

CHEASTING
HARES

A circular illustration featuring three brown hares in various poses, surrounded by a lush wreath of green leaves, blue flowers, and pink roses. The illustration is set against a dark background and is framed by a gold border.


THREE HARES & FOUR HARES
ANCIENT HARES & HARE PSYCHOLOGY

A series of fourteen short essays by

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Back in 2004 I helped record and present a BBC Radio 4 programme called *Chasing Hares* for the Natural History Unit in Bristol with a gifted and versatile radio producer called Grant Sonnex. This programme which followed three intrepid hare researchers across Europe alerted me to the Three Hares symbol and the search for its hidden meaning. The programme was repeated several times and it proved that there was a worldwide interest in the subject as well as an intellectual path to be followed.

These essays are simply a continuation of that project and delve into some very interesting historical material. The symbol occurs in four major religions and even a Hindu Maharajah's pleasure palace in Rajasthan. Also included are excerpts from interviews made with Buddhist monks and scholars in the Himalayan Kingdom of Ladakh and these give for the first time a cultural and very plausible meaning to the enigmatic symbol of the Three Hares.

I have decided to publish the essays on line so that the research material is not lost and is available for all those eager hare enthusiasts throughout the world to carry the research work forward.

Other hares, both three and four, are to be found the length and breadth of the Old Silk route connecting Europe with Central Asia, Mongolia, Afghanistan and China as well as ancient hares in Egypt, Syria, Persia and Armenia.

These hares are deeply embedded in our psychology.

The Quest is fascinating.

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THE SACRED JOURNEY

Devon to Dunhuang

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PART ONE

THE SACRED JOURNEY
Devon to Dunhuang

1

THE NATURE OF THE QUEST

OVER THE LAST TWENTY YEARS there has been great interest in what is commonly known as the Three Hares symbol, where three hares gyrate round and round usually in a clockwise direction with conjoined ears. What is truly remarkable about the Three Hares symbol is the nature of its cultural and geographical diversity. This stretches from roof bosses in old medieval churches in Devon on the edge of Dartmoor as far east as the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang in western China, on the edge of the Gobi desert, a distance, of nearly six thousand miles, which, as the camel flies, is a very long way indeed. This route mirrors the Old Silk route with all its variations to Afghanistan and India. It can be followed like a very fine thread weaving its way between mountain ranges, across deserts and from time to time linking it with ancient cities and the odd oasis along the way. Also there is a long timeline that runs from approximately the 6th century AD up to the present day. The date of the real origin of the three hares symbol may of course be much earlier still.

On the Silk Road apart from the long suffering camels, there were horses, yaks and pack mules. These animals had a very hard job particularly at high altitude crossing mountain passes and traipsing across dry barren deserts, but these beasts of burden were essential for the heavily laden caravans. And of course they were led by their devoted handlers and caravan leaders, caravanserai owners, cooks, *chai wallahs*, *dobhi wallas* and temporary wives shackled up along the way. These traders were Buddhists, Armenians, Chinese, Persians, Indians, Ladakhis, Tibetans, Bactrians and Sogdians, Yarkandis, Khotanese and Kashgaris. Even Greeks, Romans and Arabs tried their hand. And many Greek and Roman artefacts ended up in Afghanistan. Despite the distances it was all very cosmopolitan and there were strong cultural, economic and political links between the cities and countries involved.

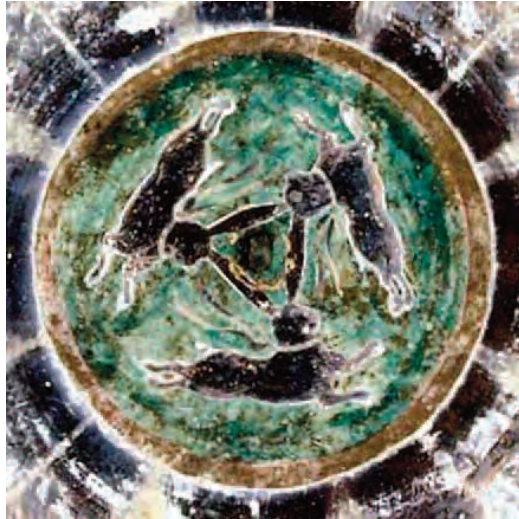
For nearly two thousand years there flowed along this tenuous, lengthy and even fragile route, an extraordinarily rich trade, not only of dried goods and fruits, silks and carpets, dyes and textiles, perfumes, gold, silver and tea, apothecaries herbs and drugs, but also ideas, philosophies and religious concepts, as well as folklore and superstition. It is along this route that the Three Hares symbol must have travelled, possibly in both directions and at different times. It was an important corridor, as important as the worldwide web is today. Yet with all our technology and scientific understanding, we still do not know the true meaning of the symbol, not least because it occurs in many different cultures in many different settings.



Three Hares roof boss, Tavistock, Devon. Photo:© George Wright

What is also remarkable is that the Three and Four Hares symbol crops up in at least four major religions: Christian, Buddhist, Islamic and Judaic contexts as well as in two locations within a Hindu Maharajah's pleasure palace in Rajasthan. This alone makes the symbol fascinating. The Three Hares symbol appears in roof bosses in Christian churches, often alongside 'Green Men'; it also appears in the centre section on the ceilings of many Buddhist caves in Dunhuang and on important robes on Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh.

The cultural significance of the symbol may have varied in certain countries but the symbol with three conjoined ears remains remarkably intact. There may be four hares at some points, and the hares may be called rabbits, and sometimes they may look more like deer but they all have conjoined ears and go round in circles, some clockwise, some anticlockwise. It is a symbol, always intriguing and always on the move.



Three hares from Dunhuang Mogao Cave 407, Sui dynasty (581-618)

In Devon, for instance, there is a significant cluster on the edge of Dartmoor. The Three Hares symbol occurs twenty-nine times in seventeen churches. But it also crops up in other parts of Britain: in Long Melford in Suffolk, Chester, Selby, Corfe Mullen in Dorset, Old Cleeve in Somerset, Long Crendon in Buckinghamshire as well as St Davids in Pembrokeshire. There is even one in Cornwall in a chapel just on the other side of the Tamar at Cotehele. The Three Hares also occur in clusters in France and Germany. Then again in Sicily, Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Swat and Ladakh. The symbol occurs in roof bosses, on coins, on textiles, on trays, on floor tiles and carpets, inside Maitreya temples and chortens, on gravestones, on ceilings, on bells, in silver caskets from South Russia, on coins from the Mongol Horde, in learned books and psalters, in illuminated manuscripts and bestiaries. The symbol occurs in stone and wood, glass, on paper and vellum, the symbol is often linked to the moon, to Easter and the Second Coming. So the Three Hares are deeply embedded in folklore and antiquity. Yet no one can be certain of the reason for their existence or the meaning of their symbolism, although there are many interpretations, particularly in Ladakh where the Buddhist culture is still intact and flourishing.

As to meaning, one needs to absorb the Three Hares symbol on many different levels, as if it was part of an intellectual journey, a quest in the true medieval religious sense, a pilgrimage and an entertaining diversion from daily life. It has all the makings not just of a good story but of an inner journey as well as a modern pilgrimage. As with any good hunt or chase or quest, the senses are often heightened and the discovery of yet more clues along the way is enticing. It is after all something of a puzzle, a treasure hunt, and the quest similar to that undertaken by a medieval knight to accomplish a prescribed task. Yet within the quest is a spiritual, if not sacred element, not least because many of the settings are often churches, chapels, caves or monastic temples, including the occasional synagogue.

The best way to approach the Three Hares, I found, is as if it is a riddle, like a Chinese or Japanese *koan*, like chasing the answer to an unanswerable question, which makes it indeed a 'curiosity worth regarding'. A typical English understatement to major philosophical questions. So to proceed to the quest - and this book is only a guide, a finger pointing out into space - devotees of the hare need an enquiring mind, a passport and the concept of pilgrimage, for it is indeed puzzling, a sacred mystery. Make of it what you will. If your mind is fertile then the hares will work their magic, not only in your waking moments but in your dreams as well.

Carl Jung was intrigued by the Three Hares, which would have had Freud going round in circles.

2

ANCIENT HARE HISTORY

THE PATH OF THE HARE IS NEVER SIMPLE. It is erratic, complex and much more ancient than people realise. By its very nature the quest is open ended with many unanswered questions. There are several different meanings to the Three Hares symbol, some of which may well have been lost over the course of time, others are conjecture, common sense and folklore. It is after all a symbol, and symbols can mean very different things to different people at different times in different cultures. The Three Hares are flexible and in motion, never staying still and that is the key to its success and long life. To some it is the Trinity, to others it is the Three Jewels of Buddhist teaching. It can be past, present and future; Vitality, Rebirth and Resurrection.



Egyptian or Syrian pottery fragment c1200AD Cairo Museum

The Three Hares have conjoined ears, each sharing an ear, and that in itself is a pleasing optical illusion. For some it is an intellectual journey in search of this remarkable symbol, for others a physical journey to track the hares down, document and where possible to photograph them.

In churches the Three Hares roof boss is often associated with the 'Green Man' whose head sprouts foliage – a dramatic and powerful male image familiar to many. The Three Hares can symbolise purity, lust and fertility, all in the same breath – quite an achievement – as well as good luck, and it can even give some measure of magical and psychological protection.

What is often overlooked is the triangle, the empty space that is left within the three ears of the three hares. Sometimes there is a dot in the centre. The inverted triangle is often seen as a feminine symbol which in India and Tibet has Tantric connotations. Tantric means 'woven together' in Sanskrit symbolising not only sexual union but union with the divine. The resemblance of the hare's ears to the female vulva has not passed unnoticed to certain scholars and artists.

The sexual element to the Three Hares forever chasing each other has an attractive and universal appeal. Is this a secret coded acknowledgement to the enormous power of femininity? Is it a male hare chasing two female hares, or is it the other way round – two females chasing a male? Or three females? In some areas the hare was thought to be hermaphrodite, male one month and female the next. But one thing is for sure – they go round and round, and spiral off into infinity. One can only marvel at their endless, boundless energy.

There are other well known associations: the hare in the moon, mad March hares, dawn hares and the spring equinox. Easter bunnies and hares that are hunted. Shakespeare makes great use of conies and rabbits to entertain his audiences. Superstition also plays its part. Hares are an integral part of our culture from earliest times. Aphrodite was at times accompanied by a hare, and hares were often used for divination. The Roman historian Cassius Dio reports that before battle, Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, who kept a hare close to her breast to keep her warm on winter's days, would release a hare from the folds of her dress and see which way it ran to guide their attack. Live hares were also presented as gifts of love.

In ancient Egypt hares were very important. The god *Osiris* was sometimes portrayed with the head of a hare. The great river Nile which gave life to

everyone through its annual floods and subsequent fertility was supposed to emanate from a mummified hare. The hieroglyph of the hare residing over a single ripple of water means 'to be' or 'to exist'. So in a sense the hare could be taken to mean the source of the life force itself.

Osiris was therefore often depicted in the shape of a hare before being torn to pieces and thrown into the Nile to ensure the seasonal cycle of renewal. So the hare, the Nile, fertility and agriculture were one and the same. Bit like hare coursing. Poor hares always get it in the neck.



