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Barthemess, Klaus

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ON SCRIMSHAW PRECURSORS

A 13th-Century Carved and Engraved Sperm Whale Tooth

BY KLAUS BARTHELMSS

Since virtually all pioneering research on scrimshaw is conducted by English-speaking scholars, homage is paid to their work by submitting this paper in their language.¹

In several articles and monographs scrimshaw historian Stuart Frank² has referred to the objects crafted during the Middle Ages by North and Central European artisans from the teeth, skeletal bones and baleen of walruses and whales. Aptly, he termed them “scrimshaw precursors”.

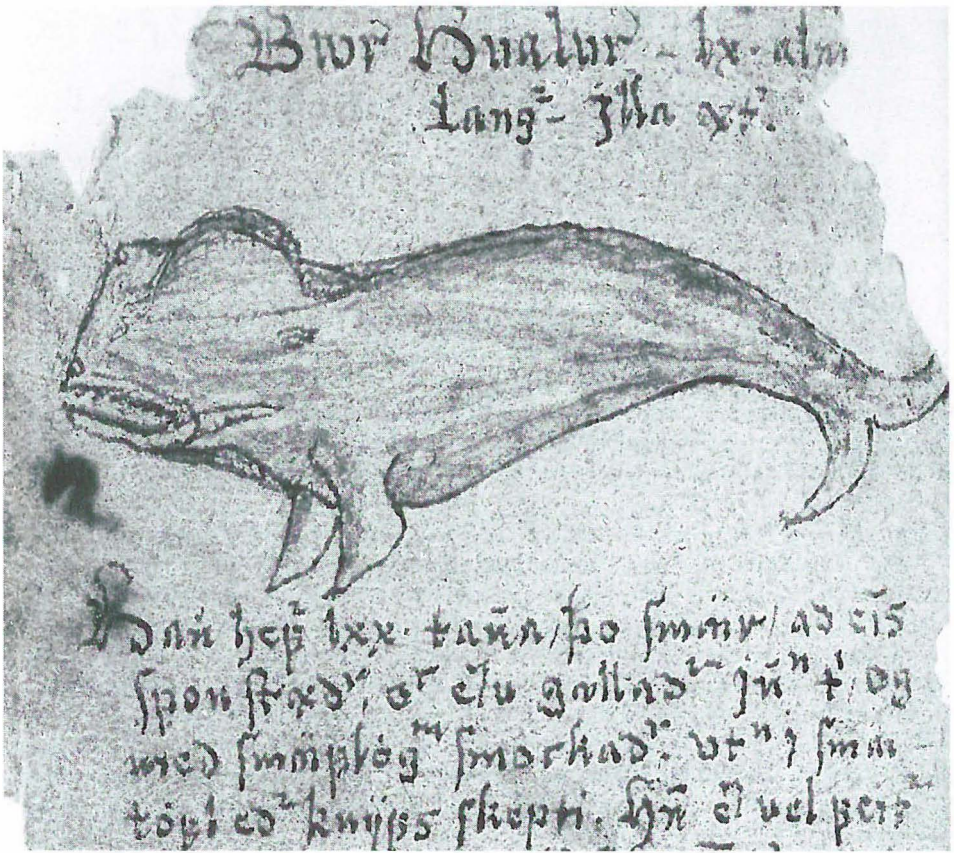
The supply of ivory from African and Indian elephants to the sculptors' workshops in Christian Europe seems to have been reduced significantly in concurrence with the expansion of Islam, particularly in the 7th and 8th, and the 11th and 12th century. In the European periphery substitute substances replaced elephant ivory in works of art.³ First in Anglo-Saxon England and shortly afterwards in Viking Scandinavia skeletal bone of whales – especially the outer dense compacta-tissue of these bones – was carved into precious decorative and liturgical objects.⁴ Following the Viking expansion over much of the North Atlantic, walrus ivory became increasingly available.⁵ In Scandinavia, Ireland and England, in Northern France and the Rhine and Maas region – with Cologne as a center – walrus tusks were almost the exclusive raw material for ivory carvings between the 11th and 13th century.⁶

Whereas the use of walrus tusks and of skeletal whale bone in works of art can be documented for the Middle Ages and the use of baleen for equally artistic purposes is in evidence from the beginning of the 17th century,⁷ it appears that sperm whale teeth as “scrimshaw precursors” are hitherto unrecorded. Our increasing knowledge about whaling in medieval Europe⁸ makes it unreasonable to assume that sperm whale teeth should not have been available. This could have been through strandings that seem to have been no uncommon event.⁹ In fact, there is a text source, reiterated over the centuries, that points to the practise of carving sperm whale teeth in medieval Scandinavia.

