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Czech Pagan Metal: A Short Introduction to Major Local Trends

Introduction and Study's Goals¹

Metal music already has been part of the global music scene for more than fifty years now (Walser 1993, Weinstein 2000). A community of passionate fans has emerged around this music, together with a specific lifestyle. Metal music is constantly evolving, and new trends continue to emerge. As part of this process, Pagan or Paganism-inspired bands began hitting the global metal scene in the 1990s (see Helden 2010: 257–265; Heesch 2010: 71–81; Weinstein 2014). Bands like Bathory introduced a fascination with Nordic mythologies and aesthetics. The thrash metal band Skyclad popularized the use of traditional folk instruments in metal. Death metal band Amorphis popularized the Finnish national myth of Kalevala in their lyrics (Urešová 2022: 57–60). Since the breakthrough of Pagan-inspired bands like Eluveitie, Amon Amarth, and Korpiklaani into the metal mainstream within recent decades, the so-called Heathen, pagan or folk metal has increased in popularity. In the Czech metal scene, metal inspired by Paganism began to emerge in the late 1990s.

This article surveys current trends in Czech pagan metal and focuses specifically on how Paganism is discursively constructed in three bands associated with different sub-genres of pagan metal. These bands include Inferno as a representative of black metal, Silent Stream of Godless Elegy as an example of doom metal and Žrec as a model for folk metal. My analysis provides new insight into understanding ways that metal's fascination with pre-Christian European history, culture, and spirituality is translated and acculturated in the Czech context. How do Czech bands approach Paganism? In what ways, if any, is Czech pagan metal unique? Or do Czech pagan metal bands simply copy global trends? How important is spiritual identity in the personal lives of pagan metal band members? The focus of my analysis is on the lyrics of pagan music, but I also discuss the sound, image, and spiritual identity of band members with a focus on their understanding of what "Pagan" means. The findings of the study are also complemented with data from my broader work on

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Czech Pagan including music collected at concerts during field research between 2018 and 2022, seven interviews with fans and from an online questionnaire distributed via Facebook in 2021 with 336 participants from across the Czech Republic.²

Genre as a Horizon of Expectations

The concepts “genre” and “scene” are now widely used in popular music studies. I review relevant aspects of these notions below, setting the stage for further analysis and framing of later discussion of modern Pagan music in the Czech Republic.

In 1993, the American musicologist Robert Walser published the ground-breaking book *Running with The Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* which situates heavy metal as a set of practices, techniques, and aesthetics that are discussed and negotiated by all people interested in metal (1993: 27–28). In line with Walser’s insights, analysis of genre can be divided into two parts: a) genre analysis, which explores the common horizon of possibilities, expectations, and conventions within the genre, and b) discursive analysis, which focuses on exploring why songs in each genre are composed in a certain way or why a given genre’s lyrics are written and discussed in a particular style (Walser 1993: 27–34).

Musical details are therefore important because they shape discourse, which in turn shapes genre. Numerous discourses engage with defining genre. For example, music critic discourse may differ greatly from fan discourse (Walser 1993: 20–26). In the case of Pagan music, there is a clear difference between neo-Pagan religious discourse and secular understanding of the meaning of Pagan music, which can include a range of experiences from partying hard to transformative spiritual encounters. In this way, definitions of what Pagan music is often come into conflict with one another as discourses struggle for dominance (Weinstein 2014: 70). In the context of this study, I use “folk metal” to refer to a branch of death and heavy metal with Pagan lyrics, and I use “pagan metal” to refer to black metal with Pagan lyrics.

Genre represents not only a “horizon of aesthetic expectations” but also a codification of values and ideologies that are important to and shared by a particular community of people (Walser 1993: 29). For example, the lyrics of Pagan music generally reflect popular views of modern Pagans including themes such as belief in pre-Christian deities, a positive protective relationship with nature, patriotism, and idealization of the past along with a rejection of capitalism and consumerism. Questionnaire data suggests that alternative spiritual communities are attracted to Pagan music. Almost 20% of respondents subscribed to some sort of Pagan beliefs and 2.1% to Satanism, 1.5% to shamanism, while those inside responding “Other” (13.5%) indicated beliefs associated with New Age movements (“my faith comes from respect for nature, inspiration is for example the goddess Gaia, PachaMama, the elements, etc.; new age magician”). For comparison, this is a relatively high proportion compared to 2021 census data in which 2995 Czech citizens (0.0285%) adhered to Paganism and druidism, and 998 people (0.0095%) adhered to Satanism.

² The text is abbreviated chapter from author’s dissertation thesis *Moderné pohanstvo a hudba v Českej republike* aimed to be finished in 2023.

Walser also argues any deep understanding of genre must include an analysis of the music itself (Walser 1993: 39–41). Musical analysis allows us to make connections between qualitative understandings of genre and embedded meanings encoded into the structure of the music. The actual sounds of music (pitches, chords, rhythms, etc.) are essentially empty vessels that only acquire meaning through specific uses in particular circumstances. While a thorough musicological analysis is beyond the scope of the current study, suffice it to say that the sounds and meanings of music are inextricably linked within a complex web of cultural signification. All gestures mean something, and discourse motivates us to use them in genre-appropriate ways and in culturally recognizable forms.

