

ΕΘΝΟΛΟΓΙΑ ON LINE

ETHNOLOGHIA ON LINE

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ΕΘΝΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΟΝ ΛΙΝΕ

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“Medieval Traditions Reconquered and Reclaimed”: Folklore and Folksong as Ideological Tools against Ethnocentrism and Alt-Right Ideologies in Black Metal

Athanasios Barmpalexis

Abstract

This article, based on ethnographic research, discusses the creation of an album that belongs to the musical subcategory of medieval black metal. The creator of the album, Christos G., re-imagines, recreates, and presents medieval peasant traditions of resistance and revolt in his *Mystras* project, but through the perspective of the rebels and not through the official descriptions of the events as written by medieval authorities who belonged to the victorious sides. To achieve this, the artist referred to folklore and traditional song; he wanted to illustrate that, if these two are used within an accurate historical context, they highlight a completely different picture of medieval times than the one usually depicted in black metal, where a white, homogeneous, and noble medieval Europe is constantly portrayed as part of ethnocentric ideologies and reactionary agendas. Folklore and traditional song become ideological “weapons” in *Mystras* that symbolise that just as the peasants of medieval times revolted against injustice and oppression, so should the artists and audience exclude and eliminate far-right ideologies from black metal.

Key words: Middle Ages, black metal, ethnocentrism, traditions of resistance, folk hero, folksong, cultural dynamics, interpretation in song, reconstruction/reimagination



«Μεσαιωνικές παραδόσεις επανακυριεύονται και ανακτώνται»: Η λαογραφία και το λαϊκό τραγούδι ως ιδεολογικά εργαλεία ενάντια στον εθνοκεντρισμό και τις ακροδεξιές ιδεολογίες στο black metal

Αθανάσιος Μπαρμπαλέξης

Περίληψη

Το συγκεκριμένο άρθρο, βασισμένο σε εθνογραφική έρευνα, πραγματεύεται τη δημιουργία ενός δίσκου που ανήκει στη μουσική υποκατηγορία του μεσαιωνικού black metal. Ο δημιουργός του δίσκου, Χρήστος Γ., αποφάσισε στον πρώτο του δίσκο του με το πρότζεκτ *Μυστράς* να επαναφανταστεί, να αναδημιουργήσει, και να παρουσιάσει μεσαιωνικές επαναστατικές παραδόσεις χωρικών, αλλά μέσω του πρίσματος των επαναστατών και όχι μέσω των επισήμων περιγραφών των γεγονότων οι οποίες είναι γραμμένες από τις μεσαιωνικές αρχές που ανήκαν στις νικητήριες πλευρές. Για να το επιτύχει αυτό, ο καλλιτέχνης ανέτρεξε στη λαογραφία και το παραδοσιακό τραγούδι. Θέλησε με αυτόν τον τρόπο να προβάλλει ότι, αν αυτά τα δύο χρησιμοποιηθούν ιστορικά πλαισιωμένα, αναδεικνύουν μια εντελώς διαφορετική εικόνα της μεσαιωνικής Ευρώπης από αυτήν που προβάλλεται γενικότερα στο χώρο του black metal ως μιας λευκής, ομογενούς και ευγενούς εποχής, που έχει ως σκοπό την προώθηση εθνοκεντρικών ιδεολογιών. Στο δίσκο η λαογραφία και το παραδοσιακό τραγούδι γίνονται ιδεολογικά «όπλα» που συμβολίζουν ότι όπως οι χωρικοί των μεσαιωνικών χρόνων επαναστάτησαν ενάντια στην αδικία και την καταπίεση, έτσι οφείλουν οι καλλιτέχνες και το κοινό να αποκλείσει και να εξαλείψει αυτές τις ακροδεξιές αντιλήψεις από το black metal.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Μεσαίωνας, black metal, εθνοκεντρισμός, παραδόσεις αντίστασης, λαϊκοί ήρωες, παραδοσιακό τραγούδι, πολιτισμικές δυναμικές, ερμηνεία στο τραγούδι, ανάπλαση/επαναδημιουργία

Introduction

Since its conception, extreme heavy metal music subgenre, black metal, has become interconnected with evil and controversy. It is not only the image, the sound, the onstage theatrics, or the lyrics that have given such a reputation to black metal, but also a series of events related to crime, bigotry, and, as to be discussed in this article, nationalistic ideologies. Just as the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries proto-folklorists used folklore to underpin national identity and promote ethnocentrism (Kyriakidou-Nestoros, 2007: 22–33), several black metal artists, especially within the medieval black metal sub-subgenre, reimagined past traditions to promote white supremacy, Eurocentrism, and racism. However, there has been a steadily growing bloc of outspoken antifascist black metal artists that have stood against these tendencies. Among those that have been particularly vocal is Athenian black metal artist, Christos D.¹ Christos in his recent 2020 album “Castles Conquered and Reclaimed” under the project name *Mystras* decided to approach Middle Ages in an entirely opposed way to their stereotypical depiction of the period in medieval black metal as a Eurocentric time of valiant nobles and fearless crusaders that were racially homogeneous. Instead, Christos concentrated on giving voice to the people who had long suffered from the oppression imposed by medieval nobility and feudalism.

Middle Ages were a period in human history “when people from relatively low [and diverse, I would add] stations in life became aware of their own power and importance”, willing to sacrifice their lives for the ideal of a better living (Basdeo, 2018: ii). Nonetheless, these early modern insurgencies for social justice and equality were doomed to fail, as they were instigated by “primitive rebels”, as Hobsbawm refers to them (Hobsbawm, 1959). Their fights and struggles, however, became foretellers for future similar initiatives and still act as inspirations for others (Guillourel and Hopkin, 2017: 33), as in the case of Christos. In “Castles...” peasant revolts become a symbol urging for a drastic change within the scene that Christos has been part of since his adolescence. To achieve this, the artist re-visions, reimagines, and recreates nine songs (among them four covers of early- and late modern traditional songs) that address medieval “traditions of resistance”² through the perspective of the common folk who have decided to oppose injustice and oppression. Christos also actively applies folklore (Bronner, 1998: 23), as he enriches his creations with elements from local folk traditions. In his album, “old slogans, old sobriquets, old threats, and challenges” (Guillourel & Hopkin, 2017: 33) are revisited and are given a revived symbolic meaning, while the traditional with the new creatively co-exist and supplement each other.

¹ Christos asked me to not include his surname in the article for anonymity purposes.

² I use the term “traditions of resistance” the same way Guillourel, Hopkin, and Pooley do in the edited book *Rhythms of Revolt: European Traditions and Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture* (2017) to emphasise the fact that folk traditions should be regarded as valuable as official written documents for a comprehensive and balanced reconstruction of the past.

In the article thus I will explore how folklore and folksong are used in Christos's album as mechanisms to restore a much-craved balance within a music scene that has been dominated by racism and nationalism since its emergence. Based on two recorded discussions I had with the artist in mid-November 2020, I will focus on how he reimagined some medieval traditions of resistance in song, and how these songs were enriched with folkloric aspects. Moreover, I will examine the recreation process of the traditional songs in the album, focusing on the significant role of the triptych “text, process, and creativity” in song traditions, (Åkesson, 2006: 9) as well as on the interaction between the traditional and the contemporary in music. I will examine all these aspects within the frame of some of the most important notions in contemporary Folkloristics such as individual interpretation, recontextualisation, and cultural dynamics in all aspects of human expression. However, before discussing the emergence of folklore and folksong and its presence in contemporary rock and metal music as outcome of the nineteen-sixties' “Folk Revival” movement, I find it important to provide the reader with some key information regarding heavy metal as a music style, and its place in the contemporary music world.

