

## *Gudbrandsdalen Tapestries and the Story of the Hekne Sisters*

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*Abstract: An intriguing combination of tapestry weave, legend and myth arose in Gudbrandsdalen in the 17th century. The legend about the conjoined twin master weavers is still living as a local story, and is now being conveyed to an international audience through novels written by Lars Mytting. The legend is tightly connected to a distinct form of tapestry weave, depicting biblical stories and narratives rooted in medieval poetry. The traditional interaction between visual and oral storytelling might be an important key to understanding the textiles. Visual stories told through tapestries have a long tradition in Norway, traceable from the 9th century tapestries from the Oseberg Viking ship grave on to the tapestries from Gudbrandsdalen. The legends about the extraordinary weavers that created tapestries in Gudbrandsdalen provide an extra dimension, linking the idea of conjoined twins as creatures of paradox with the pre-Christian tradition of natural signs that had to be de-coded.*



In the 17th and 18th centuries a distinctive form of storytelling flourished in Gudbrandsdalen. In pictures conveyed through textiles, local artists brought to life stories from the Bible, but also from chivalric ballads from the Middle Ages. Along with these stories grew tales of fantastical weavers and their almost magical capabilities. One of these tales is the legend of the conjoined twins from Hekne in Dovre.

The weavers created visual stories that helped those in their local community understand themselves and the times in which they lived. But this form of textile storytelling and the artists who created them are part of a deeper storytelling tradition that stretches back to the Viking Age.

But is it appropriate to draw parallels between the tapestries of the Viking Age and those from Gudbrandsdalen? What was actually written down about the remarkable conjoined master weavers from Hekne in the 18th century? And how does the story of the Hekne sisters relate to the quite special tapestry tradition of Gudbrandsdalen? If one looks more closely at the connection between these questions, historical and archaeological sources provide a picture of a storytelling tradition with deep historical roots, where the blending of handcraft, legend and myth form an entirety.

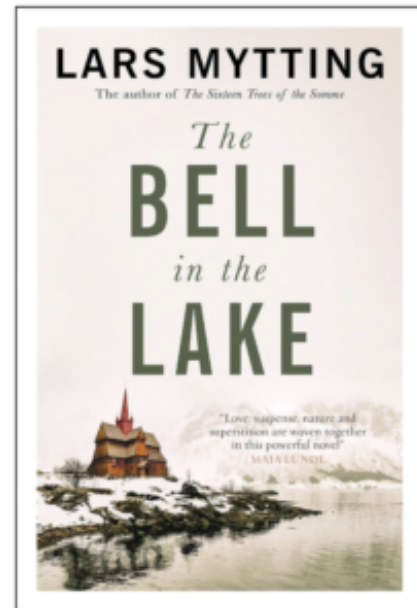
### The legend of the conjoined sisters

In the novels *The Bell in the Lake* and *The Reindeer Hunters* [*Søsterklokkene* and *Hekneveven*], author Lars Mytting brings forth the story of two conjoined master weavers from Dovre (Mytting 2018, 2020). The legend of the Hekne sisters has been known and loved in Gudbrandsdalen since the early 18th century and perhaps earlier. As with all good stories it has been passed along in the oral tradition for many generations, and over time has been changed and developed. But in addition to the oral tradition, there are also a number of early written accounts of the legend.

One of the sources for the two-sisters legend is Gerhard Schøning's well-known travelogue from the 1770s. In the years 1773–1775, historian Schøning traveled over Dovre [*Dovre fjell*, a mountain range in central Norway] and down through Gudbrandsdalen, a journey that would later be remembered through the book *Reise som giennem en Deel af Norge i de Aar 1773, 1774, 1775 paa Hans Majestets Kongens Bekostning er gjort og beskrevet* [A journey through a part of Norway in the year 1773, 1774, 1775 at His Majesty's Expense is undertaken and described]. It is here that we become acquainted with the extraordinary conjoined weavers, later known as the Hekne sisters.

This is how Schøning describes them:

In Dofre church there used to be an *Aaklæde* [coverlet], or a so called *Huusbona* [household textile], remarkable because it had been woven and presented to the church by two sisters, who were born conjoined such that they each had only one hand and one foot, but a 2nd neck and a 2nd head, which spoke for themselves as well as ate and drank for themselves. They created the aforementioned textile, and presented it to the aforementioned church, so that God should allow them to die at the same time. Their prayers were heard. They could go and accomplish whatever they wished. One's name was Giertrud (Schøning 1980:30).

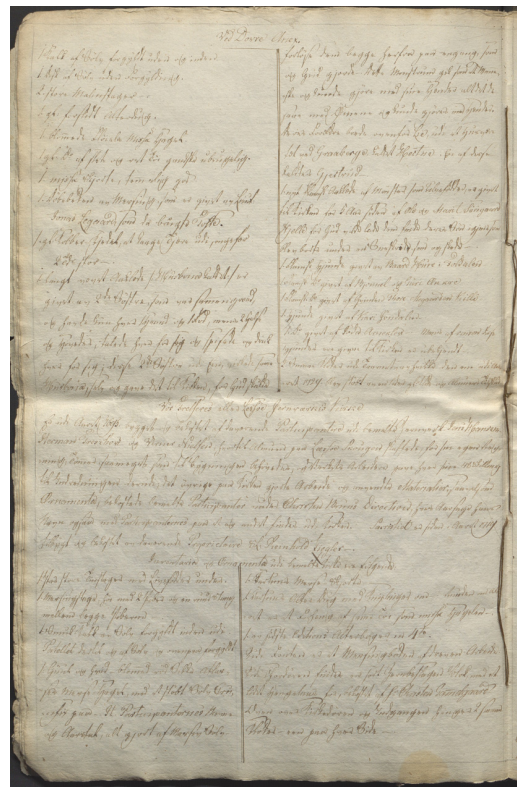


A decade later, in 1785, the priest and adventurer Hugo Friderich Hiorthøy repeats the same story in his *Physisk og Ekonomisk Beskrivelse over Gulbrandsdalens Provstie* [*Physical and Economic Description of Gudbrandsdalen Parish*]. But he adds an important piece of information: The parents of the twin sisters “were supposed to have lived above the Lie farm in a house close to Graaberge called Hechtner” (Hiorthøy 1990).

