

THE PERCEPTION OF THE MIDDLE AGES WITHIN GERMAN “MITTELALTER METAL”: A MEDIEVALIST’S VIEW

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Abstract

This paper examines the perception of the Middle Ages within one specific German subgenre of heavy metal, the so called “Mittelalter Metal”. After describing the most significant similarities of the bands belonging to that subgenre the focus lies on the most prominent medieval themes appearing in the lyrics. The essential topics are that of the medieval gleeman or minstrel, magic and religion but also death and violence. The bands use original medieval songbooks with explicit religious context but at the same time they present the Middle Ages as a gloomy and archaic age where historical reality and fantasy are intertwined.

The Medievalist and heavy metal: some preliminary remarks on methods and aims

In his research on the evolution of heavy metal the Canadian anthropologist Samuel Dunn focused in one episode on “Power Metal” (Dunn & McFadyen 2012, Disc 3/Episode 9). He visited the “Metalcamp” festival in Tolmin/Slovenia (now called “Metaldays”) and the Wacken Open Air in Germany. There he watched some re-enacted battle scenes among disguised warriors or knights, and he met visitors dressed in mail shirts or chain armours. For Dunn this particular style of Metal was “completely alien” to him and thus he classified it as a European phenomenon and part of its folklore. This conclusion does not hit the nail on the head completely. At this point the Medievalist can act as a mediator and explain and impart knowledge about this particularly European tradition which is inextricably linked to the medieval times. Namely the German academic Hans-Werner Goetz defines the creation of a dialogue between the Middle Ages and the present age as one important task of the Medievalist (Goetz 1999, p. 33). That means: the reception of the Middle Ages in modern society must be a general interest of the Medievalist. Valentin Groebner states that the designs and recreations of the Middle Ages by the popular culture are exactly the Middle Ages surrounding us (Groebner 2008, p. 144). Although Groebner claimed that Medievalists have to engage the reception of the Middle Ages in popular culture only a few have followed his demand (e.g. Buck & Brauch, 2011; Rohr, 2011; Heinze, 2012; Herweg & Keppler-Tasaki, 2012).

Especially research on the modern music scene seems to be challenging to the Medievalist since the number of publications is quite small. Particularly younger scholars have done some introductory studies on modern music and even heavy metal (Hassemer 2011). Therefore my aim is to provide access for Medievalists/Medieval Studies into heavy metal and to do basic research in an up to now rather neglected field. So the paper should be seen as work in progress. This first attempt seems necessary since the Middle Ages and as a con-

sequence medieval inspired music becomes increasingly popular in Germany. Out of this popularity a unique German subgenre of heavy metal, the so called “Mittelalter Metal”, has developed.

What I want to achieve in this paper is to analyse the conceptions of the Middle Ages within the German metal scene. That also includes what topics relevant bands associate themselves with and take from the Middle Ages. Therefore my main questions are as follows: What medieval issues are focus in the lyrics? Where do the musicians receive their information about the Middle Ages from? What idea of the Middle Ages do the performers have? Finally one has to tackle the question why the Middle Ages are so appealing and fascinating for so many people and artists.

To answer these questions I have first of all analysed the lyrics of selected songs, but also interviews, searched the homepages of metal bands and the booklets. In front of the limitation of the paper it is impossible to examine all characteristic German metal bands. As a result I will focus on four bands in particular that are “In Extremo”, “Subway to Sally”, “Saltatio Mortis” and ultimately “Ingrimm”. Of course, there are far more bands with medieval and metal influences but the selected four represent the genre “Mittelalter-Metal” as its best. It is not my intention to judge these bands in terms of their music; the purpose is to receive a better understanding of each band’s specific view on the Middle Ages.