Heavy Metal: Rock music's heavier “cousin”

Heavy metal, also known among its fans' circles simply as “metal”, is a rock music subgenre. Having emerged in the early seventies, heavy metal has its roots in the nineteen-fifties' blues and the sixties' psychedelic and early hard rock scenes. The typical metal sound is based upon heavy-sounding guitars, bass guitars, and drums, while the strong distortion in the sound of the electric guitar, the fast overall pacing, the density of the bass guitar, and the guitar solos are some of the key features that set metal apart from other rock music subgenres. *AllMusic*, the largest online music database writes about metal: “Of the myriad forms of rock and roll, heavy metal is the most extreme in intensity, masculinity and theatricality”.³

The forefathers of the heavy metal scene are Black Sabbath from Birmingham, United Kingdom. The six albums that they released in the early to mid-seventies are considered milestones in heavy music, influencing all artists that have since decided to play the heavy metal musical style. The four band members produced a sound that was unique: they expanded the blues influences that were to be found in early hard rock bands, such as Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, by adding extra pace, a thicker production, a colossal/heavy sound, and distortion, combining it with lyrics inspired by the occult, esotericism, and horror (Irwin, 2012). Following on the steps of Black Sabbath, the, also British, bands, Judas Priest and Iron Maiden further evolved the metal musical style in the late seventies. They reduced, or in some cases even eliminated, the blues or psychedelic rock influences, and, instead, emphasised on instrumental and vocal aggression and virtuosity, while their lyrics drew inspiration from other areas of interest as well, such as literature, history, social issues, and personal experience narratives. The

³ <https://www.allmusic.com/subgenre/heavy-metal-ma0000002721> (retrieved 19 May 2022).

resulting sound, known as the “new wave of British heavy metal”, eventually became the first nationwide metal movement that had reached mainstream audiences (Walser, 1993: 6).

Within the next two decades, metal would sonically evolve and experiment further; as a result of this dynamic situation, numerous substyles would emerge. Many of these newly-found metal subgenres, among them glam metal (the musical outcome of the blending of the seventies’ glam rock scene, as created by David Bowie and T-Rex, with heavy guitar riffs) and thrash metal [a speedier combination of the “new wave of British heavy metal” sound with hardcore punk, with Metallica being the most known representative of the subgenre, (Walser 1993: 14)] would become commercially extremely successful (Christe, 2003: 79). However, other subgenres would adopt an even extremer lyrical, visual, and musical approach that was “destined” for the underground. The two most important extreme underground metal subgenres are death metal and black metal. The former is based on a highly distorted sound as a result of guitar downtuning that is combined with deep, aggressive growls for vocals, and violence-, politics-, and science fiction-related lyrics (Purcell, 2003), while the latter – the misanthropic, “demonic” sounding black metal – will be discussed in detail later in the text.

To date, several other metal sub-substyles and sounds have emerged, expanding heavy metal music even further.

Folk Song and Rock Music: Folk Revival, Maintenance, and Experimentation

Since the emergence of the “Folk Revival” movement in the mid-twentieth century, folklore and traditional song have increasingly played a vital role in contemporary rock music. The nineteen-forties folk music revival with the emergence of folk singers such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had a massive impact on later generations. The movement had made artists such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Byrds, or Fairport Convention aware of the existence of countless folk tunes within and outwith their cultures, offering “a new sense of nature and value of an integral part of their cultural heritage” (Georges & Jones, 1995: 82). These aforementioned artists belonged to a generation of folksingers or “singers of folksongs” who merged folksong with rock and pop aesthetics to create a new kind of artistry that also brought folksong to the masses (Botkin, 1967). This trend continued over in the next decades, where the social aspect of music and the songs’ messages have been particularly emphasised (MacKinnon, 1993).

Folklore and folk music have since become omnipresent components in the underground subgenres of rock music, punk and metal. The “folk punk” scene, for example, fuses punk rock pace, attitude, and working-class-related themes with folksongs and traditional instruments such as the fiddle, bagpipes, banjo, or the tin whistle (Haas, 2013). Similarly, folklore has emerged in the heavy metal scene. In the early nineteen-nineties, the Irish Cruachan and the British Skyclad fused traditional music instruments and lyrics on local myths and legends into their music, thus creating a new metal subgenre, “folk metal” (de Keppler, 2007: 39). Countless bands followed this pattern; among them, the “viking” metal bands Enslaved and Amon Amarth, who revisit Old Norse traditions in their music while carrying

axes, swords, and horns onstage (de Keppler, 2007: 30–2, 38), the Finnish Amorphis who draw inspiration in their lyrics from the nineteenth-century Finnish folk epic, *Kalevala* (Lönnrot, 1989), or the, once again, Finnish Korpiklaani and Finntroll who fuse metal music with humppa, shamanic drums, the traditional Sámi singing style of *yoik*, and lyrics about trolls and native spirits (de Keppler, 2007: 42).

This blending of folklore and metal music has particularly become popular within the black metal scene. In the next section, I will therefore discuss the relationship between the two, as well as all the controversies that have taken place within the scene since its emergence.

Black Metal and Folklore: Eurocentrism, Nationalism, and the Recent Efforts for a Drastic Change

Taking its name from the 1982 *Black Metal* album by the British band Venom, black metal received extra attention in the early nineties with the emergence of bands from Norway (most notably Mayhem, Emperor, and Darkthrone) that formed what is now known as the “second wave” of black metal (Skadiang, 2017: 15). These bands not only altered drastically the sound and imagery of black metal – Venom’s speedier/thrash metal playing style was replaced by extremely distorted guitars, lo-fi production, tremolo pickings, shrieking vocals, “blast beat drumming”, and cacophonous soundscapes, while “corpse paint”, a black and white makeup style, was extensively used, making the artists appear corpse-like (Freeborn 2010: 82; Olson 2008: 9) – but also associated the scene with notoriety and crime: Murders, church arsons, and nationalistic tendencies turned black metal into the most controversial extreme metal subgenre (Moynihan & Söderlind, 2003). And while the culprits for the murders and arsons were eventually captured and imprisoned, the nationalistic ideologies have been perpetuated to this day.

Norwegian black metal bands typically tended to take an apolitical stance both in their lyrical content and their public standpoints, claiming that politics had no place into their scene; however, most musicians “flirted” with neo-Nazism behind the scenes (Olson, 2008: 103). It was Varg Vikernes, one of the artists imprisoned for murder and arson (he brutally murdered his bandmate in Mayhem, Euronymous), the first who openly admitted his nationalistic ideologies (Olson, 2008: 101). However, Vikernes with his own band, Burzum, instead of creating a type of music that would sound ferocious, misanthropic, or demonic as in any typical black metal album, incorporated gentler, ambient soundscapes and folk music elements into his creations (in fact, Vikernes’s later albums are closer to neo-folk rather than black metal) (Spracklen, 2014: 194). Moreover, the lyrical content for his albums was entirely based on fantasy medieval worlds and Norse mythology and did not reflect his extreme ideologies at any point (Von Helden, 2017: 35, 179).