On the slope above the Lie farm in Dombås there is in fact a place named Gråberget. If one stands in the farmyard and looks upwards and to the right of Gråberg one sees a place that on the map is called Hekne. This matches almost exactly with Hiorthøy’s description, but these days that location is crossed daily by the Oslo–Trondheim train, whose tracks travel right over the old farm site.

The legend says that the woven artistry of the Hekne sisters was so fantastic that by presenting one of their tapestries to the church, they were granted their last wish by God. According to Schøning’s description, they were allowed to die at the same time. How long had the legend existed as an oral tradition in his time? He himself says that it is an old story. Gerhard Schøning possibly got the story from a priest who had worked in the parish a generation and a half earlier. Niels Olesen Stockfleth was the priest in Lesja from 1724 to 1745. In the Lesja church record book he noted down a list of the church’s possessions, and a separate section is devoted to the Dovre church annex for the year 1732. That is where we find the oldest description of the story of the two weavers, in a version that combines information from both Schøning and Hiorthøy (Stockfleth 1732).<sup>1</sup>

Since the legend of the Hekne sisters was recorded by the priest Stockfleth in an inventory list, it must mean that he believed the story described real people who lived at some time during the 17th century. But at that time, no textile of any kind could have been given to the church that we know as Dovre church today. This church, with its characteristic slate slabs, first came into use in 1736 and was formally consecrated in 1740. All indications are that Stockfleth himself participated in its planning. But before that there was another church located a short distance away, between the farms Skjelstad and Bergseng. That church was probably built around the year 1400, but by the end of the 17th century it had become unsound and in constant need of repair. In Stockfleth’s time it was in danger of collapsing, and it was torn down when the new church came into use in 1736 (SAH Kirkestol for Lesja; Tallerås 1978:12-13).



A portion of Stockfleth's description of the Hekne sisters, in the *Kallsbok* [parish register] for Dovre Annex, National Archive of Norway, Hamar, May 2022. Lesja priest archive OA.

At the little medieval church there was supposed to be a holy spring, and it was so well-known that it was mentioned by the parish priest in the church's records. This is one of many so-called Olav springs, a healing source of water tied to St. Olav. The Pilgrims Route to Nidaros went past Bergseng (Werner 1998:37).

We will probably never know how much of the legend of the Hekne sisters is based on a true story. We do not know whether there were conjoined twins in Dovre at that time, or whether there could have been two sisters who wove masterworks together on a wide loom, or even what type of textiles these could have been. The earliest sources mention nothing about the appearance of the textile, other than that it was a coverlet, or a "*husbunad*," which is a form of interior textile. But regardless, it is probably not coincidental that the story originates in the 17th century, and that the setting where the drama takes place is exactly northern Gudbrandsdalen. From the first part of the 17th century and for approximately one hundred years going forward, there developed a completely special form of tapestry in this area. It was especially in the 17th century that this reached its artistic highpoint, but evidence of the weaving tradition and the legends surrounding it have lived on right up to modern times.

Later the legend of the Hekne sisters was to have consequences not only for the reputation of the tapestry weavers in northern Gudbrandsdalen, but also for the economy of the surrounding communities living nearly 300 years later.

### The tapestry art of Gudbrandsdal

In the 17th century a distinctive manner of weaving tapestries flourished in Gudbrandsdalen and in certain other areas of eastern and western Norway. Many of the tapestries that had exceptional technical and artistic qualities came from the northern part of Gudbrandsdalen. It is likely that this was a core area for this type of tapestry weaving, and many of the really capable weavers who wove such tapestries seem to have been located there.

The Gudbrandsdalen tapestries were woven in the gobelin technique, which probably came to Norway from Flanders and surrounding areas at the end of the 16th century (Sjøvold 1976:24). In records and probate documents from this period, this weaving technique was called *flamskvev* [Flemish-weave], likely because of professional weavers who brought the technique with them from Flanders. It is also possible that the special Flemish loom came with them. This loom resembles the warp-weighted loom, but in contrast to the latter it has both a top and a bottom beam, and one weaves from the bottom upwards instead of the opposite. However, there is nothing preventing one from weaving tapestry in the gobelin technique on the old warp-weighted loom, as described by Marta Hoffmann in *The Warp-Weighted Loom* (Hoffmann 1964). Quite the opposite, it is probable that tapestries from both the Oseberg find, a grave from the 9th century, and the somewhat more recent Baldsishol tapestry were woven on such a loom. Oral tradition in Gudbrandsdalen also possibly indicates that some tapestries could have been woven on the traditional warp-weighted loom in more recent times (Bøe 1961:74-75).

When one weaves in the gobelin technique, the warp threads are completely covered by the weft threads, the latter of which are inserted in their own separate pattern areas. Different methods can be used to avoid the development of slits between the separate pattern areas. One can either interlock the wefts with each other between two warp threads (with a double or single interlock), or the wefts can be wrapped around a common warp threads without interlocking with each other (Sjøvold 1976:86). To avoid slits between pattern areas, the Gudbrandsdalen tapestry weavers instead utilized a distinctive notching technique. Where the pattern areas meet, the weft on each side is moved forth and back by one warp thread on either side of the division, and in this way the fabric is “closed” (Sjøvold 1976:86, Cyrus- Zetterström 1983). This creates small shifts in the color and pattern that look like small “notches.”



*Notched edges along a vertical slit. Detail from a version of *The Three Wise Men* tapestry, ([full record](#))*

This distinctive notching technique for weaving together figures and patterns, combined with the use of color and pattern, gives these tapestries a characteristic appearance that is easily recognizable. But it is not only the pictorial stories told by the tapestries that have made them into vivid and treasured expressions of art. Over the years many of Norway’s larger museums have secured tapestries from Gudbrandsdalen as well as from certain other areas in eastern Norway.

There are somewhat different opinions on just when Flemish tapestry weaving became popular in Gudbrandsdalen. Some have maintained that the oldest tapestries were made at the beginning of the 17th century (a woven date as old as 1613 is found in some, Kielland 1955), while others believe that we have no certain evidence for tapestry production of this type before the year 1700 (Sjøvold 1976:45). That last is not correct. Existing probate documents from Gudbrandsdalen indicate that the description “Flemish cloth,” with the meaning of Flemish-weave, was in use in this area at least as early as 1658, when such a textile was part of the estate for the large farm Tofte in Sør-Fron (Engelstad 1956:121). Unfortunately, there are no preserved probate records for the first half of the 17th century.

