

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 BY CARL C. WERNER. PART 2.

Introduction

'The King's Mirror' is a didactic document of a kind that was common in European countries in medieval times. The work was probably written by a high ranking member of the Norwegian priesthood for the sons of king Hákon Hákonarson (1217-1263). For more details about the document, see the 'Introduction' to Part 1 in *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 1999, 1(2): iii-iv.

The document contains detailed descriptions of some 18 different 'species' of cetaceans said to be found in the North Atlantic and around Iceland and Greenland. Of these, 13 can safely be identified from the descriptions and names given. The pilot whale, harbour porpoise, dolphin (in the Norwegian Sea, whitebeaked and whitesided dolphin), killer whale, minke whale, and fin and blue whales (not distinguished between) were presented in Part 1. In Part 2, the descriptions of the sperm whale, right whale, greenland whale (bowhead), humpback whale and narwhal are presented, as well as one paragraph which mentions the names of seven whale species, of which only the white whale can be safely identified. Four of the others may be the sei whale, bottlenose whale, Cuvier's beaked whale and Sowerby's beaked whale, but the remaining two can definitely not be identified. Indeed they may not be whales at all, but sharks (e.g. basking shark). It is interesting to note that this account contains none of the fanciful descriptions of mermaids, sea serpents or marine monsters, which were so abundant in texts from between 1500 and Linneus (1750).

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

Sperm whale

Another kind is called *burhvalir*. These are toothed whales, although the teeth are barely large enough to be carved into fair-sized knife handles or chess men. They are neither fierce nor savage, but rather of a gentle nature, and so far as possible they avoid fishermen. In size, they are similar to those that I mentioned last. Their teeth are so numerous that more than seventy can be found in the head of a single whale of this sort.

COMMENT: The word *bur* means small house and probably refers to the rectangular head of the sperm whale. The number of teeth is strikingly accurate.

Right whale

Still another kind is called *slettibaka*; this has no fins on the back and is about as large as the sort that we mentioned last. Seafaring men fear it very much, for it is by nature disposed to sport with ships.

COMMENT: *Slettibaka* means 'smooth back'.

Greenland whale (bowhead)

Then there is that kind which is called *nordhvalir*. This fish grows to a length of eighty or even ninety ells and is as large around as it is long; for a rope that is stretched the length of one will just reach around where it is bulkiest. Its head is so large that it comprises fully a third of the entire bulk. This fish is very clean in its choice of food; for people say that it subsists wholly on mist and rain and whatever falls into the sea from the air above. When one is caught and its entrails are examined, nothing is found in its abdomen like that which is found in other fishes that take food, for the stomach is empty and clean. It cannot readily open and close its mouth, for the whalebone which grows in it will stand across in the mouth when it is opened wide; and consequently whales of this type often perish because of their inability to close their mouth. This whale rarely gives trouble to ships. It has no teeth and is fat and good to eat.

COMMENT: The Greenland whale was called *nordhval* in Norway until about hundred years ago. The meaning of the word is 'the whale that lives north [of Norway]'.

Humpback whale

Some whales are dangerous for men to meet, while others are gentle and peaceable. One of the dangerous is called *skeljung*; this fish is large and very dangerous to ships. It has the habit of striking at the vessel with its fins and of lying and floating just in front of the prow where sailors travel. Although the ship may turn aside, the whale will continue to keep in front, so there is no choice but to sail upon it; but if a ship does sail upon it, the whale will throw the vessel and destroy all on board. The largest of these fishes grow to a length of seventy or eighty ells; they are good to eat.

COMMENT: The meaning of the word *skeljung*, is '[an animal] that carries or is covered by shells'.

Narwhal

There is still another sort called the *nahvalir*, which may not be eaten for fear of disease, for men fall ill and die if they eat of it. This whale is not large in size; it never grows longer

than twenty ells. It is not at all savage, but rather tries to avoid fishermen. It has teeth in its head, all small but one which projects from the front of the upper jaw. This tooth is handsome, well formed, and straight as an onion stem. It may grow to a length of seven ells and is as even and smooth as if shaped with a tool. It projects straight forward from the head when the whale is travelling; but sharp and straight though it is, it is of no service as a defensive weapon; for the whale is so fond and careful of its tusk that it allows nothing to come near it.

COMMENT: Tusk length of seven ells fits with 0.23 m/ell, but not with 0.47 m/ell as stated in an historical encyclopaedia – see ‘Introduction’ to Part 1.

White whale and six other possible whale species

There are two other kinds of whale, *andhvalir* and *svinhvalir*, the largest of which is not more than twenty-five ells in length. These are not fit to be eaten, for the fat that is drawn from them cannot be digested either by man or by any beast that may take parts of it. For it runs through them and even through wood; and after it has stood a while, scarcely any vessel can contain it, even if made of horn.

There are certain other types of whale which are worth a passing mention only, namely *hrafnhvalir* and *hvingar*. *Hvingar* are so named because of their snow white colour, while most other kinds are black, except that some of them have spots, such as *skjaldhvalir*, *geirhvalir* and *bardhvalir*.

