

A SHORT CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY  
OF WHALING IN JAPAN DURING  
THE 17TH CENTURY

BY  
THIJS MOL & P.J.H. VAN BREE

By the publications of Möbius (1893), Andrews (1916), Omura *et al.* (1953), Budker (1957) and Slijper (1958) it has become known to the Western world that whaling and the whaling industry in Japan have an ancient history. In fact, this is not surprising as this is the case in so many other archipelagoes and coastal localities. There are world-wide discoveries of whale and dolphin remains in refuse heaps of prehistoric settlements indicating clearly that the animals were already at those times important as sources of food.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that long prior to the books and articles cited above, reports in Europe have been made of whale hunting by the inhabitants of Japan. In 1646 there was published a Dutch book about twelve voyages to the Far East. One part deals with the expedition of "upper-merchant" Hendrick Hagenaar, who started his trip in 1631 and returned safely in 1638. In several places short descriptions are given of whales and whaling in Japan. The book is rare, and reading the old Dutch text is rather difficult, so it is useful to quote here a more or less literal translation of the pertinent paragraphs.

Page 5: "On 26th March 1632, we passed the Tropic of Cancer; we saw a large number of Cachalots or whales, supposing they dreaded a tornado, (we therefore) took in the topsail."

Page 90: "On the 3rd of March 1636, we saw a whaling long-boat get hold of a rather (large) fish (whale) entering into the bay (situated) beyond the settlement. (This one was followed) by nine other vessels, (of) which (the crews) threw a large number of harpoons at the fish (every time) it surfaced until it at last (became) exhausted (and) bled to death; this provided great pleasure."

Page 156: "These revenues, as well as those from the fisheries at sea, were given to the particular Gentlemen of the Majesty (cf local nobility), the same (applies to) whaling; and yearly between 200 and 300 specimens are caught; (they) are not so large as ours, having blubber only 4, 5, 6, or 8 inches thick (but they have) very much meat, which is eaten here."

Much later—in 1786—again a book based on 17th century logbooks was published in the Netherlands. In this second publication (vol. 9, pages 38–39) we find:

"In the beginning of the summer month (cf June), our men saw the return of the Japanese boats, which had been on whale hunt. This hunt starts in the winter month (cf December) and lasts until the mentioned time. During this period they

Address of the authors: Zoological Museum, University of Amsterdam, 53 Plantage Middenlaan, Amsterdam-C., the Netherlands.

caught 274 small and large fishes (whales). The Japanese normally catch them not far away from the strand (coast). When they discover a fish (whale), they shoot it with harpoons and having hit it, they let the animal run (swim) so long that by fatigue or by loss of blood, it floats on the water. Afterwards they tow the fish (whale) to land, pull it up the shore and cut or hew the meat off it, as can be seen on the accompanying illustration.”

The caption of the print, which we reproduce herewith, reads “Whaling at Firando, in Japan”. The artist is unknown and almost certainly never visited Japan (e.g., see the clothes of the men in the picture). He was very much inspired by a print made by H. (endrik) Goltzius (1558–1617) of a female Blackfish (*Globicephala melaena*), stranded near Zandvoort, the Netherlands, on 21st November 1594. This small whale is almost exactly reproduced (e.g., the laterally placed blowhole and the swollen mammae), so one is inclined to talk about a ‘pirated’ picture. The other whales in the background are similar to the large one in front.\*

Van Deinse, the well-known Dutch cetologist (1895–1965), who published extensively on the history of whaling, mentions this ‘pirated’ print but does not seem to have consulted the original. In his thesis (1931, page 249) he calls it: “Whaling by the natives of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia).”

Although not pertaining specifically to Japanese whaling, there is an important



Fig. 1. Whaling at Firando, Japan. From a Netherlands' book (1786): see text.

\* In the period this MS was sent to the editors and reading the proofs, we were informed that a preparatory study of this pirated print, a sepia drawing, is present in the collections of the Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap in Amsterdam.

17th century book containing a description of whaling in the Far East between 1655 and 1657. This is the Report of the Embassy of the Dutch East India Company to the Emperor of China by Joan Nieuhof published in 1665. On pages 158-160, the author describes both whales and whaling as follows:

“Near the island of Hainan, the Chinese capture whales in the same way as the Dutch in the North near Greenland, whereof they make oil which serves for several uses”.

Next come several paragraphs on the habits of the whales and also on their anatomy and biology. In this section, it is of great interest that the author mentions “sea spiders”, “sea moss” and “fish” as food for baleen-whales. One whale was seen which had 40 codfish in its stomach (? *Balaenoptera borealis*). Furthermore, quite interesting is the description of copulation. It is stated that the whales take up a vertical position in the water and clasp each other with their flippers (see Nishiwaki & Hayashi, 1950, figs. A3-A6); this position is maintained from half an hour to one hour.

