The Origins Of The Easter Feast, The Easter Egg and The Easter Bunny

by John M. Joyce (May 2014)

"Two thousand years ago Jesus is crucified, three days later

He walks out of a cave and they celebrate with chocolate bunnies

and marshmallow Peeps and beautifully decorated eggs.

I guess these were things Jesus loved as a child."

—Billy Crystal:

'Still Foolin' 'Em: Where I've Been, Where I'm Going,

and Where the Hell Are My Keys'

With the passing of Easter Week I have had the opportunity to reflect, with grave disappointment, upon the ridiculous, and, quite literally incredible, distortions of fact that some people retail about the origins of Christian festivals – and the Easter observances were no exception. In recent days it has been my misfortune to read some of the most unmitigated tripe in this respect that I have ever encountered. Permit me to elucidate.

First off, there is the very name of the feast in English: 'Easter'. Other languages use different words, but English, and some northern European and Germanic tongues, use 'Easter' or some variant thereof depending upon the language. Those who wish to belittle Christianity have adopted the habit of telling us that Easter is a pagan festival because it's named after an Anglo-Saxon goddess called ?ostre. That is palpable rubbish. Such an assertion has absolutely no basis in fact whatsoever.

The goddess ?ostre never existed as a figure of worship, anywhere. She was a figment of the imagination of The Venerable Bede who is the only, let me repeat that, the only and sole early writer who ever mentioned the goddess, and he did so just once in two short sentences in

Chapter Fifteen (in which he was describing the names of the months as used by the indigenous people around his monasteries) of his book entitled *De temporum ratione* (‘The Reckoning of Time’):

> “Eostur-monath, qui nunc Paschalis mensis interpretatur, quondam a Dea illorum quæ Eostre vocabatur, et cui in illo festa celebrabant nomen habuit: a cujus nomine nunc Paschale tempus cognominant, consueto antiquæ observationis vocabulo gaudia novæ solemnitatis vocantes.”

which translates into English as:

> “Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated “Paschal month”, and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.”

Bede, I’m afraid, made a very basic error (by no means the only error that he ever made – he was certainly not infallible). He assumed that the month ‘Eosturmonath’ was named after a goddess when he had absolutely no evidence for such an assumption other than the fact that some of the other months were named in such a fashion. In fact, ‘Eosturmonath’ means ‘the beginning month’, or ‘the dawn month’, or ‘the shining month’, because it is the first month of a new year – the first month of spring, in other words; it is only in very recent times that the year has officially begun on the first day of January. Bede’s two short sentences are the only mention, by any source whatsoever, of this mythical goddess and on that slim, and linguistically erroneous, evidence a whole fabric of falsity has been constructed by those who seek to downplay and denigrate Christianity.

In Old English the word ‘?ostre’ derives from the Proto-Germanic word ‘austr?n’ meaning ‘dawn’, itself a descendent of the Proto-Indo-European root ‘aus-‘, meaning ‘to shine’. The modern English word ‘east’ also derives from the same root, by the way, and the name of the month – ‘Eosturmonath’ – may have contained as well, for our Anglo-Saxon ancestors, some implication of ‘eastness’, so to speak, related to the rising sun, but it’s impossible, at this remove, to do more than guess at the precise shades of meaning that the name might have carried.

Jacob Grimm in his 1835 work *Deutsche Mythologie* resurrected and perpetuated the myth, and he strained credulity to breaking point by advancing spurious reasons (basically just faith in Bede) as to why Bede’s mistake, or invention, should be taken at face value; although Grimm had to note, reluctantly it seems, that:

> "…all of the nations bordering on us have retained the Biblical pascha; even Ulphilas [noted Bible translator and inventor of the Gothic alphabet] writes paska…",
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> (from Grimm, Jacob (James Steven Stallybrass, Trans.) (1882). Teutonic Mythology: Translated from the Fourth Edition with Notes and Appendices Vols. I & II. London: George Bell and Sons. pp. 288-292 and 762-779.)

Grimm's vapid maunderings on the subject of '?ostre' have, of course, given rise to a belief in this false goddess amongst the modern pagans of our own day. Such people seize on anything that gives them a belief that they are re-enacting the 'real' paganism of earlier times, even though with the best scholarship in the world we still have very little idea of exactly what our pre-Christian ancestors in northern Europe actually believed in because, quite simply, they left no records. Modern paganism, modern Druidism and so-called 'wicka' beliefs are just a concoction of suppositions and wishful thinking larded with Victorian inventions and recently created myths.

