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# MEDIEVAL FOLKLORE

An Encyclopedia of  
Myths, Legends, Tales,  
Beliefs, and Customs

*Volume 2: L-Z*



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ABC-CLIO  
Santa Barbara, California  
Denver, Colorado  
Oxford, England



King Lear and his daughters, an illustration by the thirteenth-century English monk Matthew Paris. (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 26, fol. 6)

(Legrecestra, Lerechestria). The Welsh name of the city is Caerlyr and it was natural, therefore, for the Welsh translators of the *Historia* to use the familiar form Llyr for the Latin Leir, but they do not add any material relating to the native Llyr to their translations. The story may have a traditional basis, but there seems to be no reason for claiming this version or the name Lear as one of Geoffrey's putative Welsh sources.

See also: Geoffrey of Monmouth; Triads of the Island of Britain

References and further reading: W. Perrett, *The Story of King Lear* (1904); P. C. Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary* (1993); R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (1978).

—Brynley F. Roberts

## Legend

A historicized and localized traditional oral prose narrative presented as a true account, often centering on a supernatural or other extraordinary occurrence.

Legends express the collective values and beliefs of the group to whose tradition they belong. Medieval authors frequently used legends, incorporating them into the framework of larger works and occasionally changing them from prose to versified accounts. Legends from the medieval oral traditions are represented primarily in texts, although material enactments of legends in diverse forms such as paintings, manuscript illuminations, pictorial monuments, and tapestries are commonplace.

The English term *legend* is a source of potential confusion for international scholars, since it can be easily mistaken for the Latin term *legenda*. The German word for legend, *Sage*, and its Scandinavian cognates—for example, Danish *sagn*—are all related to the Old English *secgan*, “to say,” and thus maintain the sense of orality that is a primary feature of the genre. In contrast, *legenda* (meaning “that which should be read”) refers to literary compositions—saints’ lives

and other hagiographic writings. These literary works, which relate the biographies of religious figures and focus on miraculous episodes, were intended to be read during the religious offices on a specific saint's day. Because of the focus on supranormal events, authors of *legendae* made frequent use of legends in their compositions. Thus, it is not uncommon for similar events to be attributed to different figures in the saints' lives.

The Grimm brothers were among the first folklorists to define the legend, suggesting in the introduction to *Deutsche Sagen*, their 1816 collection of German legends, that "the *märchen* [fictional folktale] is more poetic, the legend is more historical." The view of legends as being historically true has informed a great deal of the scholarship on the genre. Most early studies of legend sought to isolate the historical kernel of the accounts. Consequently, individual episodes about named people in medieval texts often came under close scrutiny in an attempt to discover the "true" events embedded within the texts. However, Jan Vansina and other scholars have suggested that legends often do not represent accurate recordings of historical events. Rather, the value of the legends as historical documents may lie in their ability to reflect the social and cultural environment of the tellers. Thus, legends provide useful ethnographic information. Since legends have also been inscribed in the archival record by a medieval author, the study of which legends are chosen to be recorded and how they are used may also reveal aspects of the social and cultural conditions surrounding the literary composition of the work.

Axel Olrik attempted to build a closed generic system describing the forms of the legend, all of which were governed by his "epic laws" in folklore composition. By examining nineteenth-century folklore collections and medieval source materials he developed the categories "lay," "saga," and "legend," among others. Olrik placed two major forms within the saga category: the heroic saga, which



*A mounted devil carries off a woman. This legend theme, well known as early as the eleventh century, became increasingly popular toward the end of the Middle Ages; this depiction is a woodcut from Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, printed in 1555. (Dover Pictorial Archive Series)*

was a presumably historical account (such as the Icelandic sagas), and the folktale, which was a fictional account. He reserved the term *legend* for short, mono-episodic accounts that were performed conversationally. He divided legend, in turn, into two main categories: origin legends and anecdotes. Olrik's system reveals the numerous genres of folklore that often were incorporated into medieval texts. Later modifications of the system by scholars such as Carl Wilhelm von Sydow reveal the interplay between genres in oral tradition.