Many of the oldest tapestries have figures that are wearing old fashioned ruffs [pleated collars], the women wearing straight overhanging bodices above a parted skirt, with long moderate sleeves and shoulder accents. This was typical Renaissance dress that points to the first half of the 17th century. The figures in the oldest tapestries have individual expressions, living their own lives, and each of them are different. The foolish virgins cry openly, while the wise triumphantly hold high their shining lanterns. In the background can be seen towers, houses, columns and stone walls.

By the 18th century the expressions stiffen and become more schematic, until the figures become almost simple rows of pattern, while the background is replaced with decorative geometric patterns. By the end of the 18th century the production of this sort of tapestry is more or less discontinued, even though occasional copies were still made.

The stories presented in these tapestries revolve around a handful of themes. Most take their inspiration from well-known Bible stories: the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the story of the Three Wise Men, of Salome's dance, King Solomon's wisdom, the enumeration of Christ's ancestors and the personification of the virtues, justice and patience (Justitia and Patientia).

The stories of the Virgins and the Three Wise Men were especially popular. Thor B. Kielland claimed to have registered a total of 75 tapestries with the 10 Virgins motif, although unfortunately he did not leave a list (Kielland 1955:68).

Even today the story of the Three Wise Men is one that many are familiar with from the Christmas Gospel, however the story of the Virgins is no longer as well known. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus compares the riches of heaven with ten virgins who wait for their bridegroom. They plan to awaken during the night with their oil lamps ready to meet the bridegroom when he comes. All ten take their lamps with them, but only half remember to take extra containers of oil to fill their lamps while they wait. As they wait for the bridegroom they eventually grow tired and fall asleep. In the middle of the night someone calls and wakes them: "The bridegroom is coming, get up and meet him." They all wake and begin to set their lamps in order, but the virgins who have forgotten to bring extra oil cannot relight their lamps. They have to hurry off to get more oil from a merchant, and so are not there in time for the bridegroom's arrival. When they do return the door is closed and their chance is lost (Matthew 25:1–13).

Not all of the tapestries portray stories from the Bible. Of those registered, one single tapestry depicts events from a completely separate storytelling tradition, a tradition that points directly to the chivalric ballads of the High Middle Ages. This tapestry is found in the collection of the National Museum (museum number OK 17388). It is woven in red, blue, green and gold, with



*Wise and Foolish Virgins tapestry from 1760, owned by the Norsk Folkemuseum. It shows the increasing stylization of the figures after the design became rooted in folk culture. <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023130439/teppe>.*



Tapestry with motif from the story of Guigemar.  
Nasjonalmuseet. <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/samlingen/objekt/OK-17388>.

white contour lines, and the handwork is of high quality. The motifs are placed in four panels, two above and two below. In each of the panels we see a large figure: In the upper left a large stag with remarkable antlers. To the right of this is a horse rearing with a rider on his back. He seems to be greeting the viewers. In the lower panels a sturdy fellow is waving to us from the left, while the right panel is occupied by a snow white deer that is standing on its hind legs. It is turned towards the man and seems to be shoving something narrow in his direction with its forelegs. These motifs are likely taken from the story of Guigemar (Kielland 1955), one of the medieval romantic tales of chivalry. This is one of the courtly tales that are part of the collection *Strengleikar* (Old Norse *Ljóðabók*), a translation of French lais into Old Norse that was ordered by Håkon Håkonsson in the mid 13th century for use at the Norwegian court (Budal 2009).

One day, the greatest and most handsome knight in France went out for a hunt. This is Guigemar from Brittany. He is a charming heartbreaker, for he cares for none of the women who have offered him their heart. It seems that he is incapable of loving anyone. When he comes out into the forest, he sees a large stag, and just after that a snow white hind comes into

view with a twig between its antlers. The knight Guigemar strings his bow and shoots the white hind. She falls, but immediately the arrow turns and comes whizzing back at him. It buries itself in his thigh and down he falls beside the hind. Then the hind turns to him and suddenly he understands what she is saying. There is a threat in her voice. You have done me harm, she says, and because you have wounded me, you shall endure a cruel fate. Soon you will meet a woman who you will truly love, but she will cause you greater pain and heartache than any woman has endured for your sake. And she shall also suffer on account of you. You and she shall suffer so much that everyone who has ever loved or shall ever come to love will wonder that you could bear such great sorrow. And never will your wound heal until you are finally with one another.

After that Guigemar did not know what to do with himself. He roamed far and wide, and at last he came to a beach where a strange ship lay. He went onboard and immediately fell asleep, after which things transpired as they were meant to. The ship entered an unfamiliar port where

Guigemar met the beautiful young wife of the chieftain of that place. He fell hopelessly in love with her and she with him. After much sorrow and pain, and separation and loss, they are finally together and his wound can begin to heal (Rytter 1962:37-54).

The vivid figures, colors and lush floral background indicate that the Guigemar tapestry was made before 1700. The initials IOS, woven into the lower portion, could be either those of the weaver or of the owner. There are no firm details about where this tapestry was made. However, Kielland has argued that it was probably woven in northern Gudbrandsdalen in the decades approaching the 1650s. There are good reasons to be a bit careful with such a precise dating, but in any case, the artistic style points towards this being one of the early tapestries, and that it was woven in the 17th century. In the narrower bands that divide the figure panels one finds animal figures that bring to mind opposed lions. Both these and the form of the human figures are reminiscent of several other tapestries that come from northern Gudbrandsdalen (Kielland 1955:64).

Tapestries with motifs from, among others, the Feast of Herod, where Salome dances for the king and receives the head of John the Baptist on a platter, provide similar examples (museum numbers [OK 01707](#), [OK 17383](#), [OK 08324](#), [NF 1931-0347](#)). In the first example, an especially well made tapestry from Bøverdal near Lom, we find similarities in the forms of the human figures as well as the same opposed lions as those in the Guigemar tapestry.



