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Excerpted from **BÅTRYA i gammel og ny tid**

by Ellen Kjellmo ***translated by Lorraine Leftwich***

FORWARD

To survive next to an unpredictable sea under a heavy sky has made many special demands on people's creativity and ability to think and act with nature as a partner. It didn't benefit to fight the elements but rather learn to live with them and utilize the advantages nature had to offer.

Along the northern Norwegian coast people for generations have utilized the sea's possibilities as workplace, as navigable route and as food supplier. Life's sustenance lies in the seas generosity and in the yield a little farm under looming mountains could give.

The culture, which became characteristic in these districts has certainly, first and foremost, acquired its trait from people's fundamental needs. The need for beauty in the form of decoration and decorative display developed secondarily.

A general tendency during the time seems to be that one has one's eyes opened up to the values which have root in a tradition one can build further on. It seems to be a need to know where ones "roots" are to be found and what they consist of. Such realization gives security, strength and identity. Many believe that this is one of mans biggest needs today. Maybe it comes from the alienation which has sunk in with centralization and mechanical production of all our consumer wares. Also a factor in this context is the separation between children and their elders which has found a place in families.

Part 1 Historical overview

Introduction

There are differing definitions of what a *rye* is, The Norwegian encyclopedia defines the concept as "woven coverlet of wool, with one side covered by tufts in one or several colors, the other side smoothly woven most often in 3 or 4 shaft weave".

Ivar Åsen describes *rye* as "a thick, woolen bed cover with tufts or a nap woven in" and he defines the expression "come under the rye" as to get in bed.

U.T. Sirelius, who has done a major work concerning Finnish *rye,* characterizes *rye* as a bed cover where the technical components are warp, weft and tufts. The last named is comprised of short ends of thread fastened to the warp in regular order, either on the top alone or on both sides.

About the words *rye, ru, ruv, ry*

The word *rye* can possibly have its origin in the word *ru* or *ruv* but for the time being there is no scientific proof. In my dialect *ru* means confirmed by Johan Hveding in his Håløygske dictionary: "Ru(noun) poor wool, wool clipped in the spring, winter wool.

Other related words from Northern Norwegian dialects can also have something to do with *rye:*

Rua: to clip winterwool off, *Ru:* (adj). Small tufted. The man is tufted on the chin where the new beard growth has sprouted out and *Ruf!, ruffel:* small clusters sticking up. (Hveding 1968).

In certain Northern Norwegian dialects the word occurs also in the context to dip oneself. To spin ry means to spin yarn into *rye* tufts.

In her research from 1942, Helen Engelstad refers to the Shetland and Færoe languages. The words *ru* and *royta* occur here in the context of shearing the sheep in the spring when they shed. Linguist Carl J.S. Marstrander ascribes a Norwegian origin to the Irish word *ru,* the expression signifies a coarser coverlet, corresponding to fur. He believed the word had come to Ireland with the Vikings.

In a Danish folk tune the expression *"ligge paa Ru"* (lie on a rye) occurs, and in Swedish folk tales such phrases such as to *"ligge under roghe"* (lie under a *rye).* Both of these expressions Vivi Sylwan believes refers to the use of a shaggy coverlet

From the definition one would therefore believe that there is a relationship among the words *ru, ry, rufl* etc., and that it would have to do with shagginess. And this is exactly the character of a rye. It is a woven, shaggy coverlet where one must differentiate between the two sides. The smooth side which was the right side and turned up, and the tufted side which was down toward the body and considered the wrong side.

Which side should be considered the right side has been the subject of discussion. But from the fact that the hems turn away from the smooth side and the sewing together of the woven widths is done on the tufted side, and from older people's statements, that is considered proof that the smooth side was the right side.

Because there are different kinds of shaggy coverlets and weavings, one needs to be more specific in definition. The different types of weavings can be grouped into two major types:

1. Weavings where the tufts appear because of shaggy wool or loose ragged material.

2. Weavings where the tufts are knotted in a ground weave.

It is in this last group that one finds boat *rye.* Other weavings for example, boat grener, åklær and other forms of bed coverings in beds or boats aren't included here.

