Eostre: The Mystery Goddess Who Gave Easter Its Name

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Eostre, also called Ostara or Eastre, is a Germanic goddess associated with spring and the dawn. She is particularly known in Anglo-Saxon and Old High German traditions and is believed to be the namesake for the Christian holiday of Easter.

Notably, there is limited historical information about Eostre, and much of what is known comes from Bede, an English monk and historian from the 8th century. In his work “De temporum ratione” (The Reckoning of Time), Bede mentions Eostre as the name of a month corresponding to April and suggests that the festival of Easter may have been named after this goddess. However, he doesn’t provide extensive details about her.

where the sun rises. She is often depicted with symbols of spring, such as eggs and hares, which have become integral elements of the modern Easter celebration.

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Who Was Eostre?

The challenge of reconstructing any Anglo-Saxon religious cults or rituals is that they had no written language and, as a consequence, left no records for modern researchers to study. The impetus of the Christian church to abolish all traces of pagan religions only made it even more difficult for such information to survive even through second-hand or scholarly sources.

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Thus, hard information on Eostre is scarce. Shrines and records of Greek and Roman gods still exist – their cults – at least the most prominent – are fairly well-documented, but those of the Germanic peoples are much less so.

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A single documented reference of Eostre can be traced to the 7th Century monk known as the Venerable Bede. Bede lived almost his entire life in a monastery in Northumbria in modern-day England, and he is recognized as one of the greatest historical writers, particularly in the area of English history.

His *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* is an expansive work that earned him the title of "father of English History." But it was another work, *De Temporum Ratione* or *The Reckoning of Time*, which gives the only written mention of Eostre.

In Chapter 15, "The English Months," Bede lists the months as marked by the Anglo-Saxons. Two of these are of particular notice – *Hrethmonath* and *Eosturmonath*. *Hrethmonath* aligned with March and was dedicated to the goddess Hretha. *Eosturmonath*, or April, was dedicated to Eostre.

Bede gives nothing else. Given how recently pagan religion had been active in the area, he would surely have had access to more information about Hretha and Eostre, but whatever else Bede knew, he didn't record.

Ostara

Aside from this reference, there is a second bit of information on Eostre, one that comes over a thousand years later. In 1835, Jacob Grimm (one of the brothers Grimm behind *Grimm's Fairy Tales*) wrote *Deutsche Mythologie*, or *Teutonic Mythology*, a stunningly exhaustive study of Germanic and Norse mythology, and in this work, he advances a connection between the Anglo-Saxon Eostre and broader Germanic religion.

While the Anglo-Saxon month was called *Eosturmonath*, the German counterpart was *ostermonat,* from the Old High German *Ostera*, or "Easter." For the Jacob (a linguist and philologist), this clearly suggested a pre-Christian goddess, Ostara, in the same manner that *Eosturmonath* denoted Eostre.

This isn't a pure leap – Anglo-Saxons were a Germanic people on the British Isles, and retained cultural, linguistic, and religious connections to Germanic tribes on the mainland. That the same goddess, with relatively slight variations in name, would be worshipped in both groups isn't a real stretch.

But what do we know about this goddess? Well, as with Bede's recounting, very little. Grimm – despite his obvious familiarity with German folklore – can't provide any tidbits of mythology about her. Like Eostre, there are a few placenames that seem to be

derived from the goddesses, but there seems little else to confirm their existence beyond being name-dropped by writers – albeit ones of above-average credibility.

Who Eostre Wasn't?

That said, while we don't have a lot of hard data to fill in the gaps, we can clear out a lot of bogus junk that's collected in them. Mythology, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and the mythology of Eostre has drawn in more than its share of misinformation and make-believe.

Cutting away the fictional parts of Eostre's mythology may not leave much in reference to the goddess. However, it gives a more honest picture – and in some cases, stepping back from preconceptions and falsehoods may actually help make better inferences from what little there is.

The Goddess of the Equinox

Conditionally, Eostre had no direct link to the Equinox. Her month, *Eosturmonath*, was April – but the Equinox occurs in March, which was the month dedicated to Hretha. While we have no information on Hretha, her name translates to something like "glory," or perhaps "victory."

