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DISCOURSES AND STUDIES

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## Czech Metal Studies: 5 Years of the Study of Metal (and Religion)

### Introduction

The inspiration for writing the article<sup>1</sup> was the first chapter of the book *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* (Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, Scott 2016) describing the origin of metal (music) studies as a result of conversations among individual scholars interested in metal in relation to specific conferences about metal. Furthermore, I was also inspired by the keynote lecture by Karel Spracklen<sup>2</sup> (2021) titled *The Genesis and Evolution of Metal Music Studies* at the first online workshop of Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe, in which Spracklen provided a retrospective on the circumstances of the origin and development of metal (music) studies.

Metal (music) studies now forms a relatively broad multidisciplinary and international academic current that focuses on metal as a global phenomenon (see Wallach, Berger, Greene 2011). Although there were pioneers of the academic study of metal, such as Deena Weinstein and Robert Walser in the 1990s, metal was a rather marginal topic in the study of music subcultures. Although, for example, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain began focusing on music subcultures in the 1970s, the subcultural studies attention was primarily focused on punks, skinheads, and later, on techno. Nevertheless, metal (music) studies started to grow in the end of 2000s (see Brown 2011: 218).

The growth of metal (music) studies was also a result of conversations among scholars such as Karl Spracklen, Keith Kahn-Harris, Niall Scott, Andy Brown, Brian Hickam, and others. In connection with some specific academic conferences on metal, they began to discuss the need to constitute metal (music) studies as an independent academic discipline. In this regard, two landmark conferences—the first

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<sup>1</sup> The article is a revised and expanded version of the popular-scientific text *Czech Metal Studies: 5 years of the study of metal (and religion)*, which was published in the Czech language (Vrzal 2022a).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Spracklen is one of the main faces of metal (music) studies. He is also one of the founding members of the International Society for Metal Music Studies and the first editor of the journal *Metal Music Studies*.

on heavy metal music and culture in 2008 and also the *Heavy Fundamentalism* conference in 2009, both in Salzburg—played a significant role in the emergence of this field of study (Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, Scott 2016: 8–10; Wallach, Berger, Greene 2011: 29). At the same time, the number of academic conferences on metal began to grow in Europe and elsewhere. In 2013, the International Society for Metal Music Studies was formed, followed in 2014 by the first publishing of the specialized academic journal *Metal Music Studies*.

In response to the formation and expansion of metal (music) studies, Czech Metal Studies (CMS) was also established in Czechia in 2017 as an association of scholars and students who have set themselves the goal to focus on metal studies in the Czech environment. Like Spracklen (2021), in this text, as the founder and current head of CMS, I would like to look back on the origins, evolution, activities, and academic production of CMS retrospectively and reflexively, specifically in the periods from 2017 and 2021. Concerning the origin of CMS in the study of religion and its initial primary focus on the field of metal and religion, I would also like to outline possible challenges and the future direction that CMS should take, in my view, in terms of the aim toward greater multidisciplinary within CMS (which is also related to the variety of topics featured in Czech academic conferences on metal that are co-organized by CMS) and in relation to the academic profiles of new CMS members; as well as in connection with the efforts to internationalize CMS and international cooperation with other local metal studies researchers in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), especially regarding the recent establishment of an international network called Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe (MSCEE) in the autumn of 2021.

Before proceeding, I would like to take a moment to highlight one terminological remark. Often the term “music” is used in collocation with “metal” in the label “metal music studies” as in the nomenclature of the International Society for Metal Music Studies and its journal *Metal Music Studies* and as in the name of the Polish metal studies organization, Metal Music Studies PL. The term “metal music studies” was, after all, also used in the call for papers for this special issue of *Studia de Cultura*. As Spracklen (2021) pointed out, the use of the term “music” is necessary so that we are not included in the field of materials science.<sup>3</sup> However, the word “music” is missing in the name Czech Metal Studies. There is a reason for that. I see the use of the term “music” in metal studies as an inclination to terminological reduction, which also implies a focus of metal studies on music and evokes a primary connection with the field of musicology. However, metal music as such is only one part of the social phenomenon called metal, and therefore I perceive it as a certain terminological contradiction with the multidisciplinary of metal studies. I will use the word “metal” (without “music”) as a designation (which is also emic) for a broad global culture coalesced around the genre of metal music that possesses its own val-

