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# Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability

Edited by

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# Chapter 4
# The Madness of King Sigurðr: Narrating Insanity in an Old Norse Kings' Saga

*Ármann Jakobsson*

> Illness is the night-side of life,
> a more onerous citizenship.
> Everyone who is born
> holds dual citizenship,
> in the kingdom of the well
> and in the kingdom of the sick.[1]

**The patient**

King Sigurðr Magnússon ruled Norway for 27 years (1103–1130), first jointly with his two brothers, then with just one of them, and then finally on his own. He was one of only three out of the 18 kings who ruled Norway between 1030 and 1177 to live past the age of 35, a fact which alone would have encouraged the three kings to regard themselves as relative successes. These three kings were King Haraldr the Severe who died aged 50 in the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066; his son King Óláfr the Quiet who died in his bed at the age of *c*.43 in 1093; and King Sigurðr Magnússon who died aged 40 in 1130. There is some uncertainly about the age of King Eysteinn Haraldsson (d. 1157) who originally came from Ireland, whose age is never given in the extant sources and who may have lived past the age of 35, but certainly did not reach 40. It must be noted that of these three 'oldest' kings, two died natural deaths, as did several of those kings who passed away much sooner. This has to be seen in context with the inner conflicts that were a constant factor in the kingdom of Norway before 1240.[2] Before 1030, kings tended to die young as well, the exceptions being Earl Hákon Sigurðarson and his sons (who all died in their fifties as far as can be ascertained) and King Haraldr Finehair, whom it seems more appropriate to regard as a mythical rather than an actual historical figure in view of recent research;[3] indeed one of the palpably mythical aspects of King Haraldr is that he is purported to have lived into his eighties, but in the light of the rarity of any European king reaching such an age in the Middle Ages, let alone from a war-torn viking state such as 9th century Norway, and the tendency of mythical figures to live uncommonly long lives, this example can no more be taken seriously than the longevity of the biblical Methuselah. During the 13th century, the monarchy becoming stronger, Norwegian kings started living longer, including King Sverrir and King Hákon Hákonarson who lived into their late 50s.

King Sigurðr is sometimes referred to in history as *Jórsalafari*, or 'Sigurðr the Crusader', a nickname that illustrates an important fact with respect to King Sigurðr's life and rule. Although he ruled Norway for 27 years, his reign was by defined by an event of his youth, his pilgrimage to the Holy Land during the years 1108-1111, not only by later historiography, but also by the 12th and 13th century sagas.

This study is less concerned with King Sigurðr's rule in its entirety than with his somewhat inglorious decline into madness as recounted in the 12th and 13th century Old Norse sources. The focus of this study will be on the longest account that appears in the relatively ancient kings' saga *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220), the most lengthy account of those kings of Norway who ruled between 1035 and 1157, so extensive that it must have relied on several no longer extant sources, most likely both oral and written.[4] *Morkinskinna* contains a lengthy account of Sigurðr's glorious journey to the Mediterranean wherein it is depicted as a play within a play, incorporating King Sigurðr's impersonation of a much richer, more powerful and more splendid king than he actually is. However, the saga provides not only the most extensive account of his journey, but also takes the time to expound upon his instability in later years. The juxtaposition of the two narratives demonstrates the volatility of fortune, as following the splendour of King Sigurðr's grand European tour comes the terror of his mental decline. Nevertheless, he was thought of as a successful king by both medieval and modern historiographers, his reign characterised by peace and prosperity, but followed by a succession of civil wars that lasted from 1130 to 1240.[5] This is particularly evident in Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, wherein the authors closes his tale with Sigurðr's death because he does not want to mention the dreadful times that followed it.[6]

The narrative of King Sigurðr's madness in *Morkinskinna* is lengthy, graphic and striking. Interestingly, it is not the only account of a mental illness in this saga narrative, for the saga also includes a small anecdote about a courtier who becomes depressed and is cured by King Eysteinn, Sigurðr's brother, using a version of modern 'talk therapy' (though a couch is not mentioned).[7] In King Sigurðr's case, no therapy seems possible. His illness was clearly of the kind that defeated the combined skills of a 12th century court.