Legend is typically a highly localized narrative and has been characterized as highly oikotypified—that is, highly reflective of local conditions. Von Sydow introduced the concept of oikotypes (ecotypes) to explain differences between similar folk expressions collected from disparate tradition groups. Tale tellers change a narrative to fit their social and geographic environments. Authors of medieval texts also changed the narratives to fit their needs whether they received the story from oral sources, written sources, or a combination of the two. These two processes of variation—variation in the oral tradition and variation within the written record—account in part for some of the interesting disjunctures between individual episodes in different medieval versions of the same story. One can find examples of this type of variation in the Tristan romances by Béroul, Thomas of Britain, and Gottfried von Strassburg, as well as in the Old Norse-Icelandic *Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*.

The events narrated in legends are related to particular places. The extreme localization of the account in turn adds to the believability of the account. According to Robert A. Kaske, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* includes a noteworthy example of such extreme localization in the detailed description of the Green Chapel where Sir Gawain and his adversary are to meet. In this case, the medieval author has apparently localized the traditional account to an area well known to the local audience.

Just as events in legends are linked to specific places, they are also frequently linked to specific people. The inclusion of known individuals in the legend contributed in large part to the view that it represented a truthful recording of a historical event. However, identical stories with different named *dramatis personae* appear time and again throughout the medieval corpus. Thus, the murder of King Aethelberht (d. 794) in the hagiographic texts concerning Mildrith is part of a tradition of stories concerning murdered royal saints. The medieval legend teller and the medieval author in turn not only alter place names and topographic features to fit the geographic (synchronic) needs of the work but also adapt the personages in the legends or legend texts to fit the historical (diachronic) needs of the work.

In an interesting study of medieval legends and their contemporary analogs, Shirley Marchalonis shows how legends from medieval texts are "updated" to fit the demands of modern culture in contemporary tradition. This process of variation can be referred to as "historicization," and it requires a modification of the Grimms' original characterization of legend. Legend is not a historical narrative but, rather, a historicized narrative.

An important characteristic of legend is its narrative form: a legend tells a story. The minimal requirement for a narrative is that it must include a temporal sequence: X then Y. This distinction helps separate legend from many other

oral traditions prevalent during the medieval period, including genealogies, charms, proverbs, descriptions of local phenomena, and other nonnarrative genres of folklore that also were frequently included in medieval texts. Medieval authors, however, did not always record entire legend texts. Instead, they could refer to legend tradition. While a genealogy, such as the one from the opening of *Egil's Saga*, may or may not have been part of an oral tradition, the mention of Kveld-Ulf's great strength, sagacity, and ability to change shape certainly reference various legend accounts: "There was a man called Ulf the Dauntless. Ulf was such a big and strong man that he had no equals. ... He could give good advice in all matters for he was very wise. ... He was sleepy in the evening, and it was rumored that he must be a great shape-changer."

Medieval scholars refer to "legend cycles." Perhaps one of the best is the Sigurd cycle, the basis for the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga Saga*, and numerous Eddic poems. Often these groups of legends are referred to as if they were a single legend with locutions such as "the legend of Sigurd." Legend does not typically include multiple episodes; rather, it relates to a single event. Therefore, it may be more accurate to speak of "the legends about Sigurd." Medieval compositions frequently include several legends that have been written so as to refer to the same individual, thereby constructing a multi-episodic account of an individual or individuals that may or may not have been extant in oral tradition.

Despite the brevity of the mono-episodic legend account, its form is extremely elastic. Legend can be contracted or expanded in the medieval text depending on the requirements of the composition. Such expansion and contraction mirrors the form of legend in oral circulation, often serving rhetorical purposes. While medieval scholars interested in developing stemmata (genealogies of manuscripts) engage in the comparison of episodes from the various redactions, the mutability of legend makes such studies problematic, since one cannot necessarily determine the relative compositional age of episodes through the examination of the episode's complexity. The medieval text is not immutable, and it was under narrative pressure from both the written tradition and the oral tradition.