*Tapestry with a Feast of Herod motif. Nasjonalmuseet. Between 1613 and 1750. Nasjonalmuseet. <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/samlingen/objekt/OK-01707>*



## What the tapestries were used for

Traditionally tapestries are closely associated with interior décor. In the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, narrow tapestries in a pictorial weaving technique were hung up on the walls for special occasions. These were often called *revler* [narrow decorative strips of cloth] (Engelstad 1952:18-19; Vedeler 2019, Vedeler and Pedersen 2020). Later in the Middle Ages and after the Reformation the tradition of hanging variously formatted tapestries for parties and celebrations continued, in churches as well as in private homes. Over time the long and narrow *revle* form was not as suitable, and tapestries developed into a more rectangular or square format. It has been suggested that this was connected with the introduction of the fireplace and chimney, which produces less smoke in the living area and therefore presented alternative opportunities for the shape of textile wall décor (Hauglid 1956). But the fireplace with chimney has been known in Norway since the Middle Ages, even if they were only in use amongst the rich. In many places of the country people have probably used fireplaces in log homes from the mid 16th century (Solhjell 2007:158-163). In any case, textiles in the tapestry technique have been used both for decoration and insulation on the walls, as cushion covers and as coverlets. There is no doubt that what was called Flemish-weave in the 18th century were textiles for interior décor, often with pictorial motifs.

A source that can indicate what the tapestries were used for is found in surviving probate records. An overview of these documents from northern Gudbrandsdalen for the years 1658 to 1682 reveals that 23 farms owned at least one Flemish-weave textile (Engelstad 1956:121).<sup>2</sup> “Flemish (bed) cloth” is a descriptor that is found in probate documents. From this, one ascertains that these textiles were primarily intended for the bed. Many of the so-called Virgins tapestries, with motifs from the story of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, have probably served such a function. The story of the virgins waiting for their bridegroom works well as a bridal coverlet, but there were also many that were probably brought forth for use as a bed cover in connection with a wedding. However, a close study of probate records indicates that this was not the only purpose for which “Flemish” textiles were used. In a 1677 inheritance settlement for Thaaften Haldvorsen in Medalen in Eggedal, the distribution included “1 *listings* [border, molding] coverlet in the high seat in the living room” (Eker, Modum and Sigdal *skifteprotokoll* [probate record] no. 1, 1677; Engelstad 1956:121). It is a little unclear what usage was meant by the term *listings*. Was this a type of decorative interior textile that should lie in the high seat? Or did it mean that it should hang over it? In a similar case from Gudbrandsdalen in 1722 there is no doubt. There it says “1 Flemish cloth to set upon the wall in the high seat,” in the settlement of Joen Iversen in Søndre Langsett, Fåberg (Engelstad 1956:121). Here all indications are that this is a tapestry in the gobelin technique that should hang on the wall in the main room’s most prominent location.

## A thoughtful discussion of tapestries and the sisters from Hekne

The method for weaving tapestries seems to have been a fashionable style that came to Norway from central Europe near the end of the 16th century. Fragments of pictorial weavings have been found from the beginning of the Viking Age in the Oseberg ship grave, made in a similar technique (free gobelin in combination with soumak), but the resulting expression is rather different. Perhaps pictorial textiles woven in the so-called Flemish-weave were first a fashionable

phenomenon in towns, where this became a specialist handcraft in the 16th century (Sjøvold 1976:23). But the style developed during the first half of the 17th century into a distinctive expression in Gudbrandsdalen and surrounding areas, with an important center of activity in the north. In addition, the characteristic notching technique is an element that we do not find in the town-based tapestries. Even though the main technique may have come from the Continent by way of the towns, this manner of portraying collective stories has deep roots in Norway. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Flemish-weave, which is so well suited to telling stories, got a secure foothold just there?

The distinctive Renaissance tapestries from Gudbrandsdalen were described and investigated by collectors and museum professionals as early as the 1920s and onwards. One of the questions that was particularly discussed was whether this type of textile was an imported phenomenon or whether it was an expression of a cohesive tradition that extended from the Middle Ages. In the 1950s, one of that time's most prominent experts on historical textiles, Helen Engelstad, described these tapestries as a legacy from the Middle Ages (Engelstad 1956). But several leading voices in the museum world were not in agreement with her. They believed that the Gudbrandsdalen tapestries should be seen as pale and somewhat clumsy copies of the refined tapestries that were made in central areas of Europe in the 16th century, and that the inspiration without doubt had come to Gudbrandsdalen from the towns. Roar Hauglid, who at that time was the First Antiquarian [at *Riksantikvaren*, the Directorate for Cultural Heritage] and who aspired to become the National Antiquarian, wrote a rather tactless article in which Helen Engelstad's theory received blunt criticism (Anker 1960; Hauglid 1956; Hoffmann 1958). The critics were correct in that the Gudbrandsdalen tapestries portrayed the same motifs and themes as Continental tapestries: well-known Bible stories, among others the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the story of the Three Wise Men, and Salome who received the head of John the Baptist on a platter. In this way the Gudbrandsdalen tapestries have clearly drawn inspiration from Continental areas. It is also correct that the special Flemish loom is technically distinct from the traditional warp-weighted loom. The discussion of the tapestries concerned primarily whether there was evidence of an unbroken textile tradition that used the same Medieval technique and patterns and extended to the 17th century's tapestries (Hoffmann 1958).

This discussion, which happened mostly in the 1950s, should be seen in light of a nationalistic view of tapestry weaving. In the period from the end of the 19th century until around the Second World War, tapestry was seen as an especially Norwegian expression, both by the Lysakerkretsen [an artistic and cultural grouping in Lysaker west of Oslo] and Gerhard Munthe, and through Hannah Rygen's associations with Norwegian roots in the tapestry weaving tradition (Larson 2011:245; Paasche 2018:21). At that time, the expressed intent was to tie Norwegian modern arts to what were seen as characteristically Norwegian traditions with deep roots. This idea was helped along by two sensational finds. In 1879 the Baldishol church was torn down, revealing a well preserved tapestry that proved to be from the early Middle Ages (1040–1190, Nockert and Possnert 2002:92). A few decades later, in 1904, a number of tapestry fragments were found in the grave mound at Oseberg. The grave itself was dated to the year 834, but the textiles could be somewhat older (Bonde and Christensen 1993:153-166; Vedeler 2019:117-123). However, after the Second World War, what were viewed as explanations based on nationalistic models were not as well received. The 1950s opposition is therefore neither surprising nor unique to tapestry weaving.

