

(The following is an excerpt from the convention panel 'Legendary Swords of Japan')

Why Are Sword Myths So Prevalent?

There is no symbol of heroism more iconic and more universal than that of the sword.

The sword is found in legendary, heroic imagery across the world and across time. Just about every culture on the Earth not only reveres the sword, but directly associates the sword with their greatest legends. Heroes of all shapes and sizes, classes and creeds, find themselves with a sword in their hand and that blade being the deciding factor in some epic way over the course of their legendary deeds.

But why?

Why is the sword so popular? Why is the sword universal to legends and heroism and all that great stuff? There are stories that defy the trend, sure. Not all heroes were great warriors sporting giant swords, but the overwhelming majority were warriors, and of those warriors, most carried a sword of note. For every David that slayed Goliath with a sling, there's King Arthur and his Excalibur (and the sword in the stone, which historically are not the same blade), Roland and his Durandal, Sang Sapurba and his Cura Si Manjakini, Susanoo and his Grass-cutting Sword, and on and on. In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find a culture in the world that does not include swords as major touchstones in their legends passed down. Even the aforementioned David goes on to be a great warrior, sword in hand.

This is by no means an ancient phenomenon either. The tradition continues across the globe, with each generation continuing the association and idolization of swords. Even in contemporary times, and in cultures that prize the gun (see: America), the sword is still chief among weapons, especially in popular culture. Star Wars has the lightsabers, the sole weapon of the heroic Jedi knights. The 2013 film Pacific Rim featured giant robots with the armament of battleships and yet still found gunfire trumped by the sword (Pacific Rim along with every giant robot TV show ever made that came from Japan). The Lord of the Rings focused a whole story arc on the sword of the king of Gondor, Narsil that would be reforged as Anduril; this in a world with arrows, artillery, and magic. Just about every video game that involves combat includes swords, often by the dozens (even some first-person shooters, which emphasize the gun as the primary mechanic of gameplay, has a sword or two). Even in the real world, the US Marines

carry a saber as part of their formal uniform, not any of the implements of modern warfare.

But, again, why?

Why is the sword so prominent in legend? Historically speaking, it was supplanted long, long ago by the bow-and-arrow, before the gun took the throne as king of the weapons. It isn't the first weapon, either. The knife, the spear, or the axe, almost certainly can lay claim to that dubious honor, assuming it doesn't go to the likeliest candidate, the club. The sword also is, arguably, the most useless of all weapons because it cannot serve another purpose. The spear, bow-and-arrow, and the gun can be used for hunting wild game. The axe and club can be used as tools (in fact, they almost certainly existed first as tools that were repurposed for war). The knife has a multitude of uses that belies its seeming simplicity. The sword, on the other hand, is practically pointless except in the existence and presence of warfare.

So why is the sword so prevalent in legendary tales?

#1 – Phallic Identification

It seems trite, but in a patrilineal world, it may very possibly be the single first and likeliest reason that swords are so universal: swords are a metaphor for the phallus. The penis. The tallywhacker. Captain Gemini. Whatever you want to call it.

Many legends center on, were told by, recorded by, recounted by, and repeated by men. This isn't rank speculation, either. Throughout much of world-wide history, women were barred from literacy (the Japanese alphabet Hiragana was developed for women as their brains couldn't possibly handle the complex Chinese characters used by men in the Heian Era). As such, it's probably little surprise to find that most legends involve epic male figures thrusting their long, rigid manifestations of manliness into things they demand submit to their will.

A little sarcastic perhaps, but it's not all that facetious or even unlikely. The phallic identification of the sword simply cannot be ignored. While it may or may not be the primary motivation for the inclusion and universality of the sword in legends across the globe, one would be hard-pressed to dismiss it as at least a contributing factor. Whole schools of psychological and sociological thought assert that the male mind is influenced by – if not driven by – the libido (and, thus, its physical manifestation). Would it be so hard (snicker) to think that ancient storytellers wouldn't find themselves similarly influenced, whether consciously or subconsciously?

