Medievalism is not alien to heavy metal music. It is actually a prominent feature of two of its most successful subgenres, power metal and pagan metal, and it recurs in the aesthetics and the lyrics of black metal and, characteristically, classical heavy metal bands. Warriors, knights, sorcerers, minstrels, and the whole cast of contemporary popular medievalising fiction, TV-series and cinema alternate with Norse, Anglo-Saxon and, sometimes, plain continental Germanic mythology, ballads, epic poetry, Crusaders, Vikings, and many other supposedly more historical topics.

I will not be commenting here on the reasons behind this fascination of heavy metal for the Middle Ages. A taste for epicism tightly bound to celebratory masculinity, a longing for a simpler, nobler or freer, and more fulfilling lifestyle, or simply a morbid interest in the darkest aspects of the Dark Ages myth are frequently cited as the most likely sources, although it is even more likely that heavy metal medievalism has ended up evolving into a mere rhetorical device, at least in some subgenres. However, none of these reasons explains the apparent urge to reappropriate the Middle Ages that can be felt in heavy metal nowadays. At least since the last decade of the twentieth century, bands have started to move away from the generic, pop-culture medievalism of the old days, and to vindicate historical authenticity, which, how Simon Trafford implied at a conference in London some weeks ago, does not necessarily have anything to do with actual historical accuracy. Moreover, particularly among peripheral, that is, non-Anglo-American metal bands, this historicising tendency also manifests as a naturalising one, evidenced by the rejection of foreign medieval topics in favour of national, regional
and/or even local subjects. But this vindication of a medieval cultural heritage of their own is not without consequences, neither ideological nor identitary.

Spanish heavy metal bands are a perfect case study of this phenomenon. In a recent survey of *The Metal Archives* in search of lyrics on Hispanic medieval topics, Tomás de Torquemada and the Inquisition excluded for being a category of their own and needing a totally different kind of approach, I gathered together 37 songs by Spanish bands; more than a half of a total of 55. These, distributed solely between power and heavy metal, pagan black metal, and fascist music, can be arranged in groups around a historical character, event or both: Don Pelayo and the legend of the Battle of Covadonga, the count Fernán González, Alfonso I of Aragón, the Battler; Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, El Cid; the Reconquest, the legend of the Abbot of Montemayor, the Siege of Zamora, Al-Andalus or Andalusian topics, the idea of the three cultures, and, finally, the presence of the Vikings in the Iberian Peninsula.

Such a distribution is not a surprise. On the one hand, it perfectly reflects the historiographic and political programme that, at least since the *Estoria de Espanna* of Alfonso X, the wise king, and until now permeates Spanish history, its basic milestones being the same we find in heavy metal songs: the foundational myth of the Christian resistance against the Islam, that is, don Pelayo and the Battle of Covadonga; the foundational myth of Castile, that is, the legend of the count Fernán González, although it has been progressively losing importance outside Castile since the implementation of the modern “España de las autonomías” ("Spain of theautonomies") in 1978; the feats of the Castilian hero par excellence and national hero as well, El Cid, and, in general, the Reconquest, almost exclusively seen from a Castile-centric perspective. On the other hand, the songs on Al-Andalus primarily mirror the maurophilic views on the fall
of Granada transmitted by Spanish Romanticism, and more concretely the motif of Boabdil’s tears for the loss of the city, which are very present in literature, the visual arts, and popular culture. As a result, and as expected, more than two thirds of the Spanish heavy metal songs dealing with Hispanic medieval topics depend directly on what we could call “the Spanish historical cultural canon”, nationwide and transmitted through school and official culture.

