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Manifestations of psychiatric illness in texts from the medieval and Viking era

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Summary

The medicine of medieval Europe was influenced above all by the Hippocratic and Galenic legacies, conveyed through the medical School of Salerno, albeit also to an extent embedded in demonological and supernatural beliefs and folklore customs. More concrete or extensive clinical descriptions of mental illness are hardly found beyond the anecdotic realm. Between the Viking period (800-1030) and the high Middle Ages (1100-1300) the most vivid and universally available writings and descriptions of mental illness come from fictional literature, more precisely the sagas, written predominantly in Iceland in the native Old Icelandic language during the 13th century. This period was also called the Old Norse renaissance, hallmarked by intense intellectual and literary activity and achievements. The literature of the period has given us a wealth of reports concerning the everyday and social life and mentality, with an eye for peculiarities and abnormalities.

history of psychiatry / classifications in psychiatry / Vikings

LITERARY AND JUDICIARY REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

The alleged "material" are the *dramatis personae* of the saga period (the 9th and 10th centuries). They were historical individuals who had lived in the collective memory for centuries. Thus their psychological portraying obviously projects a later culture and psychology.

Above all, the kings' sagas of Snorri Sturlusson (1177-1241) and the Icelandic family sagas (*Islendingasögur*) offer not only short remarks and anecdotes but also more extensive narratives. They represent the oldest prose literature in Europe (alongside the French Grail romance). On the whole, these "reports" reveal an almost "clinical" level of description.

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Some vague notions on the aetiology of psychiatric illness are reflected in these texts, for example the role of heredity. Some kind of basic understanding of the importance of psychological loss/bereavement prevails in the frequent descriptions of depressive reactions. Overall, the accounts seem largely non-theoretical, uninfluenced by mainland European medical theories. Some conditions appear as just strange and unexplained. A considerable amount of psychiatric material will also be found in the old laws of Iceland and Norway. Philological studies prove that there existed concrete views of madness/psychosis as a social and individual reality. For example, mental disease or psychosis was often named *vitvirring*; the afflicted person ended up as *vitlauss*, *vitstolinn* or *hamstollinn*. Acute mental confusion was called *ærr*. The juridical sources, that is the provincial laws, date back to the 11th century and the Icelandic *Grágás* (Grey Goose Laws) without doubt contained views that mad-

ness/psychosis was a reality, most likely from a common-sense understanding. However, the law texts hardly convey information about how this was expressed, apart from brief characterisations of mad persons breaking chains. A spectacular 1325 lawsuit in Bergen against a woman named Ragnhild Tregagás is of interest, being the only known verdict of the kind from the Norwegian Middle Ages. She was exonerated from the accusation of having caused shipwrecks by means of sorcery. She was found not accountable because of her apparent mental state: *non mentis suis compote*.

The *Gulatingsloven* states that murdering a close relative is by itself indicative of madness in the perpetrator. It also mentions the phenomenon of "werewolves" with a concrete example of a person who was metamorphosed every ninth night. Such a person was then conceived of as skilled in sorcery, not as mad. Further on, when a man became mad enough to break out of his chains, he should be exiled, and an outrageous *berserkr* should either be chained or made an outlaw. Identical sentences should be given to those who guarded him if they had omitted to tie him up. The old Christian law stated that madness (*vitvirring*) was a legal reason for divorce, and it evidently knew puerperal psychosis: the law stipulated that a newly delivered woman should not be left alone. The danger of infanticide in these circumstances seems to have been a reality.

MENTAL ILLNESS IN SAGAS

Serious grief

Reactions to bereavement is a frequent and outstanding category of human suffering. Please note added to clarify, correct? Please amend as you see fit] in the sagas on the whole. The descriptions imply a spectrum of aggressive acting out, revenge (as emotional relief), apathy, depression and psychosis. As an example, let us turn to the story of Håvard Isfjording. His son had been killed. Håvard "mourned heavily, he went to bed and it was said that for the next twelve months he lay in bed and did never rise…he seemed not fit for anything further." His wife goaded him to obtain fines for the murder of the lost son, but in vain; Håvard continued lying at a deadlock in bed for another 12 months. Following yet another unsuccessful attempt to obtain justice, he remained in bed for a further 12-month period. "He had then grown completely stiff". He said he had not been asleep for 3 years. Eventually, however, he succeeded in killing his son's murderer and became "glad and lively as a youth…People thought it was almost incredible…The time now was gone when he bore sorrow or anger in his heart."

