

# Black and Viking metal: how two extreme music genres depict, construct and transfigure the (sub-)Arctic

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**ABSTRACT.** For centuries the Arctic has served as a stage of imagination and has inspired countless artists in different ways. Also the music genre of heavy metal frequently utilises the ‘north’ and the Arctic. This paper briefly explores how two heavy metal subgenres, black metal and Viking metal, approach and utilise narratives associated with the ‘north’. By using lyrics of black and Viking metal bands, different forms of utilisation come to the fore, ranging from narratives of death to the raging Northman. Also polar exploration finds musical expression and is a source for generating extreme conceptual settings.

## Introduction

It is not surprising that the world of the music genre heavy metal has found the Arctic. Contrary to the often-narrated public perception locating heavy metal within a world of violence, death and devil worship and depicting it as youth subculture (Chaker 2014), heavy metal has evolved to be an artistic musical expression with a plethora of different subgenres, different themes, styles and modes of production while having generated its own field of studies: heavy metal studies (Bartosch 2011; Heesch and Höpflinger 2014). Anthropologist Sam Dunn summarised the different forms of heavy metal in the documentary *Metal: a headbanger’s journey* (Dunn and McFadyen 2005) and the 12-episode series *Metal evolution* (Dunn and McFadyen 2011–2014).

This brief account is not intended to provide the reader with a history of heavy metal as an art form, but rather to touch briefly upon the role the ‘north’ and the Arctic play within two of its subgenres, black metal and Viking metal. To this end, the construction of the ‘north’ is investigated by using pinpointed examples from black and Viking metal bands. The paper is thus not a paper to answer the question ‘what is the north?’, but rather how metal musicians use, reproduce and alter the geographical location as well as associations of the ‘north’. The question on socio-cultural constructions of the ‘north’ is a core element in the research on Northern Europe (see Kliemann-Geisinger 2009) and this paper contributes to this discourse. At the same time, the paper contributes to the study of ‘ecomusicology’ or on discourses on how the environment shapes musical performance (Pedelty 2015). The sheer number of bands that could serve as examples forced the author, himself having been part of the heavy metal scene for more than 20 years, to approach the topic selectively. The internet database *Metal archives*, which documents past and present heavy metal bands, lists 27,812 entries for black metal and 2,653 entries for folk/Viking/pagan metal bands at the time of writing (*Metal archives* 2016a; *Metal archives* 2016b). The

illustrated examples stem from the author’s own record collection or are well-known artists in the metal scene.

## A very brief description of heavy metal

When asking listeners of heavy metal, irrespective of the subgenre, which band constitutes the first ‘real’ heavy metal band, it is very likely that different bands will be cited. But there seems to be consensus that the music genre dates back to the late 1970s when bands such as *Black Sabbath*, *Led Zeppelin* or *Deep Purple* enjoyed a high degree of popularity within youth cultures. This being said, a definite origin of the term ‘heavy metal’ as a musical genre is difficult to establish. Dornbusch and Killguss maintain that the term stems from the American band *Steppenwolf* and their well-known song ‘Born to be wild’ from the year 1968 in which the lyrics read: ‘I like smoke and lightning, heavy metal thunder’ (Dornbusch and Killguss 2005). However, Christe ascribes the origin of ‘heavy metal’ to the English band *Black Sabbath* and that *Steppenwolf*’s phrase ‘was an accident of poetry, the empty prophecy of a thousand monkeys hammering on typewriters in search of a Bible’ (Christe 2003: 10) as the band merely described the sounds of motorbikes. Notwithstanding, while heavy metal has become a well-established musical genre, it remains an issue of heated debate what the music is supposed to sound like. Generally, a heavy metal band consists of a classic band line-up, namely one or two electric guitars, bass, drums and a vocalist. Generally the sounds of modern heavy metal comprise hard and fast drumming and riffing while either clean, growled or screamed vocals are also a paramount feature in determining the musical style (Dornbusch and Killguss 2005; Chaker 2014).

