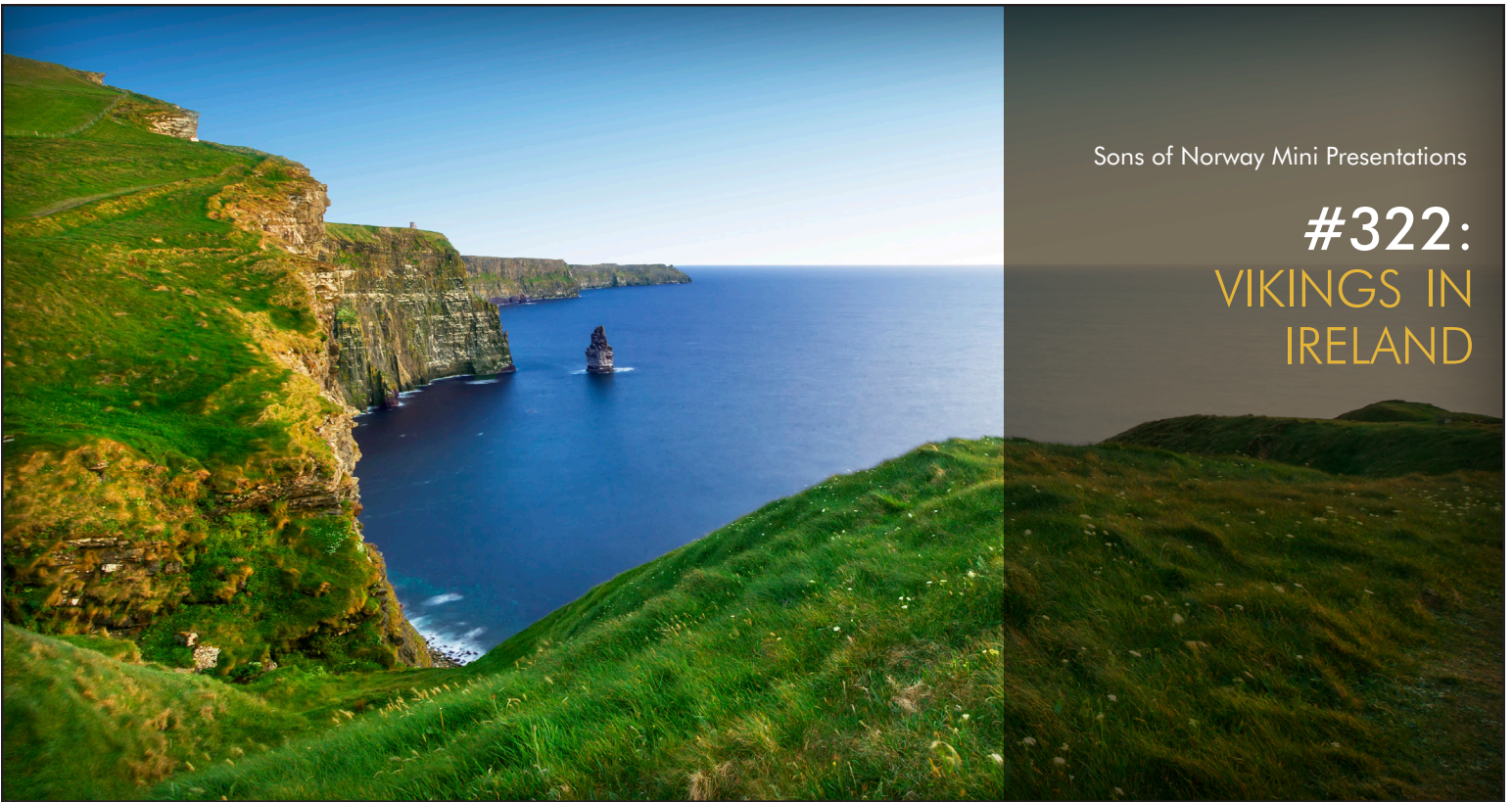


#322: VIKINGS IN IRELAND



They came from the North to explore along the coasts of the North Atlantic. They sailed in longships crafted to withstand the ocean waves and versatile enough to navigate narrow river ways; eager to raid, trade and establish new settlements. Ireland was just one of the many lands the Vikings encountered and settled.



There were two significant eras of Viking expansion that reached Ireland; the first lasted from c. AD 795-850 and the second from AD 914-980. Upon first contact with these visitors from the north, the Irish called them Gaill, 'Foreigners', or Locklannaigh, 'Northerners' and their presence in Ireland had a lasting effect. Even though the Vikings stole from and committed acts of violence on the Irish, they eventually built permanent settlements and brought about positive change for coastal ports through trade and urbanization. This era was well documented in Irish Annals, which were texts written by monks that mark the Norse

visitors' yearly feast days, obituaries and attacks on the church. The annals reveal that while the Norse were responsible for 140 plunderings, the Irish were the plunderers on 139 occasions, and maybe even more surprising, on 19 occasions the Irish and the Norse carried out the plundering together. It should be noted that the motive for these attacks was not due to religious reasons, but because the monasteries were the location where fine metal works and jewels were typically stored. In the Middle Ages, churches served as sanctuaries, not only for persons, but also for goods, and the priests were often safe-keepers of people's valuables. This tempted looters of all kinds, not just Vikings, and it explains why the cooperation between the two ethnic clans developed.

The two peoples were alike in more ways than one. Both the Irish and the Norse had an extraordinary fine poetry tradition and we know that they admired and enjoyed one another's works. Another quality common to both groups was a fierce demand for independence.

Towards the end of the first era, the Vikings began to create port settlements and longphorts or protective ship harbors for themselves in Dublin and other areas along the coast. The Irish responded by strengthening their defenses against the Vikings. Within the next 10 years the Vikings were pushed out of Ireland and the Irish regained their land. But all was not over in Ireland, the second Viking Era in Ireland arrived about 64 years later in A.D. 914 and this time their settlements would endure and become known as Ireland's Viking towns, which were located primarily on the coast. They served as vital links to the Scandinavian homelands and Western Europe. The Irish political system at that time was based on small areas, ruled by kings of local clans. The Irish leaders might have been slain, but their domains could not be consolidated. Every man, woman, and child of the inland clans formed a quiet, but invincible resistance force. The Norse had to be content with sitting



on the Irish coast, where they found comfort in crossing the Irish Sea to raid the English, who were less difficult to deal with.

Early historical sources note that political, military, economic and personal alliances formed between the Irish and Scandinavians during this time. The Viking longphorts gradually integrated with Irish ways and trade began to develop. Archeologists have found caches of Viking style silver pieces in early Irish settlements near the coast substantiating that trade did in fact occur. The most significant settlement for the Vikings was Dublin, which later served as a key player in the politics surrounding the Irish Sea and the Isle of Man. In fact, a Viking ruler of Dublin provoked rivalries that eventually led to the politics of early medieval Ireland.

Over time a gradual shift towards urbanization and trade was introduced that was unmatched at that time by any other Viking settlement in the North Atlantic region. The presence of the Scandinavians in Ireland from AD 915 and on was significant in the growth and development of Ireland's port cities. When celebrating all things Irish on St. Patrick's Day, don't forget the role that Vikings played in Ireland's history as fearless explorers, groundbreakers, and catalysts for growth.