

4 Antichrist Superstars

The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal

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The near infatuation with all things Norse among a sizeable section of northern European intellectual elites in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well-known, and its principal characteristics are easy to chart.¹ Founded upon romantic belief in the north as a home of barbarian liberty, it developed strong nationalist overtones wherever the population were able to stake some claim to descent from “Vikings”: Scandinavia, the British Isles, Normandy and even the United States.² Attempts by the Nazis to hitch northern European Viking enthusiasms to their own beliefs in the twentieth century, however, certainly contributed to a termination of the love affair of European, and even Scandinavian, intellectuals with the Vikings in the post-war period, and their general disappearance from the realms of high culture (Lönnroth 247–9).

Popular interest in the Vikings, on the other hand, has been a different matter. Already well established in the early years of the twentieth century, it has gone from strength to strength in the last fifty years, with major museum exhibitions and such enterprises as the Jorvik Viking Centre both meeting and helping to foster demand.³ The Vikings have entered the popular imagination: according to Raphael Samuel, they are among “our stock figures, our subliminal points of reference, our unspoken points of address” (27).

The Viking image has been adopted across a wide range of popular cultural forms, including films, cartoons, comic books, and advertisements, as well as works of fiction and popular history. Alexandra Service’s 1998 doctoral thesis is the most comprehensive examination

of popular usage of the Vikings and usefully highlights a number of its characteristic features. Vikings, firstly, are easily recognisable.⁴ Their appearance is distinctive and well-defined. Generally it is males who are portrayed: indeed the Viking is hyper-masculine. They are big and strong with blond or red hair, and equipped with swords or axes and winged or horned helmets (64–113). Typically they are also accompanied by an equally archetypal piece of Viking material culture: the longship, bedecked with dragon figureheads, stripy red-and-white sails, and shields. Of course, little of this supposed Viking appearance is supported by historical or archaeological evidence—a fact regularly bemoaned by academic specialists—but that is rather beside the point. Even if the audience recognises—as it perhaps increasingly does—the dubious historical accuracy of elements of this Viking kit, that does not mean it ceases to use, for instance, horned helmets as the central diagnostic symbols that “mean” Vikings: their effectiveness as a superlative brand identifier is perhaps enhanced by the pleasing sense of one’s own cleverness to be derived in seeing through them.

Service identifies a number of characteristic qualities, behaviors and attributes associated with Vikings. Most obviously the Vikings are violent: in both art and literature, their primary activity is the raid, complete with longships drawn up on the shore, burning villages, and panicked inhabitants (131 ff.). However, almost as important is the image of the Vikings as great sailors and explorers (211 ff.). Closely allied is their association with freedom: they are seen as restless and individualistic spirits following their own stars and not submitting easily to any acknowledged authority (196 ff.). Finally, Service notes that the Vikings of popular culture tend to extremes: they are the greatest sailors, the hardest warriors, the biggest eaters and drinkers, the tallest and toughest men and so on. There is simply something about them that attracts superlatives (64).

This diverse and potent combination elicits reactions that are frequently both emphatic and complex. While the dominant image of the Vikings is of bloodthirsty and rapacious attackers, barbarian disrupters of civilized life, and definitely not to modern tastes, there is enormous admiration for their energy, dynamism, military strength and sense of adventure; they are romantic anti-heroes, bad boys of a past far more exciting than, but also safely remote from, our own times.

In this paper we shall explore how various elements of the Viking image have been used by an important popular cultural form not addressed by Service: rock music, and, specifically, hard rock and heavy metal.

*“Everything Louder than Everyone Else”:
The Semiotics of Heavy Metal*

Before going on, it is important to say a little about heavy metal (also “metal” or “HM”), if only to offer a partial explanation of why it is in this musical form, and in the subculture associated with it, that the Viking image has had most resonance.⁵

Excess is the stuff of metal. Bands aim to be the loudest, the fastest, and the dirtiest. Subtlety is not especially prized: everything about HM—the music, the lyrics, the appearance of band and audience members, and the artwork of album covers, promotional material and stage sets are designed to convey their messages simply, directly and emphatically (Weinstein 21–43). The subjects to which HM addresses itself in its imagery are many and varied, but there are recurrent themes which are particularly distinctive and characteristic, and these bear out the predilection for the lurid, the grotesque and the extreme. Deena Weinstein, in her authoritative study of the genre, divides these into two broad categories: those concentrating on Dionysiac pleasure (sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll) and those invoking images of chaos, which in this context she defines as “the absence or destruction of relationships, which can run from confusion, through various forms of anomaly, conflict, and violence, to death” (38). It is squarely within this latter category that the employment of the Vikings in heavy metal falls.

