

OSTERSITTEN UND BRÄUCHE / CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS

OSTEREIER/ EASTER EGGS

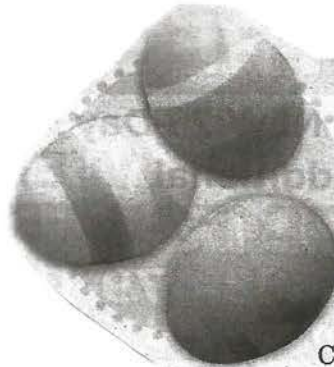
Eggs and Bunnies



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



Easter eggs

According to Anglo-Saxon myth, the goddess Ostara changed her favorite pet bird into a rabbit to amuse some children. The rabbit produced brightly colored eggs, which the goddess gave to the kids. In Germany, that tradition carried into Christian times with the tale of a Santa-like magical rabbit, Osterhase, who leaves colored eggs for good children.

Many cultures, including the Hindu and Chinese, regard the egg as a symbol of the universe and creation, and eggs were fertility symbols for numerous

early civilizations. People dyed and exchanged eggs during spring festivals in ancient Persia, Rome and other cultures. In Christian times, the eggs took on new meaning because they were forbidden during Lent — the 40 days preceding Easter — but they could be eaten after the holiday arrived. From eggs, it's a short leap to the symbol of newborn chicks, who represent new life by breaking out of their symbolic "tombs."

In America, the tradition of hunting for hidden eggs became the Easter Egg Roll, popular by the late 1800s, when children rolled eggs on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. Unhappy with the ensuing mess, Congress outlawed the practice on its grounds. In 1878, President Rutherford B. Hayes and his wife, Lucy, invited children to roll eggs on the White House lawn, beginning a tradition that continues today.



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.

A man sells brightly painted Easter eggs to people near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.