

# King in the mountain

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A **king in the mountain**, **king under the mountain** or **sleeping hero** is a prominent motif in [folklore](#) and [mythology](#) that is found in many [folktales](#) and [legends](#). The [Aarne-Thompson classification system](#) for folktale motifs classifies these stories as number 766, relating them to the tale of the [Seven Sleepers of Ephesus](#).

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## General features



Frederick sends out the boy to see whether the ravens still fly.



Constantine XI Palaiologos, the last Byzantine Emperor.

King in the mountain stories involve legendary [heroes](#), often accompanied by armed retainers, sleeping in remote dwellings, including caves on high mountaintops, remote islands, or supernatural worlds. The hero is frequently a historical figure of some [military](#) consequence in the history of the nation where the [mountain](#) is located.

The stories gathered by the [Brothers Grimm](#) concerning [Frederick Barbarossa](#) and [Charlemagne](#) are typical of the stories told, and have been influential on many told variants and subsequent adaptations. The presence of the hero is unsuspected, until some [herdsman](#) wanders into the cave, typically looking for a lost animal, and sees the hero. The stories almost always mention the detail that the hero has grown a long beard, indicative of the long time he has slept beneath the mountain.

In the Brothers Grimm version, the hero speaks with the herdsman. Their conversation typically involves the hero asking, "Do the [eagles](#) (or [ravens](#)) still circle the mountaintop?" The herdsman, or a mysterious voice, replies, "Yes, they still circle the mountaintop." "Then begone! My time has not yet come."

The herdsman is usually [supernaturally](#) harmed by the experience: he ages rapidly, he emerges with his [hair turned white](#), and often he dies after repeating the tale. The story goes on to say that the king sleeps in the mountain, awaiting a summons to arise with his knights and defend the nation in a time of deadly peril. The [omen](#) that presages his rising will be the [extinction](#) of the [birds](#) that trigger his awakening.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Examples

A number of [kings](#), rulers, and [fictional characters](#) and religious figures have become attached to this story. They include:

- [King Arthur](#) ([Great Britain](#))
- [Merlin](#) of the [Arthurian legend](#), who is imprisoned in an oak tree by [Nimue](#).
- [Bran the Blessed](#) (Wales)
- [Csaba](#), the son of [Attila the Hun](#) ([Hungary](#)) who is supposed to ride down the [Milky Way](#) when the [Székelys](#) are threatened.
- [King St. Stephen](#), [King St. Ladislaus](#), [King Matthias Corvinus](#) ([Hungary](#))
  - [Kralj Matjaž](#) ([Slovenia](#))

- Emperor [Charlemagne](#) (Germany, [France](#)) rests in the [Untersberg](#) near Salzburg
- Emperor [Constantine XI](#) of the [Roman Empire](#), a.k.a. the *Immortal Emperor turned to marble* (Greece) (a similar story, although Constantine was said to be turned into a statue, not to be resting in a mountain.)
- [Fionn mac Cumhaill](#) ([Ireland](#)), is said to sleep in a cave/mountain surrounded by the Fianna (he is differentiated from them because of his large stature). It is told that the day will come when the Dord Fiann is sounded three times and Fionn and the [Fianna](#) will rise up again, as strong and well as they ever were. In other accounts he will return to glory as a great hero of Ireland.<sup>[3]</sup>



Statue of Ogier the Dane, [Kronborg Castle](#)

- [Ogier the Dane](#) ([Danish](#): *Holger Danske*, [Denmark](#))
- [King Rodrigo](#) (Spain) Said to escape from the Moorish invasion and await for "the time of maximum need" to save his people.
- [Vytautas the Great](#) (Lithuania) He is believed to rise from its grave when the worst danger will threaten Lithuania to defend the motherland at the last battle.
- [Owain Lawgoch](#)
- [Owain Glyndŵr](#)
- Emperor [Frederick Barbarossa](#) ([Germany](#)) sleeps in the [Kyffhäuser](#) mountain and will rise to save the Empire
- King [Henry the Fowler](#) (Germany)
- [King Pelayo](#) (Spain)
- The legendary [Moravian](#) king [Ječmínek](#) will, according to a prophecy, return to save his country from enemies.<sup>[4]</sup>
- An unnamed [giant](#) is supposed to sleep in [Plynlimon](#) in Wales.
- [Giewont](#) massif which is said to be a sleeping knight ([Poland](#))
- The remains of the [Golem of Prague](#) are said to be in the attic of the [Old New Synagogue](#) in [Prague](#), and that it can be brought back to defend the Jewish people. ([Jewish mysticism](#))
- [Gerald FitzGerald, 8th Earl of Kildare](#) ([Ireland](#))
- The Aztec hero-god [Montezuma](#) — believed to have been a divine king in prehistoric times, and

suspended in an Arizona mountain that bears his image.

