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of the Northern Whale-Fishery: Volume 2

William Scoresby

Excerpt

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ACCOUNT
OF THE
NORTHERN WHALE-FISHERIES,
&c.

CHAPTER I.

CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN
WHALE-FISHERIES.

IN the early ages of the world, when beasts of prey began to multiply and annoy the vocations of man, the personal danger to which he must have been occasionally exposed, would oblige him to contrive some means of defence. For this end he would naturally be induced, both to prepare weapons, and also to preconceive plans for resisting the disturbers of his peace. His subsequent rencounters with beasts of prey would therefore be more frequently successful; not only in effectually repelling them when they should attack him, but also in some instances in accomplishing their destruction. By ex-

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perience, he would gradually discover more safe and effectual methods of resisting and conquering his irrational enemies; his general success would beget confidence, and that confidence at length would lead him to pursue in his turn the former objects of his dread, and thus change his primitive defensive act of self-preservation into an offensive operation, forming a novel, interesting, and noble recreation. Hence we can readily and satisfactorily trace to the principle of *necessity*, the adroitness and courage evidenced by the unenlightened nations of the world, in their successful attacks on the most formidable of the brute creation; and hence we can conceive, that necessity may impel the indolent to activity, and the coward to actions which would not disgrace the brave.

If we attempt to apply this principle to the origin of the schemes instituted by man, for subduing the cetaceous tribe of the animal creation, it may not at the first sight appear referable to the exigence of necessity. For man to attempt to subdue an animal whose powers and ferocity he regarded with superstitious dread, and the motion of which he conceived would produce a vortex sufficient to swallow up his boat, or any other vessel in which he might approach it,—an animal of at least six hundred times his own bulk, a stroke of the tail of which might hurl his boat into the air, or dash it and himself to pieces,—an animal inhabiting at the

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same time an element in which he himself could not subsist;—for man to attempt to subdue such an animal under such circumstances, seems one of the most hazardous enterprises, of which the intercourse with the irrational world could possibly admit. And yet this animal is successfully attacked, and seldom escapes when once he comes within reach of the darts of his assailer.

In tracing from a principle of necessity the progress of such a difficult and hazardous undertaking, from its first conception in the mind to its full accomplishment; in the existing deficiency of authentic records, much must be left to speculation. The following view may at least be considered as plausible.

It seems to be the opinion of most writers on the subject of the Whale-Fishery, that the Biscayans were the first who exercised their courage in waging a war of death with the whales, and succeeded in their capture. This opinion, though, perhaps, not correct, as will hereafter appear, is yet a sufficient foundation for investigating the probable origin of this remarkable employment. These people, like the inhabitants of almost all sea-coasts, were employed, principally, in the occupation of fishing. A species of whale, probably the *Balæna rostrata*, was a frequent visitor to the shores of France and Spain. In pursuit of herrings and other small fishes, these whales would produce a serious destruc-

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tion among the nets of the fishermen of Biscay and Gascony. Concern for the preservation of their nets, which probably constituted their principal property, would naturally suggest the necessity of driving these intruding monsters from their coasts. With this view, the use of fire-arms, or, supposing the capture of these animals by the Basques and Biscayans to have been effected prior to the invention of gunpowder (A. D. 1330), which was probably the case, the use of arrows and spears would naturally be resorted to. On shooting at the whales, either by means of the bow or the musket, they would doubtless be surprised to find, that, instead of their being the ferocious, formidable, and dangerous animals they had conceived, they were timid and inoffensive. This observation would have a tendency to supply them with such additional confidence and courage, that the most adventurous, from motives of emulation, the prospect of profit, or even from a principle of fool-hardiness, might be induced to approach some individual of the species, and even dart their spears into its body. Perceiving that it evinced no intention of resistance, but that, on the contrary, it immediately fled with precipitation to the bottom of the sea, and that, on its return to the surface, it was quite exhausted, and apparently in a dying state; they might conceive the possibility of entangling some of the species, by means of a cord attached to a barbed arrow or spear. If, to the

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end of this cord they attached one of the buoys used in their common fishing occupations, it would point out the place of the wounded animal, fatigue it in its motions, and would possibly goad it on to produce such a degree of exhaustion, that it might fall an easy prey to these adventurous fishermen. One of these animals being thus captured, and its value ascertained, the prospect of emolument would be sufficient to establish a fishery of the cetaceous tribe, and lead to all the beneficial effects which have in modern times resulted.

Historians, in general, it has been observed, have given to the Biscayans the credit of having first succeeded in capturing the whale upon the high sea. Those authorities, indeed, may be considered as unquestionable, which inform us, that the Basques and Biscayans, so early as the year 1575, exposed themselves to the perils of a distant navigation, with a view to measure their strength with the whales, in the midst of an element constituting the natural habitation of these enormous animals; that the English in 1594, fitted an expedition for Cape Breton, intended for the fishery of the whale and the walrus (*seahorse*), pursued the walrus-fishing in succeeding years in high northern latitudes, and in 1611 first attacked the whale near the shores of Spitzbergen; and that the Hollanders, and subsequently, other nations of Europe, became participa-

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WHALE-FISHERY.

tors in the risk and advantages of these northern expeditions. Thus, according to these writings, the Basques and Biscayans, then the English, and afterwards the Dutch, were the nations who first practised the fishery for the whale. Some researches on the origin of this fishery, carried on in the northern seas, however, will be sufficient to rectify the error of these conclusions, by proving, that the whale-fishery by Europeans may be traced as far back, at least, as the ninth century*.

Oppien, in his treatise *de Piscatu*, has left some details of the ancient whale-fishery, which, however, we shall pass over; because he seems to refer principally, if not altogether, to the smaller species of whales of the genus *Delphinus*. We, therefore, go on to authority which is more respectable.