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<sup>3</sup> This happened to me personally when I received an email after one conference where I had a contribution about Paganism in Norwegian black metal in connection with the church-burnings (revised text later above as Vrzal 2017a). I was asked if I would like to publish the text in one of the journal focuses on materials.

ues, symbols, and meanings (see Geertz 2000 culture definition) and is a distinctive social phenomenon, including material artifacts of metal culture. From the point of view of the subject of study, there is also no reason why metal studies operating primarily in the field of social sciences and humanities (so far) should be something less than the fields of natural and technical sciences that study materials, specifically metals. The word “metal” is not just a word of natural scientists interested in materials, but also of metalists, and it is intrinsically linked to metal culture and identity. In my view, there is no need to add any other distinguishing word like “music.” Metal as a complex culture and social phenomenon should be studied in multifaceted ways rather than focusing on the music itself. Therefore, in this article, I will continue to use the term “metal studies” and not “metal music studies”.

### Background of the Origin of Czech Metal Studies

The establishment of CMS in 2017 is existentially related to the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University (DSR MU) in Brno. I was there a doctoral student at the time, and most members of CMS were also recruited from the DSR MU. The study of religions was crucial and formative for a CMS research orientation that was focused on the area of metal and religion, especially in the early years.

Metal is logically interesting for the study of religions in that, compared to other major music subcultures such as punk, hip-hop, skinheads, and techno, metal works significantly with various religious or spiritual themes (Vrzal 2017b).<sup>4</sup> Although metal also intersects with a wide range of other topics, from its very beginnings, metal incorporated an occult discourse in its identity, which was also associated with contemporary horror (pop)culture (see Vrzal 2015).<sup>5</sup> In certain subgenres of metal, some specific religious or spiritual identities are explicitly emphasized, such as in black metal Satanism (see for example Introvigne 2016) or more generally dark spirituality (see Moberg 2009). For example, Paganism is strongly connected with black, pagan, or folk metal (see for example Weinstein 2014). However, there are, for example, Christian metal (see Moberg 2015) and bands that incorporate Islam, Judaism, or Eastern religious traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Some metalheads (whether seriously or not) also talk directly about metal being a religion to them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, for example, in skinhead subculture we can also find a partial interest in pre-Christian pagan mythology.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Partridge (2004; 2005) points out the connection between popular culture and religion, respectively with alternative spirituality. He uses the concept of occulture, which represents the broad cultural-religious field that has developed in the West, and it mixes different ideas, practices and symbolic resources. This field then influences popular culture and vice versa (Partridge 2004; 2005). Partridge also talks about the dark occulture, which draws on the sources of Christian dualism and demonology, including metal (Partridge 2005).

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the British census in 2011, 6,242 people listed heavy metal as their religion, which is more than what has been reported for Scientology or Baha’i, but also for Satanism (Voas 2011).

Various religious leaders are often critical of metal's apparent connections with the occult and satanic discourse. They of course also take issue with what they find as offensive metal lyrics, especially those of extreme metal bands, that disparage religion, mainly Christianity in the West (Vrzal 2017b; after 7–8 Vrzal 2022b). Thanks to this, metal is becoming part of the public debate (for example in 2014 in Slovakia due to the Gothoom festival or in Czechia in connection with the cancellation of the concert featuring bands Root and Törr in Valašské Klobouky in 2016, see Vrzal 2022b; Rapčanová 2017) and even the subject of moral panic (e.g., in the USA in the 1980s and 1990s in the context of the so-called “satanic panic”<sup>7</sup>). Alternatively, metal is sometimes the object of repression in connection with anti-blasphemy legislation (e.g., in some Middle East countries and in Europe, especially in Poland).