In this way, genre might, in a sense, be defined by both interpretation and expectation. There are always many possible interpretations, but in each context, certain interpretations emerge as preferred or, in other words, “normal”. It is in this way that the interpretation of heavy metal varies across countries according to the needs of the community, which will be reflected in the sound and lyrics of the music. Pagan bands often use folk instruments from their countries of origin (in Slovakia, the *fujara* or shepherd’s pipe; in Scotland, the bagpipes) and thus create localized interpretations of the sub-genre.

Access to certain technologies also influences the shape of a musical genre (Walser 1993: 41–44). In Communist Czechoslovakia, the sound of rock music was influenced by the limited availability of quality equipment, which made rock recordings of the 1960s sound badly produced in comparison with mainstream Western recordings (Berka, Frešo 2013: 259–273). This problem was due not only to inadequate hardware, but also first-generation producers’ misunderstanding of the needs of rock music. They forced guitarists to muffle distortion or were unwilling to record a distinctive bass (Frešo 2011: 71–72). Similarly, in the case of Pagan music, there is often difficulty getting good quality folk instruments since they are often only obtainable from traditional artisans, which makes them relatively hard to get and expensive. Using instruments of lesser quality or poor recording of folk instruments can in turn lead to a less-than-authentic sound, which can easily become a target for criticism from fans and critics. Music is firmly rooted in matter and body, not just in our minds, and research needs to reflect this.

Walser’s (1993) approach to the study of music, through its emphasis on the discursive dimension of music, becomes particularly useful for studying how the genre and textual content of Pagan music are negotiated among fans, musicians, and the world of the music business.

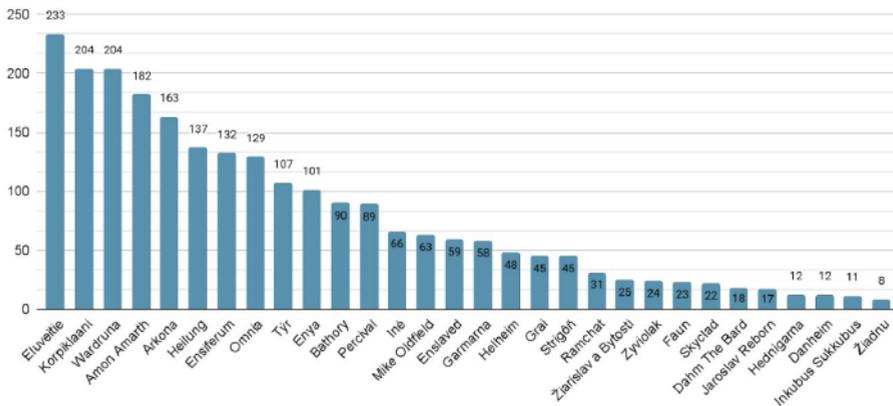
Scene as a Framework

I consider the music “scene”, as described by Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 9–68), one of the key concepts for the analysis of modern Pagan music. Discourse and genre are largely abstract concepts, which is why Kahn-Harris finds it necessary to situate them in a concrete space: the scene, an umbrella term for the activities of a group

of people in a particular time and space associated with a particular kind of music (Kahn-Harris 2007: 13–15, 32–34). The activities of a scene can thus include music production, concerts, reviews, reports, interactions between fans and musicians, and visual artifacts, all of which can also be framed geographically and thematically. This elegantly solves the problem of “what to include in all this research” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 21). Any activity associated with music is a manifestation of engaging with the scene and keeping it alive. A scene can feature one privileged center (e.g., the Norwegian black metal scene, the new wave of British heavy metal) and many peripheral nodes, localities where the music may have spread outward from the center. Each activity related to music has its own meaning and would not exist without the scene. In theory, even if someone were a great songwriter, without engagement within a scene, there would be no network to disseminate and critique their music and it would fall into obscurity. Proceeding from Kahn-Harris, this is why I find a holistic approach to the study of musical micro-worlds appropriate.

Working with the notion of the scene also allows for the study of interconnections of local music scenes with their global counterparts (Kahn-Harris 2007: 97–121). Czech listeners of modern Pagan music listen to a multitude of foreign bands thanks to the Internet (see graph no. 1). Local music groups, in turn, respond in various ways to global trends in the genre and aim to break through abroad, making for the possibility of earning a living from music alone. Scenes are heterogeneous places defined by permanent change and struggles for prestige. This also applies to the understanding of Paganism within it as its various forms are negotiated. The notion of scene allows the researcher to do work that is empirically anchored in specific contexts, but still open to other dimensions of research and its language (Kahn-Harris 2007: 21).

Aké zahraničné pohanské kapely počúvate?



Graph no. 1. What foreign Pagan bands (all genres) do you listen to regularly?

Czech pagan black metal – *Inferno*



Image no. 1. Cover of Inferno's debut album *Duch Slovanské síly* [*Spirit of Slavic Power*] (2001). Note the interplay of the dark black metal aesthetic with the folk-romantic motif (discogs.com).

