

Strangers of Popular Culture – The Verbal and Pictorial Aesthetics of Mythological Metal Music

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Abstract: Extreme metal music is held to be a destructive genre of popular culture, treated as a pariah for many. Being a seriously misunderstood genre, I would like to highlight that metal music is a result of conscious work process that cannot only be noticed on the level of the music but on the level of verbal and pictorial expressions too. In my paper, I would like to show the working mechanisms of the so-called “(neo)pagan/mythological metal” movement, focusing on the rhetoric side of its mentioned expressions, searching for the ways these bands rewrite ancient myths and legends.

For my research, I will use three main threads: 1) history of religion (looking for the connections of the reception of ancient topics in contemporary society, e.g. New Age Cults and New Religious Movements); 2) reception theory, as the thoughts of Northrop Frye, Wolfgang Iser (1972), and John Fiske (2011) all should help to understand the general processes behind reading and producing texts; 3) subculture studies – e.g. the works of Richard Schusterman and Deena Weinstein (2002) to have a deeper insight to the genres standing on the edge of mass and high culture.

After a general introduction, I would like to demonstrate the above mentioned through some case studies. The chosen mythological cultures are going to be the world of the ancient Middle East (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Old Testament), the classical Roman world, and the Viking Era, also showing some Hungarian and Romanian examples in the last section. In each section, the following issues should be examined: band and stage names connected to the topic, album titles, lyrics, and album covers. All these together will show us many clear patterns from romantic nostalgia to allegoric concepts, all revolving around the essence of metal music: being a Stranger in a familiar society.

Keywords: extreme metal, reception studies, mythology

1. General Introduction

Thinking of strangers in the world of contemporary society, it might be obvious to search for something that comes from the outer territories of the known or familiar culture in which one lives his/her life. But taking one step closer to or farther from popular and high culture, the world of subcultures may offer many strange phenomena. It may be enough to mention only the most widely acknowledged subcultures like the underground hip-hop and rap, Rastafarianism, hippies, hipsters, fetishists, punks, the many variations of Gothic, and last but not least heavy or extreme metal as well. The main features of a subculture amongst many other things are that the subculture requires a certain interest and taste that differs in their foundations from mainstream popular culture (Dyrendal, 2008: 68–72). This interest and taste may include music, clothing, literature, certain forms of behaviour, etc. In this paper, the main goal is to take a closer look into the world of extreme metal, revolving around the verbal and pictorial aesthetics of musical records originating from a certain corner of metal music: the so-called *mythological metal*.

According to widespread commonplaces from all over Europe, heavy and extreme metal subculture is often identified in the first place with deviant and excessive behaviour, aggression; in the second place, Satanism and political right-wing extremism are listed as well. It may become clear that the above mentioned simplification naturally hides a more complicated picture. The forthcoming paragraphs are going to follow the order hereby listed in accordance to investigate the world of extreme metal. First of all, the most important is to draw the frame for the examination: what is heavy and especially extreme metal, what are the borders of the subculture, and where to place it in time and space. It is just as important to draw up the methodology. Two pillars are going to be presented: history of religion and reception aesthetics. As we are going to work with bands re-interpreting myths and religious phenomena in their music, it is crucial to be aware of both the historical/cultural background and the possible ways of literary analysis. The second would be the main column of this paper regarding the verbal and pictorial aesthetics of mythological metal. Verbal expressions are gathered from band and stage names, album and song titles, and actual lyrics. In this particular case, pictorial aesthetics is going to be examined solely using album covers. After gathering the analysed data, we arrive at a summary to integrate the new findings.

2. Background

2.1. Outlines of Heavy and Extreme Metal

“Heavy metal, genre of rock music that includes a group of related styles that are intense, virtuosic, and powerful. Driven by the aggressive sounds of the distorted electric guitar, heavy metal is arguably the most commercially successful genre of rock music.” – states Robert Walser (1999), renowned scholar of the heavy metal scene. As a great percentage of popular music all around the world, heavy metal is also originating from the Afro-American blues tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Robert Johnson or James Brown. The direct prequel to the emergence of heavy metal are the beat and rock ‘n’ roll movements of the British Isles during the 1950s and 1960s. The two main branches of contemporary popular music, beat (represented by The Beatles) and rock ‘n’ roll (represented by The Rolling Stones) built a road for the beginning of the 1970s altogether for hard rock and heavy metal (Walser, 1993: 1–11): the “bad boy” image of The Rolling Stones is the prototype of the rebellious rock and metal musicians. It is also important not to forget that with the song “Sympathy for the Devil” the Stones also opened up the mainstream for mystic and occult topics. Some examples of psychedelic rock along with Coven and Black Widow showed this stress on the themes of occultism and witchcraft (with their albums *Witchcraft Destroys Mind and Reaps Souls* and *Sacrifice* respectively). During the English “Blues Boom” (Farley, 2009: 74–79), the end of the 60s called for the children of the working class to build their own subculture. Using the rebellious attributes of the counterculture and the hippie New Wave groups together with traditional patriarchal values, heavy metal was created in the now deindustrialized areas of England, first of all in Birmingham (Moore, 2009: 144–147). Blues- and rock ‘n’ roll-oriented bands such as Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, the Who, the Kinks, Cream, and even some songs of Queen influenced mostly the *heavy* sound of heavy metal. The harsh sound described above by Walser can be found in its most pure form in the first album of Black Sabbath (1970) called *Black Sabbath*. The classical metal line-up consisting of a guitarist, bass player, drummer, and singer originates from this era as well. Since the birth of heavy metal altogether with the music, the line-up, the audience, etc. altered adjusting to the geographical and chronological features of a certain regional scene. In the beginning, heavy metal was the music of white, male, blue-collar British youngsters; nowadays, it is a global phenomenon, with fans from all social classes and countries (Weinstein, 2002: 96–100).

