



SYMBEL INTERVIEW 2008

Hi Sceot,

Thanks for getting back to me through Myspace. I've enclosed some questions which hopefully you can offer me some insight on. I would very much like to use this interview in the magazine prototype I am working on. Thanks very much for taking the time to help me out.

Q: Where did the idea to form a band based around ancient cultures come from?

Hello James, and thanks for your questions.

I became fascinated with ancient European history in my early twenties, as it seemed to me to be something neglected at that time. I also felt different about things to a lot of other people. They would think one way, and I would think the opposite. I grew up in an atmosphere of working class pessimism and resignation to one's lot in life (almost a self imposed caste system), and it was hard to break free from the lowest common denominator rule of those times. There were lots of people giving out political advice in those days. Like many wide-eyed youths I sought escape and answers in all sorts of extremities, but being involved in anarchist circles as a teenager taught me a lot about how propaganda works so I could usually, though not always immediately, see what was manipulation and what was not. I think this skill is the best thing in life that you can learn.

Anyway, it really started with the discovery of a book on the runes in an old second-hand bookshop in Cambridge. I thought they were the most beautiful patterns I had ever seen. It wasn't the best book on the subject, but I was soon making my own set and beginning to view life differently. I then spent a lot of time in libraries, ordering every book on archaeology, history, folklore and the occult I could get obtain, and read them all avidly. I read all the Wiccan books available yet remained unconvinced, as I did with the Crowleyan and supposed 'satanic' literature. Only a few things stuck with me as useful -

runes, shamanism, nature based 'paganism' and the importance of culture. At the time I was asking myself a lot of questions about what I felt it meant to be English, and the Anglo-Saxon ages seemed to me to be a birthing point in history, although there are of course many more factors since then that contribute to today's culture. Once the internet became available I could get access to more information. I read a lot about Anglo-Saxon times, and that of the Norse and Germanic tales, and watched the behaviour of normal people for some time, with these old stories and values in mind. My conclusion was that the English are comprised of many tribes of people, as in the Anglo-Saxon period, who have had common purposes at points in history that have caused them to unite (namely invasion). They are a pagan people I believe - they are fundamentally good, and Christianity is a superficial veneer across them. Of course others will disagree, but this is my opinion. More recently as English we have suffered from guilt - either by atrocities carried out by the British Empire on one hand, or the puritanical curse of the protestant work ethic on the other.

Also, I witnessed a ghost in the woods when I was a child and the image has lived with me ever since. The figure was solid and lifelike, making crunching noises in the leaves, but it didn't have a body above its legs. They came up to me as I hid in a bush during a game. The legs were bound like those of a medieval peasant. It's like watching a film, thinking about it now. I can still see the colour of the fallen beech leaves. Ghost episodes was a feature of my youth, ranging from simple poltergeist activity to some terrifying encounters involving other family members and friends. I learned that evil really does exist, and this makes me different from other 'pagans'. However these days I hear and see nothing.

So, with this in mind, and the fact that I was making music (and writing bad poetry) constantly - to begin with using two cassette recorders and some extremely primitive equipment, and later with a four track (driven by an elastic band) - it was inevitable I suppose that my work would surface as a musical project. I only considered a serious release with the arrival of the internet and the technology that was becoming available. Maybe the fact that I have waited so long to release work has made Symbel what it is.

Q: How would you describe Symbel's music and how exactly do you try to portray a feeling of olden times?

I would like to think that Symbel's music is old, and far away, with a tribal feel, and with some contemporary commentary and perspective. I achieve this through an earthy approach to instrumentation (which is a better way of saying distorted guitar music!) and through diatonic phrasing wrapped in chromatic or non-standard scale structures - often whole tone (which is something I play a lot). In plain English, that means tuneful melodic music hidden within something darker and unsettling. As for production I have tended to go for warmer bass sounds and a lot of wet reverb, just like a wet oak forest. Lyrically and arrangement-wise - I think I liked the idea of the dead speaking, or of some kind of eaves-dropping on ancient conversations, punctuated with the questions a modern

day person might ask him or herself.