Probably the most important force in the first generation of Czech pagan black metal is the band Inferno from Karviná in the northeast part of the Czech Republic. Active since 1996, in its early days Inferno mainly released demos that sounded like bands from the Scandinavian black metal scene (Votruba 2016: 56–58). Inferno is importantly associated with the second wave of black metal broadly characterized by a distinctive DIY aesthetic that came about in response to the producer-dominated hair metal of the 1980s. Black metal bands of this period deliberately recorded their work with low sound quality and disseminated it via cassette tapes (Kahn-Harris 2007). Vocals are harsh and non-melodic. Guitars are buzzy, create a wall of sound, and feature only sparse solos. Drums are intense and monotonous. Songs are usually quite long, around six or seven minutes, with a strong emphasis on creating what music critics describe as “a dark atmosphere of ancient times”. The first demos featured anti-Christian and nihilist themes, which were further developed in anti-Christian, Pagan lyrics on the albums *Duch slovanské síly* (2001), *V návratu pohanství* (2003), and *Nikdy nepokřtěni* (2006). Such an aesthetic intentionally contrasts with the classic flashy heavy metal sound with intense vocals and virtuoso guitar solos.

Let's strike again and fast
 The murderers of our people
 The fate of this nation
 It will be guided by the fire of our ancestors
 We are the eternal light
 And the future of this country
 Our strength

Is rooted in Czechia
 Today sun and light
 Lives in our hearts
 Today we still have
 The history of this country
 Pagan swords and Slavic spirit
 Mightily and with honor they raised the throne
 Just as once upon a time
 My King of Bohemia
 (Inferno, "Pohanské meče", *Duch slovanské síly*, Eclipse Productions 2001)

The lyrics of this song are consciously transgressive, openly criticizing Christianity, threatening to destroy it, and extolling the ideal of a pre-Christian European culture as strong and fearless in contrast to the powerless Christian present. At the same time, the song features stark nationalistic overtones. Inferno's leader Adramelech assesses the band's Pagan period in a 2022 interview for *Czech Metal Studies*.

How do you feel about your Slavic period? In your opinion, is it still as important to proclaim a national pride to the world?

I still feel very connected to the home ground I walk on, to the land that will be my grave, and to the wisdom and traditions of my ancestors. All of this shapes my worldview and is something I pass on to my children. But I don't feel like Inferno and I ever preached anything at all – especially in the days when the lyrics had spirit of ancient times. It's just that our early albums dealt partly with Pagan themes and 19th-century romanticism, studying concepts like *blood and soil* and mixing it all with anti-Christian lyricism. That's what black metal has always been about. Satanism or Satanists often resonated with energies that are perceived as Pagan. [...] Today, however, I strongly feel that the necessary healthy balance of things is irretrievably gone, and the freedom we were given has taken a bad hold, and we are heading towards insane excesses (Mokrý, Stašová 2022).

Adramelech mentions that he perceives a strong connection between patriotism, nationalism, romanticism, Paganism, and black metal. He thus suggests that the Czech Republic is a suitable breeding ground for the development of pagan metal and its acculturation to local cultural, historical, and social traditions. Like Norwegian black metal bands, Inferno interprets Paganism from an ethnic perspective as the religion of the Slavic ancestors of today's inhabitants of the Czech Republic. Kennet Granholm considers Paganism and Satanism as appropriate religious philosophies for the sounds of black metal music (Granholm 2011: 534–538). Granholm notes and Adramelech confirms this for the Czech context. For Inferno at least, such religious practices fit with the rebellious nature of metal in that Christian discourse has shunned Paganism as an erroneous worldview since the Middle Ages. The concept of the Pagan warrior, in turn, finds support in the strong historicism of the Czech national revival (Hroch 1999: 216–221) that situates the Czech medieval state as the foundation of modern Czech ethnicity. Through such a process, for example, the medieval Hussite warlord Jan Žižka (1360–1424) has been historicized into a fighter for the rights of the Czech nation. Incidentally, as early as the first half

of the nineteenth century, intellectuals have been fascinated with the Pagan history of Bohemia (see Linda, Sabina, Kolár, Hesová, Říha, Vaněk 2011; Hněvkovský, Strejček 1905). As such, fervor over Paganism in Czechia seems to return cyclically throughout the country's history.

The critique of Christianity has been ever-present in Czech history regardless of the political regime. Pagan metal can be used as a platform for free criticism of Christianity. The latter has a long tradition in Czech history, with roots going back to the second half of the nineteenth century (Václavík 2010: 52–74; Nešpor 2021: 51–62). During this time, the critique of Christianity was linked to the construction of Czech national identity in part as a reaction against Austro-Hungarian pressure to Germanize (Hroch 1999) as Catholicism became associated with the Germans, Austria-Hungary, and the clergy rejecting the establishment of Czechoslovakia (Nešpor 2010: 50–59). In response, Czech nationalists strongly promoted the notion that the Czechs were a Hussite nation (Václavík 2010: 58–66). The concept of historical injustice in the form of the replacement of Paganism by “foreign” Christianity also fits with the Czech historical experience. Czech tribes began to Christianize under Frankish and Moravian influence during the ninth and tenth centuries. During the Middle Ages, Paganism was pushed to the margins of society and transformed into folk superstitions (Váňa 1990: 29). Anti-clericalism had strong ethnic overtones in the past, a tradition further developed much more recently by Pagan black metalists.