The presence of subjects other than the canonical ones is, in comparison, rather anecdotal, but more representative of the above mentioned tendency to naturalisation and, therefore, more relevant for my argumentation. Specially interesting are the songs on the siege of Zamora by Klanghör and Llvme. Both bands originally come from the historical region of León, which between 1834 and 1978 (in fact, 1939, as the division in administrative regions was of no use during Franco’s dictatorship) extended over the current provinces of Salamanca, Zamora, and León, and to a certain extent reflected the historical status of León as one of the great Iberian kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Particular to this region is its own separatist movement, the so called leonesismo, which, under the motto “León no es Castilla” (“León is not Castile”) longs for the division of the current administrative region of Castilla y León in the former regions of Castile and León. Moreover, leonesismo advocates for the use of llionés, a dialect of the historical astur-leonés still used in the countryside of the region, and denounces the Castile-centrism of the official Spanish historical account; vindications that can be found, both, in Llvme’s “Purtiellu de la Llïaltá” and, with the exception of the use of llionés, in Klanghör’s demo Zamora, despite no explicit support of the cause of leonesismo or official implication in politics by any of these bands, other than the people they follow in Twitter and their Facebook friends. But what about the implicit ideological and
political consequences of their choice of topic and, in the case of Llvmé, of language?

Significantly enough, both bands choose Vellido Dolfos as the principal hero of their respective compositions. While Castilian historiography portrays Vellido Dolfos as a traitor and the murderer of king Sancho II of Castile, Llvmé and Klanghör characterise him as a loyalist hero, devoted to the queen of Zamora, Urraca, and his homeland alike, and, in the case of Klanghör, unjustly treated by History:

Urraca
You daréi muerte al foriatu
Baixaréi cun armas
Sancho morrerá
Morréu
(Llvmé – “Portiellu de la Llïaltá”)

“Honor, poder y fuerza leal
a la ciudad por que nací,
si alguien pretendiera hacerle mal
así tendría que morir.”
¡Vellido! ¡Oh, Vellido!
Hacia ti fue la traición
de este pueblo,
pueblo que no agradeció
a su héroe libertador.
(Klanghör – “Vellido”)

However, there is a noticeable difference between both bands: while Llvmé entitles their song “Purtiellu de la llïaltá” (“The Loyalty Gate”), since 2010 the official name of the wicket through which Vellido Dolfos is said to have entered Zamora after murdering king Sancho II, and delight themselves describing the failure of El Cid to overtake Vellido Dolfos before he reaches the walls of the city as a defeat (“Rodrigu de Vivar derrotáu sedrá eiquí” [“Rodrigo de Vivar will be defeated here”]), Klanghör entitle their song “Portillo de la traición” (“The Betrayal Gate”), the official name by which the aforementioned wicket was known until 2010, and devote a whole song to El Cid, “Leyenda y realidad” (“Legend and Reality”), in which he is described in a rather positive manner and his unsuccessful chase of Vellido Dolfos is omitted. Consequently, Llvmé and Klanghör embody different positions with regard to Castile: although the choice of “The Betrayal Gate” instead of “The Loyalty Gate” can be chronologically explained, as Klanghör’s demo was recorded five years before the wicket was officially
renamed, their position towards El Cid—and even their feeling at ease with the denomination “Betrayal Gate” for the title of their song—shows no further conflict with the official historical account than the characterisation of Vellido Dolfos as a traitor and the implicit denial of the legitimacy of Zamora’s efforts to defend itself from the attack of “un felón rey invasor” (“a treacherous invading king”), for which, significantly enough, they blame the people of Zamora and not the official history (“pueblo que no agradeció / a su héroe libertador” [“people that did not thank / their libertator and hero”]). As a result, Klanghör’s songs give the impression of being aimed at sharing the cultural heritage of their hometown, Zamora, and, thereby, their own, and at revisiting a problematic historical character, Vellido Dolfos, rather than at making an ideological statement. By contrast, Llume’s position is much more belligerent, and, probably through the choice of a language own to a very limited number of speakers, with very negative sociolinguistic connotations and inherently bound to leonesismo, transmits an anti-Castilian feeling that greatly surpasses their alleged aims of making known “the beauty [sic] epic tale of the traditional pagan Leonese Folk”—even after obviating the problematic use of “pagan” in the context of the Spanish 11th century.