Vikernes’s approach inspired several artists with similar political inclinations (Olson, 2008: 80). Local mythologies, mystical places, and fantasy worlds, as well as fictional ones – especially Tolkien’s

lore – became the thematic focus of these bands, while black metal ferocity was fused with folk music traditions, clean vocals, acoustical passages, and atmospheric melodies, connecting, therefore, musically the past with the present, and creating a mystical and also glorified version of the distant past (Olson, 2008: 72). These bands used this revisited ancestral past for their own agendas: the past became “a very simple explanation” to propagate for nationalism and racism, while organised religions, other races, and the contemporary way of living became the “scapegoat” both in their music and overall attitude (Moynihan & Søderlind, 2003: 195–204).

Such extreme and controversial inclinations were eventually met with criticism within the scene, with various artists distancing themselves from such ideologies. This trend first appeared within the American black metal scene in the late 2000s; several American artists blended Nordic black metal’s sound with themes that were rooted in eco-spirituality and eco-feminism, producing an artistic outcome that was unattached to any Eurocentric context (Olson, 2008: 92–3, 100). It was, however, American black metal band *Panopticon* and the 2012 album, “Kentucky”⁴ that was the first that fully embraced folklore as an ideological means to stand against the dominance of nationalistic affiliations within black metal. Austin Lunn, the artist behind *Panopticon* and a Kentucky native, revisited both lyrically and musically the early-twentieth century miners’ strikes against mine-owners and state in Kentucky and West Virginia, while also expressing his own environmental concerns. Lunn also blended black metal ferocity and atmospheres with bluegrass music – banjos, fiddles, and pedal steel guitars were used throughout the album – while the artist also covered two popular American protest folksongs, “Which Side Are You On?” and “Come All Ye Coal Miners”, as made famous worldwide by folksingers Woody Guthrie and Sarah Ogan Gunning respectively (Peel, 2018).

Similar to *Panopticon*’s initiatives have since been put forward by other black metal bands, but none has incorporated folklore and folksong as much as *Christos* has in *Mystras*. In the next section of the article, I will examine *Christos*’s “Castles...” album in close detail, focusing on the background of the creation, the original songs on medieval traditions of resistance that he has reimagined as well as and the folklore applied, used as tools advocating for the need for a drastic change within black metal.

“Giving Voice to the Common Folk”: The *Mystras* Project, its Background, and the Folklore-related Themes in the Original Songs

Known in the black metal circles with the pseudonym “Ayloss”, a common practice in black metal (Olson, 2008: 15), *Christos* has been part of the Greek and international black metal since his adolescence. While studying Music at the University, *Christos* started working on his own project, *Spectral Lore*. Since its conception, *Christos* has released five well-received by the black metal

⁴ <https://thetruepanopticon.bandcamp.com/album/kentucky> <retrieved 11 January 2022>.

community and critics full-length albums, while also collaborating with several other bands and artists.⁵ Christos in Spectral Lore plays an atmospheric, ambient style of black metal, while lyrically and thematically discusses matters such as the cosmos, nature, and philosophy. Christos, however, began feeling increasingly concerned and frustrated with the dominating presence of nationalistic and ethnocentric attitudes within the scene he has been part of for so long. He has been extremely vocal in social media, constantly criticising and condemning this phenomenon; however, he decided that he also needed a “political version of Spectral Lore”,⁶ where he would be able to externalise artistically his frustration and concerns. He eventually resorted to medieval folklore and protest song to create an anti-fascist medieval black metal project under the name *Mystras* that is “against empire and aristocracy”.⁷ However, before examining Christos's creation in more detail, a few words need to be written on medieval black metal.

Medieval black metal refers to the black metal subgenre that combines traditional instruments and acoustical passages reminiscent of medieval music with the lo-fi production, eerie vibes, and epically aggressive soundscapes of black metal; moreover, the albums' aesthetics and artworks are usually distorted depictions of derelict castles and mystic forests, bringing therefore images of the distant past to one's mind. However, medieval black metal artists tend to reimagine medieval times through fictional and popular literature, or even movies and video games, instead of the accuracy of studied sources. In their music they also promote, as mentioned earlier, the idea of an ethnically homogeneous, valiant, noble, and mystical medieval Europe (Barratt-Peacock and Hagen, 2019). These portrayals of medieval times, however, have long been debunked by historical research; instead, it has been proved that medieval and early modern communities were in fact ethnically, racially, or religiously diverse (Heng, 2018; Bruce, 2019: xix).

Christos's decision to create a medieval black metal album was a conscious one: it was not only because medieval black metal has been the one metal subgenre that has been particularly associated with nationalism and racism, but he also wanted to point out that medieval times, and in extension traditions, are not “*inherently nationalistic*”;⁸ instead, they have been propagated as such by artists with “sketchy” agendas. Contrary thus to the typical ahistorical approach of the Middle Ages in medieval black metal, Christos leans on historical facts and (oral) traditions of resistance as passed from generation to generation in his album. He pays tribute to the early modern European lower classes that united and stood valiantly against injustice and oppression as outcomes of their prolonged suffering due to severe taxation, social inequity, feudal vassalage, as well as famine and plague (Graus, 2008). These movements might have been ill-fated, as the rebels lacked financial resources as well as training and

⁵ <https://spectrallore.bandcamp.com/> <retrieved 19 May 2022>.

⁶ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.

⁷ <https://spectrallore.bandcamp.com/album/castles-conquered-and-reclaimed> <retrieved 19 May 2022>.

⁸ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.

organisation in warfare (Bøgh et al., 1989), however, they were and still are perceived by later generations as symbolisation for the need for a radical change through fight and struggle (Guillourel and Hopkin, 2017: 9), which is what Christos urges for the black metal scene.

In 2020, Christos composed the music and wrote the lyrics for five original songs where he reimagined medieval traditions of resistance, while he also covered two medieval protest folksongs, a medieval Christian chant, and another protest folksong from the late modern Ottoman Empire era that served the cause behind his message. He included all these nine compositions into his album “Castles Conquered and Reclaimed”, released by the label *I, Voidhanger* in summer 2020. This would have been his first release that would promote the need for a symbolic “rebellion” in medieval black metal: “*Absolutely, absolutely [laughing] this is my intention. Clearly, I wanted to create it [the project] for this purpose*”, while he also explained why this is the right time for such projects in black metal:

This project would not have made sense in the nineteen-nineties, the time when these aesthetics and agendas were still in their infantile stage. It would not have drawn enough attention. It might have been regarded as another black metal album that deals with the medieval period. I might have even been treated [by the insiders of the scene] as the weirdo who tends to write about peasant revolts.⁹

It would also make perfect sense that a project that relies so much upon folk traditions of resistance would also require a name closely associated in collective memory with medieval times, with a central role in an ill-fated peasant rebellion, and rich in folklore. That name was, as already mentioned, “Mystras”.

The castle-town of Mystras, a fortified Byzantine town on Mount Taygetos, located in the region of Lakonia, Peloponnese, in Southern Greece, near the ancient city of Sparta, was the capital of the Despotate of the Morea in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. During the period of the revolt, it was ruled by the Palaeologue dynasty, the last rulers of the Byzantine Empire. Mystras experienced a prolonged period of cultural and economic prosperity right before the fall of the Empire (Runciman, 2010), considered to be “an amalgam of western mythology and unknown history, out-of-the-ordinary spiritual visions, and some of the most important Eastern legends of the Orthodox religion” (Koumartzis, 2017: 278). The castle-town of Mystras was eventually abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century, right before the construction of the modern city of Sparta.