Of *rye* with tufts, there are two main types: *Sliterye* (working *rye),* and *prydrye* (decorative *rye).* This book is about the coarse and modest *rye.* In short, the large, heavy *rye* which fishermen used to keep warm in the boat or shanty in the wintertime.

Dear children have many names

Rye have many names and dear was the one which survived under harsh conditions in a boat, shanty or bed. In Vesterålen, they are called *Lofotrya* because it was mainly in Lofoten that they were used. *Grårya* (gray), *sliterya* (worn), *Napparya* (nappy) are other names. In Lofoten, the names boat *rye* or just *rye* are used.

Since I place the most emphasis on those *rye* which come originally from Lofoten or Vesterålen, they will be called boat *rye* or just *rye* here.

Much of the preserved material from other parts of the country has never been in a boat, so can't be considered boat *rye*. They are also called just rye. *Rye* were commonly used as bedding in the household. One can understand this from estate records and from registration offices in connection with estates in bankruptcy. Often the estates tell where the rye was registered, for example, in the house attic, storage house loft, in the storage room.

HISTORY OF *RYE*

In 1942, Helen Engelstad documented thoroughly the occurrences of *rye* in a historical perspective based upon written material. As far as I know there are no new archeological finds which would cast further light on rye's oldest history, and I mention therefore only a summary of this background material.

Sheepskin coverlets have been common bed coverings up until this century. There must have been a reason for them to be replaced by something close to the sheepskin's qualities and appearance. The basis could have been the sheepskins weaknesses relative to use in a wet climate. In an open boat where one must anticipate that it was not easy to remain dry, the sheepskin pelt had obvious flaws. It dried slowly and the hide became hard and stiff after drying. With washing, the sheepskin had the same flaws. However, boat rye could be washed and dried and continue to be just as good and user friendly.

Nordic perspective

A question which arises when one is faced with a cultural phenomenon is whether it is something which has arisen in our culture, brought about by our special need and out of the resources available to satisfy that need. Access to appropriate material will be a factor when it concerns boat *rye,* the question is whether it can be a "strange bird" from the Far East where the tapestry tradition is quite old.

Neither theory can be proven or disproven based on the historical research which prevails today. But both U.T. Sirelius and Vivi Sylwan, who have researched the Finnish and Swedish *rye* respectively, are of the opinion that the oriental and nordic rye can be parallel phenomena. The knot, which is the same in both tapestry traditions, is so simple that it could have appeared in several places in the world independently of each other.

According to Sylwan and Sirelius the oriental tradition was introduced in Europe in the 1300's where it quickly developed into its own European tapestry art. This later became the inspiration for the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian decorative *rye,* they believe.

Helen Engelstad in the meantime places a question mark by Sylwan and Sirelius conclusion. She believes that just as tatting and cardweaving could have spread over large geographic areas in prehistoric times, so could *rye* weaving.

All research takes it for granted that new inventions come to us, not the reverse. When the need was there and the material was accessible, it's then not unbelievable that we also have been in a position to find solutions to our special needs without getting them from outside sources. And if anyone should have the need to devise something warm, it must have been people in our climate. One wonders whether we so easily renounce our forefathers and mothers ability to solve practical problems because of low national self-esteem. Our seamen were independent, long distance travelers, explorers and navigators. Along the Western route they explored and along the eastern route they fought their way over Russia's rivers and lakes until they ended up far into Asia. Is it so unbelievable that one or two wool threads were along for the trip?

Because Professor Marstander believes that the Irish word *ru* has Norwegian origin, *rye* weaving must have occurred in Norway in Viking times. This is before the influence from Oriental tapestries could have had an impact. On several points the

Norwegian boat *rye* and other everyday use *rye* differentiate themselves clearly from oriental tapestries. Boat *rye* are woven on more than a two shaft ground, the knot rows are not visible on the smooth side, there are several weft rows between each knotted row, and it is probable that the smooth side is considered the right side. The Norwegian rye are, because of the weaving technique, softer and suppler than oriental tapestries. The tufted side in boat *rye* do not distinguish themselves with patterns and symbols, and the tufts are long and lie flat.

