


'The rage of the Northmen': Extreme metal and North-motivated violence

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Research Article

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Abstract

The Vikings have for generations yielded significant output in different cultural venues. Also the music scene has utilised perceptions of the North and the Northmen to generate a stereotypical image of medieval Scandinavian society. Extreme metal, most notably black and Viking metal, have applied narratives pertaining to the Viking Age for its own purposes. This paper examines one particular aspect of the black and Viking metal music scene: violence. It examines how the North and its inhabitants are utilised to justify violent behaviour. Drawing from pinpointed examples of extreme metal, this paper shows that stereotypical assumptions of violent Viking expansion as well as fear of subjugation motivate the 'rage of the Northmen.'

Introduction

The subject matter of this paper is extreme heavy metal, also known as, for example, black metal, death metal or Viking metal. The music genre is of a special character and it has been the subject of many scholarly and non-scholarly publications (Dornbusch & Killguss, 2005; Leichsenring, 2016; Sellheim, 2016; von Helden 2010, 2011, 2017). In fact, the discipline of 'heavy metal studies' is entirely devoted to the music genre (Bartosch, 2011; Heesch and Scott, 2016). However, despite the existence of scholarly literature and a vast number of heavy metal bands, it is unclear when the music genre as such evolved and opinions differ regarding which was the actual first heavy metal band. Despite these differences, a consensus exists on the genre's emergence in the 1970s with popular bands of the time such as *Black Sabbath*, *Led Zeppelin* or *Deep Purple* (e.g. Moberg, 2015). Diversification of the genre into numerous subgenres occurred in the 1980s and continues even today, such that a virtually infinite number of subgenres of heavy metal exist, with all of them having their own musical trademarks (e.g. Kegan, 2015). Notwithstanding this, the subgenres are generally lumped together under the umbrella of 'heavy metal' (Leichsenring, 2016, p. 252).

Leaving aside the different components of the specific subgenres, a heavy metal band traditionally consists of one or two electric guitars, an electric bass, drums and a vocalist. The music is by and large rather aggressive and guitar-dominated, driven by aggressive drumming and by high-pitched vocals. In many instances, the long hair of the musicians supports the martial imagery bands attempt to invoke, even though this traditional image is, at the time of writing, no longer ubiquitous.

Violence has traditionally played a large role in the lyrical and conceptual understanding of heavy metal bands. The subgenres death metal, war metal or gore metal best exemplify this. The normative role of violence shall not be dealt with in this paper.

Instead, the focus rests on three specific subgenres of heavy metal: black, death and Viking metal dealing with northern mythology, the Vikings or Viking society. Borrowing from Imke von Helden (2017), these bands will be termed 'Norse-themed metal bands' throughout this text. According to subcultural theory, there is a significant gap between the "radicalism of the micro and the overall domination of the macro" (Kahn-Harris, 2004, p. 97). Throughout this paper it is argued, however, that the celebration of violence in the lyrics of black and Viking metal bands is rooted in the macro-understanding, meaning popular representations, of Vikings and the North. The focus rests on these representations since Arctic and northern narratives have found a common reflection in these musical genres (Sellheim, 2016). Indeed, it is often the Nordic — or at least northern — countries that have produced black and Viking metal bands, which in turn celebrate their northern heritage in their lyrics and imagery (Spracklen, Lucas & Deeks, 2014). As von Helden (2017) shows, the black metal scene demonstrates a strong sense of northern identity, particularly in Norway. While most bands do not link their northern identity with violence or murder, others do. This latter group are the focus of this paper. Yet, it must be mentioned that despite the seemingly aggressive attitude that metal bands use, the scene is diverse, including many bands with a Christian message (Moberg, 2015). The American band *Impending Doom* in its song "Silence the Oppressors" from 2013 has coined the term 'gorship' to describe the worship of God through gore-sounding music.

This paper examines, through content and textual analysis, how far the Vikings and the North are constructed and used as a means to justify violence and murder. The understanding of the North as a 'home' of purity, which translates into a racist worldview, shall also be examined here. All lyrics that are examined here are reproduced verbatim, including grammatical errors.

It is important to note, however, that the cited lyrics do not necessarily represent the respective band's worldview, but are also an artistic expression. For instance, the band *Amon Amarth*, which is dealt with below, draws its inspiration from many different sources, as interviews with the band have shown (Heesch, 2010). Their lyrical depictions and romanticised version of the Viking Age, paired with their violence-infused lyrics, should thus be placed within the aesthetics of violence or to fulfil certain clichés rather than in literal violence (e.g. McParland, 2018). In the case of extreme metal, Kahn-Harris notes "[a]ggression, anger, violence and brutality are seen as the essential elements of extreme metal and the source of its vitality" (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 52). While this may be the case, he further clarifies that "extreme metal, for all the aggression and violence of its lyrics, tends not to explicitly target particular 'real-life' people or targets" (Ibid., p. 53).

However, music and lyrics are not innocent, but rather reflect on a given social or societal situation at a specific point in space and time. As Spracklen et al. have shown, the lyrical and visual representation of a band also serves to inform the listener of an alternative past and a romanticised version of local or regional heritage (Spracklen et al., 2014). Indeed, this is inevitably bordering on an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983/2012) since historical facts are individually interpreted and reproduced in order to portray the past through a specific lens.

The approach this paper takes, however, is rather simple: without delving into the sources of inspiration for a band, what kind of image do Norse-themed metal bands transport to the outside? The lyrics are a fundamental feature in this regard as it is rather widely claimed in the media, in politics and elsewhere that heavy metal and its lyrics contribute to violent behaviour (e.g. see Mast & McAndrew, 2011). It is thus worth examining whether lyrics convey a message that has the potential to influence images of the North and thus 'defend' — by whatever means — this image against those threatening it. However, the link between conflict and music is a complex one and has generated a rich body of literature (e.g. O'Connell & Castelo-Branco, 2010; Pettan, 1998). In the interest of scope, however, this shall not be dealt with in this paper.

