# THE HOUSES OF THE NORWEGIAN "SETERS": AN ANALYSIS OF LOCAL TYPE-VARIATIONS (Part I)

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This paper will deal with the houses of the Norwegian *seters,* trying to analyze the local type-variations. Architectural types can be established on the basis of a variety of criteria, – stylistic, esthetical, historical, etc. However, through an ethnological approach to the study of human life and its manifestations, it is vital to establish the functional criteria, on a background of resoruces and means of subsistence, as well as technical skills and standards. To obtain a full appreciation of the *seter*-houses, we will need to know what a *seter* is, and how it functions in the society where it belongs.

The Norwegian *seter* has, quite rightly, been called a *centre* on the periphery of the farm.[1] The term *seter* can be compared to, and equated with the Scottish *shieling,* a term which is used both for the summer grazing ground and the bothies for the herdsmen and the dairymaids. As Professor R. Miller has stated, we find shielings wherever climate or topography cause a seasonal variation in the value or availability of pasture.[2] However, it would seem that to justify the use of the word *centre,* quite a lot of the farm's activities would need to be found going on at the seter, – and this has indeed been the case in Norway.

Allow me to repeat, quite briefly, the specific characteristics applying to a seter, by Dr. Reinton's definitions:[3]

a. the seter has *permanent houses,* some distance away from the farm (which is the regular dwelling place); the seter-houses though, are only *temporarily in use.*

b. the seter has *a regular personnel,* i.e. a person or a group of persons are staying or regularly frequenting the seter in order to perform specific tasks.

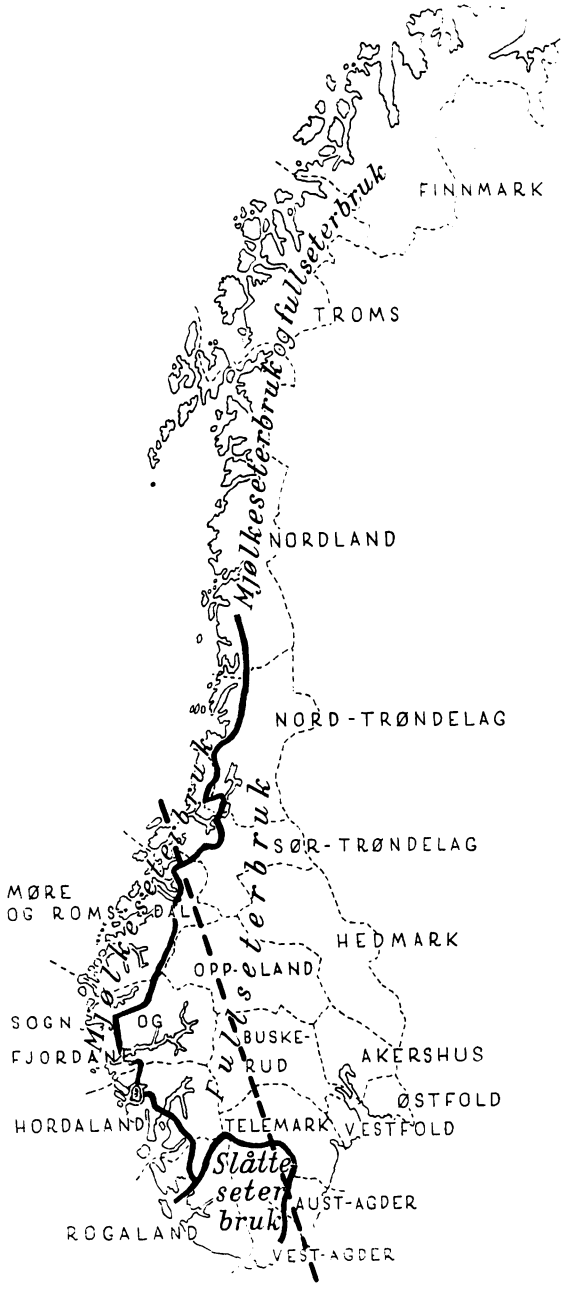


Fig. 1 Map showing areas of setersystems. (Based on map in Lars Reinton: *Til seters.* Oslo 1969). Stipled line indicating the division between eastern and western areas, as referred to in the text.

c. the definitive *objective* of a seter is to exploit certain resources for *grazing,* plus *haymaking* and other kinds of fodder gathering, in order to obtain a supply of winter fodder for the livestock, along with bringing forth a yield of milk products, mostly to be consumed over a period of time by the people of the farm.[4]

I would like to stress here – and ask the reader to note – the *winter supply* element of this seter-definition, as the various approaches to this function of the seter have brought about a number of different solutions as regards houses on the seter.