Throughout the emergence of heavy metal up to the present day, specific imagery has been an integral part of the genre: dark colours and outfits, death-related themes and generally dark and masculine appearance of the predominantly male musicians, in the form of black clothing, long hair and beards. This still constitute the genre’s

general features. A simple Google Images search with the term ‘heavy metal’ will help the reader understand the genre’s traditional themes and imagery.

### The ‘cold’ of black metal

As mentioned above, heavy metal is not a consistent genre and an almost infinite number of subgenres exist. An extreme variant is the genre of black metal, which is predominantly shaped by anti-Christian, Satanic and pagan lyrical themes and imagery. In addition, black metal bands have added spikes to their outfits while the utilisation of ‘corpse paint’, white facial colour with blackened eyes and lips, is a commonly used make-up and a trademark of this genre. Many musicians also use pseudonyms or *noms de guerre* instead of their real names. Once again, a Google search with the term ‘black metal’ illustrates this. Musically, the tempo of black metal is very fast with high-pitched vocals and shrill, yet somewhat melodic, guitar riffs. The tremolo-picking creates atmospheres reminiscent of ‘walls of sounds’ that do not allow the listener to rest. At the same time, the high speed in drumming and the guitars generate monotony. The often poorly recorded albums, both technically and musically, underline the demonic purposes the music genre follows. These are very general features, however. Black metal itself has a large number of further subgenres such as melodic black metal, war black metal or progressive black metal, each with their own distinct musical characteristics. Given its enormous popularity world-wide, ‘True Norwegian Black Metal’ is now considered to be one of Norway’s main cultural exports (Lokke 2011).

Black metal found its origins in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a counter-culture to the ever growing commercial success of heavy metal in general and can be traced back to the British band *Venom* and their 1982 album *Black metal* (Venom 1982). Specifically, however, Satanism started to play an increasing role in the lyrical themes of black metal, resulting in violent crimes, which will be discussed below. While Anton LaVey’s Satanism, as encapsulated in his *Satanic Bible* (LaVey 1976), was fundamental in shaping the identity of black metal as a musical and conceptual genre (Moynihan and Söderlind 1998), it is within this subgenre that cryospheric and northern themes started to emerge.

This is not surprising as the so-called ‘Second wave’ of black metal emerged in Norway and spread over the Scandinavian Peninsula in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the wake of the development of the music, anti-Christian and Satanic sentiments were taken to the extreme and several arsons as well as murders were committed. Most infamously, the Norwegian black metal musician Kristian ‘Varg’ Vikernes, the single member of the music project *Burzum*, a term meaning ‘darkness’ in the *Lord of the rings* (Tolkien 1954), on 6 June 1992 burned down the Fantoft Church close to Bergen. He furthermore killed fellow black metal musi-

cian Øystein Aarseth, also known as ‘Euronymous,’ on 11 August 1993 (Moynihan and Söderlind 1998; Dornbusch and Killguss 2005; Patterson 2014). A detailed description of the emergence of black metal is given by Patterson (2014) and in order further to understand the genre, the reader is advised to consult that volume. Suffice it to say, black metal musician by the pseudonym Aínvar of the band *Eismalsott*, presented below, in a personal communication describes black metal as follows:

Black metal is about self-exploration, about shining a light on and externalising aspects of our psyche that, in polite company, we generally tend to avoid putting forward. At the same time, black metal, as any ‘alternative’ cultural or musical strain, is a means of self-definition through self-imposed otherness against a perceived ‘mainstream.’ This, of course, elicits a certain amount of social friction, which can be musically harnessed through different themes. Black metal traditionally chooses themes of antagonism to human existence—criticising society in rather more sweeping terms than punk, for example. The polar regions, which many of us perceive as similarly antagonistic to human existence, are quite a natural analogy for this (Aínvar, personal communication (email), 24 January 2016).

For the purpose of this paper, it is the musical and lyrical worship of the ‘lifeless’ which is of interest, going hand in hand with the narrative of lifelessness, particularly in cryospheric environments. Band names such as *Permafrost*, *North*, *Eis*, *Arctic Frost*, *Cold* or most famously *Dimmu Borgir*, named after a rock formation in Iceland, indicate that the cryosphere and a heavy metal subgenre with its extreme musical and lyrical directions appear reconcilable.

