

Symbol: The Heathen Drinking Ritual?

Written and illustrated by John Wills, Punorrad Peod, England.

If there is one thing that links all Heathen practice it is the early medieval drinking ritual “symbol” also known as “sumble”. This tradition is lifted straight from the pages of *Beowulf*, *The Eddas* and other Germanic poetry and is a ritual that equally unites and divides the various flavours of Heathenry whilst at the core of all our social structures.

In this essay, I will examine where symbol comes from, what it is from a Reconstructionist view, what it is not and what symbol means to the members of the Punorrad Peod in England. It should be considered that there is no one right way to symbol as this ritual is a tradition within each folk, family or group, but there are wrong ways to symbol or wrong perceptions of symbol which are due to misconceptions and influences from other religions which I will discuss as they arise.

Evidence for Symbol in Literature.

Symbol is mentioned throughout the corpus of Old English poetry with the main source being *Beowulf*; it is also mentioned in Old Saxon poetry and the *Eddas*¹, it should be noted that some of the poems containing references to symbol are overtly Christian in their nature such as the Old English *Dream of the Rood*. Just a brief examination of the poetry removes common misconceptions about symbol. The first is that symbol is a mystical ritual linking humanity and the unseen in a similar way to which the Christian communion links humanity and Christ. This misconception is debunked in the *Lokasenna* where the gods are “*sumbli at*”, “at symbol”, unless there exists higher gods than those gathered in Ægir’s hall the notion that symbol is communion between man and god is unfounded². The second myth is that symbol is overtly Heathen; if this was the case then its mention in *The Dream of the Rood* “...*on heofonum, þær is dryhtnes folc geseted to symle*”, “in heaven there are God’s people sat at symbol”, would be most odd to say the least. The primary sources show that symbol is an activity for both man and god, Heathen and Christian, on earth and in “heaven”; the obvious conclusion is that the ritual is a social one not a mystical one.

Whilst the bulk of our knowledge of symbol comes from English and Scandinavian literary sources it would be wrong to assume symbol, or an equivalent, was not practised by the other Germanic peoples of the early medieval period. In Tacitus’ *Germania*, he comments in chapter 22:

“To pass an entire day and night in drinking disgraces no one ... Yet it is at their feasts that they generally consult on the reconciliation of enemies, on the forming of matrimonial alliances, on the choice of chiefs, finally even on peace and war, for they think that at no time is the mind more open to simplicity of purpose or more warmed to noble aspirations.”

Tacitus’ study was of the peoples of the Anglii southwards through mainland Germany in the first century. This may not be a description of what a symbol is in later literature but it is undeniable evidence of the use of alcohol at important or formal events. Physical evidence of high status drinking can be seen from the find of the 5th century Frankish/Merovingian glass drinking-horn from Bingerbrück, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany (*fig 1.*) and the similar 6th century Lombardic glass drinking-horn from Sutri, Lazio, Italy (*fig 2.*), both on display in the British Museum. The use of horns and glass will be examined later.

¹ Bauschatz, 1982

² Ibid.

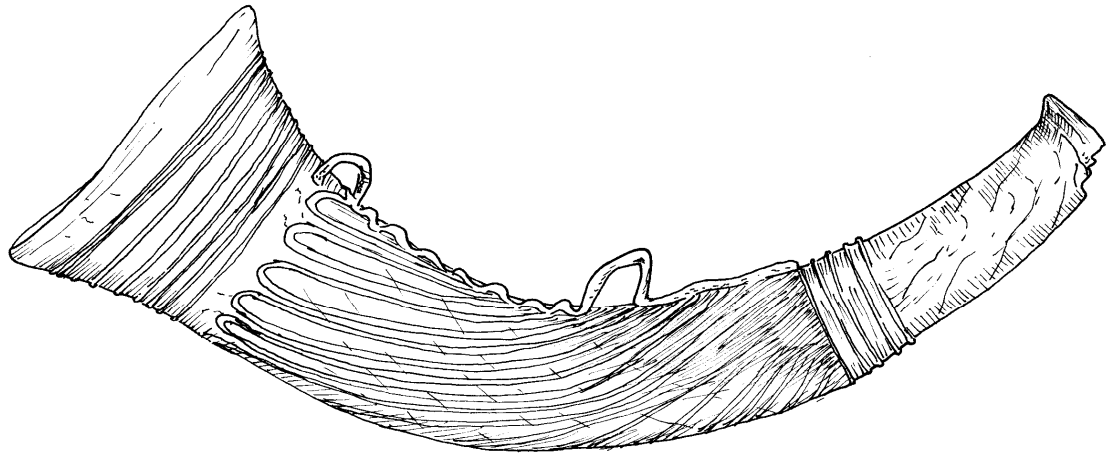


Fig 1. 5th century Frankish/Merovingian glass drinking-horn from Bingerbrück, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany

