The Story of Easter Bunnies and Easter Eggs





Easter is the day when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, following his death by crucifixion outside the city walls of Old Jerusalem.

So what do Easter eggs, and the Easter bunny, have to do with Easter? Is there a story we can trace, to a particular time in history, when the idea of an Easter bunny was born?

As it happens ... there is such a story, but be warned ... it could be just a tale based on fiction (not reality). Let's step back in time to unravel the mystery of Easter bunnies and Easter eggs.

The first stop, on our back-in-time journey, is in pre-Christian Germany. Since history tells us that St. Boniface—an Englishman, born around 675, whose birth name was Wynfrid (or Wynfrith)—converted Germans to Christianity, the story of bunnies and eggs has to predate the early-8th century.

Who were the gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Germany? One of the Teutonic deities—the goddess of spring and fertility—was Eostra (spelled in various ways).

Maybe we can trace Easter eggs and bunnies to Eostra—whose anglicized name is Easter—by means of a Teutonic myth. Kevin Shortsleeve—via the University of Florida's Center for Children's Literature and Culture—tells us more about that myth:

> *According to Teutonic myth, a little girl found a bird that was close to death and prayed to Eostra for help. Eostra appeared, crossing a rainbow bridge—the snow melting before her feet.*
>
> *Seeing the bird was badly wounded, she turned it into a hare, and told the little girl that from now on, the hare would come back once a year bearing rainbow colored eggs.*

Was this story written down, so we can verify it—or—was it more like a tall tale passed orally from generation to generation (acquiring different versions along the way)? Maybe it falls within the fairy-tale category, like the fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers (who were known for creating their own tales and recasting prior tales)?

Although it appears the Teutonic-myth story wasn't written-down in ancient times, so we can't confirm whether it's an ancient myth or a modern tale, we know for sure that a 17th-century German physician and botanist, called Georg Franck von Franckenau, examined the question of Easter bunnies and Easter eggs in a work which includes this phrase in the title: *De Ovis Paschalibus* ("On Easter Eggs").



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Von Franckenau taught anatomy, chemistry and botany in Jena and became a professor of medicine at the University of Heidelberg. In his "On Easter Eggs" essay, which he published around 1682, he considers ancient pagan symbols of life and fertility connected with religious traditions. On the Easter bunny, he says this (in English translation):

> *In Alsace, and neighboring regions, these eggs are called rabbit eggs because of the myth told to fool simple people and children that the Easter Bunny is going around laying eggs and hiding them in the herb gardens. So the children look for them, even more enthusiastically, to the delight of smiling adults.*

Did the stories about bunnies and eggs remain in Germany or did German immigrants carry such stories and traditions to America?

> *These legends were preserved and improved upon by the Pennsylvania Dutch, who referred to the Bunny as the Oschter Haws.*
>
> *Beginning in the1680s, children around Germantown Pennsylvania would build nests out of hats and bonnets, place them in the yard, or out by the barn and, on Easter morning, they would be found filled with colorful eggs.*
>
> *The decorated hats and bonnets eventually evolved into fanciful Easter baskets.* (See Kevin Shortsleeve's article.)

What about chocolate Easter eggs? Do we know when they were first created? If so—did they first appear in America or in Germany?

> *In the 1800s, in Germany, a very important advance in Easter morning rituals was achieved when the first edible Easter bunnies were made. They were made of pastry and sugar—the chocolate ones followed quickly on their heels.* (Shortsleeve.)

Did the Christian celebration of Easter predate the Easter Bunny / Easter Egg tradition in America—or—was it the other way around?

> *Like Christmas and Halloween, the Christian holiday of Easter was not celebrated throughout much of the United States until well into the 1800s. After the Civil War, however, the Easter Bunny began hopping up with more regularity.*
>
> *In the 20th Century, the bunny's popularity soared, and, in the 1950s, songwriters Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins sat down and wrote a follow up to their Christmas hit, "Frosty the Snowman."* (Shortsleeve.)

Enter ... a rabbit called Peter Cottontail:

Here comes Peter Cottontail
Hoppin' down the bunny trail
Hippity Hoppity
Easter's on its way!

Television and "Peter Cottontail" seemed like a good combination:

> *The popularity of the Peter Cottontail song led to an animated television special and, like Santa, Mr. E. Bunny began to receive numerous requests for personal appearances at shopping malls.* (Shortsleeve.)

When the Easter Bunny showed-up at shopping malls, though, he wasn't always a warm-and-fuzzy draw for young children. In fact, he sometimes seemed a bit scary:

> *... for some children, the Easter bunny took on a frightening aspect - after all - that is one huge rabbit - six feet tall - walking on its hind legs - sneaking around your house when you're asleep - never saying a word.* (Shortsleeve.)

Now ... when you enjoy your chocolate Easter eggs—and wonder how the Easter Bunny first became part of the Easter Season—you have a few myths and facts to consider. And ... don't forget to marvel at those unbelievable Fabergé eggs which members of the Russian Imperial Family once gave as Easter presents. They are something to behold (as is the story of how one long-lost Imperial egg ended-up in the kitchen of an unwitting American)!

Credits:

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Image of vintage Easter cards: On the left, a Dutch card which says, in English translation, "Happy Easter!" Public domain.

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On Easter Eggs - Georg Franck von Franckenau

Georg Franck von Franckenau was a German physician and botanist who was born in 1643 in the city of Naumburg.

He taught anatomy, chemistry and botany in Jena and became a professor of medicine at the University of Heidelberg.

Among his published works is an essay entitled "De Ovis Paschalibus" in which he writes about Easter eggs. In this work he considers ancient pagan symbols of life and fertility and how they were connected to religious customs. About the Easter bunny, he says this (in English translation):

In Alsace, and neighboring regions, these eggs are called rabbit eggs because of the myth told to fool simple people and children that the Easter Bunny is going around laying eggs and hiding them in the herb gardens. So the children look for them, even more enthusiastically, to the delight of smiling adults.

Von Franckenau moved to Denmark, at some point in his life, to serve as personal physician of Christian V, King of Denmark and Norway. He died, in Copenhagen, during 1704.

This image depicts the cover of the work which includes von Franckenau's essay, "De Ovis Paschalibus."

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