The idea that one can create a coverlet in this way with furs warming properties, comes exactly from sheepskin pelts. *Rye* can be considered without a doubt an imitation pelt. The Swedish researcher Linnè had this in mind when he described *rye* as "artificially produced pelts."

The preserved *rye* material in Norden goes back to the 1600's. Sirelius found an example from this time when he examined Finnish *rye*. Surely *rye* existed before that. Sylvan refers to convent rules at Vadstena Kloster, written between 1487 and 1496, where it is written about the sister's beds "they have a cloth over them of white homespun and in addition a *rye* and pelt of sheepskin during the winter."

It is hardly believable that the modest sisters in the convent had newly invented, modern bedcoverings on their beds. Therefore one can believe rightly so that rye weaving is a very old phenomenon in Norden.

During the 1500's one finds evidence in Latin dictionaries from this time where the Latin word *gausape* is translated as "a ragged cloth like a *rye.*"

According to Sylwan, with excavation of a boat grave from the 700's in Valsgærde in Vaksal, a couple of textile fragments in twill where the one side was covered in tufts were found, and in a grave in Birka in Sweden a similar fragment was found from around 900 AD.

We also don't know with certainty when *rye* weaving became customary here. That is the same with women's culture in general. The knowledge sneaked its way in through the kitchen, and first became known after it became a part of the daily routine.

Other findings that cast light on rye history.

In Pilgrimsdorf in East Prussia, a gothic prince's grave from 3-400 AD was found which contained pieces of tufted weaving and twill. This could have been a coverlet the dead was wrapped in. In addition, Vivi Sylwan sees a connection between bronze age clothing where tufted weaving occurred as imitation fur. This has to do with what linguists have concluded. Hvalmar Falk translates the Icelandic word "*roggvarfeldr*" as "tufted cloak or cape."

Occurrences of *rye* in Norway

In Norway, the research of old deeds and cadasters (manorial books) has cast some light on the occurrence of *rye*.

In 1440 a *rye* was used among other things as method of payment for a chest in Sogn. From the 1500's one is enlightened through entries in estate and inheritance settlements together with farm repossessions.

Mrs. Inger of Østråt and Mr. Vincent Lunge complained about having *rye* and other bedcoverings taken from them by Olav Engebretsøns people in 1527-32.

From the inventory list in monasteries one understands that *rye* were part of the furnishings. Helen Engelstad depicts the occurrence of *rye* in Trøndelag as very common in the 1500's. At Bergenhus fortress *rye* are enumerated in the accounts from 1518, and from the same time period they are discussed at Akershus. The 1600's archive material is copious. From this time forward the information is more detailed.

In 1934, Kristian Kielland researched estate settlements and auction records in Møre, Trøndelag and northern Norway and sampled where rye

occurred. With this as a background he worked out a statistical overview of the total *rye* on 10 farms. The occurrence of *rye* were quite numerous at Helgeland with 35 whole *rye* for 10 farms in the 1700's. He found just 5 which were made in ca. 1800. In Lofoten and Vesterålen he found 7 *rye* on 10 farms from the 1660-80 time period, 23 from 1700, 16 from 1750 and 7 from 1800. In Salten, Kielland found 7 from the 1700's and 2 from the 1800's. Furthermore, from the survey it appears that the occurrence of rye had declined toward 1900. Now of course this was research based on random sampling. It isn't said what kind of farms these are, if they were so called combined use or owned farms, large farms or small. Such issues can influence his research. Despite this, this survey shows that *rye* were abundant in the coastal districts where fishing was the source of livelihood.

Helen Engelstad's research, which encompasses the national archive in Oslo and Kristiansand and research of inheritance records from Østfold, Akershus, Vest-Agder, leads to a widening of Kielland's conclusions. From her conclusions, *rye* were abundant throughout the whole country, including inland. Inland *rye* are exclusively bed or sled *rye*. Several of our preserved *rye* have loops sewn on them which enables them to be fastened to a sled. Helen Engelstad has done in depth work and describes these *rye* from a geographical standpoint. I don't feel the need to reexamine her work.