[1] Sontag 1978, 3.
[2] For a recent analysis of those, see Bagge 2010, esp. 23-67.
[3] See especially Á. Jakobsson 2002.

[4] See the introduction to *Íslenzk fornrit* (Aðalbjarnarson 1951, hereafter *IF*) XXIII, xxxiv-xxxix; see also Andersson and Gade 2000, 11-24.
[5] See e.g. Sigurðsson 1999, 97.
[6] Storm 1880, 67.
[7] This episode has recently been highlighted in the *British Medical Journal* by four medical experts interested in talk as therapy (Getz *et al*. 2011). See also Á. Jakobsson 2002, 151.

Below I will speak of King Sigurðr as the patient whose mental affliction caused his nearest and dearest much anxiety and chagrin. However, given that the narrative was not contemporary to his life but rather a century younger, 'King Sigurðr' must in this context refer to the character in the saga rather than the actual historical king. This article will not be much concerned with the factual accuracy of the Old Norse sources when it comes to King Sigurðr's journey. Most historians agree that King Sigurðr did arrive in Jerusalem in the summer of 1110.[8] Steven Runciman's characterisation of the Old Norse sagas as containing 'pieces of interesting historical information in the midst of legendary details' is hardly disputed either.[9] It must also be noted that characters in a given narrative do not have a will of their own, except within the artistic illusion of the narrative in question. They may thus be held to represent the author of the narrative, in this case the author of *Morkinskinna*, although the concept of saga authorship, in itself, is considerably problematic. To begin with, the identity of the author of *Morkinskinna* is not known, and it is not even certain that the saga was composed by a single author. Furthermore, there is great uncertainty as to how much of the material in the saga is original, as it is in many cases the oldest instance of a given narrative. Medieval authors did not possess their texts in the same way that modern authors do, and, when it comes to historical narrative, there is always a gap of uncertainty between the actual event and the earliest extant narrative in which it is related. In the case of King Sigurðr's golden youth and his sad decline, as depicted in *Morkinskinna*, there is a gap of some hundred years.

As will be discussed below, there is a clear link between the *Morkinskinna* narrative of King Sigurðr's madness and other prominent preoccupations of this particular text. And yet King Sigurðr is never only a saga character. Some of his energy must come from the individual who lived a century before the narrative was composed, accounts and anecdotes that must have served as the author's material for creating the King Sigurðr who appears as a character in the saga.

**Youth**

The scope given to the king's journey to the Holy Land in the narrative of *Morkinskinna* is a good indication of its importance within the larger framework of the history of King Sigurðr and his brothers: his crusade occupies more than a third of the narrative concerning their reign.[10] Nevertheless, its wider context, the life of King Sigurðr as narrated in *Morkinskinna*, must be kept in mind in any analysis of the crusade account.

Before the crusade narrative begins, it is related that the three young kings were widely popular in Norway, that they reduced taxation, and that they relinquished other (un-specified) claims on their subjects.[11] It is then that King Sigurðr, out of the blue, decided to go to Jerusalem.[12] Nothing is related about the reason behind this sudden desire of his, although his aim is clearly stated: to '*kaupa sér Guðs miskunn ok góðan orðstír*' (buy himself the mercy of God and a good reputation).[13] The emphasis is placed on the great cost of the expedition and the size of his entourage. According to the poet Þórarinn Shortcloak, whose verse is used as a source in *Morkinskinna*, King Sigurðr travelled abroad with sixty ships and many magnates (landed men), although only those who were willing.[14] There seems to have been no shortage of the latter, which illustrates the glamour that a proposed journey to the Mediterranean must have held for the subjects of a peripheral monarch such as the king of Norway.

