

Stangs ©

This text concentrates upon stangs, but we'll start by looking at other types of sticks that witches might use in rituals, eg:

- Divining rods
- Blasting sticks
- Talking sticks.

But first, a couple of quotes from **Terry Pratchett**, the first from *Soul Music* and the second from *Wyrd Sisters*.

"The Archchancellor polished his staff as he walked along. It was a particularly good one, six feet long and quite magical. Not that he used magic very much. In his experience, anything that couldn't be disposed of with a couple of whacks from six feet of oak was probably immune to magic as well."

*"O, the wizard's staff has a knob on the end
And the wizard's staff is the wizard's friend."*

Divining rods

Divining or dowsing rods have been used from about the 1500s to find ley lines, underground springs, buried metals, wells, etc. As early as 1518, Martin Luther listed dowsing for metals as an act that broke the first commandment. But it still continues today. In 2017, it was reported that a few water utility companies use the services of dowsers to find leaks and burst pipes underground.

The traditional forms of divining rods are either Y-shaped pieces of wood or two L-shaped twigs or copper rods. Occasionally, they are called vining or witching rods.

With a Y-shaped rod, it should be balanced so that the user can hold the V part in each hand. Most dowsers use forked sticks of willow, peach or witch hazel. Tradition suggests that the most effective dowsing rods are those that have been cut fresh from fruit-producing trees.

The principle is to walk slowly with the divining rod, holding it parallel until the rod vibrates or the I part of the Y-shape points either up or down. According to the [UK Groundwater Forum](#), there is no scientific explanation as to why dowsing should work and, when it has been tested impartially, it has been no more successful than would be expected by chance.

However, the Forum does not completely discard the subject of water dowsing. Some people seem to be able to locate buried pipes with the aid of rods or twigs. One theory for this is that the muscles in the body react to some electromagnetic effect caused by the presence of the metal or the water flowing through the pipe; the rods then amplify this effect so that the searcher becomes aware of them. Another theory is that some diviners know from their experience and local knowledge where groundwater is likely to be located and subconsciously cause the reaction.

Blasting and talking sticks

As it happens, the idea of **blasting sticks** came up at a discussion in 2018 on wands at the Calleva moot. A blasting stick is a tool for rituals and ceremonies, often cut from a blackthorn tree. The principle is that the blasting spirit was used to summon spirits to the ritual, perhaps at the casting of the circle, for them to obey the commands of the witch or the summoner. In this context, the blasting stick was like a threat to the summoned spirit.

Talking sticks are often seen in rituals. In my experience, they're most common in druidic rituals. For example, the open rituals held by Basingstoke Pagan Open Ceremonies, almost always include a talking stick, which is passed from one person to another in the circle. Each person has the chance to say a blessing, offer a story or a poem to add to the ritual, while holding the talking stick. While I think about it, talking sticks are a key part of First Nation rituals – so I'll cover this aspect in a separate file.

The purpose of stangs

OK, so what is a stang? It is not the same as a staff, which may be decorated with crystals, animal carvings or wooden symbols and used to cast a circle in the absence of a broom. I have an eagle staff that doubles as walking aid, storytelling prop and as a source of energy for magick.

A stang is a type of staff that is usually forked, about six feet long and owes its origin to the wooden pitchfork. The name comes from a Norse word, *stong*, and the Middle English, *stange*, meaning *pole*. Many stangs are made from the following woods:

- Oak, to symbolise Herne.
- Ash, to symbolise the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
- Yew, to symbolise immortality.
- Blackthorn, to symbolise ill-fortune or death, perhaps in a dark magick rite.

Sometimes the forks are capped with metal, for strength during rituals. The staff part of the stang is shod with iron too, so that the stang is preserved when placed in the earth for a ritual. And this is one of the main purposes – for the stang to act as an altar during outside ceremonies. For example, the following may be placed on a stang during a ritual:

- The mask of a totem animal.
- The skull of an animal, eg a sheep, horse or deer.
- A carving of Cernunnos.
- Ribbons.
- Flowers.
- Candles.
- Crops.