In Northern Norway, the impression is that rye have been in everyday use as furnishings in boats, shanties and beds. In 408 records from Astafjord, Ibestad, 17 *rye* are mentioned between 1753 to 1800. One grasps the idea of how many *rye* there could be. But in the same records *"Rye-Nap"* are also mentioned, yarn already clipped into tufts for knotting.

Also from vektangivelser, one must presume that *rye* with tufts, *napparyer* are mentioned. During the period 1850-1900 the records from Astafjord don't mention *rye*. It can appear that already at this point the weaving of rye has stopped. One doesn't know the reason for this.

In Øksnes municipality, the records from 1753- 1800 give information about 42 *rye*. In the period 1850-1900 one finds 87 *rye* in all. 14 of these *rye* can be characterized as old, but only 4 are considered new. During this time one finds many *rye* banished to the dark attic or to the woodshed.

Another interesting clarification these records give is that where there are several *rye* spoken of in the records, they are most likely from the home of a transport ship captain or merchant. It confirms what we have seen from other places, that *rye* have been furnishings in local boats. It can also be that in such homes there were often servants, the need for bed coverings was large, and therefore maidservants could take part in the enormous work it was to produce *rye*. Where *rye* found themselves inside the home tells us also that it wasn't only "sailors" who had *rye* on their beds.

In a record from Øksnes, a *rye* is named which at that registration period was found in Eidsfjord. Could it have been along on a fishing trip there? We know that this fjord is known as a place abundant in fish.

From the 1850's onward, sources are somewhat more detailed such that one has *rye* which have survived the ravages of time and can to a certain extent tell its own story. Besides, one has people who can tell about *rye* and of the *rye* as a known article for everyday use.

Apart from one *rye* from Grytøya Bygdetun I don't have any knowledge of preserved *rye* in Tromsø and Finnmark. One must presume they went missing in World War II.

In Lofoten and Vesterålen many *rye* are found today in private ownership and in museums. Most farmsteads and museums have several *rye* in their collections, so the *rye* tradition has without a doubt been strong in the coastal districts of the northern most counties.

According to written sources *rye* weaving ended at the end of the 19th century. I believe that there is

documented proof that *rye* weaving continued in Lofoten well into this century.

In Kjerschow Zahl and his wife Anna Elisabeth's estate at old Kjerringøy commercial center in the year 1900, there were 22 *rye* and 25 sheepskin pelts. Clearly at that time *rye* were already being displaced by fine bed coverings. In just a few workers rooms were there still *rye* on the beds. I will cover these *rye* in their own section later in the book.

At the Folk Musseum at Bygdøy one finds 6 *rye* from Northern Norway.

Sunnmøre museum in Ålesund owns over 40 *rye.* These are exclusively from Sunnmøre. Two *rye* are dated from before 1850 while all of the rest are dated at the end of the 1800's. None are after 1900. This strengthens the impression that the *rye* lost their popularity at the turn of the century.

At the Nordenfjord Arts and Crafts museum in Trondheim are found 6 *rye* which are all dated from the 1800's. One of these comes from Helgeland, 2 are of unknown origin, but 2 come from Orkdalen in Sør Trøndelag.

Many *rye* find themselves in private ownership. Today the old, worn *rye* are valuable heirlooms. They are so desirable that several of them have been divided into its two widths and distributed among the heirs, Several are preserved as valuable gems in collectors possessions spread around the country. With emigration, rye have also found their way to America.

During World War II, when the shortage of materials was great, many *rye* were turned over to woolen goods factories for recycled wool. This was used for knitted coverlets or fill for mattresses. One delivered wool scraps to the factory, and received fabric, yarn or recycled wool in return. In this manner a good number of *rye* were unwittingly lost for eternity.