- [Bernardo Carpio](#) the "King of the Tagalogs" said to reside in the mountains of Montalban, [Philippines](#).
- [Muhammad al-Mahdi](#)
- [Marko Kraljević](#) ([Serbia](#))
- [King Olaf I](#) ([Norway](#))
- [Väinämöinen](#), the protagonist of the [Finnish](#) national epic [Kalevala](#). At the end of Kalevala, he leaves on a boat, promising to return when he is most needed.



Sebastian I, with whose death the house of Aviz lost its throne. Sebastianists hold that he will return to rule Portugal's Fifth Empire.

- [Sebastian I](#), ([Portugal](#)) (it is said by [Sebastianists](#) that the king will return in a hazy morning in time of need)
- The [Sleeping Giant](#) mountain in [Connecticut](#), [United States](#) was said by the local [Quinnipiac](#) Indians to be the demon [Hobbomock](#), sealed by the Great Spirit. One day he would supposedly awaken and destroy the world.
- [The Sleeping Ute](#)
- [Vlad III the Impaler](#) ([Romania](#))
- The poet and painter [Taras Shevchenko](#) ([Ukraine](#)), believed to be a supernatural hero (*xarakternyk*), is said to sleep under his grave mound in [Kaney](#) or even in the [Kiev Pechersk Lavra](#).
- [Tecumseh](#) of the [Shawnee](#)
- [William Tell](#) ([Switzerland](#), in some legends accompanied by [two other Tells](#)<sup>[5]</sup>)
- [Theseus](#) ([Athens](#))
- [Thomas the Rhymer](#) is found under a hill with a retinue of knights in a tale from [Anglo-Scottish border](#). Likewise, [Harry Hotspur](#) was said to have been hunting in the [Cheviots](#) when he and his hounds got holed-up in the [Hen Hole](#) (or "*Hell-hole*") awaiting the sound of a hunting horn to awaken them from their slumber. Another [border](#) variant concerns a party of huntsmen who chase a [roebuck](#) into the Cheviots when they heard the sweetest music playing from the Henhole, however when they entered they became lost and are trapped to this day<sup>[6]</sup>.
- [St. Wenceslas](#) (Václav) of [Bohemia](#) ([Czech Republic](#)). He sleeps in the [Blaník](#) mountain (with a huge army of Czech knights) and will emerge to protect his country at its worst time, riding on his white [horse](#) and wielding the legendary hero [Bruncvík](#)'s sword.<sup>[4]</sup>
- [Boabdil](#), last Islamic prince of Granada.

- [Bernardo del Carpio](#)
- [Lāčplēsis](#), the eponymous hero of the [Latvian](#) epic poem. It is said that he will rise out of the [Daugava River](#) when his country needs him to again take on her attackers and invaders. Alternatively, he will rise out of the Daugava at the end of the world.
- [Matija Gubec](#) ([Croatia](#))
- [King David](#) is depicted in [Haim Nachman Bialik](#)'s tale "*King David in the Cave*" as sleeping together with his warriors deep inside a cave, waiting for the blast of the ram's horn that will awaken them from their millennia of slumber and arouse them to redeem Israel<sup>[7][8]</sup>. This role was not attributed to King David in earlier Jewish tradition.

## In Tolkien

- [J. R. R. Tolkien](#) uses the king in the mountain in various places in his legendarium: the form of the [Dead Men of Dunharrow](#), the armies and king of [Númenor](#) who are trapped by the [Valar](#) when Númenor is destroyed, and in the Second Prophecy of [Mandos](#) which states that the dead heroes [Túrin](#) and [Beren](#) would return to help to defeat [Morgoth](#) at the end of times. Although in the *Hobbit* the term 'King under the mountain' itself is used, it refers to a quite different context: the [Dwarven](#) king who resides at the [Lonely Mountain](#) of [Erebor](#). The King Under the Mountain was also by right King of [Durin's Folk](#).<sup>[9]</sup>

In *The Hobbit*, the [dragon Smaug](#) was (ironically) said to be the only "king" on [Erebor](#). The true ruler was [Thorin Oakenshield](#).

