claimed in 1673 that, on one occasion at a coven meeting, Ann Baites turned into the form of a hare, as well as that of a cat, a greyhound, and a bee, 'letting the devil see how many shapes she could

turn herself into.' Then a number of the coven members assumed the shapes of hares and other animals. According to Issobell Gowdie in Scotland in 1662, to become a hare it is only necessary to say the words: 'I sall goe intill ane haire, With sorrow, and sych, and meikle caire, And I sall goe in the Divellis nam, Ay whill I com hom againe'. To change back to human form one had to say: 'Hare, hare, God send thee care. I am in an hare's likeness just now, But I shall be in a woman's likeness even now'.

The hare is usually solitary, but occasionally hares gather in large groups and act very strangely, much like a group of people having a conference (or witches at a coven!). The writer Justine Picardi mentions seeing just such a phenomenon in June 2012 in the Scottish highlands:

'On the way here last night, a magical scene: glimpsed in a field beside the lane, a circle of hares, all gazing inward, motionless in the moment that we passed. I've heard occasional stories of these rarely witnessed gatherings - but never seen one for myself. No camera to hand - although if we'd stopped, I'm sure the hares would have vanished - yet a sight impossible to forget.'

Numerous folk tales tell of men led astray by hares who are really witches in disguise, or of old women revealed as witches when they are wounded in their animal shape. There is one story, in particular, that turns up over and over again: that of the milk hare. The Irish version typically involves a farmer whose cows are suddenly not giving as much milk as normal and discovers a hare (usually white) who is stealing the milk. The farmer then attempts to kill the hare, usually by shooting at it. In most versions of the story, the hare escapes with only a minor wound, generally on a leg or flank, and the farmer tracks the animal to the house of a neighbour, where he finds the old lady of the house with an identical injury. There are, of course, many variations of the story, but the basic form involving shape-shifting is always the same.

In a well-known story from Dartmoor, a mighty hunter named Bowerman disturbed a coven of witches practicing their rites, and so one young witch determined to take revenge upon the man. She shape-shifted into a hare, led Bowerman through a deadly bog, then turned the hunter and his hounds into piles of stones, which can still be seen today. (The stone formations are known by the names Hound Tor and Bowerman's Nose.)

These associations caused many people to believe hares were bad luck, and best avoided. A hare crossing one's path, as one did to our old inhabitant a hundred and fifty years ago, could cause much distress.

The fascination with hares continues today: ceramic and porcelain hares have been made by the Munich-based Nymphenburg factory, the Lomonosov factory in St Petersburg and by Meissen. Contemporary animaliers, such as sculptors Rupert Till and Sophie Ryder and ceramicist Elaine Peto, explore a continuing fascination with these enigmatic creatures.

So come to your Museum, look at the picture of our White Hare, and marvel at the power of the creature to inspire so many stories and legends.

Rose Sharp