

Dear Friends,

Every two years the International Congress of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences meets somewhere, and this year it was in Oslo. I decided to go, and also see something of Norway while I was there.¹ So on August 2, I flew via London to [Oslo](#).



At left are the arms of Norway, known from around 1280, in the cramped and over-stylized 1937 redesign by the otherwise distinguished Norwegian heraldist Hallvard Trættemberg. The heraldic crown (which does not look much like the [actual crown of Norway](#)) is very good, but the lion reminds me of the mummified remains of a cat that used to hang over the door to the men's room in a gas station on Cape Cod. One commentator notes that "the lion's paws and claws are almost those of a bird." These are the "state arms"



– by contrast the lion in the 1905 "royal arms" (right) looks a lot more respectable, even if its version of the heraldic crown is sort of silly. You pays your money and you takes your choice. The silver-bladed ax is an attribute of [King Olav II](#), later canonized, who was instrumental in Christianizing Norway. He was killed at the [Battle of Stiklestad](#) in 1030, said to have been fought during an eclipse of the sun.



I settled into a distinctly downscale downtown Oslo hotel, just off a tawdry section of the main pedestrian street Karl Johans Gate (*gate* means street, not gate).² Left: the beautiful flag of Norway; right, the strange city seal of Oslo.³



Oslo is a staid and dignified capital. There is not much there from

¹¹ I had been to the Oslo airport coming home from Stockholm in 1983, so Norway was already on my country list, but with an asterisk because I never left the airport. I have been chipping away at the asterisks, and with Norway's now gone have them down to five. I have plans to visit Greece, and El Salvador and Peru; if I never get back to South Korea or the United Arab Emirates, it will be OK with me.

² Compare the German *Gasse*. Karl Johan was the reign name of Jean Bernadotte, one of Napoleon's marshals, who was adopted by the elderly childless King of Sweden in 1810 and became regent, and later king himself in 1818. It was all about gaming power relationships in the Napoleonic wars – Bernadotte as regent unexpectedly sided against Napoleon. Norway passed from Danish to Swedish rule in 1814, and only regained its independence in 1905.

³ It shows Oslo's patron, St. Hallvard, with the arrows of his martyrdom and the millstone his killers tied around his neck so his corpse would sink in the fjord, but miraculously it didn't. The naked lady is the [thrall](#) he was murdered for trying to help.

before 1814. The older buildings are good in a restrained 19th and early 20th century style, pale red and yellow stucco over brick, and the modern buildings are mostly not awful. Below: an apartment house in the elegant Frogner district, and an ornate downtown structure. The [new opera house](#), intended to suggest an iceberg, is an amazing sight.



I went to Oslo early in order to be first at the antiquarian bookshops and have my pick of the heraldic books. I made an elaborate list and plotted the stores on a map. It turned out, though, that only one bookshop had anything of interest; I bought eight books there. But I added to my stash at ordinary bookstores, and museum bookstores, and at the conference, and elsewhere, and ended up lugging home 23 books and pamphlets – they completely filled the carry-on wheelie I brought with me for that very purpose.⁴ On the next page of this letter I show some examples. This just in: books are *very heavy*.

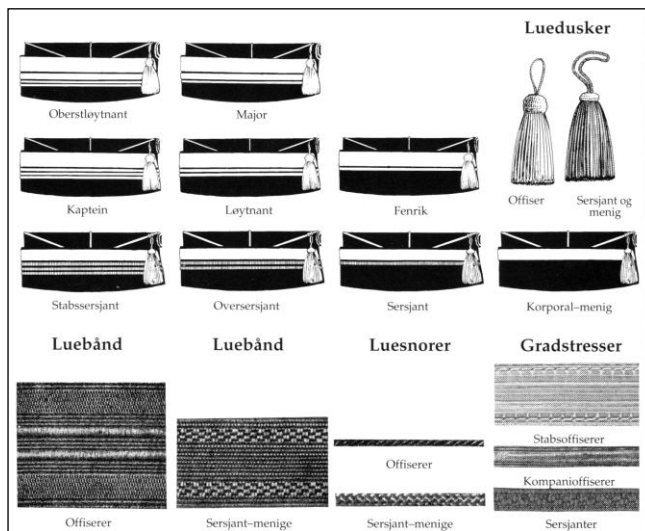
I saw some excellent things in Oslo. A highlight was a tour of the [royal palace](#), built in 1825-48. It is a small palace, as palaces go – *only* 149 rooms (compare Buckingham Palace



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I bought the wheelie in Warsaw when I had more *Polish* heraldic books than I could carry. Final score in Norway, by language: Norwegian 12, Danish and English three each, Swedish two, and one each in German, Spanish and Dutch, plus a stack of back issues of Danish and Swedish heraldic journals with lovely pictures.

