

OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

As a result of the Lent fast preceding Easter they tended to have a lot of eggs. They cooked these and paid their dues with them. And at the same time they presented to their lords the hares—often in considerable numbers—that they had killed in their fields.

“This is how the combination of hare and egg came about and became entrenched in the minds of the people over the years,” Witzel says.

During the 17th Century adults began to tell their children that the eggs came from the Easter bunnies. Foxes, storks and cranes were competitors for a long time, but by the end of World War II the bunny had won. At this time chocolate makers discovered the bunny with its bulging eyes and produced only chocolate bunnies at Easter time. They ensured that to this day the bunny brings the eggs.

Easter Eggs — Formerly Payments in Kind, Today the Children’s Delight

Along with the traditional Easter walk or outing, the giving of Easter eggs and, more recently, of Easter presents is a main feature of the feast. Parents give their children “Easter eggs” — colored and boiled eggs, chocolate eggs, marzipan eggs — Easter bunnies, sweets, and other gifts. Adults give each other things to eat and drink, but to a greater extent more recently people have also been giving more durable presents. Usually, the easter eggs are carefully hidden in the garden or in the house and the children must search for them on the morning of Easter Sunday. They are told that the Easter bunny has brought them. The Easter bunny can be seen everywhere at this time — be it on Easter greeting cards (many people send them to relatives and friends, as they do at Christmas), on advertisements or as decorations, or made out of chocolate, marzipan, and cookies.

Easter presents furnish interesting examples for a discussion of the history of cultural and social change. 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.

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 decisive factor, however, probably was a different one — it had to do with the taxes which the peasants had to pay to their lords, to the Church, or to their parsons.

Before they were turned into money payments as a result of reforms during the 19th century, these taxes were payments in kind. Easter was one of the dates when they became due and therefore many eggs were among the payments delivered at this time. The lords of the land, especially the church and the monasteries, did not keep all those eggs for themselves but used part of them to meet their own manifold public obligations, including their obligation to give to the poor. Besides, there were Easter “trick-or-treating” excursions (like those at the Day of the Magi) during which eggs were collected and eaten afterwards.

Easter