On the other hand, the seter even served as a centre for other activities within the exploitation of resources, and it is perhaps right to say that it served as an *annex* to the farm, also being a base during the hunting and fishing seasons, during charcoal burning and tar-production, as well as when the farmers were collecting wooden materials and birch bark for building purposes. All the activities mentioned were included in the annual working schedule of the traditional Norwegian farmer.

To enlarge upon this definition of a seter, it is necessary to outline quite briefly the various *seter systems* which we can identify as forming fairly distinct areas in Norway. This again will help us define more closely the various needs for housing on the seter, and point out any possible variations in such needs.

1. "*fullseter*" – system: when the seter personnel are living at the seter all through summer, and are equipped with a complete set of utensils for milking, producing and storing all the milk products on the seter itself. (Cf. map, area of "fullseterbruk".) (Fig. 1).

2. "*milkingseter*" – system: when the animals are being milked at the seter, while almost all production of butter, cheese etc. is done at home on the farm. The people attending to the animals, however, usually stay the night at the seter. (Cf. map, area of "mjølkeseterbruk".)

3. "*hayingseter*" – system: when the gathering of hay in the mountain area has *top priority* on the seter, while the milk produce seems to be of some less importance. (This system is restricted to a southern region with rather barren mountain areas, resulting in the development of a great number of widespread seters and high mobility over relatively large areas. (Cf. map, "slåtteseterbruk".)

Within all the three systems we usually find (or found, traditionally,) at least two types of seter – the one normally classified as a "*home seter*" and the other a "*mountain seter*", indicating location and distance in relation to the farm; each farm having its complement of near and distant seters.[5] Sometimes a farm could have as many as four seters in use within its complement of seters, utilized according to seasonal vegetational and climatic variations.

It is important to keep in mind that even this locational factor will play a role in the construction of the seter houses. And as an outstanding example I will point to the seters found as a special functional subgroup under group 1. the "fullseters" – namely what is usually termed "*winterseter*" (Fig. 2). This implies that man and beast return to (or stay on at) the mountain seter for a period during the darkest winter months, in heavy snows, to utilize the fodder which has been gathered and kept in store at the seter or close to it. This activity will bring about special needs and solutions regarding solidity and size of housing on the seter.

Let us now look at the environment where we find the seters, and also the locational factors – and distance – in relation to the farmstead. What about available building materials, transport problems, etc.?

Some few seters (mostly in the south-east of Norway) are located below the timberline (Fig. 3). This means that in the south-east some seters in a few areas may be surrounded by conifers, and accordingly the very best building material is close at hand. In the west (where the conifer line is at sea level)

Fig. 2 Kvarberg seter ("winter-seter"), Sjodalen, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

some of the low-lying home-seters may be situated within the deciduous tree-belt (Fig. 4). However, by far the greatest majority of seters are situated above the timberline – in many cases well above and miles away from the timberline (Fig. 5).

Our questions now are:

1. Will we find that all the seters in the "fullseter"-area have houses of the same type, size and building materials, knowing that they are all practising the same type of seter system? If not, how and why do the houses differ?

2. What differences, if any, are there between the houses of the different setersystem-regions (as outlined on the map)?

3. Will we find a variety of solutions to the same functional needs, reflecting adaptation and adjustment to local building materials? Or are there just a few simple all-over basic types?

Fig. 3 Knaistra, Hurdal, Akershus. (Note wooden shingle roofing). phot. T.M. Holmen.