The actual decorations depend upon the sabbat, ie:

- Samhain – yew leaves or berries.
- Yule – red ribbons, ivy and/ or holly leaves or berries.
- Imbolc – snowdrops.
- Ostara – daffodils or primroses.
- Beltane – yellow ribbons, hawthorn blossom and twigs.
- Litha – oak leaves.
- Lughnasadh – corn ears and poppies.
- Mabon – forest fruits, pine cones or acorns.

Using a stang

OK then, let's say that the ritual is to be performed outside during a full moon. Tradition suggests that an iron nail should be fixed into the base of the stang, to seal the magickal energy inside. The stang should be consecrated by placing it in the earth, smudging and a cleansing incantation – it's best to use your own words (as ever), but here's one of mine as an example.

Goddess of the Moon, Brigid to our belief, you are universal and forever – in the darkest night, you give light and love to us. We ask you, blessed One, to grant some of your presence and energies to this staff as a symbol of your majesty during our ritual here tonight.

Here are some more things that should be done after consecration.

1. Cast the circle - the stang should be located about three feet from the northern point of the circle.
2. Each member of the group should breathe on it three times, making the stang part of their energy.
3. As an option, each member of the group could use drops of their blood or saliva to trace an X onto the stang, again to link their energies.
4. Decorate the stang, according to the season (see above) with garlands of flowers, ribbons, fruit, etc.
5. Place the chalice of mead or wine to the left of the stang.
6. Place the athame to the right of the stang.
7. Pour a little mead onto the stang as a libation during the rite.



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Conclusion: stang symbolism

Much of this bit depends upon who you read and which pagan pathway you follow. For Robert Cochrane, the stang was very much a symbol for ritual magick, but others see the stang as an actual tool. Let's have some examples here.

1. For those of a [shamanic](#) persuasion, the stang/ staff is a representation of the world tree that connects heaven and earth – the upper, middle and lower realms. During trance work, a shaman uses the tree to travel between realms.
2. Some [eclectics](#) do not use altars at all, but prefer to work outside in nature, using their stangs instead.
3. Others, [Rae Beth](#) included, wrote that they put a small symbol of the world tree on their indoor altars.

4. For some, a stang is symbolic of the [Horned God](#), which is why their stangs are ash poles with goat horns or deer antlers at the top, decorated with skulls or crossed arrows.
5. There is a [traditionalist](#) point of view that says a stang replaces most of the common altar tools used in Wiccan ceremonies. It is a wand, athame, staff, sword and altar, all at once.
6. If the stang has an iron base for protection, it shows a union of fire and earth when placed in the soil. The fork is a symbol of the union of God and Goddess and can be seen as the sign of the cup (water). These are [elementalist](#) interpretations.
7. For more [formal covens](#), a stang is almost like a symbol of office for the person who is the coven magister.
8. The stang can also be seen as symbolic of the [Lord of the Dead](#). Standing at the northern edge of the circle, it is the portal into the unseen world and the guardian of the spirit ways.
9. And some see the stang as representing a [universal pivot](#), with its base at the deepest part of the underworld, its trunk passing through the centre of this world and the fork or antlers reaching up to the heavens. The stang unites all the worlds and this view is similar to the shamanic one.

Also, there is the belief that a stang can be used for astral travel or flying in soul-terms and can be described as a [bune wand](#) (a Scottish word). Doreen Valiente cites a bune wand as anything that can be used by a witch to fly, including plants with long stalks, brooms or forked sticks.

And finally, there's a Cornish word, [gwelen](#), that means the forked pole or cane of a cunning man. Such a stick was used for tasks as:

- To focus energy.
- To banish unwelcome spirits, similar to the blasting stick.
- To mark out and cast a magick circle.
- To become the altar, when placed in the ground.
- To be the bridge between worlds.

In practice, then, many witches use stangs as a combination tool really: laden with symbolism for ceremonies, but also as a mobile altar as and when needed.

