Whales appear in most medieval literature as one of nature’s antipathies, creatures either malevolent themselves or associated with and controlled by evil beings or malignant forces. Some medieval literature transcends this stereotype and presents whales instead as resources, great fish to be caught like any other, yet infinitely more dangerous to do so. Most medieval Europeans had neither reason nor opportunity to know more of whales beyond this typical monstrous whale folklore. We might expect a different appreciation of whales in northernmost Europe, where the waters teemed with all manner of creatures and life revolved around the sea. Medieval contemporaries had the same expectations. Adam of Bremen recognized the heightened reliance upon marine mammals by northern peoples, although he attributed the prominence of whales in northern climes to demonic rather than ecological causes: “All… who live in Norway are thoroughly Christian, except those who are removed beyond the arctic tract along the ocean. These people, it is said, are to this day so superior in the magic arts or incantations that they… draw great sea monsters to shore with a powerful mumbling of words and do much else of which one reads in the Scriptures about magicians.”

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Medieval Norwegians and Icelanders themselves saw those who lived in the Scandinavian Arctic as potentially magical and dangerous, able to divert fish, to harness the powers of nature and to harm those who sought the resources of the northern waters. Many authors noted the association of whales and northern seas and the exceptional abilities of northerners to exploit these great creatures.

The documentary record of Scandinavian whale use begins long before the first saga was written or laws recorded. Some of the earliest depictions of whales in Europe are the Stone Age petroglyphs from Arctic and subarctic Norway and Sweden. These carvings, found along fjords, rivers and especially along the shoreline of Trondheimsfjord, date from the Scandinavian Stone Age, ca. 3400 to 1500 BC, into the Bronze Age. Alongside stylized depictions of humans, boats, birds, fish and elk are numerous depictions of whales. The function or meaning of the carvings is debatable, though they have been interpreted as hunting ritual and clan symbols representing land, sea and air. The symbols show a familiarity with whales on the part of Stone and Early Bronze Age hunter-gatherers. More importantly, the association of whales with boats and other game may indicate close contact with whales at sea or even a religious component to the hunt, in which the gods’ aid is sought in capturing the whales. The period when prehistoric Europeans made the shift from primary hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists is still open to debate, although as the images of Arctic and subarctic Norway and Sweden attest, whales were essential within the earliest northern economies.

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5 Søgnnes, 1994, 46. The locations of these carvings may have been chosen less for human viewers than for the divine: “for some reason unknown to us [the site] was considered a special potent place—a hierophany—the making of rock art enhancing its special qualities or potency” (Meighan cited in Søgnnes, 2003, 206). The point must be made, then, that whales were among the chosen images to be associated with these sites. Other connections between whales and the fantastic or supernatural will be discussed at greater length in this chapter.
6 When did Europeans cease to rely on the sea and wild resources, the so-called ‘wet and wild’ as their primary means of subsistence, and shift to the ‘dry and tame,’ or domesticates and agrarian products? New archaeological techniques of palaeodietary analysis, specifically stable isotope analysis of human bone allows a fresh approach