The great size of his entourage indicates that the journey was not merely a spiritual quest, but that prestige was also important to the king. Indeed, King Sigurðr's stated aims (the mercy of God and a good reputation) encompass both spiritual and cultural capital. It should thus not be overlooked that King Sigurðr must have believed that a crusade would help him after his death, and death is certainly an important subject in the earliest Norse-Icelandic biographies.[15] In King Sigurðr's case, his biography in *Morkinskinna* ends with his burial at the Church of St. Hallvarðr in Oslo and with the sentence: '*Liggr hann nú í steinveggnum útarr frá kórnum syðra [megin]*' (he now lies in the stone wall outside the choir).[16]

Whether the journey helped King Sigurðr gain his spiritual goal is a different matter. He does refer to it in the *mannjafnaður* (flyting) with his brother Eysteinn when they compare their respective achievements,[17] but there is little emphasis here on the spiritual.[18] This flyting is a kind of spectacle, a peaceful but dramatic joust between the two kings. It also contains an evaluation of the merits of the crusade, juxtaposed with King Eysteinn's achievements at home, while he was taking care of the realm in his brother's absence. The flyting episode between the two brothers does not involve family nobility or the legitimacy

[8] See e.g. Runciman 1952, 92-93.
[9] Runciman 1952, 485.
[10] To give some indication of the scope, the text of *Morkinskinna* is 569 pages in the two volume *Íslenzk fornrit* edition. Thereof, the history of the three brothers King Sigurðr, King Eysteinn and King Óláfr occupies 82 pages, the crusade is retold in 30, thus slightly more than a third of the whole narrative. Apart from the crusade, the story of relatively friendly competition between the two brothers Sigurðr and Eysteinn is the second most consumptive narrative thread, while the insanity of King Sigurðr in later life comes third.
[11] *ÍF* XXIV, 70-71. The edition used is Jakobsson and Guðjónsson 2011. Unless otherwise stated, this article will refer to page numbers in this edition (*ÍF* XXIII and XXIV). A recent English translation of this text is Andersson and Gade 2000.
[12] Riant (1865, 175) believed that King Sigurðr had been particularly inspired by the pilgrimage of Danish king Eric (d. 1103).
[13] *ÍF* XXIV, 71.
[14] *ÍF* XXIV, 72.
[15] A case in point is the Ynglinga saga of Heimskringla, which is not so much a kings' saga but rather a collection of colourful or even downright bizarre royal deaths.
[16] *ÍF* XXIV, 152.
[17] *ÍF* XXIV, 131-34.
[18] On the flyting, see Lönnroth 1978, 53-80; Kalinke 1984, 162-65; Lie 1937, 66-68; Á. Jakobsson 2002, 183-85.

of claims to the crown, but rather the virtues, roles and obligations of a king. Sigurðr boasts of being the stronger of the two and the better swimmer, while Eysteinn claims that he is more dextrous and better at chess. Sigurðr says he is good with weapons and capable of participating in many a tournament, but people apparently turn more readily to Eysteinn to receive his judgement in their legal matters. The contest between the kings reaches its height when the achievements of the kings in office are compared. Sigurðr plays the crusade as his trump card:

> *Fór ek til Jórdánar, ok kom ek við Púl, ok sá ek þik eigi þar. Vann ek átta orrostur, ok vartu í øngarri. Fór ek til grafar Dróttins, ok sá ek þik eigi þar. Fór ek í ána, þá leið er Dróttinn fór, ok svam ek yfir, ok sá ek þik eigi þar. Ok knýtta ek þér knút, ok bíðr þín þar. Þá vann ek borgina Sídon með Jórsalakonungi, ok hǫfðum vér eigi þinn styrk eða ráð til*.[19]
>
> (I went to Jordan and was at Apulia, and I did not see you there. I won eight battles and you were in none of them. I went to the grave of the Lord, and I did not see you there. I went to the river, by the route that the Lord took, and swam over it and I did not see you there, and I tied a knot for you that still awaits you there. Then I won the city of Sidon with the King of Jerusalem, and we did not have your support or advice.)

Eysteinn shows himself capable of fighting fire with fire and counters this with a comprehensive list of structures raised under his watch: churches, beacons, shelters, harbours, monasteries, halls and bridges. He finishes his case by mocking Sigurðr's crusade:

> *Nú er þetta smátt at telja, en eigi veit ek víst at landsbúinu gegni þetta verr eða sé óhallkvæmra en þótt þú brytjaðir blámenn fyrir inn raga karl ok hrapaðir þeim svá í helvíti*.[20]
>
> (Now all this may not amount to much, but I am not sure that the inhabitants of the land are worse off or have profited less than when you butchered blacks for the devil and sent them to hell.)

