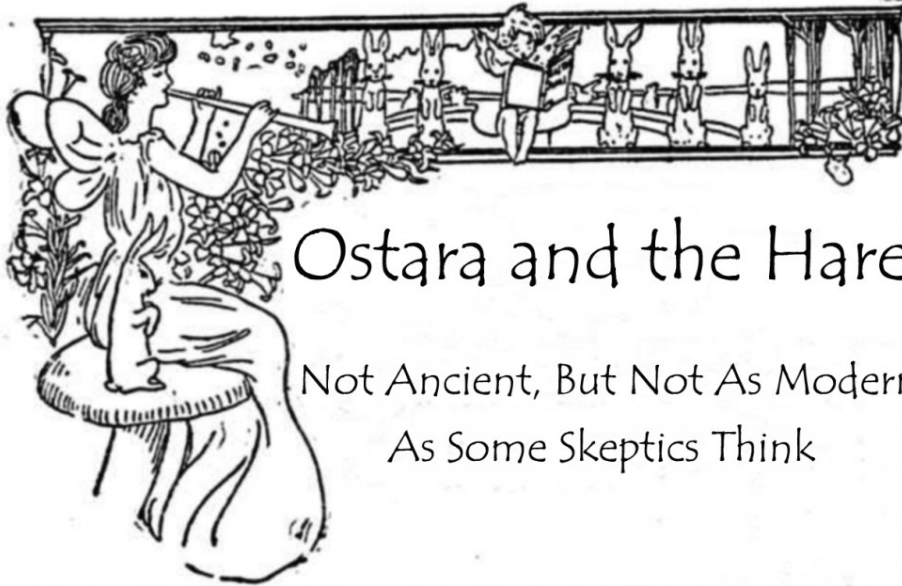




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This view of Ostara as a fairy-like goddess appeared in South Carolina's [Abbeville Press and Banner, April 18, 1906](#).

## Ostara and the Hare: Not Ancient, but Not As Modern As Some Skeptics Think

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Posted by: [Stephen Winick](#)

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If you're curious about modern holiday beliefs and calendar customs, you might be reading or doing research about them online. Chances are, you come across some stories that the presenters claim are ancient, and reach into the pre-Christian past. One popular story you might have seen recently involves the origin of the Easter Bunny. Essentially, the tale is that Ostara, the ancient Germanic goddess of the spring, transformed a bird into a hare, and the hare responded by laying colored eggs for her festival. Some online sources, such as [Goddess Gift](#), claim this story is very old indeed. Others, such as [Family Christmas Online](#), say it was invented in the 1980s.

So whom should you believe? As it turns out, neither one! I've traced the story back to the late 19th century. So it may not be ancient, but it's not that new either.

Let me back up a moment to set the scene. On Easter Sunday 2016, I had the pleasure of appearing on *CBS Sunday Morning* as a folklore expert in a segment on the Easter Bunny. [The resulting story can be viewed at this link](#). The interview gave me an incentive [Skip to content](#) thoughts on the matter and publish two blog posts, which you can view [here](#) and [here](#). In the comments section

of the first of these posts, reader Holly B. asked about the story of Ostara and the hare.



Stories about the goddess Ostara were popular in newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century. In this illustration from the [Valentine, Nebraska Democrat of April 9, 1903](#), she is called "Ostera." The newspaper, quite fancifully, tells us: "Ostera was worshiped very generally in northern Germany, and it is believed that the fame of the goddess spread to England, where the Saxons joined in worshipping her. Until the beginning of the present century court was paid to Ostera by the kindling of great bonfires and in other ways, and even to-day in some of the remote districts where many superstitious beliefs are treasured by the peasantry the fame of Ostera still lives."

As I detailed in the first Easter Bunny post, Ostara herself is a shadowy figure in Germanic folklore. Her story begins with Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess who is not documented from pagan sources at all, and turns up in only one early Christian source, the writings of the English churchman Bede. Bede may have been right that there was such a goddess, or he may have been spreading the received wisdom of his era, and scholars have debated this point for years. Jacob Grimm, the brilliant linguist and folklorist, is one of many scholars who took Bede at his word, and in [his 1835 book \*Deutsche Mythologie\*](#), he proposed that Eostre must have been a local version of a more widespread Germanic goddess, whom he named Ostara. It's impossible to tell if Ostara as a goddess ever existed outside Grimm's proposal. As for Eostre, there's no evidence of her worship except in Bede's book, and possibly in place names (which could, however, just mean "east"). There are certainly no ancient stories in which she transforms a bird into a hare. [1]

In 1874, in [another book also titled \*Deutsche Mythologie\*, Adolf Holtzmann](#), speculated about the already-popular German tradition of the "Easter hare" (the tradition from which our Easter bunny derives) by associating it with the goddess, thus claiming for the first time a connection between Ostara and the hare:

The Easter Hare is inexplicable to me, but probably the hare was the sacred animal of Ostara; just as there is a hare on the statue of [the Celtic goddess] Abnoba." [My translation from German.]

