CHAPTER SEVEN

BLUBBER MISSILES AND WHALE RIDERS: MUNDANE FISHES AND THE SAGAS

Vinland was paradise to the Norse settlers who first landed on its shores around the turn of the first millennium AD. This newly-found land teemed with giant salmon, fields of grain and grasses, plentiful timber and the grapes which gave Vinland its name. For the audience of the so-called Vinland sagas, including Eiríks saga and Grænlendinga saga, this land was likely as fantastic as the most fabulous whales that swam in the seas.¹ According to Grænlendinga saga, when the first settlers led by Thorfinn Karlsefni arrived in Vinland, the natural fruits of the land were plentiful, yet the resource that ensured the survival of the settlers was not the exotic product of this new land: “They then put out to sea in their ship and arrived without mishap at Leif’s booths, where they unloaded their sleeping sacks. They soon had plenty of good provisions, since a fine, large rorqual had stranded on the beach. After

¹ Vinland, or more precisely the Norse voyages to North America, was thought by many to be the stuff of historical myth until the location and excavation of L’Anse aux Meadows by Helge Ingstad in 1961. Most scholars agree that L’Anse aux Meadows is simply permanent camp within a larger region that may be or be adjacent to the land the Norse called Vinland. A. Stine Ingstad, The Discovery of a Norse Settlement in America: Excavations at L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, 1961–1968 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977).
they had gone and carved up the whale they had no lack of food.2

Even in Vinland, a fantastic land of plenty, the Norse chose time-worn strategies for survival and whales were essential to the Norse subsistence economy. Stranded whales represented prosperity of the sea, the gifts of Njord, Thor, or the Christian God.

Whales in the sagas typically are depicted as a famine resource or a resource sought after by newly-landed settlers. Whales represent salvation of a sort, a prodigious bounty given up by the sea, yet almost never sought out upon the waters in the sagas. The *Fornaldarsögur*, the Legendary sagas, provide a complex and often bizarre portrait of whales as they were perceived by medieval Icelanders, but the *Íslendingasögur*, the Icelandic Family sagas, depict whale use and acquisition in a formulaic but realistic manner. Many whales as shown in the sagas amount to little more than medieval roadkill, conveniently dead and discovered upon the shore. These fortuitous resources, though, were immensely valuable and thus could be the subject of dispute. Whales preeminently served in the sagas as catalysts for human action, provoking conflict, feud, violence or legal resolution. While important sources in the study of medieval whaling, sagas prove more instructive when coupled with the contemporary laws of Norway and Iceland, the greatest sources on medieval whaling. The *Gulathing*, *Frostathing*, and *Grágás* lawbooks, produced between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, and surveyed in the final chapter, provide unmatched insight into whale use, particularly legal claims, division, and even allusions to acquisition methods.

While the Family sagas and law codes provide the greatest detail on whale use within the medieval corpus, the sources are not without problems. Neither sagas nor laws provide clear insight into how often whales were used, whether they were routinely relied upon or by whom. Furthermore, neither source provides notable detail on perceptions of whales as sources, whether they were chosen sources or famine food only. It seems then that the sagas and laws, at first glance, raise as many questions as they provide answers. Neither source provides much insight into the lives of those who would be most likely to use scavenged resources.

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