

Symbol Structure as a Framework for Bardic Circles and Ceremonies in the SCA

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What is a Symbol?

A symbol (Anglo Saxon, also the Norse "sumble") is a formalized drinking ceremony used to bind together communities and inspire the warriors in the service of a lord. While the structure of a symbol is reasonably clear, many of the customs and expectations are not. What we do know is drawn chiefly from *Beowulf* and other Saxon and Nordic literary sources, where the blanks were easily filled in by those immersed in the culture. A symbol is often characterized as having a chiefly religious significance, and certainly the ceremony has a key place in the practice of modern reconstructionist heathens. However, Wills (See **Bibliography**) makes a convincing case for the secularity of symbols.

As an example of a "traditional" symbol, Bryn Madoc's warband symbols occurred in the evening during a war or melee event. Led by the baron, the assembled fighters would tell of the deeds on the field, make toasts to their comrades, and drink to friends no longer with us. A bard recited a poem, taken from early period literature or crafted that afternoon, and the baron bestowed gifts to those who most impressed him.

Bryn Madoc has used the symbol to frame three different types of events:

- Ceremony to bond together the barony's fighters at war.
- A memorial service for one of the barony's founders.
- A "high-church" bardic circle.

Other kingdoms had featured symbols; for example, a peer may host a symbol to celebrate his elevation.

Why a Bardic Symbol?

A symbol structure gives a gathering a sense of formality, significance and gravitas. A bardic symbol can frame a poetry competition, a shire or household history lesson, a bonding event for a guild, or simply an experience to bring a group together.

Symbols lend themselves to early period activities (the aforementioned warbands) and poetry, lending such activities an air of authenticity and tradition. However, this being the SCA, the structure can be adapted to fit the purpose as needed.

Preparing the Symbol

There are a number of considerations for conducting a ceremony in a proper symbol format. How memorable the experience is depends on several factors: the setting, the choice and preparation of the participants, and the stage orchestration of the officers leading a symbol. These are all factors one can have a degree of control over. One can't force lightning to strike, but one can make conditions favorable.

Why, Where, When

- *Decide the purpose of the symbol.* The purpose informs the symbol's structure as well as most other considerations. A warband symbol will have the same basic structure as the memorial, bardic, or celebratory symbols, but the details may differ considerably.

-*Decide when and where.* Unless this is a household symbol, most symbols will be at an SCA event. Discuss your needs with the autocrat well in advance so that you can reserve the space and time you

want. Thus far, all of our symbols have occurred at night, the better to insulate the group from the outside world.

Materials and Setting

Space: A quiet enclosed space is critical to the mood. Sounds of reveling or other distractions are mood killers. Further, closing a door on the world is an excellent way to frame the setting. Open air may work if the world outside the firelight is black and quiet. Wooden halls found in state parks work well; wall hangings go a long way towards camouflaging more modern settings (such as those with drywall).

Furniture: Adequate seating, preferably around a table or open fire.

Low lighting: Candles are best. Those reading poems should have just enough light to do so; beyond the faces of those listening, the hall may be murky and indistinct, adding to the atmosphere.

Drink: Mead, ale, or some other moderately alcoholic beverage works well. Non-alcoholic is fine if it works for you; something "special" (not sampled every week) is preferable to give a sense of occasion.

Handouts: Especially useful for folks unfamiliar with the structure. Handouts may include: a program, an introduction to the form, and reminders of what is expected for each attendee. *Preparation of the participants is critical.*

Who to invite?

- For a warband symbol, this is easy – all the fighters are welcome.
- For a bardic symbol, more considerations are needed. It may be necessary to limit participants. Guests must be:
 - willing to participate in the spirit of the event (i.e., learn and follow etiquette).
 - willing to contribute, or at least willing to witness.

Who is in Charge?

There are several positions of authority in a symbol.

Lord (also known as the *symbolgifa* [SYUM - bel - YEA- fa]): the host and giver of the symbol. In most events, this is the baron, king, or other ranking noble. For a bardic symbol, the lord may be a barony's chief poet, a peer, or simply a patron of the arts.

Lady: Also known as the "Alekeeper" or "The Lady with the Mead Cup." She is the hostess and the one in charge of the mead or other potables. The Lady has an equal voice to the Lord, and she can refuse to serve a guest if they're acting obnoxious.

pyle [THYUL-eh]: Order-keeper. Part spokesman, part senechal, part herald, and (in small part) jester. The *pyle* should be familiar with all the attendees and their standing relative to the setting (this could be SCA rank, artistic achievements, or relationship to the Lord). It is his place to question guests who clearly exaggerate or promise more than they can expect to deliver, or to call down someone speaking out of turn.