EXAMPLES FROM MY NORWEGIAN HERALDIC PURCHASES



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT

1. REGIMENTAL FLAGS, FROM A SOLDIER'S HANDBOOK (1956).
2. FASCIST PARTY PROPAGANDA POSTER, GERMAN OCCUPATION (1940s).
3. SCHEMATIC DRAWING OF A MUNICIPAL SEAL (13TH CENTURY).
4. UNIFORM REGULATIONS, ROYAL GUARD (1950s).

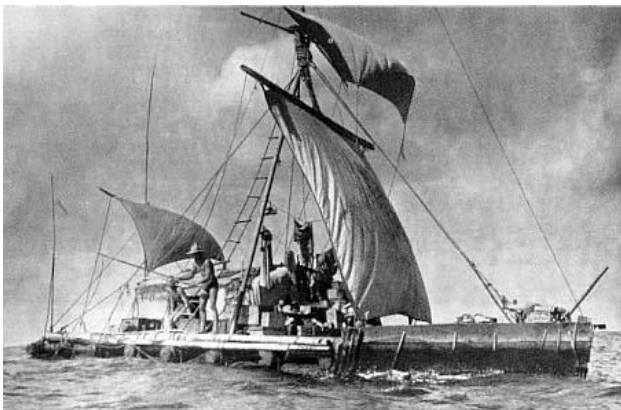
with 775) – but fine in a restrained way and a lot better than some more magnificent over-the-top baroque palaces. The royal standard was flying bravely overhead despite the absence of the king, who was at his suburban retreat (which I passed later on the bus). Soldiers in [fantastic uniforms](#), with green epaulets and black bowler hats with plumes on them, paraded in front of the palace, and a military band played martial airs. When it was over I spent a quiet hour or two in the palace courtyard, reading a book, and then strolled my way through the grounds (the palace grounds are a public park) to the bus stop (I was proud that I knew where the bus would stop).



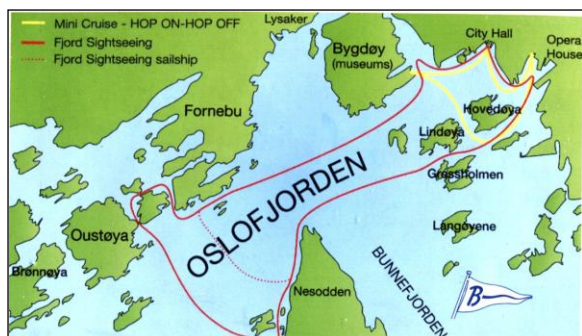
Also very good – the Viking Ship museum, which had a deluxe [Viking ship](#) that had been preserved as a royal tomb (left), and the Kon-Tiki Museum, which had not only [Kon-Tiki](#) (below left), a balsawood raft that [Thor Heyerdahl](#) sailed from South America to Polynesia in



1947, to show that it could be done, but also [Ra II](#) (below right) a boat made of papyrus that he sailed across the Atlantic from Morocco to Barbados, to show that *that* could be done too. It was a great experience to spend time with these vessels – not models, but the real thing.



I also spent a lot of time riding aimlessly around Oslo on buses and trams, a great way to see any city especially if you don't have the stamina for long walks. I took an excursion boat around Oslofjord (red line on map below); afterward I bought some shrimp right off a fishing boat. I visited the Norwegian Parliament, and filled my time with suitably improving activities. At night I gathered up some Burger King hamburgers, and some cold ham and cheese sandwiches on croissants from 7-11 (a hugely popular chain in Norway – I even bought my ticket to the royal palace there), and headed back to the



hotel.⁵ I am not much for night life anyway, and Norway is fantastically expensive, beyond anything I've ever experienced.⁶ A cup of tea? \$4.80. A taxi ride? \$20 *minimum*, and usually a lot more. Dinner at an undistinguished chain restaurant *starts* at \$65, and goes up fast from there. I am not interested enough in food to pay that much for restaurant meals in America, and didn't feel

like doing it in Norway either (except on the road in the countryside, where I was obliged to take what the local hotel offered). In other European countries – France, Italy, Austria – I have picnics in my room at night, based on the fabulous offerings of the local delicatessens. In Oslo I didn't see any of those, at least around my hotel. It was Burger King, 7-11, or the local kebab joint, and I was content with my choices.