Stony faced Egyptian hare. To be or not to be...a hare surfing on the River Nile
Wall relief of a hare, temple of Edfu, Egypt. Photographer Rémi h
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_\(hieroglyph\)#/media/File:Edfu51.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_(hieroglyph)#/media/File:Edfu51.JPG)

Osiris was also the God of the afterlife, underworld and the dead. *Osiris* was also God of Transition, Resurrection and Regeneration. He was linked to agriculture and the grain harvest in the same way that the seed of grain germinates and dies and then grain rises again and becomes an ear of wheat. Significantly *Osiris* holds a crook and a flail. Sheep and corn. The death of the god is celebrated at planting time and the resurrection at harvest. *Osiris* was also husband of *Isis*. Sometimes he was called *Un nefer* and wore the head of a hare as a mask and was sacrificed to the Nile each year to facilitate flooding which in turn led to an increase in soil fertility, irrigation and high grain yields. The hare was venerated for its swiftness and keen senses. There was also another goddess called *Wenet* the hare goddess who was Guardian of the underworld. She was taken into the cult of *Horus* and *Ra*. Egyptian mythology is complex but the hare plays a significant role within it, the downstream effects of which continued in the Middle East for two thousand years or more till the arrival of Christianity.

There are also Bronze Age Hittite hares from Syria running round in circles with double headed eagles. One stamp seal from the port city of Ugarit, now known as Ras Shamra, on the Mediterranean coast, (c.1800BC) has a hare in the centre alongside a man with a large helmet, then a ring of four hares and an outer ring of eight hares with other animals and birds interspersed.¹



Hittite hare seal with eagles – Ugarit seal, C.1800BC

Ras Sharma is on the Syrian coast seven miles north of Latakia. The seal comes from the Imperial period (1480–1190BC). The city was destroyed in 1190BC and the whole empire came to an abrupt end ten years later in 1180BC. The Hittites were a very powerful people based at Hattusa north-eastern Anatolia. Their empire stretched over most of Turkey, Syria and the Levant. One great expert on Hittite seals was DG Hogarth of the Ashmolean who excavated at Charchemish before the First World War on the banks of the Euphrates. Seals both stamp and cylinder are common and were used on important documents for treaties with foreign powers or trade agreements.

Here the hare image occurs thirteen times on the seal. Something of a record. Hare and double-headed eagles often feature together in Hittite carvings and seals. *Rundas*, the Hittite god of the hunt and good fortune, is often represented in carvings by a glyph of a double-headed eagle with a hare in each talon.

Recently I sent a copy of the image to Dr Mark Weeden at SOAS who recognised it and identified the seal as “that of Taprammi (= LEPUS + ra/i + mi), where the word for ‘hare’ in Luwian is ‘tapra-’. Taprammi is the name of a well-known official in the 13th century BC, from whom we have a number of other seal-impressions and inscriptions, including from the Hittite capital at Boğazköy (otherwise known as Hattusa)”.

“On this seal he is given the titles ‘Scribe’ (SCRIBA-la), ‘eunuch’ (where this does not necessarily mean that he had had his testicles removed but it is quite possible).”

My thanks to Dr Mark Wheeden for help in identifying this seal. So the linguistic symbolic language using the hare in Egypt was also alive and well in the Hittite empire c1300BC and it shows that there were important links between Ugarit and Hattusa hundreds of miles away in Northern Anatolia.

Also from the acropolis in Ugarit is a remarkable gold dish or *patera* showing four ibex in the centre with conjoined horns. This was found near the High Priest’s house and temple was found by the French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer in 1933 and is typical of the ‘international style’ of craftsmanship which flourished in the Levant, Cyprus and at the court of Egypt at this time (1500–1400BC).

See <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/hunt-patera>

This remarkable gold ceremonial dish or *patera* was one of a pair and was found near the High Priest’s house, behind a wall in the temple of Baal. Also in the High Priest’s house they found a library of mythological texts in Akkadian and in the local language. The two dishes were found behind the temenos wall. The other temple was that of Dagon. One dish is now in the Louvre, the other dish was left in the museum in Aleppo. One wonders where it is today. In the main outer frieze is the hunter, on a chariot drawn by two horses, accompanied by a dog. It is as if the ibex have been domesticated or tamed as they are walking round in a circle which animals do when they are treading out the corn. And on the outer rim is fabulous scene of the royal hunt. Offerings and libations.

Although made some two thousand years before the earliest known example of the Three Hares, the dish shows the strikingly similar ‘shared horns’ motif in the centre of a sacred vessel used for offerings or libations.³ On the outer rim is a royal chariot hunt. In the centre is a gold space between the horns which could symbolise either the sun, the full moon or even royal power. Priests were often used for ceremonies and sacrifices connected with agricultural events like ploughing, sowing and harvest. The transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural based economies is pivotal to understanding the Middle East. Hares and harvests go together. Another remarkable gold cup was discovered in NW Iran with a frieze of

gazelles. Early first millennium BC. Now in the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

See <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/325511>

Animals that were hunted were obviously of very high status indeed and these cups and plates and bowl may well have had a religious and political importance as well. Hares were obviously an important part of this quasi-religious animal world.

Long-eared rabbits or hares are often found in Syro-Hittite cylinder seals but rarely elsewhere. The hares are depicted as held in the hand as for food, or by itself. It is also abundant in Egyptian art and is an important hieroglyph.²

There is also a spectacular haematite cylinder seal with multiple hares on it which came up for sale at Christies recently. c1850BC



A Syrian Cylinder Seal, circa mid nineteenth-century BC from Christies



*Hittite Moon Priest Ring Seal
c1600BC.*

These are multiple hares and seem to be concerned with a specific person's identity or property and are everyday objects. Also there is a possible religious link between the moon and the hare and a priest as this Hittite seal impression shows. (Origin and provenance unknown.)

The first instance of Three Hares not in a circle but in a line that I have come across is on a rather strange bronze ceremonial object which is attributed to the Urartu/early Armenian kingdom in Eastern Turkey. There seem to be three prongs along which three different animals are seen to be running.

Three wild boars, three hares and three mythical birds. There is a border of what looks like the edge of a field of wheat so this may well be linked to the transition to early agriculture where hares and other animals seek shelter in the field.



Top: Three Urartu/Armenian Hares c800BC © Barakat Galleries

Three Urartu hares in a row. A similar style of three single hares are displayed on a Urartu bronze belt at the Ashmolean Museum Oxford.

Three Hares are seen to be running in a row circa 900BC–600BC along with wild boar and mythical birds.⁴ The hare also appears Greek coins from Messina in Sicily c420BC.

Coins with Hare motif – Sicily, Messana, c480–412BC

To find out more about these remarkable and very pleasing Greek coins see:

<http://www.coinarchives.com/a/results.php?results=100&search=mule>



Hare with ear of barley and eagle hovering, Sicily, Messina, Silver Tetradrachm, c420BC



Sicily, Messina, Tetradrachm, c480–470BC; Bertolami Fine Arts – ACR Auctions > E-Auction 32



Hare with Dolphin Sicily, Messina Silver Tetradrachm c420–413BC Classical Numismatic Group. Triton IX lot 41

So there is a distinct continuity in the use of hares on ceremonial objects in the Middle East over several thousand years. Historically the hare is therefore very important, fecund with meaning and worthy of investigation.

The transition from a single hare to three hares first in a line and then in a circle is key to this debate. Hares are also seen on coins with hunting eagles, doves, dolphins and even crabs.



Greek tetradrachm of a hare leaping over an eagle which is having a tussle with a serpent c420BC

Sicily was fought over for many years and then finally became Norman in the 12th century AD. Today the hares crop up in Sicily in a four hare Islamic mosaic in the Duomo in Monreale south of Palermo and as three hares in a painting on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo.

No doubt more artefacts, images and associated information about hares in antiquity will emerge.

3

HARE PSYCHOLOGY

THE HARE IS ALSO A VERY POTENT SYMBOL for modern psychoanalysts. Maybe it is no coincidence that one of the early books on dream analysis called *The Lady of the Hare* was written in 1944 by the anthropologist and psychologist John Layard, a student of WHR Rivers who famously treated Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen for shell shock. The link to Jung was through the psychologist called EA Bennet who later wrote a biography of Jung. John Layard's great uncle was none other than Sir Austen Henry Layard who had excavated at Nineveh.

John Layard became a student of Carl Jung and he was a mentor to WH Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Layard's ideas also influenced the work of TS Eliot. But it gets even better. I recently bought a secondhand copy of *The Lady of the Hare* and found that it had many small careful notes written into it and on the flyleaf it was inscribed with the owner's name: *EA Bennet July 1945 Cabin 64*. I delved a bit further and found that EA Bennet was a well-respected psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital. As a chaplain during the First World War he had been awarded a Military Cross for conspicuous bravery. Bennet later wrote several important books based on many years of his conversations and letters with Jung. In July 1945 as Brigadier EA Bennet RAMC he was sailing back from India, so he would have read that very copy of *The Lady of the Hare* sitting in his deckchair on board his troopship as he passed through the Suez Canal and brushed alongside Egyptian culture. *Osiris* lives on. The 8th Army and the Desert Rats did indeed defend the Nile. Two Saxon nations and the Italians fighting it out over a bit of desolate sand, and the British also had a bit of help from the Indians, Greeks, Kiwis, Australians, Polish and Free French.

So amidst the turmoil at the end of the Second World War some of the best brains in England were deeply immersed in stories of ancient hares, dreams and hare symbolism.⁵

In his book *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* Jung mentions the Three Hares window in Paderborn cathedral, which he says represents consciousness "scenting or intuiting" the unconscious and the centre of one's self. In other words for him the Trinity is the archetype of the universal Self. There are also unconscious links to ancient forms of the triple deity. In Jung's own words: 'Triads of gods appear very early, at the primitive level'. The Three Hares are therefore much older and more important psychologically than we realise, not only to early religions but to a sense of personal unity and completeness. Fluidity in balance.



Dreihasenfenster – 'Window of Three Hares' – in the inner courtyard of the cloister, Paderborn Cathedral, Germany, 16th century. Photo: Zefram GFDL, Cc-by – 3.0,2.5,2.0,1.0

To make things even more colourful, witchcraft also gets a look in. Gerald of Wales (*Giraldus Cambrensis* 1146–1243) mentions that in Ireland men and women can transform themselves into wolves, which was fine while wolves still existed, but as wolves were hunted to extinction the women then turned themselves into hares. This belief survived for many centuries. Even the redoubtable Mrs Eliza Bray, wife of the vicar of Tavistock, writes in 1833 to Robert Southey, the poet laureate about a local woman who regularly turns herself into a hare. Such a belief also exists in Nordic countries where they have milk hares and troll hares. In Scotland in 1662 a housewife called Isobel Gowdie was tried for witchcraft. Her confession, apparently obtained without torture, was enriched with many lyrical tales of hares which the singer Maddy Prior has turned into a modern day folk song called *The Fabled Hare*. Old beliefs die hard. The hare has by its curious behaviour, speed and quirkiness endeared itself to the human race.

