

## OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

## Osterhäschen / Easter Bunny

## Ursprung und Legende / origin and legends

Der Osterhase



This hopping Easter creature is believed to originate from Germany. The first known account of *der Osterhase* is found in the 1684 notes of a Heidelberg professor of medicine, where he discusses the ill-effects of overeating Easter eggs. German and Dutch settlers later brought the notion of *der Osterhase* or *Oschter Haws* (dutch) to the U.S. in the 1700's.

The idea of an egg-laying bunny came to the U.S. in the 18th century. German immigrants in the Pennsylvania Dutch area told their children about the "*Osterhase*" (sometimes spelled "*Oschter Haws*"<sup>[11]</sup>).<sup>[12]</sup> "*Hase*" means "hare", not rabbit, and in Northwest European folklore the "Easter Bunny" indeed is a hare, not a rabbit. According to the legend, only good children received gifts of colored eggs in the nests that they made in their caps and bonnets before Easter.<sup>[13]</sup> In 1835, Jakob Grimm wrote of long-standing similar myths in Germany itself. Grimm suggested that these derived from legends of the reconstructed continental Germanic goddess \*Ostara.<sup>[14]</sup>

Eggs, like rabbits and hares, are fertility symbols of antiquity. Since birds lay eggs and rabbits and hares give birth to large litters in the early spring, these became symbols of the rising fertility of the earth at the March Equinox.<sup>[15]</sup>

**What came first? Bunny or Egg?**

A universal symbol of fertility and new life, the egg, is also a common denominator unifying local Easter traditions. Because hens become productive during the spring, and since eating eggs was forbidden during Lent, they were in plentiful supply at Easter. It seems natural that they were given as gifts.

In times past, each person had specific "obligations" to fulfill. On Easter a peasant paid a portion of his taxes (in eggs) to his landlord and the lord in turn contributed (eggs) to the poor. Children, not con-

sidered full-fledged members of society, were exempted from giving; yet they received (eggs) from those who were obligated to give.

The *Osterhase* is also a child of the season: spring litters meant that rabbits appeared in almost every garden. In Germany, children prepare grass or straw nests in which the rabbit can deposit his eggs. Colored eggs date as far back as the late Middle Ages; today eggs may be made of chocolate, satin, wood, sugar or marzipan. Egg games include rolling, tossing, cracking and the familiar Easter Egg Hunt.