One of the most frequent uses of legends in medieval representations is to explain empirically observable phenomena, such as why a certain geographical feature is the way it is or why a church is built where it is. Legends were also used to "teach," as evidenced by their frequent use in exempla. Thus, the story known to late-twentieth-century scholars as "The Spider in the Hairdo" appears in a late-thirteenth-century collection of English exempla:

There is a sermon story of a certain lady of Eynesham ... who took so long over the adornment of her hair that she used to arrive at church barely before the end of Mass. One day, "the devil descended upon her head in the form of a spider, gripping with its legs," until she well-nigh died of fright. Nothing would remove the offending insect ... until the local abbot displayed the holy sacrament before it.

Certain events were so traumatic in medieval society that they spawned numerous tales. Perhaps the greatest ecological crisis of late-medieval Europe was the Black Death, which ravaged most of Europe in the mid-fourteenth

century. Legends of the plague—how it arrived, and the aftermath of its indiscriminate killing—proliferated, as evidenced by contemporaneous accounts of the plague throughout Europe. For example, the nineteenth-century Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen collected numerous plague legends from the rural Danish population, including:

After the Black Death, all of the people in two towns had died out. Then there was a dog which ran from the one town to the other every day, and when it was investigated, it turned out that it was nursing and taking care of a child which was still alive in the other town.

Repeated epidemics reinforced the need for these stories and guaranteed their longevity in tradition.

Legend was not only recorded in texts by medieval authors but was also reenacted in art and other material forms. One of the best-known works of art from medieval France, the Bayeux Tapestry, enacts pictorially, with occasional captions, the story of William of Normandy's quest for the throne of England. In scene 17 of the tapestry Duke Harold pulls men from the quicksand near Mont-Saint-Michel. The scene is accompanied by the short title "Hic Harold Dux trahebat eos de arena" [Here Duke Harold pulled them from the sand]. Here a legend about a supernatural feat of strength is enacted pictorially. In the composition, the tapestry weaver relied on a believable, mono-episodic, highly



*King Harold Godwinson, with one man on his back, pulls another from the quicksand. Detail from the eleventh-century Bayeux Tapestry. (Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis)*

localized, and historicized oral account—a legend—of Duke Harold's remarkable feat. In turn, the episode is incorporated into the larger work narrating William's quest for the throne.

Many medieval authors and artists can be considered among the earliest collectors of folklore. Medieval legend exists only in their works as written or pictorial representations, offering us a snapshot of what was apparently a rich and vibrant oral tradition. Legends collected after the Middle Ages often resonate well with records from the medieval materials, but they exhibit key characteristics of legend—localization, historicization, and an expression of the values and beliefs of the tradition participants—that make them expressions of the people from whom they were collected. Although one finds a strong continuity between medieval legends and more contemporary expressions,

it is not fruitful to speak of "survivals." Rather, one can look at how the legends are used in the different periods to understand the values and beliefs of the tradition participants contemporaneous to the legend recordings.

### Legend as Debate

Legends tend to circulate in variants that represent different individuals' and communities' views on the truth and specifics of the story. Because contrasting views are typical of the genre, the legend often unfolds as a debate or incorporates aspects of debate as participants taking different stands present their varied opinions and evidence. In his preface to the first printed edition of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), William Caxton presents an account of just such a legend debate. He states that he considered the story of Arthur false and unworthy of being published until various of his friends came forward with arguments and evidence persuading him that Arthur had actually lived. To those who wanted him to publish Arthur's deeds, says Caxton,

I answered that diverse men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur. ... Whereto they answered, and one in special said, that there were many evidences of the contrary. First, you may see his [tomb] in the monastery of Glastonbury. ... And in diverse places of England many remembrances ... of him ... ; in the castle of Dover you may see Gawain's skull and Cradok's mantel; at Winchester, the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword and many other things. Then, all these things considered, there can no man reasonably gainsay but there was a king of this land named Arthur.

Similarly, near the end of his tale of Arthur, Malory refers to the debate over Arthur's final fate:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but [was taken] by the will of our Lord Jesus into another place; and men say that he shall come again and win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I would say: here in this world he changed his life.

Such debates are signs of the power and vitality of legends, as well as indicators of how dramatically they may change in perspective and content from telling to telling.

