

HORUS AND ZEUS ARE PLAYING TONIGHT –  
CLASSICAL RECEPTION IN HEAVY METAL BAND NAMES

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**Horus** and **Zeus** are only two examples of the large number of heavy metal bands who have named themselves after ancient deities. Equally popular choices are the Greek and Roman gods of war.<sup>1</sup> If you prefer a more exotic choice, you can listen to songs and albums by **Strix Nebulosa** or **Teutoburg Forest**. Even **Holy Moses** or **Caligula's Horse** are apparently viable choices. When literally thousands of heavy metal bands pick their names from gods, historical figures or events from classical antiquity, this phenomenon calls for an explanation.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. BREAKING DOWN THE NUMBERS

This essay will approach the subject in the form of a comparative onomastic study which will enable us to see band names as an indicator for different modes of classical reception. We will focus on references to ancient Mediterranean cultures from Egyptian and biblical to Persian, Greek and Roman contexts. Even though we have restricted our search to bands with at least one proper release (full-length album or EP), our sample still contains about 2,000 entries. Due to the technical restrictions of a single essay, we will deal with this huge number of names in a three-part analysis.

#### 1.1 METHODOLOGY

First, a quantitative approach will help us identify the distribution of reference points, such as mythological figures, historical events or classical ideas and concepts, as well as areas (Rome, Greece, Egypt etc.). On this basis, we can also look at national preferences and their correlations to specific topics and contexts. Second, a qualitative approach will focus on representative case studies, relating the onomastic findings to other aspects such as album covers or song contents. In addition, we will look at 'out of the norm' cases like all-female bands and their choice of classical reference points. Last but not least, the qualitative approach will allow us to demonstrate the limits of a quantitative approach – sometimes a classical name is nothing but a name. In our summary, we will discuss other possible categories of analysis such as re-naming and illustrate their potential as well as their limitations.

The following data was compiled with the help of the *Encyclopaedia Metallum*<sup>3</sup> and crosschecked with band websites, discographies and other sources of information wherever possible. The downside of relying on an open database such as the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* is a certain modern bias. Currently active bands are well-represented, while bands up to the 1990s often have rather fragmented entries – if any. This in turn limits the results that can be gained from a diachronic analysis. The open database structure also makes it impossible to give an absolute guarantee for the reliability of the information.<sup>4</sup> To make things even worse, our results would be hard to reduplicate in all detail. The sheer amount of entries and their fluctuation mean that, by the time you are reading this essay, dozens or even hundreds of entries will have been added, deleted or modified. Our analysis is therefore something of a spot check, and you would have to retrace the version history of all entries in question to repeat our search results. This said, and without claiming completeness, our sample of 1,968 band names (March 2015) should at least allow us representative findings on certain main tendencies.

We collected our sample by going through all bands registered at the *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, and listing every entry with a name related to some ancient topic. We expanded our range by allowing the names to contain some errors or inaccuracies concerning the original material. Our second criterion is based on the number and type of releases: bands with at least one released album or EP were included automatically, but many bands were registered with no official full-length release. For this second category, we performed control checks for about ten per cent of the sample in question, using band websites and other resources where available. If we could not confirm any official full-length release going beyond the 'album-free' entry in the *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, we excluded the band to reduce our sample to a balanced data set. In the same way, we collected information concerning their regional and chronological background and their genre classification.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 CORE STATISTICS

Easily the largest category is Classical Antiquity, i.e. on the myth and history of the Greek and Roman world, including a couple of Etruscan and Oscan references, with 1,159 names (for this and the following numbers see Fig. 1). The biblical tradition is present with 471 entries, Ancient Egypt with 143, and Mesopotamia with 90. Ancient Persia (including Zoroastrianism), Phoenicia, the Gnostic tradition, pseudo-classical inventions and a few others each rank in the low double-digits. About five per cent of the names included could have been placed in two or even three different categories. For simplicity's sake, we, e.g., chose to list Serapis as Egyptian instead of creating a sub-category for inter-cultural amalgamations. Pontius Pilate, on the other hand, was a Roman official, but his main reception lies in the biblical tradition, which is why he is included in this second category.