Metal and religion is also an important domain for metal studies (Vrzal 2017b; for a brief summary of the study of metal and religion, see Scott 2014). Marcus Moberg suggests that there are two research orientations in the study of metal and religion: religion/spirituality in metal, which focuses on the presence of various religious/spiritual elements and identities in metal; and the study of metal as a religion, with some researchers, from a functionalist perspective, interpreting metal as a religion and performances of metal groups as religious rituals (Moberg 2012). However, there is also a third important pillar in the study of metal and religion in the form of the study of protests and public debates about metal, in which religious actors play an important role (Vrzal 2022b).<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, except few studies (see e.g., Vrzal 2009; [Jan] Vaněk 2010), the fact that metal and religion/spirituality are two very closely connected vessels (Vrzal 2017b; Vrzal 2022b) has long escaped the systematic attention of Czech scholars' study of religion. It should be added that partial attention was paid to metal in Czechia in the 1990s among scholars who, within the study of new religious movements, were interested also in Satanism (and its “dangers”) (see Vojtíšek 1998 or Remeš 1998). On the topic of Satanism in metal and its dangers, see also the article in the religious studies journal *Dingir* by Petr Korál<sup>9</sup> (1998), which tries to alleviate any fears about Satanism in metal. Nevertheless, metal was also largely ignored in other fields of study in Czechia, such as musicology. However, since the beginning of the new millennium, Czech political science and security studies have been of particular interest in metal, especially black and pagan metal (see, for example, Mareš 2003; Mareš 2005; Kupka, Laryš, Smolík 2009; Smolík 2010b).

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<sup>7</sup> Satanic panic, which spread in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the United States but also in other countries, was based on conspiracy theories about the secret criminal networks of Satanists performing obscene rituals involving orgies, cannibalism, murder, but also child abuse (see Fraknfurter 2001). In the context of satanic panic, metal was considered a way of evangelizing a satanic conspiracy, and it is said that secret satanic messages were also incorporated into the lyrics (Partridge 2005: 247).

<sup>8</sup> Weinstein (1991) and Walser (1993) have already dealt with this in part, responding to the campaign against metal, especially in the USA in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>9</sup> Petr Korál is one of the prominent Czech publicists in the field of rock and metal music. He also recently taught about popular music at the Prague Conservatoire.

Other exceptions were some other chapters or paragraphs in books on music subcultures (see Smolík 2010a; Daniel 2016), popular culture (Daniel, Kavka, Machek, et al. 2013), the history of rock music in Czechoslovakia, for example by Miroslav Vaněk (2010), or in the field of anthropology and folk culture (see Heřmanský, Novotná 2011).

The study of music subcultures has generally been a marginal field in Czechia for a long time, although the situation has improved especially in the last ten years. For example, in 2009 the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture was established which in part has been focused on research on music subcultures. Specific conferences on subcultures are also emerging, such as the recent conference *Mládež, populární hudba a třída v časech postsocialistické změny* (Youth, popular music and class in times of post-socialist change) in 2021.

However, as abroad, metal has long been a neglected subculture in the Czech study of music subcultures. This is illustrated, for example, by the otherwise important book *Revolta stylem: Hudební subkultury mládeže v české republice* (Kolářová 2011), which was based on qualitative field research on punk, skinheads, hip-hop and techno. But metal is sorely missing here. This also applies, for example, to the more recent book *Mikrofon je naše Bomba: Politika a hudební subkultury mládeže v postsocialistickém Česku* (Charvát, Kuřík et al. 2018). Nevertheless, in the last five years (thanks in part to CMS), the situation in the field of metal studies in Czechia is beginning to change. In addition to the research output of CMS members (see below), several recent studies and book chapters on metal have been published that add to the understanding and expansion of metal studies in Czechia, especially those by Ondřej Daniel (Daniel 2018; Daniel, Almer 2018; Daniel 2019).

However, it should be added that after the fall of communism in 1989, a number of publications in the field of music journalism dealing with rock and metal<sup>10</sup>, including books, began to be published in Czechoslovakia (and after 1993 in the Czech Republic with the split of Czechia and Slovakia). For example, there can be mentioned the book *Ohlasy písní těžkých* (Korál, Špulák 1993), which amounts to an encyclopaedia of Czech and Slovak hard rock and heavy metal bands until 1993. Also published were specialized metal fan magazines (the most important is *Spark* magazine since 1992), a number of metal zines (since the communist era in Czechoslovakia) and a huge number of fan-operated websites and blogs. Metal is one of the most important music subcultures in Czechia, with a strong fan base and several large metal festivals. Some festivals boast up to about 20,000 attendees, such as the heavy metal-focused Masters of Rock festival or the extremely metal Brutal Assault festival, both of which also have a strong international audience. Czechia is even in 15th place in the world in terms of the number of metal groups per 100,000 inhabitants (Dempsey 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> Metal experienced a significant boom in Czechoslovakia already in the 1980s. Rock and later metal music journalism had a tradition under the communist regime before 1989. Since 1985, for example, the most widespread youth magazine *Mladý svět* has contained articles on domestic and foreign heavy metal (Daniel 2013: 275).