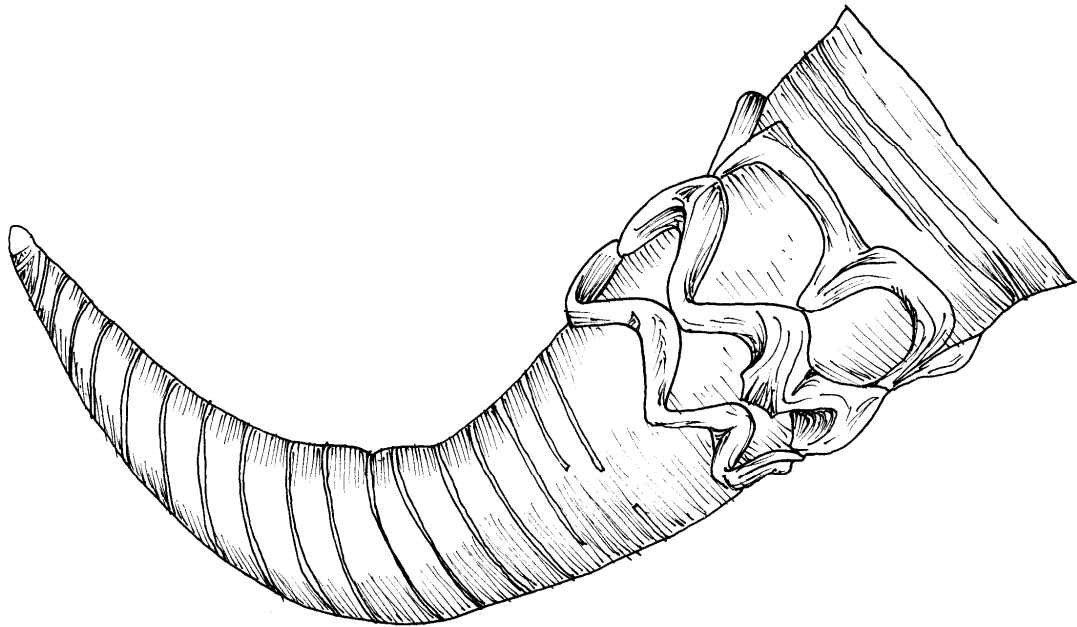


Fig 2. Late 6th century Lombardic blue glass drinking-horn from Sutri, Lazio, Italy

The way symbol is presented in literature is that one is “at symbol”, it is a specific event more than an action, and one is “seated” or “sat” suggesting a structured event³. Another important observation is that symbol is always indoors and specifically in a beer or mead hall (these terms are interchangeable for the same structure). The symbol events in *Beowulf* take place in Hroþgar’s and Hygelac’s halls, in *Lokasenna* the Æsir gather Ægir’s hall; these buildings are not described as temples or shrines but as halls the secular centre of the community from where the ruler gives his judgements and gifts⁴.

Beowulf and *Lokasenna* remain, above all other references, the clearest explanations of what actually happened during an early medieval symbol. It is clear that the participants sat at a bench or benches in some order of their rank within the community and such that key players are visible to each other and heard when speaking. The lack of description in other literature can be seen as an assumption by the author that

³ Bauschatz, 1982

⁴ Pollington 2003

the poem's intended audience was so aware of the practice that no explanation was necessary, much like today we would say "I was watching TV" or "we were at a football match".

In both *Beowulf* and *Lokasenna* only the drinking of alcohol is mentioned, there is no food. Prior to the events of *Lokasenna* is the *Hymiskviða* which in the first two stanzas contain "*sumblsamir*" and "*sumbl*". In the first stanza the gods are hunting and want a drinking feast, they use twigs and blood (Woden's glory-twigs of the *Nine Herbs Charm*?) and see that Ægir has many cauldrons. In the second stanza, Þorr confronts Ægir demanding he hold regular symbel for the gods, meaning one that the gods attend in person. *Hymiskviða* goes on to tell of Þorr's adventures to acquire a kettle large enough for Ægir to brew "*ölðr*", ale, for the symbel. The poem ends by telling us this symbel happens every "*eitrhörmeitið*" harvest or autumn dependant on the translation (this may actually be a cognate feast to the Old English "*Winterfilleð*" which is the full moon in the month of *Winterfilleð*, modern October).

Hymiskviða has set the scene and now *Lokasenna* picks up the action at one of the symbel events, *sumbl* or *sumbli* is used seven times making it clear that this event is indeed a symbel. The poem is definite in that the symbel is one of beer or ale drinking, repeatedly using the word "*öl*" when referring to the drink; mead is only used when Loki returns demanding to drink and when Sif offers him a cup. The poem ends with Loki saying "*Öl görðir þú, Ægir*" clearly stating it was ale that Ægir brewed. It is possible that beer, ale and mead are interchangeable words for alcoholic beverage however taking into consideration the timing of the symbel from the last lines of *Hymiskviða* it is likely that beer is the drink being consumed. Honey collection is typically between June and September and mead requires at least a six months brewing time. The grain harvest normally happens during July and August and beer has a brewing time measured in days making it easily ready for the autumn symbel. Mead not being ready for at least six months is more appropriate for a spring symbel; that said mead has a much longer shelf life measured in years. Such ambiguity is also found in *Beowulf* where at one symbel is in the "beer-hall", the drink is poured from an "ale-cup" and it is a "clear, sweet drink"⁵. Old English literature also gives the possibility for wine to have been used at symbel; in *Genesis* we find that both Noah and Abimelec are "*symbelwerig*" (literally "symbel weary") after being called "*wine druncen*" (drunk on wine) and both are sleeping. This mixture of terminology for the drink used at symbel suggests that "only mead should be used" is another symbel myth and that the drink consumed is chosen for cultural and seasonal reasons, the only hard rule being that it is alcoholic.

As noted above in *Lokasenna* the gods are seated, from the description of the conversation between the listed gods and Loki they are seated such that Loki has an equal audience with them all suggesting a long bench. The opening prose of *Lokasenna* gives a list of the attending gods but says that many more gods and elves were there, one long bench for everyone is impractical however using *Beowulf* as a reference for seating we have a scene with a high bench and additional benches for other ranks, Loki is addressing only the high bench. We also see at this symbel the servants are male and female gods sit at the benches. One of the servants, Fimafeng, is serving and the other, Eldir, appears to be guarding the door as he attempts to prevent Loki re-entering the hall. This again is matched in *Beowulf*, when Beowulf arrives at Heorot gives his name and purpose to Hroþgar's "herald" at the door⁶ and inside it is a thane that carries the "ale-cup". The similarities between the first *Beowulf* symbel and the *Lokasenna* symbel continue with the interactions between the attendees; the speeches are about past deeds and boasts, there are accusations and rebuttals. The primary accusers are Loki and Unferð to whom the defenders make the same initial response "you are drunk" before

⁵ Bauschatz, 1982, *Beowulf*, lines 491-496

⁶ *Beowulf*, lines 333-339

going on to set straight the story told about them. In *Beowulf*, the hero after beating Unferð in the word battle goes on to boast of how he will kill Grendel something that his challenger has failed to do. The response of “you are drunk” can be taken as an insult and point to an expectation that during sýmbel you should attempt to remain sober or at least in control of your mouth.