The “King's Mirror”, or “Konungsskuggsjá”, as it is called in its Norse vernacular, is a pedagogical text, conceived as a dialogue between father and son, that was written in Norway around 1250/60 A.D. A general overview of old Norse culture, it also contains an important section on the cetaceans found in the waters of Norway and Iceland. Besides giving a description of the animals, it records their distribution, behaviour, annual appearance off the coast, and – of particular importance to people living off the sea – their catchability, edibility and general utility. In fact, the whale section of the “King's Mirror” has been called “the oldest cetology”¹⁰ and attracted much attention from philologists, cetologists and whaling historians in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹¹

When writing of the sperm whale, the “King's Mirror” remarks that *these whales have teeth which, however small, are big enough to make large knife handles or [large] draughtsmen from them.*¹²

A similar verdict, though somewhat more detailed, is found in an Icelandic manuscript



Sperm whale illustration and commentary on the quality of its teeth for carving. From a manuscript copy of Jón Guðmundsson's *Natural History of Iceland*, executed presumably around 1640-1644. Reykjavík, National Library, Sign. JS, 401 4°. After Ayerbe.

that was written about 1640 on the natural history of this subarctic island: “Um Íslands adskiljanlegar náttúrur”.¹³ The author was Jón Guðmundsson (1574-1658), a man of many skills: traveller, historian (among other things eyewitness to Basque whaling off Iceland in the 1610s), writer, scholar, and “convicted” sorcerer. His contemporaries have given him two epithets. One was *lærdi*, i.e. “the learned” for some of his many skills, the other one, more significant here, was *tannsmíður*, which means “the tooth carver”.¹⁴ Since other teeth of carvable size were unavailable in the country Jón lived in, this doubtless refers to whale teeth and walrus tusks. This is confirmed by the detail with which Jón comments on the quality of sperm whale teeth from the craftsman’s point of view: *Sperm whale, 60 ells long, hardly edible. He has 70 teeth, albeit small ones of approximately the size of a spoon; they are imperfect inside, patterned with dense layers, and [usable] only for small draughtsmen or knife handles.*¹⁵

Interestingly, the designation of *tannsmíður* must also have been encountered by 16th century Hamburg citizen Hubertus Laguetus, who travelled to Iceland and supplied to Basle zoologist Conrad Gesner a copy of the whale list from the “King’s Mirror”: It was used in the Frankfurt, 1598 edition of Gesner’s “Fischbuch”, where one finds the following



Medieval ointment horn, carved and engraved from a sperm whale tooth. Bergen Museum, University of Bergen, Norway, Collections of Christian Art and Culture, Inv. MA 437. This and all subsequent photos: Svein Skare. Left: View of the right hand side. – Middle: View of the posterior side. Right: View of the left hand side.

confusing commentary on *Schmid* (“smiths”) using whale teeth: *The karck whale is 30 paces long, has 70 teeth which the smiths covet for their use/purpose*.¹⁶ This confusion can only be explained etymologically: the Old Norse word *smidur* is related to the German word “Schmied” – *Schmid* in Gesner’s text – and the English word “smith”, of course, and Gesner’s informant Laguetus – about whom nothing has come to light as yet¹⁷ – may have found the literal translation of *tannsmidur* as a “tooth-smith” somewhat too exotic.

The two similar texts from the 13th century “King’s Mirror” and the 17th century natural history of Iceland by Jón Gudmundsson as well as the indirect hint made by 16th century traveller Laguetus suggest that sperm whale teeth were indeed known and processed by craftsmen in medieval Scandinavia over several centuries. Nevertheless, obvious examples of the work of a *tannsmidur* in sperm whale tooth were hitherto unknown, at least to scrimshaw and whaling historians. But such a piece has been in the collection of a re-

nowned historic museum since the time when scrimshaw proper was flourishing as a maritime folk art – without having attracted the attention of either art historians or whaling scholars.

