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Long Hair, Leather and Latin: Classical Allusions in Heavy Metal Music

Classical themes are rife in popular culture today. The revival of the Roman epic in Hollywood is just one example of the trend. Recent years have witnessed an attendant increase in scholarship in this area: studies concerning Classics and the cinema are certainly more prevalent now.

Another subset of popular culture where inspiration from antiquity can be found - and one which has received considerably less attention - is music. While it is extremely rare to find references to antiquity in some kinds of popular music (e.g. funk, rap, pop), such themes are a dominant characteristic of the genre known as heavy metal. Classical motifs are ubiquitous here. Names of groups include *Roman Empire*, *Ancient Ceremony*, *Emperor*, *Tiberius' Minnows* and *Satyricon*. Latin is regularly employed in the titles of metal bands (e.g. *Imperium*, *Ars Occulta*, *Sacramentum*, *Ad Patres*) as well as in the names of records (e.g. "Odium Omnia Imperat", "Mediolanum Capta Est", "Finis Malorum", "Nemesis Divina"); indeed, some groups (e.g. *Imperator Noctis* and *Nile*) have recorded entire songs in ancient languages. It is common, too, for individual members of heavy metal groups to adopt aliases inspired by people or places from antiquity: examples include Caligula, Tritonis, Satyr and Zephyrus. Moreover, heavy metal is permeated with allusions to Classical mythology (e.g. Icarus, Odysseus, Hades, Atlantis). The genre also contains frequent references to specific events in Greek, Roman and Egyptian history (e.g. the laws of Draco, Trajan's conquests in Dacia, the Battle of Kadesh). A 1986 song by the British metal group *Iron Maiden* deals with the conquests of Alexander the Great, and the opening line of the song - "My son, ask for thyself another kingdom, for that which I leave is too small for thee" - is a translation from Plutarch (*Alexander* 6.8).

Examples, then, are legion. Several explanations may be offered for the phenomenon. For one thing, exponents of heavy metal music often claim that they feel alienated from modern society. Because of this, they find solace in the personalities, beliefs and tales from ancient civilizations instead (medieval themes also recur in the genre). Moreover, heavy metal is an aggressive form of music: songs frequently address issues that reflect the darker aspects of human experience - warfare, tyranny and death. Antiquity is replete with stories of brutality and vice. Paganism is another common theme of the music, particularly in subgenres of heavy metal such as "death metal" and "black metal": again, the past furnishes paradigms. And a few additional theories about the appeal of the ancient world to musicians can be ascertained from an article written by Iggy Pop, lead singer of the seminal 1970s heavy metal/punk band *The Stooges*, where he explains the reasons for his keen interest in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

This paper constitutes a preliminary investigation into the influence of antiquity on heavy metal music and posits some of the reasons for it.