A particularly rich source of inspiration for ideas of chaos is popular entertainment in all its manifold forms: literature, television and, above all, film have all been thoroughly worked over by bands seeking material (Weinstein 40). In selecting from such sources bands invariably concentrate on garish and powerful imagery, and on anything which will appeal to the teenage males who constitute the principal (though by no means the only) consumers of metal. Fantasy, science fiction, horror and death are particularly favoured, as is anything to do with Satan or hell. If the subject matter happens to be the sort of thing that makes parents, teachers or other guardians of moral wellbeing cross, then so much the better, a habit which has led to a long-running campaign against HM by the conservative Christian right in the US.⁶ Metal, though, has reveled in its outlaw, bad boy image, and, indeed, has emphasized it, lionising macho masculine maverick heroes and anti-heroes such as bikers, cowboys, or, indeed, Vikings.

Heavy metal emerged as a distinctive and self-aware sub-genre within the broader category of rock music in the late 1960s and early 1970s: it was in this period that the characteristic visual, cultural, musical and lyrical signifiers that would ever after define heavy metal—the “code”—were

assembled and crystallised into a distinctive medium (Weinstein 8). This was also, though, the period of a boom in fantasy literature, kicked off by the enormous popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien in the United States in the later 1960s (James 180–81). The two emergent genres grew alongside each other, attracting audiences with similar demographic profiles and interests, and it is only natural that heavy metal should have drawn extensively on fantasy in its subject matter. This interleaving of sub-cultures was only reinforced by the success of a number of fantasy films, and by the popularity of both fantasy role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, and fantasy adventure computer games, all of which appealed to the same audience. These converging cultures of music, gaming, books and film served and serve extremely effectively as recruiting grounds for each other: those who are members of any one are almost inevitably exposed to the others, thus considerably multiplying the audience for all. Members of the metal audience tend to be highly conversant in the norms and topoi of swords 'n' sorcery fantasy, which is of particular importance to the current study given the close links between stereotypical fantasy barbarians and the Vikings of popular discourse (Service 80).

Blood and Irony: Popular Vikings and Metal

Evocation of Viking imagery has been a feature of hard rock from the very beginning of its development as a distinct musical genre. Indeed, it is in the oeuvre of Led Zeppelin, arguably the band that did most to define and popularise the style, that the earliest and best-known exploitation of Norse themes can be found. The lyrics of “Immigrant Song” (1970) and “No Quarter” (1973) conjure an air of romance and adventure—albeit tinged with menace—through striking allusions to the characteristic and familiar Viking behaviours: seaborne voyaging, violence and exploration. Interestingly, neither song ever actually mentions the word “Viking,” nor details their subject in any direct way: on the contrary, there is complete confidence that a general audience will understand the references and surmise on the strength of their behavior and context alone the Viking identity of the song’s subjects.

Where Led Zeppelin led, many other mainstream hard rock and heavy metal bands from the 1970s to the present day have followed, with songs that draw upon the general received popular Viking iconography, but normally laying most stress upon the violence, chaos and danger which are their most lurid and attention-catching features.⁷ In every case, interest in the Vikings is ephemeral; they will form the subject matter for one song, but then bands will turn once more to war or Hammer Horror-style Satanism or motorbikes or any of the other standard lyrical fare

of HM. Equally, no attempt is made in the music to capture a “Viking” sound, whatever that might be: the lyrics apart, none of these songs could be differentiated from the rest of their performers’ output. The Vikings are just one more item on an à la carte menu of popular culture, to be picked up and used as a strong and easily-recognized image with well-defined meanings, and perhaps also the ability to impart an air of romance and mystery, but then to be put down again in favor of other subjects. Authentic historical representation or context is not really an aim: what matters is what they stand for in popular cultural terms, as that has been communicated by books and films, and as it is understood by performers and audience.

It is perhaps worth noting that allusions in metal—or any other form of pop music—to any early medieval culture or people other than the Vikings are very few indeed.⁸ It is precisely, we may conclude, because the Vikings have escaped from the ghetto of historical knowledge into a wider cultural milieu alongside characters from fiction or film that we see them in use thus in popular music. In this way, if in no other, the peers of the Vikings are not dowdy old Anglo-Saxons or Franks or Alle-mannii, but the colourful, larger-than-life, superstars of every other reach of popular culture: flesh-eating zombies or cowboys or serial killers.