Given the ethnonational undertones of black metal, some groups like Antifa have accused the black metal scene of having links to neo-Nazism (Antifa.cz 2008a, 2008b). Such accusations are not completely unfounded as it is well-known among metalheads that a small part of the black metal scene does indeed support neo-Nazi ideals (see Vrzal 2011: 67–72). This perhaps stems from and is in turn reinforced by the transgressive dimension of extreme metal in general. Given the fusion of metal's transgressive and Pagan nationalist discourse, it is not surprising that some pagan black metal bands espouse neo-Nazism. As an example, Adramelech and Azazel of Inferno have in the past quite openly declared their far-right, Pagan, racist, traditionalist, anti-capitalist and anti-globalist views:

People live a monotonous life, chasing after materialistic values, and do not perceive the invisible world around them, which is part of life. Things like Pride, Honor, Bravery, National feeling, Faith in one's country, ancestors, one's blood, gods, are slowly disappearing today due to Americanization and growing influence of Judaism, moralism with tolerance... Inferno is a proud member of the Slavic Empire, supporting the Pagan faith and pure White Europe!!! (Zdenda 2001).

They also name as their favorite bands those that are associated with the neo-Nazi scene (i.e., White Power: Honor, Konkwista, Iron Youth, Der Stürmer, Buldok, Bound for Glory, Skrewdriwer). And yet, Inferno refuses to be labeled as a neo-Nazi black metal band. Though it is probably unrealistic to expect that Inferno will again publicly declare such socially controversial views after the controversy caused by this 2001 interview. Labeling the controversial lyrics as “artistic statements” makes it difficult to clearly resolve the dilemma of the ideological background of a band.

Some of the controversy associated with the Pagan metal community was hinted at by one anonymous fan in the questionnaire:

Many people inside the Pagan metal scene are connected to various (neo)Nazi organizations. I have avoided the company of “metalheads” since 2000 and want nothing to do with them. I enjoy the music and lyrics of many bands, but the nihilism ad absurdum that exists in these people frustrates me. An example for all is the interview with František Štorm, who had to go to a priest to confess after the world tour of Master’s Hammer... (questionnaire response 2021).

Since 2008, Inferno has turned toward the occult (Vrzal 2020) with lyrics leaning towards themes of spiritual growth in the tradition of Western esoterism, which musically corresponds to a leaning towards transcending the experienced genre limits of black metal towards a transformative musical experience (Mokrý, Stašová 2022). As does a portion of the Pagan black metal scene, Adramelech also expresses sympathy towards Evola, although he considers anthropocentrism the main problem of contemporary civilization (Mokrý, Stašová 2022).

Popularity of Czech Black Metal Among Czech Fans

Black metal comprises a subculture within metal, which itself is already quite subcultural. How popular is black metal among Czech fans of Pagan music? Within the research sample, black metal was listened to by the largest number of people (190 out of 337) right after heavy metal. However, other information from the questionnaire suggests that this says more about the popularity of the genre than the massive popularity of local pagan black metal bands. Among foreign bands, the highest ranked are the classics of the genre including Bathory (90), followed by Enslaved (59), and Helheim (48). In comparison, the most listened to foreign Pagan band is Eluveitie with 233 fans. Of the Czech bands, Trollech (65) is the most popular. This is an interesting paradox, because is the least “Pagan” lyrically. Trollech fits the profile of the subgenre only in terms of sound and secondarily due to its fascination with nature on the edge of parody. Bands that are at least partially Pagan-oriented, including Panychida (40), Inferno (29), and Dark Seal (16), are on the periphery of the research sample. This is even more evident when compared to the number of fans of folk/folklore band Tomáš Kočko & Orchestr (125) or doom metal band Silent Stream of Godless Elegy (147). Given the results of the questionnaire, does the data truly suggest that fans of Pagan music in the Czech Republic are not so fond of Czech pagan black metal, even though a large part of them listen to black metal? There are several possible interpretations of the results. First, fans could distrust domestic bands or have a negative reaction to the quality of their music, all this exacerbated by the lack of accessible information about the Czech pagan black metal scene. Foreign bands often make a full-time living from music and have better quality studios, more money to operate, and more effective marketing. Czech bands operate on a semi-professional basis, record only with local producers, and have less media exposure except in webzines and the Czech music magazines *Spark* and *Pařát*. Another factor may be fans’ lack of interest in Pagan themes. Moreover, some

more orthodox black metal fans may associate these Pagan themes with poseur behavior. In his research on Satanism in black metal, Miroslav Vrzal encountered some interviewees who suggested as much:

I was never into Pagan black metal bands. I wasn't into them musically. I understood the evolution and at one point I appreciated it more than Satanic bands. So yes, if I want to fight Christianity, why acknowledge a sort of counterpoint invented by them. These bands in a lot of cases sort of go back before the rise of Christianity, to Pagan times. The catch is, for most of these people, I didn't believe it. Like, weekend Pagans, I'm going to be a Pagan if I go to a concert... I just didn't believe those people, and I still don't. With 90% of bands, I just don't believe it (Vrzal 2011: 62, note 143).

There are differences between Pagans. There is group of so called Pagans who listen to pagan metal in the warmth of their homes and think how Pagan they are. Paganism it's not about the music, it's about values. I am a Pagan also without it [music]. But Pagan music helped me to find my spirituality (Vrzal 2011: 65).