COMMENT: *Hvingar* must be the white whale. *Andhvalir* means ‘duck whale’, which possibly is a reference to the shape of the head of a beaked whale (Cuvier’s beaked whale?). *Svinhvalir* means ‘hog whale’ and could perhaps be the name for the northern bottlenose whale whose meat even today has the reputation of a laxative. *Hrafnhvalir* means ‘the black whale’, and most likely refers to the sei whale, since a similar term was used for the sei whale later both in Norway and Iceland. *Geirhvalir* means whale with a pointed head, and could be Sowerby’s beaked whale, since a term with the same meaning, *spissshval*, has been used for this species in Norwegian. *Skjaldhvalir* and *bardhvalir* cannot be identified, if indeed they are whales at all.

Original old norse text

Enn er þat ok eitt hvalakyn, er burhvalir heita, ok hafa þeir hvalir tennr eigi stærri en gera má mjök stór knífsheptí af eða tafl. Ekkí eru þeir ólmir né grimmir, heldr eru þeir hógværir, ok firrask sem þeir megu fund veiðimanna, ok því nær at vexti sem þeir, er nú rœdda ek næsta um; en einn hvalr hefir svá margar tenn i höfði, at hann hefir nökkura sjautigu, af þessu kyni enu sama.

Þá heitir enn hvalakyn eitt sléttibaka, ok er ekki horn á baki, ok svá miklir nökkut at vexti sem hinir, er nú gátum vér. En þeir menn hræðask hana mjök, er um sjó fara, þvíat hennar náttúra er sú, at leika mjök við skip.

Þá er þat enn eitt hvalakyn, er norðhvalir heita, ok er sá fiskr 80 álna langr eða 90, þeir er stærstir verða, ok jafndigr sem hann er langr; þvíat reip þat er dregit er jafnlangt hánum, þá tekr þat um hann þar sem hann er digrastr; hann hefir ok svá mikit höfuð, at þat er enn mesti þriðjungr af hánum. En þessi fiskr lifir hreinliga, þvíat þat segia menn, at hann hafi öngva fœzlu aðra en myrkva ok regn, ok þat eitt er fellr or lopti ofan á haf, ok þó at hann sé veiddr, ok innýfli hans opnuð, þá finnsk ekki slikt i hans maga sem annarra fiska þeirra, er fœzlu hafa, þvíat hans magi er hreinn ok tómr. Ekki má hann vel munn sinn opna, þvíat tálkn þau, er vaxin eru í munni hánnum rísa um þveran munn hans, þegar hann lýkr hánnum mjök upp, ok hefir hann iðuliga af því bana, at hann má eigi munninn sinum aptr koma. Ekki er hann mjök ólmr við skip; öngvar hefir hann ok tennr, ok er feitr fiskr ok vel ætr.

Sumir ok af þessum eru hættir við lif manna, en sumir eru spakir ok hógværir. Skjeljung kalla menn eitt kyn af þeim, ok er sá fiskr mikill vexti ok ólmr við skip. Þat er hans náttúra at ljósta skip med sundfjöðrum sínum, elligar at hann lætr fjótask ok leggsk fyrir skip, þar sem menn sigla; en þó at menn beiti frá hánnum, þá ferr hann þó jafnan fyrir, ok er engi annar kostr en sigla á hann; en ef skip sigla á hann, þá kastar hann skipum, ok týnir öllu því í á er. Sá fiskr verðr 70 álna langr eða 80, þeir er stærstir verða, ok eru þeir fiskar vel ætir.

Þá er enn þat hvalakyn, er náhvalr er kallaðr, ok megu menn eigi eta fyrir sótta sakir, þvíat menn fá sótt af ok deyrja, ef þeir eta hann. En sá hvalr er eigi mikill at vexti, eigi verðr hann lengri en 20 álna; at engu er hann ólmr, heldr forðask hann veiðimanna fund. En hann hefir tenn í höfði, allar smár fyrir utan eina, ok stendr sú í efra gómi í öndverðu höfði hans; hon er fögr ok vel vaxin, ok svá rétt sem laukur; hon er 7 álna löng, sú er lengst kann at verða, ok snúin öll, svá sem hon sé með tólum ger; hon stendr rétt fram or höfði hánnum, þá er hann ferr leiðar sinnar; en svá hvöss sem hon er ok rétt, þá verðr hánnum engi vörn at henni, heldr er hann svá virkr at henni ok kær, at hann lætr þar ekki vætta við koma.

Þat eru enn tvenn hvalakyn, þau er annat heitir andhvalir, en annat svinhvalir, ok verða þeir ekki stærri en 5 álna ok 20, þeir sem stærstir verða; ok eru þeir fiskar eigi ætir, þvíat þat smjör er rennr af þeim hvölum, þá megu menn eigi melta með sér, ok ekki annat kvikendi er þess neytir, þvíat þat rennr í gegnum hann ok jafnvel í gegnum tréit, ok þó mun illa halda, ef nökkura hrið stendr, at horn sé. Þá eru þau enn sum hvalakyn, er lítillar umræðu er vert, er bæði eru hrafnhvalir ok hvítungar; ok eru þeir fyrir því hvítungar kallaðir, at þeir eru snjóhvítir at lit, en flestöll önnur hvalakyn eru svört, fyrir utan þat, er flekkar eru á sumum, svá sem annathvart er á skjaldhvölum, eða á geirhvölum, eða á bardhvölum.

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