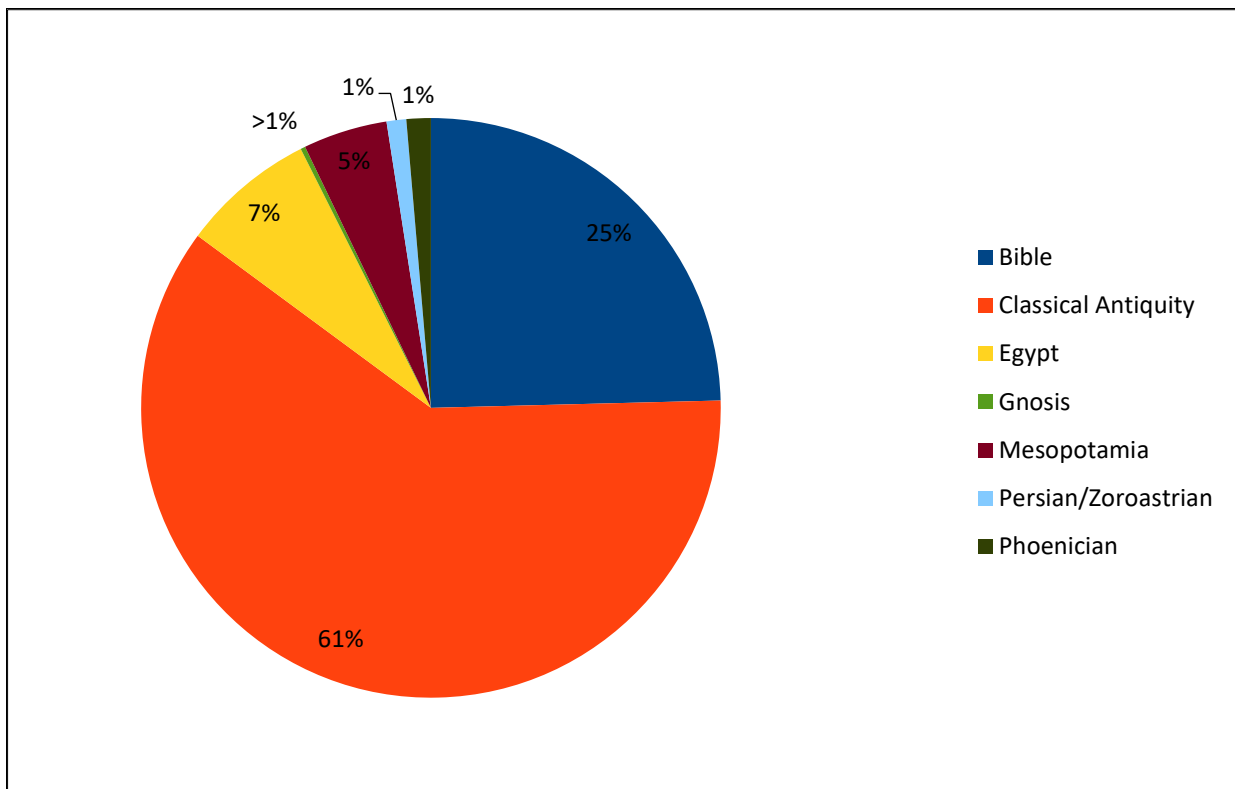


Figure 1: Distribution of thematic backgrounds.

For the following analysis, we will focus on Classical Antiquity. To anybody interested in classical epic films, a certain bias will hardly come as a surprise: Greece is mainly present in a mythological context, while for Rome the context is almost exclusively historical.<sup>6</sup> Few exceptions invert the pattern, such as the historical references to ancient Greece in the band names **Leonidas**, **A Pyrrhic Victory** and **Spartan Warrior**. The same point could be made for Roman myth in the cases of **Breed of Bacchus**, **Eye of Minerva** and **Jupiter**. In essence, however, the rule is stable for over 90 per cent of the cases. Yet unlike in filmic reception, the total numbers are clearly in favour of Ancient Greece with about twice the number of entries compared to Rome.

It should also be mentioned that the Roman references especially are often of a rather 'generic' type: a handful of bands are named **Gladiator**, **Gladiators** or **Gladius**. Six have opted for **Centurio** or **Centurion**, three for **Praetorian** or **Praetorian Platoon** and so on. Some Greek references can be just as vague, with **Logos** and **Epsilon/Epsylon** being just two examples among many. Nevertheless, a remarkable number of bands go for very specific Greek options such as **Endymion**, the mythical king of Elis who was said to have been put to eternal sleep by the god Hypnos. Especially when it comes to underworld mythology (which will be treated in more detail below), competition may have been the reason for more unconventional choices: no less than 13 bands have named themselves either **Acheron** or used a combined name including the river in various spellings. The more original choice is **Phlegethon**, a less popular river of the underworld, which has been adopted by a mere two bands.

These findings caused us to reconsider some of the categories we had originally planned to treat in more detail. One of the unexpected results was the almost complete absence of Roman emperors. We had expected

to see Domitian thanks to his ‘fame’ as a persecutor of Christianity, or the ignoble Elagabalus. The only two monarchs we could find in mentionable numbers were Caligula with six references (ranging from **Caligula’s Horse to Rise of Caligula**) and Nero with nine.<sup>7</sup> Mythology, on the other hand, clearly required more subdivisions than previously intended – not least because they shed some light on a remarkable aspect of national distribution that will be treated at the end of this section. We will therefore start with the anchor points of mythological narratives: the gods, demi-gods and other supernatural beings of the classical world.

### 1.3 NAMES AND THEMES: THE GODS AND THEIR DOMAINS

The Greek and Roman pantheon (see Fig. 2 for the Olympian gods) has a kind of traditional hierarchy, dominated by a small set of the most important gods. Nearly all of them are present in heavy metal band names, usually in their Greek form. Ares is referred to eleven times, the Roman Mars on the other hand only thrice. Dionysos has nine entries, while Bacchus receives a mere three.<sup>8</sup> Athena is clearly more popular than her Roman counterpart Minerva (five versus two). For the ten bands linking their name to Apollo, the homonymy does not allow to differentiate between Greek and Roman contexts. In the case of Zeus and Jupiter, the scales are balanced with four entries each. The same is true for Hephaistos and Vulcan, although one might have expected more than two references each for someone who is literally the god of metal. Three gods are mainly present in their Roman versions: Neptune is referred to eight times, compared with Poseidon’s five mentions; Mercury with eight is clearly ahead of Hermes with just two; and an even stronger bias can be found in the comparison of Venus (ten) with Aphrodite (one). It is hardly surprising that the goddesses of the hearth are of little interest to heavy metal bands: neither Hestia nor Vesta is present, although the latter one at least has two indirect references with **Vestal Virgin** and **Vestal Claret**. Hera and Juno have not attracted any attention, despite their qualification as the vengeful queens of the gods. Artemis and Demeter are referred to once each, which is still more than can be said of their Roman counterparts Diana and Ceres.