Mystras is closely connected to “The Morea Revolt of 1453-4”. The movement was instigated by the Arvanites (Greeks of Albanian descent) residents of the region against the rule of brothers, and also Sultan’s vassals, Thomas and Demetrios Palaeologue. Shortly after the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in May 1453, thirty thousand Arvanites, later joined by as many Greeks, frustrated by the financial insecurity they felt due to severe taxation, rose against the two despots, and marched towards the castle of Mystras. The Palaeologue brothers asked for military help, and Omar, the son of the Turk

⁹ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.

governor of the region of Thessaly, came to their aid in late 1453. He scored several victories against the rebels, also securing the release of his brother, Ahmed, who had been imprisoned since 1446. However, the rebellion continued, which caused the interference of Turahan Bey, the Thessaly governor himself. Bey and his forces sacked several rebel fortresses in the autumn of 1454, forcing the rebels to retreat and dissolve. The Palaeologue brothers continued to rule, while taxation was reinstated at the same levels as earlier (Cheetham, 1981: 217–8).

Christos addresses the rebellion in the song “Storm the Walls of Mystras”. In the song, Christos (re)imagines and (re)creates lyrically the part of story where the rebel troops approach the castle-town and are ready to invade in order to reclaim the castle from the aristocrats, which will signify for them the end of the oppressive Byzantine rule (“*All Empires Fall/ The end of Byzantium is near*”). The song is enriched with local folklore references: First, the alliance of the diverse ethnically and linguistically populations of the Arvanites and the Greeks is particularly emphasised (“*Join my Albanian brothers and sisters/ With whom we share no language/ But the shackles that we must break*”). Second, the song itself is a homodiegetic narrative song, a quite common feature in folk song (Toelken, 1986: 152), as it tells a story in the first-person, while the narrator, probably one of the leaders, plays an active role in the (Nicholls, 2007). Christos’s decision to use the first-person narration technique can be interpreted as an attempt to reconstruct the emic, an essential feature in oral tradition and folksong, and “as important for making sense of early modern rebellions as the etic categories imposed by subsequent researchers”, as Hopkin and Guillourel note (2017: 33); And third, the song is heavily distilled with the element of the supernatural, another popular motif in traditional song (Shields, 1992/1993). I will discuss this component of the song in more detail.

Christos refers twice to the supernatural in the song. In the first stanza Christos implies a still-existent local belief among the rebels in the naiads, the mythological group of minor female deities (nymphs) that dwelled around bodies of freshwater (Burkert, III, 1985: 174) found amidst Arcadian mists¹⁰ (“*Traversing the mists of Arcadia/ While the wind carries them far away/ Whispers of the Neiaids*”). Furthermore, the fifth stanza starts with the verse: “*I, pagan son of the forest!*” – referring probably to the rebels’ Greek leader – which is a line that once again hints at Christos’s idea that pre-Christian beliefs were still traceable among the populations of Peloponnese in the mid-fifteenth century, when the Morea Revolt took place. This inclusion of non-Christian beliefs in the song was particularly discussed with Christos:

Christos:

I wanted to add a mythological context [to the song]; to add stories, creatures that locals used to believe in.

Sakis Barmpalexis:

¹⁰ Theresa Bane names the belief in the presence of at least five naiads in pre-Christian Arcadia– Myrtoessa, Neda, Anthracia, Hagno, and Anchirhoe – who, according to Greek mythology, nursed Zeus when he was an infant (Bane, 2013: 241).

So, you personally believe that the residents of Morea still believed in the naiads in 1453?

Christos:

Absolutely. [I believe that] they at least believed in some [of these traditions]. There's no chance that they did not believe in any. [...] It took Christianity many, many years to establish itself. But surely, I cannot deny that Christianity was powerful in Byzantium. However, I do believe that in all places that Christianity eventually dominated, there were still remnants of the pre-existing traditions. These [traditions] either intermixed with, and became part of Christianity, or went underground and became part of "alternate" customs, rituals, or stories...¹¹

Christos is correct with his suggestions in the above excerpt: pre-Christian beliefs and traditions were severely persecuted, especially during the early-Byzantine-Empire years, forcing any followers of these belief systems to practice secretly (MacMullen, 1986: 4). Moreover, there are indeed indications that such beliefs actually survived until the late-fifteenth century in Peloponnese. For instance, in the *Peribleptos* monastery in the castle-town of Mystras, there is an anaglyph, dating back to the fourteenth century, that depicts Alexander the Great ascending to the heavens (Κουμαρτζής, 2017: 291–3). Alexander might neither be an ancient Greek deity nor a mythical hero to concretely justify any co-existence of the old with the new religion, however, he still represents a Greek cultural period that had been severely persecuted by the Byzantine authorities. The possibility of a co-existence of pre-Christian folk beliefs alongside official religion is, however, more evidently suggested in the work and teachings of one of the most renowned residents of Mystras, Georgius Gemistus Pletho, who died in 1452, shortly before the Morea Revolt. In his book *Nómōn Syngraphé*, or simply the *Nómoi*, discovered posthumously in 1460, Pletho, a well-respected scholar throughout Europe, overtly advocates for an overall rejection of the Christian belief system, prompting people to immediately return to the worship of the Olympian deities, Platonian philosophy, and Zoroastrian wisdom (Hanegraaff, 2012: 29–32, 38–41).

Christos, who also supports, as seen earlier, the above idea, attempts to also reimagine and reconstruct the folk belief system of the rebels alongside the revolt's events themselves. He approaches it the same way Leonardo Primiano argues regarding all forms of folk religious expressions: "as contestation to forms of power" (Primiano, 2012: 386). The non-Christian beliefs of the revolting peasants become a contesting mechanism expressing the dichotomy between folk traditions and the power of Byzantine nobility. They also become contesting mechanisms against ethnocentrism in black metal: Christos's reference to water nymphs and mists signifies his intention to clearly point out that mystical lands and local deities should not be exclusively connected to stories of kings and knights, as typically portrayed in medieval black metal, but can also be associated with the diverse medieval folk populations.

All these reimagination processes in "Storm the Walls..." also display what scholars in modern Folkloristics have long emphasised when it comes to artistic performance: that creative ability is

¹¹ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.

interconnected with individual interpretation and that a folklore item and its meaning are always dependent on the performer's own experiences, taste, preferences, or biases (Georges & Jones, 1995: 275), as manifested in Christos's reconstruction of the events.

While there is nothing noteworthy folklore-wise in the other Byzantine-period related original song, "The Zealots of Thessaloniki" (Christos's emic re-envision of the uprising of the medieval Thessalonica residents in 1342 against the local government), the other original piece of the album, "The Murder of Wat Tyler", is worth of a closer examination. The song deals with the most chronicled medieval revolt, the 1381 English "Peasants' Revolt", focusing on one of its leaders, Wat Tyler. Christos reimagines the events through the view of the revolt's leader. I will here introduce the main events of the revolt.

In the late fourteenth century, English lower classes had grown frustrated with the decimation of the population due to Black Death, severe taxation, and the consumption of the nation's wealth for the funding of the "Hundred Years War" against France; eventually they uprose against the then fourteen-year-old King Richard II and his aristocracy. Adequately organised and equipped, and led by Tyler, several thousand rebels from both the lower and middle classes from the English countryside marched towards London demanding redress. Little is known about their leader though. According to some sources Tyler was a war veteran who had killed a tax collector that attempted to improperly touch Tyler's underage daughter – the murder is however attributed to a John Tiler in some sources (Dobson, 1970: 199–204). When the rebels met with the king, they demanded freedom from vassalage, permission to sell in markets, and a pardon for any offence they had committed during the revolt. Their demands however were overruled, and Tyler was brutally murdered by William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, for being disrespectful to the King (Dobson, 1970: 207). The rebels, stunned by the murder of their leader, retreated; however, they were hunted down. Many of them were killed, while the other rebel leaders were imprisoned and later executed.