A short introduction to the band’s history and their careers

“In Extremo” is the nucleus of the genre “Mittelalter-Metal”. Officially founded in 1997, their first album with obvious rock music influences was “Weckt die Toten” (1998). They are playing at the most important metal concerts e.g. at the Wacken Open Air (initially in 1998). Their albums “Sängerkrieg” and “Sterneneisen” reached the first position of the German album charts in 2008 and 2011. “In Extremo” is one of the most popular and successful “Mittelalter Metal”-bands in Germany (see also the band history at the homepage of their official fan club and the Wikipedia Article about “In Extremo”). “Saltatio Mortis” formed themselves at a medieval market in 2000. Their self-proclaimed aim is to play louder and better than death. Their studio albums “Erwachen” and “Des Königs Henker” highlight their transition to rock music (self-statement at google+).

During their career they played at Wacken (initially in 2008) or they worked with guest musicians like Doro Pesch on the album “Wer Wind sät” in 2009. The album “Das Schwarze 1x1” reached the first position of the German album charts in 2013 (cf. the Wikipedia Article about “Saltatio Mortis”). “Ingrimm”, founded in 2005, is the youngest band among the chosen four. For them the most important “milestone in the band history” was the gig at the Wacken Open Air in 2009 (self-statement at their homepage). Their music is in some way similar to that of “In Extremo” or “Subway to Sally” but the guttural voice of singer René Brandt reminds somehow of Death Metal (cf. the Wikipedia Article about “Ingrimm”). “Subway to Sally” is in a way outstanding in comparison to the three other bands. In 1992, they originally started with singing folk songs in English. Thanks to medieval inspired lyrics, medieval instruments and the release of the album “MCMXCV” in 1995, they are linked to the genre “Mittelalter Metal” until today. They also have gigs at the Wacken Open Air since 1997, their album “Schwarz in Schwarz” reached the fourth position in the German album charts in 2011 (for further information see the Wikipedia Article about “Subway to Sally” both in English and German).

What is “Mittelalter Metal“? Some explanations

Of course medieval imagery found its way into heavy metal with Ronnie James Dio and Ritchie Blackmore’s Rainbow but the specific German subgenre “Mittelalter Metal” is somewhat different from this kind of metal. Certainly, this genre also deals with medieval topics but in addition to that bands often use medieval-like musical instruments such as bagpipes, hurdy-gurdys, shawms, or lutes and combine them with typical instruments used in rock music. Another feature is the language; most German bands linked to “Mittelalter Metal” are singing their songs in German or even in Latin – the medieval language par excellence. This leads to the fact that these bands use original sources from the Middle Ages like songs or poems which have survived through manuscripts. But there are also self-composed lyrics (normally in German) that include medieval topics. As the origin of this subgenre are also the medieval markets where they still perform today, the bands often wear medieval- or rather fantasy-like clothes e.g. kilts, plaids, parts of armour (plates or mail skirts) or they enter the stage topless. Hence that the bands connect two spheres when they play at big medieval festivals e.g. “Festival Mediaval” (Bavaria) or at the “Mittelalterlich Phantasie Spectaculum” (changing locations in Germany) as well as at the Wacken Open Air.

It is also possible that they wear different clothes depending on whether they perform at a market, medieval festival or at a rock festival. As the term “Mittelalter Metal” is relatively young and the borders between “Mittelalter Metal” and “Mittelalter Rock” are fluent. An exact and static definition of “Mittelalter Metal” is not explicitly intended or might be entirely impossible. Instead I have tried to describe the most significant similarities between the bands belonging to that subgenre. Basically “Mittelalter Metal” remains a specifically German phenomenon (for further information see Stein 2014, pp. 76-78; the Wikipedia Article about “Medieval Metal” and the chapter “Mittelalter Metal” at “metalstile.de”).

Minstrels, magic and violence: a synopsis of the most popular medieval topics appearing in the lyrics of German “Mittelalter Metal”-bands

Since the most popular medieval themes found within the lyrics provide an insight into the perception of the Middle Ages, it seems essential to discuss them. Necessarily the presented topics are only a representative choice among much more. This synopsis is the first important step to approach the different ideas the bands convey with their music.