Fig. 4 "Home-seter", Bolstaddalen, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

4. Will we find chronological differentiations, and if so, what does this imply?

5. And finally: Are there any variations based on social differentiation?

In this discussion we will mainly deal with the "fullseter"-region in the southern half of Norway, with all its contrasting topographical and ecological variations, and its great concentration of seters. Drawing on – among other things – material collected during several years of field studies, examples from other setersystem-regions will be discussed, though regretfully the northernmost areas of the country will be left out of this analysis at present.

Briefly, the houses we find on the seters belong to three main functional groups:

Fig. 5 "Mountain-seter", Fast, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

1. *Houses for people,* covering the following requirements:
   a) *living quarters*
   b) *room for production/work* (production of cheese, butter etc. Important feature here: fireplace.)
   c) *storage space* for dairy produce and food. (Usually cool, but depending on products.)
2. *Houses for animals,* where the maximum requirements would be:
   *byre(s)* for cows and calves
   *byre* for sheep
   *byre* for goats
   *stable* for horse
   (perhaps even a shelter for a pig)[6].
3. *Houses for storing the supply of fodder for the animals,*

i.e. *haybarns*
*mosslofts*
etc.

We may also add:

4. *Houses connected to necessary transport needs,*
i.e. *boathouses*

However, it must be stressed that examples of all these houses are *not* to be found on each and every Norwegian seter. The types and numbers are *closely related to location, setertype and -system.* This means that various combinations and solutions are found, from a complete range of very substantial houses in some seter areas, to the single very modest bothy of other areas, Both "extremes" will fit our seter-definition, which states the requirement of *permanent housing for the seter-personnel* as a basic criterion for a seter.

Before we move on to look closer at actual examples of these various house-types, let us briefly mention a few more facts about building materials and traditional building techniques in Norway.

*Wood* is of course regarded as the main traditional building material, but nonetheless, *stone* and *turf (sods)* have been in use since prehistoric times, when these materials indeed were the principal ones. (Turf/sods for construction of houses has survived longest in the north, where *turf byres* may still be found both in Norwegian and Lappish settlement areas. Turf dwelling-houses or -huts used to be common among the Lapps, but are now more or less obsolete.)

Among wooden building materials, coniferous logs are preferred, especially pine, but outside the conifer areas one has to make do with deciduous trees if one keeps to wood – most commonly birch and aspen which do not keep or last as long as conifers. (Note here: Norway has virtually no oak.) Another important point is that the trunk of a deciduous tree can have a very unshapely, crooked form, which is not suited when

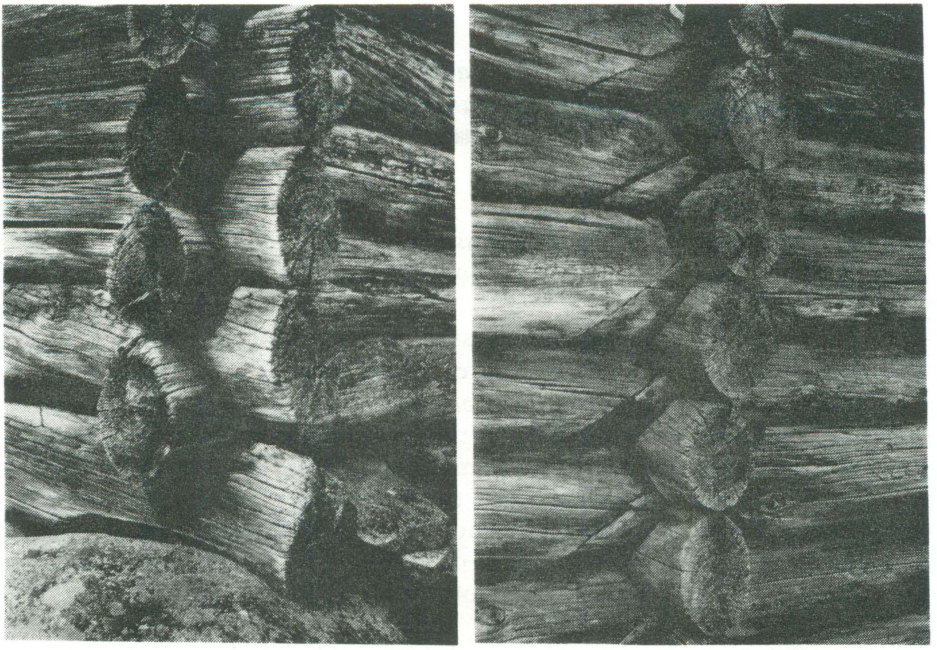

Fig. 6 Examples of "*laft*" construction. Fellese seter, Russli, Sjodalen, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

a) corner

b) detail from side wall of house, showing how timbers are added on lengthwise where an inside partition wall is "notched" in. Loghouses are easily lengthened in this way.