In the second *Beowulf* sýmbel the male servant is replaced with Queen Wealhðeow, Hroþgar’s wife, who now carries the “cup”. Wealhðeow is said to know the correct procedure, first offering the cup to Hroþgar and then crossing the hall to Beowulf, this time Hroþgar does not give any speech, it is Wealhðeow who speaks to Hroþgar advising him to be happy. She greets Beowulf and at this point we have a reference of divinity in that she “*gode þancode wisfæst wordum*”, thanked god wise words⁷, after her speech Beowulf says his words, a boast of what he had done and affirmation of the boast he had previously made declaring he would kill Grendel.

It should be noted that the *Beowulf* poet uses the seating arrangement at sýmbel to demonstrate Beowulf’s success and honour; when he arrives he is sat with the young and untested warriors but after his defeat of Hroþgar’s enemies he is sat with the proven men, the thanes and older warriors. This movement between benches is further enforces the importance of seating arrangement that is no accident or personal choice of the individual, it is strictly dictated by rank and by instruction of the hall-lord.

Sýmbel is also alluded to in some poems which can be used to back up the descriptions of boasts from *Beowulf*, for example in the Old English *Battle of Maldon* we find Ælfwin saying to the remaining men after Byrhtnoð’s death:

<i>Gemunan þa mæla</i>	<i>þe we oft at meodo spræcon</i>
<i>þonne we on bence</i>	<i>beot ahofon,</i>
<i>hæleð on healle,</i>	<i>ymbe heard gewinn;</i>
<i>nu mæg cunnian</i>	<i>hwa cene sy.</i>

Remember the times that we often at mead spoke,
Then we on the bench rose up a boast,
The hero in the hall, about cruel war;
Now (one) may prove who may be keen/brave.

(Battle of Maldon, 212-215)

This passage shows that those words spoken at sýmbel will be remembered and must be lived up to. These men at the Battle of Maldon were Christian but it is evident that they knew of and practised sýmbel as a binding ritual.

To recap the above can be condensed into the following elements required for a drinking ritual to be considered a proper sýmbel:

- An indoor setting
- Organised and ordered seating arrangement
- Medium strength alcoholic beverage; ale, mead or wine
- Absence of food
- A “cup bearer”, one who carries the drinking vessel around the sýmbel
- Oaths, boasts, speeches, challenges and defences

These elements should be considered as the base requirements. Other elements that are common to the descriptions of sýmbel but included in all are; the presence of (high status) women, the giving of gifts, material splendour and merriment. It is also

⁷ Beowulf, lines 625-626

worth noting that in all the poetic examples of sýmbel only high status individuals are present: the warrior class and people of office.

So far in this investigation all the texts have been either overtly Christian in nature or have been recorded after Germanic Heathen contact with Christian culture. The Christian influence is clear in *Beowulf* but is also in *Lokasenna* when the poet wrote the line “*þá gekk Sif fram ok byrtaði Loka í hrím-kálki mjöð ok mælti*”⁸; the phrase *hrím-kálki* for the “cup” Sif gave to Loki did not enter the Norse language until after the Danish settlement of Christian England⁹. *Hrím-kalki* is taken in some translations to mean “crystal cup”¹⁰ although more rightly it should be “rimy, frosty or icy chalice” from *hrím* “rime, hoar, frost” and *kálkr* “chalice”. Glass drinking vessels such as claw and cone beakers are common in high status burials, *hrím-kálki* works well as a description for these items (*fig 3*).

It should not be considered that because the sýmbel descriptions are of Christian sýmbel or told using Christian words that sýmbel is itself a Christian activity, what it does illustrate is that sýmbel was not considered a form of worship or communion between man and god and played an important (if not vital) role in early medieval social systems.

The identification of sýmbel as a social not mystical or communication ritual is not to exclude gods from speeches or well wishing during the ritual, just as in modern times one may raise a glass “to absent friends”, hailing the gods or ancestors may have formed part of the words spoken at sýmbel. The evidence shows that sýmbel is not prayer or sacrifice; it is a binding together of the people present through their words. One possible argument against this comes from *Saga Hákonar góða, the Saga of Hakon the Good*, in *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson. In chapter 16 of this saga there is a detailed account of a drinking ritual in which the first cup is dedicated to Odin, the second to Njord and the third to Freya, another cup is emptied for Bragi and another for the ancestors. It is very tempting to use this as evidence of sýmbel and a direct dedication to the gods however this would be wrong as the Old Norse manuscript makes it very clear that this event is a *blót* not a *sumble*. The chapter is entitled *Frá blótum*, “of sacrifice”, and tells how cattle and horses are taken into a temple, slaughtered and cooked with the blood being collected. The blood, which was called “*hlaut*”, blood of sacrifice, was then sprinkled on the participants and the walls (inside and out). Although men brought “*öl*”, ale or possibly mead, it is not completely clear whether it was this ale in the cups or the blood or cooking juices. Sigurðr is described as *blótmaðr*, a worshipper or one for sacrifices, the event is explicitly called “*blót*” and “*blótveizlu*” with all of the events

⁸ Lokasenna verse 53

⁹ Cleasby, R. and Vigfusson, G, 1874:

KALKR, m. [borrowed from Lat. *calix*; A.S. *calic* and *calc*; Enlg. *chalice*; O.H.G. *chelih*; Germ. *kelk*; Dan-Swed. *kalk*; the word came with Christianity from the Engl.; for, though it occurs in the ancient poems, none of these can be older than the Danish settlement in England: the form *kalkr* is used in a heathen sense, where as the later form *kaleikr* is used in the ecclesiastical sense only]:- a *chalice, cup, goblet*, it occurs in the poems Hym. 28, 30, 32, Akv. 30, Rm. 29, Skv. 3. 29; *hrím-kalkr*, Ls. 53; *silfr-k.*, a silver cup, Hkr. i. 50; nú er hér kalkr, er þú skalt drekka af, eptir þat tók hann kalkinn, þa var enn eptur í kalkinum, er hann hafði af drukkit kalkinum, Gullþ. 7; nú tók hann kalkinn ok hönd hennar með, Hkr. i. 50.