### What is the north ... in black metal?

This reconciliation is based on the linking of the death narrative with a seemingly ‘dead’ environment in the north. Of course, the scientific accuracy of this perception is, as readers of *Polar Record* will be fully aware, negligible and it has long been shown that the cryosphere and polar environments are anything but devoid of life (see for example CAFF 2013). This notwithstanding, linking the poles with death is not a new phenomenon. Instead of corresponding to contemporary narratives of the (Ant-)Arctic with climate change and science, resource exploitation or sustainable development, black metal bands rather adhere to the perception of the poles like in the times of exploration. At the same time they maintain the myth of *Ultima Thule*, the ‘farthest place or, in essence, an ultimate, perhaps impossible-to-attain goal’ (Officer and Page 2001: 23). By no means are heavy metal bands the first ones to locale the poles in the spheres of imagination: a wealth of literature exists which shows that for millennia the north and the south have been the central elements of ‘speculative visions’ (Leane 2012: 23;

see also Kliemann 2005; O'Donoghue 2007; Jakobsson 2009).

The famous Norwegian black metal band *Immortal*, basing their lyrical concept around an invented mythological kingdom called 'Blashyrk', frequently references frost, ice and the north. While in the early 1990s *Immortal* played traditional black metal by using high speed drumming, heavily distorted guitars and little bass, on more recent albums starting from the late 1990s the band follows a more bombastic style: underlined by the use of clearly audible bass, walls of sound are created through polyphone guitar work and a symphonic arrangement of the guitar lines. Also the songs' tempos have become more diverse and now include mid-tempo as well as groove-oriented paces. The band's album titles include: *Battles in the north*, *Blizzard beasts*, *At the heart of winter* and *Sons of northern darkness*. The band's lyrics that are performed in English continuously reiterate the *Ultima Thule* myth, in which the 'north' is associated with the unknown and threatening, the cold and death. Lyric fragments from the song 'Norden on fire' from the 2009-album *All shall fall* (Immortal 2009) stand exemplary (the lyrics are taken *verbatim*, including grammatical errors):

Beast of prey from the north arise  
 A force of strength none can defy  
 Unleashed from the gates a giant storm  
 To an end it all shall come  
 Mighty deeps of north world call  
 The power is at hand  
 Apocalypse brought by will  
 Scattered winds blow at you all  
 Bewinged by darkness from the cold  
 Come the order of chaos  
 Spread by winter, hate and storms  
 The final days descend the fall

The above in large parts reflects the understanding of southerners towards the north during the early medieval period when Vikings and other northern peoples such as the Goths constituted a major threat to the southerly kingdoms. Fjågesund summarises this medieval fear with the subheading: 'Destruction cometh out of the north' (Fjågesund 2014: 37), a modification of the Bible verse 'Egypt is like a very fair heifer, but destruction cometh; it cometh out of the north' (Jeremiah 46:20). Similarly, *Immortal* characterises the 'north' as the lingering menace that threatens the 'non-north' with its cold winds, winter and darkness. George R.R. Martin's epic *Game of thrones* further picks up on this narrative and he shields the southerly realm with a giant wall from the 'wildlings' in the north and the looming danger that threatens its inhabitants (Martin 1996).

The Norwegian band *Darkthrone* uses the 'north' in combination with a pagan narrative on their 1992-album *A blaze in the northern sky* (Darkthrone 1992) and its title song. The band is often referred to as belonging to the so-called 'inner circle' of Norwegian black metal bands and is considered as a band that has shaped the classic

Norwegian black metal sound: high-pitched, seemingly diabolically screaming vocals, tremolo guitar picking, and high speed drumming. Currently, the band's albums are oriented more towards early heavy metal of the 1980s as have little in common anymore with black metal the band helped shape. Lyrically, the band followed demonic and satanic tropes on their earlier albums, but have in recent years turned towards personal and social themes. However, the album *A blaze in the northern sky* is considered a benchmark album in the black metal scene and therefore of relevance for this paper. Thus, the lyrics to the title song 'A blaze in the northern sky read':

