

Barbarians and Literature - Viking Metal and its Links to Old Norse Mythology

Imke von Helden

Viking Metal originated in the late 1980s in Scandinavian countries, pioneered by the Swedish Death Metal Band *Bathory*. It was further developed and coined by Norway's *Enslaved* who combine Viking topics with a special "Northern" sound. Viking Metal in respect of content is focused on the Viking Age, Old Norse mythology and pre-Christian religions. Bands like *Amon Amarth*, *Enslaved* and *Týr* are increasingly popular among metal fans all over the world and will render the basis for my analysis.

The following essay renders an analysis of the reception of Old Norse mythology in Viking Metal music in terms of both lyrics and cover artworks. Viking Metal bands adopt and reinterpret saga themes, stories and characters, mainly taken from the Eddas. Heroic or romantic imagery plays an important role among metal bands in general. Strong Viking warriors in chain mail and leather as well as scenes of assumedly everyday Viking life in Northern landscapes can be found in many cover booklets.

1 Viking Metal

Subjects in Heavy Metal as analysed by Deena Weinstein involve a tendency towards Dionysic pleasures on the one hand, and chaos on the other.¹ Hyper-masculinity, excess and images of heroic warriors can already be found in the lyrics of early Heavy Metal bands like *Yngwie Malmsteen* and *Manowar*. Other qualities that reach throughout other bands' contents engage motifs of freedom, masculinity, adventure and fantasy imagery and stories.² There is a superficial identification with Viking strength and barbarism.

Viking Metal is a comparatively young branch of Heavy Metal music. It is difficult to define this Metal subgenre precisely, because it is - apart from anthem-like choruses - not to be defined by the kind of music. The music resulted from the already Scandinavian-coined genres Black and Death Metal. It is furthermore closely linked to another subgenre called Pagan Metal, which deals mainly with Pagan religions and lies in a broader context where not only Old Norse mythology is dealt with, but also Celtic myths and history, fairy tales and other elements of folklore. Traditional instruments like the violin or flute are used more often in Pagan than in Viking Metal music.

There are certain ideas connected to the music. Music journals identify *Bathory*'s "Blood Fire Death" as the first Viking Metal piece³, because of the cover artwork and identification of mastermind Quorthon with

his Viking ancestors. The link between Scandinavian musicians and their Viking ancestors is often stressed in promotion and interviews.

Only five years after “Blood Fire Death”, Norwegian Enslaved took up the subject of their barbarian ancestors and their literature in both lyrics and imagery (cover artwork, band photos). There were several other bands that followed this idea. The style of music was very Black Metal-oriented. During the 1990s, Swedish *Amon Amarth* added a new dimension to the definition of Viking Metal by means of their Death Metal style of music.

There are two kinds of approaches to the Viking motif in Viking Metal: One approach is concerned mainly with cultivating an image of strength and barbarism which romanticises the subject and displays an escapist touch. Like Trafford and Pluskowski state in their essay on “Antichrist Superstars”, “what matters is what they stand for in popular cultural terms”⁴. The other approach puts much more emphasis on being historically correct and deal with Old Norse mythology as the sole focus of their lyrics and identity. Both approaches stress their personal links to the Vikings as their ancestors.⁵

Many musicians turned away from the Black Metal-linked Satanism of the early 1990s - when young Norwegian musicians burned down medieval stave churches - to Viking motifs and more indistinct allusions to “old gods”⁶ and the subject of Christian oppression. Except for some figures, there is no close link between Nordic religions and the Black and Viking Metal scene respectively, but there is an occult tradition in Nordic religions.⁷ Heathen religions like Odinism have never constituted a vital part of Viking Metal. Consequently, the ideology of Viking Metal is not at all homogeneous. There are many ideas about what constitutes Viking Metal: descent or music, image, ideology or historical correctness.

2 Barbarians and Literature

The reception of Old Norse literature in Heavy Metal music in general is closely linked to the pre-Christian Scandinavian cultural heritage and tradition. These aspects of content and imagery thus cultivate a certain romantic, escapist image.