That being said, the link between heavy metal and violence is far from being unique, and numerous different art forms have used violence in its countless manifestations — some explicitly, some implicitly. For instance, Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 *Eroica* is for the non-expert listener *prima facie* not linkable with violence. Yet by delving into it a bit more deeply, violence in the forms of tonal transitions appears frequently, thus creating a symphony that subtly makes use of violence in its musical narrative (e.g. Holden, 1962).

As far as heavy metal is concerned, the lyrics of the genre can be broadly categorised in two spheres, namely the 'dystopian' and the 'chaotic'. While the former frames lyrics dealing with sex, drugs, male potency or power, the latter deals with themes such as the devil, violence, war, madness or death (Moberg, 2015). For the purposes of this paper we deal with the 'chaotic' sphere of metal lyrics.

Black and Viking metal

In contrast to other art forms, heavy metal has long had violence as an integral ingredient (Walser, 1993). With the diversification of heavy metal in the early to mid-1980s, the international music scene saw the emergence of black metal. The genre served as a counterculture to the ever-increasing heavy metal scene, which gained more and more popularity as a cultural good. One of the most prominent bands that emerged at that time was the US-based quartet *Metallica*, who fill stadiums to this day. To express opposition to this trend, the British band *Venom* released their album 'Black Metal' in 1982. Lyrically inspired by the Satanism promoted by Anton LaVey in his *Satanic Bible* (LaVey, 1976), the black metal subculture applied somewhat rebellious imagery and lyrical content: in addition to the long hair came black clothing, spikes on wrist- and arm-bands, 'corpse paint' — white coloured faces with black colour around the eyes and mouth — and often weapons in the form of swords, axes or knives. Violence, it appeared, was an element accompanying the inchoate black metal music scene from the beginning.

Musically, the emerging black metal scene also started to separate itself from commercially successful heavy metal. While the latter conveyed its music and performance through impressive stage shows, well-produced albums (both sonically and visually) as well as catchy melodies, the former did the opposite. Albums were released on underground-traded tapes, the recordings themselves were made in a do-it-yourself manner, resulting in badly produced sounds and visuals, and melodies were replaced by shrieking and scratching guitar sounds, topped by screaming and high-pitched vocals. The blast beat, high-speed staccato drumming, as well as tremolo guitar playing have ever since become trademarks of the black metal genre (Hoad, 2015; Moynihan & Søderlind, 1998).

By the late 1980s, however, the black metal subgenre started to fall apart into several other genres, the most prominent of which became known as 'Viking metal', dealing with Norse mythology, or 'pagan metal' dealing with other heathen religions. The Norwegian band *Enslaved* is considered to have coined the term 'Viking metal' in the early 1990s (von Helden, 2017). As the name of the genre implies, thematically the musicians had moved away from the Satanic content of their black metal peers and had started to focus exclusively on Viking and pagan issues — in terms of content, imagery and music. This meant that the aggressive and underground focus was replaced with a more nuanced approach by including 'traditional' Viking instruments such as the fiddle, clean vocals, which were and still are commonly used to invoke a strong, male-dominated choir, as well as clothing and weaponry from the Viking Age. Again, apparently, violence was part of the narratives employed. Although a clear distinction can mostly be drawn between Viking and black metal bands, the same musicians often play in both and the scenes overlap to a significant degree (Leichsenring, 2016). A uniting feature of both black and Viking metal bands is moreover their opposition to Christianity.

The North as a musical vision

The North, its inhabitants and its mythology have played a role in the arts for millennia and it has been the realm of countless speculations and associations. 'Symbolic geographies and mental maps' (Barraclough, Cudmore & Donecker, 2016, p. xi) have thus generated specific ideas of northernness which have found their way into different kinds of cultural expression. Indeed, the question arises of

what ‘the North’ is. This is a question that has been dealt with by numerous scholars since the mere geographic direction is complemented with specific understandings of what ‘the North’ as a region implies. The German historian August Ludwig Schölzer (cited in Kliemann-Giesinger, 2009, p. 10; own translation from German) in 1771 remarked in this context:

We Germans do not count [ourselves] to [be] the North anymore; the French already consider our country to [be to their] North, speaking of Berlin as we speak of Stockholm. Among Spanish authors it is very common to refer to Great Britain as [the] North; and it is natural that African geographers and historians call the Mediterranean the North Sea and imagine all Europeans as northern peoples.

By and large, according to Kliemann-Giesinger (2009), within the discourse on ‘the North’ three trends have been identified: (1) the framing of the *concept* of ‘the North’, applying flexible definitions of the region and the term, influenced by contemporary images and definitions of the ‘north’; (2) the retrospectively constructed *historical* ‘North’ with social, cultural and political commonalities within a defined ‘northern’ space at a defined time, independent from contemporary understandings and definitions of the North; (3) a focus on the union of the northern regions in terms of *political* cooperation. Paired with this are the dimensions of the North which are framed based on climatic, spatial and cultural criteria (Ibid., p. 12). While throughout the paper ‘north’ or ‘northern’ is used, it is particularly the second trend which is being referred to since this underlines the imaginary, the idealised and inherently subjective understanding of the ‘northern’ homeland — leaving aside political, geographic or climatic criteria.

By the late 18th century, the romanticised understanding of the ‘people’ or the ‘folk’ and the utilisation of ‘traditional’ stories that belonged to the whole people took hold in cultural expression in Europe. The ‘folksong’ as a means to capture the cultural heritage of the people became ever more prevalent by the early 19th century (Burke, 2009). It was also during this time that northern mythology found its way into the discourse on national heritage. Most prominently, Richard Wagner’s opera *Das Nibelungenlied* reflected the contemporary understanding of heathenism and linked the Germanic and northern mythologies to become romanticised and transfigured versions of complex cosmologies and cultures, in addition to, arguably, anti-Semitic undertones (Lausberg, 2009). Also, in Finland, Jean Sibelius started to focus on the Finnish national epos *Kalevala* as a source for musical inspiration. Several songs and symphonies encapsulate his interpretation of the epos and helped shape the current understanding in and relevance for Finnish society (Tawastjerna, 1976).

