

## OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

## OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

## Ursprung und Geschichte (origin and history)

## History

Eggs, in general, were a traditional symbol of fertility,<sup>[4]</sup> and rebirth, pre-dating Christian traditions.<sup>[5]</sup> The practice of decorating eggshell is ancient. Ostrich eggs with engraved decoration that are 60,000 years old have been found in Africa<sup>[6]</sup>. Decorated ostrich eggs, and representations of ostrich eggs in gold and silver, were commonly placed in graves of the ancient Sumerians and Egyptians as early as 5,000 years ago<sup>[7]</sup>.

In particular, the custom of the Easter egg originated amongst the early Christians of Mesopotamia, who stained eggs red in memory of the blood of Christ, shed at his crucifixion.<sup>[8][9]</sup> The Christian Church officially adopted the custom, regarding the eggs as a symbol of the resurrection; in A.D. 1610, Pope Paul V proclaimed the following prayer:<sup>[8][9]</sup>

Bless, O Lord! we beseech thee, this thy creature of eggs, that it may become a wholesome sustenance to thy faithful servants, eating it in thankfulness to thee on account of the resurrection of the Lord.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

Although the tradition is to use dyed or painted chicken eggs, a modern custom is to substitute chocolate eggs, or plastic eggs filled with confectionery such as jelly beans. These eggs can be hidden for children to find on Easter morning, which may be left by the Easter Bunny. They may also be put in a basket filled with real or artificial straw to resemble a bird's nest.

**The Easter egg — The Easter egg now caters to the taste of the young and not so young. Who would think of it as a sacred symbol with a message of deep spirituality and creativity? For that is its real and only purpose and meaning.**

The Easter egg is the emblem of renewed life after death and of resurrection. To all appearances, an egg is lifeless matter, and yet out of it can come a new creature. Just as the chick is entombed, as it were, in the egg and brought to life in due course, so out of the grave the dead will rise to a new existence. That is why, from earliest times in all kinds of cultures, the egg assumed cosmic significance and has been a symbol of fertility and immortality.

The Greeks and Romans buried eggs, real or false, in their tombs. Scenes on Athenian vases show how baskets of eggs were left on graves. Maoris used to put an egg in the hand of a dead person before burial. Even today, Jews present mourners on their return from the funeral of a relative with a dish of eggs as their first meal.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter coincided with spring, the season of the renewal of nature. Out of the dead earth, so it seemed, sprang new life. It was the moment of creation and re-creation. As early as pagan times, the egg symbolized the rebirth of nature at the

time of the solar New Year. The shape of the egg was emblematic of the shape of the Earth.

Christianity took this ancient sign of rejoicing at rebirth and applied it to the resurrection of Jesus. The ritual of Pope Paul V included a prayer in which the faithful acknowledged this very purpose of the Easter egg: "Eating it in thankfulness to Thee, on account of the resurrection of our Lord."

Also, the fact that all through the fast of Lent, preceding Easter, eggs were forbidden made them all the more welcome on Easter day.

The origin of the "Easter egg" custom is not fully known. One reason for it is, of course, that around Easter time the rural household had plenty of eggs handy. The hens — particularly the less productive strains of past centuries — began to lay eggs again in the spring. Another explanation is that Easter marks the end of the time of fasting during which eggs and meat were forbidden. All this may have helped to create the custom.

The first historical mention of colored eggs (although not of Easter eggs) goes back to the year 1230 A.D. We know for sure that in the 16th and 17th centuries colored eggs were given as Easter presents. In the Baroque period it became customary for young people who wanted to become engaged to give each other colored and decorated eggs. This remained a rural custom in some regions of central and eastern Europe for a long time.