Minstrels and minnesingers

As mentioned above the bands very often perform at medieval markets because these are also the starting point of their career. Therefore it is not surprising that they often present themselves as modern gleemen or minstrels. The English term “minstrel” is problematic because he means both the aristocratic and courtly version of a musician and the itinerant gleeman who entertains the ordinary people. By German word usage there exists only the term “Spielmann” (or “Jongleur”) for the common musician and the term “Minnesänger” for the courtly musician. As their medieval predecessors they give themselves “speaking names” like “Lasterbalk der Lästerliche” (in English: someone who is vicious and gossips at the same time), “Alea der Bescheidene”

(“Alea the Modest”), “Das letzte Einhorn” (“The Last Unicorn”) or they use historical names from medieval troubadours or poets. So the Breton Jean Meschinot (died 1491) had been reawakened as “Jean Méchant der Tambour”. Also fitting in this context is the use of medieval instruments like drums, hurdy-gurdys and bagpipes because they belong (alongside many others) to the common repertoire of the minstrel (for medieval instruments in general see McGee 2009). Even the variegated clothes worn by some members of “Mittelalter Metal”-Bands are often reminiscent to medieval gleemen and minstrels.

The lyrics itself broach the issue of the daily life of the wandering gleeman or minstrel and his position in medieval society. In this context the idea of freedom, itinerancy, pride, honour but also infamously is an essential tenor in songs like “Sängerkrieg”, “Neues Glück” (“New Fortune”), “Frei zu Sein” (“To Be Free”) by “In Extremo”, “Spielmann” (“Minstrel”) by “Ingrimm”, “Spielmannschwur” (“Oath Of A Minstrel”) by “Saltatio Mortis” or “Der Hofnarr” (“King’s Jester”) by “Subway to Sally”. The title of one album by “In Extremo” shall illustrate the bright and the dark side of the minstrel’s life since in their belief the minstrel or more exactly the gleeman was “Verehrt und Angespion” that means he was worshipped but at the same time spit on. The same idea can also be found in “Ingrimm’s” song “Spielmann”. In this point historical reality and imagination or idealization become intertwined. Later this is going to be elaborated further on. The song “Sängerkrieg” has a historical reference to the so called “Contest at the Wartburg” set in 13th century Germany. The most famous participants of this contest are the minnesingers Wolfram von Eschenbach and Walther von der Vogelweide (for the “Wartburgkrieg” in general see Heinen 1989, p. 573-574). But this was not a real song contest but only a contest fought on paper which the musicians are not aware of.

The courtly and aristocratic version of the medieval gleeman or minstrel was the minnesinger. His love for a noble woman is called “Minne” (“Courtly love”) and the lyrical outcome in a written form is called “Minnesang”. So the song “Minne” by “Subway to Sally” deals with the love of a minnesinger for a unreachable rich woman which has to be unfulfilled.

Closely related to the topic of the medieval minstrel is the motive of the vagabond (e.g. “Der Vagabund” by “Subway to Sally” or “Vagantenlied” and “Vogelfrei” by “Ingrimm”) because both are homeless and rove around. In contrast to the minstrel the vagabond has to cope with the population’s violent behaviour toward him and his life in general seems to be more dangerous and in some-how hopeless. The members of “In Extremo” call themselves “Vaganten” (“Goliards”) which is another historical name for wandering people. But the lyrical outcome called “goliardic poetry” is only simulating to be written by such goliards, so consequently goliards are in some way a literary and poetic fiction (cf. Berndt 1999, cols. 1366-1368). This fact seems to be unknown to most of the musicians. Unsurprisingly drinking is also a common topic since it supposedly belongs more or less to the daily life of minstrels or vagabonds (e.g. “Spielmannschwur” and “In Taberna” by “Saltatio Mortis”, or “Wasser zu Wein” by “Ingrimm”). This is an interesting parallel to heavy metal in general because the consumption of alcohol is part of the community (see Weinstein 1991, p. 209).

Magic and religion

No other topic in common perception or rather misbelief is as closely linked to the Middle Ages as the theme of magic, witchcraft, religion or superstition.

