

LEGEND

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Legend

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1. Core Definition

The term **legend** denotes a traditional narrative that is often regarded by its cultural bearers as being based on historical events, typically featuring human actors in a recent or distant past, and situated within a recognizable geography. Unlike **myth**, which usually centers on divine or supernatural beings and cosmological origins, the legend maintains a tenuous, yet essential, link to perceived reality. This crucial connection implies that the events described, while often exaggerated or embellished, are believed to have actually occurred, thereby granting the story significant meaning and cultural validation within the society that transmits it. A fundamental aspect of the legend, as articulated in the source material, is its function as a persistent cultural artifact: it is a story which holds **significant meaning** within a community and is characteristically passed down to **successive generations** from its point of chronological origin, often through informal, intimate settings such as the transmission of narratives commonly employed as a bed-time story.

Academically, the definition of a legend rests heavily on the concept of belief. While the scholar observing the narrative may recognize its fictional or composite nature, the key element differentiating a legend from a mere **folktale** is the implicit or explicit claim to historicity made by the narrator or the community. This claim embeds the legend deeply within the collective identity and historical consciousness of a people, serving often as an aetiological explanation for specific geographic features, place names, or cultural practices. Furthermore, legends are inherently adaptable; as they traverse time and space, they fluidly incorporate new elements, modernize details, or shift moral emphasis to remain relevant to the contemporary concerns of the transmitting generation, demonstrating the dynamic process of oral tradition.

Consequently, the legend acts as a vital conduit of societal values and historical memory, occupying an ambiguous space between verifiable history and pure fiction. Its efficacy is not dependent upon factual accuracy but upon its ability to articulate and reinforce collective memory, moral codes, and cultural anxieties. Whether detailing the deeds of a local hero, the discovery of a regional treasure, or a supernatural encounter, the legend provides a narrative framework through which the present generation understands its relationship to the past and its immediate environment, ensuring the perpetual relevance of the story as it is passed down through generations, often beginning in childhood.

2. Etymology and Linguistic Evolution

The English word **legend** derives from the Medieval Latin term *legenda*, which literally means

"things to be read." This etymological root immediately establishes the concept's initial strong association with written tradition and, specifically, with hagiography. In its earliest usage, dating back to the 13th century, *legenda* referred specifically to the narratives concerning the lives and miracles of saints and martyrs, intended to be read aloud during religious services, particularly on the saints' designated feast days. These written accounts, such as the famous *Legenda Aurea* (The Golden Legend) compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century, formed the basis of medieval religious instruction and moral exemplum, making the concept of reading and moral instruction inseparable from the term's genesis.

The semantic evolution of **legend** reflects a gradual secularization and a shift from mandatory reading to narratives of questionable historical veracity. By the 16th century, the term began to migrate away from strictly religious texts, applying more broadly to any traditional story considered worthy of preservation but whose historical claims were increasingly difficult to verify. This transition marked a crucial shift: the emphasis moved from the necessity of the text ("things that must be read") to the narrative content itself ("a traditional story of the past"). This broader application allowed the term to encompass historical tales, chivalric romances, and heroic cycles that, while not necessarily divine in origin, still commanded a high degree of cultural belief and admiration.

In modern usage, particularly within the field of folklore studies, the term has become highly specialized, distinguishing itself sharply from its written origins and embracing its role within oral tradition. While the medieval sense implied a formal, authorized text, the contemporary understanding of a **legend** foregrounds its cultural significance, its fluidity, and its persistence through intergenerational transmission, often through informal means such as storytelling. This evolution highlights how the concept transitioned from a fixed liturgical reading to a dynamic, evolving category of popular narrative that shapes cultural identity.

3. Key Characteristics and Distinctions

A primary characteristic of the legend is its foundational claim to **historicity**, which separates it critically from the genre of the pure folktale (or *Märchen*). Legends are typically set in a specific, recognizable location--a local mountain, an established town, or a known ruin--and often reference historical individuals, dates, or events, anchoring the narrative firmly in the perceived reality of the audience. Even when supernatural elements intrude--such as ghosts, localized monsters, or miraculous events--these occurrences are treated within the narrative as extraordinary yet plausible incidents that occurred in the human world, rather than fundamental events of cosmic creation, which would typically fall under the domain of **myth**.