Ad hoc appropriation of Viking imagery in this way continues to the present in rock music. The image of the Viking received from films, literature and the rest of its vast panoply of platforms is one of a multitude of iconic ideas used freely and in the certain knowledge it will communicate messages about the sorts of qualities attributed to the Vikings: freedom, masculinity, adventure and chaos. Rock music thus becomes another medium transmitting and reinforcing that Viking “package.”

However, there has sprung up a second usage of the Vikings by heavy rock bands, which lays far more stress on their historical context. Although developing out of the occasional and unsystematic allusions dealt with so far—which established the Vikings as a staple subject of heavy metal—this new usage transformed them, so that the Vikings became, in some cases, the sole focus of bands’ lyrics, identity and image.

Barbarians and the Viking Life

The trail was blazed by a number of bands who started to adopt a Viking or Viking-based persona as a permanent part of their identity. Prime amongst these, and notable in apparently taking it seriously, were Manowar. Champions of the furry loincloth, they were widely ridiculed even within heavy metal, but won a sizeable—and fanatical—following.

Making regular references to the Vikings and Norse mythology in their lyrics, they relished the Viking image, although stopping short of completely embracing it: although a significant minority of their songs are indeed on Viking themes, the bulk of them stick to more routine heavy metal fare, with songs about the majesty of rock, the awe-inspiring manliness of Manowar and typical themes of chaos, war and death.⁹ In any case, the Manowar version of the Vikings owes as much to Conan the Barbarian as to history, saga or Edda: what matters to Manowar is untamed masculinity, and the Vikings are for them merely the archetypal barbarian males.¹⁰ Unlike the Viking bands discussed below, Manowar were not bothered about the historical actuality lying behind the popular Viking image, and never attempted to claim religious or racial identity with the Vikings in any serious way: that would have been practically impossible for a band whose leading member has the less than wholly Scandinavian name of Joey di Maio.

It was in Scandinavia itself, and particularly in the more extreme Death and Black Metal scenes from the late 1980s onwards that some bands, following Manowar's lead, began to identify far more totally with the Vikings. Pioneers in this field were Bathory, from Stockholm, who, after three albums of routine Satanism-by-numbers, changed direction and released 1988's "Blood, Fire, Death," including two songs on Norse themes and completed with the striking cover image of *The Wild Hunt of Odin* by the nineteenth century Norwegian artist Peter Nicolai Arbo. This, though, was a mere prelude to 1990's "Hammerheart," again with nineteenth century sleeve art, which was a complete concept album entirely devoted to the Vikings. This, in turn, was followed up with further Viking-themed concept albums: 1991's "Twilight of the Gods," "Blood on Ice" (recorded in 1988–9 though not released until 1996), and, most recently "Nordland" vols. 1 (2002) and 2 (2003).

Bathory's songwriter and dominant figure, known only as Quorthorn, commented on the band's new interest in the north:

Since I am an avid fan of history, the natural step would be to find something in history that could replace a thing like the dark (not necessarily always the evil) side of life (and death). And what could be more simple and natural than to pick up on the Viking era. Great era, and great material for metal lyrics. Being Swedish and all, having a personal relation to, and linked by blood to, that era at the same time as it was an internationally infamous moment in history, I sensed that here I just might have something. Especially well suited was it since it was an era that reached its peak just before the Christian circus came around northern Europe and Sweden in the tenth century, establishing itself as the dictatorial way of life and death. And so that satan and hell type of soup was changed for proud and strong nordsmen, shiny blades of broadswords, dragon ships and a party-'til-you-puke type of living up there in the great halls [*Blood on Ice* sleeve-notes].

What was new in Bathory's approach was, firstly, the all-embracing character of their enthusiasm for the Vikings—the likes of Manowar may have alluded to them a few times, but they certainly did not produce album after album entirely dedicated to them—but more important was the personal link forged between the band as Swedes and the Vikings. Previously, heavy metal bands' interest in the Vikings had been based almost purely upon their emblematic status as hyper-masculine anti-authoritarian role models, propagators of Weinstein's "chaos." An element of racial or national identification between bands and/or audience and the Vikings, although not, perhaps, ever absent, was never as important as enthusiasm for the Vikings' supposed behavior. What Bathory did, however, was emphasize a romantic nationalist link between themselves (and their predominantly northern European audience) and the Vikings, portraying themselves as inheritors of their blood, and thus linked to them in a special and exclusive way. Once this was established, the way was open for the transformation of what had been a mere interest into a philosophical, religious and even political program.

