

Scandinavian Metal Attack - The Power of Northern Europe in Extreme Metal

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Abstract

The powerful and globally acknowledged metal scene of Scandinavia - or the North to include Finland - has been growing steadily ever since the early days of extreme metal in the 1980s. There are numerous examples of Northern influence within the metal scene, ranging from German and Russian bands that write their lyrics in Norwegian and Swedish to whole websites on Nordic metal music¹ and an all-metal-fan-group of Italian students who attend a Norwegian language course because it's *the* black metal language.

The present paper aims to show that national and even local identities play a vital role in the globalised music culture of heavy metal. Exemplarily, it investigates the impact Scandinavian or Nordic metal bands made during the early days of extreme metal and follows the history of subgenres in extreme metal that primarily deal with aspects of Northern identity. The essay leads from Bathory to black and death metal and from there to the smaller subgenres of viking and pagan metal. It is suggested that the influence does not only exist in terms of music, but also in terms of topics, culture and the extent to which national origin is relevant for Nordic metal regarding music and promotion.

Key words: Identity, globalisation, Northern Europe, viking metal, pagan metal, Enslaved, Amorphis, Bathory.

1. Scandinavian Metal Attack

Worldwide, the heavy metal movement has known ground-breaking and seminal waves. They included the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, the Bay Area thrash metal explosion and the first wave of black metal. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw two subgenre developments in countries that were known musically at best for producing mainstream bands like Europe or ABBA; welfare states that year after year attract hundreds of thousands of tourists and that are famous for children's literature like *Pippi Longstocking*² or *Karius and Bactus*³. "Nordic Metal" today, especially when it comes to viking and pagan metal, is a trademark and a bestseller.

The ball started rolling in 1984, when Tyfon Grammofon, a Swedish label, released the compilation *Scandinavian Metal Attack*, featuring bands from Sweden and Finland.⁴ Among them were Bathory, hitherto completely unheard of. However, *Scandinavian Metal Attack* brought them into the ranks of highly successful metal bands and marked the start of the Scandinavian metal scenes' success all over the world. Bathory, along with already well-known Venom from the UK, thus became one of the precursors of the Norwegian black metal movement. In their beginnings, Bathory followed their models Venom regarding music, lyrics and cover artwork, especially on their first three albums.⁵ However, in 1988, they discovered Scandinavia's culture for their lyrics and imagery and with *Blood Fire Death*⁶ laid the foundation for various scenic movements that are famous worldwide even today, more than 20 years later. The famous trilogy was completed by the albums *Hammerheart*⁷ and *Twilight of the Gods*⁸ that, like their predecessor, dealt with the Scandinavian countries' cultural legacy. Apart from still blasphemous contents, the lyrics depict Northern landscapes and battles, creating a dark and tense atmosphere, for example in 'Oden's Ride over Nordland'⁹. The way of living in the Viking Age including fighting, raids and death rituals as well as first references to Norse mythology carried the metaler off to long lost times. The imagery on these three albums changed dramatically from satanic elements to romantic oil paintings, often depicting martial scenes of the Viking age as cover artworks. The imagery also included iconography of fascism and National Socialism, like the sun wheel on *Hammerheart*, originally in black, white and red - the Nazi colours.¹⁰ The music also changed "from frenzied cacophony to orchestrated, melodic bombast"¹¹ and the music arrangements became more epic in that the songs were noticeably orchestrated like in classical music and that the vocals were understandable, often accompanied by chanted choral backdrops.

While bands like Mayhem, Emperor and Darkthrone further developed the genre of black metal to more extreme and brutal dimensions both sonically and lyrically, they influenced fellow bands, especially in Norway. Elements of classical music in terms of arrangements came into the genre, developing symphonic black metal. From this point on, the metal scenes in the Nordic countries developed rapidly. Meanwhile, the death metal scene in Sweden came into being that produced internationally highly successful acts like Entombed, Dismember and Hypocrisy. In Finland, bands like Amorphis, Children of Bodom and Sentenced came into being.