There are also two excellent BBC documentary films on the life of the hare. One presented by Peter Scott with photography by Eric Ashby dated 1963 and the other presented by David Attenborough dated 1993 which uses the song by Maddy Prior.⁶

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6n80q-tnCE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhdS-BBizaY>

It is also easy to see how the hare was linked to the spirit of the corn field. Hares often stayed to the very end of harvest, hiding in the shrinking square of wheat and then make a run for it and try to escape, chased by dogs, men and young boys. In classical times the hares may have been seen as an offering to the Greek goddess Demeter, who presided over grain, fertility, harvest, life and death, if not a symbol of Demeter herself.

In Devon and Cornwall, the tradition of 'Crying the Neck', was, within living memory a common ritual which involved cutting the last sheaf of corn, holding it aloft to the east for all to see, then shouting out the words, 'I have'n, I have'n, I have'n.' 'The neck. The neck. The neck.'

This ancient tradition of completing the harvest and evoking the spirit of the cornfield may like the hares run right back to Hittite and Egyptian times when agriculture was first being developed. More than anything else the reverence for the corn spirit may in turn help to explain the universal nature of the Three Hares symbol, its wide distribution, its energy and its appeal.

These early traditions and seasonal festivals are incredibly important as they symbolise this transition, dependence on the weather and the cycles of the moon for the timing of such important events as ploughing, sowing and harvest. The moon is also a vital part of these calculations and in many cultures hares also have links to the moon. *Nowruz* the spring equinox festival in Iran is one such festival. It involves a fire ceremony and dates back to the time of Zoroaster. Iran is also a likely candidate from where the Three Hares motif may well have originated along with Mesopotamia, the Urartu Kingdom and Armenia.

So if the Three Hares is a symbol of survival and renewal, fertility and abundance, which it appears to be, then on a very ancient level, it could easily symbolise the gradual switch from hunting to farming. The slow change from a hunter-gatherer economy to settled domesticated agriculture upon which so much of our civilisation depends. And if that is the case then the Three Hares symbol is a very important image indeed.

More recently many people will remember *Masquerade* by Kit Williams which in 1979 sparked a national treasure hunt to solve a puzzle and find a jewelled golden hare that had been buried in a special location. The solution to finding Kit Williams's hare was a nationwide quest in its own right and the clues involved Catherine of Aragon, Ampthill Park in Bedfordshire, a shadow at noon, the equinox and a whole raft of mathematical and trigonometrical anagrams.

Psychologically the hare is therefore fascinating, as Carl Jung rightly perceived, yet the eminent psychiatrists of their day did not fully realise the widespread occurrence and importance of the Three Hares both geographically and in history. The search for the symbol is by its very nature open-ended. Enjoy the sacred journey. It is one of life's great mysteries and we are the richer for it.

4

BBC CHASING HARES

IT WAS WHILST MAKING A RADIO PROGRAMME FOR BBC RADIO 4 back in 2004 called *Chasing Hares* that I made the acquaintance of the Devon Three Hares symbol and the links to Dunhuang caves in China. Links had already been made in the 1950s between European Three Hares and much earlier Three Hares found in Dunhuang by a Lithuanian art historian living in Paris called Jurgis Baltrušaitis.⁷ Baltrušaitis (1903–1988) was an interesting man. He was born in Moscow and his father was a diplomat. One of his first teachers was a poet called Boris Pasternak who later wrote *Doctor Zhivago*. Between 1933 and 1939 Baltrušaitis taught art history at the University of Kaunas in Lithuania, as well as lecturing at the Sorbonne in Paris and at the Warburg Institute in London. He came to know about Dunhuang through the Musée Guimet and the work of the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot and the archaeologists Joseph and Ria Hackin. In the 1930s much information had been brought back about the Buddhist caves in Central Asia both material and manuscripts along with the collections of Marc Aurel Stein and Albert von Le Coq.

For many years the Three Hares symbol was assumed to be merely local to England. But there was no inkling of the eastern connection, or indeed any connection to places outside a few parishes in Devon. The Three Hares can be found mostly on the edge of Dartmoor: Chagford, North Bovey, Throwleigh, South Tawton, Kelly and Spreyton to name but a few. As well as Tavistock, where I myself had grown up. So I had a personal interest in the quest. One of my good friends I went to school with in Tavistock was called Oliver Kelly. He lived in Kelly House opposite the church in the village of Kelly. His family had been there for at least nine hundred years, since the Norman Conquest, and no doubt knew a thing or two about hares. They probably commissioned the Three Hares carving in the first place. Kelly church has two Three Hare carvings. One old, one new.



These are illustrations from La Moyen Age Fantastique, 1955, by Jurgis Baltrušaitis showing the similarity between three and four hares from:
 (a) Lyon in France, 1310-1320; (b) Dunhuang, China, 10th century;
 (c) Islamic Vase Hermitage, St Petersburg, Russia 12-13th century;
 (d) Paderborn 15th Century.

The link with Devon Hares to Dunhuang was first realised in 1989 by Tom Greeves and Chris Chapman in Throwleigh church when talking to the artist Trevor Felcey who just happened to live in the Church house at Throwleigh not a stone's throw away from the church itself.



*Three hares inside Kelly Church, West Devon c.1500
 Photo © George Wright.*

My own contribution to the Three Hare's quest was to present and record a BBC Radio 4 programme called *Chasing Hares* which was produced by Grant Sonnex, a wonderful man to work with. This was about a journey across Europe which was broadcast in 2004 and again in 2005. This was a radio programme on a vast scale that stretched halfway round the world from Devon to China via Europe the Middle East and Ladakh – a real historical mystery set in time and space. Slowly joining up the dots one by one.

The fact that the programme was made for the BBC Natural History Unit was appropriate. Hares are living creatures and they have erratic, mysterious behaviour and are legendary in their own right. It is the true magic of radio to make images come alive, albeit images of three mythical hares which would soon be revolving round and round on the air waves. So I accompanied the three researchers, Tom Greeves, Chris Chapman and Sue Andrew, who were metaphorically joined at the ears. I knew deep down that from the moment we set off for Europe it would be great fun as well as a real voyage into the unknown.

We visited Trier Cathedral in the Moselle valley, Kloster Haina in the centre of Germany and Wissembourg on the French German border.



Kloster Haina, Germany: Tom Greeves, Sue Andrew, James Crowden, Chris Chapman, Wilhelm Helbig. Photo © Manfred Scholz



Recording in Kloster Haina 2004 with Sue Andrew

Below: James listening back to his recordings



The symbol of the Three Hares was intriguing in its symmetrical simplicity running round and round forever in a sacred, endless circle. Was this just coincidence or was it something much more universal? Where did the trail start and where did it go? Did it have a beginning and an end? There were many locations to visit. Suffice it to say the journey took the three others to Dunhuang and myself to Ladakh as well as a Maharajah's pleasure palace in Rajasthan which boasted two sets of four hares.

Chasing Hares was a great success and was repeated several times and heard by hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, all over the world. But where does it all lead? For me at least there was a distinctly Buddhist answer to the meaning which emerged, and this can be found in the essay 10 on Ladakh. But often each culture has its own explanations and in some cases, none at all.

Coming back closer to home there is perhaps a Devon answer to part of the mystery. Dartmouth, where I had first gone to school, was the point of departure for the Crusades of 1147 and 1190, which brought knights of Devon into contact with the Middle East, Saladin and the textiles from the Central Asia. The Greek and Byzantine world rubbed shoulders with the Islamic world which included Persia and Afghanistan. Returning crusaders may well have brought silken textiles and stories back with them and incorporated the Three Hares symbol into churches in a Christian context. If they could come back with St George, who had nothing to do with England, then anything was possible, so long as it gave you confidence and belief in an innate wisdom.

Wisdom comes in many shapes and forms and in the very centre between the conjoined ears of the three hares lies a space akin to emptiness or should it be a question mark? The story of the Three Hares has many twists and turns and as it unfolds the hares continue to gyrate in the heavens. The quest is of course by its very nature never ending.



One fascinating item that links the Three Hares firmly back in the Middle East/Persia/modern day Iran is this silver bowl which came up for auction at Christies in 1998 and is now in the Al Sabah collection in Kuwait.⁸

An Ilkhanid small white-metal bowl, Persia, 14th century, from Christies

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/an-ilkhanid-small-white-metal-bowl-persia-1318366-details.aspx?intobjectid=1318366>

This small silver bowl, is worked in repoussé style and is attributed to the 14th century Iranian world. It is interesting that the motif of hares sharing ears was still used during this period - most other examples are from a much earlier period. The hares in the art of the Islamic world on trays/dishes are very similar to the Ugarit dish. All face forwards and their ears taper. What is really interesting about the Ugarit dish is that one end of the horn is hidden behind the ear of the next creature thus overcoming the problem of how to depict the horn joining the head of the next beast.

This shows very clearly the extraordinary continuity of design of the bowl/*patera* and the conjoined horns/ears over 3,000 years! ie from ibex to hares. Viva the hare. Quite a song and dance over the years...

NOTES

Intro: For more information on the artist Doon Fergusson-Howlett see her website:

<http://www.doonfergussonart.com/Artist.asp?ArtistID=888&Akey=3WGDPAN5>

1. This particular image of a seal was used by JG Macqueen in a book called *The Hittites*. Dr James Macqueen was Reader in Classics and Ancient Middle Eastern studies at Bristol University. After he retired Dr Macqueen farmed goats in the South West.
2. *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* by William Hayes Ward. Carnegie Institute, 1910.
3. This particular dish is referenced by Anna Filigenzi in an article of the 'Three Hares of Barikot' 2003. My thanks to Sue Andrew for alerting me to this dish. This is not the only ancient image of linked horns. There is also another cup stand in the Louvre with interlocked horns of either ibex or goat from Mesopotamia. This was found at Larsa, near Uruk, on the Euphrates and dates from around 1750BC. Larsa was an important Sumerian city and the centre of the cult of the sun god Utu whose home was in Ur about fifty miles downstream. Utu was the son of the moon god Nanna and Ningal, the goddess of the reeds.
4. Urartu is the early Armenian kingdom in eastern Turkey based around Ararat and Lake Van. This item has three decorated prongs and a border that looks like the wavy edge of a field of wheat. It was recently offered for sale by The Barakat Collection in London.
5. See E A Bennet – 'What Jung Really Said' and 'Meetings with Jung'.
6. Both films are available on YouTube and are well worth watching.
BBC film 1963 *A Hare's life* by Peter Scott with Eric Ashby.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6n80q-tnCE>
BBC1 film *Shadow of the Hare* with David Attenborough and Maddy Prior 1993
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhdS-BBizaY>
7. This link was mentioned in his 1955 book (Bib; 1955 – *Le moyen âge fantastique* – Jurgis Baltrusaitis – pages 132–139)
8. Measurements: diameter 7.5 cm; height 2.2 cm : Provenance: Christie's London, *Islamic Art and Manuscript*, 13 October 1998, lot 241
Now in the Al Sabah Collection, Kuwait. My thanks again to Sue Andrew for supplying these details.