HRÍM, n. [A.S. *hrím*; Engl. *rime*; Dan. *rim-frost*; cp. Germ. *reif*] - *rime, hoar, frost*, Edda 4, Vþm. 31, Korm. (in a verse), Fms. vi. 23 (in a verse), Merl. I. 51, freq. in mod. usage. COMPDS: *hrim-drif*, n. a *drift of rime*, Sks. 230. *Hrím-faxi*, a, m. *Rime-maned*, a mythol. horse, Edda 56, Vþm.14. *hrím-fextr*, part. *rime-maned*, of the waves, Fas.ii.(in a verse). *hrím-frosinn*, part. *rimy*, Sks. 230. *hrím-steinar*, m. pl. *rime stones*, Edda 38, 48. *Hrím-þursar*, m. pl. '*Rime-giants*;' the Titans of the Scand. mythology were so called, as opposed to and older than the common Jötnar (Giants), Vþm. 33, Hm. 109, Gm 31. Skm. 34; *hrímþursar ok bergrisar*, Edda 10, 15, 25, 38. II. *the black soot* on a kettle, *ketil-hrím*. COMPDS: *Hrím-gerðr*, f. name of a giantess, Hkv. Hjórv. *hrím-kaldr*, adj. *rime cold*, Vþm. 21, Ls. 49, Fm. 38. *hrím-kalkr*, m. a *rimy cup*, from the froth on the mead, Ls. 53, Skm. 37.

¹⁰ Bellows, 1936

revolving around blood and the eating of sacrificed animals. If Snorri had not called the event *blót* the presence of food, slaughter and blood singles this event out as very different to any other example of drinking ritual that we identify as *symbel*. It is therefore wrong to use this source as a research tool for *symbel*, other than as a comparison between *symbel* and *blot*.



Fig 3. Migration Period (early 5th century) Claw Beaker from grave 843, Mucking, Essex, England

The ambiguity of the drinking vessel is similar to the ambiguity of the actual drink consumed, after Sif's words in *Lokasenna* the poem continues "*Hann tók við horni ok drakk af*"¹¹, now the vessel is referred to as a horn. There is no mention of horns in *Beowulf* or other Old English poetry, for example, when *symbel* is mentioned in *The Wanderer* the speaker is lamenting the removal of the seating and cups:

...	<i>Hwær cwom mappumgyfa?</i>
<i>Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?</i>	<i>Hwær sindon seledreamas?</i>
<i>Eala beorht bune!</i>	<i>Eala byrnwiga!</i>
<i>Eala þeodnes þrym! ...</i>	

... Where went treasure giver?
Where went *symbel* seats? Where are hall joys?

¹¹ Lokasenna verse 54

Alas bright cup! Alas mailed warrior!
Alas king's host! ...

(The Wanderer, lines 92b-95a)

The Wanderer, again from the Christian period, demonstrates in the lines above much of what symbol is. The Wanderer is lamenting the loss of the hall and his folk and in these lines tells us of gifts, seated symbol, merriment indoors, the “bright cup” (which may be either mead or a decorated drinking vessel), and the high status of those in the hall. This exposes another modern myth about symbol; drinking must be from a horn, from all the evidence above this is clearly not the case.

The use of horns for drinking in England is evident from the archaeological record. Notable horns include those from the Anglian high status burials at Sutton Hoo and Taplow, and the Saxon princely burial at Prittlewell¹². These burials are from the Heathen and conversion period. We know from the pictorial evidence in the Bayeux tapestry's depiction of Harold's feast at Bosham that in England horns were used for high status dinking as late as the mid 11th century.

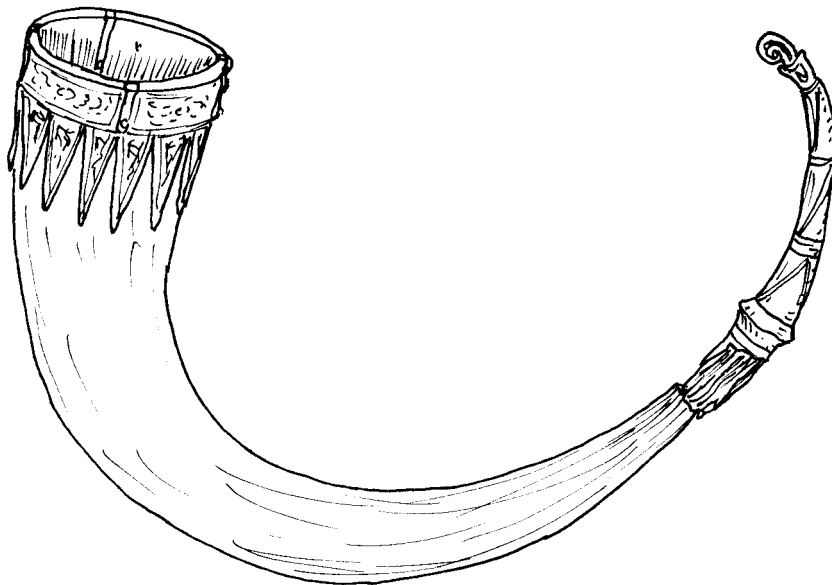


Fig 4. Late 6th century drinking horn from the Taplow Court barrow, Buckinghamshire, England

Explicit literary evidence of a known Heathen participating in symbol and the use of horns can be found in *Egil's Saga* from Iceland. Egil visits King Æpelstan after fighting the Scots (most likely at the battle of Brunanburh), Æpelstan was a pious Christian whereas Egil was a Heathen; both knew the rules of symbol and this is evidence that symbol crossed both religious and national divides. Egil sits in the gift stool, which is made clear for him, and is handed a horn but refuses to drink instead he raises his eyebrows at the king. Both Egil and Æpelstan are carrying their swords; Egil also wears his helmet and carries his shield, however both place their swords on their laps where they can be seen. The carrying of weapons is unusual; it would appear to break the rules of *grið* that weapons must not be carried in the presence of the king¹³. How the weapons are placed suggests a ritual between two men who must trust each

¹² Pollington, 2008

¹³ Pollington, 2003

other contrary to their natural instincts. Æþelstan takes a ring from his arm and passes it using his sword over a central fire to Egil who takes it using his sword, now Egil drinks and makes a speech¹⁴.

