CLARA REVIEW No. 7, 2021

K. F. B. Fletcher & Osman Umurhan (eds), 2020: *Classical Antiquity in Heavy Metal Music*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 260 pp.

ISBN 978-1-3500-7535-1.

Reviewed by Bente Kiilerich

The concepts ‘classical antiquity’ and ‘heavy metal music’ may appear to be worlds apart. Not only are they separated chronologically but each belongs to an entirely different *habitus*. While the classical is associated with tradition, good taste and

harmony, heavy metal is, at least by some, associated with the very opposite: the breaking of tradition, bad taste and disharmony. And yet, as the present book shows, a very large number of heavy metal bands reference antiquity in various ways, including exponents of Thrash Metal, characterised by speed and aggressiveness; Death Metal, characterised by macabre subject matter and growling vocals; Black Metal with related subject matter but less polished style, and other subgenres. Bands from countries ranging from Greece and Italy to Scandinavia incorporate classical quotations in their lyrics or rewrite ancient texts and myths. Some sing in Greek or Latin, others in Italian or English. The titles of songs, such as *Hymn to Apollo*, *Hymn to Zeus*, *Medusa* and so on, further show the classical inspiration.

This edited collection, which started as a panel session at a Classical conference in 2014, consists of an introduction followed by eight chapters and a coda, most focusing on a particular country, metal genre or band. The introduction by Kris Fletcher and Osman Umurhan is informative, presenting overviews of the respective fields of Classical Studies, Reception Studies and Metal Studies and their interaction as well as short presentations of the individual chapters.

Vergil has been revived with a vengeance, as the *Aeneid* has provided lyrics for several Italian bands: Stormlord, Heimdall and the one-man-band Hesperia are the subject of chapter 1, 'Vergil's Antiquity and Nationalism in Italian Metal', also authored by Fletcher. In the album *Aeneid* (2013), Heimdall present twelve songs, one for each of the twelve books of Vergil's *Aeneid*. They include some of the original text (in English translation) and provide further information on the ancient source in the liner notes. Fletcher discusses the different approaches to the material both with regard to the extent of quotations and to the languages used. Heimdall write and sing in English, while Stormlord mix English, Latin and Italian. Although drawing heavily on the *Aeneid* may seem patriotic and 'nationalistic', Fletcher is quick to point out that the bands discussed are far removed from the extreme right-wing use of antiquity associated with some metal bands.

Italian bands are similarly the focus of chapters 5 and 6. In 'Heavy Metal Dido: Heimdall's "Ballad of the Queen"', Lissa Crofton-Sleigh presents a thorough discussion of the band's interpretation of the female ruler in the track from the abovementioned album *Aeneid*. Since the topic again concerns Heimdall, one wonders why this chapter was not placed as number 2, followed, as number 3, by Iker Magro-Martínez's 'A Metal *Monstrum*: Ex Deo's Caligula'. The album cover of the Italian-Canadian group depicts 'Caligula' on horseback in a pastiche composition of the equestrian statue, Roman sculpture and pseudo-Roman interior (p. 137). As a historical figure, the Emperor Caligula provides excellent material for both ancient and modern blood-dripping fantasy. Over the years, Ex Deo has addressed other Roman subjects such as 'The Battle of Actium', and the members often dress up in Roman-style armour, visually emphasising the metallic sound.

In chapter 2, 'Eternal Defiance: Celtic Identity and the Classical Past in Heavy Metal', Matthew Taylor turns to Celtic mythology and the subgenre Folk metal. The Swiss band Eluveitie plays 'melodic death metal' (p. 54). They take their

name from an Etruscan inscription on a vase discovered near Mantua. In their re-make, they present Caesar's Gallic wars from the viewpoint of the Celts rather than the Romans, although based on Caesar's text. The German folk metal band SuidAkrA has devoted their album *Eternal Defiance* (2013) to Magnus Maximus, co-emperor of Theodosius the Great, before falling from grace and being condemned as a usurper. In Celtic legend, Maximus became Macsen and lived on as a talking head!