The thematic content of legends is also highly localized and culturally specific. They frequently serve an **aetiological function**, providing explanations for the origins of local customs, the

reasons behind geographical names, or the establishment of particular societal boundaries. For example, a legend might explain why a certain spring never runs dry, attributing the phenomenon to the sacrifice of a local saint or hero. This localization ensures that the narrative has immediate relevance and resonance for the people inhabiting that specific territory, reinforcing community bonds and a shared sense of place. This localization is a key mechanism by which legends acquire their significant meaning within a culture, as noted in the foundational definition.

Furthermore, legends are characterized by their flexibility and lack of fixed form. Unlike the rigidly structured folktale, which often adheres to specific motifs (like Vladimir Propp's functions), a legend is readily adaptable. Narrators feel free to modify details, add personal anecdotes, or adjust the moral focus to suit the immediate context or audience. This narrative elasticity allows the legend to survive over centuries, as it continually regenerates itself to address the shifting social concerns of successive generations. However, this flexibility means that legends rarely exist in a single authoritative version; instead, they persist as a constellation of variants circulating within a region, each contributing to the overall cultural significance of the story.

4. Typology and Classification

Academic study has classified legends into several distinct types based on their content, function, and distribution. The most broadly recognized category is the **urban legend** (or contemporary legend), which flourishes in industrialized societies and often deals with anxieties related to modern life, technology, and criminality. Urban legends are characterized by their plausible, often cautionary, subject matter (e.g., contamination scares, hitchhiker ghosts), their rapid global dissemination via modern media (e.g., email, social media), and the persistent belief among tellers that the event "happened to a friend of a friend" (FOAF mechanism). These narratives reflect current cultural fears and act as a form of social critique regarding trust in institutions or technology.

Conversely, **religious legends** are narratives associated with sacred figures, sites, or artifacts that are not central to foundational religious doctrine but serve to reinforce localized piety. These include narratives detailing localized miracles, post-canonical appearances of saints, or the discovery of relics. Such legends are instrumental in shaping popular religious practice and local pilgrimage traditions, often possessing a greater degree of formal structure due to their proximity to written hagiography, though they still maintain the essential legendary characteristic of being believed to be historically true by their adherents.

Another significant category is the **aetiological legend**, which focuses specifically on explaining natural or geographical phenomena. These stories often account for the unique shapes of mountains, the presence of specific bodies of water, or unusual flora and fauna, grounding the physical environment in a historical narrative involving human or semi-divine action. Finally,

historical legends center on major historical figures (like King Arthur or Robin Hood) or monumental events, taking true historical kernels and magnifying them through cycles of heroic deeds and dramatic fictionalization. These types are crucial for national identity formation and the creation of foundational societal narratives that provide moral and political context for the culture.

5. Transmission and Social Function

The transmission of legends is fundamentally rooted in the dynamics of cultural inheritance. As the source content notes, legends are passed down to **successive generations**, often beginning in childhood settings, typically as a **bed-time story** or similar intimate, low-stakes narrative context. This informal, personal method of transmission establishes the legend not merely as an abstract narrative but as a powerful, shared familial or communal memory. The act of sharing the legend reinforces the authority and cultural relevance of the older generation while indoctrinating the younger generation into the shared beliefs and localized history of the group.

The primary social function of the legend is twofold: it validates existing cultural structures and it mediates social anxieties. By recounting the heroic deeds of ancestors or the tragic consequences of moral transgression, legends provide models for acceptable behavior and definitions of communal identity. They often serve as cautionary tales, particularly in the case of urban legends, which articulate societal fears regarding safety, technology, and strangers. For instance, a legend about contaminated fast food reinforces vigilance and mistrust of large corporate entities, thus serving a protective, though often misleading, social function.

In traditional societies, legends also play a critical role in **land tenure and resource management**. Narratives detailing the punishment meted out to those who trespassed on sacred ground or misused a vital resource often act as unwritten laws, reinforcing sustainable practices and respect for ecological boundaries. The belief component of the legend--the idea that the narrative is rooted in real events and that the consequences are real--lends weight to these social functions, ensuring compliance and the continuity of tradition through internalized fear and respect.

