Spanish and non-Spanish Perspectives on El Cid in Heavy Metal: Cultural Vindication, Cultural Appreciation and anti-Muslim Attitudes

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Medievalising themes and narratives are a prominent feature of heavy metal. Warriors, knights, sorcerers, minstrels, and the whole cast of the medievalising popular culture of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries alternate with traditional ballads, epic poetry, Germanic mythology, Vikings, Crusaders, and many other supposedly more historical topics in lyrics, cover arts, video clips, and fans’ and band’s aesthetics. Whole metal subgenres even are defined to a great extent by its medievalising component, be it the medievalising tolkienesque fantasy motifs of European epic metal, the return to the pre-Christian Germanic cultures of the many subgenres represented under the term ‘pagan metal’, or the fascination of extreme metal with the most sombre aspects of the Middle Ages, just to mention the most obvious examples.

As a genre convention, heavy metal medievalism portrays a predominantly white-washed, Western European, hypermasculinised, romanticised, and idealised, for better or for worse, Middle Ages. In this sense, it is not different from the medievalism practised in other contemporary manifestations of Western popular culture. Moreover, in heavy metal ‘Western European’ seems to equate to ‘Germanic’, so that the Romania –as opposed to Barbaria, the non-Latin-heritage territories– clearly is marginalised; a phenomenon that neither is strange to other contemporary manifestations of Western popular culture. This is the consequence of the leading role of English-speaking countries in music, cinema, TV series, popular fiction, comics, role-playing games, etc., which in heavy metal is intensified by the leading role of German and Nordic bands in some of its subgenres, which, curiously enough, tend to be the most medievalising ones.
Bands without a Germanic cultural background are conditioned by this pre-eminence of Germanic culture in heavy metal. For a long time, Germanic culture has been assumed in the non-Germanic scene as a kind of genre requirement, a further rhetorical device in the rhetoric of heavy metal. Cultural references to non-Germanic contexts have been dismissed as too local and too rarefied to interest a wide audience, that is, to be marketable worldwide, or as plainly unfitting for concrete metal subgenres, in particular the extreme ones. However, in the last two decades a change has been taking place in the heavy metal scene. Parallel to the post-modern vindication of cultural identity, heavy metal bands without a Germanic cultural background have started to vindicate and to reflect their linguistic, cultural and even musical heritage in their music and aesthetics. Such is the case of Spanish heavy metal bands singing about Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, El Cid.

In 1999 two bands perfectly representative of this vindicating attitude, Avalanch and Tierra Santa, respectively issued ‘Cid’ and ‘Legendario’. The two songs could not be more different, although both of them rely on the same popular legendary account of the life of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. ‘Cid’ presents a postmodern hero overwhelmed by an identity crisis who rejects his heroic nature and questions the legitimacy of the Reconquista, while ‘Legendario’ depicts the typical uncritical religious Moor-slayer whose vital aim precisely is the Reconquista, and whose whole existence is limited to his heroic feats. However, the reaction towards both songs was the same: both bands were accused of sympathising with the extreme right.

This reaction is the best evidence of a problematic that recently has become a hot topic in the Western world, but has been a common feature of Spanish society for the last forty years: the appropriation of the Middle Ages by the extreme right and, in the concrete case of Spain, the appropriation of the figure of El Cid by Francoism. Un-
like the rest of Europe, in which the manipulation of the Middle Ages with a nationalist purpose either is a remembrance of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century nationalism and the times of the Second World War, or a relatively modern problem related to the rise of the extreme right, particularly in the United States, in Spain the franquist exploitation of El Cid only stopped being institutionalised very recently, in 1978, with the approval of the Constitution, after four decades of national-catholic dictatorship, so that the glorification of El Cid has given way to the very opposite phenomenon, that is, contempt and dismissal. In consequence, any evocation of El Cid that is not overtly disapproving is nowadays interpreted as a sign of adherence to Francoism.

This situation poses a great dilemma for Spanish heavy metal bands wishing to comply with the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal AND vindicate their Spanish cultural identity at the same time. El Cid not alone is the most iconic character of the Hispanic Middle Ages, but he perfectly satisfies the image of the Middle Ages sought-after in heavy metal: a manly apt knight with a strong character and values, whose feats still are remembered today. However, his history as a franquist icon –and the above mentioned reactions to both songs by Avalanch and Tierra Santa– dissuades most Spanish bands from doing so. Luckily for us, some bands seem to have found a workaround: distancing themselves from El Cid by not singing in Spanish, but in English.