Viking Metal

Extreme and obsessive loathing of Christianity had long been a norm—a cliché, even—of death and black metallers,¹¹ but Bathory and, in the 1990s, many other bands and fans began to turn away from Satan and place their faith in the Vikings, and more specifically in Oðin, as the foremost champions of opposition to Christianity. Many claim affiliation to Ásatrú, a religion founded in Texas in the late '60s and attempting to revive Norse heathenism.¹² Whereas many proponents of Ásatrú are hippyish and peaceable New Agers, the slant put on the religion by most of the black metallers who claim devotion to the Aesir is militant and normally fiercely patriotic or racist: Christianity is regularly dismissed as a "foreign, slave religion," whereas northern Europeans should actually be true to their old gods. The conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity is normally portrayed as entirely forcible and as a wrong that needs to be righted.¹³ Some members of the scene have proved themselves willing to back up their words with actions: indeed, it first gained attention—and notoriety—as a result of a spate of church-burnings in the early and mid 1990s by its members, including that of the 12th century Fantoft Stave Church outside Bergen by Varg Vikernes, the leader of the Norwegian band Burzum.

Thanks to the church-burnings and his murder of a rival black metallar, Vikernes has become an infamous figure in Norway, and his views and beliefs have been widely reported. Besides a taste for self-mythologizing, they reveal the confused character of ideas about the

Vikings in the black metal scene. Vikernes at first claimed to be a Satanist, the well-worn pose of extreme metallers wishing to portray themselves as evil. His tastes seem originally to have been not so much for the unmediated medieval itself as for J.R.R. Tolkien: he adopted the name of “Count Grishnackh,” based upon an orc in *The Lord of the Rings*, and named his band Burzum after a Tolkienian word for “darkness.” Only in retrospect, and taking advantage of the considerable opportunities for reflection offered by a life jail sentence, did Vikernes cloak his actions in an Oðinic garb and claim the motivation of an attempt to restore Norse paganism for his church burning (Moynihan and Söderlind 151–2). From prison he has issued his own racist and anti-Semitic interpretation of Norse mythology entitled *Vargsmål*, obviously a deliberate echoing of *Hávamål*, although also obviously with an eye on *Mein Kampf* (Moynihan and Söderlind 151). Vikernes has also released albums on Norse themes—in a musical style which increasingly draws upon Norwegian folk music rather than heavy metal—and has become a hero of the Norwegian far right. Proving both that it is not just the early medieval past to which he looks for inspiration, and that he will use any historical weapon at his disposal to offend liberal Norwegian opinion, it is notable that he has recently added the name Quisling to his own, and is even attempting to claim some sort of kinship to the wartime collaborator (Moynihan and Söderlind 165, 170).

Very few bands or individuals have gone quite as far as that, but an undercurrent of racism, nationalism and anti-Semitism continues to permeate many parts of the black metal scene. On the other hand there are a number of bands who are merely extremely interested in the Vikings, and Norse mythology in particular. There has grown up a broad church of so-called Viking Metal bands—such as Enslaved or Einherjer—who entirely eschew tired old Satanism and write songs almost exclusively on Norse themes (Moynihan and Söderlind 183, 191–2). There are perhaps as many definitions of what constitutes Viking Metal as there are fans, but something of the ethos can be captured from the description provided by one American enthusiast:

Viking Metal is about Norse Mythology. Ásatrú, Nature, the Nordic landscape, pride and strength, characteristics of the Vikings, historic events relating to the Vikings, and so forth. VM also deals with the Heathen/Pagan “soul” (if you will), and the eternal battle with judeo-x-ianity, as well as all foreign slave religions.... One can even say that VM is enshrouded in social Darwinism [sic] ... and the survival of the fittest—the survival of the finest—of Nature’s creation (e.g. the Vikings, the Norse, Heathens, etc.). Moreover, VM is a medium for viewing and celebrating life and the world through our eyes—eyes of European folk, kin, and our ancestors—without foreign influence, perversions, and lies. VM is not just music, it’s not meant for bleeding hearts or those laden with European ancestral guilt, and it’s not

about a bunch of rowdy pirates wearing horns, getting drunk from mead, and swinging axes around [<http://members.aol.com/Einherjer/VM.html>].