The core element, namely the usage of the *power chord*, remained since the birth of the genre a representation of power and authority (Walser, 1993: 2–3). Besides heavy metal, the new movement of *extreme metal* developed during the

early 1980s. N.W.O.B.H.M.¹ correlating with punk music showed heavy metal the chance to find new directions (Farley, 2009: 81–82). The new subgenres of thrash, black, death, etc. metal arose from this new, fragmented way searching of N.W.O.B.H.M. (In)famous bands like Celtic Frost (CH), Venom (GB), King Diamond (DK), or Bathory (SE) offered a lower quality in terms of production, in many cases less talented but more raw and extreme ways for representing metal music (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 2–5). Although it can be said that the lyrics are not the main power of work in extreme metal (Weinstein, 2002: 121–126), with the advent of extreme metal, many bands came into focus with lyrics pointing towards certain ideologies and topics to be examined through music.² The development of subgenres is not a closed case until recent days.

Deena Weinstein in her study (2002: 31–43) divides metal lyrics into two main groups: *Dionysian* and *Chaotic*. Dionysian topics include earthly delights, e.g. drug consumption or free love. Chaotic represents everything else. It may be useful to offer a segmented categorization for Chaotic topics. The questions of political-social issues,³ the problems of emotional life, history, or spiritual themes could be named different categories as well. For us now only spiritual themes are interesting, as mythologies and religions take the largest part in these. The term of “mythological metal”⁴ refers to all the bands using mythologies as the main inspiration for their lyrics. Although it may not be a usual direction to name a subgenre after its lyrical content, as most of the metal subgenres names are derived from its musical expressions (like thrash, death or, doom metal), it does not lack examples. In the case of “ritual black metal”, it can be seen that a branch of bands are gathered under a genre related to their behaviour towards lyrics and performance considering occultism (Granhölm, 2013: 17–18). Both traditional black metal bands (e.g. Watain) and retro-psychedelic rock bands (e.g. The Devil’s Blood) are considered to be part of the same ritual black metal scene. A two-level classification of metal music may be proposed: first of all, the musical categories are given, these have the priority but the lyrical categories form a living tradition as well. The members of the subcategory “mythological metal” are coming from black, death, gothic, symphonic, folk, and other metal genres, and just because they are mythological they do not lose their black, death, etc. label. As many lyrics may be associated with certain New Religious Movements, the terms neopagan metal and mythological metal are likely to be equivalent (or synonymic).

1 New Wave of British Heavy Metal.

2 The most infamous topic, namely *Satanism*, is not a topic of this current paper. As metal music is quite frequently accused with Satanism, this topic already has its quality literature. For a detailed discussion of the topic, please, see: Dyrendal, 2008 and Dornbusch-Killguss, 2005.

3 Politics is not an articulated problem of metal music on the level of party politics, metal is more like (or rather) a rebellion against the current social system and injustice.

4 Inspiration was gathered from the title of a compilation CD of the US band Absu, entitled “Mythological Occult Metal” (2005).

2.2. History of Religion

As now we have a basic view of heavy and especially extreme metal music, it is now time to take a closer look at the inspiration of mythological metal music: the so-called Neo-Pagan revival. Neo-Pagan revival is originating from the many times cited counterculture of the 1960s (Hammer, 2006: 855–861). The “New Religious Movements”, such as Krishna Consciousness, and the New Age phenomena, such as Wicca witchcraft, are rooted both in ancient religious practices and theories as well as in the secularization of everyday life after the Second World War. Secularization and a sort of decline in Western Christian worldview built a foundation for forgotten and exotic religions and occult traditions to land in Western thought. To understand the working method of these contemporary societies and cults, some basic introduction is needed to the history of occultism, as many forms of Neo-Pagan revival and the New Age share the concept of forgotten and secret lore (Pearson, 2006: 828–834). The word “occult” means hidden in Latin, in a wider concept: “hidden wisdom”. In this regard, the first occultist⁵ movements could be traced back to ancient Hellenistic times (around the start of C.E. and the 2nd and 3rd centuries), when Hermeticism and Gnosticism first appeared. Both religious and philosophical movements offered an alternative worldview compared to the existing Roman-Hellenistic-Middle Eastern syncretism of the ancient world (Goodrick-Clarke, 2006: 550–558). Nevertheless, it must be noted that both mentioned “schools” are typical products of syncretism. Hermeticism gathers around the works of Hermes Trismegistus (Three Times Great Hermes), who shares secret lore for the readers about the work of God and the cosmos (Quispel, 2010: 3507–3515). Perhaps being a merely literary school, Hermeticism is the basic element for modern occultism. Gnosticism, on the other hand, was a religious movement offering a dualistic worldview, where the Light and the Dark fights its eternal war, lurking for the souls of humanity. The followers of Gnostic religions (such as Manichaeism) are facing a spiritual war, in which if they choose the proper side their prize may be salvation.⁶

Hermetic cosmology and Gnostic dualism together were almost forgotten until the times of early Renaissance, when Neo-Platonism was once again discovered by Italian philosophers (most notably Marsilio Ficino of Florence). Combined with the Jewish Kabbalah, developed during the Middle Ages of Spain, a new form of philosophy emerged in Renaissance. This new philosophy created the alchemy

5 In the following pages, “occult” always indicates that some kind of rite, cult, or literature contains hidden wisdom for a higher level of consciousness. In this regard, occult must not be confused with other meanings of occultism and magic.