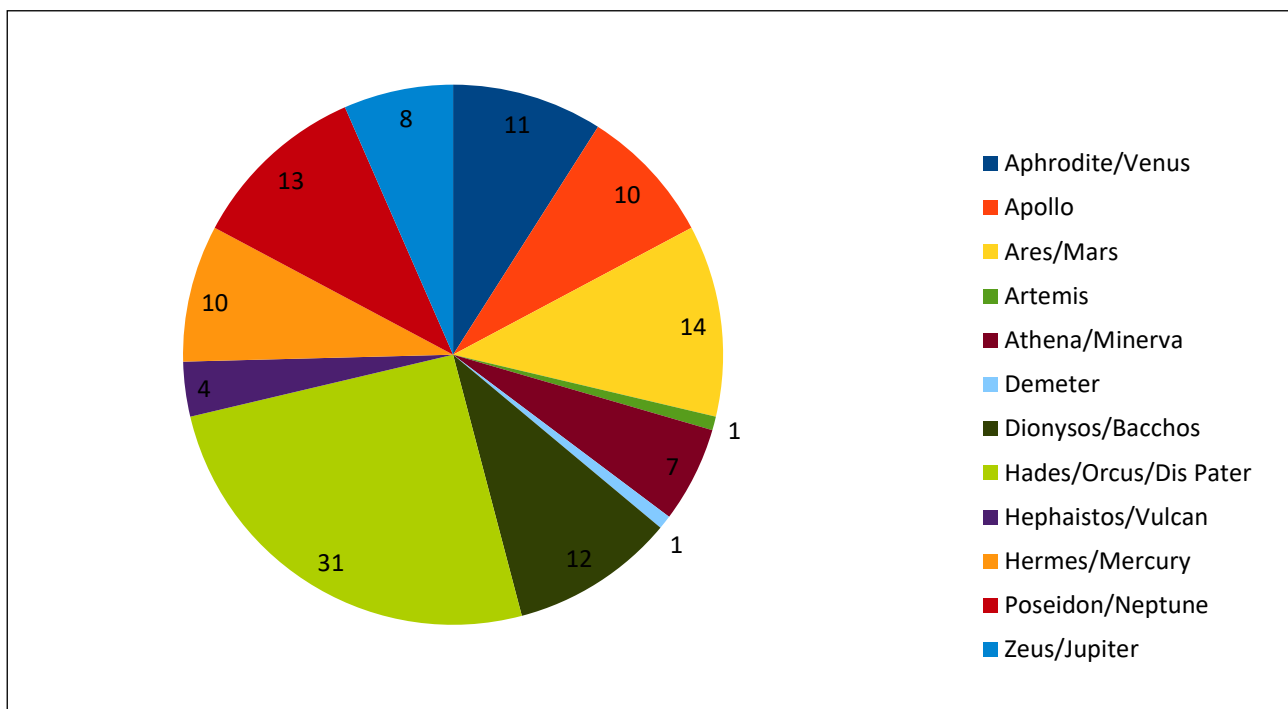


Figure 2: Distribution of Olympian Gods.

The most popular choice from the main gods of either pantheon, however, is Hades with no fewer than 19 entries. To that, we can add another eight for the Roman Orcus and four for Dis Pater. His singular position will become even more striking when we look at other figures linked to him and his domain. Yet before we move on, a few words of caution: not all of the names listed above have to be connected to classical gods. For example, **Beyond Orcus** might just as well refer to the kingdom of the dead (the Roman name can describe the underworld as well as the deity). Jupiter, Mars, Neptune or Venus could also have been chosen for the planets named after the figures from Roman mythology rather than the figures themselves, even though we did our best to exclude such examples. In at least one instance, **Mercury Rain**, the name might even denote the metal, not the homonymous god. The apparent emphasis on male gods, which one might have detected

so far, should be seen in light of the numerous occurrences of Nemesis, Pandora, Persephone and others listed below. These cases also illustrate a dilemma that can only be tackled by systematic reception studies: does the classical allusion depend on the intention of the name-givers – or on the listener who makes the connection whether or not it was intended?<sup>9</sup> We will have to return to this point in the last section.

To return to the underworld: Nyx, the goddess of night, receives two mentions. The unwilling bride of Hades, Persephone, has three certain references, while Pandora has five – one of them including her famous box as the source of all evil in the world. Hekate, the goddess associated with ghosts and death magic is included in eight band names. Thanatos as the personification of death is even more popular with 14, although several of them are only indirect or generic references that may just as well relate to 'death', the event or physical state, instead of 'Death', the deity. The ferryman of the dead, Charon, adds another eight references. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, goes even beyond that with 25 direct and indirect mentions. The fascination with the domain of Hades also stretches to other aspects like the rivers of the underworld or their personifications: in addition to the 13 references for Acheron and two for Phlegethon, we have four for Lethe and 17 for Styx (plus the combination Acheronthia Styx), albeit none for Kokytos. Elysion as the 'paradise of heroes' is mentioned a remarkable 22 times, while Tartaros falls behind with only six.

#### 1.4 NAMES AND THEMES: HEROES AND MONSTERS

This predilection for the underworld seems not to persist in choices of mythological heroes: Orpheus for example has six references, Sisyphos a mere two. A different interpretation is possible if one includes Ulysses as a hero connected to the Underworld, as he would boost the numbers to a certain degree. References to his famous travels, however, usually make no apparent attempt to emphasize the hero's contact with the ghosts of the dead.<sup>10</sup> Instead, we find mostly generic mentions: eleven bands are named either Ulysses or Odyssey in various localized forms. Ulysses' encounters are adaptable as well, with the ten entries for the Sirens (in one case even explicitly as **Ulysses Siren**, no apostrophe) forming the top of the list. The Kyklops is mentioned in three names, Kalypso in two and Skylla and Charybdis in one each. It is tempting to assign this to a certain popular knowledge of the Homeric epics or at least of their main narratives. Yet, in comparison to the numbers above, neither the rest of the *Odyssey* nor the Trojan War are of great interest. Troy is mentioned six times, the war's main protagonists even less (Achilles and the Myrmidones twice each, Agamemnon, Hektor and Ajax just once – compared to three times for Cassandra).

As an aside: warfare, the heroism of the warrior and corresponding aspects are less present than one might expect, being outnumbered by the gods and the underworld by more than three to one.<sup>11</sup> Part of this field is covered by the usage of Ares, Mars and other warlike gods or heroes. Most of the rest is made up of references to tactics, military ranks or weaponry.<sup>12</sup> More or less direct connections to historical battles, such as **A Pyrrhic Victory** or **Teutoburg Forest**, are extremely rare. The same is true for military leaders, among whom Attila with three mentions is already one of the most popular. As an inversion of the sub-category, one might include the few references to political assassinations and civil war, such as **Brutus**, **Alea Jacta** (twice each), **Rubicon/Rubicond** and **Tragedy of Caesar**. Not even the mighty Hercules seems to be able to create more interest in the deeds of ancient warriors and heroes. The demi-god and the elements of his mythological tradition have only about two dozen references – and this does not even take into account the fact that not all 14 mentions of the Hydra have to be connected to Hercules.

With the Hydra we return to another more influential area: that of classical monsters.<sup>13</sup> Again, several are linked to the popular theme of death and the underworld, like the 14 mentions of Kerberos or the more exotic eight for Alastor – the latter in most cases apparently denoting the vengeful spirit or demon, instead of the homonymous heroes or epithets for gods. Medusa is used in twelve band names, to which we may add four more generic references to Gorgo(n). Other hybrid creatures also feature prominently, e.g. the Chimera with 14 mentions, the Mantikor with eight, the Minotaur with six and the Sphinx with four. Still, it would be wrong to reduce the list of mythological beasts to mere monsters. The fabled Phoenix is referred to in twelve band names, as is the helpful Pegasus in five. Nevertheless, even "good" and "bad" monsters combined amount to less than one tenth of the numbers identified for gods, demi-gods and their domains.