Other Victorian scholars, such as Charles Isaac Elton and Charles J. Billson (two very well educated gentlemen whose powers of reasoning should have kept them from error), have helped to perpetuate the myth of the goddess ?ostre even though they knew that there was absolutely no evidence for their strange lapse.

However, quite apart from belief in a non-existent goddess there is also the assertion made that Easter is actually a pagan festival. That statement, made by people who generally dislike Christianity, especially those who post at left-wing sites and write for highly suspicious left-wing magazines and newspapers, reveals a deep well of ignorance about The Christian Faith. Such people don't know, and are very surprised when one tells them, that Easter is, in fact, firmly rooted in the Jewish Passover and that they only have to read a Bible to find out why, and also why it has absolutely nothing to do with any northern European mythical pagan festival.

Throughout our history we Christians have usually referred to the Easter season as the Paschal season and that word – 'Paschal' – means 'of, or pertaining to Easter or the Jewish Passover'. It comes from late Middle English via Old French, which got it from the ecclesiastical Latin *paschalis* that comes from *pascha*, meaning 'feast of Passover', via Greek and Aramaic from the Hebrew *Pesah* meaning 'Passover'. The word 'Paschal', also, has absolutely nothing to do with any northern European mythical pagan festival.

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If calories are an issue, store your chocolate

on top of the fridge. Calories are afraid

of heights, and they will jump out of the

chocolate to protect themselves.

(Author unknown.)

Whilst we're on the subject of Easter, what about the origin of Easter eggs? Well, we know that the remains of ostrich eggs that are about sixty thousand years old with engraved decorations on the shell have been found in one place in Africa – South Africa's Richtersveld coastal desert (see here) – and that they were used as water flasks, as they still are to this day by the Kalahari Bushmen, and no religious significance seems to have been attached to the vessels as far as can be ascertained given the age of the finds.

Decorated ostrich eggs as water carriers have been found in one or two other African cultures, including the 'Libyan' Mediterranean Bronze Age peoples from about 2000BC to about 1000BC (see here). Decorated ostrich eggs, and models of ostrich eggs in gold and silver and other materials, were occasionally placed in the graves of the ancient Sumerians and Egyptians from about 3000BC onwards (see 'Treasures from Royal Tombs of Ur' by Richard L. Zettler, Lee Horne, Donald P. Hansen, Holly Pittman, 1998, pp. 70-72). However, the eggs seems to have been nothing other than water, or perhaps wine, flasks, and they certainly don't appear to have had any religious significance, as far as we can tell.

There is a probable early historical record of egg symbolism in religion dating to about 500BC, but it's pretty tenuous and has no supporting evidence – it's just supposition and inference. Apparently, in the Achaemenid first Persian Empire, the local calendar was heavily influenced by Zoroastrianism, and the spring equinox – the first day of their calendar year, as it was for so many other peoples – became a holiday. Called Nowruz, since the second century after Christ, this holiday is usually celebrated today by decorating, sharing, and eating eggs, and may have been celebrated similarly in the past – although there is absolutely no evidence for that. There is a carved relief at Persepolis (dating to around 500BC) that seems to depict figures seemingly carrying what might be eggs, maybe even coloured eggs, but that's a matter of interpretation. It's all in the eye of the beholder, really, and many scholars say that the people depicted in the reliefs are, in fact, bringing gifts to celebrate Mehregan, which was the Persian-come-Zoroastrian celebration of Autumn that is still celebrated today.

There are one or two, more than likely Christian from the evidence, Roman child burials dating to around *AD*150 in which an egg has been included with the other grave goods. There are also a lot of fevered speculations by historians and archaeologists, both professions that should know better, about eggs that maybe, perhaps, possibly, were part of the Dionysian rites – nobody can ever know, of course, because the rites died out without ever being properly recorded.

It looks like we modern people think that eggs should have had all sorts of symbolic religious meanings for pre-Christian peoples when, in fact, they really didn't. Some of us, apparently, experience great difficulty in believing that and insist on constructing ridiculous and untrue stories about eggs and their significance in the ancient world without a shred of evidence. And that's about it for eggs, really, until we Christians came along.