Tyler's actions during the revolt made him posthumously a "folk legend". At first, Wat Tyler was not particularly celebrated in ballad tradition as other English folk heroes – Robin Hood, Arthur, or King Alfred, for instance. However, he gradually became "an inspiration for radical authors", "a man before his time" for revolutionaries, and a "divisive figure" for conservatists and moralists, while his figure appeared constantly in culture at times of turmoil, whether it is the British society or beyond (Basdeo, 2018: i–xiii). While modern representations of Tyler tend not to be entirely accurate, as in most folk representations (Basdeo, 2018: 1), the meaning of, and the message behind Tyler's deeds have become a source of inspiration promoting a constant fight for "collective consciousness" and "collective action" (Rollison, 2010). Tyler is portrayed in a similar context in Christos's song: he is a timeless folk symbol that represents the downtrodden and oppressed. Christos portrays Tyler as such in the first stanza (*"To those that have been degraded/ Written off the books that chronicle/ The passing of time and the greatness of mankind/ Yet gave all their blood and bone/ Wat Tyler represents them"*).

Christos in the song reconstructs once again the emic; he uses it as a tool to reveal “how [the] events were conceived of at the time” (Guillourel and Hopkin, 2017: 33) through the perspective of the rebels and not through the account of the official records of the time, as written by the winners. In contrast however, to the rebels’ leader in “Storm the Walls of Mystras”, who is portrayed as a “pagan son of the forest” (supernatural elements applied to folk heroes is a common motif in folk song, see Shields, 1992/1993) Tyler does not possess any supernatural elements. Stylistically though, unlike “Storm the Walls...”, “...Wat Tyler” is very reminiscent of the ballad structure: not only is it a lengthy (it consists of twelve stanzas of three, four, or five verses) narrative song telling a certain story, it also, and most importantly, does what David Buchan has pointed out regarding ballads: it focuses on human relationships, giving them as importance in the narration as the historical events (Buchan, 1982: 168).

A comparison between Christos’s take on the Wat Tyler’s story and the first proper ballad (whose tune, however, is not survived) on the deeds of Tyler and the other rebel leaders – first found in *The Garland of Delight* in 1612 (Lamson, 1939: 120) and later re-published in *Old Ballads, Historical and Narrative* by Thomas Evans in 1777 (Vol. 2: 311–4) with the title “The Rebellion of Wat Tyler, Jack Straw and Others Against King Richard the Second” – would reveal similarities as well as substantial differences: for instance, both songs are lengthy (even though the ballad shares more details), they both attempt to reconstruct the emic through the perspective of the rebels, while there is a total lack of the supernatural in both creations. However, while, on the one hand, Christos celebrates the effort by the peasants to seek justice against oppression, even though it was ill-fated, the anonymous ballad creator is more sympathetic towards the authorities and the “noble” king, and less towards the rebels, who he calls “villains”. Moreover, the two creators have a different interpretation of the aftermath of the events. While on the one hand, Christos states that “*the Crown started to crack and crumble*” in the song’s last stanza, on the other hand, the anonymous creator(s) of the ballad speak of a period of “*joyful peace*”. As historians, however, note, the truth is closer to Christos’s representation: King Richard’s reign went through constant turmoil until his death in captivity in 1400 after being overthrown by Henry IV. This turmoil was not a result of the Peasants’ Revolt though, but Richard’s own weak ruling strategies (Gillespie & Goodman 1997). It does need to be noted here, however, that the Peasants’ Revolt did yield benefits for the lower classes; historians note that serfdom started to decline immediately after the end of the events under the threat of similar future revolts, while poll tax was never again imposed (Tuck, 1987). The decision of the anonymous ballad creator to describe the years after the revolt as joyfully peaceful, is once again an outcome of individual interpretation and/or even a testimony of how the events were orally transmitted and interpreted in collective memory.

“The Murder of Wat Tyler” is preceded by, and interconnected with, a cover of the medieval English folksong “The Cutty Wren”. The song covers in the album will be discussed in the next section of the article, starting with the examination of the aforementioned song.

The Remaking of Traditional Songs: Stability, Change, and Originality

As briefly mentioned in the introduction of the article, Christos's approach of the folksongs he has covered for "Castles..." are indicative signs of the contemporary artistic trend to approach and, at the same time experiment with, folksongs (Livingston, 1999). Specifically, Christos has kept in all four folksong covers "ninety-five percent of the traditional melodies", as he told me, while has also added traditional instruments in the orchestration, and a non-professional, organic approach while recording the songs. Any other musical approach would have turned the songs into something "post-modern", according to him, altering the concept entirely.¹² However, while Christos attempted to stay as close possible to the melodies, at the same time he also decided to completely omit any lyrics from the songs, forcing the songs to go through a simultaneous recreating and reshaping process according to Åkesson's three-concept model in contemporary folk music (Åkesson, 2006: 7).¹³ According to the model, Christos decided to stay close to the source and imitate the music with minor changes (recreation), while he consciously changed its form by omitting the lyrics (reshaping). Stathis Damianakos wrote about this interaction between the new and old in any revitalising effort in folklore:

Folk tradition provides only the structures, the general framework of a creation that always restarts, and the adoption of an external element corresponds to the birth of a new cultural event. [...] The [folk] performer does not copy what he has heard, he does not 'perform', but each time he achieves a new, original (re)creation (Damianakos, 1987: 31).

Christos shares the same opinion with Damianakos: while he initially felt an inner artistic and aesthetic need to imitate the songs entirely, he eventually decided that the birth of "a new cultural event" through the conscious "adoption of an external element" (the omission of the lyrics) would serve his cause better stylistically.

Nonetheless, one might wonder: does not the idea of omitting the lyrics from a song "shed" the song's – ideological, in this case – message? Christos has a different perspective on the matter: as these songs are part of a project within a specific socio-political context and a certain aesthetic, the listener can proactively do his or her own research on the meaning of the songs and discover their socio-cultural background. He wanted thus to prompt his listeners to become active users and appliers of folklore, as he (and I, as a matter of fact) did.

As mentioned above, the first folksong cover in the album is the English medieval protest folksong "The Cutty Wren"; the song serves as an introductory acoustic interlude that leads to the black metal ferocity of "...Wat Tyler". It lasts two minutes, while the core melody, as played by Christos, is accompanied with a fiddle. The artist first heard the song through the 1988 cover by the English rock band *Chumbawamba* and though the 1962 version of the song by the folk revival band *Ian Campbell*

¹² Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 19 November 2020.

¹³ In her model, Åkesson suggests that there actually are three different categories of revitalisation of a folksong in contemporary music: They can be re-created, re-shaped/transformed, or renewed/innovated. She also points out that these categories are very "often concurrent and overlapping attitudes and approaches to traditional material and styles, and different levels of stability and change" (2006: 1).

Folk Group. Christos's musical approach is closer to the former; however, he enriches the a-cappella version of the band with instrumentation.