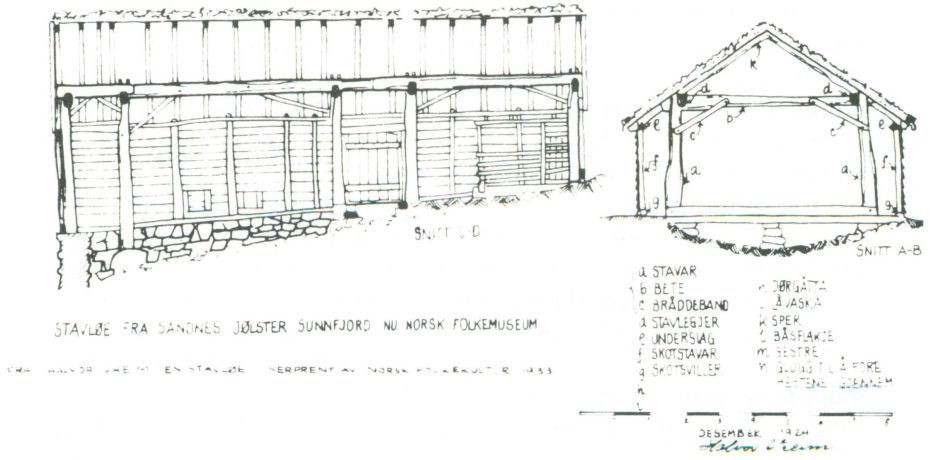


Fig. 7 Example of "stave"-construction. (Barn from Sandnes farm, Jølster, Sunnfjord.) (Halvor Vreim.)

building a log house.

The main wood-building techniques are "*laft*" and "*stav*". "*Laft*" is a construction of horizontal logs with notched corners, the logs fitting tightly and neatly together (Fig. 6a and 6b). "*Stav*" or "stave construction" is a frame construction consisting of pairs of vertical timbers of "staves" connected by a crossbeam on top (Fig. 7). Each pair is linked at the top lengthwise along the wall-line by a horizontal beam (Fig. 8). In more elaborate constructions (e.g. stave churches) there is also a horizontal timber along the base of the wall ("*syllstokk*"); this is not always the case in vernacular buildings. Note, however, that the wall itself does not carry any weight in a "stave"-construction. The roof-weight rests on the "stave"-frame.

Fig. 8 Example of "stave"-construction in derelict byre on seter in Erdalen, Oppstryn, Nordfjord, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

A third (and lesser known) wood-building technique in Norway is "*skjelter*"-technique (from *skjeltre,* v. : spread thinly) (Fig. 9). This is a relatively open construction, consisting of a notched log-construction at the base and top, with vertical wallplanks inserted in between, edge to edge. This technique is usually found in buildings which are supposed to be open and well-aired, like barns and haylofts or various types of store-houses. It is common along the coasts of Northern Norway, and is also found in south-eastern mountain areas.

A *foundation* of base of stone is necessary for all wooden buildings. This can, however, be simply solid corner stones, but on the other hand, one also finds meticulously-built dry-stone foundations, especially in connection with dwelling houses.

