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## Eostre and Easter. What are the origins of this Spring festival?



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Coloured eggs and bunnies abound at Easter and yet they are ancient symbols that even pre-date Christianity. Johnny Scott investigates Eostre, the pagan spring festival and possibly the name of a goddess



Before settling down to read about the origins of some of our Easter traditions, take a look at our guide to the **most tempting Easter eggs** and get your order in early.

Usually we think of delighted children scampering around searching for brightly-coloured eggs and symbolic rabbits hopping with baskets. (Read our **advice on organising an Easter egg hunt here**.) However though these seem to be modern, they actually originate before the birth of Christianity. The pagan spring festival includes Easter, or Eostre, and it is a slightly different celebration of the holiday than most of us would think.

## Eostre and Easter

In AD 595, Pope Gregory sent a mission of 40 monks led by a Benedictine called Augustine, prior of St Andrew's monastery in Rome (and later the first Archbishop of Canterbury), to England with instructions to convert the pagan inhabitants to Christianity. Augustine was advised to allow the outward forms of the old, heathen festivals and beliefs to remain intact, but wherever possible to superimpose Christian ceremonies and philosophy on them.

The sheer scale of the task confronting the little band of missionaries was so colossal that, halfway on the long trudge from Rome, they got cold feet and decided to turn back. They were only too aware, leaving seasonal festivals aside, that pagan Britons believed every plant, tree, spring, stream, rock, hill or animal had its own soul and its own guardian deity. Before a tree could be cut down, a stream dammed, a mountain crossed, a spring drunk from or an animal disturbed, the individual guardian spirit had first to be placated. Every aspect of the wind and the weather also had its own god or goddess. Pleas for permission to return were refused and, two years later, the anxious group of monks arrived in Canterbury and began endeavouring to carry out the papal directives.

## Christianising pagan festivals

Pope Gregory's mandate of conversion through coercion was brilliant in its simplicity: he surmised that the easy-going but deeply superstitious Anglo-Saxon peasants would not object if the seasonal festivals of the pagan calendar were Christianised, provided the ancient celebrations remained basically unchanged. Gradually, the main heathen feasts became days honouring Christ or one of the Christian martyrs, and the Church had plenty of saints in hand, ready for any eventuality. Over several centuries, all the pagan days of weather prediction – at least 40 in the year – were given saints' names, and the big feast days were converted to Christian festivals.

Imbolc, on 2 February, celebrating the first sign of new growth and the beginnings of lactation in ewes, became Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. Lughnasadh, on 1 August, was the celebration of the start of the harvest; it became Lammas or St Peter in Fetters day, when bread baked from the new crop was blessed. The great festival of Sam-hain on 31 October marked the end of the "light" or growing half of the year and the start of the "dark" or dead half. Pagans believed the spirits of their ancestors became active at nightfall, a superstition substantiated by the ghostly movements of migratory woodcock or geese flying under the moon.

The church was quick to create All Souls' Night, followed by All Saints' Day. The 12-day festival of Yule at the end of December became the celebration of Christ's birth. However,

one festival was so ancient and so deeply entrenched in the pagan psyche that, although it was to become the most important and defining event in the ecclesiastical calendar, the Church did not attempt to change its name – Easter.

The Holy Scriptures tell us that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occurred round about the time of the Jewish Passover, which equates to our spring. Easter was established in western Europe by the First Council of Nicea in AD 325, as being the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox, the day from which the hours of sunlight become progressively longer. The equinox had been celebrated as a joyous festival of fertility, regrowth and new birth by early civilisations.

## The goddess Eostre



Did Bede invent Easter?

The Anglo-Saxons worshipped the goddess Eostre, referred to by the Venerable Bede in *De Temporum Ratione* (AD 725), in which he also mentions the indigenous English name of the month: “Eostur-monath has a name that is now translated as ‘Paschal month’, and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month.” It has often been suggested that Eostre was an invention of Bede’s, as very little is known about her otherwise, and a body of opinion theorising against her existence still has some popular cul-tural currency, but the evidence in Bede’s favour is compelling.

Bede was born in AD 672 during the early stages of the Christianisation of these islands, when the names of the Anglo-Saxon gods and goddesses would have been common knowledge and, as the philologist Jacob Grimm (1775 – 1863), folklorist Charles Billson

(1858–1932) and, more recently, Dr Venetia Newall have observed, the highly respected father of English history would have been unlikely to invent a goddess of that name. Furthermore, a number of English place names of Saxon origin, such as Eastry in Kent, Eastrea in Cambridgeshire and Eastrington in East Yorkshire, are assumed to be derived from Eostre. There is also an etymological link to Ostara or Austrā, the spring goddess worshipped by the tribes of northern Europe, after whom the month of April, Ostermonat, was named, and whose existence was verified in 1958, when more than 150 Romano-Germanic votive inscriptions to the matronae Austria-henea were discovered near Morken-Harff in Germany, datable to the second century AD.