As you will all, no doubt, know, Jesus' Disciple Saint Thomas evangelised the east and founded churches throughout Mesopotamia (as well as much further east in India and beyond). It's amongst the early Christians of Mesopotamia that we find the very first Easter eggs. These early Christians stained hens' eggs blood red in memory of the Blood of Christ shed at The Crucifixion. It is faintly possible that they were adapting some local, or heard about, Zoroastrian custom to their own needs, but that is unlikely in the extreme and, crucially, there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to support such a contention. The custom of staining hens' eggs spread slowly throughout all of Christianity and gradually the stained egg came to signify not just the Blood of Christ but also The Stone that sealed Christ's Tomb – hence the custom of rolling Easter eggs to signify the rolling away of The Stone – and also as a symbol of The Resurrection: while being dormant it contains a new life sealed within it and hence signifies Christ's Tomb itself.

It would appear that we Christians are, in fact, the first people to really thoroughly exploit the egg's capability to become a complicated religious symbol. However, in the West we don't often use hens' eggs any more: they have been supplanted by chocolate eggs, or plastic egg shapes, filled with sweets or other desirable sweet comestibles. Notwithstanding our sweet tooth, however, it seems that anything we Christians do or say about our Easter egg traditions just inspires our detractors to invent even more fabulous stories based on nothing more than wishful thinking about the origin of the egg's symbolism. These people seem to think that simply because eggs have a symbolism today then they must always have had, and they will go to the most ridiculous lengths to make that so.

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“Bunnies are cuddly

The large and the small

But I like chocolate ones

The best of them all.”

(Author unknown.)

There are other symbols of Easter, apart from eggs, that ought to be considered. There is the Easter hare, for example, which most people agree has been confused, or conflated, with that other famous lagomorph, the rabbit. Well, what on earth has the rabbit, or the hare for that matter, got to do with Easter and The Resurrection?

Some scholars, determined to perpetuate the existence of Bede’s fanciful, but non-existent, goddess, ?ostre, reckon that in pagan mythology hares carried the dawn lights for ?ostre. That piece of fiction seems to have been gleaned from an etymological dictionary published in 1932 in Paris, which offered the idea without any corroboration whatsoever – in other words, it was made up – simply to create an interesting entry. The dictionary in question was *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots.* Compiled by A. Ernout and A. Meillet, but it seems that they were simply assuming that ?ostre is the same as Freyja, the Norse goddess; however, the problem is that Freyja’s carriage was pulled by cats, not hares and ?ostre never existed. It is regrettable that the same ridiculous story is still being peddled in the 1985 edition (see here) – it makes one wonder just how trustworthy, overall, such a compendium actually is!

Many people claim that the hare and the rabbit were used symbolically in the ancient world, *i.e.* before the arrival of Christianity, and here they may, just may, be on safer ground. It is posited from some evidence, slim and open to interpretation, that the ancient Egyptians associated the hare with the cycles of the moon, which was viewed, apparently, as masculine when waxing and feminine when waning. Hares were also believed to be capable of changing sex or of being hermaphrodite – not only in ancient Egypt, but, interestingly, also in some northern European folklore right up to the 18th century, but whether or not the northern European belief is in any way connected to the beliefs held in some parts of the ancient world is unknowable, and one should beware of making connections that probably didn’t exist.

It is claimed by some that a hare-headed god and goddess can be seen on the Egyptian temple walls of Dendera, where the female is believed, by some people, to be the goddess Unut, whilst

the male is thought to be, by some, a representation of Osiris. There is also an unsubstantiated idea that Osiris was sacrificed to the Nile annually in the form of a hare, but, if such an act ever took place, it was more probably one of the other ancient Egyptian gods. One must bear in mind, also, that the Ptolemaic Graeco-Egyptian Dendera Temple Complex is also the place where some strange people reckon that the engravings on the wall show an ancient Egyptian lightbulb! It seems that simply because Dendera is one of the best preserved and most accessible of the Egyptian temples then everybody with odd beliefs feels free to interpret the artwork there in any way that they need to in order to validate their own wacky ideas about the past.

