



KULSEN & HENNIG – Stone of the Month 04/2025

Which Came First: The Chicken or the Egg?

There were eggs before there were chickens

In this respect, I could make the answer easy for myself and say that eggs existed much earlier in evolution than chickens did. After all, even the dinosaurs laid eggs, as did the first amphibians before them; fish also lay eggs, even if they don't have a solid shell. The answer, then, is simple: there were eggs long before there were chickens, but they weren't chicken eggs. And our question concerns chicken eggs.

So, again, which came first: the chicken or its egg?

Once more, the answer is the egg. This becomes clearer if I rephrase the question: Who laid the egg from which the first chicken hatched?

And then we're back to the chicken!

But no, not at all! When we talk about "chickens", it's just a name that we humans have given to a particular group of birds that look a certain way, and which are different from other birds.

Chicken-like ancestors: When is a chicken a chicken?

Chickens, in fact, evolved slowly. There was never a clear, first "chicken", and in this sense, it is somewhat of an arbitrary designation. There were ancestors that already resembled chickens, although they still looked slightly different. These ancestral chickens, however, had offspring who had offspring who had offspring, and, at some point, ages ago, a mommy bird and a daddy bird produced a chick that was so like today's chickens that we, or at least a bird expert, might have said: "Aha! This is the first real chicken!"

The mother of the first chicken was not yet a chicken

Now, logically, this first chicken hatched from an egg laid by its mother, who was not yet actually a chicken. So, the big question is: Was it a chicken egg or not? The answer is clear: it was indeed a chicken egg, because this egg was created by the male bird fertilising the egg cell of the female bird. The future chick was already developing in the egg and already carried the genetic material of a chicken. In other words, this egg was part of the early stages of the developing chicken; as a result, it was indeed a chicken egg. **And so, this first chicken egg existed before the first chicken existed.**