Norway's oldest *rye*

Norway's oldest rye with definite dating belongs to Vefsn community in Mosjøen. This *rye* piece has the year 1681 knotted into the tufted side. The *rye* is from Kulstadåsen in Vefsn where it has been passed down through generations there. The *rye,* which is woven in tour shaft diagonal twill, has knotted rows of tufts with approximately 1 cm in between. The pattern on the smooth side is red stripes on a green ground with an imitation diamond effect because of two inlays of red yarn at regular intervals. On the tufted side the pattern is large squares on point in green and sheep black with an outline of a light gray color which was originally red. The same color is repeated in the center of each diamond. The year is knotted in red doubled yarn against black background. The preserved *rye* piece is 68 cm wide in woven width and 67 cm long. Surely this is a piece of a larger *rye* since on both ends there are loose warp threads. But there is not a trace of this piece being sewn together with another. Apart from the tact that the pattern is different on each selvage edge one would think that it was joined with another woven piece. The *rye* is tangibly more worn on one side, so it is believable that it was of the usual size, and that the second width is very simply worn out and has disappeared. The material is 2 ply wool yarn in the warp, weft, tufts.

Both materially and in weaving technique the Vefsn *rye* contains well known characteristics: twill, tufted knots, several weft rows between the knotted rows, and woven of wool yarn of differing qualities is typical for the yarn we know from Northern Norway. Yes, the tufted yarn's twist direction, left (S) spinning and right (Z) plying are well known.

Other rye

Apart from the *Vefsnrye* from 1681 we know very little of how the *rye* of this time period appeared. It is initially in the inheritance records from the 1700's that we get information about how *rye* appeared. In the previously mentioned records from Øksnes in Vesterålen and from Astafjord the terms "striped,

black and white striped, brown and white", for example, appear. First of all, it gives information on which colors and shapes were common, but they also speak to which side was considered the important, namely the smooth side. It is this side which is mentioned. This also must have been the right side.

Which weaving technique was used was not mentioned, but colors seemed to have importance. In the records from the 1700's in Øksnes only natural sheep colors are named such as black, white and gray. However, in Astafjord we find "nearly new blue stripes, blue and whiite stripes, new red striped, yellow striped."

Dye stuff

At this time aniline dyes had not been discovered, so natural dyes were the norm. Our most common dye stuffs give yellow color tones. Leaves from birch, heather and lichen species give good and colorfast yellow colors. For blue and red color tones today one uses indigo, krapp and cochineal. These dye stuffs are not found naturally in our flora here and must be imported from warmer climates. It is therefore possible that the red and blue color spoken of here must have come from plants which exist in our flora.

When it concerns blue dyestuff, we believe it comes from woad. Woad, Isatis tinctoria, is a semiannual herb in the cruciate family. It has yellow flowers, grows to 1-1 .5m. high and grows along the entire coast up to Finnmark. Some blue dyestuft was known already in Viking time. Queen Åse had a box of woad seed with her in the Oseberg ship. She couldn't in any circumstance be without blue in her royal clothing.

It is the leaves from the woad plant which contain a glucose where the dye stuff is bound to a carbohydrate. This dyestuff is freed through a fermentation process. The blue color is then released. The fermented leaf mass is then formed into balls, dried, then ground to a fine powder. This is used for dyeing. Yes, it definitely was a commodity. The blue color does not dissolve in water. But together with fermented urine the color dissolves and in this mixture the yarn is dyed. In oral tradition the color was known as pot blue. And the pot was the old familiar one under the bed.

For the red colors we find just two plants which could have been used: marsh cotton, Galium broeale, and korke lichen. From marsh cotton, the thin root stalks were gathered, dried, ground and used for dyeing. It is said that one had to have more root than yarn to get a good red. It is therefore no surprise that the plant was almost extinct toward the end of the 1800's.

Korkelichen, which grows like a whitish, somewhat uneven, grainy crust on rocks and birch trunks was a much used substance for red color too. The lichen was scraped from rocks with a knife, thereafter dried, pulverized, and fermented in urine. During this fermentation process a red dyestuff, orseille, is extracted which was used to dye wool yarn and clothing. Fermented lichen was formed into cakes, dried and then ground into a fine powder. Together with fermented urine this dye gave a beautiful red color to yarns and woolens. Fermented lichen cakes were, in fact, an export until the end of the 1700's.