PART TWO

NORTHERN INDIA
Emperors, Monks and
Maharajahs

JAMES CROWDEN

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www.james-crowden.co.uk www.threehares.co.uk

What is remarkable is that the Three Hares symbol not only occurs in Buddhist caves at Mogao near the oasis of Dunhuang in Western China, but also as Four Hares deep in the mountains of Ladakh, Spiti and Guge in Western Tibet. They also occur in Swat Valley in the old North West Frontier Province and then down on the plains in Moghul art at Akbar's capital Fatehpur Sikri, and again as Four Hares in the camel trading town of Nagaur. They crop up in the strangest of places and there is no obvious explanation, though there are many underlying currents and influences both historical and religious. This chapter looks at the occurrence of the Three and Four Hare symbol in these locations. The Hare certainly leads us on a fascinating zig-zag trail and in this chapter the Indian part of the journey starts with a white hare in Peshawar, the old Afghan winter capital at the bottom end of the Khyber Pass. The trail then goes all over the Himalayas and ends up back in the deserts of Rajasthan on the ceiling of a Maharajah's pleasure palace.

5

KANISHKA AND THE WHITE HARE OF PESHAWAR

THE FAMOUS SILK ROUTE WHICH CONNECTED CHINA with the Middle East and Europe had some important variants one of which ran through the Hindu Kush to Afghanistan. Another very important route ran right over the Karkoram Pass at 18,500 ft, through Ladakh, then crossed the Himalaya and ran on down to Kashmir and Northern India. A very thin thread along which ideas and artistic traditions flowed in both directions, east and west, including Buddhism and the Three Hares symbol.

Two thousand years ago this whole area was part of the vast Kushana Empire. The emperor Kanishka (who ruled 127–140AD) held sway from the borders of Persia right up to the city states on the edge of the Takla Makan desert, even as far as Dunhuang. *Takla makan* means ‘place of ruins’, or the ‘abandoned place’. A vast desert around which the Silk Route ran both north and south. Kanishka also controlled much of Northern India. He had capitals at Begram, north of Kabul, in Peshawar at the other end of the Khyber pass and at Mathura, an ancient city between Delhi and Agra. The Kushans adopted the Hellenistic culture of Bactria and with it the Greek alphabet to suit their language. The Kushans, originally from Central Asia were called the Yuezhi from Xinjiang and Gansu. They looked both east and west for inspiration and in so doing created one of the world’s truly great and original artistic cultures. They incorporated artistic skills from both India and Greece, ideas of form and beauty that were fused at the hip. This movement culminated in the school of Gandhara, which left us some breathtakingly beautiful Buddhist statues. Gandhara is near present day

Peshawar, which was then called *Puruṣapura*, which in Sanskrit meant 'city of men'.

These elegant artistic styles persisted for many centuries and many Gandharan statues can be seen in museums around the world.



Statue of the Kushan Emperor Kanishka 2nd century AD, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, North India

The story of Kanishka's white hare is interesting because it involves his conversion to Buddhism. Apparently Kanishka was out hunting and chasing a white hare when it suddenly disappeared and instead of the hare Kanishka found a young boy herding cows. The boy was in the process of building a three foot high *stupa*, a funerary mound to commemorate the Buddha. The story goes that the boy spoke to Kanishka and asked if he was an emperor and then the boy said that this meeting fulfilled a 400 year old prophecy.² The story may be true, but then again it may also be allegorical and symbolise the spiritual path.

Hares were as important in India and China as they were in ancient Egypt and the Hittite Kingdom. In Sanskrit the word for hare, *sasa*, is very similar to that of the moon, *sasin*, having the hare or *sasanka* which means 'that which is marked with the hare'. This derives from the verb *sas* which means to jump, leap, spring, bound and dance. All of which hares do expertly. White hares also symbolise many things including dawn, the full moon and direct intuitive knowledge, which would definitely have appealed to Jung.

Kanishka then decided to build a vast *stupa* on that very spot. According to Chinese pilgrims his famous Peshawar Stupa was over six hundred feet high and became one of the wonders of the world.³ Remains of it were excavated in 1908 and some parts have recently emerged in Peshawar slums. So there was more to the white hare than meets the eye. Hares, Royalty, hunting, Buddhism, even enlightenment – all in one breath.

Kanishka then sent Buddhist monks to China and one monk called Lokaksema became the main translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese. What is remarkable is that the same story with Kanishka chasing the white hare can be found in a Khotanese scroll found at Dunhuang, which describes how Kanishka would arrive 400 years after the death of the Buddha and describes the *stupa*.⁴ So in a sense the mythical white hare, Buddhist teachings and Kanishka have a common thread which reaches over the Himalaya and Karakoram, through Ladakh and around the Takla Makan desert to Dunhuang, a thousand or more miles away from Peshawar.

6

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM, MAITREYA AND SWAT

TO UNDERSTAND SOME OF THE SYMBOLISM of the three and four Buddhist Hares and their meaning it is important to understand the concept of Mahayana Buddhism. Kanishka is credited in playing a part in instigating the Fourth Great Buddhist council, which was held in Kashmir. It is said that he gathered five hundred monks who set about translating the Buddha's words from Pali into Sanskrit. It is around this time that the division occurred between the Hinayana and the Mahayana, the Lesser and Greater vehicles relating to the Buddha's teaching - the Mahayana embracing wholeheartedly the concept of the Bodhisattva, an enlightened being who has delayed his full enlightenment to be on earth and help lesser mortals. The Dalai Lama is one such being as he is the embodiment of Avalokitesvara or in Tibetan *Chen Regzig*. 'Lord who looks down' - the embodiment of Compassion. There are many different forms of Avalokitesvara. Sometimes statues have four arms; sometimes a thousand arms and heads. His mantra is the well known mantra: *Om Mani Padme Hum*, which means far more than just 'Oh Jewel in the Lotus'.

Mahayana Buddhism makes it theoretically possible for everyone to become *bodhisattvas* and to take the *bodhisattva* vows. With these vows, the devotee makes the promise to work for the complete enlightenment of all sentient beings by practising the six perfections of giving, moral discipline, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom. It is a path open to layman as well and not just monks. It is better in their eyes to practise for the benefit of others, rather than just for one's own enlightenment: compassion and altruism rolled into one.⁵

Then there is the concept of the Maitreya, the Buddha to come, the future Buddha. Buddhists have an almost geological or astronomical idea of time. The present Buddha is the one we know about who lived and died around 2,500 years ago. There is the past Buddha who is way back in 'Jurassic' time, and then many still believe that the future Buddha or the Maitreya will return when his teaching is most needed, rather like the Messiah and the Second Coming. The Maitreya also refers to the Buddha within your own self which can be released when the practitioner reaches perfection through years of meditation. Maitreya keeps you on the straight and narrow.

A thousand years ago the cult of the Maitreya was very important in Ladakh and Western Tibet and was the subject of many larger than life statues, rock carvings and wall paintings even in Hunza and Gilgit. The concept of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path and visual display of its teaching and integration with the past lives of the Buddha is therefore crucial in understanding the art and doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism and in particular the paintings of Alchi and Basgo. Here the Three/Four Hares symbol occurs only in Maitreya temples. They are painted on depictions of textiles, either on the *dhoti* or loin cloth of the Maitreya, and on the ceilings of *stupas* and temples. In other words the Three and Four Hares would appear to have an important underlying link with Mahayana Buddhism, and the Maitreya in particular.

Also there may well be a tantric element to the Three Hares symbol. Tantra is believed to have evolved in the region of Swat in modern day Pakistan, close to the Afghan border. Swat which was once within the old North West Frontier Province is now technically part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in Malakand Division.

It is from Swat that one of the earliest Three Hares symbols occurs in the form of a terracotta plaque dated to the Shahi period 9th-10th centuries AD. It was found at Barikot⁶ in 1990. Barikot was identified by both Aurel Stein and Professor Tucci as the ancient town of *Bazira* and in its day Barikot apparently even rivalled *Taxila* for the number of temples and its Buddhist teaching. Italian archaeological teams have been working there since 1984. The best reference to the Three Hares plaque and its context comes from a paper by Dr Anna Filigenzi of Naples University.⁷ Dr Filigenzi provides archaeological material in context for the Three Hares and a broad look at Buddhist Art at that time and shows its links back to Iran and Central Asia. She also mentions the Kizil caves. Anna Filigenzi was director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan in 2004 and has been a member of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan since 1984.



*Terracotta plaque from Bari Kot, Swat, N.W. Pakistan, 9th-10th centuries AD, Shahi period.
Size 8cm diameter. Source: Swat Museum Saidu Sharif, NW Pakistan*

The terracotta plaque was found in what might well be described as a small fire temple. Fire ritual was common in Iran and the Shahi period⁸, linked with Kabul and Kapisa. The Shahi period whose Kings succeeded the Kushanas ruled over much of what was Gandhara. The terracotta seal is probably from the end of the Buddhist Kabul Shahi period. Both Buddhists and Hindus lived alongside each other for over five hundred years. The early Buddhist kings may even have been Tibetan. At that time Ladakh also controlled much of what is now Western Tibet.

***http://www.academia.edu/7631088/The_three_hares_from_Bir-kot-ghwandai
_Another_stage_in_the_journey_of_a_widespread_motif***

The use of the plaque is not yet determined and it may even be a similar to Tibetan *ts'a ts'a*⁹ which are funerary figures often in the shape of a Buddha, and made after a cremation. After cremation a small portion of the remaining ash and crushed bone is mixed with clay, moulded into Buddha figures and then fired. These are deposited in sacred spots. Sometimes around old statues. Usually eight are made from each cremation. The rest of the ashes then tipped into the river. Many *ts'a ts'a* can still be seen today in Ladakh.

The Three Barikot Hares share ears but are not running. They are lying down quietly almost as if they are deer meditating. Their 'paws' do look a bit like hooves. Also on the plaque are what look like two sets of flames or possibly vegetation and a surround of thirty dots which may correspond to days of the month. Time and ritual are often linked. If it is a fire temple this will have possible connections with Buddhist Vajrayana Fire rituals that are still carried out today in Ladakhi and Tibetan monasteries.

In those days Swat was known as Uddiyana, which means 'garden' or 'orchard' in Sanskrit, and had strong links with India.¹⁰ Today Swat is still scattered with the remains of many important Buddhist sites. There are *stupas* from the time of Ashoka 2nd century BC. Also there may well be a Tantric element to the Three Hares symbol, as Tantra is believed to have evolved in Swat. A *dakini* is a 'sky goer', an enlightened female practitioner who imparts pleasure and divine knowledge at the same time. Uddiyana is also known as 'paradise of the dakinis'. The Buddhist background story to the Three Hares is therefore a complex web both intellectually, spiritually and historically.

In Tibetan folklore hares are also regarded as being very wise and quick-witted embodying wisdom, featuring in many folk tales. Hares are also consulted on questions of fertility and are linked to the moon. So from Kanishka's white hare in Peshawar there is a slender thread reaching back to the early Buddhist teachings and another slender thread leading all the way through Ladakh to the caves in Dunhuang.

7

LADAKH AND ALCHI WHEN IS A HARE NOT A HARE?

NOTHING CAN PREPARE YOU for the sheer beauty of the paintings at Alchi. It is like walking into the Sistine chapel for the first time, only the chapel is a Buddhist temple, it is relatively dark, much smaller and you have to stoop as you enter. It is also a much more intimate experience. You come face to face with the paintings in the darkness and you discover the quality of the artwork picture by picture. Alchi is much earlier, the temple walls were painted about 1200AD, at least three hundred years before the Sistine chapel. You also need a torch, so it is more like looking at cave paintings.

