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*The Reception of Biblical and Mythological Patterns in  
the Lyrics of Extreme Metal Music*

*Doctoral (PhD) dissertation summary*

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## I. Background and research questions

Heavy and extreme metal music – since the birth of the genre (the early 1970s) – is constantly addressed with aggression, hate, violence and the despising of values. The commonsense mostly established from the outside of metal music, only referring to the distorted sounds and occasionally caught lyrics fragments; since the 1990s is a relevant academic topic for researchers of various origin, e.g. sociologists, musicologists, historians, psychologists or scholars of literature and religion. In the last 25 years a host of books, articles and occasionally thematic conferences tended to get a deeper understanding in the different dimensions of metal music regarding their fields, under representing the importance of lyrics.

As metal music is a product of the counter culture of the 1970s and a parallel in manner to the New Religious Movements and New Age Cults (referring to the rebellious attitude towards Western culture and society), the impact of the cultural changes can be found in the textual layers of metal music. Our thesis is that the movement that could be named as “*mythological metal*” is a designated movement within metal music that shapes and fills the genre with creative power based on knowledge and conscious endeavour to revitalize ancient cultural heritage for today’s listeners.

Generally the subgenres of metal music are named after their sonic attributes and features, thus e.g. black and thrash metal or power metal are labelled with the sound and not the other elements of the whole work of art. During the late 1990s and early 2000s the genre of Viking metal started to arise, and as a genre that bears certain resemblances to folk metal – with extensive focus on the Nordic cultural heritage – many bands that do not follow the folk metal line and play metal music that’s lyrics are entwined with the Viking culture are nevertheless labelled Viking metal. Thus Viking and in many cases pagan metal as well, are genres that are named after their lyrical programme rather than their musical one.

In this regard, the term “*mythological metal*” could be applied to all metal bands and songs that contain any reference to mythologies, tales or legends. The label is originating from the 2005 compilation album of US’s Absu, entitled *Mythological Occult Metal*. As our interest did not focus much on occultism (that is a worthy topic as well) thus solely “*mythological metal*” remains to create a label.

## II. Methodology

In accordance of our interest we have established a three-pillar system to analyse and understand the working mechanisms of “*mythological metal*”: 1) metal studies; 2) literary theory; 3) history of religions.

1) *Metal studies*: the academic interest in the subculture of heavy and extreme metal (known as metal studies) originates from the border of the 1980s and 1990s. Since then metal studies evolved to be an interdisciplinary umbrella term for the traditional movement of humanities and social sciences that focus on the world of metal music. To list some examples: sociology, musicology, history of music, anthropology all gathered scholars who are interested in the subculture, examining the music, the community and the performance in details, in many cases giving less stress for the study of lyrics. The generalized overviews on metal music and popular culture led us to the assumption that all expression forms of metal music are layered with the interest in power, rebellion and madness.

2) *Literary theory*: with the general conceptualization of metal music we are able to close on the world of its lyrics. Although the semantic quality of metal lyrics does not reach the level of high literature, we may not deny that these popular texts bear the same features as all other written artefacts. As our main interest in connection with the textuality of “*mythological metal*” is the reception of ancient and religious topics thus reception and

reading theory were our first station. The works of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish introduced the problems of reading and the forming of canon. Northrop Frye let us sink into the duality of religious scripture, while Richard Shusterman and Mikhail Bakhtin introduced us the concepts of the somatic or corporeal dimensions of metal music and the interest towards the grotesque within it. Altogether with the weapons and arms offered by the named literary theorists we faced the next problem: the actual mythological contents.

3) *History of religions*: the revitalization of ancient religious phenomena is not an invention of our contemporary times but originates back to medieval mysticism, renaissance alchemy and 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century occultism. The accumulation of Neopaganism, New Age Cults and New Religious Movements are the scenery for “*mythological metal*”. A brief overview on the development of the named religious ideas served as a third pillar to analyse the designated topic.

Throughout the dissertation all mythological topics, cultures and themes (in order: Satanism and Christianity, Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Israel, Greek-Roman Antiquity, Viking paganism, Celtic heritage) are introduced in short contextualizing sections, followed by the individual analyses of a complete list of 85 items, and a host of bands’ names revitalizing the lore of the listed cultures.