6. Relationship to Myth and Folktale

Distinguishing the legend from the related narrative genres of **myth** and **folktale** is a foundational exercise in folklore studies, primarily revolving around the axis of time, actors, and belief. **Myth**, as defined academically, deals with the sacred past (the *in illo tempore*) and features non-human actors, typically gods, creators, or primordial beings, whose actions establish the cosmos and foundational societal laws. Myths are generally regarded as sacred truths by the culture, explaining "how things came to be" in the grandest sense (e.g., creation of the world).

The **folktale** (or fairy tale), conversely, is temporally and spatially indeterminate--starting with phrases like "Once upon a time in a land far, far away." Its characters are generic (princes,

youngest sons, wicked stepmothers), and crucially, the folktale carries no cultural claim to belief. It is understood by the teller and the audience to be fictional entertainment. While structurally complex and highly symbolic, the folktale is inherently secular and non-historical, designed for diversion and moral instruction without asserting factual veracity.

The **legend** occupies the intermediate space. It differs from myth because its setting is the historical world (the post-creation period) and its actors are primarily human or localized supernatural entities (ghosts, regional monsters). It differs from the folktale because the culture demands a degree of belief in the narrative's historical basis. Legends bridge the gap between sacred cosmic history (myth) and pure fictional entertainment (folktale), dealing instead with significant, localized human history that holds profound cultural and social meaning for the community, ensuring the perpetual transmission of the story to subsequent generations.

7. Academic Study and Analytical Approaches

The academic study of legends, often housed within the discipline of Folkloristics, employs various analytical methodologies to understand their origin, function, and persistence. The **historical-geographical method**, prominent in the early 20th century, sought to trace the global distribution of specific legend motifs (like the vanishing hitchhiker or the hero cycle) to identify the original form of the narrative and map its migratory patterns. While foundational, this approach is often criticized for minimizing the role of contemporary cultural adaptation.

More recent approaches, such as the **functionalist approach**, focus less on the origin and more on the utility of the legend within its contemporary social context. Functionalists analyze how a specific legend operates to maintain social cohesion, reinforce moral codes, or articulate group anxieties. For instance, the study of urban legends is largely functionalist, examining how stories about tainted products or criminal gangs reflect and regulate public fear in complex, anonymous environments. This approach aligns closely with the core observation that legends carry **significant meaning** within their society.

Furthermore, **performance theory** analyzes the legend not just as a static text but as a dynamic cultural event. This methodology examines the interactions between the narrator, the audience, and the context of the storytelling, recognizing that the legend's meaning is generated moment-to-moment during its performance. By studying how narrators use body language, tone, and audience feedback to assert the truth claim of the story, scholars gain insight into the mechanisms by which beliefs about the historicity of the legend are collectively maintained and passed down to successive generations.

8. Debates and Historical Authenticity

The most enduring academic debate surrounding legends revolves around the nature of their

historical authenticity. While many legends contain a "kernel of truth"--a reference to a real person, a catastrophic event, or a specific military conflict--the subsequent centuries of oral transmission inevitably inflate, distort, and fictionalize these initial facts until the narrative bears only a tangential relationship to documented history. Scholars debate the ethical and analytical necessity of attempting to strip away the fictional layers to retrieve the original historical event.

Some historians and folklorists argue that the pursuit of the "historical core" is fruitless and distracts from the true value of the legend, which lies in its cultural truth rather than its empirical factuality. From this perspective, the embellishments--the miraculous escapes, the exaggerated heroism, the supernatural intervention--are the elements that truly convey the culture's values, desires, and self-perceptions. The significance is not whether King Arthur existed exactly as described, but what the Arthurian legend tells us about medieval and post-medieval ideals of leadership, destiny, and national identity.

Conversely, other researchers, particularly those focused on historical anthropology, maintain that legends can serve as valuable, albeit flawed, supplementary sources for undocumented history. By carefully comparing multiple versions of a legend against archaeological evidence or external historical records, scholars can sometimes infer demographic movements, ancient kinship structures, or localized knowledge of past environmental changes. The ongoing debate thus centers on balancing the legend's power as a culturally meaningful narrative with its potential, yet inherently distorted, role as a witness to the chronological origins of past events.

Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Legend](#)

[Wikipedia: Folklore](#)

[Wikipedia: Myth](#)

[Wikipedia: Urban Legend](#)