6 Salvation is a common topic not just among Gnostics but of mystery cults as well. This motif can be found e.g. in the cult of Isis and Mithras.

and laid the foundations for secret societies under Christian influence, such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. The archetypical renaissance men, scholars with skills in almost all known sciences and disciplines of their age, created the highly appreciated renaissance culture and ignited the so-called “Western esoteric” tradition. Western esoteric tradition is the umbrella term for all the above mentioned occult studies, sciences, and movements that reached their first modern peak around the times of the French Revolution and rationalism at the end of the 18th century, even becoming a form of rebellion against rationalism.⁷ Later, during the 19th century, as a resistance against Christianity and the Church, many occult societies emerged; the most famous one is the *Order of the Golden Dawn*, later reformed as *Ordo Templi Orientis* (OTO) by Aleister Crowley. The influence of East Asian religions and philosophy together with Neo-Paganism and ancient Middle-Eastern symbolism can be traced in the works of Crowley and the OTO, serving as one of the sources for the New Age of the 1970s (Hanegraaf, 2006: 884–889; Pasi, 2006: 898–906).

Globalization following the Second World War along with the above mentioned secularization created a religious gap in the life of the Western society. Alternative lifestyles, new philosophies, and religious forms filled these gaps (Melton, 2001: vii–xii). The most notable cults interesting for our topic may be divided into the following sub-categories:

- Occult societies: *OTO* and its public branches: *Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica*, *Church of Satan*, *Temple of Set*, *Typhonian Order*. The most important attribute of these societies are their initiatory system and strong influences from Western esoteric tradition.
- Neo-Pagan cults: *Wicca*, *Asatrú*, *Roman revivalism*, etc. These cults are characterized by that according to their worldview the cult is not a new invention but a revival of once forgotten ancient, pure lore of European antiquity.⁸

Both categories offer the *Truth* for their followers in theory and in practice, in many cases a higher level of consciousness together with a more pure form of human existence. Neo-Pagan groups also aim to restore the romanticized ways of life before the age of Christianity (Pearson, 2006: 828–834). This resistance against and disappointment in Christian worldview and romantic nostalgia towards the past is the key point where we may connect contemporary mythological metal music with religious and other (pop)cultural tendencies.

7 Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that a rationalist-religious movement also existed; a notable author was Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), a Swedish mystic and theologian.

8 The present study does not aim to decide whether a cult is reviving an ancient form of religion in an authentic way or not, only the existence of these groups is cardinal.

2.3. Reception Theory

Contemporary, 20th- and 21st-century revival of ancient religions and mythologies proposes the problem of reception. Reception in this regard is the way how postmodern man and society re-interprets 2000- or 3000-year-old religious practices and especially texts. Wolfgang Iser, German scholar of reception theory, offers us a frame for understanding this re-interpretation. Iser (1972: 281–287) states that the reading process must be regarded as an active and not a passive behaviour towards a text. Both sides, the text and the reader, are active: the text always leaves behind questions (gaps) for the reader what must be answered (or filled in) to make sense of it. Thus, each reader and even each reading creates a new and original horizon of the text. Filling the gaps left by a text makes the reader build up coherence in it, imagine the world of it as of one's own understanding. Although Iser constructed his theory around high literature in the sense of the 20th century, it may be easily translated to the reading of ancient pieces of high literature: myths. The written forms of ancient myths should be considered as antique high literature. It does not mean that ancient texts were written with the standard of leaving gaps – it is not true for modern texts either –, but as literature it is coded in the very nature of it. In many cases, it may be encountered that mythological texts are taken out of their context in their moment of reception that may lead to misunderstanding. This feature does not change the original question: how does (in this case) a metal musician read a text, and in his or her reading how are the gaps filled in, what is the new horizon offered? The verbal and pictorial expressions that are due to be examined are going to show us these new horizons.

It may be quite clear that the topics of metal music that were labelled as “Chaotic” by Deena Weinstein (2002: 38–43) represent a certain kind of literature. The “demonic” in literature, as it was addressed by Northrop Frye (2000: 147–150), covers everything that is out of societies' control. These may be the powers of nature or anything embodying something threatening to society. Being the music of rebellion, metal music almost always deals with the demonic in the sense of Frye. It is also a feature of religious texts that the apocalyptic (opposite of the demonic in the strict literary sense of Frye's work) and the demonic are represented together (like Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon both in the New Testament, Frye, 2004: 50–57), indicating that dealing with the demonic is also a primordial attribute of literature. Many of the defining myths are gathered around the uncontrollable forces of human existence: the powers of nature, the origin of man, and the end of the world. It can be said that as metal music seeks for the demonic it defines its reading in the case of myths and the horizons offered by those.

