

NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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NORDNORSK RYER

by Inger Anne Utvåg

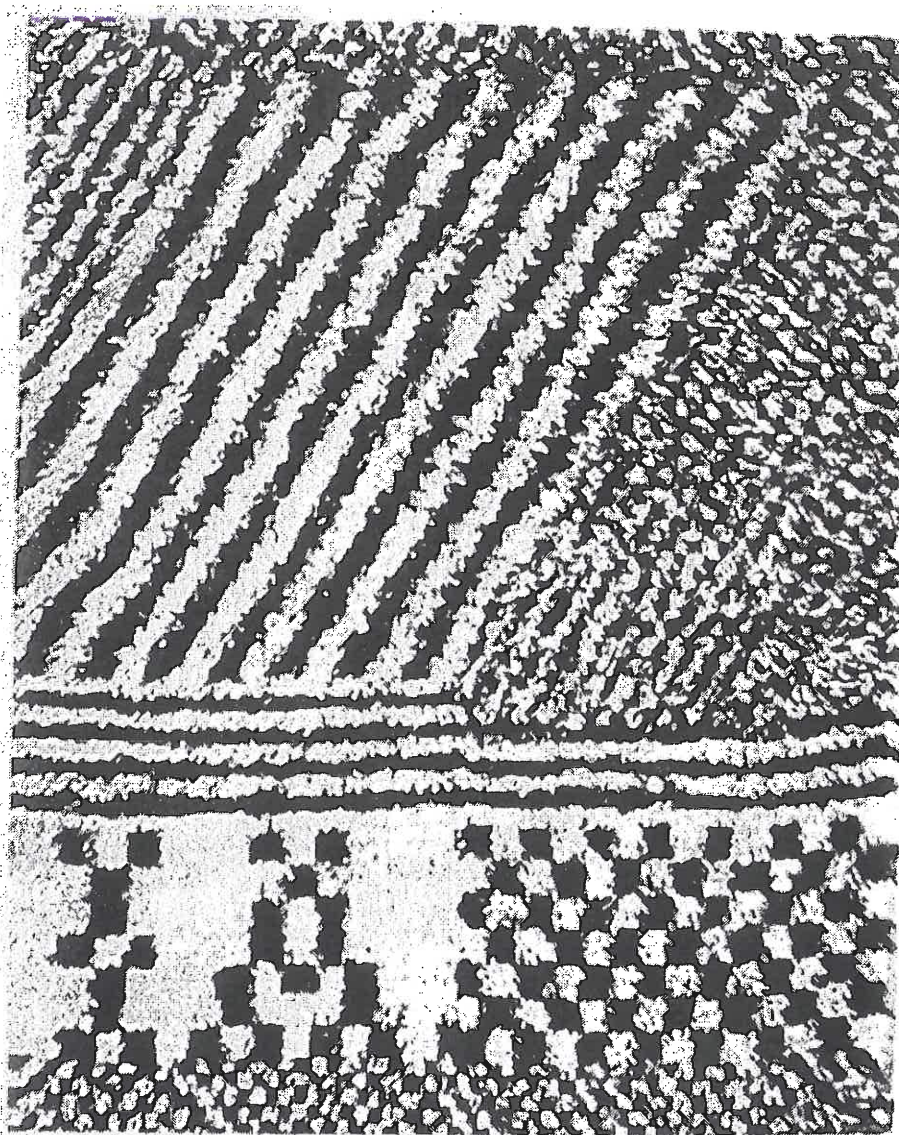
Translated by Eva Douthit

While teaching at the State Community College for Educators in Arts and Crafts (Statens Lærerskole) I undertook a study about North Norwegian rye weaving.

I started by acquiring historical knowledge about the traditional technique of rye weaving, focusing, however, primarily on the weavings of Northern Norway.

I undertook this study because I was interested in the textiles of Northern Norway in general, and in North Norwegian traditional textile arts and crafts specifically. The Norwegian Folk Museum (Norsk Folkemuseum), Nordland County Museum (Nordland Fylkesmuseum) and Tromsø Museum became my most important sources of historical information. I was aware of the fact that rye weaving was quite common in Northern Norway, especially in the county of Nordland.

