

When the words England and myth come up together, most people think about King Arthur. But...there's really a great deal more to British mythology than that.

Really, one of the earliest pieces of British myth isn't quite British at all. It's a very long epic poem called Beowulf. Right below this is a whole presentation on Beowulf saved as an Adobe Acrobat file, so I'm not going to go into too much detail here on it. Just know that it's a loooooooooooooooooong poem. Like the Greek poems (and Gilgamesh) that you've already looked at, Beowulf is an epic meant to be recited orally. It came about in a culture whose entertainment was drinking, fighting, and storytelling. In fact, there are mini-stories in Beowulf, kind of like flashbacks; they're told by storytellers or bards within the story. There's a celebration, there's a lot of drinking, and someone starts telling a story. For your homework, keep in mind that you don't have to read the stories-within-the-story, but they were very important when the Beowulf was originally told.

Now, of course, I had to include King Arthur. *Everyone* knows King Arthur, from the Disney movie if from nowhere else. The interesting thing about King Arthur is that there isn't really any single "text" for the legend. Beowulf or Gilgamesh, there's a single document that we can refer to as "the story." It doesn't work that way with Arthur...as far as we can tell, people started telling stories about a great king all the way back when the Romans tried to take over in England. Through the years, those stories grew, got added to, and finally got mixed up with some medieval romances from over in France. What came out was a whole mixed group of legends revolving around Arthur, Merlin, Guinevere, Lancelot, and the knights of the round table. And we still love the stories. They're all saturated in honor, fighting to preserve order and protect the helpless, and soap-opera tradition (thanks largely to the French input). Because there is no "real" Arthur legend, I've asked you to do some digging on your own to answer the homework questions. That's mean, and I know it. But I did it partially to prove a point. I want to drive home how daunting it is when there isn't a single source. Sometimes the stories don't all agree, and I want to see how you deal with that.

And...last but not least, I've included Tristan & Isolde and Tam Lin. Tristan & Isolde is a romance. It has its roots way back in Celtic myth, and it deals with love as almost a compulsion. Like many Celtic love stories, it has a bittersweet flavor. As you read it, remember the same ideas you applied to Greek myth – honor and love. How are those things the same or different from their Greek counterparts?

Tam Lin is a different text. It's...gasp...a poem. Actually, if you want to be technical, it's a ballad. Ballads are carefully rhymed and metered poems, usually alternating in rhythm and rhyme to tell a simple story. These ballads were frequently intended to be sung with musical accompaniment, and often involve repetition, kind of like a refrain or chorus in a song. As you read Tam Lin, you want to follow the basic plot, but you should also consider how the supernatural elements are viewed. The faerie may be different from the cute little sprites you're used to seeing in cartoons, and they're certainly different from the Greek gods. Again, ask yourself what that tells you about the culture telling the stories...why are they so unique?