Last but not least, it must not be forgotten that metal music is part of popular culture. Being part of it does not mean that metal music and its expressions must lack quality or interest, only certain definitive attributes must be kept in mind. Popular, or, by John Fiske (2011: 83–101), “producerly” texts have two main attributes: these texts are obvious and excessive in nature. As these texts are obvious, it makes them accessible for their audiences. Easier decoding does not make it worthless, as Richard Schusterman (1991: 613–632) examined it in the case of rap music: a very specific but wide horizon of interpretation can be offered in connection with Afro-American pop music. It is also the same in the case of heavy and extreme metal: beyond the obvious structure and choice of words of e.g. lyrics, a rich spring of information could be found. Excessiveness also serves this purpose – connected with the carnival pleasures of popular culture, it can be said that the excessive and the obvious are the main sceneries for mythological metal music. The main accessory of the following examination consists of a certain attention for the demonic behind the excessive, focusing on the new literary horizons of ancient mythological texts reinterpreted in the realm of extreme metal music.

3. The Verbal and Pictorial Aesthetics of Mythological Metal Music

The following chapter is not arranged around bands or songs but around mythologies and cultures. The compilation represented below does not offer a full-scale examination of the topic as the corpus of mythological metal music is too wide for one single study. Our aim now is to show highlights and typical examples of mythological metal lyrics and album covers to provide an introduction for a larger work, focusing on some local topics as well. The chosen mythologies and cultures are the following: Ancient Mesopotamia, Pre-Hellenic Egypt, the world of the Old Testament, Roman mythology, Viking mythology, Hungarian folk tales and history, and Romanian spirituality.

3.1. Ancient Mesopotamia

The religions and mythologies of Ancient Mesopotamia (from the 3rd millennium BCE up to the 4th century BCE) is a collective term for all the cultures’ legacy of the area. The main sources are the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian literary and pictorial artefacts, including all the religious, decorative, and administrative material (Oppenheim, 1982: 219–258). The first trace where one can encounter mythological presence in metal music is the bands’ and musicians’

stage names. Numerous examples are available, the most inspiring being the names of gods. Thus, we can find the band Marduk (SE), Tiamat (SE), Ereshkigal (MX), Absu (US), Sarpanitum (US), and Astarte (GR) and stage names like Namtar (NL) or Nergal (PL) to list a few. Solely choosing a mythological name does not indicate that the band itself works with mythological lyrics, as it is presented by most of the listed bands (Absu is the only one working with mythology).

The so-called *Babylonian creation epic*, the *Enuma Elish*, is of importance for us now as many bands wrote their musical version of it, e.g. *Enuma Elish* by Rotting Christ (GR), *Blood of Kingu* by Vader (PL), *Rebirth of the Nemesis* by Melechesh (IL/NL), and *The Blood of Kingu* by Therion (SE). The last one is a perfect example to demonstrate mythological metal.⁹ The excerpt from the song shows us a spiritual war that is fought in one's soul. The scenery for the lyrics is gathered from the epic that tells the story of a war between gods, namely Marduk and Tiamat and her army lead by Kingu (ANET: 60–72). After the defeat of Tiamat and Kingu, Marduk builds the cosmos from the body parts of Tiamat and creates humanity using the blood of Kingu. The spiritual warfare stated in the song thus shows us the dual nature of humanity: the godlike and human parts feel a disturbance that indicates the fight within the microcosm in the way it was fought according to the myth in the macrocosm.¹⁰ Kingu is named as a demon, which at a first glance may seem like a misunderstanding as Kingu would have been a god (Radner, 2008: 178–179). On this point, we can witness the lyricist's reading: the artistic alteration of the historical account stresses the *demonic* (in a Frye-ian way) in human existence (for a comparison with other instances, see: Höpflinger, 2011: 53–57).

The two images (*Image 1* and *Image 2*) bellow are album covers of Israeli-Dutch band Melechesh. Both are full of ancient Middle-Eastern symbols and re-imagined sculptures. The pictures share the *shedu* of Mesopotamian religion (bull-man), bird-headed apotropaic figurines (Ebeling, 1928: 107–113), figures and columns from Ancient Persian art, creating the appropriate atmosphere for the recordings that fully deal with Middle-Eastern mysticism and mythology. *The Epigenesis* also presents the sephirotic tree of the Jewish Kabbalah along with the Snake of Eden on the Persian column, once again showing occult influences. The title *Enki* further strengthens the occult sense as Enki is the Mesopotamian god of magic. These eclectic symbols and motifs drawn together invite the listener to the esoteric journey that is offered by the music and lyrics together.

9 The first three verses are: "Collect the blood of Kingu from the great old sea / And arrogate the primeval waters / Inside your veins the power of the demon flow / Have you ever searched for your descent? // Gaze into your soul, we are the children of the ancient ones / On thin façade we are the kindred of benign gods // Take up and read the tables of your destiny / They hang around the neck of Kingu / Prepare the war between gods deep inside your soul / You are the one to fight in this war!" (Therion, 2004).

10 It also presents a kind of occult approach that what happens in the macrocosm happens in the microcosm as well ("As above, so below" – as the *Tabula Smaragdina* writes).