Further, the musical side of black metal may not be entirely attractive to fans of melodic genres. Black metal is a postmodern commentary on heavy metal. Without at least a framework knowledge of black metal, some may perceive it as nothing but transgressive noise. Also, the Satanic controversies associated with black metal may put off some Czech fans. Finally, the questionnaire data may have been influenced by the way it was collected. The questionnaire was distributed via the Internet due to Covid-19 restrictions that did not allow data collection at concerts in autumn of 2021. Therefore, it is possible that the questionnaire did not reach many Czech fans, even though it was shared in several places online, including on the Facebook page of *Spark* magazine. Also, the relatively small number of Czech black metal fans suggested by the questionnaire data may be related to their distrust of academia. Therefore, they did not indicate that they listen to controversial bands such as Inferno.

Pagan Doom Metal

Doom metal is a label for a subgenre of metal characterized by slow tempos, rolling hypnotic riffs, and bleak lyrics emphasizing variations on the theme of powerlessness (Piper 2013: 33–34). Many agree that Black Sabbath was the first doom metal band, judging by the musical characteristics of their 1970 debut album (Votruba 2017: 8–10). The 1990s saw a major boom in Anglo-American doom metal with bands such as My Dying Bride, Paradise Lost, Solitude Aeternus, Tiamat, Gathering, and Candlemass. While Black Sabbath mixed riff-driven metal with a horror aesthetic that eventually moved towards heavy and black metal, the second generation of doom bands took a different path. This new vanguard featured a greater emphasis on creating music that worked to augment melancholic lyrics that often center on depression and failure. A major genre innovation was the integration of keyboards, female vocals, strings, and flutes into the musical texture (Votruba 2017: 11).

At the time when these innovative doom metal bands released their most influential records, new musical trends were flowing into the Czech Republic, and as a result doom metal gained a substantial following in the country (Votruba 2017: 2–55). Bands such as Dissolving of Prodigy, R.E.T., Love History, Hypnotic Scenery, and Silent Stream of Godless Elegy (SSOGE) reached peak popularity in the second half of the 1990s. As metal was generally moving toward a more hardened sound and coarse lyrics, the approach of these doom metal group—that relied on a combination of intimate and introspective music, instrumental innovations, alternating female and male vocals (“beauty & the beast”), and melancholic-depressive lyrics—was refreshing at the time. This introspective and deeply emotional style appealed to teenagers in particular. This is confirmed by an R1 interviewee from North Moravia and the recollection of one member of the scene:

R1: SSOGE became my entry into doom metal actually. And it was such a nice transition. It was still a lot of melodic music that was a little bit closer to the symphonic metal I was listening to before. Actually, for a long time I only knew the doom part of it and the “Relic Dances” album, where it had some of those Pagan elements, but they weren’t that prominent yet, and for me at the time, what was important there, like with the song “Lonely” or “Osamělí” afterwards in the Czech version about being sad. That was resonating with teenage me, listening to sad music was my rebellion against the mainstream society that was always happy (interview with R1 2021).

Michal Datel Rak (Et Moriemur, Self-Hatred): At the end of the nineties, doom was at the peak of popularity in our country and doom bands played in the main times in front of screaming halls. It was mainly in the north of Moravia, but I remember for example a Dissolving of Prodigy concert somewhere near Kutná Hora, where the girls in the front row were really crying under the stage. Probably a preparation for Him (Votruba 2017: 33).

The doom metal scene was concentrated primarily in Ostrava, a city in the northeast region on the periphery of the Czech Republic. Why? It may be a coincidence. Patterns from abroad attracted young musicians, and they influenced and inspired each other because the metal community (particularly the musicians) was small and most of the people involved knew each other (Votruba 2017: 16–17). Perhaps, it’s also possible that doom metal was simply fitting the character of Ostrava, a grim city of factory chimneys, smog, spoiled nature, and poverty in the nineties. The traditionally industrial and mining region at that time suffered under the transition to a capitalist economic model. Industry was adjusting to new market conditions, struggling with competition from the West, and struggling with the absence of an experienced managerial layer. As in Birmingham, the industrial center of the British Midlands, metal in Ostrava became a way of venting the emotions of living in an industrial region that offered a life of hard physical labor. Moreover, even during socialism, Ostrava had been one of the main centers of heavy metal’s popularity (Votruba 2018: 18–22). Radek Hajda and Hanka Hajdová, members of SSOGE, discuss the popularity of doom metal in the region along the same lines:

R: Twenty-five years ago, we were mostly into doom metal. The nineties was the era of My Dying Bride, Paradise Lost, Anathema, and Tiamat. My fascination with Amorphis crossed with doom, and from that Silent Stream of Godless Elegy was born. At that time, North Moravia was spoken of as the birthplace of doom metal, but why this region became such a little Scandinavia and spawned so many genre related bands, I have no idea.

H: I'm not surprised. Look how it looks in North Moravia. Industrial Ostrava, inversions, constant fog, chimneys. Logically, doom became popular here! (interview Radek Hajda and Hanka Hajdová 2020).



Image no. 2. The cover album *Smutnice* (2018).