On whaling we find: “The capture of whales happens in this way; as soon as they spot a whale at sea, they fall (go down) in a sloop, with a harpooner, that being the one who will strike the fish, in front. Having arrived near the fish, the harpooner shoots (this verb is used in the original text) his harpoon into the whale alongside the head, so that it gets struck. This harpoon is an iron of about three feet long, sharpened in front, provided with barbs and on the rear part a rope or line is fastened of about two hundred fathoms in length, which lays ready in the boat. The fish, having been struck with this iron and feeling itself hurt, darts with great force to the ground (bottom) as the rope is payed out. If it happens that the fish darts deeper than the rope is long, they must let it slip (let the end go); for if the line should be fastened to the boat or should the rope catch during the paying out, the whale would pull the sloop upside down.

Sometimes they fasten to the end of the rope an empty barrel which most of the time floats or returns (to the surface) and which they follow rowing. Sometimes it happens the whale makes off with it and they do not see it again. The fish, tossing about in the deep, becomes after a time powerless, and surfaces, dead or still living, on which the boat again draws near it, and not being dead, they spear it, that means, they stab it, with poles about half as long as lances, which are provided in front with iron points, into the sides, by which they are in danger to be overturned by the whale; for it strikes so fearfully with its tail and flippers, that the sea becomes as white as foam. The fish being dead, the blubber is cut off with long knives and afterwards they boil oil from it. When the blubber is cut off the whales, they let them (the carcasses) drift; whereupon many gulls light on them to scavenge. And so large are these dead bodies and trunks from which the blubber is cut, that from afar they look like living whales.”

In the text of the book by Nieuhof only baleen-whales, dolphins, and killer-whales are mentioned; it is therefore rather strange that in the accompanying illustration a Cachalot or Sperm-Whale clearly shows. Our reproduction is taken from the 1665 edition. Later editions such as those of 1670 and 1693 have the added

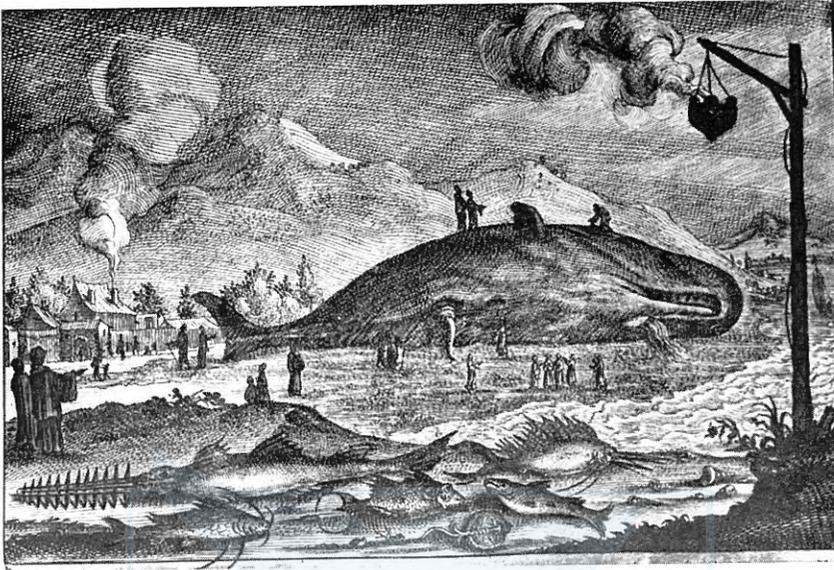


Fig. 2. Whaling at the island of Hainan. After Nieuhof (1665). For particulars see the text of the article.

title "Balene". Although the men wear Chinese-type clothes, this print is also a 'pirated' one. The unidentified artist copies almost exactly the etching made by Wenzel Hollar (1607–1677) (see Timm, 1961) and this artist, in turn, copies the copper engraving by Jan P. Saenredam (1565/66–1607; pupil of Goltzius) of a Cachalot stranded near Beverwijk, the Netherlands, on 13th January 1602 (see also Van Deinste, 1931, pages 179+184). On the print representing whaling at the island of Hainan, only the beacon in front is a new added element. We are able to reproduce the figure from the book by Nieuhof thanks to the courtesy of the management of the Netherlands Historical Maritime Museum in Amsterdam; we wish to express our appreciation to the Librarian of this Museum for her help.

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一般財団法人 日本鯨類研究所  
THE INSTITUTE OF CETACEAN RESEARCH