In March of 1978 I traveled to the Kjerringøy trading post in Nordland County. The trading post owns a large collection of registered ryes. All the ryes were hanging from rafters in storage houses (stabbur). They hung in majestic order from the rafters under the open ceiling. Each and every one was far more beautiful than what I had envisioned. After this visit I became seriously committed to exploring the technique of rye weaving and its effects.



HELLE RYA (Woven by author)

HISTORY

The oldest ryes preserved in Norway are mostly from the 17-1800's. But the collection from the country around Vefsn in Mosjøen has a fragment of a rye dated 1681. The date is knotted into the bottom of the right hand corner. We assume this rye has been put to heavy and practical uses and we do not know any other ryes dating that far back in time. (Hoffmann 1973)

We have acquired knowledge about rye weaving prior to the 1700s from written sources.

Ryes from the 1700-1800's have been found all over Scandinavia, and definitive works have been written about ryes in Finland, Sweden and Norway. In my research I have also used minor articles about the topic.

A rye is a woven rug with more or less closely spaced rows of knots creating shag on one side of the rug. The shag side might be plain or patterned. The smooth side has vertical stripes or is checked.

The oldest known written sources about ryes date back to the late middle ages. The ryes were then used as bedding. In one of the sources a rye is also mentioned as part of a boat's inventory, where it was used both as a mattress and as a cover. Ryes have commonly been used that way along the entire Norwegian coast. I became more and more fascinated by the character of the boat rye the longer I worked with the material.

I have wondered whether the rye originated in Scandinavia, or if it was influenced by oriental floss weaving. Scandinavian rye weaving is entirely different from oriental floss weaving; Scandinavian rye weaving is coarse and the shag is sparse, while oriental floss weaving is velvety and tight. In spite of this difference the technique is the same. The ryes were soft and pliable. They were often woven in black, brown and white natural wool. The colors contributed to the overall effect of sheepskin.

In most of the preserved older ryes the floss is made with spun wool yarns. But the yarns are often spun and plied so loosely that it at times appears as if the wool is combed and cut in appropriate lengths. One assumes the floss was spun from the guard hairs of the old Norwegian breed of sheep. The guard hairs were quite shiny. The ryes thus took on the quality of a sheepskin.

The sheepskin was the most commonly used bedding from primitive times to the end of the 1800's. This could explain why the ryes looked so much like a sheepskin. Rye weaving is relatively slow and therefore expensive work. There was no shortage of sheepskin in this country, so the assumption is that ryes were woven because they could be washed, and they tolerated salt seawater well. This means then that the ryes were an ideal and practical bedding solution in the open boats that embarked on long sea journeys. We know that it was common to take along ryes when fishing off the Lofoten peninsula. The ryes were warm and solid. Maybe the ryes originated with a seafaring folk? The fishermen always needed protection against wind and weather.

A well-woven rye is known to be more resistant to daily hard wear than a sheepskin.

Sources indicate that rye weaving inland is of a later date than rye weaving along the coast. We can draw a general conclusion about the similarity of development in all the Scandinavian countries.

TECHNIQUE

Technically speaking rye weaving belongs to the category of ordinary floss weaving. A rye consists of a foundation and the floss. The knot used to tie the floss to the foundation is the same knot used in most oriental carpets, the "smyrna knot".

Our ryes are unique in the sense that the knot is hidden in the foundation weave. This protects

the knot from wear and tear. The smooth side of the rye also emerges with a clearer design. It is often difficult to distinguish the front from the backside of old ryes. One can assume that this depends on the final uses of the rye. In addition to using ryes in boats, they were used in horse carriages, as horse blankets, as bedding and as wall covers.

As mentioned earlier, the rye consists of a foundation weave (ryetel), and this again consists of warp, weft and knotted floss. The floss is created by knotting evenly spaced threads to the warp ends in horizontal rows. Between each row of floss there are several rows of weft. The fewer rows between the knots, the tighter the floss. The floss is also called "napp, nupp, or nok". If there are many rows of weft between each row of knots, the floss lies flat. Often the length of the floss determines the distance between the rows. This technique is called the "rye technique".