The presence of weapons in this passage is not without precedence, Tacitus comments on the presence of weapons during drinking sessions in his *Germania*¹⁵ as do the *Laws of Horþhere and Eadric*, Christian kings of Kent in the late 7th century:

XIII. *Gif man wæpn abregde þær mæn drincen 7 ðær man nan yfel ne deþ, scilling þan þæt flet age, 7 cyninge XII scill'.*

XIV. *Gif þæt flet geblodgad wyrþe, forgylde þem mæn his mundbyrd 7 cyninge L scill'.*

13. If a man a weapon unsheathes whilst men are drinking and there is nothing wicked nor death, a shilling to that hall owner, and the king has twelve shillings.

14. If that hall is blooded is worth, pay double that man his fine of compensation and the king has fifty shillings.

There are two other significant laws from this period pertaining to the behaviour whilst drinking, the first, again from of *Horþhere and Eadric*, shows the importance of passing the “beaker” and allowing a man to speak:

XII. *Gif an oþrum steopp asettinge ðær mæn drincen, buton scylde, an eald riht scill' agelde þam þa þæt flet age, 7 VI scill' þam þe man þone steap aset, 7 cynge XII scill'.*

12. If another’s beaker is taken away whilst men are drinking, without a crime, granting old law a shilling punishment to those that the hall is property, and six shillings to the man whose beaker was taken, and the king has twelve shillings.

There are two important elements here; it is only a crime if the man whose beaker is taken is innocent of any wrongdoing, and, that the fine paid to the hall owner is from an “old law” or “old right”. The "old law" is likely to be a traditional custom predating written law as no mention of this is made in the previous law code of Æþelberht¹⁶. The “crime” which would allow a drink to be taken from a man is not specified however, the second example of drinking law, this time from the *Laws of Ine of Wessex* written in 694, helps shed some light:

VI v. *Gif ðonne on gebeorscipe hie geciden, 7 oðer hiora mid geðylde hit forbere, geselle se oðer XXX scill. to wite*

6 §5. If while in beer-drinking they chide (each other) and one of them forbears with patience, let the other pay 30 shilling as a fine.¹⁷

When sat drinking one must not start name calling, quarrelling or scolding the others with you or if someone starts to behave in that manner you are to sit it out

¹⁴ Magnusson, 1999, Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar chap. 55, Pollington 2003

¹⁵ Tacitus, *Germania* 22, in Bauschatz, 1982

¹⁶ Attenborough, 1922

¹⁷ Translation by S. Pollington

patiently. This polite behaviour is also advised in the Icelandic poem *Havamal* that has a number of verses warning against speaking when drunk, over drinking and mockery.¹⁸

These laws about drinking are more than “drunk and disorderly” laws they are enshrining into law the traditional drinking etiquette, the “*eald riht*”, and provide us with hard primary evidence of the behaviour expected in the drinking rituals described in the poems and sagas. The position at the start of the law codes also highlights the importance of drinking at the heart of society.

Applying these laws and the *Havamal* verses to *Beowulf* and *Lokasenna* we can see that Unferð’s challenge is not the same as Loki’s behaviour, and, why the outcomes are different. Loki was punished because he did not stop; he made challenge after challenge, chiding and mocking the gods, each challenge getting progressively more personal and abusive breaking both the laws of men and the moral code of the *Havamal*.

Symbolism in Symbol

So far, we have looked at what happened at symbol, where it was held and the sources of evidence. Before suggesting how to reconstruct a symbol, it is important to identify the symbolism within the ritual, why it existed and why it continued. Symbol was so important in pre-Christian Germanic culture that it was retained after conversion and its legacy is still felt today in northern European societies where it is common practise to wish someone good health after giving them a drink.

The gathering together of a community or social group inside a building sets that group apart from those people and things outside of the building. The action of coming together and closing the door on the outside world is a physical representation of the Germanic model of the cosmos, one of insiders and outsiders¹⁹. The seating arrangement and the order in which each person drinks further emphasises the hierarchy of the group inside. By being inside one is affirmed as part of the group and where a person sits shows to everyone else in attendance their status. This is social and political symbolism.

The two prominent seats described in the poems and sagas are the high seat of the lord, chief or ruler and the gift stool on which the honoured guest sits. This seating arrangement gives a physical arena in which the “gift and favour” social system can be enacted, that is the buying or rewarding service with gifts from the highest rank to lower ranks²⁰. Egil and Æpelstan are a good example of this as is Beowulf’s promotion in seat position after killing Grendel. Again, this is social and political symbolism. It must be remembered that symbol is not egalitarian or a democracy as it is not clear from the surviving literature if all the people in the hall participated in the drinking. *The Battle of Maldon* suggests that it was “heroes” in the hall who spoke “at mead” which is echoed in *The Wanderer* who laments the “mailed warrior” and “king’s host”, such people were the high ranking members of early medieval society which marks drinking in the mead hall as a special privilege.

The political and social importance of the hall and seating do not explain the drinking or passing of a drinking vessel although they do go some way to explain why after conversion to Christianity the traditional ritual continued to be practised unmolested. The poems *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna* give a mythological insight into possible religious origins of symbol.

