CHAPTER FOUR

WHALERS AND NORTH ATLANTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Historical consensus dictates that premodern whaling amounted to little more than scavenging for coastal detritus, but ethnography of modern North Atlantic whalers provides unique insights into how their ancestors may have hunted. Whaling should be understood in a number of ways, from the active hunting of whales at sea to the strategic hunt of beaches and known stranding locales for stranded whales. Whaling could be passive scavenging or more active pursuit, entrapment, driving or wounding of whales. Nonetheless, ‘whaling’ still summons images of the classic harpoon whalers described by Melville or industrialized whalers of this century, even though the act and art of whaling incorporates many varied techniques. Many forms of pre-industrial whaling involve communal efforts and investments, but oftentimes one individual may be recognized as striking the killing blow. Whaling, more an activity like hunting than fishing, is necessarily both communal and individual. “[Whaling] is ethnographically associated with an investment of community time and labor, special knowledge, individual training and leadership, high risk and prestige…”1 This generalization of the social and technological prerequisites for whaling communities applies to the

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1 L. F. Yarborough, “Prehistoric Uses of Cetacean Species in the Northern Gulf of Alaska,” in Hunting the Largest Animals: Native Whaling in the Western Arctic and Subarctic, ed. A. P. McCartney, 64 (Calgary: University of Alberta, the Canadian Circumpolar Institute, 1995).
wide variety of whaling peoples and methods to be presented in this chapter, and perhaps to the whalers of the medieval North Atlantic.

While some whaling methods are more spectacular than others, every strategy employed in acquiring whales is founded on decades if not centuries of knowledge of whale behavior and seafaring skills. The weapons and technologies employed in subsistence whaling differ little from those used in fishing or other resource acquisitions, as seen in chapter two and the fisherman of Ælfric’s Colloquy. The Faroese grindadráp or whale drive provides insight into the whaling methods of Norse descendants, while comparative studies from other northern cultures reveal the inherent technological simplicity of a variety of whaling strategies. This chapter considers the rudiments of whaling, but more importantly, it negates one common objection to the notion of medieval whaling, that it was beyond the capability of medieval technologies to pursue whales at sea.

It must be admitted that scavenging was probably the most significant means of acquiring cetaceans. Scavenging of injured or killed whales lost by medieval Icelandic hunters will be discussed in chapter eight, but it is likely that scavengers more frequently took advantage of naturally stranded cetaceans. Why whales strand is a complicated issue and all strandings cannot be explained by any one cause. Whales may strand when they are ill or wounded, when their age does not allow them to keep up with the pod, or because of malfunctions in sonar due to illness or human interference, such as clutter-noise of shipping or military sonar. Submarine topography seems to be an important factor behind strandings, and specific bays or beaches can be common locations for repeated stranding events. The topography of the ocean floor and the grade at which the floor rises to the beach may provide erroneous readings in cetacean sonar or echolocation. By sending out high frequency click sequences, or click-trains, whales and dolphins can determine by the returning bounce of the click-trains the terrain ahead and any impediments that they may face. If cetacean sonar malfunctions, misguided whales may venture into a shallow area believing it to be safe water. When the sea floor gradually inclines into shallow waters, the click-trains can skim above the surface of the ocean.

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