The artists at Alchi are thought to be from Kashmir because of the dress of the people depicted and scenes from Kashmir at a time when Kashmir was a great centre of Buddhist art and learning. This was the tail end of a rich Buddhist culture which had its roots in Gandhara and lasted for over a thousand years. It was only terminated by repeated Muslim invasions and interventions. The fact that Alchi and its paintings survive at all is something of a miracle.

The trade routes from the north, from Yarkand, Khotan and Kashgar which connected Central Asia and China to Kashmir and North India ran over the Karakoram over three major passes then right through Ladakh along the corridor provided by the River Indus close to Alchi. The Indus rushes past, cold and fresh from Tibet but the monastery cannot be seen from the old road which may account for its survival.



River Indus at Alchi. Photo © Carol Trewin

Alchi is a small but ancient monastic complex in a rural setting amidst fields of wheat and barley surrounded by poplars and apricot trees. Alchi is also that rare thing a special monastery where translations, transmission and advanced teaching took place: a place of retreat and initiation, and a powerhouse of knowledge and Buddhist philosophy. Such sites are not just monasteries – in Tibetan they are known as *chos'khor*¹¹ which literally means 'Dharma wheel' ie places where the wheel of the Buddha's teaching always turns. The wheel of doctrine. Not to be confused with the *mani* wheels which also turn and spread blessings.

Other important *chos'khor* in the Tibetan world were at Tabo monastery in Spiti, as well as Tsaparang in Guge, Western Tibet. The white temple in Tsaparang has a Four Hares motif on the ceiling.¹² There are two important temples *Lhakhang Marpo* (Red temple) and the *Lhakhang Karpo* (White temple). There is another famous monastery not far away called Tholing. As it happened, the ancient Kingdom of Ladakh was often in conflict with Guge in Western Tibet. Slowly over the years Ladakh shrank in size and Guge was absorbed into Tibet, but at the time of the Alchi paintings, Ladakh was a force to be reckoned with and rivalled Central Tibet and Lhasa. Gold panned from river deposits and alluvial goldfields provided ready cash to pay for artists and the building of temples.



White Temple, Tsaparang, Guge, Western Tibet (Ngari Prefecture).

So in Ladakh there is to this day an unbroken chain of monasteries and learning that connects them right back through Alchi to Kashmir, which was at that time Buddhist. Kashmir was itself connected back to the world of Gandhara, Afghanistan and Swat. But after these monasteries in Kashmir were destroyed or became redundant, these later smaller teaching monasteries, set deep in the mountains of Ladakh, became very important and were like jewels in a chain leading towards Tibet. It was through Ladakh that the Buddhist teachings finally reached Tibet for the second time. So the importance of these temples cannot be overstated.



Harvest, Alchi, Leh district of Jammu and Kashmir, India Photo: Carol Trewin

Today Alchi is a quiet backwater forty miles west of Leh and is under the supervision of Likir Monastery.¹³ In the old trading days, which only ceased in 1947, it was eight days from Leh for a caravan of yaks and ponies to reach Kargil and Alchi is about midway. Alchi must have always been an important site as there are also many stone carved petroglyphs of men hunting ibex which are several thousand years old; these can be seen on large boulders dotted along the river bank, as well as graffiti from early Tibetan soldiers.



Ibex Carvings on the banks of the River Indus. Photo: Carol Trewin

Alchi has three major shrines: the *Dukhang* (Assembly hall), the Sum-tsek and the Temple of *Manjushri* as well as many interesting *chortens*. The Three Hares symbol is to be found in the *Sumtsek* or three-tiered temple, painted time and time again onto the robes or *dhoti* of the central figure, the Maitreya, the Buddha to come.

As to the date of the Sumtsek temple and the painting there is some debate. According to local tradition the Alchi monastery complex was built by the great translator and artist Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo¹⁴ who lived between 958 and 1055. Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo was sent by the King of Zangskar down to Kashmir to obtain teachings and was at the forefront of the Second

Diffusion which brought Buddhism back into Tibet. There are many legends surrounding his life. He is said to have built several important monasteries in Western Tibet, including Tabo in Spiti, Tholing in Guge as well as Nyarma and Sumda in Ladakh. In Ladakh any early temple is often attributed to Lotsawa Richen Zangpo! But the paintings at Alchi, according to modern scholars, who have studied accompanying texts and dedications, may well date from a century later: 11th–12th centuries.¹⁵

At Alchi the outside façade of the Sumtsek temple is wooden and is leaning outwards at a rather alarming angle. On the façade there are many ornate carvings and some of the small pillars on the upper storey have Greek style capitals 'Ionian' carved in wood and triangular 'A' frames with carved figures in the niches. To gain entrance to the temple one has to go through a very low doorway and it is very dark indeed.



The Sumtsek temple entrance, showing intricate wood carving in Kashmiri style, c1200AD. Photo: Carol Trewin

Only after a while do your eyes become accustomed to the light inside the temple. The main central figure of Maitreya is about fourteen feet high and the lower half is covered in a *dhoti* or loincloth, which is elaborately painted. It is this *dhoti* which is of great interest. The loincloth is made from stucco that has been expertly painted to make it look as if it is fabric. This is where the Three Hares occur in small rectangular lozenges, though there is some debate as to whether they are actually hares at all.



Statue of Maitreya, Sumtsek temple, Alchi c1200AD © Jaroslav Poncar

The *dhoti* on the Maitreya has painted on it a series of scenes from the Buddha's life, past and present. It is very colourful indeed. The extensive work that academic and art historians have put into recording the paintings in Alchi is truly magnificent as are the photographs of Jaroslav Poncar.¹⁶ These scenes from the Buddha's life are set within roundels, rather like cameo shots, and between the scenes, as if holding the whole fabric together in a framework are the images of three 'hares' with conjoined ears which are racing round and round in a clockwise direction. There are over fifty sets of these 'hares' which amounts to over 150 hares in all, holding the whole 'textile' together.



*Detail of Maitreya's dhoti showing scenes of the Buddha's life. Sumtsek temple, Alchi
© Jaroslav Poncar*

These Alchi 'Hares' are all linked with what looks like a prototype *vajra* which means both 'thunder bolt' and 'diamond' in Sanskrit and is called *dorje* in Tibetan. They may just be loops used to draw the design together in figure of eight, but early Buddhists, like early Christians, were fond of secret or obscure symbolism. If it looks like a *vajra* it may well be a *vajra*.

The thunderbolt is a Tibetan ritual weapon used in *puja* or evocations of certain deities. The *vajra* may also apply to the teaching which is called Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism which was very popular at the time Alchi monastery was founded. And then you get onto some very interesting ground indeed.¹⁷



Detail of Three hares and a figure of eight pattern that is like a primitive vajra, Sumtsek temple, Alchi © Jaroslav Poncar

In their book published in 1977 detailing the temples at Alchi, the Buddhist scholars David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski from the School of Oriental and Asiatic Studies were the first to document the temples in Alchi.¹⁸ Sadly they do not mention the three 'hares'. It is however a significant part of the *dhoti* and occurs over fifty times. A later book by Ravi Kumar 1988 shows illustrations of the three hares but mentions them as leaping 'bulls', which he thinks might be linked to ceilings in Ajanta. However they do not really look like bulls either... yaks possibly!

Another respected academic Professor Roger Goeppe from Cologne is also not sure that they are in fact hares, but he makes the point that some of the other animals portrayed at Alchi are very lifelike indeed, for example elephants, horses and deer.¹⁹ In Tibetan art some animals like the Tibetan snow lion have mythical status, in other words they live in our minds and work their power there.

Dr. Christian Luczanits in his article about the Sumtsek in *Orientalia* 1999 calls them deer, and they do seem to have hooves, which might prove his argument, but they are not very slender and deer-like. So are they by any chance mythical or transcendental hares, or do they represent something totally different? Have the hares transformed into deer?



Detail of the Three Hares, Sumtsek temple, Alchi © Jaroslav Poncar

What is perplexing is that the figures at Dunhuang which are several centuries earlier, are very clearly hares, slender and athletic; and the later the cave paintings become, the chubbier the hares grow. The Three Hares in Dunhuang are often in prime position, in pride of place within a lotus in the centre of the ceiling. Are they depicting enlightenment, or form and emptiness in the very centre? Or are they showing the ceaseless round of teaching. And are they male or female? Do they symbolise fertility and the moon?

At the royal fortress of Basgo fifteen miles down the road back towards Leh, three centuries later than Alchi, the four hares have paws which definitely makes them hares, or at least rabbits. But by then the painters were indigenous Ladakhis who knew their game. Why would anyone suddenly opt for deer in Alchi? The deer park at Sarnath? The Buddha's first sermon?

The answer may lie in local conditions. The local Ladakhi hare is the indigenous Tibetan woolly hare which is found on the Tibetan plateau. It is chunkier than its counter-part in Europe, has a longer tail, and is definitely woollier. It has to survive in minus 40°C in winter. So there is a possibility that the hares as portrayed in Alchi are mythical creatures, transcendental hares; or drawn as if someone has described them, although they have not seen them for real themselves. Even in medieval Europe early animal paintings were often drawn like this, from informed imagination.

But there is another explanation to the hare/deer/rabbit mystery, as Godfrey Vigne points out in his book *Travels in Kashmir Ladakh and Iskardu* (1842). He is amazed, as a keen sportsman, to find that there are no hares in Kashmir at all, despite the good terrain, which he finds perplexing. As it is too cold for Indian Hares and there is not enough cover for Tibetan Hares, it is possible that Kashmiri artists may not have even seen a Tibetan hare. So for the moment we shall call them Hares.²⁰

That there are no hares in Kashmir is echoed by Sir Walter Roper Lawrence in his 1895 book *The Valley of Kashmir*. There is a theory that all the irrigation channels in Kashmir made it impossible for the hare to run around unimpeded, so they legged it to more open ground. There are plenty of hares in Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Eagles and hawks were trained to hunt for hares. Even Hittites hunted with eagles.

So it is just possible that the Kashmiri artists had not seen a hare close to, or they may have been working from hares depicted on woven textiles.

The Three Hare symbol in the Sumtsek temple in Alchi is no mere ornament but an integral part of the design. The *vajra* is a ritual object to symbolize both the properties of a diamond (indestructibility) and a thunderbolt (irresistible force). The thunderbolt can also imply the 'thunderbolt' experience of Buddhist enlightenment or *bodhi*: the sudden awakening which is part of the Zen experience.²¹

The Three Hares can symbolise the Three Jewels: *Gonchuk sum* (*gsang ba gsum*): Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; that is, the Buddha, the teaching and the community of monks, which is used when taking Refuge, or starting out on the path. Or in this instance, at a more advanced monastic setting, it may be more specific as in the Three Jewels related to the Buddha's teaching. There are the three *vajras*: the enlightened body, speech and mind of a Buddha. This would fit in perfectly with the idea of enfolding and embracing scenes from the Buddha's life and their relationship to the Maitreya, the Buddha to come. The Three Vajras are also known as the Three Secrets, Three Mysteries, Three Seats, Three Doors and Three Gateways. or simply 'the three secrets of the noble ones' ie *lus*, body, *gsung* voice/speech and *thugs* mind. So there you have it. The three 'hares' may well be deer but still have three conjoined ears and still charge round and round on the *dhoti* of the Buddha to come. Or they may just be imaginary hares or deer, or even yaks!.²²

The main point is that the Three Hares symbol (or Three Deer symbol) is painted in very important positions in the Sumtsek temple and in the Great Stupa. We can only wonder at their true meaning. But the fact that they occur at Alchi, in Tsaparang, Spiti and at Basgo is important. They do not seem to occur in later settings when the Tibetan wall paintings became more formal and stylistic. Alchi is still holding onto some of its secrets. It is an extraordinarily important site. Professor Snellgrove describes it as 'a fantastic chance survival from the past, and truly one of the wonders of the Buddhist world'.