As Sigurðr recounts his exploits on the crusade, accomplished for the glory of God, Eysteinn counters with practical achievements: the establishment of monasteries, the formulation of a body of laws, and his building enterprises, singling out merchants and fishermen amongst those who have directly benefited from his rule. Eysteinn is working for the benefit of others and is doing so in Norway. He is a king for peaceful subjects who require good roads, harbours, stable and equitable laws and monasteries. Sigurðr's crusades and courtliness are certainly remarkable, but seem in the end to be of less practical use to his subjects in their daily lives than Eysteinn's more mundane shelters, harbours and beacons.

The flyting serves as a 'king's mirror', revealing the brothers' respective virtues and functions. Although Eysteinn proves the victor, Sigurðr's merits are obvious. But, in this episode, the crusade comes across as a fairly worldly affair: the emphasis seems to be on the cultural capital gained rather than any acquired spiritual advantage. Sigurðr does refer to Christ, but his emphasis is on the battles he has won and the places he has seen. The crusade does not seem to have made him more devout or humble. While the size of his entourage is unparallelled, his spiritual gain seems at best dubious, and it is further undermined by King Sigurðr's sad end.

The stark contrast between joy and grief lends shape to King Sigurðr the Crusader's story. In his youth he heads south and is indiscriminately received with open arms. He travels from land to land, and as he continues on the receptions become ever grander and more elaborate, the merriment more pronounced, until he finally reaches Constantinople:

> *keisari lét fara í móti þeim með leika ok sǫngfœri. Reið Sigurðr konungr ok allir hans menn með þvílíkan prís inn í borgina ok svá til halla keisara, … þá koma þar í hǫllina tveir sendimenn Kirjalax keisara ok báru í milli sín í miklum ok stórum tǫskum bæði gull ok silfr*.[21]
>
> (The Emperor sent out people to meet them with song and dance. King Sigurðr and all his men rode into the city in great pomp and on to the emperor's hall … there two of Emperor Alexios's messengers entered the hall bearing huge caskets filled with gold and silver.)

In return Sigurðr holds a feast for the emperor and wins the greatest victory of many on this journey: starting a fire without wood and treating the emperor in a princely manner.

Although the Old Norse kings' sagas are clearly influenced by the ideology of divine rulership, they also emphasise charisma as an important virtue of any leader.[22] In spite of King Sigurðr's stated steadfast wish to buy himself the mercy of God, the crusade, as it is depicted in *Morkinskinna*, comes across more as an exercise in charismatic presence than as a spiritual journey. Although the matter of his salvation remains uncertain that does not necessarily imply that his wish for spiritual gain was insincere, nor that it was an unimportant part of the voyage.[23] However, it remains

[19] *ÍF* XXIV, 133.
[20] *ÍF* XXIV, 133-34.
[21] *ÍF* XXIV, 96.
[22] See e.g. Á. Jakobsson 1997, 89-264; Orning 2008. Orning's concepts of 'unpredictability' and 'presence' are a useful tool to illustrate the advantages (and disadvantages) that a crusade can offer to a medieval king.
[23] As Christiansen (1980, 251) has remarked, 'there is little point in trying to distinguish between crusades undertaken for pure or spiritual motives and those that were political, papalist, perverted or corrupt in

that the emphasis in the narrative of *Morkinskinna* is actually not on the spirituality of the journey, but rather on the king performing his identity successfully, and on how the crusade establishes Sigurðr as a king among kings, and Norway a kingdom among kingdoms.[24] Each royal figure that King Sigurðr meets during his voyage confers prestige on both the young king and upon his country in offering him a warm reception. Most importantly, the emperor of Constantinople entertains him with a splendid circus in the hippodrome.[25]

The splendour of King Sigurðr's magnificient journey in his youth ends up standing in stark contrast to his life at home and his sad fate later in life. The dark side of this famous journey emerges when King Sigurðr returns from his voyages - eventually in his sad fate as a lunatic on the throne, but immediately in the disruption he and his men cause upon their return. At first, King Sigurðr receives a hero's welcome, and the treasures he brings back with him cast glory on all of Norway. All hail King Sigurðr when he comes back, but soon his men start strutting around in their finery and thinking themselves above everyone who did not go on the journey, provoking a backlash from those who stayed at home. King Eysteinn's men complain that Sigurðr the Crusader's retinue consider themselves to be superior after the crusade:

> *hann hefir mjǫk framizk, enda þykkir honum allt annat lítils vert, slíkt ok ǫllum mǫnnum hans, þótt þeir væri þjónostumenn í ferðinni, þá mega nú eigi jafnask við þá ríkir búendr né vinir þínir, herra. Ganga þeir nú í pellsklæðum ok hyggjask umfram margan vaskan dreng*.[26]
>
> (He has distinguished himself and he thinks everything else of little value, as do all his men as well, even if they were only his serving men on the expedition. Now neither the rich land owners nor your friends, sire, may be considered their equals, and they walk around in fur clothing and consider themselves better than many a brave man.)

The performance that earned the respect of the other kings abroad has now acquired a life of its own at home, but there it does not feel appropriate. In fact, this presages the king's own eventual sad fate.

**Decline**

In Constantinople, just when the king's honour is at its highest, a serpent rears its head in Paradise in the form of a prophet who spoils the happiness:

> *Þat mælti spekingr einn í Miklagarði at svá myndi fara virðing Sigurðar konungs sem it óarga dýr er vaxit, geyst í bógunum ok aptr minna; lét at svá myndi fara hans konungdómr at þá myndi mest um þykkja vert en síðarr minna*.[27]
>
> (A wise man in Constantinople prophesied that Sigurðr's fame would resemble the frame of the wild beast, broad in the shoulders and tapering towards the rear; so would his kingship fare, that though at that time he was of great renown he would decline later.)

The life of a king reminds the wise man of a wild animal. Though the comparison derives from the shape of a lion, it reminds us at the same time of the animal that dwells in every civilised man.[28] King Sigurðr is now a star in the firmament, but there nevertheless dwells within him that bestial weakness which will lead to his eventual downfall.

In his youth King Sigurðr the Crusader attended a large feast surrounded by famous people. Even the emperor treated him like a brother. Later in his life he is also at a feast, but by this point everything has changed:

> *Sigurðr konungr sat með mǫrgum mǫnnum gǫfgum í stirðum hug. Var þat frjákveld eitt at dróttsetinn spurði hvat til matar skyldi búa. Konungr svaraði: „Hvat nema slátr?“ Svá var mikil ógn at honum at engi þorði í mót at mæla. Váru nú allir ókátir, ok bjoggusk menn til borðanna. Kómu inn sendingar ok heitt slátr á, ok váru allir menn hljóðir ok hǫrmuðu konungs mein*.[29]
>
> (King Sigurðr was sitting with many noble men in a sad state of mind. One Friday evening the steward asked what food should be prepared. The king answered: 'What else besides fresh meat?' So great was their fear of him that no one dared to contradict him. Everyone was unhappy and people prepared to eat. Steaming platters of fresh meat were borne in, and everybody was quiet and lamented the king's illness.)

The prophecy has been validated. The crusader king is now demanding to eat meat on Friday, and thereby violating Christian law. Many other stories in *Morkinskinna* dealing with the king's mental illness take place at feasts as he sits contentedly on his throne surrounded by his courtiers. The scene above recalls the king's famed progress in his youth. But Sigurðr is no longer the great monarch of old. He is now emotionally unstable, and his subjects are afraid of him. The joy of the former feast has now turned to sorrow.

The study of emotions is a relatively new subject for historians but incredibly important in studying the Middle

aim, execution or effect'.

[24] This has also been noted by Kalinke 1984, 155-59) who remarks: 'Sigurðr's hallmark is the grand gesture that puts him on an equal footing with the great rulers he meets' (p. 159).

[25] *ÍF* XXIV, 97-98.

[26] *ÍF* XXIV, 131.

[27] *ÍF* XXIV, 99.

[28] On lion metaphors in Old Icelandic sagas, see Beck 1972.

[29] *ÍF* XXIV, 144.

Ages, as the emotions of individuals offered an explanatory function in that period that social or economic factors absorbed in the 19th and 20th century.[30] As I have argued elsewhere, *Morkinskinna* is a saga much concerned with emotions,[31] and its narrative of King Sigurðr's decline is an excellent case study of a court governed by a mentally troubled king. As remarked by William Miller,[32] the sagas convey emotions through action and dialogue and require us to infer motivation and the emotional underpinning of human action.