This opens the door to the idea that Hretha was some sort of war goddess (interestingly, the Romans dedicated this month to – and named it for – their own war god, Mars). Though "glory" could also be interpreted to associate Hretha with the dawn – and by association, the beginning of Spring.

This is conditional because there isn't enough information about Anglo-Saxon religious observances. Perhaps April was Eostre's month because their rituals or celebrations of the Equinox continued on into that month or perhaps – like modern-day Easter – it was linked with the lunar cycle in a way that had it falling, more often than not, in April.

It's impossible to know with certainty. The only thing we can say is the month in which the Vernal Equinox falls was dedicated to a different goddess, which at least implies that it was Hretha, not Eostre, that would have had the more direct association with the Vernal Equinox.

Association with Hares

One of the most easily recognizable Easter symbols is the Easter bunny. Originating in German as the *Osterhase*, or Easter Hare, it made its way to America via German immigrants and was rebranded as the tamer, more adorable Easter Rabbit.

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And in popular modern myth, this hare-turned-rabbit is a vestige of Eostre and her worship. But is it? Where does the initial association of the hare with Spring come from, and how much is it really connected to Eostre?

The March Hare

For obvious reasons, hares (and rabbits) are a natural symbol of fertility. They were a sacred animal to the Celts, who associated them with abundance and prosperity. And white hares or rabbits are a common fertility symbol appearing in Chinese Moon festivals.

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The Egyptian goddess Wenet was originally a snake-headed goddess, but was later associated with the hare – which, in turn, was associated with fertility and the opening of the new year. The Aztec god Tepoztēcatl, god of both fertility and drunkenness, wa

associated with rabbits, and his calendrical name Ometochtli actually means “Two Rabbits.”

Among the Greeks, hares were associated with the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. Rabbits, on the other hand, were associated with the love and marriage goddess Aphrodite, and the creatures were common gifts to lovers. In some accounts, hares accompanied the Norse goddess Freyja, who was also associated with love and sex.

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Outside of these direct divine associations, hares and rabbits pop up in cultures around the world as a symbol of their mercurial, fecund characteristics. The Germanic peoples were no different, and thus the association of hares with Spring and the Vernal Equinox would make perfect sense.

The Easter Bunny

But there is no specific connection of hares with Eostre, at least none that survives in any sort of documentation. The earliest associations of hares with Eostre come much later, after Grimm’s writings, with a story of Eostre transforming a bird into a hare, yet letting it retain the ability to lay eggs – an obvious Easter Bunny origin story.

But of course, by this time, the Easter Hare had existed in German folklore for centuries. The first documented reference to it comes all the way from the 1500’s, and legend credits its origin to – ironically enough – a misconception on the part of some children.

One Easter, a mother had hidden eggs for her children to find (implying it was already a tradition for children to search for eggs, but more on that later). The children, while searching, saw a hare dart away, and assumed that it had been the one to hide the eggs – and thus the Easter Hare, or *Osterhase,* was born.

Hares and Eostre

The Easter Hare had therefore been a feature of German folklore for some three centuries before the first mention of hares associated with Eostre. That implies rather heavily that it was a 19th Century add-in rather than something that had been legitimately passed down from the pre-Christian era.

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The association of hares and rabbits with Spring is universal enough that it can be safely assumed in Anglo-Saxon culture. But while Eostre was likewise associated with Spring, there is no hard evidence that hares were associated with her specifically.

There is a Germanic goddess called Abnoba who is depicted with a hare, but she has no connection to Eostre. Revered in the Black Forest area, she seems to have been a river/forest goddess who may have been more of a counterpart to Artemis or Diana as a goddess of the hunt.

Association with Easter Eggs

The bunny may be an all-too-familiar symbol of Easter, but it's arguably not the most popular one. That honor, by virtue of generations of countless children searching diligently with baskets in hand, would go to the Easter egg.

But where did the idea of decorating eggs for Easter come from? How was it connected to Spring and the Vernal Equinox, and – more relevant here – what was its connection, if any, to Eostre?

Fertility

Eggs are an obvious and archetypal symbol of fertility and new life. Hens generally increase their laying in Spring, leading to an even firmer connection of the egg with the

resurgence of life in the world.