Often the foundation weave was threaded very simply. The loom could be threaded to a two-harness plain weave. In this case the knots would be visible, and the floss side would definitely be the front of the rye. But the foundation weave could also be a 3 or 4 harness twill, diagonal or diamond shaped twill, or a 4 harness goose eye twill. One example of a rye with a double woven foundation has also been found. This rye was uncovered in Ekre in Heidalen. The ryes were woven with a width of 0.7-0.9 meters, with two or three widths sewn together to make one rug. We see more variation in the lengths. Two widths were used for appropriate bedding, and the larger boat ryes used three widths.

Often two widths with different shades of yarn or with different designs on the floss side were sewn together, and they might have different checkered designs on the smooth side. We observe this in several old ryes. In some cases this creates a charming effect.

MATERIALS

The ryes were mostly made from wool. In some cases linen or hemp have been found in the warp, and in rare cases cotton. In the so-called "rag rug" or "wash cloth ryes" rags of all kinds were used. At times the rags were used together with wool, and sometimes the floss consisted entirely of rags.

Using rags was seen as good economy. People used the rags they had, and mixed different qualities freely. "The rag ryes" were of course of inferior quality compared to the wool ryes.

There was a wide discrepancy of quality in the ryes. The warp thread was often wool spun with a left twist and plied with a twist to the right, and in the weft the weavers used yarn spun in the opposite direction. These ryes were often well planned and of excellent quality. Of course even these ryes show some variety in the quality. The quality of the rye depended to a large extent upon its intended use, and in most cases people simply used the materials they had available. The ryes were evaluated according to its material, its design or its use of color. The weight of ryes we still have preserved varies from 2 to 12 kilos. The bed ryes from the interior of the country or especially from Southern Norway were light and fluffy, while the boat ryes from North and West Norway were thick and heavy.

COLORS

The colors in the old ryes were often monotonous on the floss side, but showed more variety on the smooth side. The weavers mostly used white, gray, brown and black natural wool for the floss side. There was a surprising amount of variety in how these natural colors were used. And the ryes were exceedingly beautiful. We sometimes see a few spots of dyed yarns in the more "daring" natural wool ryes.

We found ryes with natural yarns along the coast in Northern and Western Norway. A few colored ryes are also found, but these come from the

inland areas of Southern Norway. The colorful ryes were woven with plant dyed yarns, and the cost is estimated to have been twice that of a rye using natural colors. The natural ryes were primarily boat ryes. Plant dyes did not show good resistance against salt water and ocean air. Colored ryes from the end of the 1800's were mostly woven with chemically dyed yarns. This "modernization" contributed to detracting from the quality of the rye. But because of the wear and tear on the ryes on the coast, they continued to use naturally colored wool.

The "gray ryes" dominated the market in Nordland. On the coast of Helgeland we have found ryes with golden and warm tones in the floss, using plant dyed yarns. In Lofoten almost all the ryes were woven with the wool of black and white sheep.

DESIGN

The design of the Northern Norwegian rye was often quite simple, and of a geometric character. They might have horizontal stripes, vertical stripes or smaller or larger squares, diamonds or zigzag lines.

At times there would also be dates, monograms or small figures or symbols knotted into the design. Ryes with a single color floss were also common. At times it appears that the weaver of a rye did not feel it necessary to display any artistic ambition. Maybe the desire to be artistic found other avenues of expression in northern Norwegian textile weaving. Ryes, it is important to remember, were intended to be practical, useful items.

THE USES OF THE RYE

As mentioned earlier, the coastal ryes were mostly used in open boats. But as conditions onboard improved by the introduction of cabins, the "båtbye" was not as vital a possession any more. The ryes were expensive, and they are

often listed in inventory documents as valuable possessions.

Some ryes have bands sewn into the edge from which to hang. This indicates that they were used as covers in the horse sled. In this case ryes were used instead of a bearskin.

I am also familiar with the use of ryes as horse blankets in Northern Norway. These ryes consisted of two widths, and the same rye could be used as a coverlet for people riding in the sled on longer trips.

The ryes used as bedcovers in boats, beds, in cabins or in the sled were always used floss side down. That made the smooth side the "right" side. In these situations one can see the weaver took great care to create colorful stripes.

THE RYES AT THE KJERRINGØY TRADING POST IN NORDLAND

The Nordland County Museum took over the administrative care of the old trading post in 1959. At that time they registered 8 whole and 6 half ryes. We also know that in the death register of the estate of merchant Kjerscow Zahl and his wife were listed 22 ryes and as many sheepskin. Jens Nicolai Ellingsen was a very successful merchant of the trading post; he was married to Anna Elisabeth. Ellingsen was the owner from 1836-1855.