Despite Dark Moor’s ‘Mio Cid’ being a good –and an older– example of this workaround, ‘Mio Cid mercenario’ and ‘Mio Cid Campeador’ by Purgatory’s Troop are much better examples of the difference that the choice of language makes when singing about El Cid in a Spanish context. Both songs actually are conceived as a contrast and must be listened as a whole, with no break between the first track, in Spanish, and the second track, in English, which have well-differentiated tempos and melodies. A quick look to the lyrics shows that the song in Spanish reflects the dismissive attitude towards
El Cid typical of post-Transition Spain, as particularly evident by the lines ‘Pride of some, / shame of many’ and ‘An animal deserving vulgar despise’. By contrast, the lyrics in English are unproblematic and depict a quite traditional heavy metal knight during a violent fit of rage, with whom the listener even is invited to sympathise. As a result, it seems that, among Spanish bands, singing about El Cid only feels like a mere heavy metal rhetorical convention as long as another convention, that is, the use of English, is observed, and the potential audience is not limited to the Spanish-speaking world. That is, singing about El Cid is acceptable as long as the Spanish origin of the band is not evident from the text, and the song could pass for a composition by a non-Spanish band. In all the other cases, nationalism and right-wing ideology will be suspected.

Despite the cultural concomitances with Spanish bands, Spanish-speaking bands from Latin America are not confronted with the problematic francoist past of El Cid. Moreover, unlike other cultural remnants of the Spanish colonial past, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar does not seem to have gained the contempt other Spanish historical topics inspire in Spanish America⁷; probably because the European concept of ‘Middle Ages’, besides referring to a pre-Columbian period, is inapplicable to the American continent and, therefore, necessarily alien to the Spanish American cultural identities forged during and after the independence wars⁸. However, the resulting distancing from the Middle Ages is not enough to prevent Spanish American bands from establishing an emotional distinction between Spanish and non-Spanish medieval topics: on account of their share of cultural background attributable to Spanish colonialism, and not to a lesser extent to the consequences of the politics of Hispanicity and Panhispanism during respectively the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries⁹, Spanish American bands perceive El Cid as ALMOST belonging to their own cultural identity, or at least very close to it, and in any case much closer than any other European medieval historical character, let alone Ger-
manic ones. Therefore, it is only natural that the first heavy metal song on Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is ‘El Cid’ by the Costa Rican band Trauma, which predates the compositions by Avalanch and Tierra Santa by two years\textsuperscript{14}.

What most stands out in this song –and reappears in ‘El Cid Campeador’ by Kabrax, the only other Spanish American heavy metal band with a song on El Cid that I have been able to find– is its apparent indebtedness to the school curriculum. Instead of resorting to the legendary accounts of the Spanish popular tradition, a detail in which it can be noted that the relationship with El Cid of Spanish American bands differs from that of Spanish bands, Trauma resumes the main action of the epic poem known as Poema de mio Cid, and more concretely the plot of its first chant, the Banishment’s Song, as it is explained at secondary school\textsuperscript{15}. In turn, Kabrax resorts to an account of the life of El Cid as in History class, with just a concession to legend in the reference to Santa Gadea’s Oath, which also is studied in Literature class. Full of encyclopaedic details, the song is, exactly like Trauma’s, rather prosaic and dispassionate, thereby confirming that, for Spanish American bands, El Cid is rather part of schooled culture, that is, not part of the Spanish American cultural identity, but something –compulsorily– learned that belongs to a common Hispanic cultural heritage, but to which they do not feel personally attached. In this sense, and from the perspective of the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal, El Cid is not really different from the Germanic heroes for Spanish American bands, but only more at hand and a little bit more appealing.

Lack of attachment is the characteristic feature of bands without a Hispanic cultural background as well. However, unlike Spanish American bands, bands without a Hispanic cultural background cannot rely on the school curriculum if they wish to sing about El Cid. Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is not part of their schooled culture and he neither is as present in their everyday life as in Hispanic contexts, let alone Spain, where place
names, monuments, hotel chains, restaurants, famous musicians, etc. bear the name of or make reference to El Cid. Therefore, when bands without a Hispanic cultural back-
ground decide to sing about El Cid, it can be assumed that there is a previous research process behind the final composition, and some kind of triggering motivation behind that same research. In consequence, the resulting songs differ on account of the nature of this motivation, and on the profoundness and the sources of the consequent research.

