

The Historical Background of the Birkebeiner Name

There was civil war in Norway. Faction pitted itself against faction, each having a pretender fighting for the throne and the supremacy of the country. Father fought son, brother against brother. No one felt safe.

(One faction was the **Birkebeiners**—the underdogs who were persecuted and victimised. Living out in the open these people were in such dire need that they had nothing but the bark of birch trees as footwear. The word Birkebeiner, (literally “birch legs”), has come to mean a person strong in adversity, never daunted by trials and hardships.

The chieftain of the Birkebeiners, Sverre, had gained ascendancy over great parts of the country, but the rival faction, the **Baglers**, prevailed in the Oslo area and in the more affluent eastern parts of the country. Under Sverre’s son, Haakon, the conflict subsided, but the fighting flared up again when Haakon died in 1204.

Haakon’s son, Haakon Haakonsson (the little prince), was born a couple of weeks after the death of his father, and in him the Baglers saw a dangerous rival pretender. The Birkebeiners knew that the life of the young prince was at stake and decided to take him north to Trondheim where he would be safe. On Christmas Eve the party of refugees came to a small farmhouse in Lillehammer, where they stayed in hiding over Christmas.

Early in January 1206 they set forth again. Finding it risky to follow the route up the Gudbrandsdalen valley to Trondheim, they cut across the mountains to the neighbouring Osterdalen valley. Due to bad weather and difficult snow conditions the two best skiers, **Torstein Skevla** and **Skjervald Skrukka**, had to go ahead and leave the rest of the party behind. Never flinching, the two of them carried the child, in whom they had high hopes for the future of Norway, across the barren mountains to Rena in the Osterdalen valley, a distance of 55 km. There they were well received by local farmers and given horses and food for the further escape north to Trondheim.

Haakon Haakonsson eventually became king (1217-63), ended the civil war and established peace in the country. Under him Norway enjoyed its heyday in the Middle Ages.

On this trip they suffered much from cold, snow and wind. **Behind the saga lies a deed of valour and strength with an appeal to skiers of all ages and nations.** Their deed is celebrated today with the annual Birkebeiner races in Norway (55 km), USA (50 km) and Australia (25 km). The first

Norwegian Birkebeiner race was held in 1932 (155 skiers), the American Birkebeiner 1973 (70 skiers) and the Australian Birkebeiner in 1979 (80 skiers). **Note:** *See below for an explanation and photos of where the course went and how the track was made in those early years.*

The 5.5 kg pack carried by the present-day Birkebeiners (now only in the Norwegian race) symbolises the weight of the 18-month-old prince. The idea is that it should contain the necessities for rough mountain weather. As in all races some skiers compete for a top placing, but it is a feature of this race that the ultimate goal of every participant is to finish inside a time limit. Those who succeed are awarded a pin, considered the hallmark of a skier. The time limit in each age group is made up on the basis of the average of the time of the 5 fastest (3 fastest in the Australian Birkebeiner) skiers in an age group, plus a time increment of 25% added.

Both the Norwegian and American Birkebeiner races are foundation members of Worldloppet, which was established in 1981. The Australian Birkebeiner is not part of Worldloppet but the Kangaroo Hoppet, which developed from it, was admitted in 1990 with the first event being conducted in 1991. **Note:** The Australian Birkebeiner is still conducted as part of the Australian Worldloppet event but done in the skating technique, no pack is carried and a pin is awarded to all those who complete the distance regardless of time. The 2013 event on will be the 23rd Kangaroo Hoppet.

Updated August 2010

Read — “**The Story of Inga**” (the mother of the King’s son Hakon) below (it’s on the 3rd page).

The Story of Inga

– mother of a birkebeiner king

By Rolf Kjaernli

Most of the attention of the Norse saga-writers was centred on the exploits of men, with only brief glimpses of women's deeds shining through the shadows cast by their powerful male contemporaries.

One female name, however, stands out clearly among the many heroes of the past – Inga of Varteig, mother of the king's son Håkon, who was taken across the mountain between Lillehammer and Østerdalen in January of the year 1206.



Einar Sigstad's painting of Inga, mother of the royal child Håkon Håkonsson.

We do not know for certain whether Inga was with him for the whole of the trek or for just a part of it. But according to the saga, her party decided that due to the stormy weather their two best skiers, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka, should go ahead with the boy and take him to a place of safety.

They found shelter for the child in a remote mountain barn, where they melted snow for him to drink. The saga indicates that Inga, with the help of guides, found her way to the barn, and then accompanied her son for the remainder of the journey down to Østerdalen and subsequently north to Nidaros.

Later, she stuck by her son's side through thick and thin – even undergoing torture with red hot irons to 'prove' that Håkon was indeed the king's offspring.

Inga never became queen, but she is one of the sagas' most outstanding characters – beautiful, noble and courageous.

She lived to see her son become one of Norway's most powerful kings. Håkon Håkonsson brought peace to the land, and under his rule, Norway enjoyed her greatest medieval status.

In Inga of Varteig's memory, "Inga-låmi" – Norway's biggest all-female ski gathering – is staged from Birkebeinere Ski Stadium in Lillehammer on the second weekend of March each year.

When it first took place in 1993, the event had 1,638 entries. Six years later, more than 6,000 women of all ages took part in the 1999 Inga-låmi.