CHAPTER TWO

WHALES AND WHALING FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

The *King’s Mirror* tells the story of the monstrous whales of the Icelandic seas. Among the worst of these creatures was the Humpback, disposed to sporting with and striking ships, upturning those unfortunate vessels that sailed across its back as it lay in wait. Such a monstrous whale is an appropriate beginning to a survey of medieval whaling literature. Fantastic and diabolical whales, like the Humpback or the ‘spouter’ (Fig. 5) from Olaus Magnus’ *Historia*, served as archetypes shared and perpetuated by nearly all medieval people, both pagan and Christian. As shall be shown in later chapters, North Atlantic authors frequently reproduced in their works these pan-European descriptions of archetypal whales, while adding their own folk species to the panoply of outrageous cetaceans in the northern seas. But one cannot understand northern perceptions of whales without contextualizing those portraits within classical and medieval (mis)perceptions of whales. This chapter sets forth a selection of major sources on whales of the ancient world and medieval Europe, texts which provided models for later northern interpretations of marine mammals. The chapter also looks to some of the earliest practical accounts of whale use in Western Europe, from Anglo-Saxon whalers to the natural history of Albertus Magnus.¹

¹ The texts presented in this chapter are, as stated, a selection of major works, and not a comprehensive catalog of all medieval whaling references.
Misconceptions of the whale as a beast of the deep were partially based on ignorance about marine mammals. As seen in chapter one, the complexity of ancient and medieval views of nature, in both number and diversity, disallows simple definition. Aleksander Pluskowski’s recent study *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* succinctly articulates this point and problem:

…[Popular] understandings of relations between humans, wolves and wilderness in the Middle Ages are based on an impression of intense negativity, fear and insecurity ultimately driven and encouraged by Christianity. But as medieval Christianity is increasingly recognized as a complex and diverse paradigm, so too must human responses to the natural world. Detailed studies of some of these responses have demonstrated their plasticity and diversity—changing over time and varying from one region or country to another—whilst the few bold attempts to present a cohesive narrative of human appropriations of animals in the Middle Ages have revealed as much inconsistency as integrity.²

Like the wolf, whales could evoke fear and fascination and they had done so from antiquity. Medieval stories of monstrous whales were derived not only from classical texts, but from early portraits of fearsome sea creatures of biblical literature. The books of Job, Jonah, Psalms and Revelations all informed medieval audiences of the awesome creatures of God’s seas. Pan-European traditions of the *Physiologus* likewise perpetuated notions of whales as dangerous to humanity, particularly to sinners on the seas. Saints’ lives and bestiaries, alongside other works of spiritual and moral edification, built upon biblical and classical tradition in their depictions of whales and other monstrous creatures that threatened or challenged the faithful. Bestiaries were perhaps the most prolific of all sources, gaining the widest audience and informing the firmly land-locked of the horrors of the seas. Christian authors produced the most widely-known portraits of medieval whales, as fierce and greedy consumers of the sea. Many of these traditions began in the classical corpus, which included both natural history and outright mythology.

Transmission of ancient knowledge from Greece to Rome to medieval Europe, as briefly discussed in chapter one, occurred at several social levels, from the highest literate elites to the oral culture of the