Nonetheless there are several things that make it worthwhile to take a closer look at Helen Engelstad's original theory – and perhaps also to find parallels even further back in time than she envisioned. Her critics focused primarily on the tapestries' technical and pictorial execution. But the idea behind such a special method of telling stories was not a part of the discussion.

Also belonging to this story is an exchange of views about the Hekne sisters. This was not a discussion about what the legend could contribute to the tapestry tradition, but a question about whether the Hekne sisters had existed or not. It was carried on in 'back rooms,' but it emerges by way of bits and pieces that have come to light in letters and brief references in the literature. The positivist, scientific ideal was strongly supported in the 1960s and 1970s in Norway, with an expressed purpose of producing objective, testable and values-free knowledge (Olsen 1997). The value of legends and recollected stories were not particularly well accepted. That which local communities experienced as a worthwhile part of the tapestries' history was thus met with skepticism by those in the central museums. Pål Tallerås gives this somewhat laconic reporting of a letter exchange between Gudbrandsdalen residents and museum staff in Oslo in his book, *Kyrkene i Dovre* [The Churches in Dovre]:

...the *Kunstindustrimuseet* [Museum of Applied Art, now part of the National Museum] in Oslo says in a letter: "The story of the Siamese twins is a legend! Eilert Sund mentions it in his book *Husfliden*. It has nothing to do with reality." Someone took exception to this and received this answer from *Kunstindustrimuseet* at NN: "Our position about the history of the Siamese Hekne sisters who wove such fine tapestries is that it is a legend, which is completely in agreement with the understanding of Professor Olav Bø, Institute for *Folkeminnevitenskap* [Folklore Studies] at the University of Oslo" (Tallerås 1978:42).

The response gives a clear impression of distance while defining the tradition of this legend as irrelevant to the tapestry tradition.

### Collective textile narratives

Collective stories hold a community together. Telling such stories by way of textile pictures has a long tradition, both in Norway and in the rest of Europe. The best-known example is the Bayeux tapestry, which tells the story of William the Conqueror's Conquest of England and the Battle of Hastings. The tapestry is made in the last half of the 11th century (Bertelsen 2018). In Norway we can detect this type of visual story telling in the hundreds of fragments of pictorial weavings that were found in the Oseberg grave from the 9th century. They tell stories of battles and processions, of witches and people assuming the skins of animals (Vedeler 2019). Small fragments of pictorial weaving that are found in other high status graves from the Viking Age show that these were not unique. Both a ship grave at Grønhaug on Karmøy, a grave at Jåtten in Hetland and a magnificent ship grave at Haugen on Rolvsøy include pictorial weavings (Bender Jørgensen and Moe 2020: 182–194; Hougen 2006:73–75). There is therefore good reason to suppose that this type of textile storytelling was an important part of the visual culture of the Viking Age. Perhaps we can draw this tradition even further back in time. Tablet woven bands with motifs of animals, birds and perhaps magical beings are preserved from the late Iron Age. Among other locations, examples of such are found at Enebø/Eide and Høggom (Magnus 1982; Raknes Pedersen 1982; Nockert 1991).

Tapestry evidence from the Middle Ages is rather sparse. But if we concentrate on visual story telling rather than looking at which techniques are used to make the textiles, things look a little different.

From Norway's earliest Middle Ages a small fragment of double-cloth survived from Rennebu in Sør-Trøndelag. Although the fragment has since disappeared, it showed motifs that have clear parallels with the Oseberg tapestries (Vedeler 2019:99–101). From Baldishol in Hedmark there is, for all those interested in textiles, the famous tapestry dated to the period between 1040 and 1190. It shows scenes of people, animals and birds, and is likely an illustration of two months of the year (Engelstad 1952:58–63; Nockert and Possnert 2002:92).



*Baldishol Tapestry. Nasjonalmuseet. <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/samlingen/objekt/OK-02862> Photo: Frode Larsen.*

But there are also examples of embroidered tapestries that tell stories. One embroidered tapestry depicting a Biblical story comes from Høyland church and was made at the turn of the 13th century, while another comes from Tingelstad and is dated to the middle of the 16th century (Reinert 1988; Vedeler and Pedersen 2020).

A long line exists between the tapestries in the Oseberg grave of the 9th century and the tapestries in the gobelin technique from Gudbrandsdalen. However, the different techniques used to present these pictures, whether weaving or embroidery, when seen in this connection are of lesser importance. We also must not forget the lively narrative voices that come forth in several tapestries from Skog and Överhogdal in Härjedalen (1040–1170 A.D., Franzen and Nockert 1992; Oscarsson 2010:76; Possnert 2010). The pictures in these tapestries tie together the Old

Norse mythology with stories from a developing Christianity. Until 1645 Härjedalen was a part of Norway, and there were strong connections both geographically and culturally between that area and the mountainous regions of central Norway.

Sources that were written down in the Middle Ages indicated that tapestries held a very special position within the storytelling tradition. Textile pictures are well suited to create emotions and provide visible details for telling well-known stories. It would be a long time before broad swaths of the populace could take advantage of a well-developed written culture. Oral and visual storytelling therefore served as an especially important tool to share and maintain collective memories. Nevertheless, this is a somewhat simplistic explanation that has been much debated (see for example Aavitsland 2004 for a thorough discussion). Generally, one can say that story telling is a foundational human strategy that makes it easier to accept the times in which one lives, and the society of which one is a part.

Several poems written down in the Middle Ages describe how textile pictures were used for just this purpose (Nordanskog 2006:217-221; Vedeler in press). One of these is *Guðrúnarkviða* in *Den eldre Edda* [The Poetic Edda], which relates how legends and stories were embroidered and woven into tapestries. After the death of Sigurd the Dragonslayer, Gudrun Gjukesdatter travels to Denmark to lick her wounds. There she weaves the fantastic story into tapestries. There are sturdy warriors with red shields, there are warships with golden heads on their prow, and the deeds of chieftains (*Det gamle Gudrunkvadet*:14–15).