Czechia was also integral in the history of metal studies. Some of the first conferences on metal studies took place here. The third *Global Conference of Heavy Fundamentalism: Can I play with Madness? Metal, Dissonance, Madness and Alienation* (2010) and the fourth *Global Conference of Music Metal and Politics: Heavy Metal Generations* (2012) both took place in Prague. Unfortunately, these conferences did not garner much attention from the Czech academic community nor did they exert much influence on metal studies here. At that time, most current CMS members were just starting their university studies or were still in high school.

This aforementioned deficit in the study of metal in Czechia was one of the impulses for founding CMS in 2017. The goal of the CMS was first to situate metal as a significant social phenomenon, not only in the study of religions, but also in other social sciences and humanities. Secondly, the organization of a metal studies in Czechia was meant to reflect the boom in metal studies abroad and make it relevant for the work on metal being done by a host of scholars here.



Image no. 1. Czech Metal Studies logo. Author: Andrej Kapcár.

The very origin of CMS is also specifically related to the courses in *Contemporary Satanism* and *Religious Aspects in Metal Music and Subculture* that I have been teaching at the DSR MU for many years. As part of this teaching, I organized a one-day student conference called *Religiózní aspekty v metalové hudbě a subkultuře (Religious Aspects in Metal Music and Subculture)* in 2017<sup>11</sup> during which my students had the option of participating in the conference as part of the completion of the course. It was the first Czech academic conference on metal.

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<sup>11</sup> Program is available on: [https://www.facebook.com/events/312808339172498/?active\\_tab=about](https://www.facebook.com/events/312808339172498/?active_tab=about) (access: 28.10.2022).



Image no. 2. Banner of the first Czech conference about metal. Author: Miroslav Vrzal.

Inspired by the fact that the *Modern Heavy Metal Conference* in Finland was directly connected to a metal festival, a cultural section was included at the end of the first Czech conference on metal where Tomáš Vítek from the rock and metal magazine *Spark* and representatives of the pagan folk metal band *Žrec* were invited to the discussion. We discussed with the band *Žrec* for example its relationship to Paganism and how the band's singer makes contact with pagan deities during the performance.

Together with four other students in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs at Masaryk University (MU) in Brno and one student from Charles University in Prague, we subsequently established CMS. Matouš Mokrý was a student from Charles University, and at that time he was studying in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies with interests in black metal, chaos-gnosticism, and Thursatru. Except for one CMS member (Petra Lantorová, now Kalášková), who was a doctoral student in Scandinavian studies at MU and interested in Paganism and black metal, all founding CMS members from MU were religious studies students at DSR. One of these was doctoral student Andrej Kapcár (DSR and formerly the Department of Archaeology and Museology at MU) who was engaged in field research on the metal scene in Georgia and the aesthetics of the death of *Treha Sektori*. There was also Michal Puchovský who was researching the concept of the metal god, *ezo-kitsch*, and Paganism in metal, and Daniela Vašková who focused on Satanism in relation to the band *Ghost*. My primary interest at the time was black metal with a focus on Satanism (partly Paganism), right-wing extremism and radicalism in black and pagan metal, and metal in the context of satanic panic and controversies and public debates about metal stimulated by religious actors.

### Subsequent Czech Academic Conferences on Metal

The following year, a regular academic conference called *Metal, náboženství a spiritualita (Metal, religion, and spirituality)* was organized.<sup>12</sup> The conference was

<sup>12</sup> Program is available on: <https://metalkonference2018.phil.muni.cz/program> (access: 28.10.2022).

again organized under DSR MU, the venue for all subsequent Czech conferences on metal. Josef Smolík from the Department of Social Studies at Mendel University in Brno, who has been studying subcultures for a long time, was invited as the keynote speaker. At the conference, he gave a lecture entitled *Výzkum subkultur mládeže v kontextu sociologických škol: Metal jako náboženství?* (*Research on youth subcultures in the context of sociological schools: Metal as a religion?*). Based on the model of the previous conference, the cultural section was preserved by inviting representatives of *Spark* and a metal band to the final discussion. This time the invitation was accepted by members of the black/dark metal band *Root* led by Jiří Big Boss Valter who is also the founder of the Czech branch of the Church of Satan. In the discussion, we addressed the issue of Satanism as well as conflicts between the band on state authorities during the communist era. The establishment of CMS was also officially announced at this conference. At this point, CMS had already started operating its website where we wanted to create a continuously updated list of the Czech academic bibliography on metal, including bachelor's and master's theses at universities in Czechia.<sup>13</sup>



Image no. 3. František Štorm and his keynote lecture on Master's Hammer. Photo: Veronika Konečná.