Viking metallers tend to take their subject seriously, evincing contempt for the popular and Hollywood version of the Vikings: no self-respecting Viking metallers would be caught dead in a horned helmet. Frequently they have read extensively, if uncritically, and songs are filled with allusions to Norse mythology: indeed it is not uncommon for bands to provide glossaries or encyclopedias on record sleeves or Web sites to help their fans understand all of their references. These sleeves, similarly, are often decorated with archaeological finds of the Viking Age: Thor's hammers are favored, but other items, such as the Oseberg posts, or even the Sutton Hoo helmet have also appeared. Yet these iconic emblems of the Viking Age, found in innumerable text books and museum catalogues, are contextualised within the violent and misanthropic world-view projected by Scandinavian Black Metal bands.

A Love of the North: The Iconology of Viking Metal

Music, belief and outlook are closely related in Black Metal (Moynihan and Söderlind 33). The dark and violent outlook of Scandinavian Viking Metal as expressed in lyrics and associated literature (and in extreme cases in the actions of individuals) is underlined, even spear-headed, by visual media ranging from album art and band photographs through to merchandise and Web site design. From Bathory the Viking Metal bands have inherited an iconographic blueprint for "thoughtful explorations of ancient Viking heathenism" (Moynihan and Söderlind 22). The imagery used in Viking Metal is largely formulaic, but it is not exclusively based on the material culture of the Viking Age. It encompasses the broad semiotic system favored by many Black and Death Metal bands, not least of all the exultation of violence and hyper-masculinity expressed through weapons and battlefields. In Viking Metal, this is combined with a consistent interest in ancestral roots, specifically pre-Christian heritage, expressed visually through Viking mythology and the aesthetics of northern landscapes. This is evident in the iconography of the most influential Viking Metal bands: Einherjer, Enslaved, Moonsorrow, Thyrfing and Windir.

The album covers of Einherjer give the Norwegian band perhaps the most "Viking" feel of all, rivalled only by Enslaved, as they include actual artefacts: a Thor's hammer pendant (*Leve Vikingånden*, 1995 and *Far Far North*, 1997), a carved post from the Oseberg ship burial (*Dragons*

of the North, 1996) and part of a harness bow of a type in the “Jelling style” found in Denmark (Blot, 2003). A more unusual combination is found on the cover of *Odin Owns Ye All* (1998) which includes a representation of the one-eyed god and his two ravens, flanked by ornamentation reminiscent of the spiralling tendrils and animals found on Urnes stave church. The entire composition is represented as a wooden carving, fire-lit from below. In this respect, the band’s artwork spans the full chronology of the Viking Age: from the eighth/ninth century Oseberg to the eleventh/twelfth century Urnes art styles. You could be forgiven for assuming these were album covers from a Scandinavian folk band, but images of the band members themselves—sullen and aggressive, wearing



Enslaved's cover for *Eld* (1997) shows both the Thor's hammer (pendant) and typical examples of medieval Scandinavian animal carving. (Copyright ©1997 Osmose Records. All rights reserved. Used by permission.)

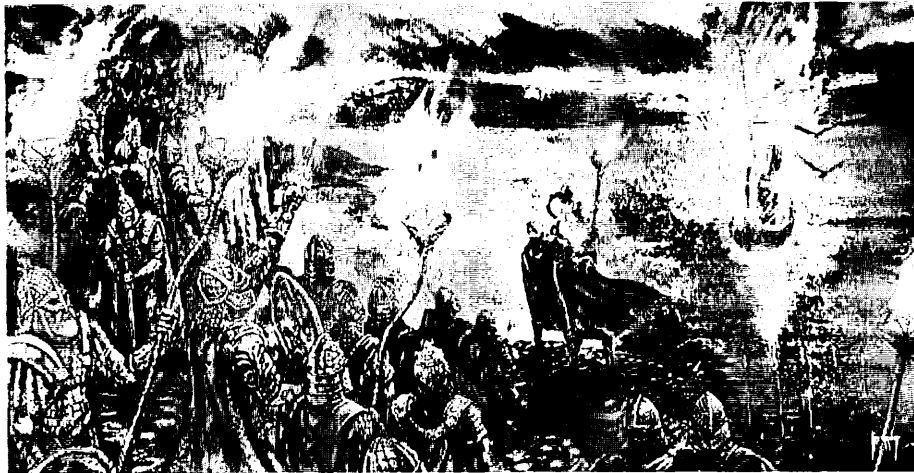
black leather and chain mail—leave no doubt and exemplify the dual character of Viking Metal: the diabolical and masculine heritage of earlier Metal combined with a conscious link to a glorious pre-Christian ancestral past. Indeed, few Viking Metal bands would be mistaken for the re-enactors that can be regularly encountered in Scandinavia or Britain during Viking-themed festivals or “living history” displays; an exception that instantly springs to mind is the cover design of Norwegian band Enslaved’s album *Eld* (1997) (fig. 1) which pictures vocalist Grutle Kjellson as a Viking chieftain, sitting on a throne decorated in the manner of dragon-headed posts recovered from the Gokstad ship burial, wearing chainmail, a large Thor’s hammer pendant and carrying a sword in one hand and a drinking horn in the other. The other band members just out of shot, but represented elsewhere in the album, are dressed similarly as Viking warriors (although one appears to be holding a Scottish claymore). The quintessential Viking-ness of Enslaved is underlined by the band’s logo, which includes the name constructed from knotwork, reminiscent of Viking Age zoomorphic art and incorporates the shape of Thor’s hammer at its center. Interestingly, the prolific use of the Thor’s hammer pendant today overshadows its function in conversion period Scandinavia, when it probably only played a minor role (Staecker 89–104), but as a recognisable Viking and pagan symbol, it conveys a very clear message. On the other hand, there is widespread evidence for martial culture in Viking Age (and earlier) Scandinavia, and this has become central to the image projected by Viking Metal bands.