SSOGE is not only one of the longest-running Czech doom metal bands, but also the only doom metal band to adopt a Pagan theme, describing their current genre as ethno-doom. It is also the most popular Czech Pagan band in my research sample (147 votes). Silent Stream of Godless Elegy formed in 1995 and originally mixed doom with death metal. During the first decade of the 21st century, after the departure of original vocalist Petr Staněk, the band gradually made a sonic turn to doom influenced by folk metal (primarily Amorphis) and folk music on the album *Relic Dances* (2004). This change was also marked by a shift to singing in Czech and an expansion of modern Pagan themes in the group's lyrics. The band also incorporated traditional Moravian folk instruments such as violin, cello, flute, and cimbalom into the established foundation of the band's metal sound. SSOGE's understanding of Paganism differs from the black metal concept. Theirs is closely linked to the traditional doom metal theme of powerlessness (see Piper 2013) and represents its

natural evolution. The band drew a good deal of inspiration from Moravian folklore traditions. The new singer Hanka Nogolová (now Hajdová) incorporated elements of Moravian folk love songs and inspirations from Czech romantic poetry (most notably *Kytice* by Karel Erben) into the band's lyrics. As mentioned previously, Czech 19th century intellectuals, including scientists, writers, and poets, turned their attention to folk culture, which they understood as an expression of pure national culture. Folk magic and superstitions were seen as leftovers from authentic pre-Christian Czech Pagan religion. From there it was only a short step to the integration of Slavic Paganism into SSOGE's lyrics, inspired by historical studies of pre-Christian Paganism (about the Czech context see Váňa 1990 or Téra 2017) in a similar fashion as Czech Romanticism and the national revival of the nineteenth century (Zíbrt 1995 [1895]).

I rise from the earth
and tree roots
are my roots.
My hair is rain,
my forehead is a cloud,
my palms are yours.

(Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, "Mokoš", *Návaz*, Season of Mist 2011)

I swear.
When the sky darkens.
That I have faith.
Chors, she knows.

(Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, "Přísahám", *Návaz*, Season of Mist 2011)

The old sun is finishing.
And new ones are born again.
Solstice Tributes.
Let it ripen in the fields
full of class.
Let Vesna come back.

(Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, "Slava", *Návaz*, Season of Mist 2011)

Oh, Morana, Morana,
you first woman, the last,
Look into my eyes
and you'll see nothing but wind.

(Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, "Bezbřeží", *Smutnice*, Redblack Production 2018)

Silent Stream of Godless Elegy reconstructs Paganism in a very similar style to other Slavic folklore-tinged, ethnically-oriented modern Paganisms that sacralize folk superstitious customs and traditions and reconstructs Paganism based on information from secondary literature about gods such as Chors, Mokoš, Vesna, and Morana and other lesser beings, superstitious customs, and rituals (the wedding vow in "Přísahám") (Simpson 2012: 11–37). Also, for the leaders of SSOGE,

Paganism is not simply a “sauce” that goes well with the music. Rather, it is a matter of personal faith. In my interview (2020) with bandleader Radek Hajda and singer Hana Hajdová, they claimed to be personally interested in contemporary Paganism and in its Slavic version, which has been gaining popularity in the Czech Republic since late 90s (for more, see Dostálová 2013: 164–182). Thus, in the case of SSOGE, Paganism is a common ground for local patriotic, spiritual, and historical themes that fits the doom metal sound. The sense of powerlessness that is at the core of doom metal is expressed in slow tempos, heavy riffs, female singing, and the use of folk instruments.

Czech folk metal – Žrec



Image no. 3. Logo of the band Žrec.

One of the first Czech folk metal bands was the Moravian band Žrec. The band was founded in 2004 and released its first demo in 2006. Subsequently, they released their debut album *Žertva* (2008), which was followed by the band’s second album *Paměti* (2012). Žrec then went through a process of personnel changes and released the EP *Klíč k pokladům* in 2017, only to break up for good in 2018. But they are still relevant to fans interested in Czech pagan metal, as they received 43 votes in my questionnaire.

In their early days, Žrec was primarily inspired by the work of Russian folk metal bands such as Arkona and Alkonost and Ukrainian blackers Nokturnal Mortum (Misterfolk 2018), which had been very popular in the Czech Republic in the mid-2000s (Tesař 2009a: 76–77). The Czech folk-metalists combined folklore-inspired melodies played with folk instruments on top of a melodic death-metal base, growls alternating to a lesser extent with pure vocals. The Pagan nature of the debut *Žertva* is accentuated by its title, a term for sacrifice in Slavic Pagan tradition. The band also borrowed its name from the world of pre-Christian Slavic spirituality: a “žrec” was the Slavic equivalent of a priest, a ritualist (Váňa 1990: 191–199). Various Slavic gods such as Perun, Mokoš, and Svarog are invoked in Žrec’s songs. The lyrics, rendered in romantic poetic language, reflects the Pagan beliefs of the

band members, casts nostalgia for the golden age of Paganism, and idealizes the ruins associated with the pre-Christian period (“Kamenný kult”). We encounter the concept of a Pagan warrior inspired by heavy metal’s Conan the Barbarian meets Manowar and black metal’s anti-Christian aesthetic (“Křev předků”). The band also comes up with its own romantic vision of the Pagan future of the world, which takes the form of a utopian return to the golden age of the past (“Nový věk pohanský”), not dissimilar to that of the Slovak Pagan musician and spiritual leader Žiarislav (Pániková 2004: 50–63; Puchovský 2018: 41–43).