The heathen romanticisation inevitably also led to the creation of specific stereotypes about the Vikings. Simek laments that for many in the past and present societies of the last 200–300 years, it was more important to link the Vikings to images of a mead-drinking (a honey wine), horned helmet-wearing and plundering people that discovered America rather than to consider the complexities and nuances of Viking societies (Simek, 1998). This is best reflected by the use of the term ‘Viking’ itself – a term that those to whom it seemingly applies (all inhabitants of medieval Scandinavia) never used for themselves. Instead, they referred to themselves as *Norrænn*, *Nordmenn* or *Norskr*. The term ‘Viking’ as a description for medieval Scandinavians can be traced back in the English records to the 8th century where it appeared as *wicingsceadan* (‘*sceada*’ = theft) in Latin glossaries equating to *piraticum* (‘piracy’). Over the centuries, the term was applied in a rather demonising manner in reference to the attacks of Vikings on monasteries and towns

across Europe despite the trade routes and international interlinkages of medieval Scandinavians with the non-northern world. The origin of the narrative stems undoubtedly from the first Viking attack on the British monastery of Lindisfarne in 741 AD, marking the beginning of Scandinavian influence on the British Isles. Yet, also in the Nordic languages the term ‘Viking’ started to appear on rune stones of the mid-10th century as *vikingr*, a sailor embarking on a looting journey, the *viking*. Whether it was the English term influencing the Nordic or vice versa is no longer possible to reconstruct (Barraclough, 2016).

The raging Northmen – the aggressive people

With this in mind, it does not appear surprising that the image of Vikings and the historical North in contemporary music follows certain narratives. One of the first reflections of relevance for extreme heavy metal can be found in *Led Zeppelin*’s ‘Immigrant Song’ from 1970 (Heesch, 2010, p. 173).

We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow.
Hammer of the gods will drive our ships to new land.
To fight the hordes and sing, and cry.
Valhalla, I am coming.
Always sweep with, with threshing oar.
Our only goal will be the western shore.
We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow.
How soft your fields so green. Can whisper tales of gore.
Of how we calmed the tides of war. We are your overlords.
Always sweep with threshing oar,
Our only goal will be the western shore.
So now you’d better stop and rebuild all your ruins.
For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing.

The song reflects the *viking* and essentially depicts Viking supremacy over the conquered lands. Peace, as the last line implies, is only possible if the defeated succumb to the rule of the Northmen. These Vikings are, however, primarily interested in finding – and arguably colonising – ‘the western shore’. Following the narratives presented above and criticised by Simek, the shore in all likelihood refers to the East Coast of the North American continent. *Led Zeppelin* thus utilise the stereotypes that have been created over the centuries for their musical purposes.

In a similar manner, the American band *Manowar* have commonly employed images of masculinity, weaponry, Satanism and northern mythology in their albums. In 1982 they released ‘Into Glory Ride.’ The lyrics on the album are dominated by images of extreme brutality and contain a mixture of Satanism and heathenism. On the one hand, the song ‘Revelation (Death’s Angel)’ reads: ‘Revelation, the chosen saved/Earth be cleansed in a blaze / Armageddon, the first trumpet blows / Hail, fire and blood fall on Satan’s throne.’ On the other, ‘Gates of Valhalla’ is inspired by the band’s understanding of the Viking Age:

Valhalla the gods await me
Open wide thy gates embrace me
Great hall of the battle slain
With sword in hand
All those who stand on shore
Raise high your hands to bid a last
farewell to the Viking land.

Manowar establish an intrinsic link between the application of violence and the reaching of the mighty hall *Valhalla*, where fallen warriors (*Einherjar*) meet their god Odin. The image responds to the appearance of the *Valhalla*-myth, first recorded in 1220 by the Icelandic monk Snorri Sturluson in his prose Edda, which originally served as a study book for Scaldic literature. Indeed, Odin adopts the *Einherjar* as his sons upon their arrival in *Valhalla*. It appears as if *Manowar* see themselves as warriors in their pursuit to reach *Valhalla*. After all, the cover of the 'Into Glory Ride' shows the musicians in fantasy-type Viking clothing, holding swords in their hands. A somewhat grotesque and slightly ironic impression of this image is unavoidable. Even though this might be the case, violence serves as a key ingredient for the lyrical content and overall appearance of the band. The utilisation of violence caused by medieval Scandinavians in combination with violence-related aspects of the northern mythology therefore feeds into this source of inspiration.

The link between narratives of Viking violence and exploration as well as Satanism can also be seen in the lyrics of the Swiss band *Celtic Frost* on their 1985 album 'To Mega Therion.' Here, the band primarily refer to Bible-inspired stories and somewhat fantasy-like tales of battles, thrones and conquerors. Yet, the song '(Beyond the) North Winds' evokes Viking narratives, and transfigures and romanticises them, as this excerpt shows:

(And) dark ships sailed beyond those lost realms
Through gates to eternity, above the sleeping mind
Forever unconquerable seemed the walls of time
To those who always feared and always fled the dawn
But then, the guardians growl invited the thirst for steel
Part god, part man, if I walked by their side

While above mentioned bands were inspired by Norse mythology in their creative output, it must be borne in mind that they did not emerge from the Nordic countries, but from England, the United States and Switzerland respectively. Although, of course, in England a link between the North and the peoples of the British Isles was also established as part of cultural production (e.g. Byrne, 2016), the focus in *Led Zeppelin's* case did not lie in the British heritage or the Viking history in Britain, but rather in the stereotypical discourse of the Norse. Violence that was inspired by stereotypical perceptions of the Vikings was therefore used to create a specific image.