Image 1. Melechesh: The Epigenesis (2010)



Image 2. Melechesh: Enki (2015)

3.2. Ancient Egypt

Pre-Hellenic, or classical Egyptian religion may be a greater mystery than the Mesopotamian one. Vast buildings, temples, pyramids, and mysterious zoomorphic gods live in the realm of the Nile. The many-faced polytheistic pantheon of Egypt provides us with only a few written resources: mostly hieroglyphic inscriptions and murals, reliefs or sculptures present the mythology (Kákosy, 2002: 288–309). The bands choosing an Egypt-inspired name are more likely to work in their lyrics with the Egyptian world as well, even more like in the case of Mesopotamia. Thus, Nile (US), Amarna Sky (BR), Scarab (EG), The Coffin Texts (US), and Apophis (DE) devote most of their works to the land of the Nile. Spiros Antoniou, singer/bassist of the band Septicflesh (GR), borrows his stage name from the god of Chaos: Seth. The most important topics found in lyrics are the Amarna-religion of Akhenaten, the Underworld, and the journey of the Sun Ark. The Amarna-religion, or heresy introduced by Pharaoh Akhenaten (pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty)¹¹ inspired the band Amarna Sky's title and topic of their first album (*Rising Heresy*, 2006) as well as two songs of the band Nile (*Cast Down the Heretic*, 2005 and *Those whom the Gods Detest*, 2009). The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the realm of the Underworld is also quite inspiring, e.g. for the band *The Coffin Texts*, which derives its name of a certain scripture type written on the insides of coffins.

The text to be introduced is of Nile's album, *Ithyphallic*. Nile has been the most prominent "Egyptian metal" band for more than 20 years now. Their song, *Laying Fire upon Apep*,¹² deals with the journey of the Sun Ark. The Sun Ark is always under threat during its journey in the sky, while the Apep snake (Greek form: Apophis) is constantly trying to destroy it. During daytime, Ra fights the snake, while in the night Seth does the same (Assmann, 1984: 1087–1090; Pinch, 2002: 106–108). The papyrus of Herweben shows us the way (Pinch, 2002: 199) exactly like Nile is performing it. God Ra fights the snake: he destroys Apep with every instrument he has, burning its eyes and, transformed into a lynx, he cuts it to pieces. The lyrics of the song interpret a mythological event for us with an archaic language use, creating a nostalgic-ancient ritual atmosphere.

11 A monotheistic approach in a polytheistic environment (Kákosy, 2002: 141–143).

12 The first three verses are: "Fire be upon thee Apep / Ra maketh thee burn / Thou who art hateful unto him / Ra pierceth thy head / He cutheth through thy face / Ra meltheth thine countenance / Lo your skull is crushed in his hand / Thy bones are smashed into pieces // Burn thou fiend / Before the eye of Ra / The hidden one hath overthrown thy words / The gods have turned thy face backwards / Thy skull is ripped from thy spine // The Lynx hath torn open thy breast / The scorpion hath cast fetters upon thee / Maat hath sent for thy destruction / Thou shalt burn" (Nile, 2007).

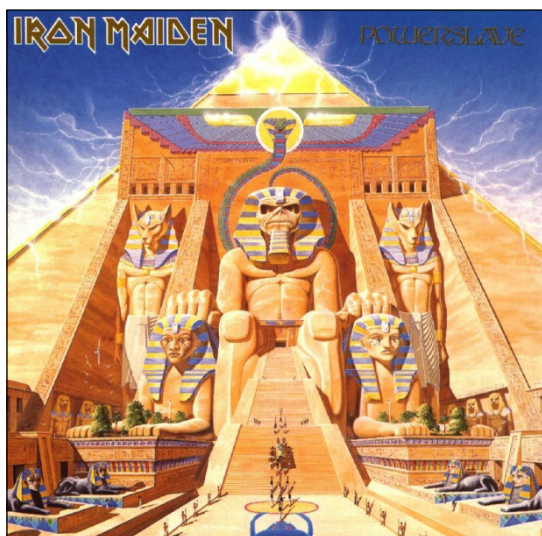


Image 3. Iron Maiden: Powerslave, 1984



Image 4. Nile: Those whom the Gods Detest, 2009

Image 3 and *Image 4* show different approaches towards Egyptian legacy. The 1984 cover of Iron Maiden's *Powerslave* imagines a fictional pyramid with the traditional form and emerging procession road. Anubis figurines and the eye of Horus can be also traced, but the main figure of the picture is the "mascot" of the band, Eddy. He is situated as a giant pharaoh dominating his environment through the pyramid. Above the building, the shining top projects a lightning. Only a handful of their lyrics deal with Egyptian thematic, but as pharaonic Egypt is often associated with hard slave labour it can be an analogy for the contemporary metaphorical enslavement of current societies.¹³ The cover of Nile uses the Amarna-style bust of Akhenaten. In accordance with the title of the record, the cover promises music to deal with the Amarna-heresy of the mentioned pharaoh – the promise is kept since many lyrics and topics revolve around the religious beliefs of Akhenaten.

3.3. The Old Testament

The Bible, both Old and the New Testament, is a rich source of inspiration for many bands around the globe. The archetypical usage of the Bible comes from Satanist metal bands (first and later, from Christian metal bands obviously). As we are not dealing with them in this paper, the focus falls to other forms. The most unique instance of reception comes from Israel. The band Orphaned Land aims to bring peace to the Middle East through their music, showing the similarities between Judaism and Islam or, as we shall see it, Christianity. The book of Genesis contains the story of the Flood (Gen. 6.7–8.22). The well-known narrative of Noah is a typical myth of the ancient world (Mesopotamian and Greek parallels could be found easily), telling the re-creation of Earth upon the wrath of God for the sins of humanity (Westerman, 1987: 51).

