

BASQUE WHALING STATION

The Basques started early to take an advantage of whale products. The oldest registered document is from the year 670. The main purpose of whaling was collecting whale blubber to make oil, which was among other things an important fuel to light lamps. In the Middle Ages train oil, as whale oil was also called, was used also to make candles and soap. Whale hunting and processing seems to have become an independent industry in the Basque country in the 12th and 13th century. The Basques were particularly sought after to catch the North Atlantic right whale.

After the European discovery of the American continent, the existence of rich fishing grounds near Newfoundland became known in Europe. In the years 1530-1600, the Basques sent there about 15 whaling ships a year. The main Basque whaling station in the region was Red Bay in southern Labrador. Towards the end of the 16th century, the Basque presence in these territories diminished considerably. The reasons are believed to be a decrease in the local whale population, and the political situation in Europe. At the beginning of the 17th century the Basques and others began to seek new whale hunting grounds that led them to Svalbard, northern Norway and Iceland.

When the whalers arrived to the hunting areas, they would look for a good harbour for the ship and a good place on land not far from the ship, where it would be easy to transfer the filled oil barrels to the ship. Once they found it, they would build a furnace and a shelter over it. For that purpose the Basques brought with them nails and bricks, which would serve as ballast on the outward journey.

The whaling itself took place from small rowing boats that the Basques called txalupa. These were usually manned by six men, including the harpooner and the pilot. The whale was flensed or cut up either beside the ship or on the beach. The ships were equipped with hoists and gallows so that the whale could be turned in various ways to make the cutting easier. The blubber was peeled off the animal (flensing), transferred to a furnace and melted in pots of iron or copper. The fuel that was used was charcoal, wood or the dregs of the whale oil, which made the melting of the blubber sustainable.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE BASQUES AND THE ICELANDERS

Whalers from the Basque Provinces began visiting Iceland in the beginning of the 17th century. They started hunting whales near Iceland in 1613-1615. In Europe these times were characterized by religious conflicts, wars, commercial sailing and piracy. Pirates who often worked with permission of their crown (privateers) were known to pretend to be from different countries than they really were, and generally spoil relations between nations. Therefore, there were good reasons to fear pirates, and whale

hunters were often confused with them.

The historical sources report of conflicts between Icelanders and Basques, and there were complaints about the rowdiness of the Basques. Icelanders at that time were very poor and were often oppressed tenants of land owners, while the Basques were free men and had privileges according to the law and the agreements with the Spanish crown. Some sources say that some Icelanders stole from the Basques, and then made excuses about language misunderstandings, when it came to reach a settlement. We know from the sources that the Basques invited the locals to come to the whale cutting and take as much as they could carry, but they would want to receive something in return, even if it was of little value, rather than nothing at all. The whalers sought to buy sheep and cattle to eat, but they were often denied those transactions. Then they sometimes took what they needed without permission. There are some Basque-Icelandic glossaries from the 17th century that seem to have been produced mainly for trade and bartering.

SHIPWRECK

In the spring of 1615 many whaling ships rounded the Hornstrandir cape, most of which sailed on to northern Norway, but at least three of them stayed behind to hunt whales off the Icelandic shores. Those ships were shipwrecked in a catastrophic storm on the 21st of September in the Reykjafjörður fjord in the district of Strandir. Their captains were Pedro de Aguirre, Esteban de Tellaria, and Martin de Villafranca. For the whole summer, the ice had been on the bay but during the storm it drifted into Reykjafjörður and broke two of the ships. The third ship was blown onto the shore and broke to pieces there. Three crew members died, and only a little of their goods could be saved. A few of the txalupas were still on land, and 82 or 83 crew members survived, but had nothing to live on. When the weather improved, the locals came to see what had happened. Some had sympathy for the survivors and offered them to stay at their farms, while others feared the hostile authorities as all interactions with foreigners were illegal. It is very likely that most of the farmers didn't like idea of having to support so many men during the winter. Others may have even been frightened to have them around.

THE CUTTER IN DYNJANDI

The survivors were told of a sailboat, a cutter, further west in Leirufjörður that belonged to Gunnsteinn, a farmer at the Dynjandi farm. It is likely that they did not know it was such a small boat. The idea of being able to sail home must have been tempting for the Basques and they all went in their eight small rowing boats north around the Hornstrandir cape and into the Jökulfirðir area. When the Basques arrived at Leirufjörður, Gunnsteinn the farmer did not want to do any trading with them and went into hiding, but they found out that the cutter was not in a state

that would make it feasible for them to cross any ocean.