It was in these countries that both national and local cultural roots moved into artists' focus. From black metal, viking metal arose, highly coined by its progenitors Enslaved and Einherjer from Norway. Both were among the first metal bands to introduce lyrics in their native language, Norwegian. Enslaved produced an entire album in the language of the Eddas, Old Norse.¹² Though most viking metal bands have a black metal

background, viking metal is defined by topics rather than music. That is why death metal bands like Amon Amarth and Unleashed are often included in the league of viking metal bands.

Thematically as well as in terms of music, pagan metal is more varied than viking metal. The lyrics cover a variety of subjects from nature to racist ideas. References to the Eddas or mythology, among other elements, play a certain role in pagan metal, too. Highly influenced by bands like Skyclad from the UK that worked predominantly with elements of folk music in metal, Finnish bands like Korpiklaani, Finntroll or Ensiferum coined the genre to considerable extent by employing elements from their traditional music like Yoik or Humppa.

2. Vikings, Humppa, Party-Trolls: Aspects of Cultural Identity

How do Nordic musicians deal with their culture in their lyrics? What do they regard as important? What roles do common cultural subjects like history, literature or even the northern European climate zone play? As already indicated, among the main ingredients in viking and pagan metal lyrics and imagery are the following: untamed nature and the strength you need to survive in it, the Vikings and masculinity, fairytales on trolls and other creatures, alcohol (especially mead and vodka), Pagan/ Heathen religions or rituals and epic music, fitting the landscape. A closer look at some selected examples shows that the topics - still strongly influenced by the sonic dimension of "Satanic" bands - changed from dark and occult lyrics to Vikings and a Heathen past. As Trafford and Pluskowski put it:

[...] and, in the 1990s, many other bands and fans began to turn away from Satan and place their faith in the Vikings, and more specifically in Oðin, as the foremost champions of opposition to Christianity."¹³

Literature from the past is often utilised in pagan and viking metal in equal measure. In the majority of cases, the Eddas and other material from Old Norse mythology are employed. In Finland, Amorphis employ ideas and images from the national epos *Kalevala*¹⁴ and *Kanteletar*¹⁵ in their lyrics. Finntroll, on the other hand, help themselves to fairytale characters, mostly trolls, and insert sounds from the forest in their music.¹⁶

Often, the bands' native languages are used, sometimes even Old Norse. One of the earliest viking metal bands is Enslaved from Haugesund, Norway. Their first album, *Vikingligr Veldi*¹⁷, concentrates entirely on Old Norse mythology and coined the Scandinavian viking metal scene like no other. The Old Norse lyrics include for example descriptions of Old Norse gods as well as attributes and stories connected with them, for example the lyrics of 'Heimdallr', that contain the most important characteristics of the

homonymous Æsir god. There are also extensive descriptions of nature, for example 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 members dissociate themselves from the term and accuse other bands of using slogans in a stereotypical way or glorifying the past. Enslaved's singer Ivar Bjørnson states that his interest in his ancestral roots was aroused by his seeing himself in the wider context of the world as a whole and helps to understand other cultures instead of fearing or rejecting them.¹⁸ Consequently, the new albums since *Monumentation*¹⁹ - after 2001 - are rather philosophical than referencing mythology all over again. Other bands with mythology-linked lyrics are the already mentioned Einherjer and Finnish Moonsorrow.

Among the first things that come to mind when thinking of countries like Norway or Sweden are the Vikings. Connected with the Vikings is their history and especially, since it's heavy metal after all- Viking warfare, strength and freedom. Self-evidently, there are numerous examples of the Viking topic in viking metal. Einherjer, also from Norway, deal with their cultural heritage in a similar way as Enslaved. They also deal with mythology, but focus more on sagas and Viking history in that they tell what they call "old stories"²⁰. However, their main aim is to sound "as Norwegian as [they] can"²¹. Some songs are in Norwegian. Moonsorrow from Finland take the same line: Their mostly Finnish lyrics deal with Old Norse mythology, but also with traditions and legends and of course the Christians taking over.