The frame of the 2004 album of Orphaned Land (*Mabool – The Story of Three Sons of Seven*) is constant: God is in fury of humanity's sinfulness and decides to destroy it. An Ark is built of revelations to ensure the survival of the True when the Flood comes. The main alteration of the story can be met in the first song, *Birth of the Three (The Unification)*.¹⁴ From the excerpt, it is clear, that Noah will not be mentioned throughout the whole recording. Instead, three other actors are presented: (1) a Snake with the Star of David, (2) an Eagle with the crescent

¹³ The title track gives a summary of the myths of Osiris, Horus, and Seth.

¹⁴ The first verses are the following: "The seventh had seven descendants / The seventh was then divided into three / They were given their first symbols / They bore faces of animals / A Snake, an Eagle & the Lion // The first was known as magic / and he bore an enchanted heart / A Star of David upon his crest / was his eternal mark // The second was strength, / half a moon was he / A triangle he adorned, / a sword for all to see // The third was Lion wisdom / a mind unmatched / Represented by the cross / the white was his essence / A crystal his defense // The three were one, divided at rebirth / Forbidden to unite, / for fear of their strength" (Orphaned Land, 2004).



Image 5. Orphaned land in 2010

moon, and (3) a Lion with a cross. The three figures are the representatives of the three greatest Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Through the recording, these three members of a shared holy unity act together for the sake of humanity to build the Ark and save the True.

For the promo photo session of their 2010 recording, the band created the picture seen as in *Image 5*. The unity suggested by *Mabool* is manifested on the photo showing the members of the band dressed to represent the mentioned religions in a peaceful and harmonic composition.

Alone in itself an introductory proclamation for an album is not the whole picture. The 7th track of *Mabool*, namely *Building the Ark*, is almost entirely sung by a choir in Latin, citing the original Vulgate passage in the following order: Gen. 6.12, 6.14, 6.11, 6.19; using passages on the corruption of mankind (6.12); the measurements of the Ark (6.14); once again stressing corruption (6.11); and the command to gather the animals in the Ark (6.19). The following 8th track, *Norra El Norra*, in a prayer-like form, melts a Hebrew text with a traditional Yemenite tune, bringing the now fighting sides to a peaceful resolution. In the epilogue of the recording, life is saved from the Flood, achieved by the Three suggesting an actualizing approach towards the original Old Testament text, bringing a many-thousand-years-old passage into life, not just for religious people but for the audience of metal music as well.



Image 6. Ex Deo in 2012

3.4. Ancient Roman Mythology and Religion

Taking a step closer to ancient European legacy, Roman mythology and religion is the next destination. Although Mesopotamian and Egyptian instances too did not lack masculinity in their motifs, any approach towards the Roman culture can easily find its fierce nature. Roman warfare, the legions, the cults of the emperor, hedonistic aristocracy, gladiator fights, oppression of the conquered and the showing of superiority¹⁵ make a perfect ground of inspiration. The legendary history of the City and the religious heterogeneity described in 2.2 both show interest for metal musicians. The parallel of devotion to a topic as seen in the case of ancient Egypt has at least one example in Roman culture as well. The crew of Canadian death metal band Kataklysm was transformed in 2008 into the band Ex Deo, only dealing with the history and mythology of the Eternal City.

Image 6 shows the stage outfit of the band using Roman-like armour. Their first album's title track, *Romulus*,¹⁶ covers the conflict between the founding fathers of Rome: Romulus and Remus. The speaker takes the role of Romulus speaking of the foundation of the City. Romulus proclaims himself the king of the city,

¹⁵ The author does not suggest that the whole of ancient Roman culture can be described by the mentioned features, but most of the time the popular associations include the cited attributes.

¹⁶ The first three verses are as follows: "Romulus, from the wolf's mouth I feed eternity / Romulus, with my brother's blood I opened wide the gates of time // Standing at the hill cliff / A flock of birds crown me / I am fathered by the god of war, I am the king of Rome // Then his jealousy blooms, the envy to lead my people / So perish everyone who shall leap over my wall!" (Ex Deo, 2009).

drawing the way to the death of his brother, using the most important elements of the original myth. The text gives us an insight into the mind of a brother who was threatened by his twin brother, justifying the fatal deed (Plutarch: *Romulus*, chapters 10–12). The song offers us a reading of the original myth that can never be restored, building an almost adventure-film-like scenery.

Maybe the most famous initiatory cult of the Hellenistic world is the cult of Mithras. Ancient Rites (BE) devoted their work to the ancient and mediaeval heritage of Europe; thus, their 2006 record called *Rubicon* includes a track entitled *Mithras*.¹⁷ The song is dedicated to God Mithras, in a hymn-like form praising his qualities and praying for his help. The text may try to imitate an ancient formula, which has a meaning only for those who are initiated into the cult – as it was the way for original worshippers. The main elements of the cult – Mithras, god of light, who protects the believers, the levels of initiations with given names, and that Mithras is a warrior god defeating darkness, keeping the circulation of the world in order (Gordon, 2005: 6088–6093) – are listed in a lyrically accurate way, romanticizing the original religion.