This approach changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s when a 'heathen reawakening' swept through the heavy metal scene. This is best exemplified by the Swedish band *Bathory* which applied Satanic imagery and lyrics from its inception in 1983. This started to change in 1988 when the band released 'Blood Fire Death', the cover of which depicts the 1872 painting 'Asgårdsreien' ('The Wild Hunt') by Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo. The introductory instrumental song of the album is called 'Oden's Ride over Nordland', indicating a thematic shift in focus of the band towards northern themes. The traces of this shift are, however, marginal on this album, but they mark a paradigmatic change in the heavy metal scene of that time. Indeed, von Helden notes that the band's reason for the shift is based on the antipathy towards Christianity of which Satanism is merely an inversion (von Helden, 2017). Additionally, the 1980s saw an emergence of a neo-pagan movement in Sweden as part of the New Age movement (Gregorius, 2015). Whether or not this influenced the band's change in direction remains in the realm of speculation, however. Despite the inclusion of Norse themes, the lyrical content of 'Blood Fire

Death' revolves primarily around violent Biblical stories and geographies.

With the album 'Hammerheart' of 1990 the band achieved a full shift towards heathen themes. As the title implies, the heathen, Norse identity had started to play a normative role in the band's self-understanding: The 'hammer' representing the hammer of Thor, and the 'heart' representing the link to the band's identity. With this thematic shift also came a shift in the band's lyrical content, and violence as the main source of inspiration was replaced by Norse identity. Contrary to the other aforementioned examples, *Bathory* now used a romanticised version of their northern home and mythology as the main core of their lyrics. Violence is merely referred to in passing although traditional narratives of the Viking Age, such as 'Set your sails / And let me take your ship to foreign shores / Take farewell of those near you / And your land of the North!' in the song 'Shores in Flames', are still applied. The main difference is, however, that violence is rather referred to in the context of outside intrusion by Christianity. The native heathen is subjugated and the old places of worship are destroyed, as best exemplified in the song 'One Rode to Asa Bay':

A man of pride with the Hammer told new God
To build his house on own
And spoke loud of the Gods of their fathers
Not too long time gone
The rumours said the man with a beard like fire
And the Hammer in chain
By men in armour silenced was and by
Their swords was slain
Those who did not pay the one coin
Of four to man of new God
Whipped was twenty and put in chains then locked
By their neck to the log [To the log . . .]
And so all of Asa bay did build
A house of the cross
Every hour of daylight they did sweat
Limbs ached because faith does cost

Violence is therefore not caused *by* the North, but ravages *in* the North, stripping the Northerners of their identity, which the band refers on numerous occasions on the album. This narrative was to become a guiding principle in the context of northern violence.

Linking northern mythology with identity discourses in the heavy metal scene took off after *Bathory's* shift and their normative influence on the development of black and Viking metal is widely recognised throughout the scene. Indeed, *Bathory's* approach towards a northern identity which is under threat by outside forces would eventually lead to a splitting of the use of violence as a rhetorical tool in Norse-themed metal lyrics. While one path still followed the 'traditional' narratives of the raging northmen, a second path followed the notion of self-defence as a justification to apply violence. After all, metal musicians perceive 'their' North and identity as being conquered by the Christian faith. As infamous musician Kristian 'Varg' Vikernes of the band *Burzum* stated: 'Norway was Christianised by the sword, so we shall make it Heathen again by flames and machine guns' (Vikernes 1995, quoted in Mørk, 2009, p. 183). These words were not uttered in a vacuum and Vikernes became an infamous figure in Norway for the murder of a fellow black metal musician and several cases of church arson (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998).

With the dawn of the 1990s the black metal scene saw its second coming with the emergence of numerous bands in Sweden, Finland

and particularly Norway. This was the time when the trademark ‘True Norwegian Black Metal’ was established – a trademark that still persists today. The Norwegian black metal scene was the most infamous and was marked by inner struggles, arson and murder, also motivated by intentions relevant for this paper. Black metal was furthermore marked by imagery of intense violence and disgust, best exemplified by the bands *Mayhem* or *Gorgoroth* who used (and still do) sheep and pig heads, blood and fire for their stage shows. A dystopian world appears to be invoked through the music and the shows, which initially served as a counter-movement of the commercially successful popular music cultures. By now, however, this extreme imagery is a commercially successful element itself (Podoshen, Venkatesh & Jin, 2014).

Bathory’s shift to include also northern themes in their thematic composition also motivated other bands to do the same yet with different foci on how violence was utilised and stylised. Two trends are notable: first, a focus on the *viking* and aggressiveness towards others – the raging Northmen. This trend, however, showed clear signs of decrease with the emergence of Scandinavian bands. The second trend is rooted in violence as self-defence against outside aggression and most notably Christianity – the struggling Northmen. This trend that *Bathory* appear to have influenced.

Focusing on the first trend, the most prominent example of promoters of the war of northern aggression is the Swedish band *Amon Amarth* which started in 1992. The *viking* and plundering voyages span like a red thread through the band’s lyrics. Heesch shows that the band follows the narratives present in cultural memory and thereby focuses on masculinity and violence (Heesch, 2010). Indeed, the image of violence the band evokes does not exclude extreme brutality against men, women and children of Christian faith. The Viking aggressors are moreover considered heroes at home. The song ‘Victorious March’ of the 1998 ‘Once Sent from the Golden Hall’ states:

Now they’re headed home,
five swordsmen who fought repentlessly.
Their story will be told,
of five brave men endlessly.
All sorrow is left for the women to bare.
The children cries, they live in fear.
No man was spared, no house or farm remains.
No christian woman unraped!
Their church consumed by flames . . .

Whether or not the band wishes to see these acts in real life is of course highly doubtful. Leichsenring remarks that these calls for violence ‘should not be interpreted as an instruction for action. First of all it seems to serve as a rejection of mainstream culture, a gesture of rebellion typical of rock music’ (Leichsenring, 2016, p. 262). The band members themselves are indeed aware of this issue and note that the warrior-based image of the Viking does not correspond to historical fact. The bass player of the band, Olavi Mikkonen, is cited as saying that “it is certain that only few Vikings actually were warriors. Most Vikings were ordinary farmers, you know. But we cannot write about ordinary farmers, because nobody would think that this is fun” (Heesch, 2010, p. 171). Without knowing the motivations of the band, the actions embedded in the band’s lyrics appear disturbing and ultimately remind the listener/reader of religious violence: Christianity is

considered the adversary to heathenism, which not only prompts violent action, but justifies and even celebrates it.

