

# A short history of skiing

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Any Scandinavian will tell you that skiing was invented by Ull, the God of Frost, Glitter and Skiing. In reality, the exact origins of skiing are unknown, but it is certain that skiing has existed, in one form or another, for the best part of 5000 years. Although it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact date at which skis were first used, the reasons why they were invented are easier to determine. In those parts of the world that are covered by snow and ice throughout the winter, primitive man developed, for his own survival, means of travelling across the snow. In North America snowshoes were developed; in Europe and Central Asia came the forerunners of what we know today as skis.

## EARLY SKIS

Some of the early skis which have been found in Norway, Sweden, Finland and northern Siberia as well as in the Altai mountains of southern Kazakhstan date back at least 4500 years and are surprisingly sophisticated. All are recognisable as skis, although there is considerable variation between the short (111 cm) skis found in Hoting in Central Sweden, which date from about 2500 BC, and the long (204 cm) Finnish (Kalvtrask) skis dated around 500 years later.

Rock carvings showing skiers are widespread throughout the northern regions, the most famous being those at Rodoy in northern Norway showing a skier apparently wearing an animal mask and mounted on very long skis. This carving is thought to be more than 4000 years old, whilst others on the shores of the White Sea and Lake Onega in Russia may date back to even earlier times. Hunting is the recurring theme depicted and it seems clear that skis were originally devised for this purpose.

The discovery of the Altai skis in Central Asia can be linked to the known migration of the Steppe or Reindeer people from this area towards Scandinavia following the last ice-age between 15,000 and 10,000 BC. The conclusion to be drawn must be that these nomadic people were the inventors of the ski which they took with them to Northern Europe during their migration. This theory is enhanced by the similarity between the old skis to be seen in Swedish, Norwegian and Eastern museums. They are flat on both upper and lower surfaces, short and wide, generally made of pine, are pointed and curved at both ends. The binding is simply a thong passing through two vertical holes at each side of the foot.



A Norwegian soldier in full military kit – winter of 1800

## LINKS WITH THE PRESENT

From this early period of history, two historical events stand out which link the skiing of that era to the sport of the present day. In 1206, during a time of civil unrest, the infant prince Haakon Haakonson was rescued from his enemies, known as the Baglers, by his bodyguards the Birkebeinere or Birchlegs, so called from their custom of wrapping birch bark around their legs as protection against the snow and cold. Two of them, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka, carried

the prince across the mountains from near Lillehammer in the Gudbrandsdalen to the safety of Rena in the Osterdalen, from whence he escaped northwards to safety with his mother Inga of Varteig. Haakon Haakonson went on to become one of the greatest of Norway's early kings. Some three hundred years later, in 1520, the Swedish nobleman Gustav Vasa, unable to persuade

the people of Dalarna to rise up against their Danish overlords and oppressors, fled towards exile in Norway. Shortly after his departure from Mora, news reached the town of the Stockholm Bloodbath, in which many Swedish nobles were murdered by the Danes. They sent their two fastest skiers, Lars and Engelbrekt, to chase after Gustav Vasa. Catching up with him at Salen, near the Norwegian border, they persuaded him to return, raise an army and lead Sweden to independence. These two historical events are today remembered in two great popular races, Birkebeinerrennet (the Birchlegs Race) and Vasaloppet (the Vasa Race)

Shortly after the events surrounding Gustav Vasa, Olaus Magnus, Bishop of Uppsala in central Sweden, wrote "The History of the Nordic Races". Appearing in Latin in 1555, the book described the way in which the Lapps used their skis: "They attach the skis to their feet, take a pole in their hands to steer in the chosen direction, and run uphill, downhill and on the traverse as they wish across the snow-covered hills". Olaus Magnus' book is illustrated with drawings engraved for each chapter, and is made more interesting by the fact that the engraver, who had never seen the things he was drawing, used his imagination to depict skis in the form of pointed wooden shoes, curved in front and cut off square behind the heels.

Although educated Central Europeans were able to read of skis in works such as these, skis were still largely unknown outside Scandinavia, where their use had continued since the very earliest times. In 1636 Lapp skis were displayed at an exhibition in Worms and another 17th Century work explained that "when a Lapp ski, he has just one long and strong pole which he holds obliquely in both hands to push, support himself and brake on either side". By this time Lapp skis were of unequal length. One ski of the pair was short and wide. Called kalhu or sivakka in Finnish or ski in Norwegian (from the Old Norse word skid a split length of wood), it was often covered in skins and provided propulsion. The other ski was long (2.5 to 3.0 metres) and had a pronounced curve. The front narrowed to a very thin point while the rounded back curved gently upwards: called lylly or suksi by the Finns and andor in Norway, it was the gliding ski. The Lapps were already sufficiently sophisticated to make their skis of different woods to suit different snow conditions, using a flexible and heavily cambered ski for hard snow and a longer, lighter ski for fresh snow conditions.

Until the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th Centuries, skiing was largely confined to the valleys and forests. About 1600 Peder Claussoen Friis wrote: "No man shall cross this mountain" (between Eidfjord and Halvingdal) "after the Feast of St Bartholomew (24 August) until the Feast In-



The world's first postage stamp to depict a skier