The oldest ryes at the trading post probably date back to his period. Two of the ryes have the letters N E knotted into the floss. Technically speaking the ryes from Kjerringøy do not differ from other ryes. But in spite of that they do have a unique characteristic. Most of the ryes have one or two letters knotted into the floss. It appears that this custom was routinely followed most of the times a rye was woven. The letters almost always correspond to the names of the owners of the place. Several of the ryes at Kjerringøy are fine examples of ryes woven with an artistic expression. I cannot describe each individual rye in detail in this article, however,

so I have chosen a few which influenced me the strongest both in terms of composition and of materials.

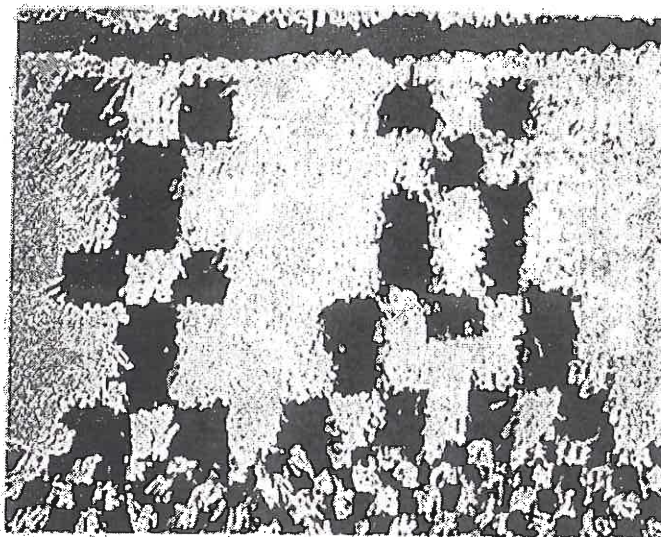
One of the ryes has the letters F G. We do not know to whom the letters refer, but it is one of the finest examples of rye weaving on the island. The foundation is woven in 3-harness twill; the warp is a 2 ply wool yarn of natural brown, light yellow and light raspberry stripes. The warp is set at 7 threads per cm. The weft is also a double ply wool yarn, but in stripes of natural brown, darker yellow and raspberry yarn. This rye gives the appearance of having been knotted with forethought and care. F is tied in a slightly darker yarn and with a few rags. G is made from raspberry colored yarn and a variety of rags. Today the G is almost a pink color. The rest of the floss is of white wool yarn and thin, red rags. The white yarn must have been spun from fine guardhairs. The rye still shines. One of the oldest ryes from Ellingsen's time has N E knotted into the bottom left corner.

The foundation is woven in a 4-harness twill, the warp is from a double ply wool yarn, and it is striped in natural sheep color and yellow. The yellow yarn is plant dyed. Almost all the ryes on Kjerringøy have touches of plant dyed yarn in the weft. The weft in this rye is natural brown yarn and the foundation is striped vertically. The floss is from natural sheep yarns, but some rags were used in making the letters. The rye is woven in two widths, each 88 cm. wide and 159 cm. long. This rye is typical, in a way, of the ryes at Kjerringøy, but here both letters are knotted right next to each other. At a later date letters were knotted into each width. This gave the letters more dominance as part of the design element. This rye is not noticeably spectacular. It appears to be knotted somewhat at random. In spite of this it tells its own "history".