Quick, brothers, draw the swords
I want to hear the screams and the moans
The enemy is bearing down on us
So, defend our land!
Let’s raise our weapons
Made of fire
And we will face death
Last one to the march.
Hey, praise the gods!

Golden Sunshine
For our steps
Dažbog, son of Svarog
Don’t let your grandchildren perish!
With the god of war at his back
Our soldiers will run
Hey, Perun Almighty
Give us courage!
Hey, praise the gods!

Brothers quickly into the woods
There we will find peace
We’ll be back
We will not betray our people
Between the branches of the trees
Let’s recharge our batteries
And with the seven-headed god
I will conquer my goal!
Hey, praise the gods!

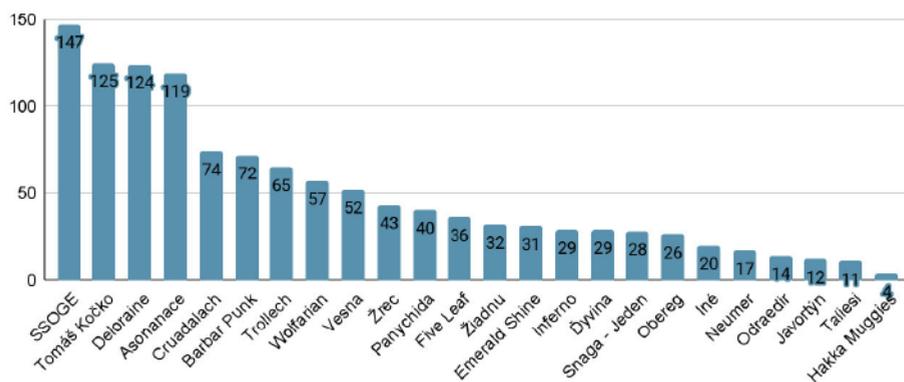
With a heartbreaking roar
Let’s run forward
Boldly and bravely
We will win!
When all the weapons fall silent
And with them the roar
This is how proudly will win
our Slavic blood!
Slavic blood!

(Žrec, “Křev předků”, *Žertva*, Murderous Music Production 2008)

The music of Žrec softens as time goes on. On *Paměti* (2012), growling vocals appear less and less, while heavy metal elements are strengthened, thus approaching the Alkonost sound. The lyrics too evolve, and on the last EP *Klíč k pokladům* (2017), lyrics have been practically completely transformed. The main lyrical themes become nature (the instrumental “River of Home” is dedicated to the Oslava River, which flows through the guitarist Torham’s home region; “Vozka” is also inspired by the eponymous hill in Jeseníky), magic (“Klíč k pokladům”), and mythology (“Vozka” is an initiation story about union with the sun god) (Misterfolk 2018). Žrec ceased to be as ostentatiously Slavic-Pagan as on their debut. Instead, they opted for a subtler atmospheric approach, to which they adapted more universal Indo-European lyrics (Misterfolk 2018).

Žrec represents an eclectic example of working with Paganism. Like Arkona (Tesař 2009b: 76–77), Žrec was initially inspired mostly by the neo-Pagan, scientific, and black metal discourse on Paganism. Musical evolution gradually led the band away from some typically Pagan themes (such as anti-Christianity) and sounds more commonly associated with folk-metal (e.g., the growl, see Heesch 2010: 71–81). Conversely, Žrec has embraced Paganism more broadly as part of a more comprehensive Indo-European religious tradition (but still grounded in local identity), to which they have adapted more universal lyrics about nature and mythologies.

Aké české pohanské kapely počívate?



Graph No. 2. Results of the survey question “What Czech Pagan bands (all genres) do you listen to?”

The Popularity of Local Folk Metal Bands Among the Czech Population

First, it should be clear that fans actually do listen to local folk metal bands. On the other hand, as with black metal bands, their popularity fails to reach the level of foreign bands. For example, compare the popularity of Cruadalach (74), the most popular local folk-metal band of the questionnaire sample, with the Swiss band Eluveitie (233). In a sample of 337 respondents, the Cruadalach is listened to by twenty-two percent and Eluveitie by sixty-nine percent. As with black metal, the lower popularity could be explained by a combination of distrust in the work of local

bands, poor promotion, and a preference for foreign bands as more original and authentic. Nevertheless, most of the respondents with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews actively seek out Czech and Moravian Pagan music, as it resonates with their local and spiritual identity. Only one respondent questions not only the quality of local folk-metal bands but also Czech metal in general as unoriginal and dumb. The graph no. 2 plots data regarding the popularity of Czech pagan bands in the Czech Republic.