How much the hare and the rabbit were symbols for anything in the ancient world is open to debate. I've already mentioned Charles J. Billson in connection with Bede's imaginary goddess ?ostre and, regrettably, I must mention him again as being the foremost of the those Victorian scholars who advanced theory as fact. He theorised, on the basis of absolutely no evidence whatsoever, that the hare was intimately and symbolically bound up with our pre-Christian northern European ancestors' religious rites (whatever they may have been, and we have no method of knowing for certain). The flimsy plank of Billson's assertion has been progressively built into a 'fact' by each succeeding generation of Christianity's detractors. Billson saw that north-western European Christianity ascribed great symbolic meaning to the hare and decided, for no valid reason, that that area of Christendom must have hi-jacked the symbolism of the hare from its pagan past. To rework the final sentence of the preceding section of this essay let me say: Billson seemed to think that simply because hares have a symbolism today then they must always have had, and he went to the most ridiculous lengths to make that so.

Yet other people are determined that Christianity must have kidnapped the symbolism of the hare from the ancient Romans. They base this madcap theory on the fact that the ancients believed some weird stuff about the hare – its supposed hermaphrodite nature (some even believed it changed sex from month to month) and that a male hare could get pregnant, amongst other beliefs equally as wonderful. The surviving writings of Pliny the elder, Herodotus, Aristotle and Claudius Aelianus the Greek (to name but a few) mention those imaginative characteristics of the hare – but then, most of the ancient writers, including all those I've just mentioned, believed, amongst many other bizarre beliefs, that bees spontaneously came into being in the decaying flesh of dead animals. Basically, people who believe that the ancients used the hare symbolically do so simply because the ancients had some demonstrably crazy superstitions and beliefs about the natural world. A superstition, or a belief, about hares does not mean that hares ported any particular symbolism for our ancestors from the classical world.

However, having said that I must also say that Pliny the Elder recommended the meat of the hare as a cure for sterility, and wrote that a meal of hare enhanced sexual attraction for a period of nine days. Strange, I know, but people that know that piece of information couple it with the fact – well, the assumed fact, that is, because there is, actually, only one reference to it ever having happened – that in some parts of ancient Greece the gift of a rabbit was occasionally used as a love token from a man to his lover – the symbolism being the fecundity of the rabbit (or so it's assumed, because we don't know for certain) which was believed to be the gift of Aphrodite. Those people then reckon that what applied to the rabbit must have applied to the hare!

It also appears that there was a similar superstition and symbolism at work in ancient Rome – well, there are two references to it that may, or may not, mean what I'm about to write next – where the gift of a rabbit was intended to help a barren wife conceive. However, rabbits and hares, even though both are equally fecund, were known as distinct animals even to the ancients, so the conflation of any superstitions about, or symbolisms concerning, either one must have happened later, if at all. There are carvings of rabbits and hares in all sorts of places on the artefacts surviving from the ancient world, but whether or not one can validly attach any symbolism to them is open to debate. After all, a carving of a rabbit, or a hare, eating for example, may be symbolic of something or just a decoration reflecting the annoying propensity of a cute little creature to eat one's crops.

The hare was, and still is, hunted for its meat, and the rabbit, as we know, was, and is, farmed for the same reason. There are cave paintings of hares done by our neolithic ancestors, which is hardly surprising for they have always been difficult to hunt – it requires much huntsman's skill to bring home a hare for the pot – and some people, particularly the neo-pagans and the neo-druids, claim that there is much significance, even symbolism, in such paintings, but there is absolutely no method of knowing that other than pure guesswork. It isn't good enough to use modern frames of spiritual reference to impute mystical motives to our remote ancestors. We don't, and we can't, know why such paintings were done – perhaps they were just a diary of a season's kill – who knows?

Foodstuffs often have acquired symbolic meanings in our Christian culture, but whether or not we should impute the same habit of seeing symbolism in foodstuffs to our pagan ancestors in the classical world simply because we do, seems to me to put us on unreasonable ground, for there is often no corroborative evidence to back up our imputations. When some of us try to draw parallels between the beliefs about rabbits and the beliefs about hares in the pre-Christian past and say that they were the same, or that there was massive symbolism underlying or overlaying those beliefs, then I just balk and demand proof. Regrettably, no proof can ever

be forthcoming, but what is often forthcoming, and far too often at that, are bald assertions and spurious theorising.

