

The Perception of Constantinople in Heavy Metal

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Heavy Metal only rarely refers to Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, but those songs that do invite consideration of the perception of this medieval metropolis. Constantinople was the capital of the longest existing medieval empire, built over the antique city of Byzantium, and renamed after its founder, the Roman Emperor Constantine I, the Great (306-337). It soon developed into the ‘second Rome’, a vibrant and densely populated metropolis, a political, bureaucratic and economic centre. Constantinople’s history, topography, art and architecture have been in the focus of Byzantine Studies and Christian Archaeology for a long time, providing accurate insights into a highly developed and strictly organised capital.

Modern ideas of Byzantium and the court at Constantinople, however, are different: the term ‘Byzantine’ evokes complexity and intricacy, deviousness (‘Byzantine deals’) or proneness to error (e.g., ‘Byzantine fault’ in computer technology).

The songs referring to Constantinople raise the question of modern musicians’ approach: how do they navigate in the dynamic field between historic accuracy, Byzantium’s reputation through the ages and artistic licence? Most often, it is the outsider’s view: in Viking Metal, e.g., the city, known as ‘Miklagard’, is represented as a glorious opportunity to gain fame and fortune. Especially the 11th-century story of Harald Hardrada (‘hard ruler’) has been adapted frequently. The later King of Norway spent several years in Constantinople in the service of the Byzantine emperor. It is a typical adventure story to the taste of Heavy Metal, dripping with masculinity and madness, and ideal to merge with Viking history on different levels of historicisation. Other songs also weave historical facts with fiction, from evoking a mere idea of the city to topographical accuracy. We will study the topic through the lyrics and cover art, as well as consider live performances.