## Kings under the Mountain

- [Thráin I](#)
- [Thorin I](#)
- (abandoned)
- [Thrór](#)
- [Thráin II](#) (in exile)
- [Thorin II Oakenshield](#) (briefly)
- [Dáin II Ironfoot](#)
- [Thorin III Stonehelm](#)

## The sleeping hero in other popular culture

- A similar story appears in the 1989 movie [Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade](#), where the sleeping hero is a knight from [the Crusades](#), made immortal by the [Holy Grail](#).
- A version of the sleeping hero legend is included in several entries in the [Nintendo](#) game franchise 'The Legend of Zelda', most explicitly in the Gamecube game [The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker](#) and the most iconic of the series [The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time](#).
- American comic book icon [Captain America](#) fell into suspended animation at the end of [World War II](#), only to be awakened in the modern era.
- American comic book super hero [Captain Marvel](#) from Fawcett Comics, after having been cancelled in 1953, was given a story where he (and most of his friends and his arch foes) was trapped in suspended animation for 20 years to explain his revival in 1973 by DC Comics.
- In the [Final Crisis: Superman Beyond](#) comic series, a mysterious statue, resembling [Superman](#), is left behind by the original [Monitor](#), to activate only when the [DC Multiverse](#) is endangered.

- The [Saint of Killers](#) who appeared in the [Preacher comic book](#) was a civil war veteran turned gun fighter chosen to replace the [Angel of Death](#). When the comic book begins he is sleeping in a hidden crypt under the [Boothill](#) graveyard.
- British author [Susan Cooper](#) makes use of the return of [King Arthur](#) and the awakening of sleeping heroes as plot elements in [The Dark Is Rising Sequence](#).
- Neal J. Iacono's 2001 novel *Dracula: Son of the Dragon* applies the King in the Mountain motif to [Vlad Tepes](#).
- In music, a single by [Kate Bush](#) released on 24 October 2005 is named "[King of the Mountain](#)". This song connects popular beliefs about [Elvis Presley](#)'s death, with references to [Citizen Kane](#) also, to the "King in the Mountain" motif.
- In the novel *Marauders of Gor*, the ninth in the [Gor](#) series by [John Norman](#), the hero Torvald is supposed to return in times of need for a Viking-like civilization.
- In [The Books of Magic](#), [Timothy Hunter](#) sees the mystical King in the mountain and talks to a minstrel who is guarding his grave.
- In [Robert Jordan](#)'s *The Wheel of Time*, heroes from ages past reside in the [world of dreams](#) until they are called forth to fight the [Dark One](#).
- In [Robin Hobb](#)'s Farseer series, skilled coterries from the past have used their own lives to create dragons that sleep in a mountain glade, to be awakened in times of need.
- In [The Sandman \(Vertigo\)](#) comic series story arc [World's End](#), 70s [DC](#) character [Prez](#) is recast as something of a [Messianic](#) figure to [America](#).
- In the [Transformers Marvel Comics series](#), the [Last Autobot](#), a final repository of some of the power of the Transformers' god [Primus](#), waits at the center of [Cybertron](#). Similarly, there is a prophecy that says that an [Autobot](#) will arise from the ranks and use the power of the [Matrix of Leadership](#) to "light their darkest hour".
- In *Star Trek*, "[Kahless the Unforgettable](#)" is the Klingon version. In the TNG episode , "Rightful Heir," he is returned as a clone by ambitious prelates. The fact that this Kahless is a clone is discovered by the *Enterprise's* Worf, who convinces the Klingon government to allow the clone to be installed as a figurehead emperor, a symbol to unite the fractured Klingon Empire.
- The plot of the book *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* by [Alan Garner](#) revolves around a Cheshire variant of the legend.
- In the game series *Half-Life* the protagonist [Gordon Freeman](#) is seemingly forced to sleep in a sort of void after the first game, to be awoken and thrown back into the world in the "right time" for him to act on the second game (several years later)

## See also



[Folklore portal](#)

- [Seven Sleepers](#)
- [Rip Van Winkle](#)
- [Honi HaM'agel](#)
- [Sidhe](#)

## References



[Middle-earth portal](#)

1. <sup>^</sup> [Jacob](#) and [Wilhelm Grimm](#), *Deutsche Sagen* (1816/1818), no. 23.
2. <sup>^</sup> [Kaiser Karl im Untersberg](#) (German)
3. <sup>^</sup> [Augusta, Lady Gregory](#) - Gods and Fighting Men (1904)
4. <sup>^</sup> <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> [Alois Jirásek](#), Old Bohemian Legends (1894, Staré pověsti české)
5. <sup>^</sup> [The Three Tells](#)
6. <sup>^</sup> Henry Tegner; *Ghosts of The North Country*, 1991 Butler Publishing, [ISBN 0-946928-40-1](#). p.13
7. <sup>^</sup> ["Canaanism:" Solutions and Problems](#), Boas Evron, Alabaster's Archive
8. <sup>^</sup> [המלך דוד במערה ח"נ ביאליק](#)
9. <sup>^</sup> [Tolkien, J. R. R.](#) (1980), [Christopher Tolkien](#), ed., *Unfinished Tales*, Boston: [Houghton Mifflin](#), Part III, chapter III, Notes, [ISBN 0-395-29917-9](#)

## External links

- [a list of other sleeping hero legends](#)

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