Scop [SHOWP]: Bardic type. In most symbols, the *scop* recites verse appropriate to the occasion. In a bardic symbol where there are several poets, this could be a bard of special note (for instance, a kingdom poet laureate, or the winner of a local event's poetry competition).

Honored Guest(s): Often times, this is a baron, king or other ranking member of the assembly. The Honored Guest receives a place of honor – at the Lord's side, across the table from the Lord, or another place of prominence. The HG is usually served immediately after the Lord.

Guests: The other invitees to the symbol.

In addition, there are optional positions if help is needed or the Lord wishes to involve additional group members:

Hall Warden is the officer in charge of the hall or grounds – arranging seating, lighting, taking care of the fire if necessary.

Drink Bearers carry the beverage that the Lady pours. If everyone needs cups refilled, the bearers may help fill them to cut down on the waiting time.

Door Warden announces people at the door before letting them in. This warden makes sure the door is shut during the ceremony, and also manages the door as quietly as possible when anyone has to depart early.

Need to Know

The Saxons were quite familiar with the etiquette and the backing social pressures of the symbol, but modern folk need to be taught. Yes, *if you want to participate, you have to know your part.*

Leader/Officers need to know:

- who would be good choices to invite, who would be interested/invested in the structure.
- the basic aspects of symbol structure, and how this one may differ. (The "standard" symbol outline can be found in Appendix C, while the bardic symbol outline is in Appendix B).

Guests need to know the proper etiquette:

- Respect for the officers.* The Lady brooks no discourtesy; she isn't a tavern wench, she is nobility.
- What is appropriate to speak about.* (e.g., bearing witness to their comrade's deeds, being well-spoken and not tavern-tongued.)
- how long to speak at a turn* (e.g., 2-3 minutes for simple declarations, or 5 or so for a poem)
- The rules for leaving early:* you should be there for the duration, but if not, leave during momentary breaks. Depending on the particular style of the event, the lord may prefer either an unobtrusive departure or a formal statement of leavetaking.

Running the Symbol

There are a number of elements common to the symbol as we have done them, with some variation depending on the specific needs of the ceremony. Appended to the end of this handout is a copy of the program for the bardic symbol at Dreamstone 34, but I shall add some notes here.

Invitations: Approximately a dozen people were invited, based on knowledge of the symbol or interest in poetry or SCA history. Few RSVP'd, so the final count was unknown until feast. In addition, several were invited at the last minute at the request of some attendees. Invitations were in the form of a handout listing what the symbol was and the purpose of the evening's gathering. [The invitation is included as Appendix A].

The Preparation: We held the symbol at Dreamstone 34, located at Camp Daniel Morgan in Hard Labor Creek State Park. The craft cabin, being some distance from the revel and the main hall, was properly

secluded. Upon arriving on site, we were greeted by a sign saying the building was closed for repairs. A judicious amount of pleading with the area manager allowed us access for the one evening.

Tables were placed end to end, covered with cloths, and set with a number of votive candles for light.

The Summoning: A horn summoned the invitees from the main hall to the craft hall (which was re-designated the Hall of Memory). The *pyle* determined who would sit where and seated them on either side of the long table. The Baron and Baroness, as the heads of local group, were the Honored Guests. The Lady sat near the Lord's chair and beside the table holding the mead.

When the Lord entered, he recited a invocation to *awen* (a Welsh equivalent of invoking a muse) and closed the door. This was an effective way to declare that mundane conversation was to cease and the outside world was shut away.

Forespeech: Now seated, the Lord welcomed everyone while the Lady poured mead in everyone's cups. The Lord restated the purpose of the symbol (remembering earlier times in SCA, and friends who have passed on).

Toast of Welcome: With all cups charged, the Lord leads the first toast.

***Gielps* ("YELPS") and *Beots* ("BEYOATS"):** This section was devoted to memories of times past. The Lord recited a poem listing the barons and baronesses of Bryn Madoc, naming some of their attributes. The *pyle* spoke next, reading a poem about when Master AEdward auctioned off a cameo in Master Dylan's next novel. One by one, the attendees spoke their piece, in prose or verse, and after each, all took a drink. The relating of past deeds is referred to as a *gielp*. Although we didn't do so here, it would have been appropriate for attendees to also make a *beot*, or public boast of a future deed. (Examples would be: "By Dreamstone next, I will present a poem of the barony's history," "In the next year, I will be able to hold a conversation in Irish," or "at Midwinter, I will present 14 poems, each in a different style, each highlighting a classic virtue or sin.")

