

Easter Eggs, Jesus Christ and the Easter Bunny: The History and Origins of Easter.

https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/easter-history-facts-meaning-origin-jesus-eggs-bunny-church-celebrate/?utm_source=Twitter%20referral&utm_medium=t.co&utm_campaign=Bitly

How does Easter relate to Jesus? Where does the word 'Easter' come from? And when did we start eating Easter eggs?

Historian Emma J Wells explores the origins of this springtime celebration...

April 10, 2020 at 3:30 am

Easter was originally a celebration of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of sex, fertility, war, and religiously-sanctioned prostitutes, right? Wrong. Well, bunnies and eggs can't possibly have anything to do with this most holy festival commemorating Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, then. Actually... they do.

Like its festive and spooky cousins, Christmas and Halloween, Easter evolved over centuries, blending Christian and non-Christian elements together. Hence the origins of the springtime celebration are far more complicated than you might expect, due in part to misconceptions which continue to circulate. So, let's put the bunnies, eggs and all other frivolities in one basket in search of an explanation.

This, in a nut-, or should I say, eggshell, is how the festival of Easter evolved...

Where does the word 'Easter' come from?

The term seemingly derives from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre, who was celebrated as she escaped Winter's harsh clutches. But Eostre wasn't quite the pagan deity who, we are commonly told, transformed a bird into an egg-laying hare companion, e.g. the forerunner to the Easter bunny. In fact, the only actual surviving mention of Eostre comes from 8th-century monk the Venerable Bede, whose writings suggest the English people called the fourth month Eosturmonath or Eostre-Month (marking the spring equinox) after the goddess, and feasts were celebrated in her honour. The Northumbrian monk clearly had some influence, as the name stuck – at least in the English-speaking world. Many cultures, however,

refer to the season by terms translated from 'Pesach' (Hebrew) or 'Passover': the Jewish celebration of the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egypt by Moses as told in the Book of Exodus. Passover was celebrated on the first full moon after the vernal (spring) equinox, therefore on the 14th day of the seventh Hebrew month of Nisan.

The Christian calendar was also constructed around Passover, as Jesus, its own Messiah, and similarly freed humanity from bondage, sin and evil.

How does Easter relate to Jesus? When was the Last Supper?

The Last Supper was the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his Crucifixion, when the bread and chalice of wine were dispersed as elements of his own body on the day now known as Maundy or Holy Thursday, named from the Latin 'commandment' which Jesus gave to his disciples at the meal. The New Testament gospels are clear that Jesus held the Last Supper; was crucified at Golgotha (Calvary) in Jerusalem (on Good Friday from the Old English 'guode' meaning 'holy') and resurrected three days later from the tomb in which he had been interred (on Easter Sunday) during preparations for Passover.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) actually present the Last Supper as a Passover Seder (Jewish ceremonial meal), though some items appear missing. Christ was therefore perceived as the New Pascha (Latin for 'Passover'), and the celebration of his resurrection became the first Christian feast. In turn, Easter was referred to as the 'Paschal month' for Christ as the paschal or sacrificed lamb (of God).

When is Easter celebrated?

Easter is held on the Sunday after the first ecclesiastical full moon (which keeps, more or less, in step with the astronomical Moon) following the vernal (spring) equinox (on or around 21 March) of the northern hemisphere, when the sun is exactly above the equator, and day and night are of almost equal length.

Who decided that Easter would be celebrated on this day?

As Jesus was crucified during the Passover festival and resurrected thereafter, it was logical to commemorate these events in close proximity. But when, exactly? Passover was celebrated according to the Jewish lunar calendar which didn't correlate with the Christian Julian solar calendar, thereby causing confusion.

In 325 CE, Emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, decided to take charge of the matter. He convened the Council of Nicaea and decreed that Christ's resurrection was far too important to be connected with the festival of another faith. Since the days following the winter solstice gradually became longer and lighter, this provided ideal symbolism for the rebirth of Christ, "the light of the world", as clarified in John's Gospel.

Constantine thus ordained that Easter was to fall in close proximity to a similar significant time in the solar year: the Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox.

So, did the issues surrounding the calculation of the Easter date end with the Nicaea decree?

No – confusion rumbled on. Nicaea only confirmed the date, not the method of calculation. So, on which Sunday should they celebrate? Disagreements emerged as differing methods – associated with the calendars of the Roman and Irish Christian missionaries prevalent in England's Northumbrian kingdoms – resulted in Easter being celebrated twice (after elaborate tables known as 'Computus' were constructed by each in hopes of correctly identifying the important date).

