

# The Role of the Bard in the Early Middle Ages

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## What was a Bard?

**Narrow definition:** In early period Ireland, *bard* was one of several classes of poet. The court poets were often the most learned of men and had high status. Lesser poets might be itinerant entertainers, but still had learning and status above the commoner.

**Broader definition:** For purposes of this class, the term “bard” refers to a poet of high status in many northern European cultures in the early Middle Ages.

**Modern connotation:** A bard is a poet, singer, or storyteller. It is the default term in the SCA for most any sort of performer.

## What was the function of a Bard?

### Keeper of Law and Tradition

The bard was the memory of the tribe. He knew how things used to be, how things were handled in the old days. Through stories of heroes and villains, or gods and “just-so stories,” he taught the morals, accepted behavior, and the virtues to aspire to in his society. He was a teacher and counselor, and a major agent of socialization for the young.

### Historian

The bard was both historian and genealogist. In his mind he carried the names and stories of leaders and clansmen of importance, and knew the important events in the people’s lives and who partook in them.

### Quasi-Religious Leader

The bard could invoke the gods and spirits at civil functions, such as royal succession. He knew the mythic origins of the world, the predilections of the gods, and the mythic connection between the ancient ancestors and the clan. The people considered his words to have power in a similar way to a priest’s. He was expected to add his poems to a ceremony or formal gathering to solemnize and empower the event.

### Newscaster

The bard, especially the itinerant variety, could relay the goings-on in the next valley or the other side of the kingdom.

### Social Commentator

The bard could tell the lord what was on the people’s mind when the people dared not. He could laud the praiseworthy and shame those who fell short of the society’s standards. Even the lord knew to keep on the bard’s good side.

## Propagandist

The bard would sing his lord's praises to the people, telling the rightness of his claim, his bravery, generosity, etc. The bard could also satirize (or even outright curse) the tribe's foes. He could stir the heart and strengthen the resolve of the people, steadying them in hard times and unifying them to common purpose.

## Elements of a Eulogy

*The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* lists the following elements common to a eulogy, or praise poem, of a leader. They may be in different orders and some elements may be expanded:

- A – Hail to the Chief!
- B – His pedigree legitimizes his rule.
- C – His brave ancestors established their rightful claims.
- D – He is valiant in war.
- E – He is generous in peace.
- F – His wife is of good pedigree.
- G – His heir is worthy to succeed.
- H – I as bard exhort him to assert his territorial claims.
- I – I as bard satirize the enemies of his clan.

## The Professional Poet

### Skills of a Bard

The bard must have a good memory; depending on the tradition, they would have to know hundreds of poems, some of which would be quite lengthy.

He had to master the poetic forms and conventions of his culture. The bard could be clever in wording, but *innovation in form wasn't a virtue*. Poetic forms in various traditions seem to have been fixed for centuries. Furthermore, few surviving works seem personal (as in self-directed) in nature.

He needed to know who was who, and know his way around the often complex local politics – it wouldn't do to praise the friend of an enemy, or the enemy of a patron.

The best bards were touched by the fire of inspiration, for above ritual, report, and news story, poetry was an art. Indeed, poetry was often considered to be divinely-inspired.

### The Perks of a Bard

Bards usually held considerable status. The most exalted rivaled lords in the weight their opinions carried and the fines garnered by crimes against them.

A wandering bard would likely get hospitality for a short period of time in exchange for news and entertainment. A court bard would receive wealth in the form of gifts or land from his patron. Should he feel shortchanged, the bard might give voice to his dissatisfaction in verse, shaming the patron into generosity.

## The Grades of Irish Poet

According to Breatnach, various early Irish texts list between 6 and 26 grades of poet, each with different rights according to the law. *Uraicecht na Ríar* (probably written c 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries) lists seven grades, in descending order of merit: *ollam*, *anruth*, *cli*, *cano*, *dos*, *macfuirmid*, and *fochloc*; there are also three sub-grades, listed as *taman*, *drisiuc*, and *oblaire*. The Ollam is listed as knowing “three hundred and fifty compositions...he is knowledgeable in all historical science, and he is knowledgeable in the jurisprudence of Irish law.” The *oblaire* knows five compositions and can’t read. Family lineage was also important, for a court poet whose father and grandfather were not also poets was worth less in the eyes of the law.

In addition, the texts says that the difference between the two broad classes – *fili* and *bard* – is that the former has both talent and scholarship, while the latter has the benefit of talent alone.

Breatnach seems doubtful that the *fili/bard* split was so clearcut in the days before the ecclesiastical orders became prevalent in Ireland. As with so many aspects of Early Period, we can know very little about society before Christians brought literacy.

## Other Times, Other Places

The niches of court poets and itinerant poets as specialized and honored individuals were filled in one way or another by many cultures over the span of time we cover. Below are just a few examples. If you want to style yourself as more than a “bard”, you could start by doing a little research on these titles:

**Ireland:** file (higher status than a bard; poet and seer. Pronounced ‘*feel-uh*’) seanchaí/shanachie (storyteller; later-period successor to the fili).

**Anglo-Saxon:** scop (pronounced *shawp*, c 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c), glēoman (Itinerant performer; socially inferior to the scop.)

**Wales:** pencerdd (chief bard, pronounced *pen-kerth*), bardd teulu (poet of a warband or lord’s household), cerddor (wandering bard), c. 6<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> c.

**Scotland:** makar (later period)

**German:** minnesinger (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> c), meistersinger (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>c, less aristocratic)

**Scandinavia:** skald (c 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c)

**Classical Greece:** rhapsode (5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c BC)

**Turkish cultures:** ashik (mystic poet, 13<sup>th</sup> c -?)

**France:** Minstrel (originally a court singer; later a wandering musician), troubadour (12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> c, composer and performer; female version is a trobairitz), jongleur (sometimes used to denote performer who didn’t compose) trouvères (northern France equivalent of troubadour)

**West Africa:** griot (wandering poet and praise singer; formed a caste where griots only married other griots)

**Pre-Islamic Middle East:** sha’ir (historian, soothsayer, propagandist), rawi

# As Time Goes By (The Decline of the Bard)

The court poets declined as

- chiefs and lords lost both their ability or will to pay handsomely.
- the introduction of writing and the widespread teaching/learning of writing into a culture.
- invaders repressed what they thought to be an enemy propagandist.
- many of the old functions were co-opted by new religion or other courtiers.
- grave misfortunes - such as famine or plague – killed off old practitioners before new bards could be trained.

Itinerant poets and storyteller continued to exist in one form or another throughout the middle ages, and can still be seen today.

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Also, look at the Early Period Poetry page at:

<http://www.gemyndeseld.net/early-period-poetry.html>

email: [bmarch5@gmail.com](mailto:bmarch5@gmail.com)

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Feel free to suggest links. Comments and suggestions regarding this class are welcome.

- *Arglwydd Dyfn ap Meurig y Pencerdd*