After waiting two nights for the farmer the Basques left and took with them one heifer and the cutter. Here the group divided into two groups. 50 men went with the cutter towards Patreksfjörður, with a short stop in Önundarfjörður. But Martin Villafranca and his men went into the Ísafjarðardjúp area. Martin's group divided again into two groups. Martin and 18 men went to Æðey in two boats, while another 14 men went in two different boats on towards Þingeyri in Dýrafjörður with a short stop in Bolungarvík.

THE SLAYING IN DÝRAFJÖRÐUR

Some written sources like *Spænsku vísur* ('The Spanish Stanzas'), by reverend Ólafur Jónsson at Sandar, say that the 14 shipwrecked men were stealing from several farms in Dýrafjörður. When arriving in Dýrafjörður the Basques settled by a fishing shed called Skaganaust on Fjallaskagi, which is situated at the mouth of the fjord on the northern side. The locals probably did not know who they were. Perhaps they feared that they were pirates, as was rather common during that time, since English corsairs had brought violence and pillaging to the Westman Islands just the previous year, in 1614. It is therefore understandable why the local population acted quickly and gathered forces against them.

During the night of the 5th of October 30 men went where the Basques had taken shelter, and attacked them and killed them all, except a youngster who managed to escape and join the big group who was sailing the cutter and had stopped in Önundarfjörður on the way to Patreksfjörður.

In *A True Account* Jón the Learned says that 5 men guarded the boats, and that the other 9 were sleeping in the shed. The locals surrounded the house and one of them managed to get to the sentinels and take their weapons. When he tried the second time, the Basques heard and attacked him. The locals came to his help and the sentinels were murdered. Then the locals attacked those that were in the shed, they broke the roof of the house open and killed the men. At the end, the locals took their spoils of war, stripped them naked and threw the corpses into the sea.

ARI MAGNÚSSON GATHERS ARMS

In the year 1615 Christian IV, king of Denmark, was the ruler over Iceland. He got interested in whale hunting and sent some whale hunting expeditions to northern Norway and Spitzbergen. Some Danish warships confiscated Basque whaling ships in northern Norway, which caused some legal trouble between the king and the Basque ship owners and outfitters.

After the Reformation the king was one of the biggest landowners in Iceland, having requisitioned all the convents' and bishops' lands. The royal revenue collectors were

magistrates like Ari Magnússon, who received a percentage of the income as wages. In order to insure enough labour force on his lands, the king passed laws to prevent competition for workers, and he forbade the Icelanders to work for any foreigner. The magistrates, bishops and lawyers all tried to obtain plots of land and it was important for them to secure enough labour force to till their soil.

In April 1615 the king issued a decree that stated that citizens were forbidden to trade or communicate with Basque whalers and that their fishing and whale-hunting was illegal. The decree says that the locals were allowed to attack and take the Basque ships and kill the mariners by any means possible. Ari Magnússon, the magistrate of the counties of Ísafjörður and Strandir, was appointed to enforce the decree on behalf of the King.

Ari Magnússon had a reason to fear the wrath of the king because he had given the Basques permission to hunt whales and received payment for it. In order not to lose his job and pay a penalty, or worse, he needed to prove himself as a loyal servant. Now he turned against the Basques and called together a tribunal on the 8th of October that issued a verdict and thereby condemned to death the 18 Basques who had sailed to Æðey. At the time of the verdict it is unlikely that news of the killing in Dýrafjörður had reached Ari. The tribunal justified its verdict by referring to the king's decree and to the thieves' chapter in Jónsbók, a 13th century legal code that was still valid in Iceland at the time. The verdict mentioned all the negative encounters Basques and Icelanders had had over the past three years. Ari, as the local judicial authority of the area, sent out an order forcing the local men to join him in the punitive expedition against the Basques.

If they did not come willingly, they would need to pay a fine. On the 10th of October, around 50 men had gathered together at Ögur.

