



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#38

THE GREAT MAELSTROM

THE GREAT MAELSTROM

Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne wrote about it. Seafarers greatly feared it. Adventurers boasted about having been in its clutches. And the fishermen of the Lofoten Islands in northern Norway defied it in their toil for their daily bread. The great Maelstrom that churns between two of the **Lofoten Islands** has sparked the imagination of authors and storytellers throughout the centuries. For the Lofoten fishermen, the dangers of the Maelstrom have represented a reality they have been forced to overcome in their work.

The Swedish bishop, Olaus Magnus, who lived in the first part of the 1500s, has given us one of the first descriptions of the Maelstrom. He pictured it as a bottomless abyss opening in the sea, capable of swallowing a sailor in a moment. The ships caught in the whirling waters were inevitably drawn down into the deep, according to Olaus Magnus, who also published a map showing ships helplessly caught in the Maelstrom's wild spin.

A description of the Maelstrom from the late 1500s is attributed to a local official who—one would think—would have a more objective impression of the phenomenon. But his story is almost as dramatic as that of Olaus Magnus. **The Maelstrom** is nothing but sky, water and stone, he claimed, and told about waves as high as mountains and whales who perished in their efforts to swim the Strøm.

The writers of the many fantastic stories about the Maelstrom probably never saw this part of the Lofoten Sea. They have listened to tall tales and rumors, added some imaginary horrors of their own and passed it on to others who added even more to the legend of the great Maelstrom. The first written eyewitness account of the Strøm completely scotched the rumor of whirling waves, crushed ships, scores of drowned sailors and dying whales. The Italian priest, **Francesco Negri**, could report that he saw nothing, heard nothing, and found the stories about the Maelstrom to be totally unfounded.

Father Negri must have been visiting Lofoten on an especially nice day—for even if the Maelstrom myths strongly exaggerate the ferocity of the sea, local fishermen can testify to the dangers of these waters. **The Moskenesstrøm** (MOHS'keh'nehs'strom)—as it is called locally—is treacherous when strong tidal currents run through the sound. Skerries, sunken rocks and shoals create foul waters sometimes impossible to navigate. Two types of undercurrents are formed, and these whip up waves and form eddies. The phenomenon can especially be observed during rising tide. If winds from the west then sweep in from the sea, it can get nasty out there—not to mention what it is like in a regular storm. At such times, no one should enter the Strøm.

Even on mild summer days, when the North Sea is calm and the sunshine flows over ocean and land, the Moskenesstrøm (MOHS'keh'nehs'strom) grinds and foams between the Lofoten Islands. A legend or two may still rise from its waters.