8

THE GREAT CHORTEN ALCHI THREE AND FOUR HARES

THE SUMTSEK IS NOT THE ONLY TEMPLE AT ALCHI. It is part of a much larger monastic complex surrounded by a wall and it is inside the Great Chorten or Stupa that three and four hares can also be seen. They are connected by what looks to be a kind of Greek key pattern which has the swastika as its central repeating pattern. In other words the four rivers are flowing from Mount Kailash in Tibet. So the Indus is symbolically connected to Mount Kailash, Shiva's mountain. When on pilgrimage The Tibetans go round Kailash clockwise, the Bon anticlockwise.²³



*Inside the Great Stupa at Alchi. The swastika is clearly seen as are the three and four hare motifs as well as the two Sarnath deer and surrounding vajra motif below. c1220AD
© Jaroslav Poncar*

The repeat occurrence of the swastika is important as it relates to the very real geography. Bon practitioners, the pre-Buddhist believers call Mount Kailash, the nine-story Swastika Mountain and regard it as the seat of all spiritual power. In the Zoroastrian religion of Persia, the swastika was a symbol of the revolving sun, infinity, or continuing creation. Kailash is seen as the centre of the world and the four rivers as arms of the Swastika.



Detail of the four hares, Alchi, Leh district, Ladakh c1220AD © Jaroslav Poncar

These do indeed look more like hares than deer, regarding their ears and paws. The Four Hare symbol occurs many times on the underside of the lantern roof. This looks like a textile with a repeating pattern. Here the hares are on their own and there are many instances of the hares which occur in roundels. To have the three and four hares associated with a swastika symbol is interesting. Around Mount Kailash, woolly Tibetan hares are very common in the rich plateau grasslands grazed by the nomads.

In the Great Chorten at Alchi these gyrating animals certainly look more like hares. They have greater freedom of movement and are slightly more athletic. Most are Four Hares but some are Three Hares - the Three Jewels and the Four Noble Truths, which makes perfect Buddhist sense. The Great Chorten was built in the early 13th century not long after the three main temples were completed.

9

NEXT ON THE LIST IS BASGO...

FIFTEEN MILES BACK ON THE ROAD FROM ALCHI towards Leh is the ancient but decaying mud bricked Royal fortress of Basgo within which lies the Maitreya temple with the four hares. Basgo was an ancient trading place and was the capital of Ladakh in ancient times long before Leh was chosen. The temples were built in the 16th and 17th centuries AD and the fortress was very lucky to survive a siege of three years in 1680–1683, when the fifth Dalai Lama went on the warpath.



Basgo Fortress, Ladakh. © Carol Trewin

In Basgo the *Chamba Lakhang* and *Serzang* temples are in the centre of the castle complex and are dedicated to the Maitreya Buddha, the fifth incarnation of Sakyamuni.²⁴ The temple walls are covered with murals depicting vignettes from the life of Buddha and portraits of the benefactors. The largest of the three structures holds a forty-five foot statue of the Maitreya Buddha.



*Four hares on the ceiling of the Basgo Maitreya Temple c1550AD
Photo: Carol Trewin.*

It is here in this temple that the four hares can be found on the ceiling painted again as if they are on textiles. These definitely have paws and are exuberant but slightly chubby - chunky hares, but not without athletic vigour. There are also deer and antelope and men on horseback, which makes a very pleasing montage of mountain life, as well as clearly defined repeating swastikas and a series of special mantras and syllables.

It is quite possible that the hares at Basgo, just like the hares at Alchi, have multiple meanings. I therefore decided that the best thing was to talk to the local Buddhist scholars in Ladakh. It was, after all, their temple... they ought to have an idea or two...



*Four Hares, Basgo c1550AD. Photo: Carol Trewin
(White on red & black in a lotus surround with what looks like flames almost reminiscent of
the Swat Three Hares)*

10

BUDDHIST CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HARES IN LADAKH

THE LAST TIME I VISITED ALCHI was in 2003. This was for a conference organised by The International Association of Ladakh Studies which was held in Choglamsar near Leh and was attended by scholars from many different countries, and many local Ladakhi scholars which was wonderful. After the conference I made a trip with Dr John Crook to Alchi and Basgo.²⁵ The main aim at Alchi was to make recordings for a future BBC programme about the Three Hares. Dr John Crook was an old friend of mine, a well-known scholar and Buddhist teacher with years of experience in Ladakh. He was also a pioneer ethologist at Bristol University.

With his help we were able to interview some important Ladakhis who enabled us to understand the Buddhist context of the Three Hares. These learned and delightful Ladakhis were Dr Jamyang Gyaltzen,²⁶ Nawang Tsering Shakspo,²⁷ and lastly the well known and highly respected Buddhist scholar, translator and historian Tashi Rabgyas²⁸ whom we met in Leh. I had known Tashi since 1976. One other visiting academic at the conference who was also very helpful was Dr Christian Luczanits from the Institute for South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Vienna.²⁹

The cultural context in Ladakh is very important, stretching back in time for over a thousand years. Nowhere else in the world, it seems, is there any direct knowledge at all about the Three Hares symbol, not even in China. It is as if to understand the Three Hares/Four Hares symbol in Ladakh, one has to understand it from within, not from the outside: one has to think like a Tibetan Buddhist. And this will by its very nature also give important clues to the Chinese context at Dunhuang. One has to think like a *nangpa*, an insider, which means a Buddhist, that is from within the teaching and from within the culture.

Knowledge from local villagers was also important. Nawang Tsering Shakspo for instance said that he had recently given a lift to an old man, near Sabu and he had asked him about hares. 'He said "Yes. Yes." He said he knows all about hares, there are many hares in my village; they are beautiful, we sometimes address them, calling them *rigung chang-chub-tsem pa* which means "hare *bodhisattva*".'

Why *bodhisattva*?

'These animals they are very peaceful animal and if somebody chases them, they just stay there closing their eyes and they are meditating. So this animal must be very interesting or intelligent or very auspicious. He said "Yes. Yes they are an auspicious animal, therefore people don't kill it".' that was his impression. Of course the hares were *bodhisattvas*. Why else were they be depicted on the robes of the Maitreya?

In Ladakh is the hare a sacred animal?

"Yes. *Bodhisattva* means being kind hearted. Some animals have special place like fish, deer and hare. By birth they were very holy. Deer don't harm any animal. I place deer and hare higher than fish. Very auspicious animal. Deer and hare most sacred animals."

So in Ladakh and the Tibetan Buddhist world the hare is a very potent symbol, a symbol of compassion forever going round and round.

Dr Jamyang Geltsen, from the school of Buddhist studies in Leh, took a more philosophical and traditional view and said that the Three Hares represented 'The Three Jewels, the Famous Three Jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and if the deer were deer, then that points to Sarnath and the first sermon. Four Hares? The Four Noble Truths. The four noble deer.' It was obvious...

So it could be that the three and four hares in Ladakh and Dunhuang both refer to the earliest Buddhist sermons and to texts in the deer park – Noble Hares, Bodhisattva Hares, Three Jewelled Hares.

Dr John Crook was also as perplexed as I was by the hares that looked like deer. "They have hooves but then they change in time at Basgo back to hares." A connection to the Buddha's first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath made sense to him. John had also been to Dunhuang a few years previously and had been taken by a Chinese archaeologist into caves which most Chinese tourists did not see. Here he saw more designs of three hares, rabbits and deer.

"Some thought the Three Hares were of Mongolian or Central Asian origin, some Persian, but in the end nobody had the least idea at all."

To John Crook "the symbol was very old and goes back to India itself to Benares where Buddha gave his first sermon. The symbol mirrors the diffusion of Buddhist teaching into Tibet, Mongolia and now England and Europe, which is why people are so interested. The teaching has come full circle. And it is a joke to see all these Christian churches in Devon having in their roofs symbols of the Buddhist teaching. Quite a joke... "

So then we met Tashi Rabgyas, the old Ladakhi philosopher, in Leh for lunch. He agreed with all of the above, and also said that the hare was a *bodhisattva* in the moon. And there are again many Tibetan folk tales about that. "When startled hares run a bit and then stand still, they are often upright and yet alert. An animal meditating." So in Ladakh the fact that Three and Four Hares symbol is located in very ancient places in Alchi and Basgo is remarkable. In many ways the Three Hares symbolise compassion which is the underlying philosophy of Buddhism. For Tashi it went even further. It was a Madhyamika Hare. Even emptiness was empty.³⁰



The philosopher Tashi Rabgyas and Dr John Crook discussing hares and bodhisattvas, Leh, Ladakh, Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, 2004 Photo: Carol Trewin

So when you see a hare running round in a circle and then stopping to look at you as if it is meditating, the answer is that it is indeed a hare and the chances are it is a Tibetan woolly hare, and it is also a *bodhisattva*: Form and Emptiness. Quite a bit going on between the ears.

THREE MOGHUL HARES

BUT THE THREE HARES ALSO HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN in North India, which is independent of the Buddhist tradition yet reaches out to the west. Take one Indian Moghul Emperor – Akbar (1556–1605), two Portuguese Jesuit priests, three hares and a skilled Indian court painter and you have a slight mystery. Who were the men? How on earth did they get invited to one of the most powerful courts in the world? Why, exactly, were they there? And how did the Three Hares come to be included as well? What was their purpose and how did the painting get painted in the first place, and when? Were the three hares brought by the Portuguese priests or ambassadors or were they there already in India? The hares have a certain upper class air to them. Are they Portuguese or Moghul hares? or were they copied from paintings, drawings or even textiles?

In a recent exhibition the catalogue which features these Three Hares concludes that the Three Hares are ‘only decorative and are probably of no significance!’ Certainly there is historical record of two Goan Portuguese Jesuits reaching Fatehpur Sikri on 28 February 1580 – Father Rudolf Acquaviva (1550–1583) son of the Duke of Atri, and Father Anthony Monserrate. Fatehpur Sikri was Akbar’s capital about a hundred miles south of Delhi and thirty miles west of Agra.³¹ The Jesuit priests were accompanied by Brother Francis Henriques who may have acted as interpreter, as he had been born in Persia. Farsi and Urdu are very similar. They brought many fine gifts including European textiles, Portuguese costumes and musical instruments as well as some heavy duty bibles and prayer books. In the painting the two Portuguese missionaries look as if they have gone a bit native, which in the summer near Agra is no surprise, for they would have been sweltering in their doublet and hose.