What can be nailed down, however, are some dates and some geographical facts. Across most of the Christian world the hare was not used to signify or symbolise anything. It was only in south-west and south Germany, the southern low countries, north-west France and England and Wales that the hare and, by association, the rabbit came to have any symbolic Christian meaning. We do know that the hare had a symbolic meaning for some Buddhists in the sixth and seventh centuries after Christ and that the iconography of it spread along the Silk Road from north-west China, but it only spread as far as north-west Persia (modern Mohammedan occupied Iran), and even that's conjecture based on surviving badly damaged artefacts.

So, it appears that a small number of Christians in the north-west of Europe – in, as I said, south-west and south Germany, the southern low countries, north-west France and England and Wales – adopted the hare and wove some symbolism around it. They did this sometime between *AD*750 to *AD*950; just about the same time that a book called the *Physiologus* began to be disseminated and become popular throughout Europe, and a very long time after the demise of the classical world. The *Physiologus* (see here) is, in essence, the first of the popular bestiaries that continued to be written and published for almost the next thousand years. Quite why the fancy of those northern Christians should have alighted on the hare I don't suppose that we will ever know, but we should be glad that it did.

Once selected, the hare motif, and, as time went by, the rabbit motif also, began to turn up everywhere in the area. Three hares in a circle came to symbolise the Trinity, as in the photograph of Paderborn Cathedral's *Dreihasenfenster* (Window of Three Hares), taken by Zefram, below:

Interestingly, although each hare appears to have the correct number of ears, only three ears have actually been carved. This motif can be found all over the area that I have defined three paragraphs back. In the parish church in South Tawton in Devon there is a medieval roof boss, photograph below by Chris Chapman, that depicts the same symbolic hares symbolising the Trinity:

The hare went from strength to strength in this small area of Christianity. It turns up in illuminated manuscripts, as architectural wood and stone carvings in window tracery and on

stained glass, as well as on roof bosses in churches all over south-west England. Folk superstitions concerning the hare began to evolve at the same time and with the introduction of the rabbit into England by the Normans after the Conquest many of those beliefs are extended to cover the new arrival, or new ones are adopted wholesale from the near continent.

The ancient belief that the hare was hermaphrodite and could reproduce without loss of virginity was to be found in the *Physiologus*, as well as in other bestiaries. Inevitably, therefore, the hare became associated with the Virgin Mary and hares began appearing in northern European paintings of the Virgin and Christ Child. George Ferguson in his 1954 book *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* notes one characteristic of this phenomenon in his entry on hares:

> "…white hare is sometimes placed at the feet of the Virgin Mary to indicate her triumph over lust."

Slowly, very slowly, because of their association with the Virgin Mother of God and The Resurrection, the hares and the rabbits began to be associated with the beginnings of things, such as the new year or springtime, and from there it was just a short step for the hare and the rabbit to be associated with Easter which, naturally, being dependent upon the date of Passover, which is an Equinoctial feast in its timing, always occurs near the beginning of spring. Gradually, the hare became forgotten, but not everywhere, and the rabbit took over, in particular in England. The English Easter bunny has spread far and wide over the last couple of centuries – perhaps because the British Empire carried it out into the world – but much more likely because it's cuter than the hare and more easily spotted in the countryside.

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"The joyful news that He is risen does not change

the contemporary world. Still before us lie work,

discipline, sacrifice. But the fact of Easter gives

us the spiritual power to do the work,

accept the discipline, and make the sacrifice."

Henry Knox Sherrill.

In conclusion, then, the reason why most of us celebrate the most important Christian feast

using the symbolism of hares and rabbits to help us is not because we adopted them from some pagan past, but because our Christian ancestors in one tiny area of Christendom adopted them as symbols and aids to memory. It is perfectly possible that the pagans, and primitive man before even the great classical civilisations of antiquity, all used the very same symbolism including eggs, but, crucially, there is little to no evidence that they did so (just a welter of assertions, speculations and theorising) and, equally so, absolutely no evidence that our Christian ancestors knew of it if they did. That's the crux of the matter – evidence, or, in this case, the lack of it.

I hope that you all had a very Happy Easter.

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