Interlude: Although not on the program, three choir-members in attendance offered to sing *Adoramus Te*. That the piece is on the edge of late period made no difference; besides being short and lovely, the song provided a good break between sections (where in a warband symbol the *scop* would normally recite a poem).

***Simblemyne* (SIM-bul-MYUN-eh:** This next section, which in Old English means "ever mind," was reserved for memorializing our friends in the SCA who have passed. After a brief explanation, the Lord related a poem about one such member. Down the table, those who lost friends gave their own short remembrances.

Gift Giving: At this point, the Lord gives praise and gifts to those in the audience who are most worthy. In the first warband symbol, the gifts were rings. At the bardic symbol, the lord lacked gifts, but declared he owed a debt to three: Master Hywel, for his masterful word-pictures, and for helping the Lord find a place in the SCA; Master AEdward, for his ability to invoke the spirits of memory; and Brian MacGregor, whose poor experience at a "typical" freeform bardic circle was the inspiration for the bardic symbol.

End Speech: Empty cups were refilled, and the Lord ended by thanking the participants, and admonishing them to "make note of the special things, great and small, that make our time in SCA worthwhile" so that they will may bear witness to them should they meet again at the symbol. He gave a final toast.

The Circle Opens: The *byle* declared the circle open, so that folk could linger or leave as it pleased them. A number of people stayed a while, but the storytelling was over. If non-invitees were interested in a bardic circle, this would be the time to put the call out for them.

Post-Mortem: This symbol had 15 attendees, more than were expected. Some were more invested than others, but all commented favorably. I expected the symbol to last maybe half an hour; it lasted well over two hours. The sentiment that "it didn't feel nearly that long" spoke well to the mood, as did the comment from one jaded peer (her words) that the gathering was "consistently very good with occasional awesome."

Thoughts for the Future

Each symbol is an experiment, where we cautiously try new ways of doing things. As with anything else, someone should keep a record of what goes on at symbol as well as any feedback the Lord receives. What follows are notes for future reference.

First, there were one or two places where things got away from us. A memory sparked another memory, and the conversation went rapidly back and forth between three or four guests. While relating memories was the point of this exercise, in this case it drew out one section of the symbol, allowed a handful of peers to monopolize the conversations, and threatened to alter the mood of the gather. In the future, I recommend some sort of "talking stick" item. A drinking horn or ornate cup, passed from a speaker to one who wishes to speak, would work well in this capacity. If the Lady wishes to be very active (and on her feet the whole time), she may in fact use her authority to cut short the long-winded by requesting the cup, or make sure that the shyer guests have their full turn to speak without interruption.

Secondly, the drinking and toasting merits some discussion. The purpose of the drink is both communal bonding and social lubrication. Drunkenness *isn't desired*, and in fact was considered very bad form in the historical symbols. In our first warband symbol, a large meadbowl was passed around for each speaker to drink from, and that worked well. In the second, everyone had a cup, and drank after each warrior spoke. By the end of the symbol, everyone was tipsy. The one-bowl idea works well for much of the symbol, but general group toasts work better if everyone has a cup to toast with. How you wish to handle this depends on your group and how long the ceremony is likely to last. If you expect everyone to participate in many toasts, advise the guests to sip rather than chug.

Repetition Caveats

Lightning rarely strikes twice, no matter how hard you try. Some symbols transported us to another realm, while others devolved into conversations about mundanities. The organizer of a successful symbol should keep a few things in mind when planning to repeat the event.

First, **don't slack up and cut corners.** Members inviting friends or spouses who aren't invested or even interested in the mood of the thing, settling for an open venue near the revel, neglecting to prepare participants beforehand – all these things can make a symbol founder. By the same token, don't fall into the trap of trying to outdo the previous symbols. There is a subtle grandeur in the solemn simplicity of the ceremony; adding a backing choir and excessive theater distracts from the purpose of the thing and ultimately diminishes its power.

Be conservative when adding or taking away elements of the symbol structure. Judicious experimentation is to the good, but change major parts of the structure or accouterments and eventually the symbol becomes something else.