Strife over the differentiation led Oswiu, king of Northumbria (654/55–670), to call upon all leading churchmen and nobles in 664 to the double monastery of Streaneshalch at Whitby, governed then by the Abbess Hild, in an effort to head off any further divisions within his kingdom. The Synod of Whitby, as it became known, favoured Rome's calculations for Easter. Of course, complications didn't exactly end there, but there was some consensus – and, ever since, Easter has been held on the first Sunday following the full moon (Paschal Moon) on or after the vernal equinox.

Why do we go to church at Easter? When did Easter church services first begin?

In the northern hemisphere, each year the end of winter's darkness was met with excitement over the coming of spring's light. By the Middle Ages, it was only natural to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus at this seasonal time, with religious services mirroring the changes.

During the three days of Holy Week leading up to Easter Sunday – named the Triduum – the medieval populace would spend a vast amount of time attending church, and for the duration of this most holy period in the Christian calendar. The midnight/early hour offices of Matins and Lauds (essentially, morning prayers) were combined and pushed to a more convenient

time on preceding evenings so that worshippers could attend an unforgettable liturgical event named Tenebrae (Latin for 'darkness' or 'shadows').

Tenebrae services were a solemn affair: they centred on the gradual extinguishing of candles set upon a candleholder known as a hearse, in commemoration and prolonged meditation of Christ's suffering – only the central candle remained lit, representing Christ as the light of the world.

Easter Sunday service then commenced at dawn, with the congregation gathering outside the church for hymns before entering for a joyful Mass. Dismissed in grace and forgiveness, worshippers filed out to begin celebratory feasting.

What do Easter eggs represent?

One of the primary tropes associated with this season of renewal was the egg from which life bursts forth. This was no Christian invention – the symbol had been used by Anglo-Saxon pagans to celebrate spring, and likely even earlier. Identifying exactly when the connection between Easter and the empty shell as a metaphor for Christ's tomb began is difficult, though such links abound in medieval England. Eggs were one of the foods forbidden during Lent, the 40-day fasting period of reflection and penitential preparation leading up to Easter. In the medieval period, any eggs laid during Lent were boiled for preservation so that when Easter Sunday rolled around, eggs were back on the menu. And eggs weren't just used as a food source: a rural practice known as 'pace-egging' (after 'paschal') was common, where costumed groups roamed villages for eggs then given as gifts (similar to 'mumming') to the church as Good Friday offerings and to the lord of the manor. And many of these eggs were brightly painted; a practice truly ancient. Red was used to symbolise the blood of Christ, first by early Christians then the Orthodox Church; while in Germanic regions, they were coloured green and hung on trees on Maundy or 'Green' Thursday. In England, they were often boiled with onions for a golden patina, though at Easter 1290, King Edward I purchased a colossal 450 eggs to be decorated with colours or gold leaf for distribution amongst his household.

Eggs then seemingly found their way into party games. There are suggestions that 16th-century German Protestant reformer Martin Luther organised egg hunts for his congregation, primarily to teach the lesson of Christ's resurrection in emulation of the disciples discovering the risen Christ in the tomb on Easter morning.

Somehow, the idea formed between bunnies or hares and the laying of those eggs. Both were ancient symbols of rebirth in the spring, and hares were particularly associated with seasonal rituals and even the Virgin Mary because of their astonishing powers of fertility – hares are, of course, known for being immensely fertile.

Where did the Easter bunny originate? And when did we start eating chocolate Easter eggs?

As explained above, hares became associated with Easter because of their powers of fertility. But the entire concept of the 'Easter Bunny' is much more recent. He likely became the large colourful rabbit we know and love today due to American influence, but 17th-century Heidelberg-based physicians Georg Franck von Franckenau and Johannes Richier in *De ovis paschalibus* ('About Easter eggs') did describe hares hiding baskets of brightly painted eggs for children to find.

Yet there is an earlier reference (from 1572) to an Easter 'Hare' which appeared at night to 'lay' eggs, again for children to search. This continued as German settlers came to America and continued the tradition, thereby spreading it throughout the nation. It is also from them that our beloved Swiss-made 'chocolate bunnies' derive, after they fashioned Easter cakes in the shape of a hare which was shown 'laying' (or should that be, excreting) its egg-shaped dropping. But it was not until the Victorian era that Easter eggs and hunts became popular in England. Historic traditions and religious celebrations infiltrated the new concept of 'family time' owing to a higher disposable income. So as Queen Victorian was seen to hold Easter egg hunts for her children around her many palaces, the population followed suit. Eggs were sold more as toys and novelty gifts – some containing dolls – before they turned edible, first in France and Germany, then crossing the channel in 1873, when Fry's (J S Fry of Bristol) produced the first chocolate Easter egg in the UK.

(Emma J Wells is an ecclesiastical and architectural historian at the University of York. Her book *Heaven on Earth: The Lives and Legacies of the World's Greatest Cathedrals* is forthcoming from Head of Zeus.)