

The relationship between epilepsy and religiosity illustrated by the story of the visionary mystic Wise-Knut



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ABSTRACT

The story of Wise-Knut is remarkable. He was born in a poor mountain district in Norway in 1792 and lived for 84 years. He had severe and untreated epilepsy with apparent ictal, postictal, and interictal religious symptoms. He heard voices and had religious delusions; a spiritual awakening after a seizure cluster was a turning point in his life. Contemporary biographers have narrated his major life events in detail, but without a precise separation between ictal and postictal spiritual symptoms. Religious and supernatural significance was attributed to his experiences; he himself believed that his extraordinary abilities were a gift from God: "The prophets have had it like myself." His story corroborates the impression that epilepsy may have had a considerable role in the history of religions.

However, apart from anecdotes on visionary and healing abilities, his biographies contain nothing that is miraculous or incredible. He falls into the line of various mystics and religious figures of the past that are currently thought to have had epilepsy. Apparently, the advancing understanding of epilepsy and its complications have influenced the dynamic balance between faith, superstition, and rationalism.

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1. Introduction

Knut Rasmussen Nordgarden (1792–1876) had uncontrolled epilepsy and delusions and was deeply religious. He had a peculiar personality and was thought to have supernatural abilities. He was widely known in Norway and other parts of Scandinavia by the name of Wise-Knut; some even considered him to be a new prophet sent from God. There is ample written documentation on his life and symptoms, as he has been the subject of several biographies [1–4], the first one by a contemporary and respected folklore researcher, Johannes Skar (1837–1914). Skar was raised in the same rural district as Wise-Knut, not far from Lillehammer and was well acquainted with him [1]. Later texts on Wise-Knut are partly based on his work. However, the best known writing is by the Norwegian national author and Nobel laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). His narrative came out in 1878; an English edition was published in 1909 [2]. Bjørnson also resided in the same parish and knew many of the locals from Wise-Knut's lifetime. The small, simple cabin where Wise-Knut lived alone is kept unchanged as a museum open to the public during the summer.

What can we learn from the story of Wise-Knut today?

To address this question, the aim of this article was to discuss his seizure disorder and its influence on his extraordinary life and personality profile in light of current knowledge about spiritual and religious symptoms of epilepsy. We also wished to convey how epilepsy was perceived and related to myths and prejudice in Norway in the 19th century.

2. Biographical data

2.1. Growing up

Knut was born and brought up in a deeply Christian family on a small farm in a poor mountain district. Due to his illness, school attendance was irregular, but cognitive development seems to have been satisfactory; he learned to read and write at home. During adolescence, he spent most of the time with his mother as he got seizures as soon as he tried to do hard work on the farm. He developed an odd and "ugly" look; "while having a seizure he was still more frightful to look at" [3]. He was large-limbed and tall with a limp. He had long raven hair hanging down his shoulders. "His visage was big and extremely expressive, the mouth crooked and half open, the nose long and straight, the brows strong and heavy. He had big sparkling and strongly squinted eyes. His whole appearance created both wonder and awe" [2] (Fig. 1). He was always bare-headed. "It was whispered into his ear that he should take his cap off"; wearing a cap induced "fits and cramps" [3].