#### 1.5 NAMES AND THEMES: VERSATZSTÜCKE

**Alea Jacta**<sup>14</sup> has already pointed us towards a more curious pattern of classical reception: using 'Versatzstücke' – quotations, buildings, technical terms or even authors – from or related to ancient source material as part of a band's name. Three groups have named themselves **Vae Victis** ('woe to the defeated') after the legendary saying of Brennus the Gaul at the sacking of Rome in 390 BC.<sup>15</sup> Two bands have chosen Horace's famous **Carpe Diem** ('seize the day');<sup>16</sup> five have inverted the same quotation to create **Carpe**

**Mortem** ('seize the death') or **Carpe Noctem** ('seize the night'), as well as the ungrammatical **Carpe Noctum** and **Carpe Tenebrum** (the latter probably intended as 'seize the darkness'). Architecture is a less popular option, but prevails in the form of names such as **Arapacis**, **Circus Maximus**, **Colosseum** or the more generic **Agora** and **Acropolis**. Strangely enough, cities or similar places are hardly ever referred to. Rome (mentioned four times) and Delphi with its oracle sanctuary (thrice) are already the most popular ones. There are, however, some singular cases and other exceptions that will be treated in the following section on national preferences. Even more unusual is the occurrence of technical terms such as **Patronymicon**, i.e. the usage of the father's name as a component of the name of his son or daughter, or **Defixio**, i.e. a curse tablet or the dark magic worked with its help. The latter at least fits with the popularity of the death mythology theme. Among our oddest findings are entries including the names of classical philosophers and/or authors with bands like **Seneca**, **Epicurean** or **Vitruvius**. Seneca may have been chosen for a certain part of the tradition, propagated e.g. by the writings of Diderot, the *Poppea* opera by Monteverdi and others, which emphasizes Seneca's negative connection to Nero and his suicide.<sup>17</sup> Epikuros could be attractive as the (misunderstood) father of Hedonism whom a long line of Christian authors attacked as a dangerous heretic.<sup>18</sup> The reasoning behind **Vitruvius** as the name of a heavy metal band, on the other hand, still baffles us.

## 1.6 GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Italian bands – like the above-mentioned **Alea Jacta**, **Damnatio Memoriae** or **Deus Ex Tenebris** – favouring Latin quotes bring us to the connection between nationality and preferences in name choice, yet this important factor is not as easy to grasp as one might think. Some of the more basic examples appear to be motivated by the desire to create a connection to local or regional historical 'heritage': **Allobrogia** refers to the Celtic tribe of the Allobroges, making it an obvious choice for a French band. **Noricum** and **Norikum** are two Austrian bands whose names relate to the former Roman Alpine province. **Hellvetica** refers to the Latin name derived from the ancient tribal name of the Celtic Helvetii (here combined with the Christian tradition, thanks to the additional 'l' in **Hellvetica**).<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, **Constantinopolis**, the former name of Istanbul, is used by a Turkish group. **Alesia** as the name of a Belgian band is a more indirect reference, since the historical battle site is strictly speaking nowadays a part of France. Nevertheless, one might argue that the Romans at Alesia were fought by united Celtic tribes from various regions, including modern day Belgium.

Yet the picture changes when one looks at the actual figures (see Fig. 3): immediate local, regional or national connections are the exception to the rule. For every direct link, there are ten other examples proving the opposite: bands from Egypt can just as well call themselves **Brutus** or **Hecate**, while Austrian bands choose **Amun Re** or **Osiris**. Out of the 199 names of German bands included in our sample, all but a few have no discernible connection to either Germanic or local Roman history.<sup>20</sup> **Porta Nigra** – a name that can be linked to the UNESCO World Heritage site of the same name at modern day Trier – is characteristic as a rare exception to this rule. Unfortunately, the band is not really from Trier, but from the city of Koblenz (admittedly only 80 miles away). To make things worse, the Latin words may just as well have been chosen simply for their literal meaning, 'the black gate'. **Teutoburg Forest**, on the other hand, seems to be an ideal candidate, but was actually adopted by a British band, not a German one. It might therefore be more helpful to approach national preference by looking at two different aspects: (a) the distribution of the various categories discussed above in contrast to the few existing local, regional or national connections, and (b) the preferences in countries whose own history has no direct connection to the classical world.

The first part confirms the impression of a rather stable distribution of reference points as described at the beginning of this section. Most countries of Western or Southern Europe show remarkable similarities in their preferences, as they focus more on classical names that can to a certain degree be linked to their own history than on Egyptian or Mesopotamian material. Even anomalies like Greece are less dramatic than they appear at first glance. 34 of a total 43 Greek bands refer to what might be called 'the classical world', but only five of the remaining nine are strictly linked to the biblical tradition and none to Ancient Egypt. However, the points of reference are not necessarily Ancient Greek ones, giving us results like **Manticore's Breath**, **Rubicond** or **Tribe of Neptune**. In addition, a sample of just 43 is very vulnerable, as even a handful of bands missing in the database could severely change percentile distribution. The same problem is in play when we are confronted with a mere ten per cent for references to the biblical tradition in Belgium. In total numbers, our sample contains only 20 Belgian heavy metal bands, so each additional one we might have overlooked could shift the results by almost five per cent.