The Greek Black metal group Kawir, discussed by Christodoulos Apergis in 'Screaming Ancient Greek Hymns: The Case of Kawir and the Greek Black Metal Scene' (ch. 3), are less metallic in sound than most bands in this genre. Videos show nostalgic cuts of Greek antiquities and landscapes, almost like a tourist advertisement, and the music includes folkloristic elements. Given the unfortunate existence of BMNS (black metal national socialism), with a Nazi ideology, an apology, once more, is required. Apergis argues that the nostalgic polytheism of Kawir's pagan revival is a far cry from any such extreme views and political implications. An appendix (pp. 91-93) contains an impressive list of Black metal bands that used ancient Greek hymns in their songs between 1998 and 2017.

Heavy metal is generally associated with masculinity and male power. Female figures play a minor role. In 'Cassandra's Plight: Gender, Genre, and Historical Concepts of Femininity in Gothic and Power Metal' (ch. 4), Linnea Åshede and Anna Foka concentrate on the Trojan priestess Cassandra in Gothic metal and Power metal. The Norwegian group Theatre of Tragedy represents the Gothic trend: a melodic, symphonic sound with both female and male vocals. Each track of their album *Aégis* (1998) is named after a female historical or mythical figure, such as Venus, Poppaea and Cassandra, the protagonist of the chapter. The German Power metal band Blind Guardian devoted two songs to Cassandra in 2002. The authors analyse the different approaches in the interpretations of the powerlessness of the tragic heroine.

Jared Secord's contribution 'Occult and Pulp Visions of Greece and Rome in Heavy Metal' (ch. 7), addresses a trend that can be traced back to Black Sabbath and Alice Cooper. This chapter is less directly concerned with the classical tradition, as the musicians in question rely more strongly on recent fantasy and horror-writing than on a classical repertoire.

In "‘When the Land Was Milk and Honey and Magic Was Strong and True’: Edward Said, Ancient Egypt and Heavy Metal", Leire Olabarria explores Egypt as the theme in Traditional, Power, Thrash, Progressive and Death metal bands. She pays special attention to the American band Nile (ch. 8), a band that over several decades have drawn heavily on Egyptian references. In addition to mentioning battles and cruel punishments, life in the other world and other themes inspired by Egyptian lore, Nile even included the noises of crocodiles (p. 184) and tried to reconstruct the sound of the pre-Coptic Egyptian language. Egyptian imagery, as noted by Olabarria, featured prominently in Iron Maiden's stage set on

the *Powerslave* tour of 1984-85, whereas Nile's stage sets are more neutral. They do, however, have some pseudo-Egyptian covers that might deserve attention.

Osman Umurhan's 'Coda: Some Trends in Metal's Use of Classical Antiquity' summarises the various directions of this musical genre and introduces further musical acts. He also raises issues of globalisation, pointing to the growing impact of Metal in all parts of the world. It does, however, seem doubtful that this should lead to a desire to learn the ancient languages.

Although the subject of heavy metal may seem light, this book is far from easy reading. The authors' knowledge of classical philology and of the diverse exponents of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century metal music is impressive. Notes and references are plentiful. The bibliography (pp. 217-241) reveals that quite a lot has been written about the intersections of antiquity, myth and popular culture, from mass media to musicology and anthropological studies, although a book like the present one appears to have been lacking. Most readers will be surprised by the profusion of bands that in recent decades have addressed antique texts and myths. The discography (pp. 242-245) lists more than 150 titles which, to varying degrees, have incorporated the classical world, albums ranging from the early days of Cream (*Tales of Brave Ulysses*) in 1967, via Iron Maiden (e.g. *Flight of Icarus*, 1983; *Alexander the Great*, 1986) up to 2017. There is thus much material for future research.

What is missing from the book is the sound of the music – it would have been quite useful to have had a CD with excerpts from the albums in question, especially since most of these bands are not regularly played on rock radio stations. It is, however, possible to track down audios and videos of some of the bands on YouTube and Spotify. The book could also have benefitted from more illustrations than the few included, and possibly a chapter discussing the ways in which the classical references are reflected in cover images, advertising material, videos and stage sets. This is particularly pertinent given that the classical quotes in contemporary music coincide with the use of the classical in contemporary visual art and design (see the forthcoming CLARA special issue no. 2: *The Classical in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*). That said, the book provides important insights into various unions of antiquity and metal music. Indeed, *Classical Antiquity in Heavy Metal Music* proves that antiquity pervades nearly every aspect of contemporary life and resounds even in the most unexpected places.

Prof. Bente Küllerich
University of Bergen
Dept. of linguistic, literary and aesthetic studies
N-5020 Bergen
bente.kuellerich@uib.no