Considering the content of the lyrics, allusions to Old Norse mythology are frequently employed by Viking Metal bands. As the following examples will demonstrate, hardly any other subjects and motifs can be found in the lyrics. Saga material is being retold and reinterpreted, sometimes even quoted literally in the songs. Fascination for native folklore and tradition as well as primal energies within man is being displayed.⁸ Christian oppression is a recurring motif, too, especially in Viking Metal texts. Some musicians also involve racist ideology in their lyrics, as seen in the case of *Burzum*. Today, most bands dissociate themselves from right-wing ideologies. Another very important aspect in terms of lyrics is the portrayal of Northern

nature in order to create an atmosphere of bleakness and untamed nature, which underlines the Viking motifs. In contrast to musicians who studied mythology and linguistics, there are various bands that promote stereotypical views on the Viking Age and Norse mythology. Within the Metal scene, diffuse ideas about Vikings who fight against Christian oppression and who are associated with stereotypical qualities and attributes like heroism, bravery and masculinity have established themselves and continue to fascinate a considerable number of Metal fans.

Like in Old Norse mythology⁹, alcohol plays an important role in both lyrics and promotion of Viking Metal which also affects the bands' image. Apart from beer and other drinks mentioned in Norse sagas, it was mead that made its way into the texts and, what is more, into the Metal concert halls of Europe.¹⁰

Moreover, the lyrics are often written in Nordic languages like Norwegian, Old Norse and Swedish. There are also examples in Finnish and Faroese. There are, of course, also many texts written in English, to be able to ensure and enhance the understanding of the texts by fans.

Nearly all lyrics of the Swedish band *Amon Amarth* cover mythology and the Viking Age. Founded in Stockholm in 1992, the band has currently established itself as one of the leading Death Metal bands in Europe.¹¹ The band members lay much emphasis on a Viking image rather than a correct historical context. They state that they - as opposed to right wing enthusiasts - are merely interested in mythology and the Viking Age because of their personal interest in their own ancestral roots. They adapt stories like the famous saga about the loss of Thor's hammer, rewrite the saga from another perspective and even make own additions to the plot. *Amon Amarth*'s lyrics predominantly deal with momentary pictures of Viking warfare with different focuses: Christian oppression, revenge, sea-faring, heroism and details of people dying are recurrent motifs on every single one of the band's seven albums. The lyrics concentrate on blood, fire, death, heroes and tough, brave men that continue fighting with knives stuck in their backs. Old Norse mythology is only used peripherally. There is much talk of Oðinn as Allfather and prayers to him. Furthermore, there are lyrics that deal with Norns (a complete album actually, "The Fate of Norns") and very few allusions to actual historical events, like the war of King Olaf against the Irish.

Enslaved from Western Norway released their first album *Vikingligr Veldi* in 1993. Their early albums concentrated entirely on Old Norse mythology and eventually established the Scandinavian Viking Metal scene. Several lyrics include descriptions of Old Norse gods and attributes and stories connected with them, for example the song "Heimdallr", in which the reader is informed about the most important characteristics of the *Æsir* god.

Other means of applying mythology involve references to heathen deities in idiomatic expressions (“Kingdom of the Hammer” meaning Norway in the song “Living beneath the Hammer”). There are stories of ancestors coming to land where there are extensive descriptions of nature, the characteristic shore and the rough climate. Because of the newly upcoming trend of uncritically applying mythology in Viking and Pagan Metal lyrics, the band dissociate themselves from the term and accuses other bands of using slogans in a stereotypical way. *Enslaved*’s Ivar Bjørnson states that his interest in his ancestral roots was aroused by his seeing himself in the larger context of the world as a whole and helps to understand and not be afraid of foreign cultures.¹² Consequently, the new albums since “Monumension” (2001) seem philosophical rather than mythology-oriented.

Týr from the Faroese islands, on the contrary, are very popular with Viking and Pagan Metal fans today and can be witnessed at nearly every Metal festival in Europe and even at some in the USA.¹³ They adapt old Faroese ballads and famous melodies from their country and are proud of their origins which can be traced back to the 16th century. As opposed to other bands, singer and guitar player Heri Joensen states that he would like to organise a heathen organisation on the Faroese islands and feels strongly connected to heathen religion.¹⁴ Several lyrics are written in Faroese and translated into English. However, there are also a number of English lyrics.