“The Cutty Wren” is the Number 236 entry in the *The Roud Folksong Index*;¹⁴ its first written version was published in proto-folklorist's David Herd's *Scots Songs* collection in 1776 (vol. 2, 210–1). The song in Herd's collection consists of eight four-lined stanzas and is under the title “Will Ze Go to the Wood?”. It describes a gang of boys that begin a trip to the local woods to kill a wren, bring it back home, and later feast with its parts. The song is a typical example of the significant role of repetition in folksong, as the lines “*Will Ze Go to the Wood?*”, “*What to Do There?*”, and “*To Slay the Wren*” as well as the protagonists' names (*Fozie Mozie*, *Johnie Rednozie*, and *Foslin'ene*) are repeatedly sung (Nicolaisen, 1978). An almost identical, but with a more refined language, version of the song with the title “The Hunting of the Wren” is to be found in a later Herd folksong collection as published by Hans Hecht (1904: 200).

As with all folksongs, “The Cutty Wren” went through several alterations throughout the ages; the protagonists' names changed, the lyrics gradually added, or omitted, details, the variants adopted a more Standard-English language, while in Orkney the song evolved into a lullaby with the title “The Bethren Three” (Gosset, 1915: 119). Moreover, since the late-nineteenth century its tune has started to resemble another popular British folksong, “Green Bushes” (Palmer, 1979: 188–9). The tradition of “killing the wren” can be found in ritual to this day. For instance, in contemporary Ireland on St. Stephen's Day (26 December) – also known as “Wren Day” – young males disguise themselves as animals and hunt a symbolical “wren”. When “caught”, they place it on a pole, carrying it around the town, while also acting mischievously (Muller, 1996/1997: 140-5).

Naturally, the meaning of the song altered over time. Earlier interpretations of the song followed J.G. Frazer's idea of all folklore items being survivals of past traditions (Frazer, 1906–15; 1936). According to those interpretations, the slaughter of the wren – the “king of all birds” in several European folk traditions (Muller, 1996/1997: 131) – refers symbolically to the annual sacrifice of the “Year King” that will bring prosperity and crop fertility (Atwood Lawrence, 1997). However, more contemporary approaches argue that the song is actually a protest song. The wren in European folklore symbolises evil and dishonour, using its manipulative abilities and cunningness to deceive the other forest animals to become their king and eventually their tyrant (Muller, 1996/1997: 136–9). Therefore, notions began to spring that suggested that the wren in the song in fact symbolises aristocracy that needed to be “sacrificed”. The first who made this association was English folksinger and folksong collector, A.L. Lloyd, in mid-twentieth century.

¹⁴ The *Roud Song Index* is a database of more than twenty-five thousand folksongs as collected by librarian Steven Roud. It can be found on the online “Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Song and Dance Society” (<https://www.vwml.org/vwml-help-2/>).

Lloyd, who was particularly influenced by Marxist ideas, suggested the idea of “The Cutty Wren” being a protest song in his book *The Singing Englishman* (1944). Lloyd argued that peasantry and labouring classes were the actual forebearers and gatekeepers of the English language in late medieval and early modern Britain – as French was the language of aristocracy – while folksong became a mechanism of the common folk not only to sing about their living environment and everyday lives but to also demonstrate their frustrations. Anti-authority songs began to spread, according to Lloyd, among them “The Cutty Wren”. He wrote about the song and its symbolisation:

In “the Cutty Wren” it would seem the tyrant wren had become a symbol for baronial property, preparations for whose seizure and redistribution to the poor was such a formidable task, to be carried out in great secrecy (Lloyd, 1944).

As Hopkin and Guillourel note, since its conception, “of all oral traditional genres, song is perhaps the most important to the creation and maintenance of social groups that wish to contest the powers that be”, while it never shied “away from social conflict” (2017: 4, 10), a notion that aligns with Lloyd’s interpretation of the song. The idea of the wren as a symbol for tyranny, authority, and unjust rule that needs to be killed and to be fed to the poor has since been established in music, turning the folksong into an anti-authority song. Following the path created by Lloyd, the majority of the contemporary versions of the song, Christos’s included, include the song in albums which promote thematically the need for action: for instance, “The Cutty Wren” is part of the 1988 Chumbawamba album “English Rebel Songs 1381–1984” and the 1962 Ian Campbell Folk Group album “The Times They Are a-Changin’”.

A very similar to “The Cutty Wren” background is to be found in the next folksong that Christos covered, “Ai Vist Lo Lop” (meaning “I saw the Wolf” in English). A song of Occitan¹⁵ origins, “Ai Vist Lo Lop” is thought of being created in the thirteenth century (Laforte, 1981: 158). The song that consists of two six-lined stanzas, describes the gathering of a wolf, a fox, and a hare in the woods, where they dance and celebrate around a tree and a bush. The element of repetition is strong in this song as well, as the line “*Ai Vist lo Lop, lo Rainard, la Lèbre*” is repeated four times in the song. Variants of the same song, but with the title “*J’ai Vu Le Loup*”, have also been collected from the southern-central Massif Central French region; in these variants the hare is however, frequently replaced by a weasel (Martel and Saisset, 2016: 240). It also needs to be noted that the song in some regions became a children’s song (Vernus, 2004: 165), which might explain the reason why both its tune and lyrics remained so stable over time (lyrical stability is a very common feature in all children’s songs, see Toelken, 1986: 149).

Little research has taken place regarding the song’s meaning; however, the assumption that “Ai Vist Lo Lop” is in fact a protest song is the result of the second stanza of the song. I will here present the stanza, alongside its English translation:

¹⁵ Occitania is a southwestern French region from Monaco in the East to Bordeaux in the West, and Limoges in the North to the borders with Spain in the South, where the Occitan language was historically spoken alongside the official one. The Occitan language is also to be found in some parts of southwestern Italy and in Andorra (Lafont, 1971: 11).

<i>Aquí trimam tota l'annada</i>	<i>Here we slave away all the year round</i>
<i>Per se ganhar quauquei sòus</i>	<i>So we can earn a few coins</i>
<i>Rèn que dins una mesada</i>	<i>And just in a month's time</i>
<i>Ai vist lo lop, lo rainal, la lèbre</i>	<i>I saw the wolf, the fox, the hare,</i>
<i>Nos i fotèm tot pel cuol</i>	<i>There is nothing left</i>
<i>Ai vist lo lèbre, lo rainal, lo lop.</i>	<i>I saw the hare, the fox, the wolf.</i>

The anonymous creators of the song portray themselves in the first two lines of the second stanza as slaves with minor incomes who, according to the next four lines, are obliged to give all their earnings in a month's time to the three animals until nothing is left. It is this depiction that made artists such as Christos to assume that the three animals of the song might covertly represent the French medieval authorities collecting the entire income of poor peasants as tax. This interpretation of the song is also mentioned in the online Folksong Archival Library "Mama Lisa's World".¹⁶ According to these interpretations, the lines in the second stanza symbolise the social divide between the rich and the poor, and the need to fight against "medieval capitalism", as Christos refers to the feudal system.¹⁷

Finally, Christos's approach musically is very similar to "The Cutty Wren": the song is a two-minute-long acoustic instrumental, while the core melody played by Christos is accompanied with a tin whistle and a daire – a Greek traditional type of percussion.

