

G.W. Jacobsen & E. Hem respond:



Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim. Sculpture portraying a person in great despair. Is it headache or anguish? Photo: NTB scanpix

We wish to thank Viggo Jønsson for his appreciative words and interesting hypothesis. Although we cannot know anything for certain about the intentions of the artist who made this figure almost 700 years ago, it is typical of good art that it evokes a variety of associations in the beholder. One feature that may counter the hypothesis that this is a singer is the context in which the woman's head is placed. To her left is a male figure with a jester's cap, to her right are five mythological beasts.

After the publication of our article (1) we have been made aware of another work of art that has also been interpreted through a medical lens. Professor Lars Jacob Stovner, St. Olavs Hospital and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, told us that during a conference in 1990 his colleague Olav Sjaastad accompanied Professor Michael Welch, who at the time was at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, USA, on a walk around Nidaros Cathedral. Reportedly, it was Welch who referred to one of the figures on the north wall as «the headache sufferer» (Figure 1). One could imagine that it portrays a migraine patient with abdominal pains (hand on the stomach) and nausea, who is about to vomit.

The tentative diagnosis has not received much support in this case either, however. According to the archaeologist Øystein Ekroll, who is in charge of the restoration work in Nidaros Cathedral, this is a so-called «grotesque», modelled by Wilhelm Rasmussen (1879–1965) around 1910 on the basis of similar sculptures on French cathedrals. Rasmussen's intention with the sculpture is unknown, but according to Ekroll it is most likely a portrayal of anguish and despair, for example in a person who fears eternal perdition. Nidaros Cathedral is replete with such characteristically expressive sculptures.

Geir W. Jacobsen
Trondheim

Erlend Hem
Oslo

Geir W. Jacobsen (born 1945) is Professor at the Department of Public Health and General Practice, Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Medical Editor of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Erlend Hem (born 1970), MD, PhD, is the Deputy Editor of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association.

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References

1. Jacobsen GW, Hem E. Sykdom i Nidarosdomen? Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2012; 132: 686–7.
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