Martial imagery clearly plays an important role in the iconography of many Metal bands, with eras of inspiration ranging from prehistory through to the Gulf War. The Viking Age is certainly not short of suitable material, and weapons and warriors are readily incorporated into the iconography of Viking Metal bands, ranging from logos, such as that used by Norwegian “folkloric black metal” band Windir, which substitutes two Viking-Age swords for the “i”s,¹⁴ through to band member personas.

Promotional photographs of band members of Moonsorrow standing in chainmail, wearing Thor’s hammer pendants and carrying swords (photo shoot Verisäkeet, 2005) typify the visual presentation of Viking Metal bands and underline their interests: dressing in black, often leather, represents a virtual uniform that identifies them with Metal (rather than folk music); wielding weapons identifies them with the violent and masculine concepts associated with Black Metal; and sometimes carrying authentic Viking arms represents a deliberate link to the glorious age of their ancestors. The backdrop is often a forest but includes any typically northern, and particularly Scandinavian, landscape such as fjords and mountains. With the exception of the odd promotional photograph of band members wielding firearms or carrying bullet-belts, there is a distinct

lack of references to modern, Western civilisation and this links back to a key motivation of north European Black Metal as an extreme reaction against mainstream European culture, as well as emphasising a natural connection with the ancestral lands. Indeed, Thyrfing's most recent promotional photographs have the individual band members literally rising out of a forest bog.¹⁵ The use of Viking motifs to emphasize an ancestral connection extends beyond Scandinavia; when Austrian Black Metal band Amestigon released a promotional album in 2000 titled *Remembering Ancient Origins*, they chose for its cover a widely published carving from the stave church in Hylestad, Norway, depicting the hero Sigurd slaying the dragon Fafnir. Although written down within a Christian milieu, many elements of the story are frequently linked to pre-Christian oral tradition.

Einherjer stand out visually because of their use of iconic examples of Viking material culture, and other bands dip into this bountiful resource: the instantly recognisable symbol of the square-sailed Viking ship is readily used. The album art of Falkenbach includes a number of images of longships and seascapes, as well as a familiar burning dragon-headed prow from a re-enactment of a ship burning (*Magni Blandinn Ok Megintiri*, 1998), represented in full on the cover of Swedish group Månegarm's album *Dödsfärd* (2003) (fig. 2). Similar fjord landscapes are found in the album art of Windir, while longships and seascapes are also used by Thyrfing. Enslaved, seen by many as a foundational Viking Metal band, went as far as representing themselves as Viking warriors standing on a rocky shoreline with their boat moored in the background (on the cover of *Blodhemn*,



The cover of Månegarm's 2003 album *Dödsfärd*, which translates as "Death Journey", features the stereotypical Viking funeral. (All rights reserved. Copyright Displeased Records.)