'Two Portuguese in conversation,' gouache on paper with a floral Moghul border, c1580, artist unknown. © Bibliothèque nationale de France

Two of the most famous Moghul painters at that time were Kesu Das (active 1570–1590) and Manohar (active 1580–1620). It is highly probable that one of these two men in fact made the painting. Akbar would have put his best artists on the job to record the visit of important foreigners.

He encouraged his painters to incorporate new ideals of realism and perspective which he so admired in the new imported European paintings.

Akbar was also keen to stimulate religious debate; every Thursday night for many years learned debates and expositions were held in his court between scholars and holy men – Sunnis and Sufis, Shiah, learned men from Khorasan, Iraq and Transoxiana, doctors, theologians, and even the odd philosopher thrown in for good measure. When Akbar heard that there were Christian missionaries in Goa he sent for them to liven up the debate, which is how they were invited to his court in the first place.³²

Akbar was not averse to Christians. Lady Juliana, believed to be a sister of one of Akbar's Armenian wives, was a doctor in the royal harem, which at its peak at Fatehpur Sikri, consisted of around five thousand women, of whom three hundred were his 'real' wives, guarded by an army of eunuchs. The Three Hares were definitely outnumbered.³³



Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India, 1870 photo by Samuel Bourne³⁴

Diplomatically the Portuguese mission was successful. Friendly relations were maintained and their presence at court was an intriguing 'curiosity worth regarding' in its own right. The Jesuits stayed three years but made no headway with converting Akbar to Christianity. Realising the futility of their intentions the priests then left.³⁵

So if the two Jesuits in the painting are the two Portuguese ambassadors then the painting can be dated between 1580 and 1583. If it is later than that, they would have been with a later Portuguese mission and have been painted in Lahore. So the three up-market Moghul hares may in fact be Portuguese Jesuit hares that travelled to India from Portugal via Goa on textiles. I think that the picture is almost certainly from the Moghul court when it was at Fatehpur Sikri which dates it to c1580–1583.



12

NAGAUR- FORT OF THE HOODED COBRA

THE SURVIVAL OF TWO RAJPUT-MOGHUL FOUR HARE/RABBIT PAINTINGS within an old rambling castle in Nagaur, in the middle of Rajasthan is remarkable. Nagaur is an ancient trading town roughly midway between the cities of Jodhpur and Bikaner, but it is now something of a backwater. To the west lies the Thar desert and the city of Jaisalmer. In the past, this part of Rajasthan was referred to as Jangladesh. Nagaur is even mentioned in the Mahabharata and is also a centre for Sufis. Every February there is a famous camel fair where around one hundred thousand camels and cattle are sold. The rabbits/hares are again outnumbered.

In the centre of Nagaur lies the 'Fort of the Hooded Cobra', also known as *Ahhichatragarh*. The palaces within the fort have Moghul influences but exhibit a later Hindu/Rajput style. There are four highly decorated palaces: the Hadi Rani Mahal, Abha Mahal, Bakht Singh Mahal and Sheesh Mahal. There were also many gardens and fine water features. The inner compound extends over thirty-six acres and is confined behind a long array of fortified walls and towers, many of which were crumbling when I saw them in 2005.

Most of the paintings on the walls and ceilings were from the time of Maharajah Bakht Singh, who reigned from 1725 to 1751. Bakhat Singh was an intrepid warrior, poet and a great supporter of the arts. Bakhat Singh loved women and the murals are a testimony to his love of worldly pleasures. He succeeded to the throne as Maharajah of Jodhpur in 1751 but a year later at the tender age of forty-four he was poisoned by a vengeful niece. Some say it was cholera. Whatever the mode of his death Maharajah Bakht Singh established a rich and lavish Hindu court at Nagaur and for

over twenty-five years he hired some of the best painters in the land. They may have sought refuge after the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah in 1739.³⁶



LI118.36 Portrait of Bakhat Singh, Maharaja of Jodhpur. On loan from Howard Hodgkin.
Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The murals, although in need of conservation, are among the finest examples of Rajput-Mughal art in Rajasthan. The wall paintings are breathtaking and display many scenes from courtly life within the women's quarters and thus provide an intimate portrait of royal life in Nagaur in the 18th century.



*Entrance to Hadi Rani Mahal, Nagaur, Rajasthan showing elephants fighting, (top right).
Photo: Carol Trewin*

Within the Royal compound at Nagaur Fort the four hare/rabbit symbols occur in two locations. The first four rabbit roundel is to be found on the ceiling of a loggia belonging to the Hadi Rani Mahal which was the queen's palace, the *zenana*, and second is to be found in the Abha Mahal, a pleasure palace connected to the Hadi Rani Mahal by a long colonnade and is adjacent to a large swimming pool.

13

FOUR HARES IN THE HADI RANI MAHAL NAGAU, c1750

THE RABBITS/HARES ARE FOUR IN NUMBER and painted as a central roundel on the ceiling of the loggia and are surrounded by *apsaras* with angel wings. These *apsaras* are more Sasanian and Persian in origin than Indian, though they do occur in both Dunhuang and in Alchi. *Apsaras* are a common theme and can be *houris* or angels depending on where you come from. Here they are beautiful, gyrating and voluptuous dancing girls with tassels, bangles and bells; strong women with attitude – just right for a Maharajah. The four hares/rabbits are also gyrating clockwise and have a rather bemused expression on their faces, as if they know something we don't. They may well be connected to festivals held on the full moon. Maharajahs got up to all sorts of things on the full moon which left little to the imagination.³⁷ Such is the heat of the desert nights.



Four hares and Apsaras, Hadi Rani Mahal Loggia, Nagaur, Rajasthan, c1750
Photo: Carol Trewin 2005

Each of the *apsaras* is making an offering to the hares/rabbits, and this may hold the clue. Each of the *apsaras* has angel wings and they are all very dexterous. It is as if fertility and erotic wisdom have combined in a sacred dance that spirals round and round in the heavens for all time. In all probability they are offering pomegranates – an ancient symbol of fertility and wisdom, that in the west has been replaced with the apple.³⁸

The *Apsaras* were female spirits of the clouds and waters in Hindu and Buddhist mythology: beautiful, supernatural female beings, youthful, elegant and superb in the art of dancing.³⁹ There is a very appealing description which defies the notion that the supposedly innocent rabbits and *apsaras* look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. According to the Mahabaratta the *apsaras* are possessed of 'eyes like lotus leaves and are employed in enticing the hearts of persons practicing rigid austerities. They have slim waists and fair large hips, and when they dance they begin to perform various evolutions, shaking their deep bosoms, and casting their glances around, and exhibiting other attractive attitudes capable of stealing the hearts and resolutions and minds of the spectators.'



Four Hares and Apsaras, Hadi Rani Mahal Loggia, Nagaur, Rajasthan, c1750
Photo: Carol Trewin 2005

14

FOUR HARES IN THE ABHA MAHAL NAGOUR, c1850



Abha Mahal, Nagaur, Rajasthan. Photo: Carol Trewin 2005

INSIDE THIS PALACE lies the second hare/rabbit roundel. In the foreground is the Queen's swimming pool. The Abha Mahal has since been restored. The colonnade on the left connects to the Queen's palace, the Hadi Rani Mahal. So the rabbits are in prime royal locations. Some of the finest Rajput/Moghul murals in all of Marwar.⁴⁰

The hares/rabbits are on a mauve background and are thought to date from about 1850. The rabbits are similar to those in the Hadi Rani Mahal – they look slightly more bemused and humorous, but then they are 100 years younger. They too are running in clockwise direction. The surround however is totally different: still a roundel in a ceiling, but there are eight tulips, roses or possibly opium poppies? Production of opium was and still is a major Marwar industry.

These *apsaras* are very different in style and many are carrying musical instruments. There is a marked Portuguese feel to these paintings; Portuguese artists were known to have visited the court of Akbar and the Indian painters even adopted some of the European styles. Indeed there is a style of painting called Indian baroque. Ideas went backwards and forwards between India and Portugal, particularly in the way in which angels were depicted. Roses or pomegranates? Roses more likely...



Four Hares, Abha Mahal, Nagaur, Rajasthan, c1850

Photo: Carol Trewin

The surround is reminiscent of the eight petals of a lotus so beloved of Buddhist and Hindu painters. There are song birds, parakeets, petals and seeds – Heaven indeed. The Portuguese feel may well be as a result of the Portuguese artistic influence in Moghul courts during the reigns of Akbar and Jehangir. (*See 11 Three Moghul Hares*)

It seems that pleasure was at the centre of it all in Nagaur which is probably what Maharajah Bakht Singh intended all along. But which way was the three/four hare/rabbit symbol travelling – East or West? Here there were Sufis, camels, full moons and luxurious evenings. Emperors, monks and Maharajahs, Jesuit priests, hares and rabbits as well as scantily clad dancing girls: Northern India has them all. And it is pleasure which is central to these palaces. A point backed up by none other than William Dalrymple: ‘The paintings Bakhat Singh commissioned show sensuousness almost unknown in Mughal or earlier Rajput painting’. So Nagaur paintings and Nagaur rabbits/hares are very important indeed. The erotic and tantric element cannot be ignored even in Rajasthan. Bunny girls have a long and noble tradition. Three or Four take your pick. Watch out for the full moon in Rajasthan.



NOTES

1. This photograph of Kanishka comes from *Ancient India* compiled by K de B Codrington (1926) published by Ernest Benn, London. This weighty tome also has a fine essay on Indian art by Sir William Rothenstein. There are four *Fleur-de-lis* symbols in a square emblem repeated twice on the bottom end of Kanishka's smaller sword.
2. See translations by Samuel Beal 1906: Book 2 pp99–100.
Si-yu-ki. Buddhist records of the Western World. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1906)
3. These travellers and pilgrims were: Faxian, who travelled between 399–412 AD; Sung Yun who arrived in India in 518AD and Xuanzang who went to India in 630AD.
4. Kumar, Baldev. 1973. *The Early Kuṣāṇas*. New Delhi, Sterling Publishers. p89
5. The split in Buddhism may have been political as well. The Northern and the Southern school thus developed along slightly differing lines. The Mahayana countries being Ladakh, Bhutan, Sikkim, parts of Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan and Vietnam, whereas the Hinayana countries are Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand etc.
6. Barikot is the largest city in the south end of Swat valley and is located fifteen miles from Mingora. Barikot is one hundred and thirty miles from the site of the ancient and important site of the Buddhist university of Taxila. Barikot is also eighty-three miles from the Kanishka chorten at Peshawar.
7. See the excellent article by Dr Anna Filigenzi 2003 'The Three Hares from Bir-Kot-Ghwandai: another stage in the journey of a widespread motif' in Fontana M. & Genito, B. (eds) *Studi in Onore di Umberto Scerrato* (Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Naples) pp327-346.
http://www.academia.edu/7631088/The_three_hares_from_Bir-kot-ghwandai_Another_stage_in_the_journey_of_a_widespread_motif
8. The Shahis of Kabul are generally divided into the two eras. The 'Buddhist Shahis' from c.565–870 AD and the 'Hindu Shahis', from around 870–1010 AD.
9. Many *ts'a ts'a* are made just from clay and have no connection with funeral practices and are just used as religious offerings at house shrines or temples or places of religious significance.
10. Dakinis also feature in the Vajrayana formulation of the Buddhist refuge formula the Three Jewels, known as the Three Roots.