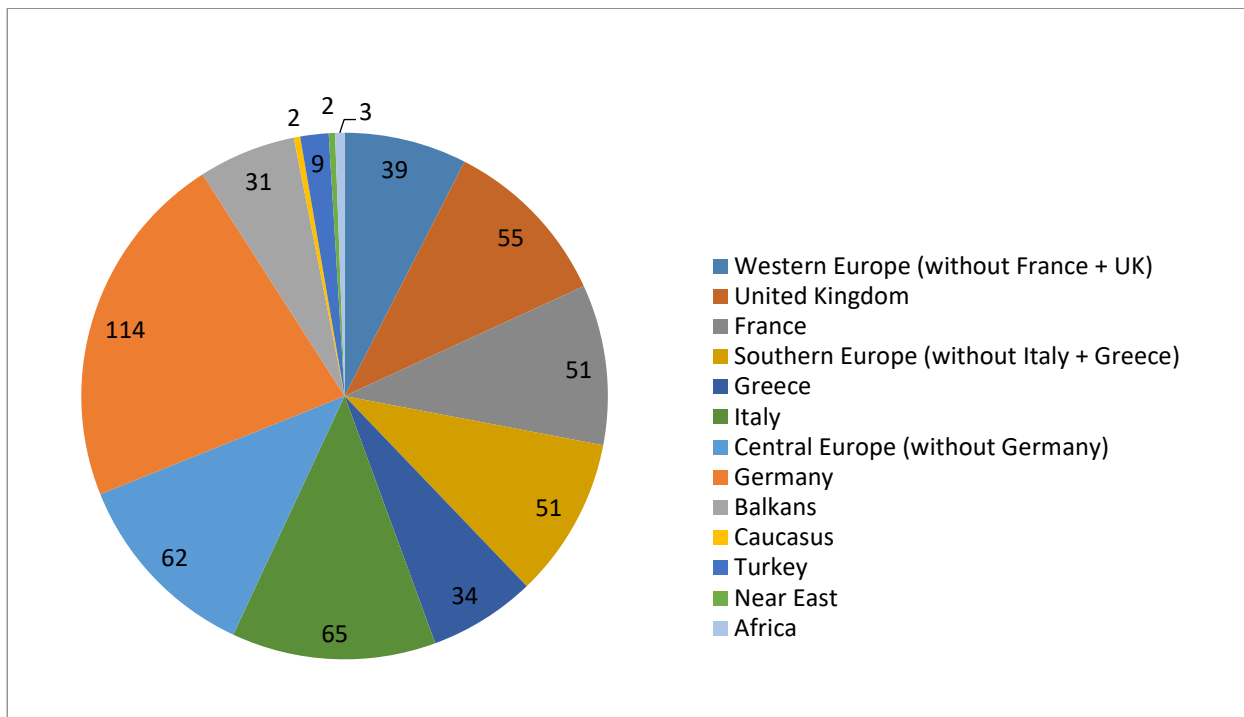


Figure 3: Distribution of countries that were part of the classical world.

Otherwise, the numbers change very little not just in Europe, but also in Northern, Central and Southern America as well as Australia (see Fig. 4). Some slight anomalies (references to the biblical tradition in the US and to Ancient Egypt in Brazil each are ten per cent above average) are statistically negligible. For Africa, we have – for various reasons – only few entries. Nevertheless, there is nothing to suggest that the total distribution is different from that in Europe or the Americas. The exception to the rule, as far as our sample allows us to say with certainty, seems to be Asia. All five entries from Iran are related to either Ancient Persia or the Zoroastrian tradition. With Japanese band names, there are almost no biblical references, but two dozen to Ancient Greece and Rome. For other parts of Eastern and South Eastern Asia, however, the distribution again is fairly standard (albeit only Indonesia has entries in the double-digits). The total numbers – six references from Singapore, five from South Korea, four from Malaysia, three from Thailand, two from Taiwan and a mere one from Bangladesh – put those findings into perspective. The general picture seems to be one of inverse proportionality: the fewer connections the countries have to Classical Antiquity, the more unrestricted the use of ancient names becomes. They also act more freely when it comes to references concerning non-classical names, which leads to a different distribution of historical backgrounds when compared to European and Mediterranean countries.

The problem concerning low band numbers in total, as mentioned above, is more crucial in the rest of Asia: China, India, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle and the Near East combined have fewer entries than Finland alone. One reason is probably the smaller heavy metal scene in those regions, another one the willingness or ability to enter one's band into an open English database.<sup>21</sup> Equally probable is an influence of the lacking cultural connections to most parts of classical history or mythology. If, therefore, we have to restrict our interpretations of quantitative data, we may at least point out some qualitative aspects. Quite often, the small numbers go hand in hand with choices that are more creative. There are just ten references to the mythological complex of the 'earth mother' Gaia in our whole sample. Out of these ten, one each stems from Columbia, El Salvador, Japan and South Korea. **Thriumvirath** may sound like an unlikely choice for a band name; nevertheless, it is just one of several references to Roman history in the works of this black metal group from Kazakhstan.

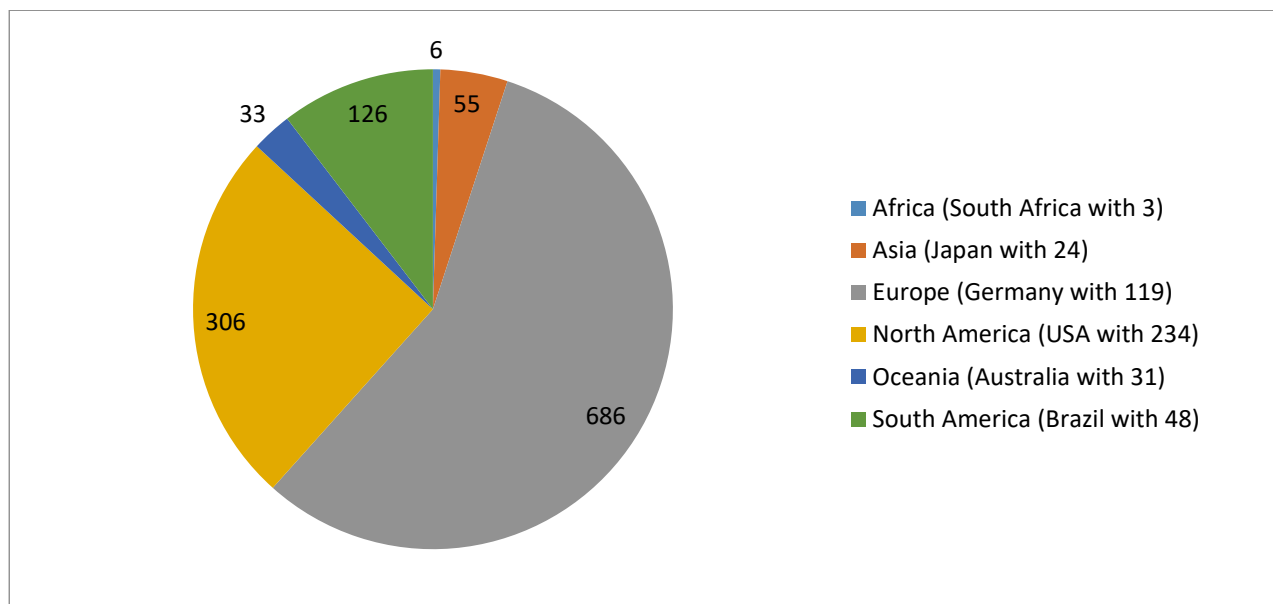


Figure 4: Distribution of classical band names by continents.