Dragonharp is, for example, an Italian power and symphonic metal band, whose song ‘El Cid’ is devoted to the third chant of the *Poema de mio Cid*, known as the Song of the Marriages of El Cid’s Daughters. Leaving the exalted apostrophes of the introductory and final strophes as well as the bridges between strophes aside—which would be unthinkable in a song by a Spanish band and serve as a clear evidence of non-Span-
ish bands not being subject to the problematic of the francoist past of El Cid on which I do not have the time to comment today—, the lyrics touch all the important points of the poem and show that Dragonharp very likely has ACTUALLY read the text. This is all the more important as the third chant of the *Poema de mio Cid* does not include the usual succession of battles and heroic feats dear to heavy metal medievalism, but the account of the judiciary case of El Cid against the Infantes de Carrión which, besides not sounding like a lot of action, is one of the most neglected plots of the story of El Cid and does not appear in the 1961 film by Anthony Mann, which is the main gateway to the story of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar in non-Hispanic contexts. Therefore, it can be assumed that Dragonharp has taken a personal interest in the *Poema de mio Cid*, invested time in reading it, and released an informed song which, besides complying with the medievalising rhetoric of their subgenre of metal, evidences a personal cultural appreciation of Hispanic epic literature. That is, Dragonharp are not content with the superficial portrait of El Cid as a Christian hero and a Moor-slayer of Anthony Mann’s film on
which bands without a Hispanic cultural background tend to rely—although they are not immune to it—, but Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar really appeals to them and they devote some time to exploring further and knowing more about the character. (Unfortunately, I must admit that, in the last days, I have found a Spanish-Italian film called *La spada del Cid* that precisely deals with this topic, so that I might have to revise this part when I finally watch it).

On the opposite end of the spectrum is ‘Revenge of Tizona’ by the German power metal band Metalium. The song has been described as a nonsense by Alfonso Boix, in which only the approximate birth date of El Cid and the proper names of his sword and horse are correct, the whole character being distorted and transformed into a revengeful knight formerly at the service of Ferdinand of Aragon and betrayed by him, now seeking vengeance, instead of the loyal vassal of Alfonso of Castile unfairly banished because of a conspiracy against him trying to please his king and recover his favour of the Spanish tradition AND the 1961 film.

Such an accumulation of base errors evidences an absolute lack of interest in the topic, and necessarily leads to the conclusion that Metalium sings about El Cid with an instrumental purpose, very likely fitting the concept of the album *Hero Nation*, which also devotes songs to other historical characters outside the German cultural background of the band and the Germanic context in general such as Nero (‘In the Name of Blood’), Rasputin (‘Rasputin’), or Jeanne d’Arc (‘Accused to Be a Witch’). Not in vain, far from being a manifestation of interest in and a vindication of non Germanic topics, the uninformedness of Metalium’s lyrics evidences that they exclusively serve the purpose of variety within the rhetorical conventions of their heavy metal subgenre and their own musical project. As a result, having used the term ‘cultural appreciation’ to describe the attitude towards Hispanic epic of Dragonharp’s ‘El Cid’, let me apply to Metalium’s
‘Revenge of Tizona’ a lax interpretation of the concept of ‘cultural appropriation’: as part of the Germanic dominant majority of heavy metal and, more specifically, of power metal, in which German bands even are more influential, Metalium resorts to the cultural heritage of a non-Germanic minority, given the subordinate role of Spanish metal bands in the scene, to enrich their repertoire as well as to satisfy their own musical conceptions, and benefit from this without making the slightest effort to inform themselves about what they are singing about, while Spanish bands cannot sing about El Cid without fear of being considered too local or too nationalistic and, thus, unmarketable.