Obvious psychopathology from serious grief is presented by Snorri Sturlusson in a most lucid account of symptoms of King Harald Hårfagre from the early 10th century. The king had not yet reached the age of 40, when he mourned his dead queen Snefrid: he had "…loved her so witlessly that he neglected his kingdom and all that was seemly for his kingly honour. The king always sat over her and thought that she would come to life again, and thus it went on for three winters that he sorrowed over her death and all the people of his land sorrowed over his madness (*viltan*)." For Snorri this madness is understandable, but his next remark is interesting, as it hints to demonological beliefs: he makes the king believe himself to be bewitched by his dead wife.

Psychosis

Acute psychosis belongs to a group of disorders. Please note added to explain the "group", correct?] characterised by the alleged exposure to severely frightening experiences, especially encounters with ghosts of the recently deceased, renowned for their evil nature: "The man became black as coal all over the body. He became ill and died". Several in the household fell ill after seeing ghosts: "Later on, one after another died until altogether six of the household had passed away" (a case of delirious infective disorder, ergotism?).

Going berserk

Several figures are characterised as having gone berserk (*berserkr*), with a reckless fury, violence and fits of manslaughter. They were in-

sensitive to pain, they hardly noticed their surroundings during the fits and they exhibited doubtlessly dissociative traits. However, they were not considered or labelled insane. The *berserkr* "went around undressed, they were mad as dogs or wolves, they were biting the edges of their shields, they had the strength of bears or oxen, they killed all people, neither fire nor iron could injure them". "It is said that those people who are shape-shift (metamorphosed), those who go berserk (*berserkr eða hamramr*) have got such capacity that nothing can withstand them. But as soon as the state wanes they get weaker than before". Most probably we are dealing with episodes of a self-induced type of dissociative trance, which was achieved by way of collective, suggestive rituals. The widespread and popular opinion that the berserk state was achieved by consumption of a toadstool (*Amanita muscaria*) is not a very tenable theory.

The frequent connected accounts of *berserkr*, shapeshifts, *hamramr* and werewolves give an impression of identical phenomena. However, they were probably two separate phenomena, including the psychotic state of lycanthropy. This state may have been the origin of mythological accounts of werewolves, as that about the brothers Sinfjotle and Sigurd. They became werewolves simply by dressing in fur cloaks from wolf skin, from which they were not able to escape. They then speak and understand wolf "Tongue" However, the authors of the sagas do not refer to the werewolf phenomenon as insanity, nor was going berserk viewed as insanity.

Bipolar disorder

Two descriptions represent a particular category, *kveldulv*, of the Egilssaga. From the mid-9th century this condition was depicted as being "swarthy and ugly". One line of the family was relieved by brothers who are fair-haired and of a more friendly and pleasant temper. *Kveldulv* got his peculiar name (meaning literally evening-wolf) from a pathological diurnal rhythm. Every evening he would grow so bad-tempered that few people dared to address him. He always went to sleep early in the evening and woke up early in the morning. This tendency was coupled with being a *berserkr*, a possibly manic state.

In the other account, King Sigurd Jorsalfare (1090-1130) exhibits inexplicable reactions within the saga, and it was assumed that they represented psychopathology. Snorre tells us that a bath was made for the king, but he then thought that there was a fish in the bath water; and he fell to laughing so much, that on account of it, his mind wandered, and this very often came upon him". The same saga also tells about the king's temper: one morning "…he was reticent and uncheerful and his companions feared that his fits had come over him again". During his crusade to Byzantium, his boasting and lavishness is referred to. Later on, Snorre tells us that "the king was at times visited by a serious illness"; in later life he "had not always the power to control himself". Once, in front of the court "he looked very tired and had a worried countenance". He then says that the two things in life that really mattered now represented the worst of everything: and he throws a precious Bible written in gold letters into the fireplace and he strikes the queen's face. The last action he explains by having seen goat's horns protruding from her forehead. From the context of the descriptions of the king's clinical state, this must have represented such an extreme exertion to the queen that it was the final reason for the church granting her a divorce from the king, a spectacular event in the 12th century.

Autism spectrum

Pervasive developmental disorder with autistic traits, or Asperger's syndrome, is mentioned briefly in a few contexts. For example, Reidar den fåvise ("the unwise") had so little wit that one could hardly imagine that he could manage for himself without help. He is presented as a person with a mechanical, concrete, non-symbolic and very literal understanding of language. He had low social intelligence, a trait that caused much amusement for his surroundings. He was sweet-tempered, but "in most instances he had acquired some strange ways of behaviour that he was looked upon as almost a half-wit". But "a large family descended from him".

CONCLUSIONS

The stunning psychological insights provided by the saga authors are revealed in the many lucid accounts of normal and deviant personalities. Altogether, there is hardly anything about the legal and literary fictional sources of the 13th century that can be judged as just fanciful or psychologically improbable, or even absurd, compared with the psychological knowledge of our time.

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