There is a certain tendency against Christianity as the destroyer of the Heathen religions in Northern Europe. This attitude might be comprehensible since most bands come from black metal. However, there is a further dimension to that: The Pagan religions - though an umbrella term for various forms of belief - share among them a pronounced reverence for nature, which can also be said of pagan metal. In pagan metal, the term is used quite vaguely in that it does not always have a connection to any religion at all- it might simply mean that the band or fan loves nature and metal or plays with names from mythology like Odin or Thor. It might as well depict a certain affinity towards a solitary existence far away from civilisation or simply show an aversion against the forces of Christianity. After all, it is most certainly utilised as a marketing strategy. Nevertheless, Enslaved, like many of their colleagues, underline that viking and pagan metal for them does not have any religious connotations and that heathenism is not some kind of substitute for Satanism.²² All in all, Paganism only seems to provide certain ideas and can not be viewed as religion-inspiring, like having religious groups. Nature, however, is a very important aspect that unites nearly all Nordic bands.

Within the sonic dimension, there are only few authentic examples of applying traditional melodies. Most bands admit that they do not use authentic folk melodies. Frode of Einherjer states that they create melodies that ‘feel’ Norwegian for them instead of looking into old song books. He explains the feasibility of this procedure with the fact that most people have the melodies of their country in the back of their heads, ready to come out, whether consciously or unconsciously.²³ Týr from the Faroese Islands - who thematically resemble Enslaved or Moonsorrow - on the other hand are one of the few that actually include traditional music (and texts), in their case Faroese ballads, in their song writing.

There are two recently very popular bands of Finnish origin that add new dimensions to pagan metal: Korpiklaani (Finnish for “Clan of the Forest”) and Finntroll. Shamans and the indigenous Sami people who mainly live in the North of Finland, Norway and Sweden and the Kola peninsula of Russia with their reindeer herds are often the subject to Korpiklaani’s lyrics. The band explains word concepts peculiar to the Sami or the Finnish languages they use in their songs in the album booklets. Another important aspect in their lyrics is celebration in terms of chants and alcohol (mead, vodka).²⁴ Maybe it is also a little thirst for adventure that motivates them, as in the “Hunting Song”. Starting out as a folk band under the name of Shaman, the band added metal to their music and Korpiklaani was born. Striking are Korpiklaani’s and Finntroll’s catchy music styles - Finntroll’s style is dubbed *Trollish metal* - that combines death, black and power metal elements with traditional music components like *Humppa*²⁵ or *Yoik*²⁶ of the Sami. Their music combines metal with traditional instruments like the accordion and flutes. The languages used in the lyrics are English and Swedish, since the former singer and main songwriter belongs to the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. The lyrics nearly exclusively deal with trolls in various situations and of course their habit of eating good Christians. What certainly unites these bands is love for their country and criticism of contemporary politics and society.

3. Conclusion

Today, pagan and viking metal are extremely popular not only in Europe, but also in the US, producing festivals like the *Paganfest* that is about to take place the second year. There are also a number of smaller festivals specialising on these subgenres like the *Ragnarök* in Germany (in its 6th year), the *Fimbul Festival* and *Celtic Rock*, all of them in Germany, or samplers (Metalmessage “V”). Thus, apart from the second wave of black metal and Swedish death metal, the Northern European countries are famous for a third wave - that of viking and pagan metal. Of course, none of these bands invented the folk-metal-combination. There were examples far earlier, like Led Zeppelin, the “Champions of the furry loincloth”²⁷, Manowar as well

as the already mentioned Skyclad or Sepultura from Brazil. But still, none of them had this impact the Nordic bands had. In other words, viking and pagan metal provide a new space to grapple and identify with one's own nationality. Playing with identity and sometimes even constructing hybrid identities (like Finnish Ensiferum in Scottish skirts and war paint combined with Finnish subjects) has become the subject - be it conscious or unconscious - of many bands. Sometimes, bands are even labelled ambassador of their country²⁸ for bringing for example national literature to other countries as in the case of bands like Amorphis or Enslaved.