#2 – Conquerors Write History

The old expression 'history is written by the victors' likely also plays into the prevalence of the sword, in so much as the existence of a victor more often than not connotes an armed conflict. Armed conflict means warfare and violence, which invariably means the use (or at least presence) of the sword.

As societies expanded beyond their initial territories and/or came into conflict with neighboring groups, warfare was (sadly) an inevitable result. Those with swords became the bastions of hope, protecting the Us from the Them. Bards, minstrels, scribes, and the variations of the historian documented the account of the battle(s) from the perspective of those who lived, which almost always was the winning warrior. For that reason alone, the record would skew towards the perception of those with the swords.

Even in the rare instances where the account was documented from the defeated group, the surviving warriors would invariably still be feared. Little is written in the Abrahamic books about Goliath, but he stood as the figurehead of the Philistines, a major foe against the people of David. This turned him iconic on his own, his great stature certainly only helping. Even though he is defeated with a single, clever shot from David's sling, both the Bible and the Torah specifically mention his sword (which would become the Sword of David), as a hallmark of David's success against him (depending on the translation of your preferred Abrahamic book, there may be more written about Goliath's sword than Goliath!).

However accounts that would become tales and then legends came into being, they would have relied on the words of those present. If those present were all warriors, then the warrior (and thus his tools, IE the sword) would become central to the tale.

#3 – Peace Is Boring

Related to the above entry, we also find a truth every writer and storyteller has discovered: a story without conflict is boring. And what greater conflict is there than warfare?

Our cultural and historical traditions rest on the accounts of great warriors because warfare and fighting, action in general, is what most audiences find entertaining. Throughout history, we have entertained and inspired one another with tales of great deeds. Great deeds invariably mean much was at stake. What more can be at stake when lives are on the line?

Our legends and stories may focus on action and fighting and warfare for the very simple reason that it's entertaining as hell. If it's epic accounts of great battles the audience wants to hear, then battles and war, warriors and combat – and by extension the tools of war – will be what gets told around the campfire. Even in historical accounts (as opposed to legendary tales), human history is mostly defined by warfare. It's easy for that history to be characterized by the warriors who fought it. From that, it becomes little doubt that the tools of their warrior profession would likewise become idolized, if not personified.

#4 – Swords Are Expensive

In the modern world, we take for granted the availability of not just goods but the resources to make them. Were you so inclined, you could run to just about any flea market in the world and buy a halfway decent piece of metal that's got a blade. Sure, they might not be combat ready, meaning it wouldn't fare too well in a fight. It'd be like taking a sports car to a demolition derby. Not the best idea in the world, but it'll work in a pinch.

Most people will acknowledge that making a sword is a long and laborious task and while that's true (more so than far more people even begin to suspect, but more on that in a minute), that isn't the only long and laborious part of the process. Go on YouTube and you can find a dozen (hundred) videos on making swords, knives, axes, all the various implements of war. They vary from professional, master-grade constructions to quickly improvised weapons that can take a matter of minutes. What they all have in common, usually, is that most begin with "now you take the metal..."

But what if you don't have the metal to start with?

Back in the day – in the truest sense of the expression – metals had to be mined from deep within mountain caves. And not only just mined but it also had to be treated. You think steel is found in nature? Getting the metal for a single sword was an enormously expensive undertaking. Thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, of man-hours of labor went into the backbreaking work of finding the iron within a mine (and that's assuming you already knew where such a resource existed). Cobble together all the rocks with the tiny fragments of raw iron ore laid within and then gently chisel them away until the ore remains. From there, you combine and purify the ore and treat it and prepare it. Days, weeks, and months, went into gathering and readying just the materials for a single sword. Not a sword – not even remotely – just the materials that you MIGHT be able to turn into a sword.

Now that you have the iron ready to make the sword, the actual art and craft comes into play and it is here that the novice sword makers learn new definitions for the words 'daunting' and 'grueling'. Sword making is an exhausting, time-consuming, and very precise, process. There are numerous points in the process where everything can be rendered moot, from the heating to the blade work. Ask any smith about the heartbreak of forging a fine blade, only to have the metal crack under the cooling at the final stages. Once a serious mistake is registered, the metal very likely becomes useless for anything but scissors and nails.