## 2. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The size of our sample has the unavoidable drawback that we were unable to review all of the material in detail. We were also limited by language barriers: most songs are in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian or Spanish (and sometimes Latin), while almost ten per cent of bands stick to a native language like Czech or Serbo-Croatian. As most of these languages were not accessible to us, we are unable to provide a truly representative discussion of lyrical content. Therefore, the following sections should be seen merely as a representative sample illustrating some aspects that go beyond a general onomastic comparison. This said, what actually is in a classical band name? We will start our answer by looking at song lyrics and visual components for a selection of bands to see whether their name choice mirrors itself in the actual image of the band. To avoid personal preferences, the following examples were chosen from our sample at random.

**Ars Amatoria** ('Art of Love') from Austria is a gothic metal group named after the collection of elegiac poems by the Roman author Ovid. The band itself may not be that well known in the current metal scene. For the point we are trying to make, however, popularity of a name is less important than its function and "exclusivity", i.e. the restriction to a specific ancient topic. Fittingly for a group called **Ars Amatoria**, the band has songs like "Aphrodite" on its first – and so far only – album *The Symphonic Rock Opera*. The lyrics, however, show very little connection to either Ovid's poetry or its specific contents. And while it may sound pedantic, combining the Roman title *Ars Amatoria* and the Greek Aphrodite (instead of Venus) is not an entirely consistent approach.

**Visigoth**, an American power metal band, shows the just opposite pattern. The group is named after the Western Goth tribes responsible for the conquest of Rome in AD 410. The artwork of their album *The Revenant King* features a battle scene of two unidentifiable armies on the brink of clashing. Between them stands an armoured man with a long white beard, a horned helmet, a bloody longsword and a small round shield. In the foreground, a charging soldier is shown in profile; in the background, a flying raven (as an allusion to Odin's birds Huginn and Muninn?) is visible against the dark clouds. The colours feature mainly blueish-green shades and grey with the exception of the white beard and the black raven. In a nutshell, *The Revenant King* combines the familiar elements of Gothic/Germanic reception in modern popular culture.<sup>22</sup> The same could be said for most of the lyrics, yet classical reception is not the dominant factor in either part. The result may be consistent, but the influence of fantasy literature and imagery is clearly the prevailing one. This is perfectly illustrated by the lyrics to the song "Dungeon Master" from 2014: "Master of evil, lord of the dark | In catacombs and lackened tomes is where is foul will is wrought | But on the field of battle, see our legions ride | Thunderous hooves like raging storms will sound across the azure sky".<sup>23</sup>

**Stench of Styx**, a German black metal band, combines classical imagery of rebirth with the use of Latin. The effect is blurred by the attempt to amalgamate these elements with a wide selection of 'the occult' in the broadest sense. The death metal band **Medeia** from Finland has classical reference points in some of the lyrics, although not necessarily related to the figure of Medeia. In addition, a comparison of **Medeia**'s songs

makes it clear that Hades and the mythological underworld are treated interchangeably with Satan and the Christian concept of hell.<sup>24</sup> To various degrees, these findings apply to most bands focusing on Greek mythology like **Kronos** from France or **Lair of the Minotaur** from the US. The albums of **Kronos** include many classical topics, e.g. in songs about Centaur warriors (“Bringers of Disorder”) and Ancient Egypt (“Aeternum Pharaos Curse”), but also a praise of the medieval Vikings and their gods (“Supreme Nordik Reign”). **Lair of the Minotaur** approaches a whole set of mythological narratives in a rather free combination: “Grisly Hound of the Pit” deals with Kerberos, “Horde of Undead Vengeance” with Hekate and her domain. “Death March of the Conquerors” is stylized as a war song addressing the Greek Zeus and Enyo (a minor deity associated with close combat), but also the Roman god Mars. As one can see, the use of classical names within lyrics does not necessarily follow a holistic approach, and even a band named after a classical entity can proceed rather eclectically in this regard.

A more consistent impression is achieved by the Polish death metal band **Centurion**.<sup>25</sup> Many of the lyrics allude to the Christian persecutions of Imperial Rome; the others at least allow us to associate them with the same context. The approach of **Bacchia Nereida** from Greece goes one step further with its themed albums. The first, *Διώνυσος*, deals with a selection of mythological figures mostly linked to the god Dionysos and his entourage. The second, *Εἰς τοὺς δώδεκα θεοὺς τοῦ Ὀλύμπου*, is arranged as a set of hymns to the twelve main Olympian gods. The album covers are based on ancient Greek artwork and make use of the corresponding style of letters. Some songs even feature traditional instruments.

As an aside: we have already drawn attention to band names including or even focusing on female characters. In some cases, this is also reflected in the lineup of the bands. For most of the time, **Ars Amatoria** actually had a pair of singers, one of them male, the other female. **Medeia** has a singer who, quite fittingly, is the only female in an otherwise male band. **Gaia** (US) has a female lead vocalist and two out of the three singers of **Demether** (Serbia) are women, and it would be easy to extend the list with similar examples. This said, heavy metal is still a clearly male dominated genre of music,<sup>26</sup> and nine out of ten bands are all-male ones, regardless of the fact that their name may be **Callisto**, **Cleopatra**, **Messaline** or **Minerva**. There are some rare cases like **Afrodite**, an all-female band from Sweden. Unfortunately, the mythological reference appears to have been chosen for the single purpose of underlining the unusual line-up. Otherwise, there is no indication of textual or visual connections to the classical world.

Even though an analysis based on sub-genres seemed promising, the results never stood up to our expectations. One problem concerning methodology was the categorization of sub-genres, as the boundaries between them are extremely vague, fluid and subjective. We also refrained from using the genre categories employed by our main source of information, the *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, because they were apparently not standardized. The only reliable, yet impractical alternative would have been to listen to all bands and create genre categories of our own. Another problem we encountered lies within the material itself: initially we thought that bands with a more extreme metal background would distinguish themselves by their names from non-extreme bands. Our observations, however did not confirm our presumption. The war god Ares, for example, is included in band names from such different genres as Heavy, Power and Death Metal.<sup>27</sup> We encountered the same results in band names using variations of e.g. Athena, Gladiator, Hades, Hecatomb, Kronos, Medusa, Siren, Stygia and Thanatos.