One last consequence of the lack of attachment to El Cid of heavy metal bands without a Hispanic cultural background singing about Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is an absolute lack of political, racial and religious consciousness when talking about the Reconquest. Lines like ‘stand and deliver / thy land from these dogs!’ of Folkodia’s ‘El Cid, the Champion’, or ‘ready to break muslims’ spine’ of Eagle the White’s ‘El Cid’ convey a degree of violence and contempt against muslims only found in the songs of Spanish neonazi bands. Even if it is true that both bands respectively base their compositions on sources that portray El Cid as a convinced Moor-slayer and the Reconquest as a religious war, that is, Anthony’s Mann film in the case of Folkodia and, through a series of misunderstandings, the legend of Don Pelayo in the case of Eagle the White, this alone does not justify either the exalted tone or the choice of words. In fact, it does not even justify the central role these lines play in the above mentioned songs, given that all the songs analysed until now perfectly have been able to avoid the Moor-slaying bit, either by omitting or getting round the references to the religious belief of the Moors, and even the word ‘Moor’ itself –characteristic of the Spanish bands for obvious reasons–, or by choosing aspects of the story of El Cid in which Moor-slaying does not play a role, like his banishment (Trauma, Metalium, Kabrax) or the trial of the Infantes de Car-
trón (Dragonharp)\textsuperscript{21}. Therefore, the choice of topic and of words in Folkodia’s and Eagle the White’s songs must serve a purpose, either artistic or political, for these bands.

Trusting that there is no political intention behind these lines, something particularly difficult in the case of Eagle the White on account of the anti-Muslim climate of their homeland, Poland, and the recurrence of anti-Muslim feats of the Middle Ages and of references to Christianity in their songs\textsuperscript{22}, only a claim of historicity explains this wording. Exactly like in the recent polemics about the presence of people of colour in the European Middle Ages, in which their absence in movies, videogames, and other vehicles of popular culture has been mistakenly justified as a form of historical accuracy\textsuperscript{23}, verbal violence against Muslims only is justified in this context as the bands’ perception of the kind of words the real El Cid or his contemporaries would use. However, this perception is, first, rather to be attributed to decades of whitewashing and “manicheanising” the Middle Ages in popular culture, including heavy metal, than to contextualised historical evidence, given the popular sources of both bands. And, second, claiming that the characterisation of El Cid as a Muslim-hating Moor-slayer is historical shows a profound ignorance of Spanish History and the propaganda mechanisms through which—and when and with which purpose—this image was created in the late Middle Ages and later, in the Early Modern period and during Franco’s dictatorship. Therefore, not unlike Metalium, Folkodia and Eagle the White are not moved by a real interest in El Cid, but they personify in him their (received) ideas about the Spanish Middle Ages, which are not supported by any kind of historical research.

In the light of the ten songs analysed today, it is obvious that there is an enormous difference between the attitude with which Spanish and non-Spanish heavy metal bands address the topic of El Cid. This primarily is related to the psychological and political consequences for the current Spanish society of the francoist appropriation of
Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar during forty years of dictatorship, however, cultural attachment to El Cid poses the greatest difference. The less culturally attached to the character a band is, the more El Cid is transformed into an archetype to which the band resort as a mere rhetorical device that, besides fitting the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal, supports a correspondingly archetypical image of the Middle Ages and allows them to diversify their repertoire. And the less the band reflects about the possible nationalistic or racist implications of the character in his original cultural milieu. Unless the band develops a real personal interest on the topic and renounces to instrumentalise it.

Furthermore, this analysis also has raised at least three important issues in the heavy metal scene nowadays: the consequences of the appropriation of the Middle Ages by the extreme right for the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal, the subtleties of cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation applied to the power dynamics of the heavy metal scene, and the fallacy of historical accuracy to justify racist statements in medievalising songs, which is related to the manipulation of the Middle Ages by the extreme right to a great extent. Therefore, I would not like to reach the end of my contribution without making an out-loud reflection: maybe the time has come in which the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal no longer can be reduced to a mere rhetorical device, and bands need to unmistakably position themselves politically and sing about the Middle Ages being conscious of and taking into account the implications of their choice of topic, of words and of sources, to avoid unwillingly supporting the discourse of the extreme right, undermining the cultural heritage of others or perpetuating the power dynamics of heavy metal. In other words, if bands decide to keep to the medievalising rhetoric of heavy metal as uninformedly as it has been until now, let it not be because of a lack of discussion on the implications of doing so, but because they knowingly choose to ignore them.