At the end of King Sigurðr's story there are five episodes that reveal the king's growing disintegration.[33] In the first he is '*með miklu vanmegni ok þungu bragði… leit yfir lýðinn ok arðgaði augunum og sá umhverfis sik um pallana*' (in a bad way and extremely unhappy … looked out over the people and rolled his eyes and looked around him at the benches).[34] The behaviour of the king is violent and only the valiant Óttarr the Trout dares to talk straight to him. Then the king calms down and agrees that he was '*ærr*' (mad).[35] On the second occasion the king is so displeased at the praise of a man as a good swimmer that he nearly drowns him,[36] and in the third incident Áslákr Rooster prevents the king from eating meat on a holy day.[37] In the fourth narrative the king is seized by lechery and yields to his weakness for meat, and in the fifth he wishes to divorce his wife and take another. In this last incident, once again a courageous subject saves the king from misfortune and the king begins to '*þrútna ok bólgna*' ('swell and puff up').[38] The symptoms are not only psychological but here become physical as well.

It is remarkable how often Sigurðr mends his ways, never punishing his subjects for preventing him from fulfilling his misguided plans, but they remain very frightened of him and at loss how to behave. On every occasion when he refuses to speak, people become afraid '*at þá myndi enn koma at honum vanstilli*' (that another attack would come over him).[39] The state of confusion that the mental illness initiates is graphically depicted in the texts, not least how baffling and terrifying the changes that come over the king appear to his court.

As his illness worsens, Sigurðr the Crusader's rule becomes a veritable reign of terror against which his subjects and his friends do not dare to protest. His insanity also leads him to various un-Christian activities such as eating meat on Fridays, abandoning his wife for another woman, and, finally, refusing to repent of his sins before his death. While *Morkinskinna* unambiguously depicts it as the result of mental illness, the king's behaviour in his later years might still seem to undo any and every spiritual advancement that he had gained with the crusade. However, the saga tends to be silent on such otherwordly matters. Although the saga demonstrates a marked interest in moral issues, it rarely speculates on the afterlife of its royal characters, and is mostly concerned with the material world.[40] *Morkinskinna* does include a prophetic narrative that could possibly be interpreted as a suggestion that King Sigurðr's place in the afterlife will be less favourable than that of his brothers, though his brother King Eysteinn offers a different interpretation, that King Sigurðr will face some serious grief in his old age, as he indeed does.[41]

Sigurðr's illness is repeatedly called *staðleysi* ('unsteadiness' or 'misplacement') or *vanstilli* ('lack of control'). In *Heimskringla* the following description occurs at the beginning of Sigurðr's illness:

> *'En er konungr var í laug ok var tjaldat yfir kerit, þá þótti honum renna fiskr í lauginni hjá sér. Þá sló á hann hlátri svá miklum, at þar fylgði staðleysi, ok kom þat síðan mjǫk optliga af honum*'
>
> (When the king lay in the bath and the tub was covered by a tent, he thought that fish were swimming in the bath near him. Then he began to laugh so loudly that unsteadiness followed and thereafter it happened very often to him.)[42]

In Theodoricus' *Historia*, Sigurðr is said to have been originally one of the best of rulers but later only mediocre and his madness is mentioned as having possibly been the result of a poisonous drink:

> *'Siwardus inter optimos principes tunc mertio numerandus, postmodum vero inter mediocres, dicentibus quibusdam sensum illi fuisse immutatum propter potionem cujudsam noxiæ confectionis. Sed qui hoc affirmant viderint ipsi, quid dicant; nos ista in medio relinquimus*'.[43]

The king loses his bearings and his self-control, and without self-control a king cannot be just. He is unable to discharge his responsibilities to his country and subjects. In his biography in *Morkinskinna*, this emphasis on lack of control in the king's later years is remarkably contrasted with the supreme control he demonstratesd during his performance as an excellent monarch from the North in the crusade of his youth. So the *staðleysi* is not a part of his character, it is a disease that starts afflicting him in his later days, presumably in his thirties.