1998). Moonsorrow make use of equally familiar late Viking Age runestones (on *Kivenkantaja*, 2003) but draw on even earlier prehistoric material such as rock carvings and megaliths for their ancestral connection. Many Viking Metal bands focus on their local roots first, and perhaps a north European identity second; in the case of Moonsorrow this is Finland, and with Einherjer it is Norway. All however see Christianity as the common enemy, whether in the past, or, as in the case of groups such as Burzum, into the present. Moonsorrow's exultation of their pagan heritage and the struggle against Christianity is explicitly stated on their Web site:

Picture vast battlefields with ravens soaring above them. Now picture the forest nearby. Therein skulk the oppressed heathens of the barren North. The brazen sons of the earth fighting against the scourge from the West.... During their journey of nearly ten years Moonsorrow have gained prestige as advocates of the pagan ways. Telling credible tales of the struggle of the tribes of the northern heathens, and combining this with their recognizable brand of epic folk metal.¹⁶

While scenes of Christian oppression are uncommon in Viking Metal iconography, a notable exception is found on Burzum's *Daudi Baldrs* (1997), which depicts pagans being offered a choice between baptism and death. Yet scenes where Christianity is directly targeted are equally rare. They are perhaps most vividly associated with Månegarm's recent albums, such as *Vredens tid* (2005), which pictures a troll emerging from



The cover of Månegarm's 2005 album *Vredens tid*, which translates as "The Time of Wrath," depicts what seems to be one of the Jotun, or giants, who appear in Scandinavian mythology, smashing a medieval stave church. (All rights reserved. Copyright Displeased Records.)

the woods and pounding away at a stave church (fig. 3), perhaps interpreted as “the land” fighting back against the intruding belief system, while *Havets vargar* (2000) depicts two squabbling monks about to be cut down by a Viking warrior stepping off his ship.¹⁷ The opposition to Christianity is not always aggressive in band iconography. Many Viking Metal bands choose to focus on themes from pagan Scandinavian mythology, as found on the cover of Bathory’s *Blood on Ice* (1996), which represented characters from the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök set against a background of forests and mountains, and in the art of Dutch band Fenris, whose album *Offerings to the Hunger* (2001) appropriately represents the great wolf himself on the cover, whilst Thyrfing’s *Valdr Galga* (1999) depicts a scene in Valhalla. Explicit anti-Christian iconography is relatively uncommon and tends to be found more frequently where clear Satanic rather than pagan interests are expressed. Of course, within Black Metal ideology the line between the two is blurred (Moynihan and Søderlind 191 ff.), but many Viking Metal bands choose to focus on ancestral, martial imagery, sometimes having initially begun their careers with Satanic motifs drawn from the stock pictorial vocabulary of Black Metal.

Their use of Viking imagery ranges from the pristine, such as directly incorporated artefacts, through to more elaborate interpretations of the Vikings within a suitable context, whether violent or contemplative. Although there is much diversity in how individual Viking Metal bands present themselves, they all share, or at least project, a common world view—a world of snow, frost, mountains and woods, a world of endless conflict with undertones of a universal struggle for survival from some of the more extreme groups, in particular the struggle against Christianity. In general, the predominance of pagan themes, particularly apocalyptic ones, may reflect the general tendency towards using martial Viking imagery rather than a direct statement against Christianity. In other cases, this opposition is more explicit. Actual representations of misanthropy are comparatively rare in Viking Metal iconography and so the overall impression is that the ancestral culture of the north is at the heart of the band’s image, whether expressed through Viking material culture, landscapes, or creative vignettes drawn from Scandinavian mythology and history. Alternatively, the recurring metaphor of life as a battle, as a struggle, and the band members as heathen warriors is reinforced with more widely employed imagery, particularly martial imagery that can verge on the animalistic and the barbaric.

Practically all of the bands in the scene believe that they are descendants of Vikings: predictably, the Viking Metal scene is strongest in Scandinavia, but it is also active in other areas of Europe that saw Scandinavian settlement in the Viking Age: England, Russia, and even Normandy. Indeed, the Vikings have currency across northern Europe, particularly for those who find common ground within a shared Germanic

culture; in Austria, for example, the Vikings, complete with horned helmets, are central to the ideology and iconography of “Teutonic War Metal” band Valhalla.¹⁸ There are also a number of Viking Metal bands in the United States and Canada, who generally claim Viking blood either directly from Scandinavian forebears or through English descent. Some members of the scene indeed state explicitly that it is impossible to be a Viking if one is not oneself of northern European descent.¹⁹ By way of contrast, it is interesting to note that there has recently sprung up a new genre of so-called Celtic Metal in Ireland and France (and, more surprisingly, in Germany), which sounds essentially like Viking metal, albeit with the addition of a few harps, but celebrates Celtic gods and myths.

