

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 Birkebeineren 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.