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**The Rise of Turkish Vikings: Heavy Metal in Turkey and the Globalization of the World's Most Outsider Music**

on Pierre Hecker, Turkish Metal. Music, Meaning, and Morality in a Muslim Society

**Mark Levine**

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

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**Pierre Hecker, *Turkish metal. Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society*, Farnham & Burlington, Ashgate, 2012.**

A WHOLE BOOK on Turkish metal? Is there really that much to write about? At first glance, Turkish metal might not seem that much more interesting or unique than, say, Norwegian or Finnish metal. After all, Turkey has been an officially “secular” state for well over eighty years and undoubtedly the most secular and “Western” Muslim country. Despite the routine official European rejection of its place on the continent, European and American artists have long made Istanbul one of the most important ports of call on the summer rock circuit, as epitomized by major corporate international festivals such as Sonisphere and more grassroots but equally cosmopolitan festivals like Barsia Rock for Peace.

Yet Turkey is a unique place in the global metal geography—not more so than Scandinavia or the United States, or Birmingham for that matter. But not merely a copy or combination of them either. Rather, it has incorporated “traditional” local idioms—instruments, scales and rhythms—combined with international rock and metal aesthetic norms to produce a powerfully rooted style within the global metal norms. Turkish metal artists have sought to break down existing boundaries and create truly hybrid sounds that nevertheless are fully metal.

*Turkish Metal* is a pioneering work in exploring the aesthetic, political and socio-cultural complexities not merely of metal in the Turkish context, but of all genres of music that move between preexisting identity and political boundaries. With his musician’s ear and eyes, strong familiarity with both the sub-culture and larger culture about which he’s writing, and an exceptional grounding in the relevant theoretical literature, Pierre

Hecker has produced a work that will not merely help define the state of the art in the still young discipline of metal studies, but be of interest and use—both as a course book and a source for (comparative) research—for scholars in a number of disciplines related both to modern Turkish studies, and ethnomusicology and cultural studies as well.

Hecker begins with a synopsis of the history of Turkish rock music, which is crucial for the larger narrative because it demonstrates just how global and hybrid Turkish rock has been from its beginnings in the 1960s. This history allows Hecker to explore how in combining the local with the global, metal with “traditional” soundscapes, Turkish metal artists and the broader scene have challenged core components of Turkish cultural and political identity. At the same time, Hecker reminds us that Turkish metal is merely the latest incarnation of a much longer traditional of “Anatolian rock.” I can recall sitting with members of the seminal Anatolian rock band Moğollar before we both played the Barışa rock festival in 2007 excitedly explaining to them how the Iranian band I was performing with was doing a hybrid of metal, funk and traditional Persian music. When I stopped speaking for a moment, one of the members turned to me and said, laughing, “You think you invented that? We were doing the same thing forty years ago.”

And that’s what’s so important and useful about both Turkish metal and *Turkish Metal*. It takes a subject that might normally appeal only to a very specific subset of scholars and uses it to point out just how deep and long-lasting globalization has been in the Middle East. Certainly one reason for this is that Hecker has long

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experience as a musician and as a metalhead, which gave him a level of access to and sympathy with the people he studied that goes beyond that normally achieved by even the most talented anthropologists, who remain in the end unbreachably Other from the people they study.

After the history of the country's rock music more broadly Chapters two and three explore the emergence and development of Turkish metal, and the inevitable accusations of Satanism that cropped a valuable summer of the history of Turkish rock until the 1980s, Hecker discusses the slow emergence of Turkish metal, beginning with the difficult early years during the economic hardships and military regime of the 1980s and continuing until its increasing successes in the 1990s and 2000. Crucially, the hardships faced by the scene, including routine accusations of Satanism (which also and even more dangerously plagued the scenes in the Arab world and Iran in the 1990s and 2000s through the present day, helped instill a crucial DIY ethos to Turkish metal which is at the heart of all vibrant local scenes today. From cassette tapes to independent radio stations and fan 'zines, all the usual channels for disseminating underground music were deployed in Turkey, and helped to create a vibrant metal subculture in the country. Indeed, the story here reminds us that the internet and other contemporary are requisites for spreading a powerful youth-oriented message and culture. Far from it.

One unique component of Turkish metal's lyrical concerns was from the start Islam, which early on came to play the role of foil early on for what might be termed a "metal ethos." Thus the lyrics for the anthemic Pentagram song "Şeytan bunun neresinde"--"Where is the Devil in it?"

Stringed saz is its name/Neither does it listen to the verses of the Koran, nor to the Islamic judge/The one

who plays it understands himself/Where is Satan in that?" (64).

Such lyrics are indicative of the larger social conflict and debates in which the metal scene was participating, and represent what Hecker describes as its fierce "invasion of the public sphere" (68) during a crucial moment of transition in Turkish society. The members of the scene "did not fit into any common category to which others could attach meaning," which, as in other moral panics, led the protectors of the established order—especially in the media, which knew a profitable story when it found (created) it, helped publicize the emergent scene as filled with licentious devil worshippers bent on destroying all that was good in Turkish society.



The situation became more dangerous for metalheads after a series of suicides and a brutal murder that supposedly involved not merely Satanists—who were virtually unheard of before the 1990s—but metalheads (who were fully equated with Satanists). There was significant manipulation by the media and raids by the police, but the scene refused to buckle or even go underground. Indeed, as Hecker shows in great detail, at the very time metalheads were being made scapegoats in a largely fabricated moral panic the most extreme form of metal, “black metal,” became popular in Turkey.

Juxtaposing the rise of black metal in the context of the struggles over the future direction of Turkish culture, politics and the economy during this period, Hecker shows how it serves as a symbol, however confusing, of the various intersecting, overlapping and contradictory processes and the religious as well as secular social and economic actors who participated in them. The most enlightening discussion here comes from a lengthy interview the author did with one of the founders of the black metal scene, a singer named Kuzu, who provides a fascinating portrait of how creative and almost Dada-esque the use of various forms of lyrical

and musical imagery was in the scene during its early years (pp. 136–40), with many of the core symbols that have been interpreted as Satanic—upside down crosses, the 666, etc.—being deployed by bands for no other reason than they’re cool or piss off their parents.

I have long found that more than any genre of popular music, metal’s self-identified “outsider” status makes it a canary in the coal mine for judging the level of censorship, intolerance, and oppression in a society. Thus, comparing the way in which Turkish metalheads confronted their larger societies with the responses by the scenes in countries like Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon and Iran, offers a useful metric for understanding the level of cultural and political liberalism more broadly in these societies. For this reason, and because of the fascinating detail and captivating glimpses into the lives of young Turks during a pivotal moment in its slow and still incomplete transformation to a post-Kemalist order, Turkish Metal is an innovative and important addition not merely to the field of modern Turkish studies, but to the sociology of religion, cultural studies, ethnomusicology and related disciplines.

Mark LEVINE