The raging Northmen revisited

Inevitably, the presentation and utilisation of violence in the concept of bands like *Amon Amarth* allow for the question of its effects on especially younger listeners of that music. Moreover, since violence is embedded in an appealing Norse context, larger questions on the aestheticisation of violence in the arts emerge (e.g. Black, 1991). This, however, shall not be subject of this study.

That being said, in order to understand the aesthetics behind the ‘raging Northmen’ narrative, it is revealing to look into historical sources that deal with the *viking*, and the people conducting it. The way the pillaging Vikings are depicted corresponds by and large to the way outsiders have perceived them. Especially Anglo-Saxon, French and German clergymen were terrified by the focus of the Vikings on Christian buildings and the disrespect they showed towards monks, religious symbols and objects. The records show deep fear of the intruders although they are not necessarily referred to as people from the North, but rather as *pagani*, *barbari* or *piratae* (Simek, 1998). External northern violence as depicted in the lyrics of Norse-themed metal bands therefore inevitably incorporates a Christian worldview on the North and its people and does not present an ‘inside view’ from the Vikings themselves. This is not surprising. After all, literacy amongst medieval Scandinavians and associated written records were not a widely-spread phenomenon of that time. Instead, runestones and other carvings as well as recorded poetry provided rather shallow impressions of medieval Scandinavian society. Moreover, the latter were recorded in writing only after Scandinavia had been already Christianised. Inevitably, a Christian worldview is embedded in the writings (Jesch, 2008). Of course, it is not possible to determine the primary sources of inspiration for bands such as *Amon Amarth*. However, by taking into consideration the narrative of the ‘raging Northmen’ a rather one-sided perspective rises to the surface, which does not take into account the complex array of historical sources that medieval Scandinavia yielded.

Ironically, therefore, the image of the heathen Viking as the antidote to the Christian as applied in contemporary metal is fundamentally rooted in the worldview of those it seeks to oppose. Of course, it is easy to point towards historical accuracy in art and criticise shortcomings, but for the context of this paper I argue that the narrative of the ‘raging Northmen’ is inherently contradictory.

The struggling Northmen – violence as self-defence

As introduced above, the second strain of the utilisation of violence is rooted in the assumption of a North colonised by Christianity. The narrative of the ‘struggling Northmen’ is therefore a common feature in the lyrical content of contemporary black and Viking metal bands. Inevitably, the notion of the colonised North further evoked national romantic ideals which were embedded in the concepts and lyrics of Nordic bands.

One of the first bands to explicitly link self-defensive violence and national romanticism is the Norwegian ‘supergroup’ *Storm*, consisting of members of the popular bands *Darkthrone* and *Satyricon*, both of which are still active, and their first and only full-length release ‘Nordavind’ of 1994. On the album, the band links folk tunes with black metal in order to romanticise their northern home. As a consequence, the heathen past and opposition

towards Christianity play a crucial role in the band's lyrics. The song 'Oppi fjellet' ('Up the Mountains') reads:

Skogtroll varsler en grusom død [Forest troll warns of a cruel death.]
 Der Fenris-ulven ulte samme glød [Where the Fenris wolf howls with the same glow.]
 Oppi fjellet, oppi fjellet [Up the mountain, up the mountain] [...]
 Kan dere se han? [Can you see him?]
 Kan dere se han? [Can you see him?]
 Se den kristne kjøter'n! [The Christian filth!]
 Deng ham opp! [Hang him!]
 Deng ham opp! [Hang him!]
 Og om du noen gang lukter kristenmanns blod, oppi fjellet.
 [And if you ever smell a Christian's blood, up in the mountains.]
 Ja, hent øksa og kutt dem ned!
 [Yes, take the ax and strike them down!]

Here, Norwegian folklore is linked with violence against Christians. The derogatory term 'kjøter' can be interpreted as an impure dog, which consequently sheds light on the musicians' perception of ethnic purity, inevitably bringing a racist worldview to the fore. Whether or not the musicians did and still do have racist agendas is not relevant here. It is however important to highlight that with lyrics like the above a romanticisation as well as aestheticisation of racism and violence occurs by using the narrative of the colonised Northmen.

The Swedish band *In Battle* released its first album 'In Battle' in 1997. While not following the national romanticism of *Storm*, the band nevertheless applies similar connotations and considers violence against the Christian faith and Christians in the name of Heathenism justified. Their song 'Odhinn' reads:

Thor!
 master of the skies
 thy hammer shall not fail,
 none shall stand thy strike
 Odhinn!
 master of war, release thy wolfs
 and let there be war . . .
 Born into this world with blood on my hands
 Blood stains the past and the future shall be . . . born in blood
 Let the fire rage, let the blood flow
 never let them breathe again of the northern air
 Let the hammer strike, let the wolfs slay
 destroy the symbols of Jerusalem

Utilising the violent aspects of northern mythology, the band appears to intend to remove the Christian faith from the northern lands – implying that Christianity had been imposed without the approval of the Northerners. The destruction of the 'symbols of Jerusalem' moreover mirrors the fear of the Christian clergy as a response to the Viking raids. On their second album, which also serves as the title for this paper, 'The Rage of the Northmen' from 1999, the band turns towards 'raging Northmen' narratives and presents Northerners as outwardly aggressive people filled with bloodlust. Violent behaviour is linked with mythological aspects, first and foremost the 'master of war' Odhinn (e.g. in the song 'Endless War'). Until the band's hiatus in 2008, two more albums were released which placed great emphasis on narratives of war

and Norse mythology. Outward aggression and violence play a key role in the band's lyrics, replacing the 'struggling Northmen' with connotations of pride and strength.

