The medieval literature surveyed in preceding chapters abounds with monstrous whales, and Norse literature teems with the same sneering bristling creatures. All whales were not so malicious, though, and many texts reveal encounters with mundane and harmless whales, both at sea and more importantly, dead onshore. But while medieval authors luxuriate in description of monstrous whales, they often fall short when describing mundane species of whales and their uses. As will be seen in chapter seven, the Icelandic sagas frequently describe whales that have washed ashore, though rarely in any detail. These stranded whales almost always were single large rorquals that stranded during a great famine or hardship, on land over which ownership was contested. As a result, their division was never a simple matter, and they served as a pretext for some human drama, be it a verbal dispute, a legal debate, or occasionally a good bloody fight.

One such brawl over a stranded whale occurs in Grettis saga, when a famine provoked a skirmish over, and then on top of, the carcass of a stranded whale. When the rorqual was found, several chieftains along with their bondsmen rushed to the scene to butcher it. Over twenty men began the flensing and many more came to contend for the rights to the whale. A deadly battle erupted, fought with butchering axes and knives but also whale ribs and flesh as weapons of battle.
Thorgeir Flask-Back was the first to climb on the whale, and he attacked Flosi’s servants. Thorfinn… was standing in a foot-hold cut into the whale just behind its head and was busy carving up the whale. Thorgeir said, ‘I give you back your axe.’ Then he struck at Thorfinn’s neck, taking his head off…. Flosi was standing on the beach when he saw this, and he urged his men to strike back… Few of the men had any weapons except for the axes and cleavers with which they had been cutting up the whale.

The men of Vik abandoned the whale and retreated up the foreshore, but the Norwegian merchants were armed with proper weapons and were dangerous opponents. Stein, the captain, cut off Ivar Kolbeinsson’s leg, but Ivar’s brother Leif struck one of Stein’s companions dead with a whale rib. They fought with everything they could lay their hands on, and men were killed on both sides.\(^1\)

This long bloody episode ended in a mocking verse: “I’ve heard how steely weapons were used, when whale-blubber was wielded at Rif Skerries. The fighters kept exchanging lethal whale-meat missiles. That’s how these boors play the game of battle.”\(^2\) Entertaining as the battle is, the text more importantly shows us more detail on butchery than we see in most other sagas or laws.

For historians and archaeologists of whaling, our attention strays from the human drama and back to the massive, steaming, half-butchered hulk on the shore. We linger over the carcass and wonder what the fighters would do with those ribs that they had just used as weapons. Will they leave them on shore or will they be taken to a farm, to serve as a post or a tether or raw material for some fine tool? Will the vertebrae cut from those fine slabs of meat be left to roll about on the shore, or will they too be transported, maybe becoming stools in the byre? Will that mandible remain on the beach, buried and drying or will it serve some greater function back on the farm, maybe a linen-smoothing board for some fine Norse woman?

These questions, of course, are never answered for us in the sagas. Only rarely do medieval texts describe the mundane and practical matters of what happens to a whale after it beached and was butchered and divided, for such was not the typical stuff of literature. And such has not been the focus of most medieval historians or archaeologists. The archaeology of whale use presents challenges to historians and zooarchaeologists of the medieval North Atlantic, where whales were

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2 Grettir’s Saga, 20.