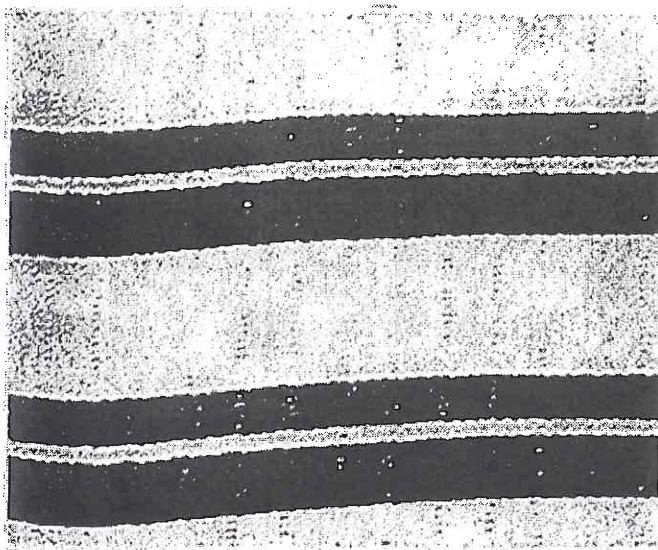
Anna Elisabeth Ellingsen became a widow in 1855 and in 1858 she married merchant Benedikter Kjerscow Zahl. One of the ryes has the letters A Z, so we can assume the letters stand for Anna Zahl. The foundation of the rye is striped and made from natural brown,

raspberry and yellow yarn. The letters are woven over two widths against a light background. The letters appear in the lower half of the rye. The upper half is woven of natural brown and white yarns in stripes. This section includes some rags. The white floss is still quite shiny and again tells us that the weaver chose her material with care. The rye is woven between 1858 and 1879.

My visit to Kjerringøy inspired my own work with ryes. My own ryes are also constructed with some of the same foundation stones in the design (the letters). I have in addition tried to add something new, give them a unique character, and in any case, keep a good tradition alive.



Detail of Initials in Floss



Smooth Side of Coverlet

The three photos accompanying this article are of a rye I composed, with the following measurements: 1.6 meters wide, 2.0 meters long. The rye is woven in two sections and weighs 4.8 kilos. The foundation is striped vertically in white, black, light gray, dark brown and a somewhat warmer reddish brown yarn. I used mostly natural sheep colors, ranging in shades from white to black, but I have also "sneaked in" a lot of colors in the darker areas of the rye. The smooth side and the floss side must harmonize with each other, at the same time as one should be surprised by the design of the floss when one sees the smooth side, and vice versa.

Warp and weft consist of similar quality yarns, but in the rye knots I used a variety of types of yarn. I used only wool, however.

Since the boat rye has had the strongest effect on me, it is reflected in the feel of this rye. It has a long floss, 8-10 cm. and the rows of knotting are spaced relatively far apart. The floss lies flat. The rye is heavy, but it is very flexible and elastic.

My goal with this work was to weave a rye using my own composition, but one which was anchored in the old, North Norwegian tradition.

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INGER ANNE UTVÅG

By Ellen Kjellmo

From: **Båtrya i gammel og ny tid** Ellen Kjellmo. Orkana, Stramsund, 1996. pp 117-119
translated by Eva Douthit

(Born 1951) Artisan, Professor at the Oslo Community College, Department of Esthetics.

Inger Anne Utvåg was born in Tromsø and grew up in Harstad. She might have earned the distinction of being the only one currently being able to tap into the old rye technique while at the same time developing a unique, personal expression in her rugs.

She first learned about the ryes at Kjerringøy when she was a student at the State Educational School of Arts and Crafts. At the time it was fashionable to get in touch with ones roots and her teachers pointed her in the direction of her heritage. Thus she happened to find an island where old, dusty ryes were going to get a significant importance in her development as an artist. The almost 100 year old ryes became an inspiration for her work, not only technically, but also as a source of artistic, creative expression.

In the beginning she strove for the authentic, simple expression in the traditional ryes. This was a step in the right direction. Her style today is pure simplicity, building on triangles, rectangles and squares. In her last rugs she combines rye knots, thick floss weaving and tapestry weave. She frequently allows long threads of silk to flow down over tightly woven tapestry areas.

Inger Anne Utvåg always weaves her rugs with a twill background and combines two or more sections to make a wider rug, as was done traditionally.

She says she prefers a warp not exceeding one meter wide. The wear and tear on shoulders and arms is heavy when weaving wide warps. When one section is done, she cuts it off and allows its design to influence the design of the next section.

She uses the same set per inch and the same threading for most of her rugs. She has found the optimum set, size and quality of yarns she feels convey her ideas the best. She uses Norsk Kunstvevgarn or Rauma two plied yarns set at 8-9 threads per cm. She uses the same type of yarn for weft.