Where the days are dark  
 And night the same  
 Moonlight drank the blood  
 Of a thousand pagan men  
 It took ten times a hundred years  
 Before the king on the northern throne  
 Was brought tales of the crucified one  
 [...]  
 We are a blaze in the northern sky  
 The next thousand years are ours

In other words, ancestry and a pagan past are associated with the 'north', a crucial element in the link between the narrative and another subgenre, Viking or pagan metal, which will be described below. The way *Darkthrone* presents the north in the above mentioned song can be considered a counterpoint to what 'northerners' were for those living in the 'south': an underdeveloped, uncivilised and backward-oriented people that have yet to reach the social state of the south (see for example Körber and Volquardsen 2014). Here, a certain pride of late Christianisation *vis-à-vis* other regions of the world takes hold while a return to paganism appears to be the aspired goal for the 'next thousand years'. The lyrics thus denote the north as the musician's home based on which an identity and belonging to darkness and a somewhat mythical world is shaped. In essence, it can be argued that the lyrics show an inverted form of 'othering'. While the concept is commonly related to subaltern peoples or colonised societies, in this case withstanding outside intrusion demarcates the Christianisation of the 'north' as the 'other' (Hálfdanarson 2014: 57).

Interestingly, while the north in black or heavy metal lyrics is oftentimes related to a mythical world, these bands and indigenous discourse share an important commonality: the north is home (see for example Dorais 1997). This is best exemplified by the Norwegian black metal band *Satyricon*, a band belonging to the early black metal scene in Norway and playing high-speed oriented black metal. Their song 'Mother north' is considered a 'hymn' amongst the black metal audience due to its highly catchy melody, the utilisation of atmospheric keyboards and its overall 'dark' feeling created through melodies in distinctly minor scales. Additionally, the song is accompanied by a music video in which 'mother north' is presented as a blond woman who is threatened

by dark forces (see also von Helden 2011). The song is found on their 1997-album *Nemesis divina* (Satyricon 1996). The lyrics, including grammatical errors, read:

Mother north - how can they sleep while their beds  
are burning?  
Mother north - your fields are bleeding  
Memories...The invisible wounds  
Pictures that enshrine your throne (gone?)  
A future benighted still they are blind  
Pigeonhearted beings of flesh and blood  
keeps closing their eyes for the dangers that  
threat...ourselves and our nature  
[...]  
Mother north - united we stand (together we walk)  
Phantom north - I'll be there when you hunt them  
down

The northern environment is thus no longer an abstract entity in which the protagonist is embedded, but an active being that needs protection from outside threats. The 'north' is therefore implicitly fragile and prone to dramatic changes if not protected. Once again, similarities to indigenous and animistic narratives come to the fore while inverted 'othering', and 'us' in the north against 'them' in the 'non-north', is constructed. At the same time, the northern Finnish band *Suotana* on its 2015-record *Frostrealm* (Suotana 2015) presents the northern environment differently. While musically the band utilises typical black metal trademarks such as high-speed drumming and screaming vocals, the songs, despite being performed by distorted guitars, are highly melodic and show an orientation towards classical arrangements, generating an epic atmosphere that enables the listener to imagine the wintery north. Lyrically, the protagonist is located within a sub-Arctic environment and while the north still serves as the platform of imagination and a powerful force, it nevertheless constitutes a place of comfort and belonging. The lyrics to the song 'Child of frost' read:

I need to go on and on  
When the autumn rain still falls  
I have a snowstorm within me  
The frost and dark living within me  
[...]  
I need to find the way to the gates  
Before my everything withers away  
I have the power to freeze rivers, lakes and seas  
Blow neverending winter and execute all my fantasies

Also, the Norwegian Viking metal band *Einherjer*, further discussed below, uses the 'north' as a source of power and place of belonging. In their song 'Norrøn kraft' ('Northern power') from the 2011-record *Norrøn* ('Northern'), entirely written in Norwegian and translated by the author, it is sung:

Eg er norrøn av natur (I am northern of being)  
I tanke, vilje og i sinn (In thought, will and sense)  
Mann i hjerta, mann i ånd (Man in heart, man in spirit)  
Klar for ka en så komme nå (Ready for what may  
come now)

