

The Rivers of the Greek Underworld in Metal Sociocultural Contexts, Emotions, and Political Agendas

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The world of Hades is a topic of ever-growing interest among metal artists, with references covering - according to the Encyclopaedia Metallum - approximately 5,000 songs. Of these, almost 1,000 allude to the five rivers that delimit the realm of the dead. My aim is to trace back the reception of classical texts and the streams' metaphorical usage to sociocultural contexts across the globe, to investigate their employment as a means to promote political views and ideologies, as well as to highlight certain choices of rivers as symbols conveying emotional messages. The case studies will be complemented by a methodological discussion, championing the benefits of Cultural History.

From Homer to the Suda, most relevant sources have endowed the rivers with feelings and concepts perceived as inherent to death: hatred (Styx), oblivion (Lethe), lamentation (Cocytus), flames (Pyriphlegethon) and - of uncertain etymology - sorrow (Acheron). The examples of Acheron and Lethe illustrate the variety of their interpretation in metal. To the Colombian band Vitam et Mortem, Acheron equates to the Río Magdalena, becoming a symbol for the victims' woe during the La Violencia era. Similarly, Chthonic employs the stream as a metaphor for sorrow in the context of its political activism (Amnesty International, Taiwanese independence), combining it with elements of Taiwanese mythology.

The reception of Lethe has undergone substantial changes. Turning away from the contrast to *alētheia* and its largely negative ancient connotation, forgetfulness becomes desirable to several Melodic Death, Doom or Gothic Metal bands, underlining the melancholy consistent with their lyrical themes or the subgenre's characteristics (e.g. Dark Tranquillity, Ancestral Legacy, Furtherial). Despite its rareness, the rejection of Lethe goes hand in hand with the embracing of Mnemosyne, an Orphic idea that points to metal's "Dionysian cluster", as ascertained by Deena Weinstein (e.g. Lucky Funeral). However, it can likewise encourage right-wing propaganda, which often links oblivion to the loss of an alleged glorious and preferable past (e.g. The Shadow Order).