[30] An important early study is Stearns and Stearns 1985, 813-36. The most extensive study to my knowledge is Reddy 2001, and for the Middle Ages Rosenwein 2006, who discusses some of the problems facing historians (medievalists in particular) studying emotions. As Rosenwein points out (2006, 3-5), the meaning of the word 'emotions' is far from self-evident and it could be debated whether words such as 'passions' or 'feelings' are synonymous to 'emotions', although they are used in much the same way.
[31] Á. Jakobsson 2002, 148-52.
[32] Miller 1992, 107.
[33] *ÍF* XXIV, 138-52.
[34] *ÍF* XXIV, 138-139.
[35] *ÍF* XXIV, 140.
[36] *ÍF* XXIV, 141-142.
[37] *ÍF* XXIV, 144-145.
[38] *ÍF* XXIV, 150.
[39] *IF* XXIV, 146.
[40] Á. Jakobsson 1997, 191-239.
[41] See *ÍF* XXIV, 106-8.
[42] Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1951, 262.
[43] Storm 1880, 66.

In the episodes concerning his madness,[44] it is clearly established how mentally unstable the king is. This is evident from the way he rolls his eyes and his erratic and unpredictable behaviour towards his wife and his subjects. The king's confused state is something that those with mentally sick relatives recognise well; the changes that come over the sick person can be baffling.

The king himself is aware of his disability. When his son, Magnús the Blind, and his alleged brother, Haraldr Gilchrist, have begun competing for power, he refers to it candidly:

> *Illa eru þér at staddir, Nóregsmenn, at hafa æran konung yfir yðr. En svá segir mér hugr um at þér mynduð rauðu gulli kaupa af stundu at ek væra heldr konungr en þeir Haraldr ok Magnús; annarr er grimmr en annarr óvitr.*[45]
>
> (You are badly off, you Norwegians, to have a crazy king ruling you, but I suspect that you would soon pay in red gold for me to be your king rather than either Haraldr or Magnús. The first is cruel, and the other foolish.)

This evaluation proves accurate, when both men become inferior kings. Sigurðr's misfortune is of a different order: he is an excellent king who loses his mind. But his illness is not so severe as to blind him to its nature, and his sufferings in this sickness are clearly depicted.

King Sigurðr died in 1130, making these narrative accounts the only data avaible to diagnose him. Although *Morkinskinna* is quite extensive and graphic, it is still almost a century removed from the actual events. Thus it is not possible to determine what sort of mental affliction King Sigurðr suffered from, and the text provides no clue as to how it emerged. To modern medical experts, '*ærr*' (crazy) hardly suffices as a technical term and Sigurðr's unblanced behaviour could be explained by a variety of causes, physical or psychological in origin. Neither do we know how it was treated; in fact the King's subject seem more or less powerless when their ruler becomes disturbed.

What it is possible is to say is that Old Icelandic sagas demonstrate a sensitivity and an awareness of mental illnesses that today's scholarship might not expect from the 13th century North. Though the court society depicted in *Morkinskinna* offered no cure for King Sigurðr, the sympathy for his condition shines through. The madness was not explicable, and both king and subjects had to survive without those handy labels available to make people feel as if they understood what is happening.

And yet the illness of the king was still a tale worth telling and, according to the saga, the king himself remained a remarkable man in spite of his ignoble end:

> *Þat er mál manna at eigi hafi meiri skǫrungr verit né stjórnarmaðr í [Nóregi en] Sigurðr konungur. Ok þó var þat er á leið ævi hans at varla fekk hann gætt skaplyndis síns né hugar at eigi yrði þat stundum með [miklu á]felli ok þungligum hlutum. En ávallt þótti hann merkiligr konungr ok dýrligr hǫfðingi af ferð sinni ok atgervi.*[46]
>
> (People say that there never has been a more distinguished man or ruler in [Norway than] King Sigurðr, but towards the end of his life he could hardly control his temper nor mind, so that it was not sometimes afflicted with [grave] illness and severe events, but he always was considered a remarkable king and noble ruler because of his journey and accomplishments.)

[44] *ÍF* XXIV, 138-152.
[45] *ÍF* XXIV, 149.
[46] *ÍF* XXIV, 131.

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