MARTIN DE VILAFRANCA CHASED DOWN

Martin settled on Æðey island with 18 of his men, and from there they fished and hunted whales. Ari heard that the Basques had caught a whale and Martin and most of his men were processing it at Sandeyri, on the outer edge of Snæfjallaströnd. In Æðey there were only 5 men left who were killed immediately by a group of 50 men. Ari and his team continued on to Sandeyri that same night. There they met Martin and his men. Ari and his men surrounded the farm and shot through doors and windows. Martin did not return the shots, but called out and asked for mercy, since he and his men had done nothing wrong against the locals. Ari promised to spare Martin's life and asked him to surrender his weapons, which he did as he came out. At this point, Ari now lost control over his men as one of them struck Martin with an ax. Martin jumped up and ran out into the sea and swam away from the shore. Ari's men started to throw rocks at him, but Martin swam away singing. This caused both astonishment and admiration among the Icelanders. They followed him in a boat until one of them managed

to throw a stone that hit his head. It seems that Ari did nothing to prevent this breach of his word that Martin's life would be spared. Martin's body was then brought to shore, mutilated and thrown again into the sea. Then the rest of Martin's men were brutally killed and their corpses also sunk at the sea. Ari Magnússon's punitive expedition wanted to get some reward for their actions, but Ari declared that the Basque's belongings were the possession of the king and the men got nothing in return but the bloodstained clothes of the Basques.

THE BASQUES TAKE AN ENGLISH SHIP IN PATREKSFJÖRÐUR

About 50 basque survivors sailed from Dynjandi in Leirufjörður on to Patreksfjörður. At Vatneyri in Patreksfjörður they settled in the merchants' houses, which stood empty during the winter. From there they fished and searched the neighbourhood for food. It was a harsh winter and not easy to survive. There was famine in the country and not much food to be found. The Basques seemed to have frightened people, even if they were not necessarily always aggressive. Moreover, the sources say that the Basques were polite, at first.

In the new year 1616, Ari assembled a new tribunal at Mýrar in Dýrafjörður in order to condemn the Basques that were holed up in Patreksfjörður.

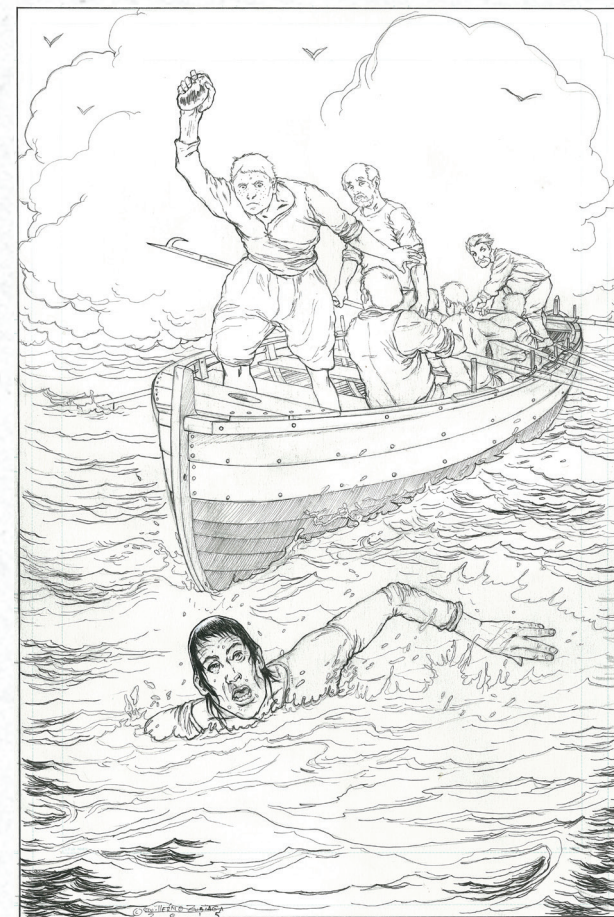
Snow and bad weather prevented Ari from reaching Patreksfjörður with a new punitive expedition. The Basques struggled through the winter and when they saw the arrival of a foreign fishing vessel, they manned their boats and took over the ship. Then they sailed away, but their fate is unknown.

The only one who did not agree with Ari the magistrate's actions in Iceland was Jón Guðmundsson the Learned, who a few months after the events wrote *A True Account* about the murder of the Basques, based on eye-witnesses' accounts. His manuscript is the main source about these events. The Icelanders feared retaliation from the Basques, a retaliation that never took place.

Sources about the Spanish king's reactions are not known at this time, perhaps in the future unknown sources may surface from royal archives, or shipowners' and insurance companies that may shed further light on the fate of these Basque mariners and the aftermath of these violent events.

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