Conclusions

Over the last four decades, popular music has become active alongside film, literature and history in the production and dissemination of the Vikings. Their wide presence and availability in popular discourse made them obvious subjects when attempting to impart a strong image within the confines of a four-minute pop song: they are well known, easily identified, and associated with a set of strongly defined attributes, and thus correctly interpreting the messages they are intended to convey makes few demands of the listener. It is in heavy rock and metal that enthusiasm for the Vikings has been most evident, largely because the characteristics typically attributed to the Vikings—machismo, chaos, freedom, irreverence for authority and so on—correspond closely to those most lauded by heavy metal culture. Also there are close links between the popular image of the Vikings and the barbarians of fantasy literature and film, which is another area which has provided rich lyrical pickings for heavy metal.

However, although most bands remained playful and casual in their allusions to the Vikings, since the late 1980s or early 1990s an extremist fringe have come to identify themselves with them in a far more determined manner. Viking Metal is, by its nature, evangelical and attempts to engage the listener in an integrated, if not especially profound, religious, philosophical and sometimes political outlook. In doing so it resembles far more the nationalist, racist and romantic appropriation of the Vikings generally associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than the popular post-war usages of the image.

In concluding, it is reasonable to allow a measure of conjecture about how this development has come about, and why it has happened where it has in the last ten or so years. It is tempting to treat this as yet another manifestation of the pan-European anxiety about identity in the wake of global realignment and mass migration since 1989, which has also

produced a wave of nationalist demagogues. Alternatively, and paradoxically, it may perhaps also be correct to seek causes in the very stability and liberalism of contemporary Scandinavia. Escape into a stirring past, like rock 'n' roll decadence, may be an understandably attractive alternative to the horrors of respectable middle-class life in an affluent, enlightened European democracy.²⁰

Notes

1. See Wilson and Roesdahl 39–63; Wilson, “The Viking Age in British literature and history” 58–71; Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art*; Lönnroth, “The Vikings in history and legend” 225–49; the papers collected in Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity*; Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*; and Shippey 215–236.

2. Wilson and Roesdahl 48–58; Wilson, “Viking Age,” *passim*; Lönnroth, “Vikings in history” 235–44, Wawn, *Vikings and Victorian*, *passim*. On French and Norman reactions to the Vikings see Boyer 69–81.

3. See Wilson and Roesdahl 59 and Addyman 257–64.

4. In popular usage the word “Viking” is applied in a broad and ill-defined manner to refer to all the inhabitants of Scandinavia in the Viking Age. The academic hesitations regarding usage of the word “Viking” have made no impact upon its currency and meaning in the wider world, which remains broad and un-nuanced (c.f. Service, 7–10). Throughout this paper I have used “Viking” in this sense.

5. Heavy metal is an under-researched topic, but a small literature does exist. Deena Weinstein’s *Heavy Metal* is an important but dated sociological study. See also Robert Walser’s *Running with the Devil*.

6. See Weinstein 245–75.

7. Examples are many, and have been produced by leading luminaries of the HM scene such as Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden.

8. Although see below, p. 000.

9. *Pace* Lewis, “I take my place by Odin’s side,” 000.

10. Space forbids proper discussion of the complex and reflexive interface between popular ideas of Vikings and the barbarians of sword 'n' sorcery fantasy as they appear in literature, film, rock music or role-playing games. See Service 74.

11. This probably originated in a milder form as part of the rejection of what were perceived as the mores and cultural values of adult society, but was given greater impetus by attacks on heavy metal by right-wing evangelical Christians in the United States. See Weinstein 245–70 and Baddeley 113 ff.

12. See Moynihan and Söderlind, 180–1. For the core beliefs of Ásatrú, see Gundarsson, *Teutonic Magic and Teutonic Religion*. There are numerous Ásatrú and Óðinist-related Web sites.

13. See, amongst others, Bathory, “One Rode to Asa Bay” from *Hammerheart* (1990).

14. <http://www.windir.no/default.aspx?p=biography&lang=engelsk>.

15. See image gallery at <http://www.thyrfing.com/>.

16. <http://www.moonsorrow.com/2005/mainpage.html>.

17. <http://www.manegarm.com/?meny=albums>.

18. <http://www.truemetal.org/legion-of-eternity/>.

19. “Another criterion I firmly adhere to is that only bands of ancestral European decent [sic]—which can include American, Australian, Canadian, and Russian bands (but excludes those from the vile Mediterranean lands ... thus wannabe Italian Vikings can give up the disgusting, ridiculous act)—can be VM” (<http://members.aol.com/Einherjer/VM.html>, accessed 18 July 2003).

20. See Service 44; Roesdahl and Wilson, “What the Vikings Meant.” 39.

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