A few words on the subject of name change: many bands are rather conservative and stick to their classical names. Modifications often take the form of a simple addition to individualize the initial choice. Thus, **Morpheus** becomes **Morpheus Ascends**, or **Hades** turns into **Hades Almighty**. A few others opt for an entirely different subject and go from, say, **Prometheus** to **Mind Machine** – or the other way round from **Ashened** to **House Of Atreus**. Unfortunately, our sample does not allow us to deduce any rule. The changes are chronologically widespread through our whole material and show no concentration around a specific year or subject. Our initial assumption of name changes being connected to specific dates or events, e.g. the release of a major movie related to classical myth, proved wrong and had to be discarded early on. We simply have to assume that changes in band names all follow the same chaotic patterns regardless of whether they include a classical reference or not.

What is in a (classical) band name? Unfortunately, we can give no final and satisfactory answer. The data showed more of an arbitrary picture when we researched the use of ancient references. Some bands have built a complete concept revolving around their name choice, but the large majority is less coherent. As far as we can say at this point, there is no general pattern which could explain the different approaches. Can we at least state how many of the bands with classical allusions in their names really deal with the corresponding classical history and myth? For the reasons mentioned above, it is impossible for us to give an answer in the form of exact figures or percentage. As far as we could tell from our findings, cases like **Bacchia Nereida** are



extremely rare. Most bands seem to have either little, very selective or rather generic interest in the mythological or historical context.

It would also be wrong to focus on this question as the sole criterion – not only because an inversion of the argument is all too easy. There are countless bands that may not be named after a Greek goddess or a Roman town, but still have a themed album or some other sort of classical references in their songs. One might think of **Symphony X** with their own version of Homer's *Odyssey*,<sup>28</sup> or **Manowar**, who adapted the *Iliad*.<sup>29</sup> **Virgin Steele** based two albums<sup>30</sup> entirely on the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus and even included many direct quotes or close paraphrasings from the original text: for example, in the song "Blaze of Victory (The Watchman's Song)" the first line 'Blessed gods, cold stars, release me from my long suffering' is taken almost directly from the first line of *Agamemnon*.<sup>31</sup> The song continues to quote and paraphrase the first 39 verses of the tragedy.<sup>32</sup>

All of these examples are limited by the basic rules of song writing. An adaptation of the complete Homeric epics would literally require dozens of albums, and the standard song structure might force the band to readjust the text to achieve a good chorus.<sup>33</sup> For our purposes, however, another point is more important: a classical reference in a band name indicates an increased likelihood of textual references – but several of the most impressive cases, like **Satyricon**, illustrate that this is a rule with many exceptions. Sometimes, classical antiquity might simply be attractive due to its quality of 'otherworldliness'.<sup>34</sup> This last point could help explain amalgamations in the fantasy-building tendencies of heavy metal music, e.g. between Viking and classical themes.<sup>35</sup>

A systematic analysis also took care of our presumptions about 'localized' adaptations. We had expected to see a considerable number of bands using local transliterations of classical names in the best tradition of German 'Aneignung' (i.e. appropriation of ideas, values and concepts). Yet, the dominance of English as the lingua franca of heavy metal music seems to be so great that localized adaptations are reduced to minor occurrences and some phonetic idiosyncrasies like writing 'k' instead of 'c'.

### 3. CONCLUSION

We as classicists tend to see classical references everywhere, even if we have to stretch the point to make the connection. We have encountered this problem on several occasions, e.g. when we looked at the names of Roman gods. Sometimes, Mercury is just a metal, and Saturn is no more than a planet. On the other hand, we should accept that we will not understand every motivation or inside joke – which is why we refrained from contacting the members of **I Am The Trireme** when we stumbled upon the eccentric name. On a personal note: in a few rare cases like that of the neo-Nazi trash metal band **Vetis** from Malaysia we were literally too appalled to go into detail. The name may be derived from a malapropism in modern popular culture where *Vetis* is supposed to denote an Etruscan demon or god of the underworld. The possible connection would be *Vedius* or *Veiovis*, a deity whose origin and function already baffled Cicero: *quid Veiovi facies?* ("what do you make of Veiovis?").<sup>36</sup> Frankly, we could not be bothered either.

Future research will provide us with more treatments of specific examples with their individual modes of classical reception, including performative aspects, and the intentions behind it.<sup>37</sup> This is the only possible way to achieve this kind of detailed results, but this is not what a comparative onomastic study can or should try to do. What we can achieve by an approach such as ours are what might be called 'structural' or 'framework results'. We were able to identify an emphasis on certain thematic categories, especially in (Greek) myth. We could also confirm a distribution of reference points, which seems to be stable more or less on an international scale, such as with the choice of certain gods, monsters and realms.

While our sample was collected over a year before this essay was completed, recent spot checks of our findings showed minor quantitative deviations as predicted in section 1. On average, however, they proved insignificant in the analysis. The already popular underworld became slightly more pronounced, yet in the same distribution we identified above: Hades e.g. received another six mentions, Charon only three, but Nemesis eight. We found six more references to the Hydra and at least one each for the Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Elagabalus. Name changes remained infrequent and non-systematic, like with the American band **Wraith** moving on to the nearby **Charonyx** – but also the less self-evident name change of the Paraguayan band **Graveyard Ritual** to **Caligula**.

At the same time, our results illustrated the homogeneity of a seemingly diverse musical genre. Our onomastic findings revealed patterns of a surface nature relevant for most modern appropriations of the ancient world. We encountered hierarchies and 'networks' of knowledge and presentation, e.g. that countries related to a certain part of antiquity more often refer to these themes than to others, which we recognized from our own

research experience in other fields of popular classical reception: films, comics and novels. On the other hand, we saw characteristic anomalies in heavy metal's classical reception that could be explored in (and compared) to other musical genres. We observed, for example, that bands from countries that were not part of the classical world act more freely and almost arbitrarily with the usage of classical names like **Ariadne Project** (Argentina), **Icarus Complex** (Australia) or **Cassandra Cross** (Japan). Another musical genre that could be surveyed for the use of classical entities as band names would be Hard Rock where the band **Styx** is just one of the major examples with a name based on ancient myths.

Names may not tell us everything, but they can give us an orientation, similar to the outlines and landmarks of a map. Somewhere, **Horus** and **Zeus** are playing tonight – or at least it would not be improbable that they do.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all band names (set in bold face) refer to the last identified name version; song titles are given in quotation marks, albums in italics: **Visigoth**, *The Revenant King*, “From the Arcane Mists of Prophecy”. We have refrained from giving years for every issue and re-issue mentioned in the text, so as not to impair readability.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, last accessed April 20, 2015 (<http://www.metal-archives.com/>); see also the last section of this essay. The *Encyclopaedia Metallum* is a web-based open access database, which aims at collecting metal bands and related data concerning releases, line-up changes and biographical dates from all around the world. As of today over 100,000 bands from 148 countries have been registered.