It is true that nearly everyone in Norway speaks excellent English. It is quite acceptable to begin a conversation in English, and no one looks crosswise at you for doing it as they would in France. I find Norwegian pretty much impossible even to read, and forget about understanding it – they have vowels we never imagined, and some of their consonants are kind of peculiar too – for example *Gol* is pronounced *Mool*. Sometimes a word or two can be deciphered, by analogy to German, and sometimes by sounding it out – for instance the word for *environment* is *miljø*, which sounds just like the French *milieu*. But basically Norwegian is out of reach. Here's what it looks like.

Herren er min hyrde, mig fattes intet. Han lar mig ligge i grønne enger, han leder mig til hvilens vann. Han vederkveger min sjel, han fører mig på rettferdighets stier for sitt navns skyld.	The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁷
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OK, maybe we can make something out of *Herren* or *grønne* or even *sjel*. If you *already know* that *retterferdighets* means *righteousness*, perhaps you can figure out how it got there. But *fattes intet*? *Vederkveger*? *Hvilens vann*? No can do. *Jeg snakker ikke norsk*, that's what I always say.⁸

⁵ The sandwiches were delicious. *Ost & Skinke* means *cheese and ham*, not a Norwegian comedy team.

⁶ My theory is that North Sea oil wealth has inflated the Norwegian economy; this is not felt much by locals whose income as well as expenses are local, but has a marked effect on outsiders who have to buy their Norwegian *kroner* with dollars. This effect would be muted if Norway were in the Eurozone, but it's not.

⁷ Psalm 23:1-3.

⁸ Meaning *I don't speak Norwegian*. But it must be fun to speak a language with phrases like
(footnote continues →)

And it rains a lot in Norway, and I mean a *lot*. But northern countries – what can you do? It’s nothing personal. It rained almost every day I ever spent in Scotland and Ireland – you have to expect it. If you can’t stand rain, go to Egypt instead.

The Congress was much like other scholarly conferences – papers in the morning, coffee break, more papers, lunch, more papers. There were 3½ days of papers, of which I skipped the last half day, plus a banquet and an excursion which I also skipped. But



except for the last morning I went to all the lectures (on the heraldry side – the genealogists had their own program in a separate hall). Some were very interesting, and some were kind of boring – par for the course. A few were both interesting and directly relevant to my own work – one paper, “The Eagle Resurrected: The Abdication of Charles V, the Spanish Monarchy, and the Reinvention of the Imperial Eagle,” by two Belgian scholars, was relevant enough that I added a paragraph about one of its points, and an image, to my forthcoming book about the double eagle.⁹ That sort of synergy is the reason to go to these events – that and of course the chance to buy books.¹⁰

On the last day I skipped a paper on skis in Scandinavian coats of arms (!), and another on the development of the arms of Ljubljana (I had already bought the speaker’s book on the subject, in English), and headed out into the Norwegian outback. After some crowded suburban sprawl I made it into the amazingly beautiful countryside, dominated by [fjords](#), mountains, fog, and moist greenery. Tight fields of green and yellow, separated by lines seemingly drawn with a ruler. Farmhouses of red and yellow wood – scarcely any metal or cement buildings. Independent-looking Norwegian cattle; shaggy sheep and goats. The wind made extravagant patterns in golden hay.

Billions of trees – not the famous Norwegian spruce (I was too far south), but sturdy firs and high aspens, bare on the sides but leafy at the top, trees rising straight up on the steep mountainsides, sometimes right down to the road but almost always filling the distance. These mountains rose from the fjords in cliffsides of sometimes 70 or 80 degrees – not

(footnote continues)

snakker ikke, and words like *skinke*.

⁹ Naturally I credit the authors of the paper with suggesting the material.

¹⁰ The conference was held within the Akershus military reservation, which included the Armed Forces Museum but also the Norwegian defense headquarters. It was a security zone, so I had to get clearance from the military police for my taxi to pass their barrier both in and out. By the third day they knew me, and saluted.

even a goat could climb them, with no place for a road, so the road had to pass in a tunnel under the mountain – some tunnels were 3 or 4 miles long, or more.