In 2019, the third Czech academic conference on metal was organized at DSR MU. This time it was called *Metal, okultura, umění (Metal, Occulture, Art)*<sup>14</sup> and focused again on the topic of religion, specifically occult elements in metal and its connection with the so-called occulture, especially with dark occulture. The keynote was given by František Štorm, the frontman of the famous black metal band *Master's Hammer* and a well-known typographer, painter, and graphic designer. He previously worked as the head of the studio at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. Štorm lecture *"Okultní" vlivy v hudební a vizuální tvorbě Master's Hammer 1987–2019: Reflexivně-retrospektivní pohled* (*"Occult" influences in music*

<sup>13</sup> Means a list of publications on metal from authors in Czechia: <http://czechmetalstudies.com/odborna-bibliografie-o-metalu-v-cr/> (access: 28.10.2022).

<sup>14</sup> Program: <https://religionistika.phil.muni.cz/metalkonference2019/program> (access: 28.10.2022).



and visual production of *Master's Hammer 1987–2019: A reflexive-retrospective view*) looked back at the band's history and highlighted how the group was inspired by occult influences, which he associated with artistic decadence, spiritism, and shamanic rituals involving ayahuasca.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we, unfortunately, had to move the 2020 conference *Metal made in Česko(a)Slovensko: IV. česká odborná konference o metalu (Metal Made in Czechia(and)Slovakia: IV. Czech Academic Conference on Metal)*<sup>15</sup> into the online mode. Ondřej Daniel from the Institute of World History at Charles University was the keynote speaker. His lecture was titled "*Muzika jen pro lopaty?*": *Metal ve světle sociologie hudby ("Music just for the shovels?": Metal in the light of the sociology of music)*. This time Radek and Hana Hajda from the folk/doom metal band Silent Stream of Godless Elegy were invited to the final discussion, with whom we discussed folklore and pagan influences in the band's work and why metal in Czechia has such a strong base in northern Moravia. This conference foreshadowed a partial departure from the primary focus on metal and religion, although this component still plays an important role in the activities of CMS and the conferences it organizes.

With the next conference, we wanted to be even more open to fields outside of religion. As such, the 2021 conference, which took place in person once again, had the theme of *Scény, gender, identity (Scenes, gender, identities)*. Contributions from the field of religion (such as religious identities within individual metal scenes) were still emphasized in the call for papers. Our keynote was given by Marta Kolářová from the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. Her lecture was titled *Čarodějky a mužská bratrstva: Genderové aspekty subkultur (Witches and Brotherhoods: Gender Aspects of Subcultures)*. Jan Müller from the band Tisíc let od ráje, who is also a martial arts trainer, accepted the invitation to the cultural section this time as a special guest. He presented the work of his band, in which women have always played a key role. In his story, he also recounted the "wild" 1990s and subcultural violence in Brno. This time, the conference attracted wider attention both within the metal subculture and in some larger public groups on Facebook. In this setting, we met with some negative reactions. Metalists, for example, have argued that academics cannot understand metal<sup>16</sup> and that metal should not be studied but lived. Moreover, few people in Czech metal culture are even aware of the academic discipline of metal studies. On Facebook, some online commentators turned to criticize the supposed uselessness of the social sciences and humanities in general, all while particularly emphasizing that the research presented at the conference was a waste of time. The focus on gender was also controversial since there is generally a negative perception of gender studies in Czech society. From this experience, we learned more about the disconnect between academic work in the humanities and social sciences and the public's opinion of it. In response, we resolved to do more to make the activities of CMS more accessi-

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<sup>15</sup> Program is available on: <https://religionistika.phil.muni.cz/metalkonference2020/program> (access: 28.10.2022).

<sup>16</sup> It is also possible to add here that most members of CMS, but is also true for metal studies in general (Spracklen 2021), are at the same time listeners of metal music and participants in metal culture.

ble. As part of this effort, we created a CMS Facebook group and created a YouTube channel to publish videos of presentations at our conferences.