The earliest authenticated account of a fishery for whales, is probably that contained in Ohthere's Voyage by Alfred the Great. This voyage was undertaken about the year 890 by OHTHERE a native of Halgoland, in the diocese of Drontheim, a person of considerable wealth in his own country, from motives of mere curiosity, at his own risk, and under his own personal superintendence. His enterprise was communicated by the navigator himself to King Alfred, who preserved it, and has handed it

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down to us in his translation of Orosius*. On this occasion, Ohthere sailed to the northward along the coast of Norway, round the North Cape, to the entrance of the White Sea. Three days after leaving Drontheim or Halgoland, "he was come as far " towards the north, as commonly the whale-hunt- " ers used to travel †." Here Ohthere evidently alludes to the hunters of the walrus or seahorse; but subsequently, he speaks pointedly as to a fishery for some species of cetaceous animals, having been at that period practised by the Norwegians. He told the King, that with regard to the common kind of whales, the place of most and best hunting for them

* The work of Orosius is a summary of ancient history, ending with the year 417, at which period he lived. He was a Spaniard and a Christian. To this translation, Alfred added, of his own composition, a Sketch of Germany, and the valuable Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan, the former towards the North Pole, the latter into the Baltic Sea. The principal MS. of Alfred's Orosius, which is very ancient and well written, is preserved in the Cotton Library, Tiberius, b. 1. In 1773, the Honourable Daines Barrington published the Anglo-Saxon Orosius, with an English translation. His MS. was a transcript formerly made of this.—Turner's Anglo-Saxons, vol. ii. p. 282, 283, and 284.

† Hackluyt's Voyages, vol. i. p. 4. Turner's History of the Anglo-Saxons, vol. ii. p. 288.—296, reads, " Three days was " he as far north as the whale hunters farthest go."—" Da " ves he sva feor nord sva sva hocel huntan fyrrest farad."

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was in his own country; whereof some be 48 ells of length, and some 50, of which sort, he affirmed, that he himself was one of the six who in the space of three (*two*) days, killed threescore*. From this it would appear, that the whale-fishery was not only prosecuted by the Norwegians so early as the ninth century, but that Ohthere himself had personal knowledge of it. But when he affirms, that himself, with five men, captured 60 of these whales in two days, when it is well known that fifty men, under the most favourable circumstances, and in the present improved state of the fishery, could not have taken one-half, or even one-third of that number in the same space of time, of any of the larger species of whales,—we are naturally led to question the authenticity of the account, as far as relates to this transaction; and in questioning one part, throw a shade of doubt over the whole narrative. As, however, the voyage of Ohthere is a document of much value in history, both in respect to the matter of it, and the high character of the author by whom it has been preserved, it were well to examine carefully this circumstance, before we decide on a point so important. Hitherto I have followed Hackluyt; but if we refer to the original, we shall find, that Hackluyt himself, is probably, in this instance, the

* Hackluyt's *Voyages*, vol. i. p. 4.

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occasion of the apparent inconsistency. Turner, in his "History of the Anglo-Saxons," gives a copy in the original language of this part of Alfred's Orosius, taken from the principal manuscript preserved in the Cotton Library. In reference to this passage, where the remarkable exploit of Ohthere is recorded, he observes, that the Saxon words of this sentence have perplexed the translators. He has ventured to give it some meaning, by supposing, that *syxa* is an error in the manuscript, and should be *f xa*; by which alteration the passage reads, "On his own land are the best whales hunted; they are 48 ells long, and the largest 50 ells. There, he said, that of (*fyxa*) some fish, he slew sixty in two days*." Thus, the whale here referred to, might,

* The words of the original are, "Ac on his agnum lande is se bet'sta hwæl huntath tha beoth eahta and feowertiges elna lange, tha mæstan fiftiges elna lange, thara he sæde thæt he syxa (or *fyxa*) sum of sloge syxtig on twam dag-num." Turner's Anglo-Saxons, vol. ii. p. 292. note.

The Honourable Daines Barrington, in the account of Ohthere's Voyage, published in his "Miscellanies," translates the passage, containing his exploit in the whale-fishery, in the words, "That he had killed *some* six; and sixty in two days;" but, conscious of the unintelligibleness of the sentence, he observes in a note, that "*Syxa*," he conceives, "should be a second time repeated here, instead of *syxtig* or sixty; it would then only be asserted, that six had been taken in two days, which is much more probable than sixty." (p. 462.)

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possibly, be that species of *Delphinus*, so frequently driven on shore in great numbers at Orkney, Shetland, and Iceland, in the present age; where, in this way, a few small boats have been known to capture even a larger number than Ohthere speaks of, in one day. If so, though it does not contradict or explain away the fact, of larger whales having been likewise hunted and captured, it removes the objection as to the improbability of the exploit recorded, and enables us to adhere with greater confidence to our authority of the great antiquity of the whale-fishery by the Norwegians.

In various ancient authors, we have accounts of whales as an object of pursuit; and by some nations held in high estimation as an article of food. Passing over the notices of these animals by the classic authors as objects of peculiar dread, or as prognostics of peculiar events, I proceed to the consideration of those which mention the whale in the way of fishery or capture, as my more immediate object*.

* For the following researches relative to the ancient history of the Whale-fishery, up to the middle of the sixteenth century, I am chiefly indebted to a "Mémoire sur l'Antiquité de la Pêche de la Baleine par les Nations Européennes," by S. B. J. NOËL, Paris, 1795, 12mo. The greater part of the references I have compared with the originals; and where the spirit of the language has been altered by the translations, I have endeavoured to correct it.