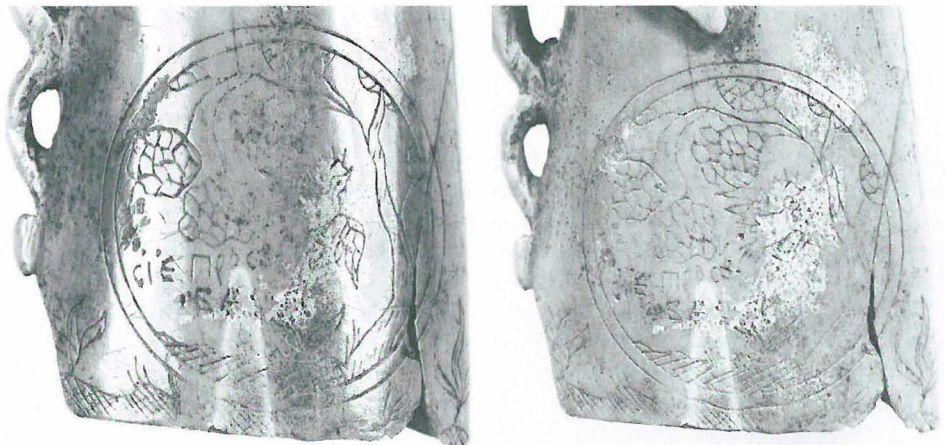
This object is an ointment horn which is kept in the Collections of Christian Art and Culture of the University of Bergen, Norway, Inventory Number MA 437, and is on display at the Bergen Museum in this old mercantile and Hanseatic town. It was found by a baker named Ellertsen during reconstruction work done at Engen, a town quarter of Bergen, in 1869, and later given to the museum by an engineer with the name of Daae. The measurements of this artifact are 10 x 3.5 x 2 cms.¹⁸

There is a bore hole drilled from the apex (tip) of the pulp cavity to the apex of the tooth, and this led to the identification of the item as an ointment horn. The opening at the radical (root) end of course had to be sealed somehow. On the left side of the tooth, a big piece of the radical end has broken away. On the curved (posterior in anatomical terms) side of the tooth a three-dimensional gryphon has been carved out of the dentine, taking up almost four fifths of the length of the tooth. The nozzle is carved in the shape of a gargoy-like faunistic head. There are no carvings on the bowed (anterior) side of the tooth.

There are, however, engraved lines all around the radical edge of the tooth, covering much of its smooth surface. They form a floral and foliate pattern. Set apart from the rest of this pattern by a double line on the right side of the tooth is an engraved circular scene which encompasses a fruit-bearing stem growing out of the soil and a little bird ascending in flight with a twig in its beak. Both images are meaningful symbols of fertility, proliferation, and love, and thus no unbecoming decoration for an ointment horn in the service of beauty. And there is a two-line inscription within this circular scene.

The engraved epigraph reads ЦІЕИРОСЕ. // БА [...], in Latin transcription: *sieprose ba*[...]. It must have been this perceived “Greek” inscription that led to the original identification of the tooth as “Byzantine”. In fact, most of the characters may be both Greek and Cyrillic, except for the little “b”, which is definitely only found in Cyrillic. The meaning of this inscription, however, remains unclear.¹⁹

A comparison of the Bergen ointment horn with the Byzantine ivory carvings published in the monumental work by Goldschmidt and Weitzmann yields no support for identifying the carved work on the sperm whale tooth as “Byzantine”. Although the gryphon and



The same item, detail of the engraving on the right hand side, in different lightings.

the gargoyle nozzle are slightly too crude to make a convincing attribution, their style is rather consistent with that found in other ivory sculptures carved in Northern and Central Europe under Scandinavian influence.²⁰ For the time being, there is no apparent reason to revise the dating of the carvings on the tooth as of the 13th century, or, somewhat more widely, as “gothic”.

Could it then be that the sperm whale tooth was carved into an ointment horn by a “gothic” artist in Scandinavia or Central Europe, found its way along the *österled*, i.e. the established Norman and Varager trade routes following the major waterways of the Daugava, Dniepr and Volga, into Slavic lands²¹ and into the hands of a Cyrillic-writing epigrapher artist, who then engraved further embellishment with his own gusto? This speculation is one of several conceivable possibilities, and there are many more as to how this ointment horn found its way (back?) to the town of Bergen, where it was unearthed several centuries later. No doubt whaling and scrimshaw historians will welcome and encourage more research by art historians on this interesting whale tooth.