I am under the impression that a 'Symbel' is some kind of ancient drinking ritual. Is this correct and if so, what exactly would the ritual entail?

Yes you are right. The Symbel is, or rather was, an oath taking ritual whereby the participants place themselves in the flow of fate and announce their intentions with gods and folk as their witness. It is, for want of a better word, a magical activity, and is described in the Beowulf tale. I think that it is important in these times to regain a proper understanding of rituals such as this - free from the polarised arguments of science and psychology on one hand, and the rampant and bizarre theories in the new age movement on the other. Anyway, we could take the analogy of a stone in flight. Someone threw it – it came from somewhere – and it was aimed in a specific direction. We can either speed it to its target, change its direction, let it drop, or pick it up and throw it again. So what your ancestors did, whether good or bad, affects you. And naturally you should do what is best with what ever hand you are dealt. Some people are dealt four kings and a wildcard, and all they do is feel sorry for themselves and spend the rest of their lives moaning about how victimised they are, or blaming other people for their problems. I have no interest in people such as that, whatever guise they are wearing. Others have nothing, or worse, yet make something of it. These are the people in the world I am interested in, and I would like to think that this is a value that the English hold dear.

I also thought it interesting that our culture has such an ingrained use of alcohol in its social customs, and I am sure that these go back to ancient times such as those represented by the symbel. Its an interesting suggestion that alcohol use seems to be linked with colder climes who historically may have eaten more pickled food, and so have developed both a tolerance and a craving for the substance. I remember the first time I tasted beer, and it was truly magical!

If you were to do the ritual today you would devise your own way of making some kind of sacred space, invoke a power, entity, or what is rather awkwardly called a 'god', in whatever way you see fit, and pass an alcoholic beverage from participant to participant whilst they announce their plans for the future. For instance an Anglo-Saxon travelling poet might have said 'In the presence of (names of drinking pals, gods, ancestors) I, son of (insert name) who in his short life wrote many tales of the Eastern tribes will continue his work in the Western hills. I will complete his book and pass it to my son this coming Ostara'. There are no rules of course for observance of particular clothes, props or speeches, (despite what some people may claim) but the farther one can remove oneself from the aesthetics of everyday life the better. This is why groups in the USA often seem to do so well I think. They have more space to do it, and seem freer to explore things unchallenged.

Q: How closely do you identify with Viking metal bands such as Bathory and Unleashed? Were they an influence on Symbel music and concept wise? Also, what bands are you currently listening to, and how much of an influence do they have on

Symbol?

I think that you often need other people to open your eyes for you and it was only by experiencing those bands that I felt it possible to do an English interpretation. They opened up the arena for others to present what they had probably dreamed of for a while (as is always the case with trail blazers and their followers). I never understood the appropriateness of the satanic side of things, which just seemed childish, nor the national socialist elements in later Black and Viking Metal. Quorthon was definitely a man of sound views however, and the Bathory sound was perfect at the time. I only really listened to the early stuff though, and some of his later work.

I don't listen to much contemporary music right now. Everything seems to have been cheapened - by the sheer amount of internet bands, the way that even the most underground movements have been popularised and sanitised, and the downloading culture.

As for pagan metal, I have listened to a lot of the Eastern European and Russian stuff - Obtest, Butterfly Temple, Radigost, Loits. I was most impressed this year by the Valar album. I do listen to a lot of folk music. When I say folk music I don't necessarily mean bearded men bothering people with acoustic guitars (like the legendary Incredible String Band) - I mean Ralph Vaughan Williams, German Lieder, and the folk song movements of Europe in the early 20th Century. There is music for all occasions I think, but the type of person you are in general will gravitate you towards one quality. For me it is that which is passionate and melancholic with a genuine sincerity, presented in a challenging package, and that is usually music of individual social or so called 'racial' groups of people. If you look at music that way, it's generally all the music that most normal people don't like.

Q: What aspects of ancient British culture do you find so appealing and how does that correlate with today's culture?

