INTRODUCTION

MUNDANE AND MARVELOUS WHALES IN THE MEAD-DARK SEA

Ottar was a wealthy Tromsø merchant and explorer who engaged the late ninth century court of King Alfred of Wessex with his tales of the wondrous North. Ottar traveled up the coast of Norway, "as far north as the whale hunters go at their furthest," and then even further beyond.¹ He went to the land of the Beormas, where walrus hunting was good, but the whaling there didn’t meet his expectations. His country, he told Alfred’s court, had the best whaling: “…those [whales] are forty-eight ells long, the biggest fifty ells long; of these he said that he, one of six, killed sixty in two days.”² Ottar’s account offers a description of the great northern seas, full of massive and plentiful whales. What his account omits, though, is more telling, for he leaves out detail and drama. There are no great Melvillian tales of bold mariners or struggles for survival, nor descriptions of how these whales were hunted. He is detailed in the catch, but not in the catching. His tale could be a great fish story, but only the ‘fish’ were great and not the story.

² “…ac on his agnum lande is se betsta hwælhuntað: fla beoð cahta and feowertiges elna lange, & fla mæstan fiftiges elna lange; flara he sarde flæt he syxa sum obsloge syxtg on twam dagum” (Lund, 20).
Ottar’s whaling experience is an atypical medieval description of whale acquisition and use. A more realistic view of medieval whaling is found in the case of the humble Christian fisherman of Ælfric’s Colloquy, a character who could be seen as the anti-Ottar. No whales for this fisherman, for they clearly posed too much of a risk to both men and equipment. “I prefer to catch a fish that I can kill,” mused the fisherman, “rather than a fish that can sink or kill not only me but also my companions with a single blow.” This fisherman sought a modest haul and no more. He neither looked for nor wanted to encounter a whale, and he sought no adventure.

Neither of these accounts, memorable as they may be, provides a fair model of whaling in the medieval northern world. From the outrageous exploitation of Ottar to the humility of Ælfrics’ fisherman, whaling in the medieval world offers an historical connundrum. Historians often contend that whales were scavenged in the Middle Ages and that hunting just didn’t occur for two reasons: it was both unnecessary and technologically beyond the capabilities of medieval fishermen. “Whale bones are sometimes found on Anglo-Saxon sites, but these seem to have come from animals that were accidentally stranded, and claimed as a rare treat by the king or nobility.” Such assumption seemingly finds accord in Ælfric’s Colloquy yet flies in the face of Ottar’s simple narrative of extraordinary catches of whales. But Ælfric’s Colloquy also contends that this fisherman doesn’t hunt whales, although that many others do to great profit. Either Ottar and Ælfric are exceptional accounts of early whaling or historical assumptions must be revisited.

Whales remain conspicuous in their absence from economic and cultural dialogues on the Middle Ages. Archaeological, literary and historical evidence indicates that they were pursued in both ancient and medieval Europe, sought out at sea and shore, scavenged when

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3 The term ‘whaling’ is used throughout this text in its broadest sense, not simply in the sense of active pursuit and acquisition of whales at sea, but the general practice of whale exploitation.


5 I. Friel, Maritime History of Britain and Ireland (London: British Museum Press, 2003), 44. Here, Friel correctly states that whale bones are found on Anglo-Saxon sites, but the assumption of stranding is not necessarily borne out by the meager evidence from most sites. Likewise, hunting cannot be assumed to have produced the bones. Friel incorrectly ascribes the possession of whales to kings and nobilities in this era, as whales are not yet considered exclusive royal or noble property prior to the Norman Conquest. While a minor example, this quotation exemplifies assumptions surrounding whale use.