The interlude "O Tsakitzi" is a cover of the Greek-Turkish folksong tradition on the life of a renowned late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century social bandit, Tsakitzi. Born Tsakitzi Mehmet Efes, Tsakitzi was a Zeybek captain;¹⁸ his and his gang's deeds made him a folk hero among both the Greek and Turkish populations of Asia Minor, Eastern Rumelia, Istanbul, and later in Greece (Yasar, 1994). Known as the "Anatolian Robin Hood" in folk narrative and memory, Tsakitzi and his gang, just as the world-famous English folk legend, robbed the rich distributing the loot to the poor, while also using it to help underprivileged girls get married, or for public works (Korovinis, 2005). His notoriety and his deeds not only inspired numerous folksongs but had also reached mainland Greece long before the refugees from Asia Minor in the early nineteen-twenties, bringing along with them their traditions. There is a Greek folksong, for instance, dating from the late-nineteenth century, wishing that Tsakitzi would come to Greece to mete social justice: "*Tsakitzi, did you not get bored in the villages of Smyrna? Why don't you come to Greece, to help orphans get married?*"¹⁹ (Stathakopoulos, 2015).

¹⁶ "Ai vist lo lop, lo rainard, la lèbre – Occitanie" in *Mama Lisa's World en Français. Culture Enfantine et Internationale*.

¹⁷ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 19 November 2020.

¹⁸ Zeybeks were a group of illegally armed Islamised Greeks in the mountainous territories of western Anatolia (Δραγούμης, 1984: 58).

¹⁹ Translated from Greek into English.

One might correctly remark that “O Tsakitizis” is a subsequent to the medieval period folk tradition; however, there were specific reasons behind Christos’s decision to include it into his project. Not only was it a folksong and a story that his friend Viktoria knew well – Viktoria also plays the yayli tambur, a Turkish long-neck lute, in the song – but it also perfectly served Christos’s message. Tsakitizis is a personification of social justice and anti-authoritarian attitude, while his deeds were sung and narrated by both Turkish and Greeks regardless of their religious, or ethnic backgrounds. In the album thus the folk hero Tsakitizis transcends ethnocentric boundaries, and instead, personifies the need for a united cause against aristocracy. Graham Seal notes regarding this phenomenon: “[social bandits] represent a struggle against a power greater than themselves and those who support them”, while the stories and songs on their actions “continue to shape the attitudes and actions of later individuals who, for whatever reason, willfully defy the forces of authority” (Seal, 2011:10). Tsakitizis becomes a metaphorical symbol in “Castles...”, representing the need for unity and action that “willfully defy” the reactionary forces that have dominated black metal.

“Contre Dolour” is an anomaly. While all other songs in Christos’s project are either folksong covers or original songs that reimagine and recreate the emic in traditions of resistance, “Contre Dolour” is a Christian chant that belongs to the Cypriot Cycle of the “O Antiphons”: thus a “high court” song. The “O Antiphons” are short chants, of unknown origins (Cabaniss, 1947), of the canticle of Mary that are sung in evening services in the last seven days leading up to Christmas (Hiley, 1993: 99-100). The Cypriot cycle of the antiphons is thought of being created during the French occupation of the island, thus somewhere between 1189 and 1492, while the only source for the repertory can be found in the *Turin Codex J.II.9*, where it is known as the “Cypriot-French” Codex (Data and Lucca, 1999).

Here raises the question: why did Christos decide to cover a song belonging to the repertory of one of the European authorities that medieval common folk had grown frustrated with, and not a song created by the anonymous folk itself?

As mentioned earlier, the song first appeared in Cypriot music during the three-hundred-year period of occupation of Cyprus under French rule. And while it is being said that the co-existence of the French rulers with the Cypriot nobility was a rather harmonious one that also led to the blending of many imported Roman Catholic traditions with Orthodox Byzantine ones – as seen with “Contre Dolour” –, it was still a “occupier and occupied” situation for the lower Cypriot classes (Coureas, 2021). Nicholas Coureas confirms this by noting that the Latin immigrants in Cyprus were the ones receiving the best-paid jobs, eventually becoming the society’s middle class, while the presence of the feudal system was particularly strong on the island, making the king and lords wealthier than their counterparts in Jerusalem or France. Coureas adds also that this financial growth and prosperity reinforced the demand for even cheaper labour and sometimes slavery (Coureas, 2005). A social uprising took place in 1426–27 that was triggered by the political turmoil caused by the Mameluke invasion and the resulting

capture of the king, however, historians consider this uprising more as a series of spontaneous riots rather than an organised peasant revolt (Nicolaou-Konnari, 2005).

The answer therefore to the question regarding “Contre Dolour’s” place in the project is once again related to the significance of artistic interpretation and innovation in song. “Contre Dolour” might not be a protest folksong per se, it personifies though, according to the artist, the occupation of the island by foreign rulers and the hardships it brought to the lower classes, and in extension the imposing of foreign traditions. The song has therefore undergone a “recontextualisation” process in the album, where “it is not the individual who is recreative, reshaping/transformational, or renewing/innovative, but the relationship or attitude [of the artist] to tradition” (Åkesson, 2006:10). Christos presents the song as a symbol of the oppression that French rule brought to the local Cypriot lower classes.

Christos even attempted to “traditionalise” the song for the purposes of his project. He applied the technique of “counterpoint”, the art of combining different melodies alongside the core melody, also known as polyphony (Laitz, 2008, 96). While “counterpoint” is a technique that was developed during the Renaissance and the Baroque periods within the classical music tradition (Mann and Edmunds 1965), it can also be found within folk music under the name “round” (MacDonald and Jaeger, 2006: 15). “Round” is the simplest “counterpoint” form, where three or more voices/melodies follow the same musical line at different times creating a perpetual harmony in song (Johnson, et al 2001).

Christos applied the technique of “round” in “Contre Dolour”. He simplified the three core melodic lines of the song that harmonise with each other, but in a rather looser structure as opposed to the rigidity in early modern Baroque music where a melody needs to be imitated intactly (Buelow, 2004). Christos’s instrumentation is also accompanied by a flute played by his friend Stelios. As Christos points out, he wanted to recreate the song that originates from “literary” music within a folk music context, manifesting thus the idea of the constant interaction between the traditional and the formal in music (Toelken, 1986: 149).

Can, therefore, Christos’s recreation of medieval songs in a black metal album be considered medieval music? Christos thinks so; however, he points out that medieval black metal is merely one successor of the genre. He said: “*This needs attention! There are many successors, of course, but once you are tagged as [medieval metal], then automatically you are part of this succession*”.²⁰ Christos sees medieval black metal as part of the dynamic processes in music, confirming therefore the notion in contemporary Folkloristics of the ever-evolving nature of culture and tradition (Toelken, 1979).

The album also includes two more songs: the first song in the album titled “Castles Conquered and Reclaimed” and its concluding one, “Wrath and Glory”. They are not, however, discussed in this article as the songs simply introduce and “wrap up” the album’s message respectively.

²⁰ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.

Conclusion/Discussion

The ever-increasing levels of both in-print and sound publication has made archival material, including historical sources and traditional song, accessible to an expanding number of contemporary professional musicians. This professionalisation by musicians who have “a pre-knowledge of several genres and style [...] clears the ground for more elaborated kinds of reshaping” in music traditions, as manifested in this article (Åkesson, 2006: 13–4). In “Castles...” Christos reimagines medieval traditions of resistance through the rebels’ standpoint: he combines traditional song with ferocious black metal and applies folklore elements throughout his creation in a symbolical effort to “conquer and reclaim” his beloved black scene from the nationalistic ideologies and racist behaviours that have dominated the scene since its emergence in the early nineteen-nineties.

