

## Early descriptions of whales

Many of the early descriptions of whales and their behaviour and ecology were published in languages other than English. These were often sections in books or articles that were more broad in scope, for example general works on zoology or geography. If translations into English exist at all, they are often not very precise with respect to the cetacean component. The Journal invites submissions of such descriptions. Submissions should include: full bibliographic information; a brief introduction to the author and the work in which the description is included; the full text in the original language; and a careful translation.

### ABOUT 1250. THE KING'S MIRROR [KONUNGS SKUGGSJÁ]. PRINTED IN CHRISTIANIA (NOW OSLO), 1848.

#### Introduction

'The King's Mirror' is a didactic document of a kind that was common in European countries in medieval times. The work comprises a dialogue between a wise and learned father and his son. According to the introductory chapter, the work was to deal with the four great orders of men in the Norwegian kingdom: the merchants, the king and the court, the clergy and the peasantry. Only the first two parts have come down to modern times in a manuscript from about 1275 and in some later manuscripts. The author is unknown, although it is generally agreed that the document was written in Namdalen, north of the city of Trondheim, by a high ranking member of the Norwegian priesthood who was working in close connection with the royal court. The work was probably written for the sons of king Håkon Håkonarson (1217-1263). One of them, Magnus, succeeded his father as king (1263-1280).

Trade with Iceland was important to Norwegian merchants. The section on merchants contains detailed descriptions of animals which can be found in the North Atlantic and around Iceland and Greenland, including 18 different species of cetaceans. Of these cetaceans, 13 can safely be identified from the descriptions and names given: pilot whale, porpoise, dolphin (in the Norwegian sea white-beaked and white-sided dolphin), killer whale, minke whale, sei whale, white whale, sperm whale, right whale, narwhal, humpback whale, Greenland whale (bowhead), and fin and blue whale (but these two are not distinguished between). Two of the five unidentified species may be the bottlenose whale and Sowerby's beaked whale, but the remaining three can not be identified. They may not be whales at all.

For many of the whales the document gives the length in 'ells'. When the lengths given in ells are plotted against modern measurements (I have used the numbers given in Martin, 1990), the points lie very close to a straight line through the origin, which suggests that the author had precise information on the relative size of these whales. However, the slope of the line is about 0.23 m/ell, while a historical encyclopaedia states that the medieval ell in Norway was 0.47 m/ell, i.e. double. I have no explanation for this discrepancy, which does not seem to have been discovered by scholars who have studied this document.

The translation below is based on the translation from old Norse to English by Laurence Marcellus Larson (Twayne

Publishers Inc, New York, 1917), but I have corrected obvious errors and translated the important sentences more literally.

#### English translation

Father: Aside from the whales in the ocean, there are, I should say, few things in the Icelandic waters which are worth mentioning or discussing. The whales vary much both in kind and size.

#### Pilot whale

Those that are called *hnydingar*, and they are the most numerous, grow to a length of twenty ells; a great many of them are, however, so small that they measure only ten ells; the rest are in between, each having its own size. These fishes have neither teeth nor whalebone, nor are they dangerous either to ships or men, but are rather disposed to avoid the fishermen. Nevertheless, they are constantly being caught and driven to land by the hundreds, and where many are caught, they provide much food for men. [The statement that these whales lack teeth is of course wrong. The word *nydinger* has been used for pilot whales in Norway until quite recently.]

#### Porpoise and dolphin

There are also other varieties of small whales, such as *hnisa*, which is never longer than five ells, and the *leiptr*, which has a length of seven ells only. [*Nise* is still the Norwegian word for harbour porpoise. The etymology of the word *leiptr* is the same as the English word *leap*, i.e. an animal that leaps or jumps out of the water. The current Norwegian word used by fishermen for dolphins is *springer*, which is etymologically different from *leiptr*, but has the same meaning.]

#### Killer whale

There is another kind of whale called *vagnir*, which grows no longer than twelve ells and has teeth in proportion to their size very much as dogs have. They are also ravenous for other whales just as dogs are for other beasts. They gather in flocks and attack large whales, and, when a large one is caught alone, they worry and bite it till it succumbs. It is likely, however, that this one, while defending itself with mighty blows, kills a large number of them before it perishes. [The killer whale was still called *vagn* or *vagnhund*

in Norway until about a hundred years ago. The etymology of the word is probably connected to the shape; *vagn* meaning 'spindleshaped'.]

#### *Minke whale*

There is another sort of whale, called *fiskreki*, which is perhaps the most useful of all to men; for it drives the herring and all other kinds of fish in toward the land from the ocean outside, as if appointed and sent by the Lord for this purpose. This is its duty and office as long as the fishermen keep the peace on the fishing grounds. Its nature is also peculiar in this, that it seemingly knows how to spare both ships and men. But when the fishermen fall to quarrelling and fighting, so that blood is spilt, this whale seems able to perceive it, for it moves in between the land and the fish and chases the shoals back into the ocean, just as it earlier had driven them in towards the men. These whales are not more than thirty ells in length, or forty at the very largest. They would provide good food, if men were allowed to hunt them, but no one is permitted to catch or harm them, since they are of such great and constant service to men. [The idea that whales drive fish toward the shore was commonly accepted among fishermen in Norway as late as one hundred years ago. This belief was the basis for strong opposition to whaling from fishermen in northern Norway in the 1890s. A Scandinavian word for minke whale has been *sildeskipper*, which can be translated as *herring captain*. The prohibition of the hunting of minke whales cannot have been complied with, at least not for long, since it is known that minke whales have been caught in bays and inlets since medieval times.]