In *Vendetta Metal Magazine* the main songwriter and lyricist of *Suotana*, Ville Rautio, notes: 'I love fly fishing and spend a lot of time in the wilderness. Those feelings that I feel there I transform into music.' Moreover, 'winter, coldness, frost, nature, death' form the main lyrical contents of the band's songs (*Vendetta Metal Magazine* 2014a). Thus, the north is not merely a platform of imagination or a sphere of 'speculative visions' but rather an active player in shaping the identity of musicians and bands. Indeed, the natural environment as a source of inspiration plays a prominent role in different forms of heavy metal and especially in black metal (von Helden 2011). Danish female black metal musician Amelie Bruun names '[t]he frozen nature of Scandinavia, the winter darkness, the midnight summer sun that keeps us restlessly awake, the cold sea that my family bathes in all year long' (*Metal Injection* 2014) as primary inspirational sources for her solo project *Myrkur*. The rather recent project has gained significant popularity in the black metal scene with its self-titled first album from 2014 and even more so with its 2015-record entitled *M* (Myrkur 2015). Apart from extreme vocals, high-speed drumming and melodic, sometimes slightly dissonant black metal guitar lines, Bruun furthermore utilises her clean vocals to generate melancholic and epic atmospheres. Indeed, the song 'Nordlys' ('Northern light') is a short instrumental piano piece in which Bruun uses her voice as an additional melody without lyrics. Also above-mentioned, Oslo-based *Darkthrone* draws heavily on natural inspiration. Gylve 'Fenriz' Nagell, one of the band's main songwriters, emphasises the prime importance of the Norwegian forests for his band: '[the forest] is in the identity of Oslo. I've tried to explain it more deeply in my lyrics. [...] You just have to be there. The thing is it's so close. We don't have to travel to get there. It's here, it's around us' (*MetalSucks* 2013).

While the north and the cryospheric world in black metal are commonly linked with darkness and death, it further serves as a source of inspiration and functions as a demarcation for the area of belonging and/or protection. However, the music genre of black metal has also traditionally embedded the north in a discourse on death, decay and overall 'lifelessness'. Often this is paired with Satanic and misanthropic tropes, narratives and storylines in which the north plays a secondary, supportive role to provide the atmospheric setting.

### Northern mythology: Viking or pagan metal

The thematic focus on the 'north' is not absent in the world of heavy metal. Already in the late 1980s the Swedish band *Bathory* started to include northern themes into its lyrics with an exclusive focus on Viking mythology. The album *Blood, fire, death* from 1988 is commonly regarded as the first Viking metal record (Moynihan and Söderlind 1997), yielding ever more bands with names stemming from northern mythology,



such as *Thyrfing*, *Bifröst* or *Einherjer*. While musically black and Viking metal to a large degree overlap and a musical distinction is often difficult to be made, musicians often play in black and Viking metal bands at the same time, the styles are roughly different in so far as Viking metal bands more frequently use clean male vocals, often arranged in a choir-like fashion and mid-tempo paced songs. Grutle Kjellson of the Viking metal band *Enslaved*, which will be presented below, remarked:

I think the music is metal. The category all depends on the lyrics, from my point of view. As long as it is not dealing with Satanism or such things. The lyrics describe the music, the music is metal, but our Viking lyrics can explain how we're not black metal, so we use the term 'Viking metal'. It is not really a category, the category is metal and the Viking stuff is just something with which we've put a label on the music many years ago (*Chronicles of Chaos* 1999).

The thematic northern orientation, however, was and is not confined to geographically northern bands. Viking and pagan metal bands can now be found all over the world. For example, the Spanish band *Incursed* links northern mythology with other medieval themes (*Vendetta Metal Magazine* 2015). In many instances and especially in the early 1990s, northern mythology and paganism was linked with racism and neo-Nazism (Dornbusch and Killguss 2005; Schnurbein 1993). To this day, black and Viking metal bands with explicit or implicit racist agendas can be found (Spracklen 2010). Given the breadth of that topic it shall not be part of this paper.