A number of the Gudbrandsdalen tapestries have woven text appearing as a frieze between and around the figure panels. Often these are a combination of short explanatory texts that indicate what story is being portrayed. An example is found in a tapestry from Skjåk from the first half of the 17th century that portrays the Feast of Herod. Here the text reads: “S John when he was beheaded for the dance of a whore ano 13?” (Sjøvold 1976:48, National Museum number [OK-01707](#)). Such minor explanatory texts can also occasionally be found in the older medieval tapestries. There is a good example in tapestry 1a from Överhogdal, where there is a small text, *Guðby*, written in runes, inserted under the figure of a house (Horneij 1991:138–140). Presumably these texts have been of lesser importance in the telling of the stories portrayed in the pictures. Copies of older tapestries, which have previously been called “replica tapestries,” offer an interesting commentary on exactly this point. Often the same story was repeated, and over time copied from one tapestry to another. When an older tapestry is laid in back of the new warp like a kind of “cartoon,” for technical reasons it is easy for the motifs on the older tapestry to appear reversed in the new. When the copy is done, the text is no longer readable in the usual way. This can be corrected during weaving if one can read and is clear therefore on the difference, but in a number of the copied tapestries the text is reversed. This could mean that the weaver either could not read, or perhaps did not care. Regardless of the reason, when seen in this light the text has less importance than the pictures. It is the pictures that tell the story, right up until they finally become indistinct decorative elements that no longer hold any meaning.

## The weaver and the skald

Several major theorists have said that visual communication is closely linked with time, place and social belonging (Baxandall 1988; Bourdieu 2002; Gronow 1997). The storytelling tradition strengthens the solidarity of a place, whether large or small. In this regard it is also important to look more closely at who it is that actually participates in telling the stories, both of the tapestries and about the tapestries. The central elements of Old Norse mythology as they were written down in medieval literature probably had their origin in a tradition where oral and visual storytelling went hand in hand. They were part of a performance with more than one active participant, where the connection between the scene, the visual and the oral elements creates a whole (Vedeler, in press). Of course here the story portrayed in the tapestries would have a central role, but the storyteller was also an active participant.

From the start, Flemish-weave was likely a handcraft for the few, and never became something that “everyone” did (Sjøvold 1976:45). To a certain extent the weaver had the freedom to design the images, but at the same time they were bound by strict norms. In a number of cases old tapestries were regularly copied, with many examples of tapestries that are very similar. Aside from a few exceptions it is also the same stories that appear again and again. Nevertheless, there are some tapestries that stand out among the rest with their lively and imaginative execution or their distinctive motifs. Even if we do not know who the weavers were, it is reasonable to assume that the legends that grew up around them were tied to those who in one way or another stood out, either because of their skill, or because of their creativity, or also because of their otherness.

The tapestries are interior textiles with somewhat different usages. Some were used as coverlets for the bed, other as wall decorations. The tapestries that were meant to hang on the wall probably served as part of an oral storytelling tradition. From medieval literature we have stories of skalds [bards] who convey the tapestries’ stories for an invited audience in the king’s hall. In the saga about Olaf Haraldsson from the first half of the 13th century we hear about a tapestry with the story of Sigurd the Dragonslayer that was placed behind the king and his high seat in the hall. The king calls the bard to come to him and invites him to tell the story for those that sat in the hall: “Thorfinn the Skald sat on the bench in front of King Olav. Then the king said to him: Tell us, Skald, about that which is portrayed in this tapestry” (Johnsen 1922:58).

Medieval skaldic verse is primarily poetry, and therefore differs from prose narration in several ways. Skaldic verse has strict poetic meter, rhyme and not least a system for metaphor or set paraphrasing (Birgisson 2007:10). Nevertheless, the skald and the storyteller are similar in that they both operate within an oral landscape. Just as for stories told in prose, skaldic poetry has the goal of entertaining and making life meaningful and understandable (Birgisson 2007:66). But both in the medieval and the post-Reformation tradition, some skalds had darker motives. Verbal magic also included certain poetic forms, and this is reflected in the laws of Iceland from the 13th century. By the 17th century there was a term for the magic skald, *skraptaskáld*, or power skald (Hastrup 1987:332-333).

In less elite settings it is natural to suppose that it was the local storyteller whose task it was to tell the stories portrayed in the tapestries. The textiles were brought forth on special occasions and hung up as decorations in prominent places along the walls. This has been the tradition well into modern times in Norway (Hougen 2006:106–107; Vedeler in press). Storytelling tied to these tapestries has therefore been closely associated with celebrations and gatherings of many people. In such circumstances the colorful tapestries functioned in a dual role, as both decoration and as collective “memory cues.” The stories portrayed are not complete but give the plot a direction and bring forth central parts. Such is the case with the tapestry that portrays the legend of Guigemar, where we see the knight in the forest, the stag and the hind with the arrow. This is an indication of a combined oral and visual storytelling tradition for which we see traces from medieval sources. Despite the fact that the preserved version of *Strengleikar* was written down, these short stories were part of an oral tradition. The text explanations indicate that they were meant to be conveyed aloud, perhaps also accompanied by music (Budal 2009).

In the *Orkneyinga Saga* there is a scene where two skalds entertain a gathering with a competition to see which of them can make the best verse about the story shown in a tapestry in the hall. It is Christmas and there is a celebration, with tapestries hung up for the occasion. Then Earl Ragnvald challenges the skald Odd the Little, requesting that he make a verse about one of the warriors shown in the tapestry, and the Earl will do the same. (*Orknøyingasoga* 1929:85). The resulting competition in versifying is entertainment at its highest. The crux of the competition is that the poets must make their verses while thinking on their feet. But the two skalds have a ready source, a manuscript to take inspiration from, namely the tapestry on the wall.

### **The uncommon weavers: from Valkyries to witches and monsters**

The weavers who made the tapestries have often disappeared behind the veil of history. Only occasionally do we hear of named artists. In such cases it is often a woman who in one way or another is distinguished by her difference.