Romans sacrificed eggs to Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. And eggs featured in various creation stories in ancient Egyptian, Hinduism, and Finnish mythologies. All of this makes it no surprise that the symbolism of the egg would attach itself to the Vernal Equinox and, by extension, to the later Easter holiday.

Balancing eggs to stand upright is a popular tradition in Chinese Li Chun festival, which marks the beginning of Spring (though it falls in early February on the Western calendar, well before the Equinox). The practice was popularized in the US largely via an article on the Chinese tradition published in *Life* magazine in the 1940's – though it migrated to the Vernal Equinox in American mythology – and still makes the round as a challenge each Spring.

Pre-Christian Eggs

It's also true that decorated eggs played a part in Spring celebrations in some Eastern European regions, notably modern-day Ukraine. These intricately decorated eggs, or *pysanka*, were a tradition that long preceded the arrival of Christianity around the 9th Century.

It's worth noting, however, that the areas in which this tradition was rooted were well outside the range where Eostre's worship could be reasonably inferred. It's always possible, of course, that Eostre or Ostara – or some more ancient proto Indo-European goddess – was recognized over a broader expanse, and equally possible that the practice of decorating eggs was once part of Eostre's worship as well, and the practice merely lost to history, but there's no solid foundation for either possibility to be more than an intriguing "what if."

More relevantl, Ancient Persians also decorated eggs to celebrate the *Nowruz*, or new year, which began on the Spring Equinox. And while, again, this practice was well

outside any connection with Eostre, it has a much more direct connection to the modern Easter egg as the apparent origin of egg decorating among Christians.

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Christian Eggs

Early Christians in Mesopotamia adopted the practice of dying eggs from the Persians, and were known to have colored eggs in green, yellow, and red. As the practice took root around the Mediterranean, these eggs – symbols of the Resurrection – were exclusively dyed red.

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Popular in Greek Orthodox communities, these *kokkina avga* (literally "red eggs"), were dyed using vinegar and onion skins, which gave the eggs their trademark red color to symbolize the blood of Christ. The practice migrated to Christian communities in other parts of Europe, along the way returning to a wider variety of colors.

Eggs were one of the foods given up for Lent throughout the Middle Ages – and so not surprisingly they prominently featured in Easter celebrations, when that embargo ended. This further encouraged the decoration of eggs with not only color but in some cases gold leaf as well.

Thus, it can be said with a level of certainty that the modern Easter egg came from ancient Persia via Mediterranean Christianity, without a discernable or verifiable link to Anglo-Saxon traditions in general or Eostre in particular. It is, again, always possible that such linkages exist, that the tradition of hiding eggs (which originated in Germany) had a longer history that stretched back into pre-Christian times or that the evolution of egg decoration was influenced by native pre-Christian traditions related to Eostre – but if so, there is no record of it.

Ishtar

One of the enduring myths about Eostre was that she was a translation of the ancient goddess Ishtar. In this retelling, Ishtar is an Akkadian fertility goddess associated with eggs and hares, whose cult would endure and evolve, ultimately becoming Ostara/Eostre in pre-Christian Europe.

This is flat-out not true. Yes, Ishtar and her Sumerian predecessor Inanna were associated with fertility, but Ishtar was mainly recognized as being associated with love and war. Her dominant aspects made her a closer match to the Norse goddess Freya, or the Greek goddess Aphrodite (who, in fact, is seen by many scholars as having evolved from the Canaanite goddess Astarte, who in turn evolved from Ishtar).

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Ishtar's symbols were the lion and the 8-pointed star, and she was never shown to have association with hares or eggs. The closest connection she seems to have with Eostre – the similarity of their names – is completely coincidental (it's already been noted that Ishtar would go on to become Aphrodite among the Greeks, a name that bears no resemblance to Eostre – it makes little sense to speculate that the name actually drifted back to something similar to Ishtar later on by pure happenstance).

The Wiccan Goddess

Modern Paganism and Wicca have taken much from European mythology – predominantly Celtic and Germanic sources, but also Norse religion and other European sources. Africa and Western Asia have also made contributions to this modern religious movement.

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And one of the things Paganism has brought in from these older sources is name Ostara. Paganism – as popularized by Gerald Gardner in the mid-20th Century – has eight festivals, or Sabbats, that mark out the year, and Ostara is the name of the Sabbat held on the Vernal Equinox. Gardner claimed much of what he wrote had been passed down to him by practicing adherents of an ancient tradition, but modern scholarship largely dismisses this claim.