This idea is co-responsible for the concept of the so-called “Dark Ages”. Therefore it is not surprising that magic is also a key element in the lyrics. Very prominent and often cited are the so-called “Merseburg Charms”, which are two Old High German incantations written down in the 10th century. According to them, one should liberate prisoners, the other should heal the foot injury of a horse (for further information see Murdoch 1988, pp. 358-369). A lot of bands have made the charms into music, among those linked to “Mittelalter Metal” especially “In Extremo” and “Saltatio Mortis”. Even an Estonian charm (allegedly against diseases) can be found on the album “Sängerkrieg” by “In Extremo”. Equally associated with the “Dark Ages” is the often misinterpreted and misconceived Inquisition. So the song “Werd ich am Galgen hochgezogen” (in English: just about to be raised up on the gallows) by “In Extremo” describes the thoughts of a condemned man who had been convicted as a heretic by the Inquisition. A negative attitude against the Catholic Church seems to be a basic tenor. This mindset is obvious in songs like “Wasser zu Wein” (“From Water To Wine”) and “Diaboli” by “Ingrim”. There the Church is allotted the role of the oppressor who wants to control their believers thoughts and if they don’t obey punish them. Therefore it is rather astonishing that almost every band uses songs from medieval songbooks or poems by Minnesingers which include religious topics. The very prominent “Palästinalied” by Walther von der Vogelweide is a written proof for the glorification of the Holy Land against the backdrop of the crusades. This song has been performed by almost every band linked to the Middle Ages till today (“In Extremo” at the album “Weckt die Toten” or “Saltatio Mortis” at “Heptessenz”). Oftentimes the songs or songbooks had also been written for the veneration of the Virgin Mary. At this point it seems necessary to approach an essential question: How do the Middle Ages find their way into music?

Excursus: from medieval manuscripts into the CD player

A specific number of surviving songbooks from the Middle Ages exist which constitutes the core of medieval music in general. Very popular and therefore often used are the so called “Carmina Burana” from the 13th century and the “Llibre Vermell de Montserrat” from the 14th and 15th century. Coming to a mainstream fame through Carl Orff the “Carmina Burana” contain altogether 315 texts. Some of them are written down with a melody (neumes instead of notes). The major language of the texts is Latin, complemented with songs in Old French and Middle High German. Largely covering the timeless issues of love and nature, the lyrics also focus on drinking, board and dice games and eventually they criticise the degeneration of morals in society (for further information see Schaller & Mertens 1999, cols. 1513-1516). Highly popular songs from the “Carmina Burana” among German “Mittelalter Metal”-bands and the medieval music scene as a whole are “Totus Floreo/Tempus Est Iocundum” (performed by “Saltatio Mortis” and “In Extremo” as well), “In Taberna” and “Ecce Gratum” (both performed by “Saltatio Mortis”) and “Hiemali Tempore” as well as “Omnia Sol Temperat” through “In Extremo”. The so called “Llibre Vermell” is a compilation of texts for the veneration of the Virgin Mary originated in the cloister Montserrat near Barcelona (Spain). Written in Latin, Catalanian and Occitan the songs bear witness to a vivid Marian devotion. Several of them are almost “Evergreens” like “Stella Splendens”, “Cuncti Simus Concanentes” or “Ad Mortem Festinamus”. One last manuscript collection has to be mentioned which also derives from the Iberian Peninsula that is the “Cantigas de Santa Maria”. Originated in 13th century at the court of King Alfonso X of Castile (a few he himself wrote!) all the songs are also recorded with notes. This enables modern musicians to render the pitch and partly rhythmic

shape of the songs (Schmid 1999, cols. 1461-1462). Like the “Llibre Vermell” the “Cantigas”, as the name indicates, are set to music poems written in Galician-Portuguese to honour the holy Virgin Mary. Another aspect are miracle stories that took place at pilgrimage sites (Mettmann 1999, col. 1459-1460).