### **CMS Publishing Activities**

The orientation towards the study of religion and the religious studies backgrounds of most CMS members has helped guide the organization's publishing activities. Moreover, we have been inspired by and have relied on similar academic sources and theoretical foundations. In this regard, I would like to mention in particular Keith Kahn-Harris, Kennet Granholm, Marcus Moberg, Christopher Partridge, and Massimo Introvigne, all authors whose writings have been critical in teaching the aforementioned courses that some CMS members participated in.

The metal-centered publications of CMS members<sup>17</sup> have focused primarily on the analysis of religious/spiritual elements in metal, mainly from the perspective of sociology. In terms of metal genres, CMS has focused mainly on black metal and pagan metal, in which the connection between metal and religion is quite clear. Regarding religious currents in connection with metal, the CMS focused mainly on Satanism or Paganism or more generally on dark spiritualities. Based on contributions from the first conference on metal and some papers from the course on contemporary Satanism, we organized a special issue of the religious studies journal *Sacra* (volume 15, no. 2, 2017) focusing on the topic "Metal and Satanism". Overall, most of the publications of CMS members up until 2021 were published in *Sacra* and two in the religious studies journal *Dingir* (Vrzal 2009; Vrzal 2015; Vrzal 2017b; Vrzal, Řezníček 2017; Morký 2016; Lantorová 2017; Vašková 2017; Kapcár 2018; Nanadalová 2019; Vrzal 2020; Puchovský 2020). So far, only one study (Vrzal 2017a) has been published in a foreign academic journal as of 2021. Recently, another of my own articles was published in the international journal *Metal Music Studies* (Vrzal 2022b). One of the goals of CMS is to expand its publishing activities to other academic journals, including foreign ones.

A particular problem with such a close-knit group of scholars like that of CMS is that there is a danger of a certain insularity. Indeed, the research and publications of those associated with CMS have begun to circle similar themes and theoretical approaches. Moreover, the articles published by CMS members up until 2021 tend to cite the same body of research done by the key set of authors mentioned above. As such, I think it is of critical importance for CMS to move toward more multidisciplinary perspectives while simultaneously working to attract members from outside the field of religious studies.

### **Further Directions for Czech Metal Studies**

Especially over the last two years, the "Brno school of metal studies" based on the study of metal and religion has begun to enter the next phase. In an effort for

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<sup>17</sup> However, in addition to metal studies, all members have devoted themselves to other areas such as: sociology of religion, new religious movements, esotericism, cognitive science of religion, Baltic languages, and Egyptology.

greater multidisciplinary, CMS gradually began to grow to include new members with interests in other thematic areas within the framework of the study of religions as well as new members whose expertise and research agenda lay in other areas entirely.

Jan Král (PhD student, DSR MU) joined CMS with an interest in the current black metal scene. He had previously researched the Orphaned Land band and its efforts to integrate and “reconcile” various religions. Another new member Jana Nenadalová (PhD student, DSR MU) focused on the spirituality of Colin H. van Eeckhout and the Church of Ra in connection with the performance of the post-metal band Amenra and its stage rituals working with pain.

In 2021, two members who joined CMS with experience outside the field of religious studies include Gabriela Stašová (Department of Musicology, Masaryk University), who is currently engaged in qualitative research on the role and position of women in Czech metal subculture; and there Vojtěch Volák (PhD student, Department of Electronic Culture and Semiotics, Charles University), who deals with topics related to the transfer of meanings in metal music and grasping the concept of heaviness. In 2022, Jiří Lukl from the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University also joined CMS. Regarding the study of metal, he is interested in various social, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic phenomena, such as gatekeeping, the online communication of metalheads and the discourse of metal YouTubers and with the reception of J. R. R. Tolkien’s work in metal music.

In the future, we would like to further strengthen our cooperation with other researchers in Czechia in the fields of the study of music subcultures and the study of popular culture. In 2022, Ondřej Daniel also joined CMS. As a member of the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture, Daniel already has several publications on metal (mostly focused also on black metal) (Daniel 2016; Daniel 2018; Daniel 2019), including a study published abroad together with Jiří Almer (2018).