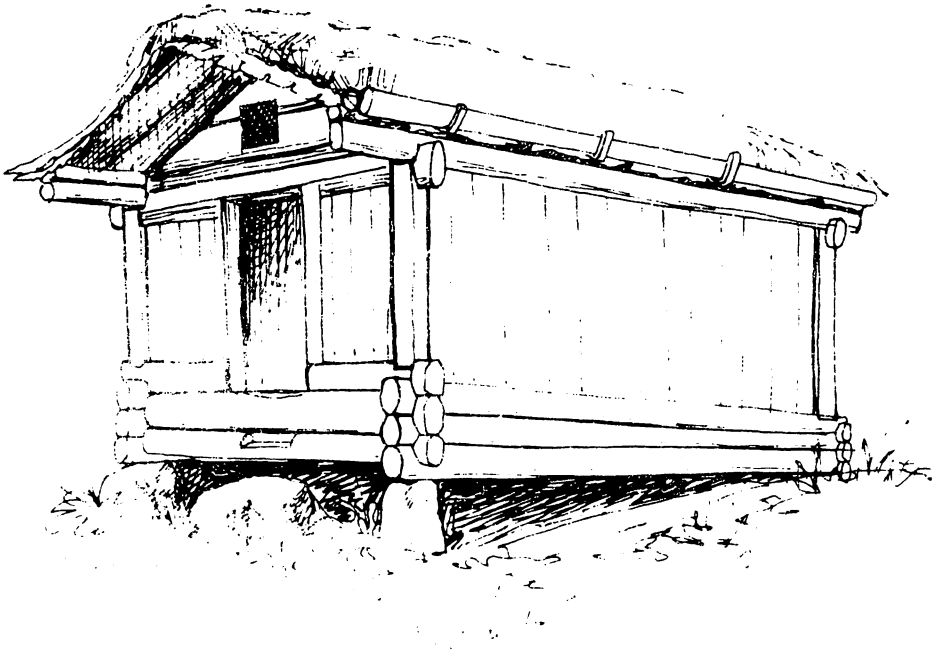

Fig. 9 Example of "*skjelter*"-technique. (House for storage, from Holmenes, Balsfjord, Troms.) (Stigum.)

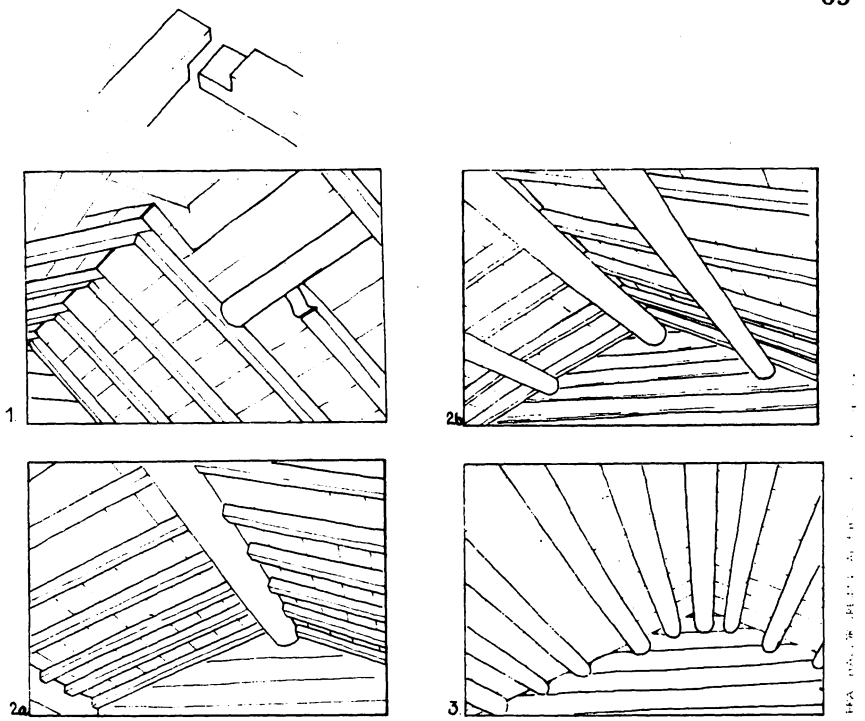


Fig. 10 Examples of roof construction:
1) rafter roof ("*sperretak*") + detail of joint. (Note sky-light construction.)
2a) single ridge-beam roof ("*mønsåstak*").
2b) ridge-beam roof with two side beams.
3) "roof-beam roof" ("*åstak*") (Vreim/Stigum)

*The roof construction* is on the whole relative to and depending on the wall-construction. In houses of "laft"-construction one will mainly find *horizontal roof beams* ("*åser*") or one single *ridge pole* or ridge beam, ("*mønsås*") (Fig. 10). In buildings of "stave"-construction one finds sloping *rafters*/couples, ("*sperrer*").