After discussing the most important medieval songbooks and manuscripts the question arises how the metal bands respectively the musicians get to them. Thanks to technical process digital versions of manuscripts and song books are easily available in the internet like the “Llibre Vermell” or the “Cantigas” (the particular addresses can be found in the bibliography). The “Cantigas” are re-hashed for musicians and especially singers in terms of pronunciation and notation. These digital versions are willingly used by “Mittelalter Metal”-Bands as well, e.g. by the members of “Saltatio Mortis” (Gunter Kopf, personal communication, November 6, 2014). Anyway, with the aid of “Google” almost every song, regardless of whether it comes from the “Carmina Burana” or from another songbook, can be found oftentimes even with a translation into German or English. This results in a serious problem. Since most of the musicians are neither Medievalists nor philologists, they are not proficient in languages like Latin, Old and Middle High German, Old French, Catalanian, Occitan, Portuguese and in some cases Estonian, Swedish, Gaelic and other rather exotic languages. Even a Medievalist would not be able to master all these languages! As a consequence, they are not able to check the translations or the pronunciation. So if they want to understand what they are singing of the musicians necessarily depend on translations. At this point the Medievalist would like to know where these used translations are coming from but inside the booklets this information is mostly lacking. Quite often no translations are provided at all und the listener learns nothing about the content and background of the songs (cf. the album-booklet “Des Königs Henker” by “Saltatio Mortis”, “Weckt die Toten” by “In Extremo” or “Mitgift” by “Subway to Sally”). It is remarkable, that the origin of the songs, regardless of whether they are borrowed from the “Carmina Burana”, the “Cantigas” or the “Llibre vermell”, is often not mentioned. Instead of this, only the statement „traditional“ can be found (cf. again the album-booklets “Weckt die Toten” by “In Extremo” or “Mitgift” by “Subway to Sally”).

Some musicians also state that they are going to archives and libraries to study the original manuscripts itself or they ask musicians specialising in “Early Music” for songs and song texts (Gunter Kopf, personal communication, November 6, 2014).

Death, war and violence

Finally, one last topic has to be discussed which also belongs to the common perception of the Middle Ages that is violence, death and diseases. Especially the emerging of the so called “Black Death” during the 14th century seems to be part of the collective memory till today. So it is not amazing that this disease is also a topic in songs like “Die Pest” by “Ingrimm”. Since the Black Death claimed many victims from all strata of society the plague was interpreted as divine judgement (for general information about the plague see Backmann 2009, pp. 466-478). The mortality of all being is reflected in medieval songbooks too. The song “Ad Mortem Festinamus” from the “Llibre Vermell” is about the evanescence of life and therefore urges people not to sin anymore and instead of this to seek salvation in god. This song is used by “Subway to Sally” as a prelude to their album “Mitgift” (“Dowry”) that includes stories of murders throughout the last five centuries (in this sense it is comparable with

Nick Cave's "Murderballads"). This is an interesting example for a creative combination of the Middle Ages with the modern times.

Another object of interest seems to be the figure of the executioner and his allegedly dishonourable status in medieval or rather early modern society. "Saltatio Mortis" named one whole album "Des Königs Henker" ("The Executioner Of The King") and the undertone of this album is a very pessimistic, violent and harsh one. Only the song "Ecce Gratum" does not fit in this context because it is a song about the awakening of love and nature in spring! The self-titled song "Des Königs Henker" is from the executioner's view and his emotional distress. Since he is a murderer in commission of the king he has to cope with the irretrievable loss of salvation. One last point seems worth mentioning. The big feature "war and warriors" is not as widespread in the lyrics of "Mittelalter Metal"-bands as it may be expected. Of course, there are songs with a connection to war e.g. "Krieger" ("Warrior") by "Ingrimm" or "Die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt" ("Hope Dies Last") by "Saltatio Mortis" but these songs do not have an obvious reference to the Middle Ages. They are in the true sense of the word timeless.