Finally, **make symbols rare and special**. Participants suggested that our bardic symbols should be limited to one every few years (perhaps every 5 years on the group's anniversary). This gives time for the previous one to fade to a pleasant memory, allowing the next one to be fresh and stand on its own. It keeps the idea alive and exciting – something that people will clear their evenings for, rather than an activity as common as the Saturday revel (and as easily missed). Of course, some ceremonies lend themselves to more frequent time frames – a warband symbol might be just the thing on Friday night of each Gulf War, for example.

In Conclusion

The symbol form adds structure and brings a taste of authentic ancient tradition to activities of the modern middle ages. If done properly, it can make an SCA function more memorable. If all the elements align and lightning strikes, it can allow a gathering of people in costume to transcend modernity and briefly capture the feel of long ago times that so many of us look for in the SCA.

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Questions? Comments? Contact me at bmarch5@gmail.com

The Symbol of Scops: A Ritual of Verse

Some years ago, members of Bryn Madoc participated in symbol – Germanic ceremonies meant to strengthen bonds among a warband – adapted to the SCA setting. In 2009, a memorial ceremony for Master Dylan was held in symbol form. The symbols were well-received, helping folk step away from their mundane selves, move beyond the pseudo-period personas, and touch something deeper and older.

Bryn Madoc has endured for decades – longer than most of its current members have been alive. There are thousands of memories that make up the barony’s history. Some few were written down, in story or verse. Dust lies heavy on these pages, and far too many have been lost to time.

For those lost tales, nothing can be done. But as the Seated Bard, there is something I *can* do for other verses. I propose to hold a symbol, comprised of invited bards and select listeners, dedicated to reminding us of who and what came before.

Structure

The bardic symbol is more structured and theme-focused than a typical bardic circle. As it begins, the doors of the hall will close, symbolically sealing the participants in a sacred communal space, away from the distractions and outer concerns of the general Dreamstone event. The Lord (the host) and the Thyle (part spokesman, part seneschal, and part herald) guide the sequence of poetic recitations, mead toasts, and speechifying. From open to close, the symbol should run between half an hour and an hour, depending on the number of poems and discussion. After the symbol closes, the room will reopen as a standard bardic circle, where anyone who wishes is free to sing or versify as usual.

The Purpose

The purpose of this ceremony is two-fold. Firstly, this select gathering pairs wise wordsmiths with willing ears, so that old friends may garner the word-fame they deserve. Secondly, the chosen guests, the secluded hall, the ritual, and associated trappings are combined to evoke a mood, transporting the participants into a different realm for an hour or so. At the very least, the symbol will be more solemn (not to say somber) and “high-church” than the average bardic circle. It is an experiment in SCAdian theater, and if everyone invests themselves in a part, the results should be memorable. And if it encourages poetic endeavors in others, so much the better.

Why Invitation Only?

I am limiting the size and composition of this event in the hope that a group of interested and invested folks will be more amenable to chasing the hoped-for mindset than would the more casual visitors common to the typical bonfire circles. If this trial is successful, perhaps we will advertise more broadly in the future.

Poetic Contributions

Although an appreciative audience is all to the good, all invitees are encouraged to present a poem in one of the two categories (listed below). Early-period styles are especially fitting, but most structured poem styles are appropriate (But save filks and such for after the symbol proper). *This will not work if only one or two people perform.* If you can, bring one or two poems.

Poems should fit into one of two themes:

- Poems of the ***Myne*** (“MYOO-na”) will focus on people who are no longer with us – SCA and perhaps otherwise.
- Poems of the ***Gielp*** (“yelp”) will focus on deeds of the past in SCA.

Poems may include the works of other hands, so long as they are attributed.

In Conclusion

I know that folks often have plans after Dreamstone feast. Some want to revel, others want to visit with friends, and many who worked hard on the event want nothing more than to retire to the cabin. I’m fine with that! I would much rather those who participate do so out of interest instead of perceived obligation.

Please let me know whether or not you will be attending. If you have any questions, comments or suggestions regarding this venture, please don’t hesitate to contact me. Finally, if you have any inkling about writing a poem to one of the themes, even if you don’t plan on attending, I would love to help you develop your idea.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Ld. Dyfn Pencerdd
Seated Bard of Bryn Madoc

Symbel: a Saxon ceremony to celebrate our History

The symbel [pronounced SYOOM bel] was a ceremony used to define and strengthen the bonds of community, especially between a lord and his hearthmen. A structured affair of social and religious significance, the symbel was festive yet serious. The lord would give honors and gifts due to his followers and important guests, and would in turn receive honors, gifts, and/or vows of service from those attending the symbel. Beyond this, however, those assembled shared in the honor of a place at symbel. Like many rituals, the symbel served to connect the participants with those who had gone before, through unchanging traditions. Though specifically Anglo-Saxon in style, variations on the form could be found among the Britons, the Irish, and other warrior-elites of the Early Middle Ages.