More developed stories have since emerged connecting Eostre/Ostara and the hare, one of which was the subject of Holly B.'s question:

I have been trying to track the origins of Easter rabbit myths, and of course very little primary source material exists for oral traditions. There seem to be two versions of the story of Eostre and the hare: that she found a bird with frozen wings and saved it by transforming it into a rabbit, which retained the ability to lay eggs; and that a bird who laid beautiful eggs was so proud that Eostre was irked and turned it into a rabbit, but she was so moved by the rabbit's despair that she allowed it to lay beautiful eggs once a year. These stories are attributed to Anglo-Saxon folklore, and so it makes sense for it to appear in Pennsylvania Dutch tradition, but I can find no sources for either story, modern or otherwise. As a librarian, it is driving me batty. This article and the comments have been helpful.

Holly B's question is particularly interesting because recent years have seen a backlash against these stories, and modern authors seem eager to claim they are very recent indeed. As an example, the popular blog [Family Christmas Online](#) calls the story "a modern-day hoax popularized by 'New Age' circles," and further asserts that "no such myth was ever associated with Eostre or any similar goddess before 1987."

*Family Christmas Online* goes on to describe their belief as to the origin of the story:

As far as I can tell the Eostre bird-bunny story dates back to an article published in a K-12 school resource by feel-good writer and frequent Oprah guest Sarah Ban Breathnach. In 1990, she incorporated the article's content in *Mrs. Sharp's Traditions: Reviving Victorian Family Celebrations of Comfort & Joy*. Then, in 2002, Jean-Andrew Dickmann published a version of Breathnach's story as "The Coming of Eostre" in *Cricket Magazine* a "Weekly Reader" sort of publication.



The caption on this illustration from the [April 3, 1898 Richmond Dispatch](#) says: "The 1898 Goddess of Easter Quite Eclipses Conventional Ostara."

In response to Holly B, and contrary to *Family Christmas Online*, a few weeks ago I traced versions of the story back to the [June 8, 1889 issue of the journal \*American Notes and Queries\*, page 64](#):

**The Hare and Easter** –Whence comes the legend of the Hare in connection with Easter?

–RWH PHILADELPHIA PA

In Germany and among the Pennsylvania Germans toy rabbits or hares made of canton flannel stuffed with cotton are given as gifts on Easter morning. The children are told that this *Osh'ter Has* laid the Easter eggs. This curious idea is thus explained: The hare was originally a bird, and was changed into a quadruped by the goddess *Ostara*; in gratitude to Ostara or Eostre, the hare exercises its original bird function to lay eggs for the goddess on her festal day.

Unfortunately, this reference was given as an answer to someone's question, with no source cited. So although I had traced it back over a century, I still didn't know where it came from with any certainty. Nevertheless, I expressed my "best guess":

If I had to guess, I would say it probably came from a German scholar writing in the wake of Grimm. As we have seen, Holtzmann's speculation seems to be the first direct connection between hares and Ostara, so the story, in a form that includes Ostara, cannot predate Holtzmann (1874). Wackernagel, by 1882, already had a specific story in which Ostara "rode over the fields in the spring in a wagon drawn by hares." So it's not too surprising that, seven years later, someone would have come up with a more developed narrative. I'll continue to look for a more definitive source.

Now I'm able to report some more definitive sources. First, a very similar report to the one in *American Notes and Queries* appeared as [a note by H. Krebs in the first volume of the English journal Folk-Lore in 1883](#), but this time with a citation:

*Easter-Eggs and the Hare.*—Some time ago the question was raised how it came that, according to South German still prevailing folk-lore, the Hare is believed by children to lay the Easter-eggs. I venture now to offer a probable answer to it. Originally the hare seems to have been a bird which the ancient Teutonic goddess *Ostara* (the Anglo-Saxon *Eastre* or *Eostre*, as Bede calls her) transformed into a quadruped. For this reason the Hare, in grateful recollection of its former quality as bird and swift messenger of the Spring-Goddess, is able to lay eggs on her festival at Easter-time (r. Oberle's *Ueberreste germanischen Heidentums im Christentum*, 8vo, Baden-Baden, 1883, p. 104.)



