

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### López Poza, Sagrario, and Nieves Pena Sueiro, project leads. SYMBOLA. Divisas o empresas históricas (Historical devices or mottoes). Other.

Amaranta Saguar García

Volume 43, Number 4, Fall 2020

Spaces of Power of the Spanish Nobility (1480–1715)  
Les espaces de pouvoir de la noblesse espagnole (1480–1715)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076845ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36402>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)  
2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Saguar García, A. (2020). Review of [López Poza, Sagrario, and Nieves Pena Sueiro, project leads. SYMBOLA. Divisas o empresas históricas (Historical devices or mottoes). Other.] *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(4), 262–266. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36402>

**López Poza, Sagrario, and Nieves Pena Sueiro, project leads.**

**SYMBOLA. Divisas o empresas históricas (Historical devices or mottoes).**

**Other.**

A Coruña: Seminario Interdisciplinar para el Estudio de la Literatura Áurea Española (SIELAE; Interdisciplinary seminar for the study of literature of the Spanish Golden Age), 2007. Accessed 17 March 2020.

[bidiso.es/Symbola](http://bidiso.es/Symbola).

SYMBOLA defines itself as “a database and digital library that gathers (and offers free on the Internet) historic devices or *impresa* (jousting devices, heraldic badges) utilized by kings, knights and ladies, clergymen, scholars, printers, etc., from the very onset of this genre, towards the end of the late Middle Ages, up until its manifestations in its prime (15th–16th centuries) and through its decline at the end of the 17th century” ([bidiso.es/Symbola](http://bidiso.es/Symbola)). Led by Sagrario López Poza and Nieves Pena Sueiro, it is one of the results of a wider research project entitled Biblioteca Digital Siglo de Oro 5 (BIDISO 5), funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (MINECO; Ministry of Economy and Business) and the Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional (FEDER; European Regional Development Fund) between 2016 and 2019 (MINECO-FEDER FFI2015-65779-P). Its multidisciplinary team is part of the research group Seminario Interdisciplinar para el Estudio de la Literatura Áurea Española (SIELAE; Interdisciplinary Seminar for the Study of Spanish Literature of the Golden Age), active since 1993 at the Universidade da Coruña, which is formed by specialists in the fields of classical and Spanish philology, history, art history, communication history, and computing who, at the same time, have extensive experience in the digital humanities. This variety of research profiles is the key to the project, ensuring an appropriate level of proficiency in every relevant aspect of the digital study of emblematica: the linguistic, literary, visual, performative, historical, sociological, and technical.

SYMBOLA is accessible through Biblioteca Digital Siglo de Oro (Digital Library of the Golden Age; [bidiso.es](http://bidiso.es)), the portal that brings together the digital projects of the research group SIELAE. It is of great interest for early modernists working on Spanish emblematica (Biblioteca Digital de Emblemática Hispánica [Digital Library of Hispanic Emblematica] and SYMBOLA), polyantheas (Biblioteca Digital “Poliantea” [Digital Library “Poliantea”]), book inventories (Inventarios y Bibliotecas del Siglo de Oro [Inventories and Libraries of the

Golden Age]), and *relaciones de sucesos* (Catálogo y Biblioteca Digital de Relaciones de Sucesos [Catalogue and Digital Library of News Pamphlets]). Ranging from 1996 to the present day, these projects evidence an evolution in technology and design, SYMBOLA being a perfect example of the current trends in digital humanities with regard to interoperability, scalability, accessibility, open metadata, and consistent standards. The project's reliance on a REST API for the operations on the server (backend) and open-source frameworks for, respectively, accessing the database (Hibernate) and giving form to the functionalities of the website (AngularJS) ensure compatibility with other technologies, as well as the future growth of the project. Moreover, its configuration as an Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH) repository automatically integrates SYMBOLA into ARACNE: Red de Humanidades Digitales y Letras Hispánicas (Network of Digital Humanities and Hispanic Letters; red-aracne.es), Hispana (hispana.mcu.es), and Europea (europeana.eu), and makes its data harvestable by the relevant service providers. Finally, the project's website complies with the guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) with regard to accessibility, making its content fully compatible with screenreaders.

Leaving technology aside, from the point of view of layout and usability, the website is exemplary in its design: clean, intuitive, and responsive. Besides the usual static pages devoted to introducing the project ("Principal"), the team ("Equipo"), and the terms of use ("Condiciones de uso"), three interactive indices provide access to the data. "Propietarios" and "Motivos" list the owners and the motifs of the devices, respectively. To the right of each entry, the number of matching emblems appears. When clicked on, it displays the link(s) to the full record of the relevant devices. At the same time, "Motes" lists the emblems and their owners, and forwards users to the full record of the corresponding devices.

Records are presented in a three-column layout, in which the central part is consecrated to the specific data on the emblem, the left one to the biographical data of the owner, and the right one to images of the device (where available). Through this layout, the centrality of emblems in the project is highlighted. Biographical data and images exclusively complement the exhaustive and systematic description of devices, so that users do not really miss them when they are not available (images) or are fairly concise due to the lack of historical records (biographies). These difficulties notwithstanding, data in the biography

section tend to be very detailed and informed—understandably, as they have been specifically prepared by specialists for this project, although there are a few historical characters about which little or no biographical information could be found. Images—with full provenance and contextual information—are provided for most of the records. In addition, in the biographical section, person and place names, years, and certain concepts are linked to Wikipedia as an extra support for the user.