Suffice it to say, while the 'north' in black metal is commonly associated with death and cold, the above mentioned song 'Norden on fire' exemplifies another, crucially important narrative that heavy metal bands in general utilise: endurance and strength. Racist and white supremacist bands ascribe these trademarks to the Aryan people predominantly populating northern European areas. Here, Jean Bodin's *Six books of the Commonwealth* (Bodin 1576 (2009)) can be made reference to in which he aims to use scientific evidence to prove that the 'savage creatures who live like beasts in caves' indeed show a superior strength: '[...] internal heat gives them much greater strength and natural vigour than have the rest. The coldness of the climate, by conserving their natural heat, gives them greater appetite, and they eat and drink more than others' (Bodin 1576 (2009): 151). Honour and virtue, as already described by Montesquieu (1748 (2001): 248) in *The spirit of laws*, are also often-seen narratives within heavy metal. Perceived superior strength, honour and virtue in combination with misanthropic memes thus lead to an 'Übermensch'-narrative, easily portrayed in black and Viking metal contexts.

This is not to say, however, that Viking and pagan metal bands always follow racist agendas—in fact, very few bands do. Instead, '[i]n Viking metal lyrics and imagery, there is a focus on strength and barbarism: both are deeply concerned with displaying heroic warriors, fight

and, in addition, untamed and barren nature' (von Helden 2010: 257). The 'north' is once again used as a sphere of imagination: northern mythology is paired with a depiction of Viking life as it might have been. Historic accuracy is irrelevant, but instead the image of a rather barbaric, yet proud Viking living in a harsh environment is coupled with explicitly anti-Christian agendas. The popular Swedish band *Amon Amarth*, playing a bombastic, heavy and somewhat monotonous style of Viking metal, thus sing in their song 'Gods of war arise' from the 2006-record *With Oden on our side* (Amon Amarth 2006):

Sacrifice to gods of old  
Bleed them of their lives  
Fresh blood on our swords  
Gods of war arise  
[...]  
Some seek shelter in the church  
A refuge for those with faith  
But we know how to smoke them out  
A pyre will be raised  
But those who choose to stand and fight  
Will die with dignity  
For the unfortunate few who survive  
Waits a life in slavery

Dignity and honour are linked with the will to fight in order to please the heathen gods. The killing of Christians, burning of sacred places and enslavement of survivors implies radical heathenism and a return to the old ways, whatever these may be, at all costs and is reminiscent of the practices applied by the terror organisation ISIS (Weiss and Hassan 2015). As Heesch points out, *Amon Amarth* maintains and reiterates the image of the brutal and barbaric Northmen with little regard to whether this is aligned with historical accounts of Viking life or northern mythology. Instead, the phrase *A furore Normannorum, libera nos Domine* ('Save us, Lord, from the rage of the Northmen') as commonly heard in French churches during the time of Viking raids, appears to be the guiding narrative describing northern peoples (Heesch 2010). It is thus not surprising that *Amon Amarth's* record covers depict extreme masculinity paired with fantasy and northern mythological imagery.

On the other hand, historicity plays a role in the genre as well. The prose and poetic *Edda* serves as the major source of inspiration as the books compile Old Norse tales on gods and heroes. The author of the poetic *Edda* is unknown while originally the *Edda* referred to the prose text written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson around 1220 as a study book for Scaldic literature. Snorri's *Edda*, in the literature referred to as the 'Snorra Edda', was subdivided in three major parts, the *Gylfaginning*, a presentation of the Old Norse pantheon, the *Skáldskaparmál*, a study guide for metaphorical paraphrasing of people and terminology, and the *Háttatal*, a compilation of 102 verses in 100 different forms, commented on by Snorri regarding the measure of the verses (Simek 2006). Indirect references to the *Snorra-Edda* can be found frequently in the lyrics of Viking metal bands. For example, the