An interesting case in point is the Norwegian band *Windir* and its successor *Vreid*. The former, which was formed in 1994 and found its sudden end with the death of one of its core members in 2004, exclusively dealt with Norse mythology. In fact, the band's name can be translated into 'warrior.' In a rather elaborate manner and using, what appears to be, a local Norwegian dialect, the band's concept circles around heathenism and the defence of the northern lands, with concrete localities, against Christians and other intruders. Violent acts are approached from rather a metaphysical angle and in reference to elements of Norwegian history. For instance, the song 'Dåmmedag' ('Doomsday') from the 1997 album 'Soknadalr' celebrates the day of the clash between good and evil, the latter of which refers to the Christian god. The main theme of a threat against the North – or more precisely Norway – is also used by the succeeding band *Vreid*, whose name translates into 'wrath.' In contrast to *Windir*, the band does not refer to Viking history, but to rather recent history, such as the Second World War, or contemporary politics. While *Windir's* album covers displayed historical Viking images, *Vreid's* covers display militaristic content. However, it is the threat against Norway which drives the band's narratives. The song 'Blücher' from the 2004 album 'Milorg' refers to a battle of WWII between Norwegian and German forces in the Oslo fjord in which the German battleship *Blücher* was sunk in 1940.

At 04.21 the first bomb of Oscarborg is shot
 Smoke fills the ship
 As fuel and ammunition catches fire
 51 shots on the starboard side
 Torpedoing the Blücher entirely
 Soldier are burned
 And choked by smoke
 Thrown overboard
 In the fjord so cold
 1000 German soldiers die this April 9th
 The exquadrare is turning
 As they see how their mothership is burning
 They set full retreat
 In this battle they suffer defeat

Contemporary politics and notions of cultural diversity are openly opposed in the lyrical concept of the Finnish black metal band *Goatmoon*, which saw the light of day in 2002. The openly fascist lyrics nevertheless express deeply rooted fear of Christianity, Judaism and Islam by which the 'pure Northerner' is outnumbered. Northernness is linked with ethnic purity and a pure northern environment both of which have experienced degradation due to the influx of different ethnicities, religions and cultures. Indeed, pre-Christian Finland is considered a 'paradise' which 'would never be the same again' (in the song 'And the Tears of Our Fatherland Fell' from the 2014 album 'Voitto tai Valhalla'). Northern mythological aspects are opportunistically used to convey a message rooted in national socialist ideology (see also Dornbusch & Killguss, 2005, on the link between national socialist ideology and the black metal scene). Violence against 'subhumans' is consequently openly promoted based on the band's understanding of what northernness entails.

Similarly, but not openly nationalistic, the Finnish band *Clandestine Blaze* makes reference to the 'Fist of the Northern

Destroyer' on their album with the same title, which was released in 2002. The title song thus attacks religious diversity and calls for the 'fist of the northern destroyer' to destroy the symbols of Judaism and Islam in Finland. After all, the 'culture of Zion was never meant to be here' while 'Islamic plague raising/ Spreading it dirty seed / Violent intolerance as reward/For their holy secret war.' It is left unanswered which culture was meant to be there. In a Swedish context the answer seems to be given by the band *Lord Belial*, which in general terms deals with aspects of anti-Christianity and Satanism. However, on its 2003 single 'Purify Sweden' the band wishes to eradicate Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism in the name of 'Swedishness' which refers to 'all Swedish born' and the 'forgotten glory' of the country. The ideal of a forgotten past, which, presumably, refers to pre-Christian Sweden, thus delimits the band's idea of who is legitimately Swedish and what constitutes Swedishness. Every other influence is considered adversarial and thus justifies a 'purification' and 'cleansing' of Sweden.

The struggling Northmen revisited

The above examples show that in the name of Northernness violent acts appear justified. The primary motivation behind these promoted acts is not of an outward-looking character, but rather seen in a context of self-defence: Christianity as well as other religions are regarded as enemies of the Northerners. It is perceived as having been imposed on the Vikings and the northern people in general. At the same time, ethnic diversity is considered as weakening the 'Pure Blood' (*Goatmoon*) that runs through the veins of the North's original inhabitants. Of course, the indigenous Sámi, who have lived in the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia for millennia are not considered in this context. Instead, the deeply colonial, as being the colonised, and nationalistic ideals of 'northern Europeans' and 'Vikings' with associated characteristics of honour and purity are the guiding narratives behind the bands' lyrical concepts.

When taking into account the history of Christianisation in Scandinavia, it quickly becomes clear that the assumption of a uniaxial process of colonisation cannot be upheld. Instead, Northern Europe was Christianised gradually. One must bear in mind that this passive expression should also be considered actively and Northern Europe also Christianised itself gradually. While the process itself has been subject to scholarly dispute (e.g. Abrams, 1995; Bagge, 2007; Simek, 1998), it is rather clear that the progressing Christian belief in the emerging nations of the 10th and 11th centuries, in combination with the established trade routes that linked Northern Europe with the outside world, led to (1) an influx of Christian values and ideals; (2) coercive actions from the outside to forcefully convert pagans to the Christian faith; and (3) self-determination of pagan kings who joined the Christian belief for political and social reasons (Pentikäinen, 1990; Wittrock, 2004). In fact, Bagge (2007, p. 109) notes that '[t]he religious aspect of Christianisation was for a long time subordinated to the social and political.' It is thus by no means that the North and its inhabitants were uniformly subjugated to the Christian faith. The narrative of the 'struggling Northmen' combatting the Christian intruders can therefore not be historically supported but should be interpreted as the musician's individual antipathy towards the Christian faith for personal reasons. An inductive reasoning in the name of 'the Northerner' thus appears unjustified.