3.5. Viking Mythology

Speaking about white masculinity, the era of Viking mythology is the best place to find inspiration for metal music (Heesch, 2011: 67–69). Norse mythology (common name: Viking mythology) deals with stories of the gods and mortal heroes (sagas). The main sources are the works of the Icelandic monk, Snorre Sturlason of the 11th century (Prose Edda) and the folk poetry of the Poetic Edda. Just as in the case of Mesopotamia, many bands are inspired by the names of gods and other supernatural creatures. Amongst the most important bands we can find Týr (FO), Einherjer (NO), Manegarm (SE), and King of Asgard (SE), mainly of Scandinavian origin. The first pioneer of the black and Viking metal genres, Swedish band Bathory, serves us the first lyrics in connection with the Nordic realm. The song *Valhalla*¹⁸ comes from the 1990 CD entitled *Hammerheart*. The song has three main topics connected together. First of all, we see a detailed depiction of God Thor (Lindow, 2001: 287) on his chariot with his hammer. Then we see a funeral

17 The first two verses are as follows: “Mithras, God of the morning, our trumpets awaken the wall! / ‘Rome is above nations, but thou art over all’ / Now as the names are answered, and the guards marched away / Mithras, also a soldier, give us strength of the day! // Mithras, God of the sunset, low on the western main / Thou descending immortal, immortal to rise again! / now, when the watch is ended, now when the wine is drawn / Mithras, also a soldier, keep us pure til dawn!” (Ancient Rites, 2006).

18 The first five verses are as follows: “God of Thunder / Who crack the sky / Swing your hammer / Way up high // In chariot of gold / Ride across the clouds / The black storm is unfold / Burning mist is but a shroud // Seeds and honey / Milk and blood / A sacrifice / To thunder god // Laid in ship of oak / On final sail to fate / Steel is at side / Drifting to the open gates of // Valhalla / Shields of gold / Valhalla / Great warriors hall” (Bathory, 1990).



Image 7. Bathory: Blood, Fire, Death, 1988



Image 8. Amon Amarth:
With Oden on Our Side, 2006

rite, mainly restored from ship burials and the promised heaven for warriors, called Valhalla, where only those can dwell until the end of days who died in battle (Lindow, 2001: 308). The song moulds living beliefs of the Nordic societies that could also be found in contemporary Neo-Pagan Odinism and the Asatrú.

Bathory's fascination with traditional Scandinavian culture is taken on a higher level in the cover artwork of *Image 7*, as it is based on the painting of Peder Nicolai Arbo (Norwegian Romantic painter of the 19th century) entitled *Asgardsreien*, depicting the flight of Odin and his host.

Amon Amarth, once again of Sweden – although they do not like the label of “Viking metal” (see the linked interview with Johan Hegg in the “Literature” section) –, use Viking content in all their lyrics. Their 2011 album *Surtur Rising* deals with the events of Ragnarök (Twilight of the Gods), or the Viking apocalypse and end-of-the-world myth. The song *Destroyer of the Universe*¹⁹ is the self-introduction of the fire giant Surtur on the battlefield of Ragnarök. His self-depiction gives an authentic picture according to Prose Edda (Lindow, 2001: 282), clearly stating his allegiance against the gods and enumerating his weaponry.

Their usage of authentic archaeological material can also be traced in their artworks. In the background of the title and band name featured in *Image 8*, a horseman and a symbol can be seen. Both of them (Odin on his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, and the Valknut) are taken from at least a thousand-year-old depictions and runic stone inscriptions (compare Tjängvide image stone).

The last Viking band to deal with in this present paper is Týr from the Faroese Islands. The programme of the band is quite similar to Amon Amarth's, but while Amon Amarth plays melodic death metal without folk influences, Týr plays progressive folk metal with only metal instruments (no folk instruments as usual for many bands of the same genre). The song *Ragnarök*²⁰ once again gives an insight into the minds of mythological figures. The einherjer, the souls of warriors who died in battle, march to war against the armies of darkness on the day of Ragnarök. Like in the case of *Romulus*, this insight creates a film-like scenery, showing the imagined mighty einherjer to be afraid of the coming battle. Events of the fight are not listed, only the psychological imagination is stressed.

19 The first two verses are as follows: “I rise up from Muspelheim / My fury is sublime / The sword I bring burns violently / With wild and lethal flames // I march against the Asa gods / To bring the end of time / I am pure and endless pain / And Surtur is my name” (Amon Amarth, 2011).

20 The first two English verses are as follows: “Revenge returns to us, this returns to me / We are bound to battle for eternity / The wolf restrained in chains, dragon in the deep I see / This war will throw us corpses in a heap // With heavy hearts we head, on towards the end / I've done all I can, never will I bend / Battle clad we ride, over barren land / Nothing matters on the battlefield we stand” (Týr, 2006).

3.6. Hungarian Folk Tales and Romanian Spirituality

Before drawing the conclusions, some regional topics ought to be considered. The rich tradition of Hungarian folk tales and history has its own musical representation. Two prominent, Hungarian bands, famous throughout Europe, are going to be introduced: Sear Bliss of black metal underground and Dalriada of the folk metal movement. Shamanistic and pre-Christian Hungarian tradition often can be traced in the works of Sear Bliss, both in lyrics and artworks. Their debut album, *Phantoms* (1996), contains the track *1100 years ago*,²¹ which is the first example in this paper to be openly anti-Christian. 1100 years prior to 1996 is the year 896, the date of Hungarian tribes to conquer the Carpathian Basin. From that point on, the Hungarian tribes were drawn under the increasing influence of Christianity; thus, in an anti-Christian, anti-clerical way, the golden age ended with that symbolic event. As the text indicates, the song is a saga from the 11th century, the century of the official baptizing of the Hungarian Kingdom. The violent pictures presented in the text show a resistance against Christianity crying for the times before 896. Everything is driven upside down in these images: e.g. the Apostles and the Holy Trinity are prosecuted, not the witches.