In 2021, CMS also began conducting interviews with scholars in the study of metal and with key figures in metal culture itself. The first of such was an interview by Matouš Mokřý with Kennet Granholm for *Sacra* (Mokřý 2017) with the aim of also later publishing it on CMS’s website. We began making efforts to conduct video interviews as well, the first of which was with Ondřej Daniel. As part of our work to directly engage representatives of metal culture Gabriela Stašová and Matouš Mokřý interviewed the leader of the controversial Czech black metal band Inferno. Inferno is controversial mainly because of its supposed association with the far-right, a notion espoused by anti-fascists who mainly cite old interviews with the band. Here it would be good to emphasize that CMS focuses on metal from the perspective of the social sciences and humanities, and the aim of CMS interviews is to provide insight into the various currents, ideologies (e.g., religious, political, environmental), and views of the world present in metal culture, even when it is extreme. Without reflecting on the perspectives of those enmeshed in metal culture themselves, knowledge about metal culture can only be partial at best. In this context, interviews conducted by CMS are not fan interviews, but a collection of important data about metal culture itself. The next (online) interview was done in 2022 by Miroslav Vrzal with the Pagan (Ásatru) musician Styrbjørn from the pagan black metal band Dark Seal

and Viking metal band Tears of Styrbjörn. The interview included questions about Styrbjörn's Pagan faith and its relationship with metal and the perception of metal performance as a pagan ritual.

In general, CMS currently has the following goals:

- publish studies and other academic texts in the field of metal studies
- maintain the website [czechmetalstudies.com](http://czechmetalstudies.com) with an overview of the current Czech academic bibliography on metal
- conduct interviews with scholars in the field of metal studies and studies of music subcultures and popular culture, as well as with representatives of metal culture itself
- maintain the YouTube channel Czech Metal Studies
- maintain the public Facebook group Czech Metal Studies
- establish cooperation with scholars in metal studies and the study of music subcultures and popular culture in Czechia and abroad
- take part in the organization of upcoming Czech and international academic conferences on metal and possibly organize other academic or popular-scientific events related to metal

Another goal of CMS is the internationalization and integration of CMS within European metal studies. This effort has already begun, and in line with this goal I created a network called Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe (MSCEE) in the autumn of 2021 that currently brings together scholars in various fields of metal studies from universities in Czechia, Poland, Hungary, and Germany. In this regard, I would like to also mention the important role of Ondřej Daniel in the formation of MSCEE. The original idea he came up with in our email communication (and on the basis of his discussions with Wolf Zaddach) was the creation of an international section at the last Czech conference on metal in 2021. In the end, this section was not included in the program. Nonetheless, the idea to create an interconnected network of scholars interested in metal studies in the CEE region was raised, and I started working to make it happen. Daniel would send me information about scholars who may be interested in such a network, then I would reach out to them (for example, János Fejes from Hungary who presented at the Nordic Metal Music Seminar in 2021 where Daniel also gave a presentation<sup>18</sup>). I also contacted Polish metal studies scholars associated with Metal Music Studies PL since I knew they had been organizing their own conferences on metal since 2017, just like CMS. I established especially close contact with Karolina Karbownik and Jakub Kosek in this regard. To create the MSCEE network, a closed Facebook group was established, to which several other people interested in metal studies in CEE were gradually added, including members of CMS and, for example, Karel Spracklen. Currently (28.10.2022) this Facebook group boasts 32 members.

The need for a constitution and international organization for MSCEE was discussed at the first online meeting which I organized in September 2021. I also declared my intention to organize the first online MSCEE workshop and to subsequently organize an international conference focused on *Metal and Religion* in Brno,

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<sup>18</sup> See: <http://nordicmetalmusicseminar.tilda.ws/start> (accessed: 28.10.2022).

which would be the first in-person meeting among some MSCEE members. We also agreed at the meeting that the long-term goal was to make MSCEE visible on the world map of metal studies.

The CEE region is decidedly on the periphery of the interest of metal studies. One aspect that has emerged through collaboration and discussion within MSCEE is that the region experienced specific circumstances that have shaped metal culture in the region. For example, the states on the east side of the former Iron Curtain have historical experience with communist regimes and post-communist transformations. In Czechia (previously Czechoslovakia) there was a huge boom in musical subcultures in the 1990s (see Daniel 2016) in connection with the post-communist transformation. The collective memory of this period continues to play a crucial role in shaping the identity of musical subcultures. Central and Eastern Europe also have very strong metal scenes in some areas as well as famous and globally recognized metal bands such as the Polish death/black metal band Behemoth. There is also a very vibrant pagan black and folk metal scene in Eastern Europe such as in Ukraine. It is yet to be seen what the long-term effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will have on musical subcultures, metal in particular. Undoubtedly though, it is likely that the reverberations of the war will greatly impact metal culture in Ukraine, Russia, and the entire CEE region. All this suggests that the CEE region is definitively an important area for metal studies and it will continue to be for quite some time in the future.