Bauschatz, in *The Well and the Tree*, puts forward a theory about the physical symbolism of symbol. He argues that at the heart of Norse cosmology is *Yggrdassil* (an

¹⁸ *Havamal* verses: 11 to 14, 17, 19 and 30 to 32

¹⁹ The community and one’s family are the “insiders” people outside of this circle are “outsiders”, from a reconstructionist Heathen perspective one aims to always benefit one’s community and family. “*Ásatrú spirituality is based on the interacting with the real world in a way which supports the well being of family and community. It is not and never has been about looking outward or inward.*” Rood, 2011

²⁰ Pollington, 2003

ash tree at the centre of the universe) and *Urðarbrunnr*, Urth's Well, at its base, Volsupa and Gylfanning both tell us it is at this well that the Norn's determine the fate and lives of men and decide law. Bauschatz made a strong argument that the captive liquid inside the horn passed from man to man is symbolic of the water of Urth's Well²¹.

This theory is plausible although not without fault. The importance of wells and springs outside of Norse literature is evidenced in Anglo-Saxon culture by the multitude of place names referring to wells or springs, for example Sywell (seven wells/springs, *seofon wella*) and Twywell (two/double wells/springs, *twi wella*) in Northamptonshire²². Wells and springs in the early medieval period (as now) were often the only reliable source of safe drinking water, different in physical nature and cleanliness to other bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and seas where monsters and powerful creatures live. It is no accident of imagination that Grendel's Mother dwells at the bottom of murky pool, the surface of the water is a gateway to another world and one outside the world of man. However, in contrast the spring bubbles up from the ground into the centre of our world bringing us life and refreshment.

I believe, if Bauschatz is correct in his hypothesis, that this is actually the tip of the iceberg and the symbolism goes deeper and that this is evidenced in the *Hymiskviða* and in the archaeological record.

In *Hymiskviða* the plot revolves around the acquisition of a cauldron or kettle in which to brew the ale (or maybe warm the mead) for a symbol for the gods. In the *Lokasenna* the liquid is drew from this "kettle" and poured into the cups; the same action as one would use when drawing water from a well. These two poems are the only references to symbol related cauldrons or kettles in literature; however, "princely" burials throughout Heathen period England such as Wollaston, Sutton Hoo and Prittlewell²³ all contain cauldrons, some with suspension chains. The acceptance of the horn's use in symbol from a relatively small number of literary references compared to cups is strengthened by the inclusion of horns in high status graves; this can (and should) be extended to the cauldron or kettle. By extending Bauschatz proposition to the cauldron the symbolism of the contained liquid becomes a more holistic representation Urth's Well in the mead hall.

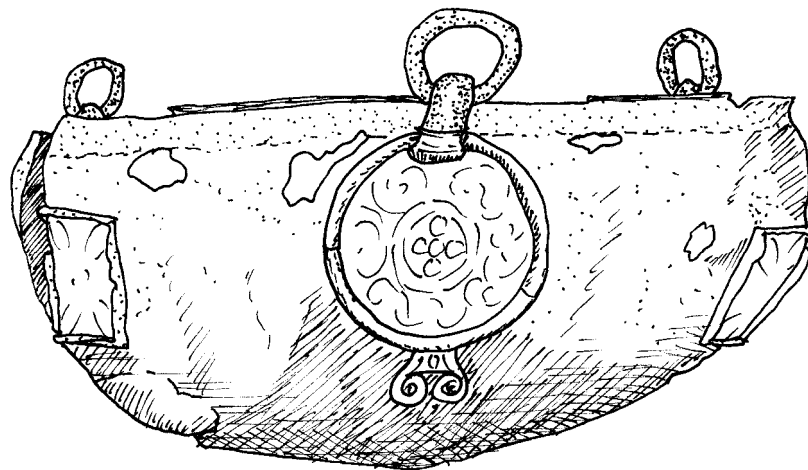


Fig 5. Sutton Hoo hanging bowl or cauldron

²¹ Bauschatz, 1982

²² English Place-Name Society

²³ Meadows 2004, Pollington 2008

Such an extension of Bauschatz's position also helps to explain the reason for the setting inside the mead hall. If the underlying symbolism of the ritual was to enact the drinking from Urth's Well at the base of Yggrdassil then why was it not performed in a grove with a spring under an ash tree? *Volsupa* and *Gylfanning* give answers to this by telling us it is at Urth's Well where the Norns make law and the gods hold council. By bringing the symbolic spring into the mead hall where men make laws and hold council the status of both are confirmed; laws are passed where the well is and the well is where laws are passed.

The use of intoxicating liquor is part of the symbolism; it is mind altering and therefore different to ordinary water. It is not clear as described above whether the alcohol was mead or ale but what is clear from each description is that it was alcoholic and likely to make the drinker drunk even though drunkenness it has been shown was not a good state to be in during sýmbel. What is clear is that the drink was special; Beowulf describes clear sweet liquid, which contrasts with river water or herbal infusions, as does the clear bubbling water of a spring. The head of froth on ale in the glass and during fermentation can also be seen as a connection to springs and with its alcoholic effects potentially to Urth's Well or "otherness" in general.

The speaking and actions during sýmbel are of as much importance as the setting and paraphernalia. A sýmbel cannot be held in silence, the literary evidence is clear that words are spoken over the horn before drinking. Here Bauschatz makes his most interesting point in his examination of sýmbel, the words are heard by the liquid as we speak them and then we drink them, we take the words back into ourselves and we become one with our words²⁴. If we make insults or slurs then we carry them always after drinking, if we make boasts then we must live up to them and if we make oaths then we must stand by them. Urth's Well is the font of *wyrd*, by symbolically bringing this well into our ritual and sharing its issue we are drinking our *wyrd* and shaping ourselves in the eyes of all present both seen and unseen. The cup or horn, from the evidence and the symbolism proposed from Bauschatz work, should be held below the mouth so that words spoken go over the liquid. The horn may be raised above the mouth after speaking or drinking but not before as this prevents the words from entering the symbolic spring water that the speaker will then drink.