Imagery plays a vital role in Heavy Metal. Visual media like CD cover designs, band photographs, merchandise and web site designs are all used to cultivate image. Many Black and Death Metal bands favour martial images of violence, weapons and battlefields.

The cover artwork of the majority of bands, for example, is not exclusively based on the material culture of the Viking age. Martial imagery is also favoured on a broad basis, but not always used in a historically correct manner.¹⁵ This combines with the fascination for ancestral roots (cf. Pagan Metal) and pre-Christian heritage, expressed visually through mythology (symbols, runes and saga characters) and aesthetics of Northern landscapes.

Barbaric image in appearance and demeanour, like in Black Metal is another important means of self-representation.¹⁶ The image of strong male warriors who defend their homes and families and fight bravely is promoted widely. Most bands try to convey their vision of a glorious past which in most cases does not have much in common with historical facts. Images like this can be found on several cover artworks of *Amon Amarth*. Their album covers are dominated by fire on a dark background. The albums “Versus the World” and “The Crusher” show a warrior in loincloth, fighting unknown dangers. *Enslaved*’s cover of “Eld”¹⁷ shows the singer of the band in Viking clothing and chain mail, with a drinking horn and a sword in his hands. Around his neck is a pendant of Mjølner, more commonly known as Thor’s

hammer.¹⁸ *Týr* also apply battlefield aesthetics and combine them with seafaring romantics.¹⁹

Scandinavian people tend to have a very strong attachment to nature (which plays a very important role within the Viking Metal scene). *Unleashed*'s singer Johnny Hedlund says in an interview with Moynihan/Søderlind, that

“the influences that I have are actually from my ancestors and from sitting in the countryside and feeling the power of nature – just by sitting there knowing that my grandfather’s, father’s father was standing here with his sword...by knowing that you are influenced from it.”²⁰

This corresponds with *Enslaved*'s cover artwork of “Blodhemn”²¹, which shows the band members standing on the shore, surrounded by rocks, dressed in Viking clothing and armed with swords. The background is made up of the sea and a drifting Viking longship underneath the outlines of a gigantic human skull that appears to be hovering in a darkening sky.

3 Conclusion

What do barbarians have to do with literature? The main focus of most Scandinavian Viking and Pagan Metal bands are their own cultural roots. They can be distinguished by their different approaches to Norse mythology. On the one hand, there are bands like *Enslaved* and *Týr*, who adopt a critical and well-informed perspective at their own history and even study the subject at university. On the other hand, there are bands like *Amon Amarth*, who claim they have not even really read the sagas²², and who utilise Old Norse mythology as an overall image carrier that is as famous among Metal fans all over the world as it is popular. In the Scandinavian countries themselves, bands like *Enslaved* are well known even among “normal” people and their international success is being reported in newspapers and on TV. Norwegian media channel NRK proudly writes about the band’s success and labels the members keepers of the cultural heritage.²³ Considering that a few years earlier some of the band’s members were active in Norway’s Black Metal scene, which was commonly associated with church burnings and periodic outbursts of violence, this positive media reaction may appear rather strange. However, it also serves to illustrate that the Scandinavian peoples’ passion for their cultural identity is not limited to the Viking Metal scene.

Influenced by their Scandinavian idols, ancestral imagery nowadays functions without boundaries: Swiss Pagan-Folk Metal band *Eluveitie* successfully stress their Celtic roots in music, image and lyrics. The extent of

the Scandinavian influence becomes clear when reading about German bands like *Drautan* who write songs in Norwegian.