Once, an English man was a free man. That is the most appealing quality. There is nothing specific about ancient culture that I would want to bring back, other than the philosophies and the connection with nature, and I think we can apply them to our lives today. For the average society, this world (and revolution) is only three meals away, so I think it's important. Some insight can be gained by re-enacting some ancient practices (such as the fighting and domestic activities of re-enactment groups) as I think you already know. I would argue that this closeness with the land - this sense of awe in the face of the immense power that is nature - was present even as recently as this last century. It is a combination of technological advancement and the atheistic materialist society that has rapidly evolved to fill the gap with the illusion of consistency and the person centred world we now inhabit.

Q: The 'Ale Whores of Mercia' release is based loosely around the concept of

Beowulf and 'The Wanderer'. Can you explain these ideas and why you chose to base an album around them?

Beowulf and the Wanderer are Saxon writings that have survived, thanks to individual monks in the church no less, and despite the English reformation. They show of England's links with Northern Europe and of the Saxon worldview. It has some Christian influence, which really isn't such a problem some people will make it to be. I think that the church in AS times was really just a political institution that began to focus the separate tribes of England into having one conscious identity. The message of Christ was paid lip service (literally - as most people didn't understand it) and people just went about doing what they had always done - lived closely with the land, maintained their tribal loyalties, having a pagan philosophy, and so on, yet at the same time being good people. It was this spirit that I have wanted to encapsulate with Symbel, something far removed from the generic victim-status paganism that we find in much of today's extreme metal. The English are just different, and I think I wanted to celebrate that.

Anyway I have been really busy and distracted these last three years, and finally decided to release some Symbel demo stuff for fans, and rather than just put a load of tracks together linked them with a story. In the end though I spent as much time on it as I would have doing an album. I think that every product should be a physical object worthy of owning and that particular release is. Having said that, it was on those really terrible 'warez' type file sharing sites within hours of being released (and soon spread to many, many more) so I don't know whether I'll be doing a fan-only release again. Although I never intended it for mass consumption, and it does have a rough edge to it, there are some powerful songs on it.

Q: Given that England has such a rich heritage, both culturally and musically, are you surprised that there aren't more bands treading the ancient metal path?

No, I'm not surprised. Firstly, I think that there is an uncomfortable feeling with anything pertaining to our culture that runs through every layer of society. Even underground metal bands are guilty - Graveland clones anybody? The mainstream consumer mocks music that sounds English – to them normality is RnB pop. Just how this became the norm is highly questionable, but I think that the media has a lot to do with it - in a space of fifty years the English appear to have completely thrown away their musical culture, and the void has been happily filled by others.

'Ancient metal' music does not actually exist, of course, and all we are doing is a modern presentation of some of the topics. If anything the music in those days, I'm quite sure, would have been poems sung with a very small musical compass such as those in shamanic societies around the world – instruments and drums would have accompanied the words. Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson's rendition of the Havamal might be a good example (though it is clearly diatonic), as would be the songs of the indigenous tribes in Papua New Guinea recorded by the pioneers of the English Folk Movement a century ago. Maybe in druidic priest strata there would have been some knowledge of the modal scales

from Classical Greek and they would have incorporated this into ceremonies and workings of magic, but nobody appeared to write any of this down, as to do so would expose the knowledge to those who were not perhaps worthy. So in a way it suits me that people find our music uncomfortable and embarrassing. They would titter as much at our work as that of the genius of a Bach Cantata. It's their own problem. As for metal, well sometimes the only similarity across the genre is the instruments and technology used. Pagan influenced music, even the most base and simplistic, tends to have a classical approach to form and a melancholic folkish approach to melody, in my observations. In Symbol I am more influenced by the folk compositions of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Holst and my current personal hero Percy Grainger. As for the 'English' metal sound - I'm quite sure it goes back to the advent of the tonal system and the English baroque composers such as Purcell. You can hear it especially in Iron Maiden, in Forefather, and in some of my guitar work in my other band Bretwaldas. I think it might even be a subconscious reaction against the staggeringly awkward and ill-conceived insistence banded about these last decades that 'all music comes from the blues'.

Q: Why has the word 'Heathen' become adopted by the far-right in certain parts of Europe? Is this anything to do with the influence of Varg Vikernes?