The Bauschatz theory of Urth's Well has one major flaw in that sýmbel continued into the Christian period. If the ritual were so intimately bound to this part of Germanic cosmology, it would likely have been frowned on by new religion. There is argument that Urth's Well is only recorded in Norse literature however the evidence from English literature and place naming reflects the notion of wells and water being of special significance. The ritual and temple described in *Saga Hákonar góða* would not have been tolerated by the new faith. Bede demonstrates this in recording such events as the destruction of Heathen temples by their priests. Somehow, sýmbel survived.

If Urth's Well is removed does sýmbel still work? Obviously the answer is "yes", else, the ritual would not have been so important to our Christian ancestors; this then begs the question "was Urth's Well there to be removed in the first place?" Without the Well, we have people gathered in a place separated from the rest of the world, publicly displaying their ranks within society and making their speeches, vows and boasts sealing these with the shared action of drinking from a communal cup. The liquid and its container in this picture of sýmbel now represent the oneness of the social group which ties each speaker to the others, this is no less related to *wyrd* (a concept incorporating fate, the past and the present into one) than the symbolism of Urth's Well²⁵. Each speaker is making clear their intentions for the future, their thoughts of the present and memories of the past for all to hear and to be held accountable should these words be

²⁴ Bauschatz, 1982

²⁵ *Wyrd* (OE) is cognate to *Urðr* (ON) from which the name Urth's Well comes.

untrue or not fulfilled. At the point at which the speaker drinks, those words are committed to the group and become part of the social binding.



Fig 6. Valkyrie figure carrying a horn from Birka, Sweden



Fig 7. Valkyrie presenting a horn to Odin on the Tjängvide image stone

In the Bauschatz model, the high status female cup bearer carrying the drink from drinker to drinker can be seen as the final key to overall symbolism of symbol. During the ritual, she can be seen as a representative or symbol of the unseen: a Norn, valkyrie or wælcyrige carrying men's fate around the room, choosing who will speak and who will not, speaking her words before the drinker and ensuring the proper order of things. The best examples of this role in practice are Wealhðeow presenting the cup to Hroþgar and Beowulf²⁶ and Sif presenting the cup to Loki²⁷, both use polite, calm and greeting words as they hand over the cup.

Without the Bauschatz model the high status woman continues to have a major social and symbolic importance. The social position of women was not one of second-class citizens: they were the equal to males but different.²⁸ The high status of these women must not be overlooked; these are women who under any other circumstance would be served not serving. Being served by the high status woman demonstrates the honour and privilege being bestowed onto the male participants of the symbol. The words spoken by the women in literature are in contrast to challenges made by the male spokesman, the *þyle*; the women encourage good words and promote a peaceful atmosphere in a situation that could otherwise become a drunken brawl. In *Lokasenna*, it is initially servants that carry the cup but as Loki becomes more aggressive and abusive it is Sif, the wife of Þorr, who presents him with a cup and soothing words in an attempt to bring peace to the proceedings.

This female role of maintaining the peace within the hall brings to mind the high status women known as *friðuwebbe*, a peace maker (literally "peace-weaver"), who became brides of a rival folk to build peace between the two people²⁹. The use of the noun *webba*, a weaver, continues the theme of *wyrd* and this woman indeed does weave backwards and forwards between the participants of the symbol.

²⁶ Beowulf lines 612 to 628

²⁷ Lokasenna verse 5\3

²⁸ Herbert, 1997

²⁹ Herbert, 1997 *friðuwebbe* and Clark Hall, 1916, "*friðe-webba*" female noun.

Reconstructing a Symbol

Reconstructing a symbol should not be a physically difficult task considering that it is, at its core, a simple drinking ritual. As stated in the preamble to this study, it is wrong for anyone to dictate the “one true way” to symbol. The evidence clearly sets out a correct framework within which to practice symbol. There are a small number of roles that should be filled and objects that are required, there are also some dos and don'ts to be considered. Using the literary evidence above it is possible to create a generic template from which a symbol can be devised to suit most groups.

Reconstructing a symbol can prove to be a spiritually difficult task because of preconceived ideas based on alternative world-views to that which is Heathen. Understanding, accepting and believing the underlying reason for symbol is what differentiates a reconstruction from a re-enactment of the ritual. It is only in this aspect that the Heathen symbol resembles other religions' rituals; for example, eating bread and drinking wine does not make a Christian Eucharist, it is the participant's belief that the bread and wine have for that moment transformed into the actual flesh and blood of their god that makes it the Eucharist.

Basic material requirements:

1. An indoor area with adequate seating for all attending the symbol.
2. Medium strength alcoholic beverage such as mead or ale (5%-15% ABV).
3. A suitably ornate or distinctive vessel such as a drinking horn or large cut crystal glass.

Key roles:

1. The “Lord” or host, this is either the location owner or highest ranking individual present in a communally owned or rented space. This is a required role.
2. The “Lady” or “Cup Bearer”, this is the person who will carry the drinking vessel between each participant. This is a required role.
3. The “þyle” or “Challenger”, this person challenges the boasts made by the guests on behalf of the host thus saving the host the embarrassment of entering into or losing an argument. This role is not required but is useful; the person taking this office should be thick skinned and knowledgeable of lore and the group's history and politics.
4. The “Scop” or “Skald”, an entertainer, a singer or story teller (who may also be the þyle). Again, this role is not required but adds merriment and joy to the otherwise solemn ritual.
5. The “Guest”, this person is the guest of honour, the person sat opposite the host. This role is taken by whoever the host wishes to honour, it is completely at the host's discretion if this role is filled.
6. The “Door Guard”, an optional role, this person calls the participants to symbol and closes the door when they are all seated; he also prevents others from entering without announcement.