Norwegian band *Enslaved* name a song ‘Gylfaginning’ on their album *Frost* (Enslaved 1994) from 1994. *Enslaved*, stemming from the early Norwegian black metal scene has musically differed from other bands as their music has used more progressive and less predictable melodic lines. Hook lines and catchy melodies are absent in *Enslaved*’s music and the band has followed a more chaotic approach. The band has used Snorri’s account and historically less dubious perceptions of the ‘north’ and northern mythology and the lyrics on older records, while indeed imaginative, utilise more closely the writings of Snorri and other historical accounts on the Viking age than, for instance, *Amon Amarth*. The lyrics touch upon mythological aspects of the Viking age and the interaction between humans and gods rather than creating a masculine and barbaric imaginative account of northern peoples. The north is thus not a field of projection of specific narratives, but rather a source of inspiration and lyrical perception. On the later albums, the band has left the *Edda*-inspired paths, however, and now combines Norse mythology with philosophical aspects in their lyrics.

The best example of historical accuracy is presented by the Norwegian band *Wardruna*. While itself not a metal band, its members are, or were, members in known Norwegian bands. For the purpose of *Wardruna*, however, the lyrics and music focus on Viking life and mythology and instruments are built based on historical accounts (*Green Global Travel* 2014). To this end, the music is highly atmospheric and almost trance-like through its focus on monotony, using mouth harp, diverse percussion instruments and nature-inspired sound effects. Also, while utilising the trademarks of Viking metal, the aforementioned band *Einherjer* appears to constitute a middle ground between *Amon Amarth* and *Enslaved/Wardruna*. While using historical imagery on album covers and frequently referencing Old Norse mythology based on the *Edda*, a clear identification of ‘northernness’ takes places while the anti-Christian narrative is further spun, as the song ‘Hammer i kors’ (‘Hammer for cross’) from the album *Av oss, for oss*, for *oss* (From us, for us; *Einherjer* 2014) shows:

Bytte ikkje hammer i kors (Won’t trade the hammer for a cross)

Me brenne samme brann (We burn the same fire)

Blota kraft i tankene (The power of blot [a Viking ceremony of sacrifice] in the thoughts)

Northern imagery and history thus are crucial elements in defining a specific music genre. Yet, by showing some distinct examples it can be argued that there is no consistency in how the ‘north’ is utilised in Viking metal. Historicity meets imagination in a Wagnerian sense while reinforced narratives of barbarism and anti-Christianity meet Old Norse mythology.

### An emerging role of polar history?

While research on Old Norse mythology within the heavy metal scene is growing, so is the number of bands and

albums dealing with this issue. Over the last two or three years a new trend within black metal is emerging: the inclusion of polar history into the bands’ lyrical concepts. In general, heavy metal bands have incorporated cultural heritage and history into their lyrical and musical concepts for a long time (see for instance Saouma and others 2007). With regard to polar exploration, not only black metal is prone to its incorporation, now classical opera has ‘discovered’ the poles as the opera *South Pole* by Miroslav Srnka and Tom Holloway, which received its premiere on 31 January 2016 in Munich, indicates (Bayrische Staatsoper nd.). Once again, polar exploration is not confined to geographically northern bands as the three bands under scrutiny in this paper stem from the Netherlands (*Grey Aura*), Germany/England (*Eismalsott*) and Norway (*Ihsahn*).

The black metal band *Grey Aura* released an album with the title *Waerachtighe beschryvinghe van drie seylagien, ter werelt noyt soo vreemt ghehoort* in 2014 (*Grey Aura* 2014). While the title appears difficult to ascribe to polar exploration for the untrained in polar history, the band utilised the journal of Dutch officer Gerrit de Veer, who accompanied Willem Barents on two of his Arctic voyages. It is thus that the title translates into ‘True descriptions of three sea voyages, stranger than anything ever heard before.’ The band thus aims to conceptually and musically capture Barents’ journey into the Arctic, which for the musicians is a ‘story about courage, fear, hope and death’ within a context of patriotism (*Blight of Plebians* 2015). Underlined by audio drama-like sound effects and dialogues, polar exploration links with the ‘cold’ of black metal as the genre is able to express ‘the fear, cold and loneliness the crew of the *Windhond* experienced’ (*Vendetta Metal Magazine* 2014b). For *Grey Aura* an historical source thus serves as the main source of inspiration, screened through a lens of courage, fear, hope and death and wrapped into a musical cloak.

