

The European rabbit

When the rabbit has escaped comes advice.

Spanish proverb

The European rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, originated in south-western Europe. Fossils from caves show that rabbits were well established on the Iberian Peninsula in the mid-Pleistocene, somewhere between 780–130 thousand years ago. Furthermore, their undoubted adaptation for life in the Mediterranean climate of Spain, Portugal and the south of France would argue a long evolution in that region. Strangely, there is no evidence of rabbits in equivalent parts of North Africa even in Neolithic times. Consequently, it seems likely that rabbits were taken to countries like Morocco and Tunisia by the Romans or even the earlier Phoenicians. The Romans certainly took rabbits to other parts of the Mediterranean world because historic writings establish that wild rabbits were being bred in a *leporarium* as a source of food near Rome in 230 AD (Corbet 1994). The Romans may also have taken rabbits either live, or cooked and preserved in olive oil, as far as Britain. The bones from a small butchered rabbit dating to the first century AD have been reported from archaeological excavations near Lynford, Norfolk (BBC News Channel, 13 April 2005).

The present-day rabbit populations in northern Europe were established much later, and this in itself is a fascinating story which reflects an intricate interweaving of the fortunes of rabbits and humans. Rabbits were first domesticated in French monasteries between 500 AD and 1000 AD. The monks' intense interest in rabbits was probably related to a decree by the Pope forbidding the eating of red meat during Lent. It seems that there was quite a loophole in this decree, because unborn rabbits and even newborn rabbits were considered to be 'fish' because they were bathed in fluid, and therefore they were able to be eaten during the lead-up to Easter. Beavers, because of their convenient aquatic habits, were apparently eagerly sought at such times too.

The monks spread the culture of rabbit keeping northwards through western Europe, but it was Norse adventurers and warriors who had established themselves along the River Seine who provided the next critical element. Granted land for service as mercenaries, they built alliances by taking Frankish wives and adopting many of the cultural elements of the time: linguistic, culinary and agricultural. Transformed to Normans, they dominated not only northern parts of continental Europe but subsequently invaded and conquered Britain, where they expanded agriculture, introduced new livestock including rabbits, and created a new environment (Davies 1999). It was within the resultant mix of open cornfields, hedges, parks and woodland remnants that rabbits would eventually persist and thrive in the wild.

Associated with this change was something less obvious. Rabbit-keeping was no longer just the speciality of monks who broke bread and drank wine; now it was also in the hands of entrepreneurs who preferred beer and grain porridge. Furthermore, they liked hunting and