Pagan and Wiccan traditions are a diverse lot, and outside of the broad strokes, such as the names of the Sabbats, there is a great deal of variation. However, references to Eostre can be found throughout much of Pagan literature, complete with the usual assumptions and misconceptions – associations with hares and eggs, celebrations on the Equinox, and so on.

New Gods

Let's first acknowledge there is nothing wrong with this, *per se*. Religions have borrowed and adapted gods from earlier cults for as long as there have been earlier cults to borrow from. Wiccans today are doing nothing different than Akkadians did in taking Ishtar from Inanna, nor the Canaanites in taking Astarte from Ishtar.

Greeks, Romans, Celts, . . . cultures throughout history have syncretized and otherwise appropriated practices, names, and religious trappings – and how much they copied accurately versus how much they brought in through the lens of their own perceptions and biases is left up to debate.

In this case, the modern, popularized version of Eostre that appears in New Age religions likely has nothing more than the name in common with the Eostre that the Anglo-Saxons knew. This modern Eostre can be worshipped sincerely in her own right just as much as Hera or the African river goddess Oshun – but she is not the Anglo-Saxon Eostre and has no more connection to her than she does to these other goddesses.

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Filling in the Gaps

The Easter Holiday

It should be pointed out that Easter's association with the Equinox has a wholly Christian source. In 325 C.E., the Roman Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea to standardize aspects of the newly legal Christian faith.

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One of these aspects was the setting of festival dates, which could vary wildly in different parts of Christendom. Eager to separate Easter from the Jewish Passover, the Council set Easter to fall on the Sunday after the first full moon to occur after the Equinox.

This holiday was called *Pascha* in Greek and Latin, but somehow acquired the name Easter. How this happened exactly is unknown but is almost certainly related to an Old High German word for dawn – *eostarum* (the festival was described in Latin as *in albis*, a plural form of "dawn").

But this points back to the idea of Eostre/Ostara as associated with the dawn, hence the connection of "dawn" to the name. Possibly this would then hint at a connection with life and rebirth (quite a natural fit for a celebration of the Resurrection), and at least infer a possible connection with the Equinox.

Syncretization

Despite its hard stance on heresy and heathenism, Christianity was nonetheless not immune to absorbing practices of earlier faiths. Pope Gregory I, in a letter to Abbot

Mellitus (a Christian missionary in England at the dawn of the 7th Century) laid out the pragmatism of allowing certain practices be absorbed for the sake of slow-walking populations into Christianity.

After all, if the locals went to the same building, on the same dates, and did largely the same things with a few Christian tweaks, the path of national conversion became quite a bit smoother. Now, how much latitude for this syncretization Pope Gregory truly intended is debatable, but there's little doubt that it happened to some degree.

So, does the fact that *Pascha* took on the name Easter suggest that there was enough similarity between the surviving rites and mythology of Eostre and the ideas of life and rebirth associated with *Pascha* to warrant such an absorption? The evidence is maddeningly circumstantial, but the speculation can't be wholly dismissed.

The Enduring Mystery

In the end, there's just too much we don't know. It can't be said Eostre was ever associated with hares or eggs, despite the near-universal association of those fertility symbols with Spring, where the month dedicated to her fell. And she can't be firmly connected to the Equinox, though slivers of linguistic evidence suggest it.

And she can't be connected to prior or subsequent goddesses, either Germanic or further afield. She is like a single stone arch in an otherwise unspoiled forest, a marker without context or connection.

It's unlikely we'll ever know more about her. But all the same, she endures. Her name is celebrated every year by association with a foreign religion that overwrote her own, with symbols and festivals that may (or may not) be completely alien to those of her cult.

It's interesting to compare her to her fellow goddess Hretha – both received the same mention by Bede, yet only Eostre remains. Only Eostre was adopted as the name of a Christian holiday, and only she was carried into the modern age, however altered.

Why is that? Did those early people who appropriated her name, who would still have been able to see and know so much about Eostre and her cult that we've since lost, have a reason to pick her to be the name for Easter? How wonderful it would be, if we could know.

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