*Eismalsott* from Germany/England released an EP with the title *Weißblendung* (*Snow blindness*) in 2014 (*Eismalsott* 2014). The black-and-white cover depicts a polar mountain landscape, a tent and a person walking away from the tent and merges a photo by Robert Falcon Scott and a woodcarving by Fridtjof Nansen (*Storm-bringer.at* 2014). While the recording, itself a traditional black metal recording, does not in its entirety deal with polar exploration, the song ‘Weißblendung/Titus Oates’ lyrically deals with the member of the *Terra Nova* expedition who supposedly walked out into a blizzard with the words: ‘I am just going outside and may be some time.’ Contrary to *Grey Aura*, including polar exploration into the band’s lyrical concept is not driven by patriotic ideals. Instead, Aïnvar remarks that ‘human exploration and human endurance are nation-less, therefore I feel the same affinity to *Terra Nova* as to the *Fram* expedition or the Gemini and Apollo Programmes’ (Aïnvar, personal communication (email), 24 January 2016). He further states that *Eismalsott*’s engagement with polar

exploration is centred around the narrative of human endurance to human failure to withstand a hostile environment. Within this context, the musician notes, it is an engagement with one's own mortality by an attempt to transpose oneself into someone else's mind (Ainvar, personal communication (email), 24 January 2016). The approach the band thus takes is rather of a personal nature in which the polar environments once again serve as the stage upon which acts of endurance and failure are committed.

Lastly, the solo artist *Ihsahn* releases his album *Arktis* in April 2016 (Ihsahn forthcoming). While at the time of writing little information and merely two songs are available, the cover of the record shows Fridtjof Nansen on skis on his attempt on the North Pole in 1896. Polar exploration and musical concepts, in this case, complement one another. The musician remarks in the Magazine *Loudwire*:

The whole atmosphere of facing the cold, immense unknown fits rather [well] with the general lyrical concept of the entire album. It paints a sense of doubt, hopelessness and frustration yet celebrates curiosity, free will and the choice to avoid conformity. It is, at best, an observance of one's insignificance in relation to time, nature and space yet each individual's ability to make things matter even if only to themselves (DiVita 2015).

Although *Ihsahn's* music can as such not be located in the realm of black metal as he uses very diverse song structures, harmonies and rhythms, he is nevertheless an influential musician in the black metal scene due to his primary involvement in the symphonic black metal band *Emperor*. In light of the above examples and the applied narratives regarding polar exploration it would not come as a surprise if further bands with a polar history were to pick up on the topic in future releases. It appears that the harsh environment and the psychologically and physically strenuous endeavours especially constitute the link between polar exploration and the extreme music genre of black metal.

### Conclusion

In heavy metal the north, the Arctic and the polar environments in general serve as platforms of imagination and, especially in the Viking and pagan metal genre, reflect the interaction of the 'northerner' with his natural environment while handling outside intrusion from the 'south'. Lerner adequately summarises the narratives in relation to Pálmi Hannesson's short story *Allein durch die Einöde* (Hannesson 2007) in which a farmer in the late 19th century gets lost in the Icelandic wilderness: only through 'tenacity, endurance and strength of character' (Lerner 2009: 142) the protagonist is able to survive the grip of the Icelandic desert. At the same time, historicity is embedded into the lyrical and musical concepts of some bands. Of course the arguments presented in this note, given the small sample of bands highlighted, are not

complete and a larger-scale research project is necessary to understand further the role of the 'north' in heavy metal.

The 'north' and the Arctic appear nevertheless to be a tool to sharpen the self-image and identity of bands and musicians *vis-à-vis* 'non-northerners'. While in the Viking and pagan metal scenes the 'north' is the focal point in the appearance, musical and lyrical set up of the bands, in the black metal scene it serves merely to support existing narratives of death, cold and the void of life. This being said, polar history appears to be an increasingly attractive topic within heavy metal as the examples have shown. It seems that the endurance of the explorers within an extremely hostile environment serves as a source of inspiration and is reconcilable with the overall style of the extreme art form that heavy metal constitutes.

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