## Modern Easter imagery

The modern imagery of Easter – the eggs and the Easter bunny – pre-dates Christianity and has its provenance in pagan fertility symbols. The bunny was originally a hare; no other animal is surrounded by such a volume of myths, legends, superstitions and omens over so many cultures. (Read more on hare mythology – [why we're all mad for hares.](#))



Modern Easter decorations can be a long way from Eostre traditions

## More than mere animals

Solitary and crepuscular, except in the spring, when the bucks and does perform their elaborate mating rituals, hares are capable of speeds up to 40km, can turn on a sixpence in full flight and jump seven metres with ease. This in itself was enough to command the

respect of early people, but their behaviour, which sometimes appears almost humanly irrational as they double back and forth in the dusk, making sudden leaps and 90-degree turns, and their hideously childlike screams when caught or injured, convinced our ancestors that hares were more than mere animals. (Read our list of the [best hare-inspired gifts](#).)



The ancestors of the Easter bunny.

For many centuries, there was a belief that hares were hermaphrodites and that both sexes bred; that they had a second set of teats inside their wombs, and that fur grew in their mouths. Although this was eventually disproved in the 19th century, hares are almost unique in their extraordinary ability to be pregnant and conceive at the same time, thus carrying two or more foetuses at different stages of growth; this and their habit of producing four litters in a year made them worthy of deifying and an obvious symbol of fertility and springtime fecundity.

Some folklorists claim that hares carried the light for Eostre as she lit the spring dawn and, although there is not a shred of evidence to support this, it is not unreasonable to agree with the statement written by Charles Billson: “Whether there was a goddess named Eostre or not, and whatever connection the hare may have had with the ritual of Saxon or British worship, there are good grounds for believing that the sacredness of this animal reaches back into an age still more remote, where it is probably a very important part of the great spring festival of the prehistoric inhabitants of this island.”

## Hares as pets

Paradoxically, hares, the wildest and most sensitive of all animals, can easily be tamed, if caught young enough, and the Celtic ruling classes liked to keep them in their homes as a sort of living connection to the gods – Boudicca is reputed to have careered into battle on her chariot with the family pet stuffed up her tunic. Caesar remarked that, although the flesh of hares was considered an aphrodisiac by the Romans – Pliny the Elder recommended a diet of hare to increase sexual attractiveness and claimed that the meat had the power to cure sterility – the Celts regarded it as taboo.

This gives rise to the perplexing Easter hare-hunting rituals, which seem to bear the stamp of immemorial antiquity. Once held in various parts of Leicestershire and Warwickshire, these were believed by the antiquary and politician Charles Elton QC, MP (1839 – 1900) to be survivals of sacrificial rites connected with the worship of Eostre. Perhaps strangest of all unexplained connections between hares, paganism and Christianity is the iconography in early medieval churches and cathedrals throughout Britain, depicting three running hares joined by the tips of their ears to form a triangle. This symbolism is found in Chester Cathedral, St David's Cathedral, Pembrokeshire, a chapel in Cotehele, Cornwall, and churches in Widecombe, Devon, and Scarborough, North Yorkshire, as well as in sacred sites in the Middle and Far East, across Europe and in Russia.

Eggs have been a symbol of spring rebirth since antiquity. Engraved ostrich eggs have been discovered in Africa dating from 60,000 years ago; decorated eggs were commonly placed in the graves of ancient Sumerians and Egyptians 5,000 years ago; and pysanky, the Ukrainian art of decorating eggs elaborately for Easter with beeswax, dates from pre-Christian times. (Read our list of [where to buy the best eggs.](#))

The custom of colouring Easter eggs was started by the early Christians of Mesopotamia, who dyed eggs red to represent the blood of Christ, but was not officially adopted by the Church as representing the resurrection until 1610, when Pope Paul V proclaimed the prayer: "Bless, O Lord, we beseech thee, this thy creature of eggs, that it may become a wholesome sustenance to thy faithful servants, eating it in thankfulness to thee on account of the resurrection of the Lord."

The two symbols of fertility, the egg and the hare, come together in the ancient German tradition of a mythical hare that laid coloured eggs in its form for good children to find on Easter Day. This was taken to the US by German immigrants in the 18th century and, as Easter gradually became commercialised, the hare became a rabbit and the egg became chocolate. Yum, yum !

*This article was originally published in 2014 and has been updated.*