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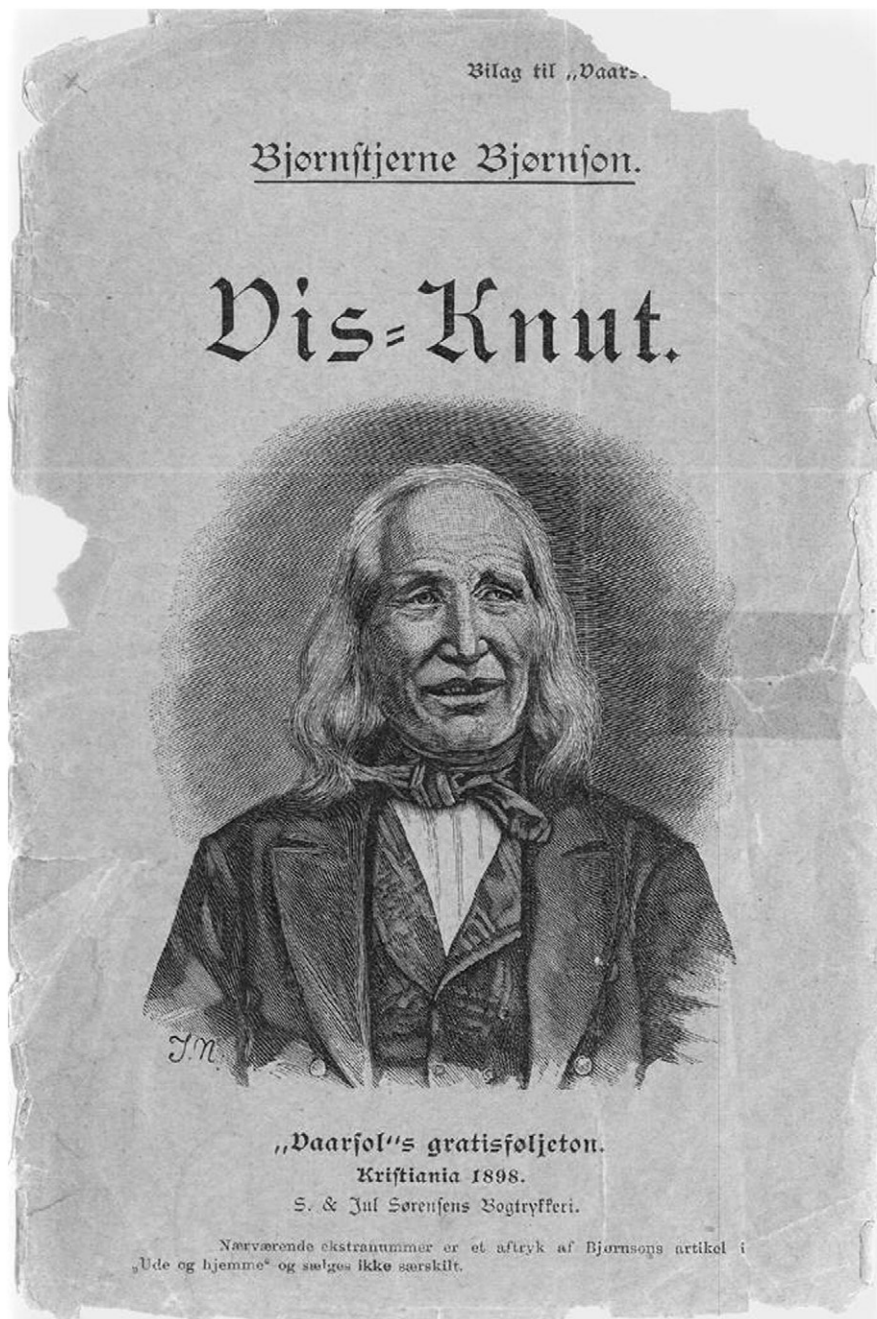


Fig. 1. Wise-Knut, as portrayed in the publication by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson.

2.2. The seizure disorder

Seizure onset was reported to occur at the age of about half a year. During childhood, he often fell to the ground with “spasms”. According to Bjørnson, he received what was considered the best treatment for epilepsy in Norway at the time [2]: “Three drops of blood from three different crippled persons, eaten on a piece of bread/roasted heart from a snake in the spring before the call of the cuckoo/an amulet around the neck carrying a part of a snake.”

During seizures, his head and torso could turn towards one side [3], or he could lose contact with his surroundings, “as if he was dreaming” [2]. Sometimes, he could hear a voice in his ear, often in a commanding way. He also had convulsions with “grinding of teeth and foaming at the mouth” [2].

The epilepsy gradually improved throughout childhood, and upon reaching his teens, he was seizure-free. The seizures returned at the age of 16 years after the death of his father, and later, he had persistent uncontrolled epilepsy.

2.3. A revelation

At the age of 26 years, he decided to visit the local church for communion to receive forgiveness. However, three days before the service, he became so violently ill that he had to stay in bed for weeks. After days of seizures, he eventually became calmer. He could hear “harps playing in the air and the singing of hymns, followed by violin and clarinet music sweeping along the floor as if coming from the earth itself,

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