Because legends often test the limits of belief, their subject matter is very nearly limitless and will vary in accordance with the beliefs of each teller and community. Tales flatly labeled fantasies by most modern readers were told as belief tales in certain medieval contexts. For example, the twelfth-century Welshman Gerald of Wales tells of a 12-year-old boy who, one day in the woods, encountered "two tiny men ... no bigger than pygmies," who led him through a tunnel in the earth into a rich and beautiful but dark country, without sun or stars. He made friends with the tiny inhabitants and frequently came and went. He told his mother about this otherworld, and she told him to steal some of the gold that "was extremely common in that country." The boy ran home with a golden ball, but the tiny men caught up with him and took it back and disappeared with it. From that day forward, the boy could never again find the entrance to that magic land.

Many twentieth-century scholars have labeled his story a *märchen*, a fictional folk narrative filled with magical elements. But as told by Gerald, the tale clearly shades into legend. Gerald introduces it by suggesting that he can identify the approximate time and place and perhaps the exact person involved: "Somewhat before our time, an odd thing happened in these parts. The priest Elidyr always maintained that he was the person concerned." At the end of the tale Gerald debates with himself over its truthfulness: "If I reject [the account], I place a limit on God's power, and that I will never do. If I say that I believe it, I have the audacity to move beyond the bounds of credibility, and that I will not do either." Others believe this tale, and even though Gerald refuses to commit himself, he participates in the transmission and continuing life of a legend by retelling it and pondering its believability.

See also: Black Death; Exemplum; Folktale; Saints, Cults of the

**References and further reading:** A. Olrik's two important works, "Eiske love i folkedigtningen," *Danske studier* (1908), and *Nogle grundsætninger for sagnforskning* (1921), translated by K. Wolf and J. Jensen as *Principles for Oral Narrative Research* (1992), may be supplemented by A. Jolles, *Einfache formen* (1930), which provides a structuralist overview of the legend genre, its relation to other genres of folklore, and the use of legend in medieval works. The Grimm brothers' early edition of German legends, *Deutsche Sagen* (1816), includes an informative and classic characterization of the genre. C. W. von Sydow's work on the legend and other forms of folklore is conveniently collected in his *Selected Papers on Folklore* (1948). J. Vansina considers the historical value of folklore in *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965). R. A. Kaske's discussion of the Green Chapel can be found in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. J. Mandel and B. A. Rosenberg (1970). S. A. Mitchell's *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (1991) focuses on the Scandinavian legendary sagas and includes an interesting discussion of the interplay between folklore and literary works. J. B. McNulty's *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (1989) provides a fascinating look at how narrative can be enacted in material forms. H. Delehaye's *Les légendes hagiographiques*, translated by D. Attwater as *The Legends of the Saints* (1962), offers an introductory overview of *legenda*, while D. W. Rollason's *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (1982) specifically examines the hagiographic writings concerning Mildrith. The plague and its implications for late-medieval society are discussed in R. S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (1983); legends about the plague often appeared in medieval writings as well as in later collections such as E. T. Kristensen's *Danske sagn som de har lydt i folkemunde* (1892–1901; rpt. 1980), which is the source of the plague legend quoted in the text. Works such as *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, translated by K. Fell as *Egil's Saga* (1975) and quoted in the text, and Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* reveal medieval authors' reliance on legend in their compositions. S. Marchalonis's article "Three Medieval Tales and Their Modern American Analogues," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976), which cites G. R. Owst's *Preaching in Medieval England* (1926) as a source for exempla, considers continuity in legend tradition from the medieval period to contemporary times. The history of legend scholarship is conveniently surveyed in the first chapter of T. R. Tangherlini's *Interpreting Legend: Danish Storytellers and Their Repertoires* (1993).

On the shifting definitions of legend and the concept of legend as debate, see the articles by R. Georges and L. Dégh in *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, ed. W. D. Hand (1971), and L. Dégh, *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration* (1995). The quotes from Caxton and Malory may be found in E. Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (1967); the spelling has been modernized. The story of Elidyr is found in Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, trans. L. Thorpe (1978). The final section of this entry, on Legend as Debate, was contributed by Carl Lindahl.

—Timothy R. Tangherlini