Bands openly expressing their sentiments against Islam essentially follow the rhetoric of populist parties, whose political

relevance has been increasing in the Nordic countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The history of Islam in Finland differs somewhat from that in Norway and Sweden. In the case of Finland, the Muslim community was mainly comprised of Tartar groups as well as Russian Muslim minority groups. This was due to Finland's political relations with the Soviet Union, especially as a non-NATO member. But even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, little non-European Muslim influx could be noted (Larsson, 2009). With the advent of the crises in the Middle East, Finland saw an increasing number of refugees from Middle Eastern, Arab and African countries. In 2015, for instance, the largest percentage of the 32,476 asylum seekers came from Iraq (20,485), Somalia (1,981) and Syria (877) (Finnish Immigration Service, 2016). The percentage of Muslims, however, cannot be ascertained. In Norway and Sweden, the Muslim population had increased steadily since the late 1960s from different ethnic backgrounds as part of the economic upswing in Europe and the demand for cheap labour. Although the influx from the Muslim world stagnated in the 1970s due to the slowing down of the economies, up until the year 2009, Sweden's Muslim population constituted the largest number of Muslims in Scandinavia (Svanberg, 1999). However, numerically, the Muslim population is marginal in comparison with the non-Muslim population. In Sweden, it constitutes around 3.8–4.4%, in Norway 2.5%, and in Finland 0.8% (Larsson, 2009). The fear of being numerically outnumbered, as implicitly suggested by the 'struggling Northmen' is therefore not justified. However, it can be assumed that this percentage has slightly increased since the recent refugee crisis.

As the actions of black metal musician Kristian 'Varg' Vikernes, as well as others, have shown, antipathy towards Christianity and other perceived adversaries turned into violent acts, particularly in the 1990s. Murders and church burnings in the name of 'purification' and other motives brought the Scandinavian black metal scene into the spotlight of international attention (Moynihan & Søderlind, 1998). This, in turn, made particularly the Norwegian black metal scene a major cultural export in the 2000s (Sellheim, 2016; von Helden, 2017).

Norse-themed metal and indigeneity

The above has shown that neither the depictions of the struggling Northmen nor those of the raging Northmen are rooted in historical or contemporary facts. Instead, the narratives serve as a justification for lyrical violence that constitutes a core feature of Norse-themed metal. This once again underlines that the 'Viking' as (re)produced by bands is a deeply socio-cultural construction – rather serving the purpose of a specific message than sticking to presenting 'Northerners' within provable and verifiable parameters. Indeed, this raises the question of what this message is supposed to be or whether there is a message at all. On the one hand one might argue that masculinity and violence in a Viking cloak are merely entertaining and somewhat 'cool' – marketing tools to boost a band's sales, along the line of *Amon Amarth's* Olavi Mikkonen, cited above. But as Catherine Hoard has shown, heavy metal music in general is rooted in an inherently white context and that "understandings of its aesthetics, practices and cultures continue to be steeped in white hegemony" (Hoard, 2015, p. 20). It is thus notable that the perceived 'other' against which the raging as well as the struggling Northmen move are all essentially non-white: historically Christians that do not emerge from the 'white' North but from the south; and today Muslims from the Middle East that threaten the perceived Northern society.

An exception in this regard is *Vreid* which showcase how their home Norway is defended against any intruder, including other whites – Germans.

Even though Norse-themed bands may not actively promote racism, may even openly speak out against it (e.g. *Amon Amarth* in Gonda, 2006), or may present themselves as unpolitical, the promotion of a white discourse becomes apparent: after all, Vikingness or white Northernness is presented as being chthonic to the northern lands. And despite bands' attempts to distance themselves from nationalist ideals, the myths of racial purity, of identifying the imagined communities of 'self' and 'other' are unmistakably communicated via the lyrics. At the same time, "[w]ith all this construction of whiteness comes the simultaneous attempt to hide it through protestations that all they are doing is playing with myths and telling stories that people have forgotten" (Spracklen, 2015, p. 372).

This neglects the colonial history within Scandinavia, which assimilated – and arguably still does so today – the indigenous Sámi population into Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish society (e.g. Kent, 2014). As von Helden has pointed out (von Helden, 2017), the Sámi are notably absent in Norwegian metal culture. This observation can be expanded to Swedish and Finnish metal as well. To the knowledge of this author, an explicitly Sámi metal band does not exist in Norway, Sweden or Finland. This being said, the Finnish band *Korpiklaani* uses Sámi symbolism and emerged out of a two-member project called *Shamaani*, one of whom was ethnic Sámi, but who no longer is part of *Korpiklaani*. Contrary to Norse-themed bands, *Korpiklaani* does not deal with narratives of having to defend its homeland against intruders nor expand its scope to other regions of the world. Instead, the band uses the Finnish epos *Kalevala* as a source of inspiration and links this to traditional Finnish rural life and practices such as hunting, going to sauna or spending time in the forest. The album covers of the band also portray Sámi-related goods, such as a Sámi shaman drum.

However, the utilisation of indigenous cultural heritage is problematic. In particular, the Sámi shaman drums have been an issue of utmost sensitivity (e.g. Joy, 2018) and concern as to cultural heritage and indigenous intellectual property rights inevitably rise to the fore when they are used in non-indigenous contexts. To the knowledge of this author, however, *Korpiklaani* has not been confronted with these concerns yet. Contrarily, the Finnish Sámi rock-metal band *SomBy*, which consists exclusively of Sámi members, was awarded the Liet International prize in 2009 – a prize for minority languages in Europe – as well as the Sámi Culture Award of the Finnish Sámi Parliament, which was awarded by then Minister of Culture Stefan Wallin (*Väylän Pyörre*, 2009).