Notes

- ¹ D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology*, Lexington, New York, 1991, p.18.
- ² S Trafford & A Pluskowski, 'Antichrist Superstars. The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal' in D W Marshall (ed), *Mass Market Medieval. Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, McFarland, London, 2007, p.61.
- ³ B T Jaschinski, 'Laenderspecial Schweden', *The Legacy Chronicles: Pagan Fire*. special issue of Devil Inc. Presseverlag, Saarbrücken, 2007, p.66.
- ⁴ Trafford & Pluskowski, op.cit., p. 61.
- ⁵ ibid., p. 63.
- ⁶ M Moynihan & D Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos. The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, (new edition). Feral House, Los Angeles, 2003, p.207.
- ⁷ ibid., pp. 205, 237.
- ⁸ ibid., p. 199.
- ⁹ G Kreutzer, 'Bier, Met und Wein- Aspekte des Alkoholismus im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien', in K Brynhildsvoll (ed), *ÜberBrücken. Festschrift für Ulrich Groenke zum 65. Geburtstag*, Buske, Hamburg, 1989.
- ¹⁰ Result of field research on the *Pagan Fest 2008* and *Summerbreeze Open Air 2008*.
- ¹¹ Biography on band homepage
- ¹² C Wachter, 'Enslaved. Jenseits von Vergangenheit und Zukunft', *The Legacy Chronicles*, op.cit., pp.58-59.
- ¹³ *Pagan Fest Tour 2008* with Moonsorrow, Ensiferum, Eluveitie and Týr.
- ¹⁴ B T Jaschinski, 'Týr. Zwischen Tyr und Angel(n)', *The Legacy Chronicles*, op.cit., pp.130-131.
- ¹⁵ Trafford & Pluskowski, op.cit., p. 67.
- ¹⁶ Moynihan & Söderlind, op.cit., p. 201.
- ¹⁷ Norwegian for 'Fire'.
- ¹⁸ Trafford & Pluskowski, op.cit., p.67.
- ¹⁹ Týr: 'Land' and 'Ragnarok'.
- ²⁰ Moynihan & Söderlind, op.cit., 203.
- ²¹ Norwegian for 'Revenge in Blood'.
- ²² "Ragnarök aktuell - Asgards Wächter melden Vollzug." Interview with Amon Amarth in *Legacy* 4/2008.
- ²³ M Solbakken, 'Norske satanrockere topper New York Times', NRK <<http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/1.3985829>> 08.11.2007.

Bibliography

Kreutzer, G., 'Bier, Met und Wein- Aspekte des Alkoholismus im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien' in K. Brynhildsvoll (ed), *ÜberBrücken. Festschrift für Ulrich Groenke zum 65. Geburtstag*. Buske, Hamburg, 1989.
 Moynihan, M. & Söderlind, D., *Lords of Chaos. The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (new edition). Feral House, Los Angeles, 2003.
 Trafford, S. & Pluskowski, A., 'Antichrist Superstars. The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal.' in D. W. Marshall (ed), *Mass Market Medieval. Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*. McFarland, London, 2007, pp. 57-73.
 Weinstein, D., *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology*. Lexington, New York, 1991.

Magazines

Kohl, U., 'Ragnarök aktuell - Asgrads Wächter melden Vollzug.' *Legacy* #4/2008, pp.16-18.
The Legacy Chronicles: Pagan Fire. special issue of Devil Inc. Presseverlags Vol 1. Saarbrücken, 04/2007.

Internet

Amon Amarth homepage <<http://www.amonamarth.com>>. 03.09.2008.
 Solbakken, M., 'Norske satanrockere topper New York Times.' NRK <<http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/1.3985829>>. 08.11.2007.

Discography

Amon Amarth: The Fate of Norns. Metal Blade, 2004.
Bathory: Blood Fire Death. Black Mark, 1988.
Enslaved: Blodhemn. Osmose Productions, 1998.
 -: *Monumension*. Osmose Productions, 2001.
 -: *Vikingligr Veldi*. Moonfog Productions, 1993.
Týr: Ragnarok. Napalm Records, 2006.
 -. *Land*. Napalm Records, 2008.

Imke von Helden is postgraduate at Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg (Department for Scandinavian Studies) in Germany. She writes her dissertation on the role of Old Norse mythology and folkloric tradition in the Viking and Pagan Metal scene.