

# Sickness in the Nidaros Cathedral?

Up towards the ceiling vault of the Nidaros Cathedral, a number of artworks are hidden from public view. Many of the stone sculptures portray mythological animals and other scary creatures. In such company, one would imagine that human faces were also intended to evoke fear and anguish. Do they depict people with diseases?

In the winter of 2011, parts of the Nidaros Cathedral were cleaned and renovated for the first time since the mid-1920s (1, 2). This took place in the octagon, the octagonal space erected over the spot where Saint Olav is believed to be buried. A six-storey scaffolding replaced the high altar to reach the keystone in the vault. On his way up and down the scaffolding, the first author had an opportunity to admire works of art that have been inaccessible to the public since the previous cleaning. According to archaeologist Øystein Ekroll, who is in charge of the restoration works, another century will pass before anyone will come so close to these art treasures again (2).

## Human faces and mythological animals

In this elevated space one would possibly expect to encounter portrayals of angels and saints, but there are few to be seen. On the contrary, strange mythological animals, and not least demons and other eerie apparitions dominate the upper space (2).

Our interest soon turned to a group of figures on a cornice frieze at the third level of elevation – a depiction of two human faces and five mythological animals, all with a ghoulish appearance.

On the far left side we could see a man's head with a jester's cap. The face is contorted in a grimace that could arouse suspi-

cion of a deformity, injury or a severe neurological affliction, although it could also represent a serious mental disorder or mental disability. To the right of the jester and to the left of the mythological animals an old, toothless woman is staring right at us (Figure 1). The composition of the figures may make us believe that the woman was also intended to evoke disgust and fear. But what is she doing in the company of her bizarre neighbours, the jester and the mythological animals?

## Was she ill?

Little is known about the artworks in the Nidaros Cathedral, but the cornice frieze can be dated fairly precisely. It was added during the restoration undertaken after the first large fire had damaged the then newly-built cathedral in 1328. Since all work came to a halt during the Black Death (1349–50) (3), we know that they were put there over a period of 20 years. Most likely, they were carved by English stonemasons (Øystein Ekroll, personal communication) (3). Could similar figures from Britain help us further?

In St. Mary's Church in the village of Burton Lazars in Central England, where a leprosy hospital was established in the 12th century in honour of St. Lazarus (4), we can find a similar stone head. Seen from the front, it bears some similarities with the woman's head in Nidaros Cathedral, even

though the former is more worn by age and less detailed and direct in its expression (Figure 2). The English woman's head is called «the leper», and the diagnosis of leprosy has been made on the basis of several characteristic pathologies that are especially evident when seen from the side (5). Could the woman in Nidaros Cathedral also be a representation of leprosy?

We have consulted several colleagues who are knowledgeable in the field of leprology and medical history. First, the figure lacks the characteristic lion's face (*facies leonata*), which can occur when the disease has lasted for a long period of time. In instances like these, the subcutis is filled with small pustules packed with leprosy bacteria. This gives the face a swollen appearance, with furrows caused by folds of engorged skin (Gunnar Bjune, personal communication). It speaks against this disease that the skin apparently seems smooth and lifeless, which could possibly have been caused by a paralysis of the facial muscles. Tooth loss is typical of leprosy, but tends to primarily afflict the upper front teeth and canines. The poor state of her teeth could as easily be interpreted as an effect of poor health in general or low social status. In case of leprosy, the nose typically recedes at the root, and we cannot see any signs of this here. Most likely, the damage to the tip of the nose was inflicted at a later time.