In her floss she uses silk, linen and beautiful woolens, materials which our foremothers hardly even dreamed about feeling against their weathered skin. Still she has maintained a solid hold on her Northern Norway tradition, and she plays along the entire spectrum of colors and light as well as with the quality of wool.

Her designs are simple, geometric and pure, a style which is infinitely suitable to the rye expression.

Inger Anne Utvåg has had several one-person exhibits both in and out of country and has had several large format commissions both in Norway and in the outside world. Her rugs are decorating large monumental buildings as well as cruise ships and Norwegian coastal steamers.

"Aurora Borealis", the beautiful North Norwegian tapestry about the northern lights, 145 x 400 cm, 1989, is woven in several widths. The design is based on several single colored, calm areas with diamonds in a rich color spectrum. We can detect her Northern Norwegian inheritance in the geometrically developed letters influenced by the rugs from Kjerringoya. Silk threads hang down the length of the central section. One pearl at the end of each thread adds the weight it needs to hang straight.

In "Night without borders II", 175 x 140 cm. she combines the rye technique, floss technique and tapestry weave. Long silk threads run down over geometrically built tapestry areas and create an exciting "space" in the rug.

The beautiful rug "Homage á J. J.", woven in 1993 is in honor of the paintings by Jens Johansen. His beautiful pictures have a strong

connection to Norwegian folklore, and have inspired Inger Anne Utvåg. The rug is composed of clean, geometric patterns and uses both tapestry and rye technique.

Inger Anne Utvåg often finishes her rugs with an edge of tapestry weave in strong colors, using linen yarns.

We recognize the rye technique and the geometric motif in Inger Anne Utvåg's rye. But as the use has changed from protecting against the cold to decorating the walls, the materials, the colors and the expression in Utvåg's ryes have become more sophisticated. Still, we do not doubt that she has been influenced by traditional technique and motifs.

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SAMI WARP-WEIGHTED LOOMS FOR SALE

The Nordic Heritage Museum is building looms for the Sami Warp-Weighted Loom Workshop in Seattle this October. The looms will be built with the modern Sami free-standing adaptation, an improvement in convenience well overdue after 8,000 years of use. Following the warp-weighted loom workshop, looms will be available on a first come, first served basis. Inquiries can be directed to Kay Larson, (206) 842-7734 kaylarson@hotmail.com

"THE WOVEN COVERLETS OF NORWAY" AVAILABLE THIS FALL

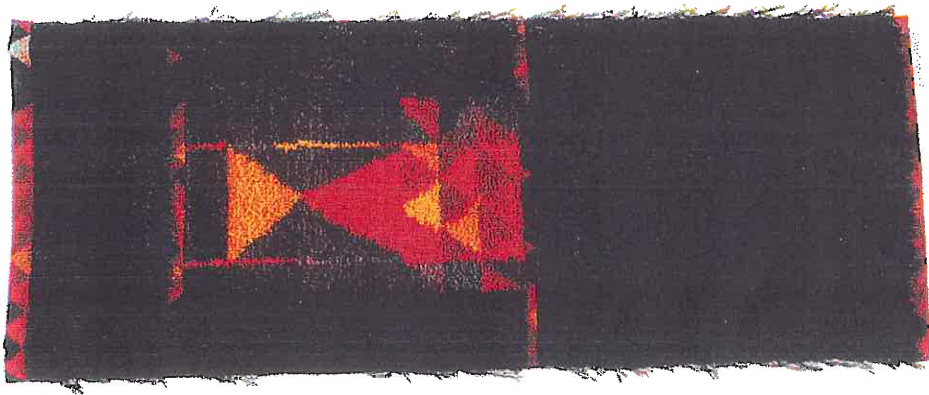
This September the University of Washington Press, in association with the Nordic Heritage Museum, will publish THE WOVEN COVERLET OF NORWAY by Norwegian Textile Guild member Katherine Larson. Over twelve years in the making, this is a full color treatment of the Norwegian coverlets, the women who created them, and the tools and materials with which they were made. A discussion of Norway's yearly cycle of textile production describes the major role textiles played in the lives of Norwegian women prior to the 20th

Inger Anne Utvåg: "Aurora Borealis", 1989





Inger Anne Utvag: "Natt uten grenser II", 1993 (Helge Vold)



*Inger Anne Utvag: "Homage a J. J.", 1993
(Helge Vold)*