The 'Nordic wave' is being further developed today outside Scandinavia or the North, for example in countries like Germany²⁹, Switzerland³⁰, Russia³¹ and Lithuania³². The influence is especially obvious in Germany, where dealing with the own nationality or national identity is still a difficult subject. Of course, there are still quite a lot of problems, for example with the the Antifa or BIFFF, the Berlin centre for fascism research who try to stop concerts by pagan bands and collect hints of racism. They stepped into the consciousness and provoked the protest of the metal scene by publishing an article on a concert of the Paganfest in a leftist venue in Berlin³³ and moving Týr and Moonsorrow to stating they were no politically active or even racist bands. There is still discordance among fans as well as critics on what viking and pagan metal are all about: Both might contribute positively to a cultural examination of one's own or even others' national history and thus play a vital part in identity construction in a globalised world. But they can also reach extremes that both musicians and fans should be aware of.

Notes

- ¹ Metal from Finland, viewed on 29 Sept. 09 <<http://www.metalfromfinland.com>>.
- ² A Lindgren, *Pippi Longstocking*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1945.
- ³ T Egner, *Karius and Bactus*, Skandisk Publications, 1986.
- ⁴ Apart from Bathory, the compilation featured the following bands: Oz, Trash, Spitfire and Zero Nine.
- ⁵ Bathory, *Bathory* (1984), *The Return* (1985) and *Under the Sign of the Black Mark* (1986).
- ⁶ Bathory, *Blood Fire Death*, 1988.
- ⁷ Bathory, *Hammerheart*, 1990.
- ⁸ Bathory, *Twilight of the Gods*, 1991.
- ⁹ Bathory, *Blood Fire Death*, 1988.
- ¹⁰ The colours were later changed in favour of gold because of too much controversy.
- ¹¹ cf. M Moynihan & D Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos. The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, Feral House, Los Angeles, 2003, p.21.
- ¹² Enslaved, *Vikingligr Veldi*, Moonfog Productions, Norway, 1993.
- ¹³ 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.63.
- ¹⁴ The Kalevala contains verses on Finnish mythology collected by Elias Lönnrot during the 19th century (from oral tradition).
- ¹⁵ *Kanteletar* is a 19th century collection of songs and ballads (collected by Elias Lönnrot). The *Kantele* is a Finnish plucked string instrument.
- ¹⁶ Finntroll, *Visor om Slutet* (2006) or *Jaktens Tid* (2001).
- ¹⁷ Enslaved, *Vikingligr Veldi*, Moonfog Productions, Norway, 1993.
- ¹⁸ C Wachter, 'Enslaved. Jenseits von Vergangenheit und Zukunft', *Pagan Fire 1 - The Legacy Chronicles*, pp.58-59.
- ¹⁹ Enslaved, *Monnumension*, Osmose, 2001.
- ²⁰ I von Helden, *Interview with Frode Glesnes and Gerhard Storesund at Ragnarök festival*, Germany, 18 April 2008.
- ²¹ *ibid.*
- ²² Wachter, C, „Enslaved - Jenseits von Vergangenheit und Zukunft“ in *Pagan Fire 1*, p.58f.
- ²³ von Helden, *op.cit.*
- ²⁴ Korpiklaani dedicated a whole album to party (Finnish *Karkelo*).
- ²⁵ In sonic terms, a Finnish variant on Foxtrot and a dance.
- ²⁶ A guttural singing method, used to depict animals or phenomena of nature (e.g. wind).
- ²⁷ Trafford & Pluskowski, *op.cit.*, p.61.
- ²⁸ T Wanzek 'Pagan Metal - Neue Musik fuer alte Goetter?', *Pagan Fire 1 - The Legacy Chronicles*, pp.8-9.
- ²⁹ Wolfchant, *Determined Damnation*, Massacre, 2009.
- ³⁰ Eluveitie, *Vên*, Season of Mist, 2008.
- ³¹ Arkona, *Ot Serdca K Nebu*, Napalm, 2008.
- ³² Obtest, *Gyvybes Medis*, Osmose, 2008.
- ³³ Unknown author, 'Rechtes Neuheiden-Festival mit Nazi-Runen im "SO 36"', viewed 4 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.biff-berlin.de/aktuell72.html>>.

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