The countryside got rougher as I got further out. Water everywhere: spacious fjords, calm rivers, stony rushing brooks, even waterfalls and glaciers, and water in the air too – rain, mist, fog. The continuous moisture made green everywhere, a riot of species on the verges, even the rocks were green with moss and lichen. Roofs of farmhouses were allowed to grow turf like tiny wild pastures – was this deliberate or just quirky? Bright pink fireweed grew wild by the roadside.



The class A roads in Norway, as you would expect, are magnificently engineered and immaculately maintained. Not a pothole to be seen; not a beer can or a plastic bag anywhere (this is how a tourist in Norway knows he is not in India). These main roads, red on the map, are distracting to drive because of oncoming traffic and lack of shoulders to pull onto to stop and take in the scene. Usually I try to get off red roads onto yellow or white ones, but in Norway the yellow roads were significantly worse, not only less well maintained but *single lanes* for mile after mile. The local drivers did



not seem to notice that the roads had only one lane, and they zoomed and swerved with bold abandon. But it was too nerve-wracking for me – white knuckles all the way – buses and trucks and sports cars sped by as if on a wide Italian *autostrada*. I honked at every blind curve until my thumbs ached, but no one else bothered about this. After a while I tired of being always millimeters from fiery death, and kept to the red roads.



I was aiming for a small town called Fjærland, at the head of a fjord but not really on the road to anywhere, because a bookstore there listed a large number of heraldic books. I thought, why not make this a destination? Even if the bookstore is a bust, I will have a place to aim for and couple of days in a small town (Google Earth revealed only one street). So that's what I did, crossing a relatively treeless (but still beautiful) stretch of



mountainous territory before descending back down to fjord-level on the other side. Waterfalls. Thunderheads. Tule fog. Birdsong. Pastures at 45° inclines. Slosh of fjord; clank of distant cowbells. A stave church from 1180 (left; detail at right). Part of the journey was taken on a ferry (the *Stryn*) – there are lots of these in the Norwegian highway system.

The bookshop was indeed a bust (they had listed as *heraldic* books that were really about family history and pedigrees, of no interest to me even if I could read Norwegian). But the town was *típico*, and there was a glacier museum, and a hotel with an elegant public room of the type that used to be called a *saloon* before that word came to mean a bar. Below: Fjærland's main street, and the saloon of the Fjærland hotel.¹¹



¹¹

The hotel was there because Fjærland used to be the place where visitors would arrive in ships and arrange for local farmers to take them up to the glaciers.

I used my day in Fjærland to drive north to see the glaciers – the most accessible one was *Brikdalsbreen*, an arm of [*Jostedalsbreen*](#), the largest glacier in Europe.¹² The further north I drove (sometimes on the terrifying yellow roads) the more spectacular the country became – higher mountains, deeper fjords, whiter light – sometimes the entire scene of sky, fog, mountains and fjord would appear in shades of shining white. It was the most dazzling country I have ever traveled in – sort of like Alaska, but plainly European and not just huddled along the shore. Goats, sheep; placid cows strolling on the road unconcerned as any cow in India. But no wildlife (except birds), not even roadkill – I did not see even a rabbit my whole time in Norway.

When I got to the trailhead at Brikdalsbreen there were little trolleys to take us further – to the glacier, I hoped, but no, only past some showy splashy waterfalls to a second trailhead, beyond which the glacier was “only a ten-minute walk.” I have learned that when a tourism person speaks of a *ten-minute walk*, he really means a hike of about an hour and a half, up at least a 30° incline, on gravel or unstable scree, to a windy overlook. And it was raining anyway. So I enjoyed what I saw from the trolley but did not scramble up to the glacier itself, unnecessary anyway because it was visible from many points along the road. Here’s what I could photograph of its scraggly tip end.



The next day I resumed my westward passage across Norway. As I got further from the high mountains, toward the sea, the vistas grew less dramatic, but were still around the level of the very peakmost sights of Glacier National Park. Very scenic, Norway. I stopped at another elegant fjordside country hotel in Lavik, where they were enlarging the port, and watched while a monster machine crunched down the old 1970s wooden supermarket. This was a satisfying work of destruction and amused me for several hours. The next morning I drove onto another ferry (the *Gloppen*) and continued on my way to Bergen.¹³

¹² I was told that if Norway lost all its other sources of fresh water, Jostedalsbreen alone would provide enough fresh water to supply the whole country for the next hundred years. If it doesn’t melt and slide into the fjords.