Sequence of events:

1. The guests enter the symbol room and are seated in accordance with the wishes of the host, possibly with the assistance of the door guard.
2. The drink is brought into the room by the cup bearer or Lady. Depending on the custom of the group, the drink may have been blessed in private beforehand

or during this part of the ritual by the host. Some groups may prefer not to bless the drink at all.

3. The cup bearer/Lady presents the host with the first draft with suitable words.
4. The host stands and takes the cup and makes a welcoming speech thus opening symbol. He then sits.
5. The cup bearer/Lady takes the cup around the room personally welcoming each participant to drink who stands to accept the cup. Before drinking, each receiver of the cup has the opportunity to make a speech, make a boast or simply thank the host. After drinking, the participant should return to his seat. The direction of the cup should be clockwise³⁰ although if someone is sat in the guest seat he may be offered the cup directly after the host.
6. When the cup reaches the host again, the Lady sits down. The rounds may continue requiring an attendant to follow to ensure the cup does not empty.
7. Each time the cup reaches the host it is at his discretion whether it should continue or the symbol closed.

It is at point six that the reconstruction of symbol becomes less clear and open to interpretation, the literary evidence does not include the closing of a symbol nor make clear how rounds progressed after the first speeches. *Egil's saga* tells of drinking rounds leading to helpless drunkenness and vomiting³¹ although this drinking is at a *dísablót* not a symbol. *Beowulf* only describes the cup moving around the hall between the key characters' speeches. In *Lokasenna* there appears to be numerous cups in use, there is a situation mentioned in *Egil's saga* where we hear of every man having his own horn and another where men being paired with drinking partners³².

If the cup bearer takes a seat at the end of the first round, they would be taking the seat to the right of the host demonstrating the role of cup bearer to be one for the highest of office. In *Beowulf*, Queen Wealhðeow sits by Hroþgar's side after she has offered the drink to Beowulf and he has returned the cup to her, whether she took a drink is not mentioned³³.

It is clear that should the cup or horn continue to make rounds amongst the assembled participants it must be accompanied by an attendant whose role is to ensure that it does not run dry. Alternative arrangements may be made such as after drinking checking there is enough for the next person and if not calling out for a refill, but whatever solution is adopted the cup should not run dry during a symbol.

The final issue for complete reconstruction is what to do with the cup and remaining drink at the end of symbol. The recording of symbol is Christian and therefore any ritual activity with the remaining liquid such as pouring onto the ground as a symbolic gift to the ancestors or other ritualised disposal would have been viewed as "demonic" or "devilish" thus no longer practised and ignored in literature. Symbol's persistence into the Christian period and potentially up to the Norman conquest of England and the end of the Viking Age suggests that it changed to suit the religious and social climate. Symbol's original symbolism steeped in *wyrd* and the unseen world was over taken by the spoken word for its own value, other overtly non-Christian elements may have mutated or fallen by the wayside. I will leave this final step open ended for each individual group to decide what is right for them. The leader of the symbol may drink the last drop symbolically taking in all the words of all the participants and enforcing his role as "luck carrier of the folk". The liquid can be placed into a votive bowl and left for unseen guests, taken to a sacred site and gifted to the unseen there or to

³⁰ Pollington 2003

³¹ Magnusson 1999, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* Chap. 44

³² Magnusson 1999, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* Chap. 48

³³ *Beowulf*, lines 639-641.

the ancestors; this could be a grove, tree, spring or grave. However the drinking the vessel is emptied, when it is the symbol is over.

Punorrad Symbol

Symbol is core principle within the Punorrad Peod; my fellow ðeodwitan have kindly provided me with their thoughts for publication in this article.

Lee James, Peoden, Punorrad Peod:

“To my mind, symbol is the time and place for a man to be truly measured by his community. The story of everything he has known to have said, done, or failed to do may be retold in front of his people. It is both the start and the end of his success. It is also where the community shows their trust in him, his standing amongst them and his worthiness to share the warmth, laughter, protection and joy that is his theod.

Every time I symbol, as I speak words to my gathered folk, restating my luck and my strength, sealing these words with potency and permanency by drinking from the shared horn or cup, so my folk do the same. And with our ritual words and drinking, we become tied and bound together, and share in the wholeness of the group. Indeed, we become obligated to each other and are each expected to maintain and uphold our wholeness. I would say that it is that expectation which acts as a guide and a drive throughout my life, and it is that, more than all other things, that I would consider to be the core of a "heathen" way of life.”

Liam Green, Hwicce Ealdormann, Punorrad Peod:

“Symbol to me is the act of myself reforming my ties and commitment to my kin in the Theod in the eyes of its leadership, its fellow members, the Gods, our collective and personal ancestors and Wyrð itself in hope of bringing further good luck to my Theod and my Family. It also reaffirms my place within the Theod and the sharing of mead with its members signifies that the position I hold in it to the leadership in the sense that I wish to continue in this position along with the responsibilities (Hospitality rents etc) and duties to the leadership and the community as a whole.

“In my opinion Symbol is crucial to my and any theod, unless a firm social structure is in place and that structure is accepted by the membership and community as whole and hopefully Wyrð willing recognised by our Gods and ancestors we can't begin the process of engaging with them for the good of ourselves our community and descendants and more importantly we can't show them the respect they deserve.”

Conclusion

Symbol is, at its core, a social ritual binding people together and binding them to their words. Being present at a symbol may not automatically entitle you to participate as this is totally at the discretion of the Lady carrying the cup, as the Peace Weaver she may present the cup to someone not in favour with the group leader to allow this person an opportunity to make his peace with the group or alternatively pass someone by due to their low rank. As shown above from *Egil's Saga* participants may refuse the cup until gifts have been exchanged. It could be seen to be easier and safer not to be offered the cup as with the cup comes a great responsibility to make your speech and to stand by your words; equally not to be given this opportunity can be humiliating or angering, Loki being refused a drink for example. Symbol is a political ballet performed in public and in which each participant be they speaking, serving or observing being are of equal importance to the overall event as during the cup's rounds the whole structure and ethics of the group are laid bare for all to see and its future is declared.

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