<sup>4</sup> Band lexica such as Stark (1996), Popoff (2005) and many others may provide more reliable data in specific cases, but they lack the necessary breadth of scope for our purpose.

<sup>5</sup> Although we refrained from making this an analytical category, see below. Our method is not based on any certain case study, but is more a common attempt of approaching statistical dates and following analyses.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Berti and García Morcillo (2008); Lindner (2007); Richards (2008); Paul (2013). For a short introduction to classical reception in heavy metal music, see Umurhan (2012).

<sup>7</sup> On the wider context of these two rulers in modern popular reception see Elsner and Masters (1994) on Nero and Lindner (2013a) on Caligula.

<sup>8</sup> Heavy metal as a musical genre is, up to a point, a form of mass entertainment (on the consumers of heavy metal music see e.g. Brüggemann (2011); Nohr (2011); Weinstein (1991). Therefore, one might have expected classical references alluding to this fact in the form of band names taken from the wide field of Dionysiac subjects that could be said to symbolize or embody ancient mass entertainment, at least in the eye of the modern beholder. Yet apart from the gods mentioned above, with nine references to Dionysos and three to Bacchus, there is little more than the five mentions of the Satyrs. One could argue about placing **Ariadne Project** in a Dionysiac context, however, the name might just as well be linked to Theseus and the Minotaur. We have almost no references to the Thiasos, the Thyrsos staff of Dionysos, Faun, the Maenads, the Bacchantes or Silenus. Compared to the context of death mythology (see below), the Dionysiac field is of negligible importance in heavy metal music. This also illustrates the difficulty of approaching the subject of name choice by using thematic fields, even if they seem to be related like ancient (Dionysiac) and modern entertainment (heavy metal music).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hardwick (2003); Porter (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Reception in other modern popular media does not completely exclude the adventures in the underworld, but a similar tendency is recognizable, see e.g. Hall (2012); Luther (2005); Myrsiades (2009); Schein (2016).

<sup>11</sup> For example, one might have thought of the patriotic and militaristic role of the *Anabasis* tradition in the English-speaking world, cf. Rood (2004); Rood (2010).

<sup>12</sup> For the Roman examples of **Centurion**, **Gladius** or **Praetorian** as well as **Sparta** see above. To give but a few Greek examples: three bands are named **Phalanx** after the tactical formation, one group opted for **Sarissa**, a type of spear made famous by the Macedonian Army etc.

<sup>13</sup> We use the term in the sense of Cohen (1996), even though the classical understanding of “monstrum” may differ from this concept, cf. Chappuis Sandoz (2008); Gaevaert and Laes (2013); Metzger (2011).

<sup>14</sup> The Latin version of the Greek proverb made famous by Caesar was *iacta alea est* (according to Suet. *Iul.* 33), “the die has been cast”, supposedly uttered when he crossed the river Rubicon during his march on Rome.

<sup>15</sup> Liv. 5.48.9.

<sup>16</sup> Hor. *Od.* 1.11.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Manuwald (2005); Schubert (2004); Stacey (2007); see also the varied contributions to Bartsch and Schiesaro (2015).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Erler (2000); Paladini (2011); Wilson (2008).

<sup>19</sup> On the reception of the Helvetii (and the Celts in general, which are not included in our analysis for the reasons stated above), see soon Taylor (forthcoming) and McDonough (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, German classical reception in modern popular culture is a minefield in its own right; cf. Lindner (2013b) with further literature.

<sup>21</sup> Iran has 64 entries altogether, including many without a proper release. Saudi-Arabia has 13, Iraq 11, Tajikistan 5, Kyrgyzstan 4 and Myanmar a mere 2. Even the 152 entries for India have to be compared to the country's population of over 1.2 billion. For details on heavy metal music in Islamic countries see e.g. Hecker (2012); LeVine (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Puschner (2001); von See (1994). See also footnote 18 above, Lohmann (2002) and the forthcoming PhD thesis by Irina-Marina Manea (Bucharest University).

<sup>23</sup> Visigoth Bandcamp, last accessed February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (<https://visigoth.bandcamp.com/>).

<sup>24</sup> On this amalgamation see Dornbusch and Killguss (2007); Dyrendal (2008).

<sup>25</sup> The entry refers to the still active band from Warsaw, not the homonymous Polish band from Kalisz.

<sup>26</sup> On the topic of gender and heavy metal music see e.g. Juno (1996); Leonard (2007); Walser (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Genre categories based on *Encyclopaedia Metallum* (see footnote 3 above).

<sup>28</sup> In the song "The Odyssey" on the album *The Odyssey* (2002).

<sup>29</sup> In the song "Achilles, Agony and Ecstasy in eight parts" from the album *The Triumph of Steel* (1992). For a band completely focusing on Roman history, see Blais (forthcoming); cf. also the 'Roman' bands ADE and Triarii.

<sup>30</sup> *The House of Atreus Part 1* (1999) and *The House of Atreus Part 2* (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Aeschyl. *Ag.* 1; Virgin Steele 2016 Booklet: 3.

<sup>32</sup> In addition, the song's lyrics end with 'Yet if this house could speak, what a tale it could tell', a quote from Aeschyl. *Ag.* 37f.

<sup>33</sup> On adaptations of Homer, see Kyriakou (forthcoming) and footnote 8 above.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. García Morcillo, Hanesworth and Lapeña Marchena (2015).

<sup>35</sup> To name but a few examples: **Heimdall** usually focuses on Nordic myth, but the Italian band has also released *Aeneid* (2013), a themed album loosely based on the works of Vergil. **White Skull** combines all kinds of epic motifs, resulting in some unlikely pairings. Their album *Public Glory, Secret Agony* (2000) has songs about the Egyptian god Anubis, Julius Caesar and the emperor Nero. In *The Ring of the Ancients* (2006), we hear about the legendary Irish king Nuadha as well as the Gauls before the battle at Alesia. *Forever Fight* (2009) tells about Attila and the Celtic queen Boudicca etc. See also footnote 20 above.

<sup>36</sup> Cic. *Nat.* 3.62.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most interesting projects in this regard will certainly be the collective volume *Heavy Metal Classics* (Fletcher and Umurhan [forthcoming]), for which an earlier version of this text had originally been written as an introductory chapter.