The connection between the weaver’s art and uncommon capabilities can be traced back as far as the Viking Age. Magic is also strangeness. From the Middle Ages we find a number of stories from the sagas that identify unusual women’s capabilities to employ weaving and the use of magic to affect fate and change the course of history. One of the most well-known is found in *Njål’s Saga*. A man named Dørrud lived in Caithness, Scotland. It was Good Friday and he was out for a walk when suddenly he saw twelve figures come riding. They went into a house nearby, and he crept close to a small opening to see what they were up to. He saw that they were women, and that they were setting up a loom inside. But it was no ordinary warp-weighted loom. Instead of warp threads it had men’s intestines, and these threads were held taut by weights made of men’s heads. They used a war sword to beat in the weaving and an arrow in place of a weaving comb. Through gruesome songs about a battle they kept the rhythm in the bloody weaving. To his horror Dørrud discovers that this is a real battle they are singing about (*Njåls saga* 1951:261–264). Through this frightful weaving the fates of the warriors and the outcome of a battle far away are being shaped. These magical women are Valkyries, housewives and goddesses of fate all at the same time, and like Valkyries they have the power of life and death (Nordberg 2003:106; Friðriksdóttir 2020:6). In this story, the women who are weaving are not just passive

storytellers, they are active participants who are affecting the course of history. What is expressed here is an understanding of the world as both practical and magical at the same time, without a division between what today we would call reality and mysticism.

In surviving tapestries from the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages one finds possible references to magic, or *seid* [sorcery]. With this type of magic one could see into the future, but one could also cause misfortune and disease, rob people of their wits and strength, open mountains and burial mounds and even commit murder (Price 2019:57). A woman with such powers is found in Torbjørg Veslevolva [volva = seeress], who is described in *Eirik the Red's Saga*. She is equipped with a number of implements that help her perform sorcery. She holds a large staff in one hand, an object that itself can be a reference to spinning. When she conducts magic, she steps up on a platform, a *seiðhjallr*. There are several references to such platforms in the sagas, and it is quite clear that they are high, or raised high above the ground. When the sorceresses Heid and Hamglåma conduct magic in *Fridtjof's Saga*, they both fall down and break their backs (Bugge 1901; Fosse 2013:38–39). It is worth noting here that medieval ideas about the magic of earlier times are drawn from an oral tradition and do not necessarily reflect factual practices (Friðriksdóttir 2013:57–58).



*Woman standing on a platform, on the back of a red horse. Tapestry from Oseberg, Museum # C55000/377/13b2. Photo: Marianne Vedeler.*

On one of the preserved tapestry fragments from Oseberg one sees a woman. She stands up on a flat platform, bound fast to a horse. She seems to turn her face upwards in the direction of a strange form that comes towards her. It is a giant woman, with a head that either forms a beak or horns. A likely interpretation of this scene is that it portrays a magical ritual (Vedeler 2019:53–55).

Another characteristic of the seeress is that she could see into the future. She could interpret signs and omens in nature and decode magical messages that might appear in, for example, the flight of birds. In the *Voluspá* [volva's prophecy, from the Poetic Edda], a seeress foretells what will happen when the world as we know it ends. The End Times, or Ragnarok, is



possibly portrayed in the tapestries from Överhogdal in Jämtland. There are scenes with animals, ships and human figures. A large animal opens its mouth wide, is this the wolf Fenrir that is in the process of destroying the world? And the ship that glides over a large tree with its branches spread outwards, is that the frightful *Naglfar*, a ship made from the fingernails of the dead, cast loose and setting its course towards the battlefield? But along with these ideas from a pre-Christian world we also find Christian symbols in this tapestry, and perhaps scenes from the Christian Apocalypse (Wikman 1996; Oscarsson 2010:32-37). In the Överhogdal tapestries, which are dated to 1040–1170, we find a unique combination of both a pre-Christian and a Christian world view.

After the Reformation it would seem that the connection between magic and tapestry still existed. Records of court documents from the end of the 16th century indicate that at least two of the women who were burned as witches at that time were associated with tapestry weaving. They were Johanne Jensdatter, Flemish weaver, and Anne Pedersdatter Beyer.

From legal documents we learn that witnesses who were considered trustworthy by the court testified that Johanne could make things fly through the air and make a storm come to life, and also scare cats on New Year's Eve. But more serious still was that Johanne Jensdatter bewitched the pregnant wife of Mogens the Woodworker such that "she lost her purpose, and her body has become lifted and very thick and large as if she has been blown up, and she since then and still lies in great pain and agony" (*Norske trolldomsprosesser*, p. 634).

Johanne carried the name *Jensdatter flamske, veverske* [Jens-daughter Flemish, weaver]. This can be interpreted in two ways, either that Johanne came from Flanders, or that she wove Flemish-weave. I tend to believe the latter, but either way there is no doubt that she was connected with weaving. So was Anne Pedersdatter Beyer, the most well-known woman burned as a witch in Norway. She was a woman of the better classes, and legal documents reveal the story that connects Anne to the art of tapestry weaving. The origin of the witchcraft accusations against Anne were that she ordered a loom for weaving Flemish-weave from Giert *snekker* [carpenter]. She got into a dispute with his wife, who later became mysteriously ill. Anne was accused of casting a spell over Anna Snidkers and was later judged to burn alive (Gilje 2010:47).

Two unusual people with unusual talents are also at the center of the legend of the Hekne sisters. In descriptions of the Hekne sisters from early in the 18th century they are characterized as monsters with two heads and only one arm and one leg each. This is how the priest Stockfleth describes them in his inventory list for the Dovre church annex:

One long woven cloth: called *Husboned*: was a gift from the two sisters who were grown together and had only one hand and one foot each, but two necks and heads, each talked and ate and drank for themselves, these two sisters from one together made the husbona and gave it to the church, such that God should redeem them both from here at one time, which God did. This monster walked like a person and could make with their hands everything that they saw with their eyes and could make with their hands. Their parents lived above Lie, out in a house close to Graaberge called Hectne. One of them was called Gjertrud" (Stockfleth 1732).<sup>3</sup>

In early modern Europe, monstrous births found their way into everything from printed drawings to books about miracles to medical works. Strange creatures that were reported to have been born of human mothers ranged from monstrous fish to conjoined twins. These were extreme creatures, lying at the intersection between human and animal, between man and woman, between one and several. The word *monstrum* [monster] comes from *monere*, which means to warn. All these births had in common that they were seen as a sign or an omen that had to be decoded and interpreted (Bates 2020:119–120). When viewed like this, in many ways this is a direct continuation of the pre-Christian understanding of magical signs and omens in nature that we also recognize from medieval thought. An example is the warning about the king's birth in *Sverre's Saga*. Gunnhild, Sverre's mother, has a remarkable dream. In the dream the midwife that is sitting with her cries out in fear:

“My Gunnhild! You have borne a strange fetus, awful to look at.” Three times she cried out the same words, and hearing the midwife cry the same with trembling voice, she wondered what kind of fetus it was that she had borne. She then thought it was a stone, rather large and snow white, and it glowed so brightly that it gave off sparks in all directions like glowing iron that is blown on in the forge (Koht 1995:12).