When it comes to his application of folklore, Christos decided to enhance the revived traditions with local folk belief systems, supernatural elements, folk heroes, while he also attempted to reconstruct the emic in the songs by making the rebels the actual protagonists of the events as in folk traditions. He also covered two medieval folksongs considered contemporarily to be protest songs, a late modern folksong on a social bandit that was loved by the common folk of both Greece and Turkey, while he also attempted to “traditionalise” a “high court” song by changing both its meaning (in the album it symbolises foreign occupation and oppression) and orchestration.

Christos uses folklore in the album as a recreated, without losing any of its imagination, ideological weapon with which he attempts to (re)approach past events and review them through the perspective of class struggle and the perpetuated relationships that are related to collective behaviours and ideas. As Éva Guillorel and David Hopkin point out,

stories of rebellion and lost entitlements would raise very powerful emotions. Being presented with an incontrovertible narrative of injustice in the past would all but force one to seek justice in the present. (Guillorel & Hopkin, 2017: 15; also 23)

Tamara Livingston adds to this argument; she writes that revisited traditions are “shaped by the social, political, and economic circumstances which motivate revivalists to take action in the first place” and that the tradition that is chosen to be revisited is very often the result of an inner desire to distinguish a subgroup from a dominant group (1999: 68), as manifested in this article: Christos clearly attempts to communicate that not everyone in black metal endorses reactionary ideologies, and that there are “healthy” minds and voices within the scene that in fact want to reverse this situation. Christos hopes that the traditions of resistance that he has decided to revive will indeed raise “powerful emotions” to the audience of the album and will lead them to eventually reverse the “injustice” that alt-right ideologies have brought to the scene.

Folklore in “Castles...” is also a transcendent force. Unlike thus the dominant attitude in black metal where folklore is a-historically weaponised to promote Eurocentrism and racial homogeneity in medieval times, folklore in Christos’s project adopts a trans-national and a trans-regional character, as

it should (Hopkin, 2010). The songs, the tales, and the events that he reimagines transcend borders and become traditions that can inspire anyone regardless of their ethnic, educational, occupational, or gender background (Guillourel & Hopkin, 2017: 20–1).

There are a few more aspects of the album regarding folklore and its place in the contemporary world that also need to be discussed.

First, the significance of the interaction between technology, printed documents, and folk traditions is particularly evident in the project. What “Castles...” manifests is that any contemporary recreating effort of folklore largely “depends on the existence of a prepared ground” (Guillourel & Hopkin, 2017: 2), and that in the contemporary context, where learning a tradition most frequently comes through either digital or written sources, the reanimation of the deeds of a folk hero or a folk tradition is a lot easier and historically accurate process “if there are already traditions in circulation concerning them” (Guillourel & Hopkin, 2017: 27) Nonetheless, contemporary creators, such as Christos, who have decided to reimagine the emic in earlier folk traditions give oral traditions and folk commemorative narrative as much importance as historical accounts for their reviving efforts. Such creators “have learnt to ‘read against the grain’” of official records, which were largely, if not exclusively, written by the authorities – thus the winning sides –, attempting to discover what actually happened in these events beyond the prejudice and ignorance of those records (Hopkin, 2010: 5). Richard Dorson, who largely advocated for the need to include folklore as a supplementary tool in the account, reconstruction, and interpretation of historical events in Historical Studies, noted that folklore can not only “illustrate the veracity of tradition” but also “enable the historian [...] separate fiction from fact” by cross-examining sources, concluding that a researcher, as Christos became for his project, “can find history alive in the field [of folklore] as well as entombed in the library” (Dorson, 1971: 132, 134, 138, 140, 144).

And second, the project as a whole is an excellent example of how traditional music and folksong constantly change and evolve. As manifested in “Castles...”, the traditional songs have been both recreated by keeping almost intact the core melody, and reshaped by omitting the songs’ lyrics. The “typical condition of folksong is one of flux”, while these new attitudes towards song are always interconnected with the artists’ “responses to time, place, rhetoric, and performance”, as Toelken reminds us (Toelken, 1986: 147–8), and as found in Mystras. Music, David Atkinson argues, goes through a constant process where “a canon of texts that provides a cultural identity for its practitioners” continually changes to meet the requirements of the present (Atkinson, 2004: 149), while Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin do not see music as “a non-bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts”, but rather as “a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past” (1984: 287), which is exactly how traditional music and folksong are interpreted and treated in the album.

Since our discussion in late 2020, Christos has released another album as Mystras, titled “Empires Vanquished and Dismantled”, where he has expanded his anti-authoritarian vision and message by also including anti-imperialistic traditions of resistance alongside anti-aristocratic ones. He, once again, covered four medieval period songs, among them the popular Arabic folksong “Ah Ya Zein”, as well as composing a song based entirely on the melody of the German folksong “Ach Meiden du Vil Sende Pein”. His plan is to keep releasing albums based on medieval folklore and song traditions, until his message that black metal needs to be conquered and reclaimed from any nationalistic ideologies and racist behaviours reaches a wider audience. He compares his mission to the Arthurian knights’ quest for the Holy Grail, giving thus a medieval-related connection to his argument: “*I’d like to think that each of us can actually do something important in our lives, that we matter, and that our actions have significance*”.²¹ Maybe in the future Arthurian lore also becomes the subject of Mystras and it is the common folk who actually find the grail and not Galahad, being praised for their glory and honour just as the valiant Arthurian knight is. Such reversal of attitudes and interpretations, however, are long needed in black metal regardless.

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²¹ Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 19 November 2020.

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Fieldwork

- Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 17 November 2020.
Recorded Interview with Christos G., Athens, 19 November 2020

Short CV

Athanasios Barmpalexis holds a Ph.D. in Ethnology (and Folklore) from the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. His doctoral thesis was on “western” forms of contemporary shamanism and vernacular healing, focusing on shamanic healers residing and practising in the wider area of North-East Scotland. He currently is an Honorary Research Fellow and a Visiting Lecturer at the Elphinstone Institute, where he gives lectures on Mythological Theories and Vernacular Medicine. His current research interests range from Celtic mythologies and local legends and folk music elements in contemporary subgenres of extreme metal music to traditions of resistance, folk medicine and vernacular healing, and traditional witchcraft.



Σύντομο Βιογραφικό

Ο Αθανάσιος Μπαρμπαλέξης έχει λάβει το διδακτορικό του δίπλωμα στην Εθνολογία και τη Λαογραφία από το Elphinstone Institute του Πανεπιστημίου του Αμπερντίν, στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο. Η διδακτορική του διατριβή πραγματευόταν δυτικές μορφές σύγχρονου σαμανισμού και παραδοσιακής θεραπείας, εξετάζοντας συγκεκριμένα θεραπευτές σαμανισμού που ζουν και προσφέρουν τις υπηρεσίες τους στη Βορειοανατολική Σκωτία. Αυτήν την περίοδο είναι Ομότιμος Ερευνητής και Επισκέπτης Λέκτορας στο Elphinstone Institute, όπου διδάσκει Θεωρίες Μυθολογίας και Λαϊκή Ιατρική. Τα τωρινά ερευνητικά του ενδιαφέροντα κυμαίνονται από τοπικούς Κέλτικους μύθους και θρύλους και παραδοσιακά και λαογραφικά στοιχεία στο σύγχρονο ακραίο ήχο της μέταλ μουσικής σε παραδόσεις αντίστασης, λαϊκή ιατρική και παραδοσιακές μορφές θεραπείας, και παραδοσιακή μαγεία.