The procedure for dyeing with korke lichen was described by Christian Jensøn in 1646. Urine from humans was a valuable resource in connection with dyeing.

A large dye center on the continent was famous for its dye industry, and a regular practice in this process was to gather in the residents urine output. Monschau in Germany is a small city known for its dye industry. Much of the dye process was based on people's urine plus dyestuff which could have been lichen, woad, indigo among others.

Also yellow striped/brown striped r*ye* are named in the records. Without doubt, the plants referred to are from our own flora.

One dyestuff which gives colorfast color and moreover is easy to dye with is gray *farge* lichen, Parmelia saxatilis. This lichen species grows all over

the country In the coastal districts there is a lot of it and it is an especially powerful dye here. In wet conditions it loosens from the stone, and it is therefore easy to gather in large amounts. In addition it is very easy to use to dye. The yarn doesn't need any preparation (mordanting). The lichen and yarn are layered in a dyepot, water is poured in and then one only has to warm up everything to 90 degrees and hold at that temperature for 1 hour or more. After cooling the yarn is washed and rinsed. The color intensity is dependent on the amount of lichen in relations to yarn and the dyeing time. The lichen species is mistakenly called stone lichen in the dye books. Probably it is because one finds so many kinds of lichen growing on rocks, and it isn't always easy to tell one from another.

Lichen dyed yarn, which varies from gold beige to dark brown, often appears in *rye*. One also finds other dye stuff used such as birch leaves and heather. By themselves in the old times, *rye* could have been very rich in color. So much for the smooth side.

On the tufted side, at least we believe, there has been much said about wool's natural colors but the use of scraps and warp remnants gave this side variations in material. In our time we have so easily forgotten that this is the wrong side. At exhibitions one often finds *rye* hanging with the tufted side out, while the flat side isn't offered as remarkable.

Size, weight and value: Records don't say anything about the value of rye in relation to size. It appears that first and foremost the rye's value came from its weight and amount of wear and tear. The *rye* in Astafjord in the time period 1754-1800 vary in weight from 1 *pund* (actually 1 *bismerpund*= around 6kg) to one *vog* (=3 *bismerpund*= 17.9 kg). The most are reported to weigh 1/2 *vog,* or around 9 kg.

Rye weaving comes to an end

Home production of clothing and bed coverings ended suddenly in Northern Norway in keeping with the upturn in the fishing industry and because people had more money. The industrialization of textile production over the 1800's meant that homespun gave way to storebought goods and surely *rye* also gave way to down comforters in the homes of the well to do. In the homes of servants, in fishing boats and in shanties the use of homemade wool articles and *rye* continued for a while.

As machines took over textile work, it became common to send work to the factory to get yarn and finished fabric back. This influenced rye also.

With the transition to the 20th century most looms were occupied with finer weaving. The home crafts movement which was started around 1860, tried to counter the industrial influence. It was "refined" to spin and weave but not among those who had done it before. It's now the genteel who sit next to the spinning wheel and on the weaving bench and it is not *rye* these upperclass women produce.

Over the 20th century women in village communities developed embroidery and crochet patterns and knitting needles clicked in a thousand homes. In just select places were the old weaving traditions kept up. When we once again seize an interest in boat rye, there will be no one left to help the *rye* tell their story.

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TEXTILE STUDY TOUR UPDATE AND OTHER NEWS FROM VESTERHEIM

The Textile Study Tour to Norway and Sweden is full. It was amazing to see 21 registrations arrive in three days. The last six spots were taken within the next three weeks. Nine people are on the waiting list. Because of the strong interest in touring textile sites in Norway and Sweden, Vesterheim is seriously considering repeating the tour in 2009. Please let me know soon if you're interested in the idea of a repeat tour for the summer of 2009 and whether or not you'd