We now gather in the spirit of the ancient *symbel* to stir the embers of memory, to introduce a new generation to the legends of Bryn Madoc and Meridies, and to strengthen the bonds of our folk.



The Symbol of Bryn Madoc, In Celebration of our Past in Verse

I. THE SUMMONING

- A. Horn Summons the **Guests**.
- B. **Guests** are greeted and shown their place by the *pyle*. Company assembles.
- C. The **Lord** arrives.
- D. The **Lady** (and servers) enters and pours drinks for the guests.
- E. The *pyle* closes the door.

II. FORESPEECH

- A. The **Lord** welcomes those assembled and states the purpose of the gathering.

III. THE TOAST OF WELCOME

- A. The **Lord** leads the toast.

IV. GIELPS AND BEOTS: TALES OF GLORY, PAST AND FUTURE

- A. The **Lord** speaks speak of deeds of glory and honor from the past.
- B. If desired, each **Guest** may offer a deed or a poetic contribution offering of his own.

V. SIMBLEMYNE ("Ever-Mindful")

- A. The Lord speaks to the memories of those kith and ken who have gone before.
- B. If desired, each Guest may offer a name or a poetic contribution offering of his own.

VI. GIFT GIVING

- A. The **Lord** bestows gifts at his pleasure.

VII. END SPEECH

- A. Cups are refreshed as the **Lord** brings the ceremony to a close with fitting words.
- B. The **Lord** toasts the assembly, and when cups are set down again, the hall-meet is formally ended by the *pyle*.

VIII. THE CIRCLE OPENS

- A. The Folk may come and go, saying such words and singing such songs as best pleases them.

OFFICERS AND ATTENDANTS

Lord (in this role, also known as the *symbelgifa* [SYUM - bel - yea' - fa]): the host and giver of the symbol.

Lady of the Meadcup: The hostess and the one in charge of the mead or ale. An equal voice to the Lord.

pyle [THYUL-eh]: Order-keeper. Part spokesman, part senechal, part herald, small part jester.

Guests: the speakers and hearers assembled to share the evening's verse.

Honored Guest: Special visitor or a guest with a special part to play in a given symbol.

OPTIONAL:

Hall Warden: Officer in charge of the hall or grounds – arranging seating, lighting, taking care of the fire if necessary. *pyle* may perform this duty.

Drink Bearers to carry the beverage that the Lady pours.

OTHER TERMS

Beot [BEOT]: A vow to undertake a deed, often for the honor of one's lord, peer, lady, etc.

Gielp [YELP]: A telling of a noteworthy past deed.

Leoð [LEOTH]: Song or poem.

Myne [MYUN-eh]: Memory or remembrance.

Symbel [SYOOM-bel]: A formal communal ceremony to strengthen ties among the members of the group.

Wes Hal [wes hall]: "Be hale!" A greeting and common toast.

Appendix C: Handout given to participants at the "standard" symbol. Note the minor differences between this and the bardic symbol.

The Symbol of the Warband of Bryn Madoc

I. THE SUMMONING

- F. Horn Summons the **Guests**.
- G. **Guests** are greeted and shown their place by the **pyle**. Company assembles and stands until the lord arrives.
- H. The **Lady** (and servers) enters and pours drinks for the guests.

II. FORESPEECH

- B. The **Lord** welcomes those assembled.

III. THE TOAST OF WELCOME

- C. The **Lord** leads the toast.

IV. THE TOAST OF MEMORY [MYNE]

- A. The **Lord** leads a toast in memory of those who have gone before.
- B. If desired, each **Guest** may make an offering of his own.

V. LEOÐ

- A. The **Scop** speaks a short poem or fragment.

VI. TALES OF GLORY: GIELPS AND BEOTS

- B. **Guests** related deeds of glory and honor from the days' battles, and make vows of future undertakes. The **pyle** moderates.

VII. GIFT GIVING

- B. The **Lord** gives gifts.

VIII. END SPEECH

- C. Cups are refreshed as the **Lord** brings the ceremony to a close with fitting words.
- D. The **Lord** toasts the assembly, and when cups are set down again, the symbol is formally ended by the **pyle**.