In the same warrior-like manner is the Szekler mythical hero Prince Csaba depicted in *Image 9*. According to legend, Prince Csaba saves Szeklerland from its enemies in a time of need. In the picture, the enemy below have banners with crosses, strongly suggesting that Christianity is the final enemy needed to be defeated.

The second Hungarian band, Dalriada, uses classical Hungarian poetry (like the works of János Arany) and folk tales as a base for their lyrics. Their 2008 song *A Nap és Szél Háza* (House of Sun and Wind) is a musical version of the creation tale of the star constellation known as the Pleiades. The tale comes from the Moldavian *Csángó* ethnical group, connected to Hungarian folk tradition. The verbal form of the tale is available as a record (Bakos, 2008). The song follows accurately the narrative of the tale dealing with all its major and minor details.

Last but not least, one of Romania's pioneer metal bands, Negură Bunget, is the flagship of Central European natural mysticism. The testimony of the band's homepage (<http://www.negurabunget.com>) draws certain parallels with the ideologies of Norwegian black metal. Norwegian black metal at its foundations is the primordial Satanist metal music, but it has also a strand of natural mysticism, including prominent bands like Satyricon or Immortal (von Helden, 2011: 114–

21 The first two verses are as follows: “‘Oh my lord, let us fire up every church / Oh my lord, let us break every bell / Oh my lord, let us kill every priest’ / (11th century saga, Hungary) // Witches burn the twelve holy disciples / Christian believers frozen in blood / On the darkest infernal day / On the dawn of eternal funeral / The holy trinity burns on the stake / Faith of our heart, the only sign is immortal” (Sear Bliss, 1996).



Image 9. Sear Bliss: The Arcane Odyssey, 2007

123). Nature is a place where everything is perfect and untouched, bears a certain nostalgia and a factor of romanticism. It is the same concept behind the natural-mystical lyrics of Negură Bunget, as it is stated by the headman of the group, Negru (2015). This approach using mostly folklore for inspiration does not sink back to a past that has no direct living successor today but breathes from a live atmosphere and tradition that fuels respect for the rural and resistance against the urban, once again drawing a distinction between light and dark.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Classification

Taking a further look at the texts and arts listed above, some clear patterns may be drawn. First of all, the lyrics should be put into different categories according to their modes and literal tonalities. The myths, whether they are used in their entirety or only partially, show the reading and new horizons created by the musicians. The sub-classification of texts may be the following:

- 1) romantic-nostalgic lyrics: Bathory, Ancient Rites, Dalriada, Negură Bunget;
- 2) violence-driven lyrics: Nile, Amon Amarth, Sear Bliss;

- 3) psychological-insight-driven lyrics: Ex Deo, Týr;
- 4) hidden-message-driven lyrics: Therion, Orphaned Land.

Other classifications may be appropriate as well. In case of group 1), a clear, storytelling mode is presented, with an effort to reproduce the atmosphere of a certain myth. Group 2) works with explicit images of violence with a similar goal as groups 1) and 4).²² Group 3) steps a bit away from the pace of the myths and imagines the inner world of the figures presented, whether being an *eponymous hero* or a nameless warrior in the final battle. Group 4) uses the myth to transfer a new message, actualizes the problem of the ancient world, and actualizes the problem of the present day, exchanging concept, showing that thousand-year-old texts deal with the same questions as today's people – or that many thousands of years ago humanity faced the same fears as we face now.

4.2. The Carnival of Extreme Metal – Summary

The examinations above naturally represent only a small section of the wide world of mythological metal music. Other cultures could have been listed as well, but our aim was only to give an introduction and show the most important ways of mythological lyrics writing. All the lyrics and artworks rely deeply on the phenomenon of the *demonic* described by Northrop Frye. The demonic in its nature is a stranger for civilized society. The core concept behind the usage of the demonic can be found in the carnival of heavy metal (Halnon, 2006: 33–48). Based on the carnival concept of Mikhail Bakhtin (Bahtyin, 2002: 12–21), heavy and extreme metal music serve as a place where all the frustrations and aggression of everyday life can explode in a frame of control. This carnivalesque feature gives one answer to the question: why mythology and why extreme metal? In many cases of the lyrics, we see violence- and aggression-driven myths as inspirations creating on every level the impression pointing at the commonplace that heavy and extreme metal are out of societal norms. Yet, it must be kept in mind that not only heavy and extreme metal work with the *demonic* and the *carnival* (Fiske, 2011: 56–82). Contemporary popular cinematography has its own genres for horror and thrill; in recent years, for mythology as well. It is enough if we think about the direct mythological movies e.g. *Troy* (2004) or *Clash of the Titans* (2010) using Greek mythology or *Noah* (2014) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) inspired by the Old Testament or *Gods of Egypt* (2016) based on classical Egyptian myths. Compared to other popular arts, if we tend to take a closer look at not just the musical extremities but the artworks and texts, it will be clear that extreme music is not only an instrument of hate but of reviving ancient lore that has a meaning for the present-day man as well.

22 In case of Sear Bliss, the message is the concept of anti-Christianity.

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