Compared to pagan black metal, Czech folk-metal bands are today more popular and more active on the scene. Fifty-seven fans listen to Wolfarian from Brno in the South Moravia region, forty-three listen to Žrec, thirty-one to Emerald Shine from Nový Jičín in the Ostrava region, and twenty-six listen to Obereg from Pohořelice in the South Moravia region. Apart from the now-inactive Cruadalach and Žrec, these are all relatively young bands still at the beginning of their careers from Moravia and Silesia, respectively, with each having released one or two albums. The local Moravian scene was vital during the period of my field research between 2018–2022. Especially around Brno, various larger club events such as Heathen Assault Over Brno, Lughnasad, Mokoš Fest, and Folk Metal Fest have been organized on a regular basis over the last decade (except for the coronavirus period from 2020 to 2021). These Brno-centered events have also regularly hosted local Moravian folk metal bands, helping to maintain the popularity of the pagan subgenre of metal. I have also noted the strong presence of local Pagans in concerts of local Pagan bands. Going out to a concert of a Pagan band is not only a matter of musical taste, but according to previous research and my own observations, an expression of religious affiliation and of possible ways to “live” their Pagan identity as well as an opportunity to meet like-minded people (see Ezzy 2014; Puchovský 2018).

Summary: Czech Pagan Metal and the Construction of Paganism in Popular Music

Over the last twenty years, Pagan themes have been successfully incorporated into Czech metal, building on the previous history of metal in the former Czechoslovakia and inspirations from abroad. The lyrics are a crucial indicator of Paganism in Czech metal music. With few exceptions, bands sing in the Czech language, thus accentuating the ethnic and national dimension of the music. The Pagan sound is constructed in accordance with inspirations from abroad: heavy metal style electric guitar plus strings, brass, and acoustic instruments. Thematically appropriate Czech Pagan lyrics are mapped onto this musical texture. Pagan black metal was the first to establish itself in the Czech region. Paganism as performed by bands like Inferno featured a strong anti-Christian bent, was mostly Slavic-oriented, and borderline nationalistic. Black metal’s Pagan discourse in the Czech context followed a long tradition of anticlericalism, the origins of which can be traced back to the last third of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Trollech’s work is closer to parody and brings wit to its interpretation of “Paganism in black”. Pagan doom metal in the Czech Republic may not be extremely widespread, but its main representative, Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, is one of the most popular Czech metal bands ever. SSOGE

belongs to the broader stream of Czech doom metal bands of the 1990s, from which they draw sonically, including the involvement of brass and strings to evoke a gloomy atmosphere. In the case of SSOGE, the Czech romantic perspectives on Paganism intersected with the neo-Pagan Slavic one, which found fertile ground in doom metal discourse with its emphasis on the theme of powerlessness. Czech folk metal found its inspiration in the Vikings and Slavs and in spiritual and “party” currents of the subgenre. Paganism is also constructed according to scholarly research on the history of pre-Christian religions in Europe, complemented by the romantic stylization of Pagans as noble warriors and spiritually advanced ancestors with a well-developed culture. There is also a strong infiltration of neo-Pagan discourse (as some musicians from metal bands claim to be Pagans themselves), primarily in the form of references to ancestral beliefs and faith in Paganism’s resurgence in the face of a supposed crisis of the Central European model of capitalism in a globalized age.

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Discography

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Abstract

This article offers a short introduction to Czech pagan metal. I offer a brief summary of the main trends within the local scene and analyze how Paganism is discursively constructed in the music and lyrics of three bands representing different metal sub-genres: Inferno, Silent Stream of Godless Elegy, and Žrec. I seek answers for some important questions. How do Czech bands approach Paganism? In what ways, if any, is Czech pagan metal unique? Or do Czech pagan metal bands simply copy global trends? How important is spiritual identity in the personal lives of Pagan metal band members? The main theoretical inspirations for the article are Robert Walser's discursive study of heavy metal and Keith Kahn-Harris's concept of scene. The analysis of lyrics and music is enhanced by data from ethnological and quantitative research among listeners of Czech Pagan metal music.

Czeski pagan metal: krótkie wprowadzenie do głównych trendów lokalnych

Streszczenie

Opracowanie prezentuje wprowadzenie do czeskiego pagan metalu. Jego głównym celem jest nie tylko przedstawienie syntetycznego podsumowania głównych trendów na lokalnej scenie, ale także przeanalizowanie, w jaki sposób pogaństwo jest dyskursywnie konstruowane w muzyce i tekstach trzech wybranych zespołów z różnych podgatunków metalu – Inferno, Silent Stream of Godless Elegy i Žrec. Autor poszukuje odpowiedzi na pytania: jak czeskie zespoły podchodzą do pogaństwa? Czy istnieje jakiś unikalny wymiar czeskiego pagan metalu, czy czeskie zespoły tylko kopiują światowe trendy? Jak ważna jest tożsamość duchowa w życiu osobistym członków zespołu pagan-metalowego? Głównymi inspiracjami teoretycznymi wykorzystanymi w artykule są dyskursywne studia heavy metalu Roberta Walsera oraz koncept sceny w ujęciu Keitha Kahna-Harrisa. Analiza tekstów i muzyki wzbogacona została o dane pochodzące z przeprowadzonych przez autora badań etnologicznych i ilościowych wśród słuchaczy czeskiej muzyki pogańskiej.

Keywords: contemporary Paganism, metal studies, pagan metal, Czech pagan music scene

Słowa kluczowe: współczesne pogaństwo, metal studies, pagan metal, czeska scena muzyki pogańskiej

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