This tension between inclusive and exclusive vindications of the own cultural heritage through the use of national, regional or local medieval topics and languages or dialects is nowadays a constant in heavy metal and, in particular, in pagan metal, in which the Middle Ages not only are genre defining, but bands and fans tend to identify and empower themselves through them. This might explain why Spanish pagan metal bands not wishing to be accused of nationalism prefer to sing about national topics with which they are, to the extent to which this is possible, unengaged, and lend more weight to historical accuracy than bands playing other styles (and in other countries, for reasons
that I will discuss later). With that aim, Lobera, from Almeria, in Andalusia, focuses on Castilian, not Andalusian, topics and literature, with textually unchanged versions of the ballad “La jura de Santa Gadea” and the 14th-century *Poema de Fernán González*, while the Madrilenian band Heid renders almost exact accounts of the chronicles in their songs “Golpejar” (on the Castilian-Leonese Battle of Golpejera in 1072), “Ruido de batalla” (on the consequences of the battle), “El traidor” (on the reconstructed epic tale of the Abbot of Montemayor), and “Rumbo al Sur” (on the presence of Vikings in the Iberian Peninsula). By approaching these topics through the pretendedly more objective perspective of literature and history, both bands seek to distance themselves from the ideological connotations associated with the choice of medieval subjects and, thereby, from any nationalistic reading of their songs. In addition, to further avoid being misinterpreted, both bands keep their lyrics quite far away from the most problematic topic of the Hispanic Middle Ages, the Reconquest, which at the same time is a warhorse of the Spanish extreme right and, by extension, fascist bands27.

On the contrary, power metal does not show a comparable concern for unwanted ideological connotations—with the exception of Avalanch, Purgatory’s Troop and, to a certain extent, Dark Moor, as you will be able to read in my contribution to the book on medieval literature and heavy metal edited by Ruth Barratt-Peacock sitting here, besides me28—, so that the Reconquest and Reconquest-associated topics occur all the time. Not in vain, 13 of the 18 power metal songs analysed for this paper are somehow related to the Reconquest, fascist bands excluded, while only one of the 16 pagan metal songs analysed, “Arde la rebelión” by Heid, addresses the topic. In addition, power metal bands do not restrain themselves from singing about regional or local topics to which they are personally and/or emotionally bound, that is, referred to their places of origin.
This explains why the Asturian bands Avalanch and Arenia sing about the Asturian hero Don Pelayo (“Pelayo” and “Mi dueño”), why the Burgalese and the Zamoran bands Xentria and Klanghör devote one song to El Cid each (“Leyenda y realidad” and “Inmortal”), why the Aragonese band Rosslyn writes one song on Alfonso I of Aragon (“Legacy of the Battler”), and why the Andalusian bands Saurom and, in particular, Legendaria contribute songs from an Andalusian perspective (“Wallada la Omeya”, “Almanzor”, “El llanto de Al-Andalus”, and “Reconquista”).

Despite dealing with the Reconquest and, sometimes, coloured with regionalist and localist colours, I could not ascertain any excluding, that is, explicitly or implicitly nationalistic intention in these songs. On account of the naiveté with which they address their topics, the apparent lack of conscience of the ideological implications of their subject, how historically uninformed they tend to be, and how they just focus on the epicism of the story, I feel tempted to state that, for Spanish power metal bands, the Spanish Middle Ages just are a handy resource to satisfy a mere genre requirement. Or, in other words, a source of epic accounts that very well fit the epic narrative of power metal and have the advantage of already being familiar to Spanish bands and fans alike. As a result, although there obviously is a certain component of national, regional or local pride, the identitary feeling is much more secondary than it seems to be in the pagan metal scene, and, in any case, it seems to be oriented towards introducing variety in the repertoire of epic topics of power metal. Not in vain, Spanish power metal bands dealing with Hispanic medieval topics do not renounce to sing about epic topics from other cultural contexts, so that epicism prevails over nationality. However, this is not how the above mentioned songs have been received: the most famous case being that of Avalanch and Tierra Santa, accused of sympathising with neo-nazi groups in the book
Diario de un skin because of their songs on medieval topics and on El Cid, singing about Spanish medieval subjects in Spain is considered a clear sign of support of the conservative, Francoist sector of society.