Each device entry consists of three components: descriptive data, interpretative data, and formal data. Besides the information relative to classification, descriptive data comprises textual, visual, and contextual details; interpretative data is devoted to explaining the meaning of the corresponding emblem in its context (literary, social, historical, etc.); and formal data includes information on how to cite the database, the terms of use, the relevant bibliography, and (most importantly) the author(s) of the record, so that their work is acknowledged and quotable under their own name(s). Unexpectedly, user interaction with the displayed information is limited to collapsing and opening certain sections of the entry. Clicking on the type of emblem will not display all devices under the same classification, and this applies to every other classificatory field of the record. Moreover, there is not a motif field that corresponds to the motif classification of the motif index, but I suspect that this absence is related to Iconclass classifications having not yet been included in the records, despite being implemented in the database. In the near future, SYMBOLA will replace its current motif thesaurus with Iconclass, so that the present classification will become obsolete and should therefore be omitted from the record.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there is both a simple search and an advanced search feature. The first one covers only the text of the device and the owner, while the second one allows users to search by personal information (name, gender, date of birth and death, family, etc.), contextual information (country, region, event, etc.), and device-specific information (content, language, motif, type and subtype, concepts, etc.).

The contribution of this project to early modernists is not only that of a well-executed digital tool—which it is—but the establishing of a framework for

1. For the future functionalities of SYMBOLA, as well as for the technical documentation of the project, I follow Sagrario López Poza, “La base de datos ‘Symbola’ de divisas o empresas históricas. Planteamiento y diseño conceptual,” *Studia Aurea* 11 (2017): 93–109. doi.org/10.5565/rev/studiaaurea.262.

the study of personal emblems, which have not received much attention until now. Devices are the subject of several digital projects, *Emblematica ONLINE* ([emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu](http://emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu)) being the most ambitious of them. All of these projects have two things in common. First, they are conceived as repositories of emblem books, in which digitizations are central but, above all, in which devices are always bound to a textual medium. Second, books of emblems being the object of study, personal devices that never entered a book, or devices that we know only through textual descriptions, are not represented. By contrast, in *SYMBOLA* emblems are not bound to a book, although they may be, or to any other specific type of medium, but to a historical character. From this perspective, devices are seen less as literary artifacts and more as social objects. In addition, *SYMBOLA* does not depend on digitizations or even images; the detail with which emblems are described makes pictures unnecessary. This feature opens the door to devices that do not exist as an image (“Motivo descrito” in the database) or exist only as a motto (“Sin cuerpo”). However, the most significant and characteristic difference of *SYMBOLA* is not its wider scope. It is that emblems as a whole—as a concept and as a social device—are at the centre of *SYMBOLA*, while in other comparable projects the physical manifestation of emblems as book illustrations is what matters most.

Behind this shift in the treatment of emblems is an ontological reflection on their nature which, on the one hand, clearly shapes the data structure of the database, while on the other implies a theoretical reconsideration of the genre of emblematica that will have repercussions for future projects on the topic. This vindication of emblems as an object of study on their own, linked not so much to a physical medium as to a social one, has enormous theoretical and conceptual consequences for the study of historical devices. It opens totally new methods for the study of emblems, digital or not, and entails a greater involvement of historians where literary and art scholars have predominated until now.

However, until the impact of this change of paradigm materializes, the only thing that is clear is that the team of *SYMBOLA* has succeeded in creating a practical tool for getting acquainted with personal emblematica that specialists and non-specialists alike can enjoy and exploit. Specialists will very likely value its thoroughness and open-data concept, while regretting the still small number of entries (152, although there are 147 more waiting for approval)

and the resulting limited international variety, despite the database not being limited to devices linked to Spanish historical characters. Non-specialists will probably enjoy the contextual information: images and biographical data, and concise explanations. Be that as it may, SYMBOLA fulfills what it says it will, that is, to bring together emblems and historical devices from the late Middle Ages up to the seventeenth century associated with historical characters. And it does this through a clean, user-friendly interface while observing good digital humanities practices that every project should take into account: interoperability, scalability, accessibility, open metadata, and standards. The only thing that remains now is to wait for more records to be entered and for the promised updates to take place, and to see where this project can take the study of emblematica.

AMARANTA SAGUAR GARCÍA

Universidad Complutense de Madrid – CAM

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36402>

**Petersen, Suzanne H., project dir.**  
**Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project. Other.**

Seattle: University of Washington, 1996–2017. Accessed 17 May 2020.  
[depts.washington.edu/hisprom](https://depts.washington.edu/hisprom).

The Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project, based at the University of Washington, continues Suzanne H. Petersen's lengthy field and digital work on the Pan-Hispanic ballad, beginning with her 1979 University of Wisconsin dissertation project, which was directed by Diego Catalán Menéndez Pidal. This is an active, long-term project which continues to develop steadily. The Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project is designed to serve a wide range of students of the pan-Hispanic ballad tradition, including experienced investigators. Its site can be consulted in Spanish, English, or Portuguese.

A single website unites an impressive group of major collections, in combination with Petersen's own database. Major sources include the archives of Manuel Costa Fontes and the Hispanic Society of America (author and copyright holder, respectively, of *O Romanceiro Português e Brasileiro: Índice Temático e Bibliográfico* [The Portuguese and Brazilian ballad: Thematic and