

History of Easter Traditions

Did you know...

Easter originated as a Pagan tradition, celebrated by the Anglo-Saxons in honor of their goddess of birth and springtime—Eastre (also known as Oestre or Ostara).

During the second century, when Christian missionaries were attempting to convert the population to Christianity, many Pagans who converted to Christianity still refused to give up their traditional religious celebrations. “Easter” began to be celebrated as a Christian holiday, in order to allow former Pagans to celebrate Eastre without being *blasphemous*. It became a *hybrid* celebration of both the Pagan Eastre and the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ.

Modern Easter traditions ...

Most Easter traditions originated from the Pagan festival of Eastre. For example the *fertility* goddess Eastre was associated with a sacred earth animal—the rabbit. The tradition of the Easter Bunny may have started in Germany where the goddess Eastre was known as Ostara. As one story goes, Ostara arrived late one Spring, and many animals had been frozen by the snow. She saved a small bird whose wings had been frozen, and she transformed him into a white snow-hare so he could run fast and survive the winters. However, she allowed the bird the ability to lay eggs one day a year. And every year during the Eastre or Ostara Festival the snow hare would lay colorful eggs and give them out to the children.

Eggs have been longtime symbols of rebirth and fertility, even as far back as ancient Greece and Rome. During the Festival of Eastre it was customary to exchange colored eggs with one’s neighbors. Colored and decorated eggs were given as a token of good fortune and wishes for a prosperous year. According to some, the tradition of Easter egg hunts began during the rise of Christianity in Europe. Since egg-giving was a Pagan tradition, some people were *persecuted* because of it. So people began hiding eggs instead of giving them as gifts, and soon it became a game for children to hunt for the hidden eggs.

VOCABULARY

Blasphemous – A violation against God or other sacred things

Hybrid – A mix of two different things

Fertility – Ability to produce young

Persecuted – Harassed or harmed, especially due to one’s race or beliefs

QUESTIONS

Why do you think it was important for the early Christians to hold on to their old celebrations and holidays despite persecution?

In what other ways can the egg be meaningful within the theme of Easter?



Ostara etching by Johannes Gehrts