This version of the goddess appeared in Vermont's [Windham County Reformer, April 8, 1887](#).

As we can see, Krebs was reporting a new explanation citing a German book by K. A. Oberle, which was at the time brand new. [Looking at that book](#), we see that Krebs's passage is a word-for-word translation of a sentence by Oberle:

Der Hase scheint vorerst ein Vogel gewesen zu sein, den die Göttin in ein vierfüßiges Tier verwandelte; darum kann er in dankbarer Erinnerung an seine frühere Eigenschaft als Vogel am Feste der Göttin Eier legen.

But where did Oberle get the idea that the goddess transformed a bird into a "four-footed animal?" He does not give a specific source for the story of the goddess changing a bird into a hare, but he does give a general source for his information about Ostara: Holtzmann, who (as we have already seen) is the origin of the idea that Ostara and hares were connected. Looking back at Holtzmann, I found the following sentence:

Uebrigens ist doch der Hase ein Vogel gewesen, da er Eier legt....

This translates to:

By the way, the hare must once have been a bird, because it lays eggs....

This simple statement seems to be Oberle's source for the idea that the goddess Ostara changed a bird into a hare. As in English, the German sentence CAN mean that an individual hare used to be an individual bird—or in other words that a bird was transformed into a hare. But it can also mean that the role of the hare in the story used to be occupied by a bird. In my reading, Holtzmann seems just to have been speculating that a previous version of the story featured a bird, but Oberle made the leap to a tale in which a physical transformation occurred, and then ascribed that transformation to the goddess Ostara. [2] He likely did this because his book was specifically intended to argue for survivals of paganism in Christian Germany, and giving the Easter Hare a definitively pagan origin served this scholarly agenda. In adding this element, Oberle provided the essence of the current popular stories.

Shortly after these stories began to appear in academic venues, they were imported into popular books, newspapers, and magazines. The [November 1896 issue of Popular Science Monthly](#) carried an article by Walter James Hoffman called "Popular Superstitions," which stated:

The association of the hare with eggs is curious and the explanation is found in the belief that originally the hare seems to have been a bird which the ancient Teutonic goddess Ostara turned into a quadruped. For this reason the hare in grateful recognition of its former quality as a bird and swift messenger of the Spring Goddess is able to lay eggs on her festival at Easter time.



This "pert, tall-eared rabbit" was featured in [Michigan's Crawford Avalanche on April 12, 1900](#).

Quite early, the story began to be prefaced by statements about how very ancient it was. For example, [Michigan's Crawford Avalanche of April 12, 1900](#), tells us that the story is "one of the oldest in mythology," despite the fact that it was then less than twenty years old:

#### **ORIGIN OF EASTER RABBITS**

##### **According to Teutonic Tradition Bunny Was Once a Bird**

One of the quaint and interesting features of our modern Easter carnival is the appearance in shop windows, side by side with the emblematic colored egg, of a pert tall-eared rabbit, and those who cannot understand why bunny should have a place in our Easter decorations shrug their shoulders and think it a trick to please the children. But the legend of the Easter rabbit is one of the oldest in mythology, and is mentioned in the early folk lore of South Germany. Originally, it appears, the rabbit was a bird, which the ancient Teutonic goddess Ostara—goddess of the east or of spring—transformed into a quadruped. For this reason the rabbit or hare is grateful, and in remembrance of its former condition as a bird and as a swift messenger of spring, and of the goddess whom it served, is able to lay colored Easter eggs on her festival in the spring time, the colors illustrating the theory that when it was a bird the rabbit laid colored eggs, and an egg has always been a symbol of the resurrection, and therefore used as an illustration at Easter.

A story in the [Richmond \(Virginia\) Times from March 30, 1902](#), claims the story reflects the blind and barbarous nature of the heathen Saxons:



## Easter a Relic of Pagan Days

Strange as it may seem, Eastertide, like Christmas, is a relic of pagan days. In former days, when the dawn of civilization was just beginning to break, that time of the year when winter was passing away and summer approaching, was made a period of festivity. The people in their blind fashion thanked the unseen beings who ruled the world for the breaking up of the frost-time and prayed for plenteous harvests and fruitful flocks and herds. When Christianity pushed its way further and further into the then barbaric world the early missionaries, not wishing to antagonize their prospective converts, took this festival and consecrated its observance to the new form of faith. In England the festival became known as "Easter" from the goddess Eostre, and in the eggs so widely looked upon as typical of Easter is a mark of the old legend of a bird that was changed into a hare in the spring.