#### *Fin and blue whales*

Then there is a kind of whale called *reydr*, and this fish is the best of all for food. It is of a peaceful disposition and does not bother ships, though it may swim very close to them. This fish is of great size and length; it is reported that the largest thus far caught have measured thirteen times ten ells, that is, one hundred and thirty ells by ten-count. Because of its quiet and peaceful behaviour it often falls prey to whale fishermen. It is better for eating and smells better than any of the other fishes that we have talked about, although it is said to be very fat; it has no teeth. It has been asserted, too, that if one can get some of the sperm of this whale and be perfectly sure that it came from this sort and no other, it will be found a most effective remedy for eye troubles, leprosy, ague, headache and for every other ill that afflicts mankind. Sperm from other whales also makes good medicine, though not as good as this sort. [*Reydr* means tubes or grooves, and refer to the characteristic structures found on the ventral surface of the lower jaw and neck of these animals. A later Norse version of the name of these whales is *rørkval*, which was borrowed in French and later in English as *rorqual*.]

#### **Original text**

Faðir: Í Íslands höfum þykki mér fátt þat vera, er minnig sé vert eða umreðu, fyrir utan hvali þa, er þar eru í höfum, ok eru þeir mjök með ýmsum hætti eða vexti.

Ok verða þeir hvalir er hnýðingar heita, er með mestum fjölda eru, 20 álna langir, verða þeir ok sumir sva fjöldinn af þeim smár, at eigi eru lengri en 10 álna, ok þar á millum hverr eptir sinum vexti. En þessir fiskar hafa hvárki tönn né

tálkn, ok ekki eru þeir hættir hvárki við skip né menn, heldr forðask þeir veiðimanna fund, ok verða þó veiddir iðuliga ok reknir á land hundrum saman, ok er þat mikil fœzla mönnum, þar sem þeir verða margir neiddir.

En þa eru önnur smá hvalakyn, sva sem er hnísa, er eigi verðr lengri en 5 álna, eða leiptr, er eigi verðr lengri en 7 álna.

þat er enn eitt hvalakyn, er menn kalla vagnir, ok verða eigi lengri en 12 álna, ok eru þeir tentir eptir sinum vexti, svá mjök sem hundar, ok þvílíkir í ágrind sinni við aðra hvali sem hundar við dýr; þvíat þeir samnask flokkum saman ok renna at stórum hvölum, ok þar sem mikill hvatr er einn staddr, þá bita þeir hann ok mæða til þess, er hann hefir bana. Kann ok þat vera at hann drepr iðuliga mikinn fjölda af þeim í storum höggum í vörn sinni, áðr en verðr dauðr.

þa heitir enn hvalakyn eitt fiskreki, ok stendr mönnum náliga mest gagn af; þvíat hann rekr til lands or höfum utan bæði síld ok aðra allskyns fiska, svá sem hann sé skipaðr eða sendr til þess af guði, ok þat sé hans skyldarembætti æ meðan fiskimenn gæta með spekt sinnar veiði; ok hefir hann þó nökkut svá undarlíga náttúru, þvíat hann kann at þyrma náliga bæði mönnum ok skipum; en ef þeir verða úsáttir ok berjask, svá at blóði verði spilt, þá er sem þessi hvalr viti þat, ok ferr þá millum lands ok fiska, ok rekr görvalla brott ok út í haf frá þeim, svá sem hann hafði áðr rekit til þeirra, en þessi hvalr er eigi meiri at vexti en 30 álna, eða 40 þeir sem stærstir verða; ok er mönnum vel ætr, ef lofat væri at veiða hann, en mönnum er því eigi lofat at veiða hann eða nökkut mein gera, at hann gerir mönnum jafnan mikil gagn.

þa er enn eitt hvalakyn, er reyðr er kallat, ok er sá fiskr allra beztr atu. Hann er hógværr fiskr ok eigi hættir við skip, þóat hann fari nær. En sa fiskr er mikill ok langr at vexti; svá segja menn, at þann hafi menn mestan veiddan, er hann var 13 tigu álna langr. þat er 30 álna ok hundrað tírcætt; ok verðr hann opt veiddr af veiðimönnum fyrir hógværi sinnar sakir ok spektar; ok er hann betri áttum ok betr þefjaðr en nökkurr fiskr annarr þeirra, er nú höfum vér um rætt, ok er hann þó vel feitr talinn; hefir hann ok öngvar tennr. þat er ok mælt, ef maðr mætti na aukningu fræs hans, svá at þat vissi til sanns, at af hánum væri ok eigi af öðrum hvölum, þa væri tat öruggast til allra lækninga, bæði við augum ok líkþra ok við riðu, ok við höfuðverk ok á mót öllum sóttum, þeim er menn fá; en þó er annarra hvala auki góðr til lækningar, þó eigi sé svá góðr sem þessi er.

(Continued in the next issue.)

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#### REFERENCE

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