

Heavy Metal Holy Land Premodernity as a Place at the Wacken Open Air Metal Festival

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Since 1990, the Wacken Open Air festival in Germany has traditionally been the largest and most prestigious heavy metal music festival in the world. As it has grown into this role from modest beginnings, the W:O:A festival has increasingly included and encouraged imagery and experiences that evoke the premodern past—principally, but by no means limited to, a European medieval past—which have helped to promote the image of the festival among metal fans as the “Holy Wacken Land” and their trips to it as “pilgrimages,” like those of Christian and Muslim travelers in medieval times.

This presentation will examine the construction of a premodern past as a literal place, centered at the Wacken festival grounds, that heavy metal fans visit and experience as an escape from the modern world. Special attention will be paid to the “Wackinger Village” attractions and their use of premodern, especially medieval, imagery and experiences, from sword duels and role-playing to clothing and food. This presentation will rely both on participant interviews and documentary sources to build a thesis that many fans view the Wacken festival as a unique opportunity to encounter and participate in a constructed, idealized vision of the past, defined by the imagery of heavy metal music. This view transcends the specific programming of the commercial festival and includes fans’ own organic interpretations of heavy metal-themed premodernity.