Imagine a Norse farm on a warm and sunny day in thirteenth-century Orkney. The unpredictable weather had abated and the temperate days which the farmer and his family had always known in Orkney had returned. As we survey the long house, the byre, the infield and outfield, and the many ecological niches which the farmer’s forefathers had so cannily settled centuries ago, we notice countless uses of whale bone. Inside the house, women work on the vertical loom, whale bone weaving battens by their side. A fine, worn linen smoothing board is brought out as linen is pressed for an upcoming feast. Outside, boys play with the vertebrae of a small whale which had washed ashore months earlier, pulling off the epiphyses that capped the bones of the young whale, no older than they were when it had stranded. They drill through the center of these round bones and absently whirl away with their new noisemakers. Further afield, the older boys, their father and fellow farmers cut peat, one using a spade with a heavy whale bone blade. As they rest, they pull out polished bone playing pieces for a quick game. Their work ceases when they see smoke rising from the shore and hear the call. The grind have come to the bay. In these days of unpredictable weather, all resources must be gathered, and they rush off to shore. This scene describes a handful of objects in a much longer catalog of artifact types made from whale bone. Upon first glance into
this farm house, whale bone is invisible, one of many materials used throughout the house, yet it becomes omnipresent once sought out.

This imaginary Norse farm could be virtually anywhere in the medieval North Atlantic. We could visualize the farm and its greater territory, beyond the infield, past the outfield and finally to the adjacent coastal territory, property scoured routinely by the landholder and his sons. We can imagine, using an arsenal of legal, literary, ethnographic and material evidence, the scene if a great whale, a rorqual, washed ashore near the farm. The honest farmer secured the whale and began to butcher it, since he held rights to that shore, and after a few minor and unpleasant setbacks involving a perforated whale stomach, he located a spear head bearing the mark of a farmer from a neighboring island. He kept his own butchered portion, as was legally his due, but then sent quick word to his neighbor that a whale which he shot had washed ashore. These men had had words before over coastal rights and a feud was not in the cards today. This honest farmer would not be accused of whale theft. The vertebrae and tail, along with the remainder of the unbutchered whale, were left on shore to testify that the farmer had not claimed a greater share of the shot whale than the law allowed. But he did not take only meat and blubber. The local law, a long-held Orcadian variant of Gulathing, allowed him also to take a few plates of baleen, several ribs and a pectoral fin. The meat, upwards of sixty pounds, was dried, boiled and salted, and would feed the family for months, essential if the weather took another turn, as it had done so frequently in recent years. The pectoral fin was additional fuel and the rendered blubber was used to keep the ropes on the farmer’s small fishing vessel supple and watertight. The baleen became a handy lashing material for tools around the house and byre. The bone, though, was destined for something even greater. One of the bones from the fin would become a distinctive cup for the farmer, while the dense rib bone was fashioned into fine playing pieces with which the farmer and sons would play hnefatafl long into the night.

When De Smet described whaling as “a classic example of uncontrolled predation by man on a marine resource” he simply reiterated the assumptions long held by scholars on premodern whaling.¹ The

¹ W. M. A. De Smet, “Evidence of Whaling in the North Sea and English Channel During the Middle Ages,” in Mammals in the Seas, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO Fisheries Series No. 5, Vol. III, 302 (Rome: FAO Advı-