I have different views to other heathens on the political far right. What draws people to these groups is the search for identity, and some parts of Europe have suffered from a loss of identity. Every man needs to know who he is. When identity is compromised, denied or undermined, whether by conquest, relocation, slavery, or guilt and its inevitable antithesis (anger and denial), then this will lead to an interest in roots movements. Jamaican culture went through this with the emergence of reggae and Rastafarianism in the last decades of the twentieth century, and their movement was loaded with a lot of anger, confusion and falseness. Europeans are now reclaiming their heritage in a similar way. Whenever identity is threatened in Europe, the far right get stronger.

For the lost soul the route to heathenism is most often obtained through the music to which they are most likely to be drawn - the rebellious genre black metal. I personally liked black metal (in the early 90s) so much because it was the first time I had ever heard music that seemed to be talking just to me, to the exclusion of others. It was definitely a race / cultural experience and I have no shame in saying that I felt emboldened by that. However it is a step backwards to go from a pride in one's own culture to the mindset of the totalitarian Nazi party of twentieth century Germany with its abhorrent and totally flawed views on race. Apologists for the Nazi regime have tried to paint them as 'just the same as everyone else' and 'no worse than Stalin' but this is devious propaganda. To be English and a Nazi sympathiser is just ridiculous in my opinion. I've heard all the arguments and I've never found one worthy of any respect.

I have some admiration for Varg Vikernes and his tenacity, though I disagree with a lot of his views. I don't really know what else to say whilst he is still in prison, as it is difficult to know what is truth and what isn't.

Q: Speaking of Vikernes, he is a vocal advocate of burning churches which he justifies by claiming they are built on top of sacred Heathen monuments. Would you support church burnings in England in the name of Heathenry?

No. Christianity in England wasn't used as a political tool of oppression until the Normans invaded, and for a long time before and certainly afterwards the churches were decorated with heathen images and themes. The question of Christianity and cultural identity in this country are complex.

There are much more obvious church burnings taking place in Europe as we speak - Kosovo has seen a spate of Serbian church desecrations at the hands of Islamic elements. There is also a historical link between the Nazi party and Islam, I believe.

Q: What do you think of how ancient culture is represented in Britain today? For example does the new Beowulf movie mark a step forwards or back?

Throughout history ancient culture has nearly always been represented by people with their own agendas, and I would guess that this is still true today. The C19th Victorians agenda was to revive and recreate a Nationalist 'British' identity (although happily continuing to ignore the Welsh, Scottish and Irish) based on stories such as that of Boudicca, King Arthur and Robin Hood, yet leaving out the Anglo-Saxon period (this was perhaps out of fear of growing Teutonic domination in European culture and the impending war with Germany).

The original story of Beowulf has been studied by many a bored public schoolboy in recent centuries I am sure, but it's contextual link with the Anglo-Saxons, who became the peasant underclass in the shadow cast by the Norman invaders' tyranny (with which the British Empire, ironically, had more in common), relegated it to art of low status. In recent times, and especially once the unearthing of the Sutton Hoo burial had proven that the Saxons perhaps weren't, after all, dirty blue eyed savages living like animals amongst the remains of the Roman landscape, this has been proven incorrect.

I think that the new Beowulf movie has been directed by someone who seems to want to rewrite an important part of our history for the sake of making a saleable film. The reason it probably hasn't been made into a blockbuster film already is that the story just doesn't lend itself to it. I don't know much about the movie to be honest, but it seems that everything has to be compromised for Hollywood. A good (albeit clumsy and B rate) film that draws from the story of Beowulf I would recommend is the 13th Warrior.

Q: Do you partake in any reconstructionism, and if so, what does that entail? I have a mental picture of people sword and staff fighting in some remote woodland stopping only for a swig of mead. How romantic a notion is this?