Under the auspices of DSR MU and CMS, the first (online) MSCEE workshop was organized on December 8, 2021, at which Karl Spracklen provided a keynote speech. Scholars from Czechia, Poland, Hungary pagan black and folk metal, and Germany also made important contributions at the meeting. MSCEE workshops and conferences are likely to follow, a promise we made in the concluding round table of the workshop. An important objective is to expand the MSCEE network to other countries in the region. At the same time, it was announced that a special issue focusing on metal studies in Central and Eastern Europe of the Polish journal *Studia de Cultura* would be edited by Jakub Kosek and Miroslav Vrzal. This project is thus one of the tangible results of international cooperation within MSCEE.

In conclusion, although CMS is moving towards greater multidisciplinary, the work of CMS members will likely remain largely focused on the area of metal and religion/spirituality. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, metal and religion are two connected vessels: religion and spirituality in part provide the substance of metal culture while metal actively works and interacts with religion and spirituality. Metal and religion was also the topic of the 6th Czech academic conference on metal held on September 7–8 in Brno. In connection with the goal of internationalization of CMS (and MSCEE), the conference solicited international participation and invited two foreign keynotes whose work has been vital to the global development of metal studies. The first was Marcus Moberg, who has long been interested in popular culture (including metal) and religion (e.g., Moberg 2009; 2012; 2015); and the second was Niall Scott, who is the current editor-in-chief of *Metal Music Studies* journal and is also interested in the area of metal and religion (see Scott 2014). The *Metal and Religion* conference, which was done in hybrid form, was attended by participants

from various European countries, and by those from Mexico, Canada, and the USA. This conference played a significant role in the international recognition of CMS and MSCEE in the field of metal studies.

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## Abstract

In 2022, the association of scholars interested in metal studies in Czechia, Czech Metal Studies, (CMS) celebrated its fifth anniversary. The article retrospectively looks at the origins of CMS in the context of the deficit of academic study of metal in Czechia and reflects on the development of metal studies abroad. The very origin of CMS was closely connected with the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University in Brno, resulting in the primary research orientation of CMS toward the topic of metal and religion. The text surveys the current academic production of CMS members and other CMS activities, including the organization of Czech academic conferences on metal. Finally, the further direction of CMS is discussed in connection with the effort for greater multidisciplinary and internationalization. The multidisciplinary of CMS is manifest in attracting scholars from outside the field of religious studies, and internationalization is apparent in the founding of the research network Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe.



## Czeskie Metal Studies: 5 lat studiów nad metalem (i religią)

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł powstał w celu uhonorowania stowarzyszenia uczonych zainteresowanych muzyką metalową w Czechach, Czech Metal Studies (CMS), które w 2022 roku obchodziło 5-lecie swojego istnienia. Artykuł opisuje historię powstania CMS w kontekście deficytu akademickich studiów związanych z muzyką metalową w Czechach i nawiązuje do refleksji nad rozwojem metalu poza granicami tego kraju. Samo powstanie CMS było ściśle związane z Katedrą Badań nad Religiami Uniwersytetu Masaryka w Brnie, co również świadczy o pierwotnej orientacji badawczej stowarzyszenia (muzyka metalowa i religia). Artykuł odnosi się do aktualnej aktywności naukowej członków CMS oraz innych działań, w tym organizacji czeskich konferencji naukowych na temat muzyki metalowej. W ostatniej części tekstu omówiono kierunek dalszego rozwoju CMS w związku z dążeniem do większej multidyscyplinarności i internacjonalizacji Stowarzyszenia. Multidyscyplinarność CMS przejawia się w częściowym wyjściu poza obszar religii, a internacjonalizacja w dążeniu do stworzenia sieci badawczej nad metalem w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej.

**Keywords:** metal, metal studies, Czech Metal Studies, study of religions, religion, Czechia, Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe

**Słowa kluczowe:** metal, studia nad metalem, czeskie studia nad metalem, religioznawstwo, religia, Czechy, studia nad metalem w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej

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