The understanding of the world as a universe of signs stretches back to Antiquity. But in the Early Modern period (ca. 1500–1700) it was important to document and systematize such happenings and group them with methods that made them understandable in a new way. This was also a time with a widespread belief that the End Times were near. People and nature were connected with invisible bonds, where each single element in a microcosm (the person) corresponds with an element in the wider world (macrocosm). With such an understanding, the birth of conjoined twins could be interpreted as a warning of Doomsday (Gilje and Rasmussen 2002:205–228).

A through line passes from the pre-Christian goddesses of fate and seeresses to the witches in the 17th century and thence to the Hekne sisters. They are different, they weave, and they have magic in their hands. Embodying a combination that is both frightening and inspires respect, they are interpreters of magic messages and they are creators of magic happenings.

### **The legend of the Hekne sisters lives on**

The distinctive tapestry tradition in Gudbrandsdalen died out more or less at the end of the 18th century. Even so, the legend of the Hekne sisters persisted into the 19th century and has since remained alive. We see glimpses of it in the collection efforts of Eilert Sundt and later of Anders Sandvig (Sandvig 1907). But at least as interesting is seeing how the area's own inhabitants continue to be inspired by the legend and the magic surrounding the Hekne sisters. A striking example is seen in memories noted down about a skilled weaver, Åse, who married into the Haugje farm in Dovre in 1812. When she relinquished supervision, there were said to hang a total of 12 tapestries in the great room at Haugje. Her name is especially tied to a tapestry that portrays the Three Wise Men, which now belongs to the Sandvig Collection at Maihaugen (museum number SS-14812). According to tradition, this tapestry took a very long time to complete. Åse was the one who completed it, and a cryptic sentence in the notes implies that this happened through inspiration or even with the help of the Hekne sisters. “Åse had the well-

known Hekne-sisters to her home so she could see how they worked, but they were not there to do anything” (Doset, no date). What this actually means is unknown. The legend of the Hekne sisters originated over a hundred years before Åse’s time, so the preserved notes must refer to some sort of spiritual inspiration. A hint of magic lies between the lines.



*Blue unicorn. Detail from a Three Wise Men tapestry. Maihaugen. <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011021908492/akle>. Photo: Marianne Vedeler.*

The Three Wise Men tapestry is in a Renaissance style and bears clear indication of having been copied from an older tapestry. Perhaps Åse had an older tapestry that, according to tradition, was woven by the Hekne sisters and that she used as a model? In any case, the sisters’ reputation for magical capabilities has been a part of the memories about Åse’s weaving.

The tapestry was sold by the family in 1951 to the Friends of the Sandvig Collection for the significant sum of 14,000 kroner, and is described for the first time in the museum’s yearbook the following year. The legend is not mentioned there, but it is noted that Fartein Valen-Sendstad, who was curator at the Sandvig Collection at that time, believed the tapestry had been made in the 17th century (Valen-Sendstad 1925:22).

Respect for and knowledge about the quality of handcraft must have been the basis for such legends arising in their time. There are oral stories about “Hekne weavers” that are tied to weavings on a number of farms in Gudbrandsdalen (Mytting personal communication).

Through his novels Lars Mytting has brought forth the legend of the Hekne sisters to a larger audience. In his world, handcraft has meaning for how a community understands itself. Mytting writes with his feet squarely planted in local tradition, a skald of our time who tells us the story of the tapestries. Through him the legend is transformed in almost magical fashion into new art.

### **In closing**

The tapestry tradition in Gudbrandsdalen ties together myths, legends and the visual storytelling tradition on several levels. That which immediately occurs to one is how the tapestries mediate collective narratives through their repetitive repertoire of Bible stories and medieval legends, just as tapestries from the Viking Age mediated collective stories that held meaning in earlier times. The stencil-like scenes that are portrayed show selected highlights in the stories. They point towards an oral and visual storytelling tradition that went hand in hand, just as there was a connection between the skald and tapestries in medieval halls and dwelling rooms. The legends of those who made the tapestries exist on another level. Here the weavers are central. These meta stories help to both keep the tradition alive and to bring forth the actors that otherwise are often silent or nearly invisible in the source material. In this context it makes little difference whether the stories are “true.”

The legend of the Hekne sisters is part of a common European idea that so-called monstrous births were special happenings that should be interpreted and decoded as messages. This points back to the pre-Christian symbolism of natural omens that was now interpreted in a new early modern understanding of the world. To consider the tapestries of Gudbrandsdalen in light of the stories they portray as well as the stories that have been told about the legendary weavers gives a different and richer picture than a single-minded focus on technique and execution.

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## Notes

1 Discovered in a copy of the Kallsbok [parish register] for Dovre Annex, National Archive of Norway, Hamar, May 2022. Lesja priest archive OA. Sources of Stockfleth's writings have been reported missing since the 1950s (Hoffmann 1958; Tallerås 1978:40).

2 Probate records show that the following farms were in possession of Flemish-weave tapestries in this period: 1658 Tofte in Sør-Fron, 1659 Hovind in Lom, 1660 Kruke in Vågå, 1660 Amundgård in Lesja, 1660 Bjorlien in Lesja, 1664 Opphaug in Lom, 1665 Bjokne in Lesja, 1665 Skjåk in Skjåk, 1666 Thogestad in Fron (?), 1669 Engelsgård in Dovre, 1671 Steig in Sør-Fron, 1671 Seggelstad in Sør-Fron, 1671 Gryting in Sør-Fron, 1672 Brek in Skjåk, 1673 Bjørnsgård in Dovre, 1674 Hundorp in Sør-Fron, 1678 Holen in Vågå, 1680 Forr in Sør-Fron, 1682 Håkonstad in Vågå, 1682 Listad in Sør-Fron (Engelstad 1956, 121). Many of these are large rich farms.

3 Transcribed by the author.

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