

Rabbits 101: Rabbits in the Middle Ages

Intro: Whether you call them coney, cuniculi, lagomorphs, or rabbits; these animals have been ubiquitous in human history. With over 80 different breeds of rabbit on the planet, they have been seen as food, pests, pets, even deities. Though rabbits are similar enough in appearance to hares to be interchangeable in context, they are not the same.

Not all rabbits are rabbits!

(Images of the European Rabbit and the European Hare, respectively.)



Rabbits (lagomorphs)

- Born hairless and blind
- Have a rounded spinal structure
- Live below ground in groups



Hares & Jackrabbits (Lepus)

- Born with fur and their eyes open
- Have an upright spinal structure
- Live above ground singular or in pairs

Here we will be discussing one specific breed of rabbit: The *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. We will be looking at the evolution and migration of this creature, its connection to humans as well as its uses throughout the centuries.

The *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, commonly known as the European Rabbit, originates in Spain, Portugal, and France. Today, they are found living on every continent except for Antarctica.

Present Day: The European rabbit is the most common species of rabbit on the planet. Modern day domesticated rabbits trace back to wild European rabbits.

Wild Rabbits in Danger of Becoming Extinct: Due to the recent decline in its native range; this rabbit's population has declined to the point that the **International Union for Conservation of Nature** classified them as "Threatened" in Europe in 2006 and globally in 2018.



(Red highlights origin of European rabbit on the Iberian Peninsula)

In the Beginning There Were Rabbits:

Here we will discuss the migration of this animal..

“Archaeological records show that rabbits were hunted during the **Palaeolithic era** (about 3.3 million years ago) in the Iberian Peninsula and southwest France”. These were the ancestors of the European rabbits. Among the list of small game, along with birds and turtles, rabbits were commonly hunted in this time period...

Oryctolagus cuniculus was the only member of its genus to survive to the Late Pleistocene era (129,000 to 11,700 years ago).

The **Gravettian era**, 33,000 - 22,000 years ago witnessed an increased exploitation of rabbits, as well as hares and foxes captured with nets.

During the last **ice age** (roughly 18,000 years ago), advancing glaciers likely pushed the French rabbits into Spain. Once the ice retreated, rabbits returned to France.

Rabbit-Human interaction:

Spain: The first records in the history of man's relationship with the rabbit start as early as 200 BC. The Phoenicians called modern day Spain, “*Hispania*”, which means, “Land of the Hyrax”. The Phoenicians, unfamiliar with rabbits, possibly misidentified the region's rabbits as hyraxes. The name, later adopted by the Romans for the Iberian Peninsula and its provinces during the Roman Empire.

The etymological origin of the term Hispania is uncertain, although the Phoenicians referred to the region as *i-shphan-im*, possibly meaning "Land of Rabbits"

Cuniculture:

Though rabbits are prolific breeders, to gain the numbers they have today would require human intervention. And here is where we get cuniculture. Cuniculture is; the practice of breeding and raising domestic rabbits for their meat, fur, or wool.

The **origins** of rabbit domestication are interesting. France held claim for years with this story:

Sometime around 600 A.D. Pope Gregory the Great issued an edict declaring that rabbit fetuses, called laurices, were not meat but fish and so could be eaten during Lent. As a result, French monks started breeding them in the monasteries.

In an attempt to prove this “[Evan] Irving-Pease traced that story to a 584 A.D. document from Gallo-Roman bishop and historian St. Gregory of Tours—not Pope Gregory the Great. The passage describes the actions of Roccolenus, a henchman from northern France, who planned to ransack the city of Tours.

But before he could, the henchmen fell dead, incidentally after eating young rabbits during Lent. The passage was misinterpreted by scholars in the mid-1900s, and over time the apocryphal tale was born.” (*The Odd, Tidy Story of Rabbit Domestication ...*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 14, 2018)

The Romans have the best claim for creating cuniculture. In the 1st century BC the Roman writer Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24–79) described the captivity of rabbits as a food source in rabbit hutches, and enclosures called leporaria. He also mentions eating of laurices comes from the **Balearic Islands**.

Marcus Varro [116-27 BC] discusses in his treatise, *De Re Rustica*, about breeding and fattening of rabbits.

In the 1st century BC Julius Caesar states in the *De Bello Gallico*, that “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”.

As the Romans spread throughout Europe, they took rabbits and cuniculture with them. It was not until the Norman conquest (1066-1071) that the animals became established in England.

Fun Fact: Aristotle believed the rabbit was capable of superfetation – that is, he thought a pregnant rabbit could become pregnant again, thereby gestating multiple litters at once. This is false.

The domestication process spread over a number of centuries and completion of this process occurred by the 5th or 6th century. The French medieval monastic establishments were responsible for the early spread of the domesticated animal. By the 12th century, French rabbits were being imported to Germany and England.

By the Middle Ages rabbits were kept in pillow mounds in England and other types of warrens where they could live underground but not escape. They were also bred bigger and fatter to get more meat.

In 13th century England, rabbit cultivation in warrens was practiced by the well to do, and rabbit fur was much in demand, so poaching was a lucrative and much practiced activity.

By the 16th century, there were already several races of rabbits. The oldest currently existing and recognized breeds are the Flemish Giant and the Silver both dating back to the 16th century.

Rabbit Uses In The Middle Ages:

Pets

Wool – Spun into yarn

Poop – Great for gardens

Religion - Countries

throughout the world have seen rabbits and hares as deities.

Sport, Hunting

Sport, Hound Coursing –

Used as the lure that the hounds chase

Meat – A high source of protein with very little fat, rabbit meat was baked, broiled, fried, and stewed.

Pelt (skin with fur on) –

Clothing, hats, and trim

Hide – (skin with fur removed)
Made into glue, and parchment

Foot – Carried as a charm.

Also used in some religious practices