¹³ *Gloppen*, like *Stryn*, is the name of a Norwegian municipality near where the ferry named for it runs.

TWO PAGES OF SCENES FROM THE NORWEGIAN COUNTRYSIDE







ABOVE LEFT: A FORESTED CLIFF SEEN THROUGH THE FOG. ABOVE RIGHT: A WATERFALL.

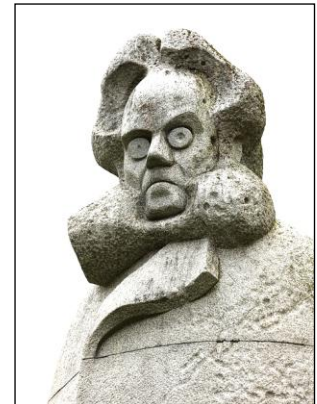
[Bergen](#), Norway's second city and an old Hanseatic port, was the goal of my car journey. Below: [Bryggen](#), the famous harborfront of Bergen. I was supposed to stay in an apartment B&B that belonged to a friend of a friend, but when I found it was a fourth-floor walkup I had to make other arrangements. My choices were more or less limited to the ominously named Hotel Terminus, and the almost equally unpromising P-Hotel.¹⁴



There was lots to see in Bergen (seal at left), a much more picturesque town than Oslo. Parts of it, with narrow streets and frame houses, looked a bit like Provincetown, or how Provincetown wished it could look. I



took a funicular up the highest local mountain, called Fløyen, and looked down at the city spread out far below, with the sun shining on the water and enormous cruise ships inching in and out of the harbor. I had a smoked salmon sandwich at the famous open-air fish market, visited the gloomy old [Hanseatic](#) trading house where the Germans used to buy and export



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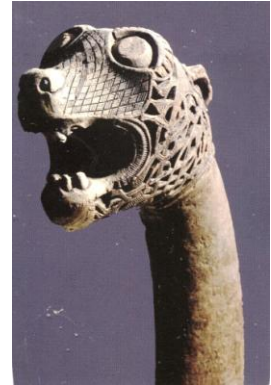
Auspiciously, there was no room for me at the Terminus – even a P-Hotel seemed better than that.

squillions of tons of dried Norwegian codfish, and was slightly creeped out by the local statue of [Ibsen](#) (above). In the evening crowds of young people dressed like zombie nurses howled through the city streets.¹⁵

I returned my car in Bergen and headed for the railroad station; the ride back to Oslo (on a *very* comfortable train) took most of the day, through a desolate region above the timber line, all boulders and snowfields and glacial ponds and isolated barracks belonging to the railroad. One more night in Oslo, and then onto the big iron bird for the journey home.



Norway is bigger than Italy; it is the fifth largest country in Europe (not counting Russia).¹⁶ I was only in the south (see the red area on the map at left), but the south was so dramatic I'd really like to see the north too. There are 19 counties (*fylker*) in Norway and I got to only five of them (26%); there are 230 municipalities (*kommuner*, not towns but the next division down from the counties) and I was in 40 of them (17%).¹⁷ Each *fylke* and



kommune has arms, many of them strikingly beautiful and [almost all](#) simple and uncluttered, unlike local division arms in many other European countries. Below are a few from places I visited; left to right: Sogn og Fjordane *fylke* (arms based on fjords), and Sogndal, Gol, Nes (arms based on local headland) and Jondal *kommuner*. Above right: a figurehead from the Viking Ship Museum, Oslo.

David

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¹⁵ I asked them what was happening. We are students, they said. Students where, I asked. In the nursing school! Of course I should have known.

¹⁶ After Ukraine (for now anyway), France, Spain and Sweden.

¹⁷ It is a question which division comes closest to our American counties. Norway is about the size of Montana, which has 56 counties. Norwegian *fylker* average 7827 square miles, about three times the size of Montana counties; the average American county-equivalent jurisdiction (excluding Alaskan census areas) is 998 square miles, half again as large as the average Norwegian *kommune*. It's a tossup, and so I'll go with *fylker*, as my score is already higher than with *kommuner* and I have a better chance of someday completing the list.