a



b

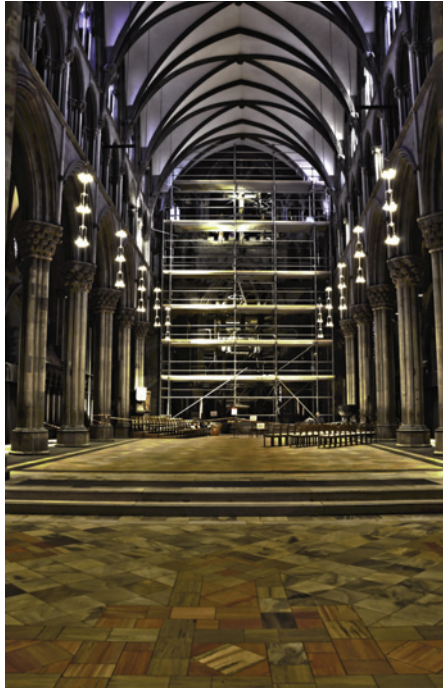
**Figure 1:** a) The woman's face from the front. Photo: Harald Brandtzæg. b) The woman's face from the side. Photo: Øystein Ekroll. This sculpture has again been hidden from public view, like a number of other precious works of art in Nidaros Cathedral.



**Figure 2:** *Woman's head, called «the leper». St. Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray, England. Photo: Tina Negus*

Another issue pertains to the stonemason's intentions and possible knowledge of the disease that was sought to be portrayed and whether this would allow us to determine the correct diagnosis after the fact (Sigurd Sandmo, personal communication). As long as the indications of the disease remain ambiguous, it becomes that much harder to arrive at a precise diagnosis and a definitive conclusion. The intentions may also be lost since we are looking at a head made of stone.

When facing a work of art that soon will be 700 years old, medical diagnoses must be made with a great deal of caution. Distance diagnostics is a complicated exercise – in time as well as in space. In addition to the intention behind the work of art as well as a historic context which is constantly changing, a definitive interpretation of the diagnosis would also depend on supplementary sources (Øivind Larsen, personal communication). In our case, this might well be that a sculpture or a portrayal appears in combination with a depiction of a saint who is generally associated with a particular disease. We are unable to find any such connections.



*Nidaros Cathedral, apse and octagon (2011). The high altar has been replaced by 20 metre high scaffolding. Photo: Nidaros Cathedral Restoration Works*

### Conclusion

The woman's head in Nidaros Cathedral is unlikely to be a representation of leprosy. The intentions of the stonemason remain lost in the recesses of history. Even the precious works of art and the results of the persistent work of numerous stonemasons again will remain concealed. In this light, it is highly meaningful that after 25 years of hard work, all those who participate in the restoration work in Nidaros Cathedral receive a silver platter with the inscription «God in Heaven sees thy work» (2).

#### Geir W. Jacobsen

*geir.jacobsen@ntnu.no*  
Department of Public Health and General Practice  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

#### Erlend Hem

Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association

*We wish to thank Øystein Ekroll for his kind assistance (tour of Nidaros Cathedral and picture), Gunnar Bjune, Øivind Larsen, Per Holck and Sigurd Sandmo for their comprehensive comments, and Tina Negus for lending us the picture from St. Mary's Church, Melton Mowbray.*

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

### References

1. Nidarosdomen. Oktogonen. [www.nidarosdomen.no/nb-NO/oktogonen/oktogonen.html](http://www.nidarosdomen.no/nb-NO/oktogonen/oktogonen.html) [1.2.2012].
2. Rogstad B. Kun for Guds øyne. *Vårt Land* 19.3.2011: 28–30.
3. Krüger S. Elefantene i Nidarosdomen: fra steinhuggerlivet ved St. Olavs katedral. Trondheim: Communicatio forlag, 2006.
4. Hem E. Lasarus, lasarett og lasaron. *Tidsskr Nor Legeforen* 2012; 132: 701.
5. Marcombe D, Manchester K. The Melton Mowbray «leper head»: an historical and medical investigation. *Med History* 1990; 34: 86–91. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1036003](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1036003) [1.2.2012].

*Received 9 February 2012, first revision submitted 27 February 2012, approved 1 March 2012. Medical editor: Petter Gjersvik.*