### III. Results

After the considerate analyses of the enumerated corpus (that is only a selection from the most typical songs of the related topic, as a complete collection would be impossible in the constantly developing world of metal music) three different layers of categorization are drawn up: 1) the categorization of myths by main theme/motif 2) the categorization of lyrics

by main feature/approach 3) the depth of sinking into the world of ancient cultures of a certain piece or band.

1) *The categorization of myths by main theme/motif*: seven different categories were observed amongst the most popular myths that inspire metal musicians. On the peak of the chart stay two: a) the cult or figure of a deity; and b) myths focusing on warfare and heroism. The seconds in the list are c) the myths of creation; and d) the figures that rebel against divine power. After these comes e) the myths of death and the afterlife; and f) the ones focusing on the end of the world<sup>1</sup> and last but not least g) romance and tragedy.

2) *The categorization of lyrics by main feature/approach*: four categories were defined. A) (Anti-) Christian (-Religious) content, containing 15 titles; b) Retelling of a story, containing 33 titles; c) rewriting or expansion of a story, containing 18 titles; d) actualization of a story, containing 19 titles.

3) *The depth of sinking into the world of ancient cultures of a certain piece or band*: five levels were defined. Level 1) Usage of mythological/religious topics as an inspiration for a band's or musician's stage name, containing 33 items; level 2) Usage of mythological topics as an inspiration for a band's album title, containing 32 items; level 3) Song (or complete album) dedicated to mythological topics, containing 72 items; level 4) Mythological text cited in translation or in original, containing 9 items. Level 5) Ancient ritual scenery used during performances is the fifth layer that was not analysed in the dissertation but is a great starting point for further researches.

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<sup>1</sup> N.b. Satanist and Christian topics are excluded from this list.

As an overall and general summary of the dissertation's results we can state, that the topics chosen and the rhetoric used for interpreting different mythological and religious topics, and the overall proposed genre of "*mythological metal*" is a coherent part of the code of heavy and extreme metal, stressing the foundation values of power and rebellion. The close reading of the lyrics proved as well for us that in a musically driven subculture the importance of textuality may be underestimated. The closing analysis of interviews in connection with the motivations behind the reception of mythological topics in metal lyrics showed us, that in many cases the lyrics have the same importance as music, even using the music to be a vessel to contain the actualized message of an ancient myth. In further researches the pictorial side (e.g. album covers, band photos, etc.) of "*mythological metal*" may serve with many interesting points as well, not forgetting the musical and performative aspects of scene that together may serve us the whole picture on the proposed genre.

#### IV. Publications related to the research topic

- *Vallásközi párbeszéd a (metal) zene nyelvén – Az Orphaned Land karrierje = Vidimus enim stellam eius...*, ed. SZÁVAY László, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2011, 100-108.
- *Rajtunk a Vízözön – Egy ősi történet új funkcióban?* (co-author: KŐSZEGHY Miklós), *Egyháztörténeti Szemle*, 13/1 (2012), 25-45.
- *Kozmogónia és theogónia Tolkien világában – Az Ainulindale és a Valaquentia mitológiai rétegei = J.R.R. Tolkien: Fantázia és erkölcs*, ed. dr. PÖDÖR Dóra, NAGY Andrea, FÜZESSY Tamás, Budapest, Magyar Tolkien Társaság, 2012, 37-47.
- *Prometheus, avagy a posztmodern Frankenstein. Áthallások: mítosz, film, irodalom*, *Apertúra*, 2015, Spring (accessible: <http://uj.apertura.hu/2015/tavasz-nyar/fej-es-prometheus-avagy-a-posztmodern-frankenstein-athallasok-mitosz-film-irodalom/>)
- *With the Music of Satan on the Side of God – The Aesthetics of Christian Metal Music = Hiszek, hogy megértsem*, ed. GÉR András László, JENEI Péter, ZILA Gábor, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2015, 301-308.
- *Mesopotamian Magic and Demonology in the Lyrics of Melechesh = ICONEA 2012-2015*, ed. Richard DUMBRILL, London, ICONEA Publications, 2016, 1-12.
- *Modern skáldok*, *Szépirodalmi Figyelő*, 2017/3, 47-58.
- *Strangers of Popular Culture – The Verbal and Pictorial Aesthetics of Mythological Metal Music*, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Communicatio (De Gruyter Open)*, 2017 (4), 37-60.