The cost of a rudimentary sword was incalculable for most of human history. A nice sword? A high quality sword? A sword fitting a king? The creation of such a blade could easily be a life's work for a metalsmith. Not only would the process of making the sword be taxing, time-consuming, and expensive, but so would the practice leading up to it to prepare the materials.

An entire village's income might equal one such legendary weapon. Is it any surprise then that a village's stories might come to revolve around that weapon? Especially if it proved its worth by keeping the ruler or village warrior alive? The more costly a thing (not in dollars but in resources), the more it is prized. And that which is prized is told of. That which is told of becomes part of tradition. Tradition becomes legend.

#5 – Swords Are War

We touched on this above, in the introduction, but it bears repeating: swords weren't the first tools used for fighting but they were the first weapons.

Knives existed as tools as far back as humanity has existed. With the possible exception of the club, knives might well be the first tool (depends on whether or not you consider use of ready-made objects as tools or deliberate fashioning of objects, but that's neither here nor there). Axes (or likely hatchets) and spears, perhaps even the bow-and-arrow, more likely evolved out of a need for food than a need for war.

The sword is different. It's different because the sword serves no other purpose. A sword is too unwieldy and too indelicate to do the work of a knife. The sword is rarely if ever sturdy enough to do the work of an axe. The sword doesn't have the range of a spear and certainly not an arrow. Swords do not even work particularly well against animals. They are too slow to use against most smaller animals, and too flimsy (for most of history, anyway) to use against larger animals. In either instances, the axe or spear are invariably more preferable. No, swords have only a single

demonstrative use and that is in the combat against and killing of other human beings.

While the sword almost certainly evolved from the knife, it would be a mistake to categorize the sword as nothing more than simply 'a big knife'. The mechanics of making a sword, even a primitive one, require far more knowledge and engineering. The primary distinction between the knife and the sword is the amount of effort that goes into the strength and resilience of the blade. Just about any material can withstand abuse at lengths measured in inches. A knife made of wood, stone, obsidian, and metal; all can function adequately at lengths up to a foot with little worry about the durability of the weapon, anchoring the blade or supporting the cutting edge.

The sword is different. A sword made from wood or obsidian, even stone, may break under its own force if used improperly. Only metal is likely to stand the force of repeated use at lengths longer than a foot. Once you surpass the length of one's hand for the blade alone, the complexity of creation goes up exponentially. These issues of balance, blade strength and resilience, all separate the swords from the more-easily made knife.

The knife and axe, spear and arrow, may have been repurposed from their original role to become tools of war but the sword was made exclusively for war.

#6 – We Associate Heroism With Warfare

Heroism is a trait universally prized among all societies, across all time. It is a trait whose definition is subject to much debate and interpretation, but most would agree that heroism is the rising to face a challenge against grave odds. The more daunting the challenge and the more serious the odds, the greater the heroism displayed. As mentioned above, there are no odds greater than life or death, and perhaps no greater challenge than the direct contest of physical will against another human being. We may prize knowledge and resolve, cleverness and ingenuity, but the truest challenges are the ones where there will never be a second chance.

Mortal conflict will likely remain the ultimate test (and demonstration) of heroism. The symbol of that challenge – combat and warfare in whatever scale – has always been the sword. It is the manifestation of personal warfare. By sheer association alone, we will associate the tool of war with the heroes that use it.

The sword is one of the most universal symbols in our world.

It is found worldwide, representing a combination of heroism, valor, and strength. It is found as the basis for our heroes and our legends. Names like Excalibur, Masamune, and so many other famous blades all dot the landscape of our cultural heritage.

It's with this understanding that we can appreciate the reason for the importance of the sword and how it came to play such a vital role in our stories and in our world culture. Our association of warfare with heroism, and the tool of war with the deeds of heroes, is a deeply ingrained part of our heritage. Thus, it's no surprise that the sword is at the heart of so many of our tales and legends.