

Important Genre Definitions for Arthurian Legends

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HISTORIA (plural: *historiae*): This Latin word gives us the modern word *history*, but the connection between the two terms is tenuous. Most modern readers think of a *history* or a historical treatise as a scholar's attempt at creating a factual or scholarly narrative of events from humanity's past. Some ancient texts do fit this model to a certain extent, such as certain **biographies** (Plutarch's *Lives*) or Sallust's *The Jugurthine War*. Other classical works have a veneer of factuality, but may disguise deliberate **propaganda** or accidental (but distorting) authorial assumptions, such as Julius Caesar's *The Conquest of Gaul* or the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. However, in ancient times, the word *historia* meant roughly the same thing as the modern English word "story" (i.e., any narrative whether factual or fictional). Latin writers, especially in medieval times, might on occasion use the word *historia* refer to history, to **legends**, to **vitae**, **mythology**, **folklore**, hearsay, gossip, and rumors. The term has no necessary connection with factuality, and this often confuses those students (and sometimes even amateur scholars!) working with medieval or **Arthurian** material, since many of the Arthurian works such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* are technically *historiae* rather than histories in our sense of the word. See also **annals** and contrast with **historical novel**.

MYTH: While common English usage often equates "myth" with "falsehood," scholars use the term slightly differently. A myth is a traditional tale of deep cultural significance to a people in terms of **etiology**, **eschatology**, ritual practice, or models of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The myth often (but not always) deals with gods, supernatural beings, or ancestral heroes. The culture creating or retelling the myth may or may not believe that the myth refers to literal or factual events, but it values the mythic narrative regardless of its historical authenticity for its (conscious or unconscious) insights into the human condition. See also **folklore**, **legend**, **mythography**, **mythos**, and **mythology**.

MYTHOLOGY: A system of stories about the gods, often explicitly religious in nature, that possibly were once believed to be true by a specific cultural group, but may no longer be believed as literally true by their descendents. Like religions everywhere, mythology often provided **etiological** and **eschatological narratives** (see above) to help explain why the world works the way it does, to provide a rationale for customs and observances, to establish set rituals for sacred ceremonies, and to predict what happens to individuals after death. If the protagonist is a normal human rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually called a **legend** rather than a myth. If the story concerns supernatural beings who are not deities, but rather spirits, ghosts, fairies, and other creatures, it is usually called a folktale or **fairy tale** rather than a myth (see **folklore**, below). Samples of myths appear in the writings of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid.

LEGEND: A narrative or tradition handed down from the past; distinguished from a myth by having more of historical truth and perhaps less of the supernatural. Legends often indicate the lore of a people and thus serve as at least partial expressions of a national spirit.

FOLKTALE: Folktales are stories passed along from one generation to the next by word-of-mouth rather than by a written text. See further discussion under **folklore**.

FOLKLORIC MOTIFS: Recurring patterns of imagery or narrative that appear in **folklore** and folktales. Common folkloric motifs include the wise old man mentoring the young warrior, the handsome prince rescuing the damsel in distress, the "**bed trick**," and the "trickster tricked." Others include "**beheading games**," "the exchange of winnings," and the **loathly lady** who transforms into a beautiful maiden (all common in Celtic folklore). These folkloric motifs appear in *fabliaux*, in **fairy tales**, in **mythology**, in archetypal stories (see **archetype**), and in some of Shakespeare's plays.

SAGA: The word comes from the Old Norse term for a "saw" or a "saying." Sagas are Scandinavian and Icelandic prose narratives about famous historical heroes, notable families, or the exploits of kings and warriors. Until the 12th century, most sagas were **folklore**, and they passed from person to person by oral transmission. Thereafter, scribes wrote them down. The Icelandic sagas take place when Iceland was first settled by Vikings (930-1030 AD). Examples include *Grettir's Saga*, *Njál's Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, and the *Saga of Eric the Red*. The saga is marked by literary and social conventions including warriors who stop in the midst of combat to recite extemporaneous poetry, individuals wearing dark blue cloaks when they are about to kill someone, elaborate genealogies and "back-story" before the main plot, casual violence, and recitations of the names and features of magical swords and weapons. Later sagas show signs of being influenced by continental literature--particularly French tales of chivalry and knighthood. For modern readers, the appearance of these traits often seems to sit uneasily with the surrounding material. In common usage, the term *saga* has been erroneously applied to any exciting, long narrative. See **cycle** and **epic**.