While there are some traces of indigenous cultures within music emerging from areas that Norse-themed metal bands transfigure as 'theirs', they remain hardly visible and so a discourse on indigeneity in Norse-themed metal which includes the Sámi people does not exist. Indeed, the existence of indigenous traces within metal at large is marginal and Hoad even goes so far as to say that even if they do exist metal music "reduces colonised cultures to monoliths that become appropriated in the toolbox of musical 'styles'" (Hoad, 2015, p. 26). This is also exemplified by the New Zealand band *Alien Weaponry*, whose lyrics to a large extent are sung in Māori. Echoing Hoad's concern, in reference to *Alien Weaponry*'s Māori lyrics and cultural approach, Zoe Camp of *Revolver Magazine* writes that "the haka [traditional Māori dance to intimidate opponents — the author] aligns with the empowering, cathartic, tribal and generally badass nature of heavy music like

few other things do" (Camp, 2018). In heavy metal, indigenous cultural traces – or even indigenous bands themselves – are, generally speaking, treated as something exotic and 'other' while being fully absent in the lyrics or lyrical messages of Norse-themed bands and other metal bands. The Brazilian thrash metal band *Sepultura* navigated itself into a discourse on indigeneity with its 1996 album 'Roots', similar to Norse-themed metal bands. On this album, the band cooperated with the Amerindian Xavante people and linked this indigenous culture with the band's own understanding of Braziliananness – their 'roots'. Even though Harris demonstrates that the collaboration was not without controversy, it nevertheless "was a sincere (if perhaps naïve) attempt to collaborate and learn from Sepultura's fellow Brazilians" (Harris, 2000, p. 22–23). Attempts such as *Sepultura*'s have not found their way into Norse-themed metal, underlining the lyrical hegemony of whiteness, which is transported to the listener.

At the same time, in light of the colonialist history of Swedes, Norwegians and Finns – both within the respective countries and elsewhere – lyrics that glorify the pillages of the Vikings are not innocent words. Instead they also underline and manifest the superiority of whiteness since the subjugated other is, as stated above, also predominantly non-white and ultimately inferior. After all, the lyrics of Norse-themed bands highlight the strength of the Northmen *vis-à-vis* the weakness of non-Northmen. A critical self-reflection as to the underlying racial paradigm is often brushed under the carpet and lyrics and images are justified as being merely artistic or apolitical (Scott, 2011). Moreover, in the depicted outward violence lyrical themes do not present the 'other' as the superior, but always as the inferior to the Northmen. While arguable a marketing tool, an artistic expression and indeed not expressly linked to a racist worldview, colonisation and subjugation of the 'other' are nevertheless communicated as something 'good' or 'necessary' – or at least as something justified to fulfil the violent needs of the Vikings.

In light of the current political climate in the Nordic countries, which, in the case of Norway, Sweden and Finland have seen a rise in right-wing and populist parties, and the rise of nationalism, it is questionable how much longer these lyrics can continue to be used in contemporary times, especially since many bands claim to be apolitical. The increasing rights of indigenous peoples – enshrined for example in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 – make an uncritical approach towards the North as a 'home' a questionable endeavour, especially when it necessitates or justifies violence. Inevitably, the message Norse-themed metal bands convey in their lyrics are political and must be interpreted as such. As Laura Wiebe Taylor claims for the Norwegian context: "On these grounds – the construction of a white Nordic national identity, hostility towards non-Nordic and especially non-white immigrants – Norway's mainstream nationalism and xenophobia may be understood as directly related to black metal's ultranationalism: extreme and everyday racisms intersect, the latter informing and enabling the former" (Wiebe Taylor, 2010, p. 166). After all, particularly since the influx of newcomers from the Middle East in 2015 and 2016, anti-immigrant sentiments in Norway, Sweden and Finland have increased, as has been identified by several international bodies and organisations (see Sellheim, *in press*). Therefore, a continuation of inherently whiteness-based narratives within lyrics appears to counteract claims of being apolitical or against racism. Of course, lyrics of the past cannot be undone, but in order to fully remove themselves from debates of politicality or to underline their anti-racist stances, Norse-themed bands must rethink their lyrical concepts.


Conclusion – the noble Northmen?

The role of violence in the arts has been an issue of controversy for generations. The heavy metal scene has utilised this controversy for its own purposes and has generated outputs of extreme brutality and aversion. While in many instances an artistic tool, Norse-themed metal has made violence in the name of the North an inherent part of its *raison d'être*. The North and the Northerners are being linked to either a violent nature which bring violence to the outside world in the form of *viking*, or to violent colonisation by Christianity or other forces which necessitate a violent response. Neither narrative can be justifiably upheld. While it is undoubtedly so that both outwardly and inwardly directed violence played a role in medieval Scandinavia, the portrayal and justification in Norse-themed metal contexts either corresponds rather to a self-generated image of the 'Northman' – after all the role of women in medieval Scandinavian society is fully ignored – corresponding to common beliefs concerning Viking conquests, or it mirrors individual fears of having been or even being colonised by outside forces.

Throughout the 2000s this image has been increasingly challenged, however. For example, the Norwegian band *Enslaved* started its activities in 1991 and from the very beginning focused on Norse mythology has continued to do so. Their lyrics remained in old Norse until the release of 'Frost' in 1994, when they then switched to bokmål. Moreover, with their 2000 release 'Mardraum' the English language started to appear in the lyrics. Over the course of more than 20 years, the mythological and philosophical aspects of Viking belief have increasingly found their way into the band's lyrics. Also, the Norwegian band *Wardruna*, consisting of former metal musicians, but performing somewhat ambient music, has focused on authenticity and the spiritual, non-violent aspects of Norse mythology. This trend was already started by the Finnish band *Amorphis* in the 1990s, which had exclusively focused on the Finnish national epos *Kalevala* and the different non-violent and somewhat nature-related elements therein (see also Leichsenring, 2016).

While this may be the case, the underpinning of whiteness and racial superiority cannot be ignored. Even though most bands distance themselves from this discourse, the narratives applied in the imagery and lyrics still make 'blood and soil' rhetoric a key component. Also the absence of any engagement with indigenous Sámi history in Scandinavia and Finland echoes nationalist policies since the lyrics identify the bands as the true inhabitants of the northern lands.

Of course, the Vikings, despite their sophisticated cultural and economic achievements, were by no means pacifists. While this is certainly true, it can be argued that the early Middle Ages were in general no times of peaceful interaction. Medieval Scandinavians, therefore, were no exception in that regard.

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