That's an accurate description actually. I started doing reconstruction with a small group of friends some years ago, but I never fancied the idea of joining a group - especially not

after finding myself in the same pub as one rather famous group, and listening to them prattling on like old women about so-and-so who uses the wrong period glue to make their gloves. It's one aspect of the past of course, and it's certainly a good way into the field. Its important to realise how terrifying it must have been in a battle, and how brave the men were who have died for England (and, of course, everywhere else) in wars. I have spent a fair amount of time swinging badly welded steel swords around in dark woods on Sunday mornings and it really hits it home at how unfit you are. You can sprint for 800 yards, or fight with swords for 30 seconds and be just as exhausted. These day however I am exploring the use of the staff, which is a weapon associated with the English. I have five good staffs of different woods at the moment and I am seasoning many more from this Winter's harvest. My good friend Wartooth used to have a rented piece of woodland where we could fight and have a fire, but these last few months we have less time due to other commitments. We turned down an incredibly kind invitation to a private Jomsviking's weekend recently - that's how bad it has got. However like I said the staff is my new weapon of choice and I shall be incorporated it into a lot more of my work in the coming year - both as a writer and a composer.

Q: Symbol and Forefather are arguably the two biggest names in the Anglo-Saxon metal scene. As this is the case, why do they never play any gigs? Is it for an air of mystique or simply due to a lack of band members?

When I first started Symbol I was actually quite happy to be completely anonymous, let alone be a gigging outfit, but I underestimated how much interest there would be. It's thanks to Forefather putting out the first Symbol album on their label that the project got any exposure at all.

I have my own theories on why people join bands and these reasons do not always lend themselves to projects such as mine. I'd rather not do it at all than have someone just going through the motions, - you really have to be into this stuff to make convincing music! Nowhere is this more apparent than in the vocal department. I did have a good vocalist sing a Symbol track but it just didn't sound convincing because he was not comfortable. Most bands have a nucleus of only one or two constructive members anyway. Live performances aren't for me anymore - though I do make the odd appearance in other bands. But once your CDs are out and people know the music, then playing gigs is more rewarding.

Q: Is there a particular period or figure in Anglo-Saxon history that inspires you most?

I'd have to go with Harold Godwinsson. He encompasses everything that I associate with the ideal English - he wasn't trying to conquer others - he merely wanted his own space for his own people, and the shield wall represents the feeling in our hearts. He also (reputedly) had his the name of his woman tattooed on his chest and was the only way his corpse could be identified at Hastings - how inspiring is that? His actions showed that he valued England as a country in its own right, and that love for his country led him to

arms. So, you should live your life looking for the best in everything and in everyone – what you need is people on your side – people who would fight for you and likewise – as a threat can come in any shape, guise or colour, and at any time.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who wants to learn more about ancient culture?

Use your own mind and question the motives of anyone giving you a romanticized picture. Read books, not just what can be found on the internet. Remember that the tales of Valhalla aren't altogether much different from the muslim bombers' promise of forty virgins and a lifetime in paradise, which therefore puts both in the same bracket. Life was hard - so learn about how hard it was by trying to make your own stuff. Get outdoors and learn about every tree you can see. Build fires - play metal and drink beer. Look for the truth everywhere.

Q: How does Heathen metal differ from other genres such as Death and Black metal?

Heathen Metal is just more concerned with workable and honest views than those of the other two, which are more visibly reactionary. I think the clean or more audible vocals also give it a level of honesty. Black metal I think was merely a reaction against Death Metal's perceived 'political correctness' - a bit like little brother rebelling against his older brother. Death metal (and its forerunner, hardcore and grind-core punk) was a reaction against the high pitched falsetto screaming of all the crap hair metal bands that used to be in Kerrang magazine in the 80s. Heathen Metal, if it has to be called that, is an attempt to step aside from all of that.

Q: You are also a member of Bretwaldas of Heathen Doom, who have a more doomy sound. What are you trying to say with Bretwaldas and how does it differ from Symbel?

Bretwaldas is more accessible, live sounding, and more metal than Symbel, which is more abstract and 'religious' for want of a better word. Wartooth writes all of the lyrics and they are very different to what I would write about. It is perhaps fair to say that it's core is more bitter and violent than that of Symbel. For me it is a chance to work as a musician. In Symbel I play the role of composer with no regard for an individual musicians ego - that I play all the instruments is incidental.

Q: Are there any final words you would like to say?

Check the King Penda Productions website for info on new Symbel releases. By subscribing to the mailing list you will be the first to know.

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider these questions and I eagerly await

your response.

Hails,

James Conway

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