The perception of the Middle Ages within German "Mittelalter Metal": a critical analysis

After discussing the most prominent topics within the German "Mittelalter Metal" the focus now lies on the different ideas of the Middle Ages the bands convey. As mentioned above, the chosen issues also implicate the perception. Three subjects seem to be prevalent: "gleeman/minstrel", "magic and religion" and finally "death and violence". The life of the gleeman or minstrel is presented as ambivalent but in a sort it is idealised because in the songs the value of freedom is a crucial one. Yet the itinerancy and often marginalised being of the gleeman has a positive connection for the musicians as they want to see themselves following the medieval gleemen and minstrels. As a consequence, the allegedly infamy of the gleeman is reinterpreted in a positive way. However, the gleeman was not as infamous as often thought by the musicians or by popular culture anyway. Instead of legal infamy he had to suffer far more from ecclesiastical infamy (Schubert 1999, col. 2113). As stated above, the topic "war and warriors" is not represented excessively among "Mittelalter Metal"-bands. This finding could be explained with the self-conception of the musicians. Since the medieval gleeman or minstrel in their imagination lived on the fringes of society, he was not obliged to war service and so he did not have to fight. Therefore issues like fighting strength or bravery in the field are not as important as for other subgenres of heavy metal like the so called "Viking Metal" or the "Power Metal" represented by Manowar (cf. Hassemer 2011, p. 249-250, 258-259). Quite similar to the perception of the medieval gleeman is those of the executioner. Equally transfigured he always fills the role of the dishonourable and scorned killer who has to cope with his isolation. And just as those of the gleeman the position of the executioner in medieval society is similarly misinterpreted and does not correspond with the historical facts (Schild 1999, col. 1440). Obviously the (allegedly) social marginalisation of particular groups of persons in the Middle Ages seems to be very charming for many musicians. The outlaw is somewhat positive in our modern times; Robin Hood and the various filmings of his fabled life is just another example for this positive interpretation. After analysing the songs, the impression emerges that almost every people in the Middle Ages were infamous or somehow disadvantaged.

The self-composed songs with a religious subject matter reveal a negative attitude against the Catholic Church and its representatives. Therefore it is all the

more surprising that the musicians regularly draw on medieval songs with an explicit religious message e.g. the songs written for the veneration of the Virgin Mary or songs about miracles. This does not really fit together. Hence the religious songs are completely quoted out of their original context. One possible explanation could be that they do not know what they are singing of but this seems rather unlikely. As their self-image implies they maybe want to proof their connection to the Middle Ages and that they are familiar with original medieval song texts.

The theme of death, violence and sometimes war is already apparent from the band names. "In Extremo" matters "In The End", "Saltatio Mortis" means "Dance Of Death" (or "Dance Of The Dead") so the association to perishability is obvious. In this way the perception of the Middle Ages is also dominated by a rather gloomy one. This is not a surprising finding for the Medievalist because this notion is part of the popular imagination of the so called "Dark Ages". Altogether the perception of the Middle Ages in popular culture is alternating, namely between a positive and a negative view on this particular era of European history (cf. Goetz 1999, p. 48-50). This exactly seems to generate the charm of the Middle Ages as Alex Haas, the guitarist of "Ingrimm" recently said in an interview. For him, the fascination of the Middle Ages is constituted by the gloomy atmosphere and simultaneously by the simple way of life without technical achievements (Stein 2014, p. 78). Gunther Kopf, member of "Saltatio Mortis", expresses himself in a similar way. According to him the Middle Ages are in a sort related to our modern world especially in terms of emotions like love, hate, joy, faith or anger. Nevertheless the medieval times seem completely different and due to this "appealingly archaic" (Gunter Kopf, personal communication, November 6, 2014).

For the Medievalist this perception of the Middle Ages described up to here is interesting but not unproblematic. Namely, this involves the danger that the Middle Ages become in some way a place of refuge where historical reality and fantasy are mingled (see also Goetz 1999, p. 64). But herein lays also a chance: the Medievalist could act as a mediator between the academic world and society. Through an increased research on the reception of the Middle Ages in popular culture the Medievalist could contribute to a better understanding of this currently most popular European Age. And the music is only one piece of a jigsaw.

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