*The roof-covering materials* will decide the *angle* or *slope* of the roof (Fig. 11). Main types of materials are: 1) *sods/turf,*

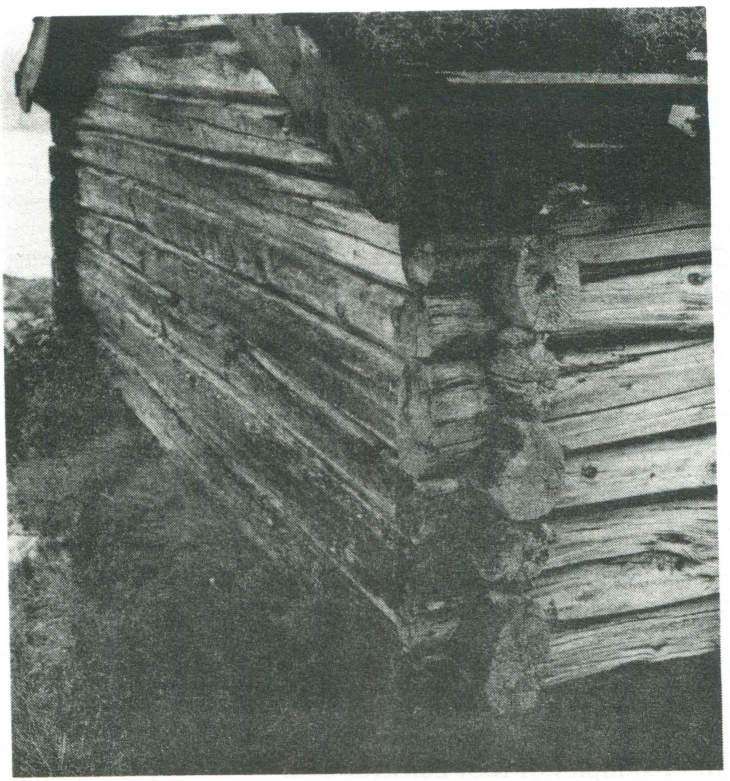

Fig. 11 Detail of "*laft*"-corner and lower part of sod roof. Søre Byre seter, Byrtnes, Tesse, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

traditionally resting on several layers of birch bark on top of a wooden roof (Fig. 12). 2) various types of *wooden roof covering,* like *split logs, wooden shingles* of several types etc. (Figs. 13, 14). 3) *flagstone* or *slate roofs* (Fig. 15). 4) *corrugated iron, asbestos sheets, (pantiles),* etc. (Pantiles are relatively uncommon on seter houses, due to transport problems and probably also cost.)

Roofs covered with sods or wooden shingles are usually *less sloping,* and give a flatter appearance than, say, the slated roofs. This is of course because the sods are liable to slide on a steep roof. A sod roof is extremely heavy, however, especially

Fig. 12 Sod roof on "*innsel*", corrugated iron on "*utsel*". "Home-seter", Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ó. Borchgrevink.

in wet weather, and there is a traditional "golden" rule-of-thumb for construction of the slope of a sod roof, called "*treungsrøst*", a term describing the form of the gable. The height of the gable triangle corresponds to 1/3 of the width of the house.[7]

Often various layers of roof covering are found on top of each other, as a result of constant upkeep and repair work. By leaving on old sod roof below split logs or corrugated iron, the roof insulation is bettered.

Fig. 13 Wooden roofs. Austrem seter, Sjodalen, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

Fig. 14 Wooden shingle roof (barn). Austrem seter, Sjodalen, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

Fig. 15 Combination of sod roof and slabs. "Mountain-seter", Fjellsli, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

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4. See also: Anne-Berit Ø. Borchgrevink: The "Seter"-Areas of Rural Norway – a Traditional Multipurpose Resource. Northern Studies 1977:9.
5. Ibid.
6. Cf. the many houses on the traditional Norwegian farm. Functional division – a result of the timberbuilding technique?
7. Halvor Vreim: Laftehus. 5.ed. (abr.) Oslo 1966.


(To be concluded in 'Northern Studies' vol. 17.)