11. Mani wheels are used by often pilgrims and devout villagers whilst perambulating around temples and chortens. The prayer wheels are often embellished with the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* written in Sanskrit.
12. The ruins of the former capital of Guge at Tsaparang in the Sutlej valley are not far from Mount Kailash.
13. It was then another eight days from Kargil down to the fleshpots of Srinagar and from there down to the plains of India over yet more passes.
14. Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) With gold from the rivers of Western Tibet it is likely that he arranged for a gang of around thirty Kashmiri artists to come to Ladakh and decorate various temples. But it is by no means certain that he painted the temples in Alchi even though there is a temple dedicated to Lotsawa himself.
15. Professor David Snellgrove and Dr Tadeusz Skorupski (1977 Aris and Phillips) opt for an 11th century date for the temples but do not rule out 12th century. Dr Christian Luczanits of SOAS in London thinks that the oldest monuments can be dated to the period after 1200. [Luczanits, C. (1999) 'The Life of the Buddha in the Sumtsek', *Orientalism*, 30, January 1999, 30-39.] For more information about the history of Alchi see Snellgrove, D. L. & Skorupski, T. (1977) *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh* (Aris & Phillips, Warminster) Volume 1 pp29-80.
16. All these themes are very well illustrated in Roger Goepfer's magnificent book on the *Sumtsek* and identified in Christian Luczanits's article in *Orientalism* 1999 *ibid.* see Goepfer, R. & Poncar, J. (1996) *Alchi: Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary: The Sumtsek* (Shambhala Limited Editions, Boston) The photographs of Jaroslav Poncar are breathtaking, particularly when you consider that the temple is like a dark cave with very little natural light. Many of the paintings are in the upper stories which are inaccessible to the general public.
17. An early copy of the Diamond Sutra was found by Aurel Stein in Dunhuang and this is now kept in the British Library in London.
18. My great uncle Professor K de B Codrington who was keeper of the Indian Section of the Victoria & Albert Museum and then Professor of Indian Archaeology at SOAS tried to get into Ladakh to visit the temples in the spring 1942 but had been prevented from crossing the Zoji La on foot at night by powder snow avalanches. The party had burning torches which they held above their heads to see the way but the snow was too deep and they had to turn back. The nallahs are death traps when the snow begins to melt. The rigours of art history. Even Aurel Stein lost a few toes in the Tarim Basin. My own interest in Ladakh comes from Professor Codrington and at the time 1976 he told me that he tipped off David Snellgrove about the wonders of Alchi when Ladakh opened in 1974. He had heard about Alchi from Joseph Hackin of the Musee Guimet in Paris in the 1930s.

19. In other words the artists were very good at portraying animals that they knew but the 'mythical' animals are not portrayed accurately at all. They are often playful. The Tibetan Snow lion is more like a Lhasa Apso dog than a real lion. So why make these hares or bulls ambivalent as to their true identity? Maybe they are meant to be symbolic and we have to look for their inner meaning. The Tibetans are very fond of jokes.
20. Perceval Landon, special correspondent of *The Times* on the British military expedition to Lhasa 1904 had this to say about the Tibetan woolly hare: 'The woolly hare is universally distributed across the Tibetan plateau. The most obvious distinction with the British hare is by the patch of grey fur over the rump of the Tibetan species. The characteristic grey patch is well marked even in leverets. The woolly hare is singular in its custom of habitually squatting among the bare stones on the hillside in preference to the grassy plains'.
21. The Tantric yogas of this time also lean towards this possibility or attainment. Dzogchen which is Tibet's version of Zen certainly does. In India and Hindu religion the *vajra* is the mythic weapon of Indra, who is Lord of Heaven and Deva of rain and thunder.
22. Many of the paintings were used not just for teaching but for visualisations. An advanced practice that needs peace, quiet and inner guidance.
23. The waters of the four rivers are regarded as sacred. They give water and life far away from their source irrigating the plains of India. Without water there is no life.
24. For more information about the history of Basgo see Snellgrove, D. L. & Skorupski, T. (1977) *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh* (Aris & Phillips, Warminster) 2 vols. Volume 1 pp93-97.
25. Also on the trip were Carol Trewin, ex BBC producer who took photographs and handled the recording equipment and my daughter Nell Crowden.
26. Dr Jamyang Gyaltzen is a Ladakhi scholar from the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar, Leh.
27. Nawang Tsering Shaksपो is Head of the local branch of Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages in Leh.
28. Tashi Rabyas is a famous historian and scholar in Ladakh. He acted as the Dalai Lama's interpreter when his Holiness visited Ladakh. He has also written a history of Ladakh in Ladakhi. He was a great expounder of the Madhyamika path.

29. Christian Lucanzits had studied the paintings at Alchi extensively. He suggested to us that we might like to go to Basgo as well, because the four hare symbol could also be found there. Christian is now the David L. Snellgrove Senior Lecturer in Tibetan and Buddhist Art at SOAS in London.
30. It is a tribute to the artist and the inner power of the teaching that they still survive and that the teaching is still as relevant today as it was back then in the 12th century. The teaching like the universe goes round and round.
31. Fatehpur Sikri A rough translation means 'Victory Town – Thanks to God'. It was a most remarkable purpose built city and served as the capital of the Mughal Empire from 1571 to 1585 when it was abandoned due to lack of sufficient water. The capital then shifted to Lahore. Akbar was quite a lad as well as being a great patron of the arts.
32. The other extraordinary thing, reminiscent of Gandhara, is the fusing of western and eastern artistic tradition where western concepts of perspective and all the other tricks of the Renaissance were quickly absorbed by Akbar's court painters. Later they developed their own miniature style and even painted many Christian scenes from the bible.
33. Lady Juliana is credited with building the first Christian Church in Agra. She was later married to Jean Philippe de Bourbon of Navarre, a royal descendant of France. So the court of Akbar had important links with both France and Portugal. The Three Hares could have easily been introduced into Moghul Art from either country. The Portuguese link however is the more likely. There is a story that Juliana and her sister were captured by pirates and thence taken to Akbar's court.
34. Samuel Bourne (1834–1912) was a British photographer who worked in India 1863 to 1870. His company Bourne & Shepherd was set up in Simla in 1863 and still exists today in Calcutta.
35. It is assumed that the painting was made within those three years. ie between 1580–1583, and that the painter was either Kesu Das or Manohar. There were other Portuguese diplomatic missions in the 1590s and they brought their own artists and musicians but none of them succeeded in converting the Emperor.
36. See Giles Tillotson, *Nagaur: a garden palace in Rajasthan*, Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, 2010. Also verbal communication about the Moghul painters fleeing suggested by Ilay Cooper the great expert of Shekhawati.

37. Sadly the condition of these paintings has deteriorated badly over the years but a conservation team from the Courtauld in London has been working there since about 2005. One illustration of these same rabbits in their 2013 report on the Hadi Rani Mahal and an enhanced photograph shows clearly that the white paint is flaking badly. The close up detail from ceiling panel B2 from Loggia shows that the rabbits have long curving eye lashes and the outlines of the rabbits are picked up in turquoise blue set on a green background. For more information on conservation see:
<http://conservation-studies-nagaur.org/>
38. As to the styles of painting in Rajasthan at this time, four main schools flourished, defined by mainly by geographical area. Mewar in the south including the city of Udaipur. Marwar in the north including the cities of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Nagaur and Ghanerao. Then there was the Hadoti school including Bundi and the Dhundar school including Amber, Jaipur and the wonderful wall paintings of Shekawati. Each has its own particular delights. The Rajput style of painting was very colourful, dynamic and even humorous.
39. *Apsaras* are often wives of the court musicians of Indra. They dance to the music made by the Gandharvas, usually in the palaces of the gods, they entertain and sometimes seduce gods and men. Better far to have them on your side and dancing on the ceilings.
40. *Abha* means 'splendour light' in Sanskrit or 'lustrous beauty'. which may refer to the buildings, the paintings, the dancers or the wives and courtesans of the Maharajah himself.

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JAMES CROWDEN

My own interest in hares stems from my childhood in the 1950s when we lived in a chauffeur's cottage on the clifftops at Little Redlap near Dartmouth. There were hares living in the field behind the house and in the winter my mother would take me out and show me the forms left by the hares in the snow and their prints. Form and emptiness. This magical world was enhanced no end by the Harbour Bookshop, down in Dartmouth run by a kind man called Christopher Milne alias Christopher Robin. Myth, fiction and reality were intertwined. More than thirty years later I returned to Little Redlap and was told an intriguing story about hares by Rachel Lambert who still lived at the big house down the road and had been our landlady. We had a cup of tea and she then told me an extraordinary story about hares.

One summer's evening she heard a noise and a hare was pawing at her French window, either intrigued by its own reflection or as she supposed, asking to be let in. The hare was insistent and fearless, apparently wanting human contact. She knew that Christopher Milne, who still lived locally, had a tame hare so she phoned him up supposing it was his hare. But he replied 'No' he had his hare with him. It was another hare altogether. Not knowing what else to do, she put the hare in with her chickens. But a few weeks later Reynard got into the chicken pen and sadly it was then no more chickens and no more tame hare.

So a childhood experience of hares in winter has set me on the path of a really fascinating psychological journey. And my life is the richer for it.

Back in the 1970s when I was in the British army I traveled very widely in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Ladakh and one 'hare' incident sticks in my mind very clearly. This was on the Russian border in Eastern Turkey at the ancient Armenian capital of Ani. On the opposite side of the gorge was a tall barbed wire fence, a minefield and eagle eyed Soviet guards in the watchtowers. The Turkish soldier who was accompanying me suddenly dropped his rifle and started running down the slope towards the river Araxes, which was the official border, all the time chasing a hare, whooping with joy but of course never caught it. The Soviet soldier watched through his binoculars but luckily he did not open fire. The one that got away. Was it an Armenian Hare, a Kurdish hare or a Turkish hare I wonder?

Also I was by now well aware of the Three Hares project as I had known Chris Chapman and Tom Greeves for a number of years. I had also met the artist Trevor Felcey in a field with his tame donkey. Every time I met Sue Andrew her dogged research had invariably uncovered yet another intriguing example of oriental Three Hares. At the time I was doing some work for the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol and when I mentioned the Three Hares project to the producer Grant Sonnex he was immediately interested, and so the programme *Chasing Hares* was commissioned. Later I made recordings in Buddhist

monasteries in Ladakh looking for Tibetan hares with Dr John Crook from Bristol University and other Buddhist scholars.

I still feel that there is much to learn about the history and the mythical status of this most enigmatic of animals as well as the endearing and enduring importance of the Three Hares symbol whether it be Three or Four Hares, clockwise or anticlockwise, East or West.



If you have enjoyed reading these essays on the Three and Four Hares
then why not visit my own website

www.james-crowden.co.uk

and possibly purchase a few books on a variety of other subjects.

I am now currently writing a book about a 'Long Walk in the Hindu Kush'
in Afghanistan prior to the Russian invasion.

And then a book about spending a 'Winter in the Himalaya.'