There is a problem inherent to epic that, to a great extent, explains this attitude and, surprisingly enough, I have not found discussed at all: the essence of the epic as a genre being the definition of group identity, it is excluding per se. This very much explains the frequent correlation between epicism and trueness in heavy metal, which deserves a study on its own, and probably the principal role of pagan identity in pagan metal, a genre in which epicism is central as well. But it also explains why the presence of national, regional or local epic medieval topics in heavy metal is felt as a matter of identity and as a strategy for the naturalisation of the genre, and not as mere thematic variety, by both bands and fans, and heavy metal scholars. Furthermore, group identity having developed into national identity in Western Europe, and Western European epic being basically medieval, it is only natural that epicism, the Middle Ages, identity, and nationalism are intrinsically intertwined. If to this particular circumstance be added that 19th- and 20th-century Western European nationalisms made extensive use of medieval and medievalising epic and epicism to support their political programmes, there is nothing surprising in the association of medieval epicism with nationalist attitudes and excluding group identities, a correlation that perfectly explains the not-so-recent-but-currently-topical phenomenon of the appropriation of the Middle Ages or, better said, of medieval epicism by the far right. And an identification that only becomes stronger when the medieval epic subject is national, regional or local, like in the analysed songs.

In the Spanish case, this connection is particularly strong on account of special historical circumstances: while in the other Western European countries medievalising
nationalist epic narratives tended to disappear after the Second World War, Franco’s dictatorship in Spain constructed a whole new national-catholic Spanish identity, the so-called “Hispanicity”, in correlation to nazi “Germanity” and fascist “Romanity”, based on religion, epicism and Spanish History. With this purpose, existing epic accounts were reinterpreted –the same epic used by Alfonso X to support the Castile-centric political programme behind the already mentioned Estoria de Espanna– and a whole new epic was created around the times of the Spanish Empire. As a result, the appropriation of the Middle Ages by the far right is not felt as a novelty in Spain, basically because it never has disappeared: considering that the dictatorship ended only forty years ago and, since then, uncritical rejection of Spanish history has dominated, instead of evidencing the national-catholic manipulation to which it was subjected and restoring its credibility, far right readings of the Middle Ages still are so common in Spain as they were with Franco, if not even more due to of the emergence of a revisionist historical trend in the last two decades. Therefore, it only is natural that songs on Spanish national, regional or local medieval epic topics, no matter the musical genre, are received with great suspicion in Spanish society.

The consequence of all of this is that Spanish heavy metal bands unknowingly are more self-conscious of the problematic relationship between medievalising epic and nationalism than non-Spanish bands, probably with the exception of German ones. This explains why Spanish bands always seem to be torn between sharing their Spanish medieval cultural heritage with their audience, but risking thereby their songs to be misinterpreted as evidences of ideological support of nationalism, and renouncing to misunderstandings through renouncing to singing about Spanish medieval topics, but renouncing to their Spanish identity as well. Not in vain, one of the most recurring
questions in the metal scene is: “Why can’t Spanish bands sing about Spanish medieval history without being accused of being nationalists, like foreign bands do?”.

Leaving the alternative formulation of this question frequently used by Spanish nationalists to support their nationalistic views aside –“Why can’t Spaniards be proud of their country like other Europeans do?”–, the truth is that Spanish heavy metal bands very clearly identify Spanish medieval epic as a marker of Spanish cultural identity, but have deeply rooted conflicts with that very same Spanish cultural identity and, above all, with Spanish identity as defined through epic and the Middle Ages. This is the consequence of the national-catholic manipulation of the Spanish Middle Ages under Franco’s dictatorship, and particularly of the substitution of Spanish cultural identity with the national-catholic concept of Hispanicity, so that Spanish cultural identity rather is understood as Francoist cultural identity. But, above all, the Spanish situation is a preview of what non-Spanish medievalising heavy metal bands, regardless of the subgenre, will be facing in the next few years if the appropriation of the Middle Ages by the far right and its manipulation to create and impose an artificial white male Western identity continues to progress like until now. Therefore, I want to finish my paper with an invitation to counteract this phenomenon from our scholarly position as researchers of the repercussion of the Middle Ages in our time: if we do not do something now, it is for sure that our work will be the next to be misunderstood as an evidence of support to nationalistic views.

Thank you.