

## OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

## OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

## Easter Eggs: From Taxes and Charity to Presents

In the old days, Karneval customs often included the “driving out of winter.” During parades and plays men wrapped in straw or twigs were led through the villages. This was also done in the towns during the late Middle Ages and early modern times, when the craft guilds’ journeymen would accompany the gruesome figures. Sometimes, the figures were not disguised men but rather dolls made of straw or twigs, which later were to be burned as symbols of winter.

Here and there, such customs were practiced as late in the year as Easter, but this was rare, for in spite of an occasional snowfall spring usually begins at this time, and the first spring flowers are already blossoming.

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#### *How Customs Change: The Role of Gifts in Feudal Societies*

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*All these “gifts” were not presents in the modern sense of the word. They were part of social convention, fixed in kind and number, and they would not be exchanged but rather could only be given by higher ranking individuals or groups to those of a lower rank. Modern presents, however, as we shall see most clearly in connection with Christmas customs, are primarily a voluntary matter — even if certain indirect obligations do come into play. In the past this was not the case at all. In feudal society one’s social standing was set from birth, and this meant that the different social classes had different rights and duties “by birth” — including the right to receive Easter presents or the duty to give them. In contrast to this, modern society claims that all men have the same rights and obligations toward society. The customs relating to gifts have changed accordingly. Presents are now exchanged between individuals who want to surprise other individuals and make them happy.*

But since children are not yet full-fledged members of society, they are not obliged to give presents. They only receive them. In some German regions, children virtually “collect” Easter eggs from their relatives, especially their godparents. In general, however, the customs relating to children’s gifts have also changed. What once were conventional little gifts have now become more or less “surprise presents,” with differing values. Also, an anonymous, mysterious figure has

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#### *Easter Is the Oldest of all Christian Feasts*

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It is certainly not by chance that Easter is celebrated at the beginning of spring. The Christian doctrines and feasts were being worked out at the same time as Christianity was spreading over Europe. Very often, Christian missionaries in central, northern and western Europe deliberately used pre-Christian rites, holy places and holy times of the year to make the new creed meaningful to the people, by enhancing the old customs with new beliefs. The same may have been the case with Easter, although it is the oldest Christian feast, introduced in the early second century. There has been much speculation about a possible connection between the name “Easter” (“Ostern” in German) and an ancient Anglo-Saxon spring goddess named Eostra (Ostara) but this is unproven. It is quite possible that there were certain pre-Christian spring festivities and cults which were continued in Christian feasts, partly at Karneval and partly at Easter. But today’s Easter customs have been shaped by the rites of the Christian church and other, younger traditions.

Easter and spring go so well together because the Resurrection of the Savior in the Christian religion is reflected by the “resurrection” of nature after winter. The whole cycle of church feasts from Easter to Whitsun symbolically repeats the story of the life and sufferings of Christ.

been placed between the child and the giver of the present. The child is told that it is the Easter bunny who brings the Easter eggs and Easter presents. The Easter bunny is less of an “educational” figure than Santa Claus is, however, since the eggs are not given to children as rewards for being good.

Scholars have traced the custom of the Easter bunny hiding Easter eggs back to the year 1682. Rabbits also occurred in connection with other Easter customs, perhaps because they have their litters at this time and so they appear more often in people’s gardens to nibble on the fresh greens. In the 19th century, the rabbit gradually became popular as the bringer of Easter presents, and in the first half of our century he finally won out for good over all “competitors.”