Whether the Easter bunny is male or female is an interesting question. German texts tend to use male pronouns, but since the creature lays eggs in this story, it would make sense for it to be female. The [Crawford Avalanche](#) provided one of each!

As time went on, the story was sometimes blended with other tales or beliefs about Ostara, none of them older than Grimm's 1835 book. The [Warren, Minnesota, Sheaf of April 13, 1911](#) ran the following version with a new detail about Ostara's chariot, drawn from the already growing (and already fanciful) literature about the goddess:

The Easter bunny is said to have been the bird which at one time drew the chariot of the Goddess of Spring and was turned into a hare. Every year however, at the coming of spring the hare remembers, and in commemoration of its original bird nature lays eggs as an offering to Spring and Youth it symbolizes.

Sometimes the story grew even more in the telling. The detail that the goddess changed the bird into a hare specifically to help it endure the cold appears in a version printed in [Ohio's Fulton County Tribune for April 13, 1922](#):

## WAS MESSENGER OF GODDESS

### Pretty Legend Which Connects the Hare With the Symbol of the Awakening of Life.

It appears from a very ancient, but little known tradition, that the rabbit, or rather the hare; sacred to Ostara, was originally a bird, very possibly the swallow. The goddess finding her winged messenger was not fitted to endure all toils and climates, transformed her into a brisk, quick-footed little quadruped with long ears, a warm furry coat, and no tail to speak of, ready and able to summon belated spring from wherever she might be lingering, and to guide her safely, even among the icebergs of the frozen north. Thenceforward the hare, the emblem of fertility, was known as the friend and messenger of the spring goddess; and in memory of her former existence as a bird, the hare once a year, at Easter, lays the gaily colored eggs that are the symbol of the awakening of earth and the renewal of life. This is the mythological explanation of the connection of Easter eggs and bunnies, but there are many other stories telling why the sportive hare is responsible for the bright-hued eggs at this spring festival.



This very bipartisan illustration of the goddess with her hare appeared in both the [Ohio Democrat](#) and the [Republican News Item](#) (Laporte, Pennsylvania), in 1898.

It's interesting to note the clear debt that many of the more popular stories owe to the versions first published in academic books and journals. The 1896 article in *Popular Science Monthly*, and the newspaper account from 1922, both use the word "quadruped," first used in the very first English-language version from *Folk-Lore* in 1883, itself a translation of the German "vierfüßiges Tier" from Oberle's account. It's also interesting that *Family Christmas Online* dismisses Sarah Ban Breathnach's claim, made in the book *Mrs. Sharp's Traditions*, that she found her source material in Victorian magazines. In fact, given its origin in 1883, and the fact that it was recounted in *Popular Science Monthly* (a Victorian magazine, albeit an American one with academic leanings), her story seems quite plausible.

The above was a just a brief rundown of early versions I turned up in books, magazines, and especially newspapers. I haven't come across a version in which the bird was transformed as a punishment for pride, which is one of the stories recounted by Holly B., That may indeed have a more recent origin. Searching the Library's *Chronicling America* collection for more versions of the story might fill in even more details. One thing is clear, however: while the story of Ostara turning a bird into a hare is not ancient, it's also not new. [3] It is, like most things about Ostara, a 19th century German idea affected by the Romantic Nationalist movement. Since the story arises from the work of Jacob Grimm, it's also interesting as an example of folklore that arose from the work of folklorists.

[1] As a reader of the previous posts pointed out, local shrines in Germany have turned up with the somewhat similar name "Matronae Austriahenae," but again since both "Eostre" and "Austriahenae" are etymologically related to "east," it's impossible to tell if there's any relationship or if we have several goddesses understood as in some sense eastern.

[2] Many thanks to my Library of Congress colleague Sybille Jagusch for helping me understand the German texts.

[3] Whether the story can be considered "New Age," as *Family Christmas Online* suggests, is another question. Depending on how we define the New Age movement, it may itself not be that new. Although many define New Age proper as having begun in the 1970s, it clearly has roots in the blend of Western esotericism and Eastern religion that emerged in the nineteenth century. The Ostara story is mostly popular in Neopagan communities, which usually hold themselves distinct from New Age thought. But there is overlap among

all these ideas

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