

Eternal Defiance: Celtic Identity and the Classical Past in Heavy Metal

This paper seeks to prove that metal music can engage in the same kind of “imaginative historiography” that Wyke (1997) has shown is a prominent element of Classical cinema. It examines in particular the re-articulation of Roman history in the service of constructing non-Roman cultural identities in the present day, and more specifically those artists who engage with the Classical past in order to establish and legitimate so-called ‘Celtic’ identities. Since these musicians approach Roman history with such a forthright historiographical agenda, their work provides an excellent opportunity to appreciate how Classical sources are often read in the service of European identity politics (Fitzpatrick 1996; Cunliffe 1997), and to situate heavy metal within such politics and cultural narratives.

The main focus of this paper is the Swiss band Eluveitie, purveyors of a blend of melodic death metal and traditional Celtic music produced by combining the customary instruments of modern heavy metal with others such as the pipes, fiddle, and hurdy gurdy. This choice of instrumentation reflects their lyrical project, which is engaged in recovering a Helvetian identity by exploring events from ancient history. Ironically, the best literary source for the ancient Helvetii are the *Gallic Wars* of Julius Caesar, and Eluveitie’s lyrical choices are often torn between relying on the Roman general for their past and castigating him for his misrepresentation of their people. Indeed, the single ‘Thousandfold’ from 2010’s *Everything Remains (As It Never Was)* makes their opinion of his text very clear, claiming that he did more damage with his narrative than he did with his army: “Whilst the crucial weapon’s not the *pilum*/But the feather held in your hand.” Their next album, *Helvetios* (2012), expands on this criticism to present a narrative of Caesar’s conquests from the perspective of the Helvetii and

other Gauls, one which emphasizes the bravery and freedom of the native peoples while characterizing the Romans as rapacious, immoral, and untrustworthy. This counter-narrative presents a Gallic perspective on Rome's history as the basis for a modern, anti-colonial, Celtic identity (Fleury-Ilett 1996).

The paper also addresses the music of Suidakra, who, like Eluveitie, are interested in constructing a Celtic identity from pieces of the Classical past. While the band are actually from Germany, they mine the culture of the insular Celts for their compositions; this is reflected in both their lyrics and the inclusion of bagpipes on several of their songs. The album *Caledonia* (2006) explores the Roman invasion of Scotland and the Celtic resistance and—while it is ultimately more triumphant in tone than *Helvetios*—it similarly imagines the narrative of the Roman empire as it would have been experienced by its subjects. Although two tracks on *Caledonia* do take up the perspective of a Roman soldier, it is in order to emphasize the inhospitableness of the land the legions are invading and the ferociousness of the foe that they face—a Roman trope turned to the service of Celtic pride.

Eluveitie and Suidakra also share a peculiar complication in their historiographical musical projects, in that the culture that they opt to defy and malign also provides the best sources for the ancient peoples with whom they identify. Even as they name Caesar a “liar” in ‘Meet the Enemy,’ Eluveitie accept his claim that the ancient Helvetii had intended to migrate to Santones (modern Saintonge) in ‘Santonian Shores’—a fact for which he is the only authority. Similarly, the primary source for Suidakra's *Caledonia* must be Tacitus' *Agricola*, and the band paraphrase the famous (and presumably invented) speech of Calgacus from that text. Even the names of the nations they both champion are Roman inventions, and Eluveitie seems not to

engage with irony of proclaiming a “free Gallia” in the song ‘Havoc,’ even though the peoples of whom they sing only became ‘Gallia’ before and under the might of Rome (Drinkwater 1983).

Ultimately, this paper will show how bands like Eluveitie and Suidakra, by approaching Classical material with their own peculiar agendas, go about manufacturing conflicting national narratives about the past. This not only confirms that metal music is a productive site of imaginative historiography, but also exposes the role of narrative and imagination in historiography more generally.

Works Cited

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