Anmerkungen:

- 1 I thank Prof. Richard Vaughan, York, for kindly reviewing the English manuscript and for a critical commentary on the text.
- 2 Frank, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b.
- 3 Tools and utilitarian objects have been found dating from the same, but also much earlier, periods, see Clark; Frank, 1993a; Liebgott, # 50, 54.
- 4 Gaborit Chopin, 1978, p. 38; Goldschmidt, Vol. IV, Nos. 14, 262; Williamson, Fig. 3.
- 5 Vaughan, 1981, 1994, ch. 2; Viking Scandinavia provided the ivory not only for Europe but also for the Arab and Chinese trade in walrus and narwhal ivory, see Laufer.
- 6 Euw; Fillitz; Gaborit Chopin 1978, 1992; Niehoff; Schnitzler; Williamson. In the 13th century, Cologne was also a major market for strips of walrus leather – which can be up to 7 cm thick! – that were used as ropes for lifting heavy weights; no lesser authority than Dominican clergyman, university teacher, scholar and since 1932 saint, Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200–1280) witnessed this; see Stadler, p. 1525.
- 7 Frank, 1991, s.v. Osborne.
- 8 Notably Lindquist, 1993, 1994; Schnall, 1992, 1993; de Smet; Barthelmess, pp. 11–13.
- 9 See e.g. Sliggers & Wertheim.
- 10 Maurer.
- 11 Guldberg; Killermann; Lockwood; Maurer; Nordgaard; Schnall, 1994a & b; Whitaker, 1985, 1986. During the 18th Annual Kendall Whaling Symposium in October 1993 the present writer pointed out some interesting parallels between the “King’s Mirror” and the almost contemporaneous text “de ani malibus” by Albertus Magnus, concerning, in particular, the edibility of several whale species but also the description of a “hairy” kind of whale.
- 12 [O]k hafa þeir þvalir tennur ecki stærri enn geora má miök stor hnífahefti af, edur tabl. Einersen, p. 127.
- 13 Ed. by Hermannsson.
- 14 Hermannsson, p. XXVIII.
- 15 *Bærvhualur, lx. alna langur, jlla ætur. Hann hefur lxx. tanna, þó smár, ad eins spónstædar, og eru galladar jnnan til, og med smáflögum smockadar, utan j smátöfl edur knífs skepti.* Hermannsson, p. 8; see Ayerbe, p. 302, for a facsimile of the text passage. I thank Faroese poet Carl Jóhan Jensen, Tromsø, Ole Lindquist, Akureyri, Kate Sanderson, North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, Tromsø, and Dr. Uwe Schnall, German Maritime Museum, Bremerhaven, for their joint efforts in helping to translate this Old Norse text. The translation of *smáflögum* as “dense layers” correctly describes the appearance of cut and carved sperm whale dentine, see Boschma, 1938, pp. 242f; 1951, pp. 10; Penniman, p. 27f. According to Carl Jóhan Jensen, the word cannot refer to the small nodules of osteodentine that are usually found embedded in the dentine and which must not be confused with non-carietic! resorption cavities found in sperm whale teeth; for these see Boschma, 1950; Fabian.
- 16 Gesner, fol. 87 verso: *Karckewall ist auch 30. schritt lang / hat 70. zän / welche die Schmid begeren zu jrem brauch.* Also see Schnall, 1994a, p. 204.
- 17 If it is not a misspelling of Hubert Languet, 1518–1581, philosopher, historian, Saxonian ambassador in Paris, traveller, and correspondent of many learned people of his time.

- 18 I thank Marit Nybø, curator at the Bergen Museum, University of Bergen, Collections of Christian Art and Culture, for kindly supplying additional information and helping to obtain photographs of the tooth I had seen on display many months earlier.
- 19 I owe these significant insights entirely to Professor Dr. Peter Schreiner, who holds the chair for Byzantine Studies at the University of Cologne; in litt. 19 September 1994.
- 20 See especially the "Scandinavian" ivories illustrated in Gaborit Chopin, 1992; Goldschmidt, Vols. III and IV; Liebgott; Williamson.
- 21 For an introduction to our present knowledge of the Viking – Norman – Varager trade routes see Roesdahl.

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Über »Scrimshaw«-Vorläufer – Ein beschnittener und gravierter Pottwalzahn des 13. Jahrhunderts

Zusammenfassung

In der einschlägigen Forschung zur Walfängervolkskunst des »Scrimshaw« – den seit den 1820er Jahren populär gewordenen Seemannsarbeiten speziell auf und aus Pottwal- und Walroßzahn, Barten und Walknochen – werden künstlerisch bearbeitete Gegenstände anderer Kulturen aus denselben Materialien als »Scrimshaw«-Vorläufer bezeichnet. Aus dem europäischen Mittelalter sind zwar zahlreiche Beispiele von Schnitzereien aus Walroßzahn und Walknochen bekannt, nicht jedoch aus Pottwalzahn, dem beinahe stereotypen Werkstoff der »Scrimshander« des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. Der »Königsspiegel«, ein um 1250/60 in Norwegen geschriebener pädagogischer Text, erwähnt gleichwohl Schnitzereien aus Pottwalzahn. Auch aus dem 16. und 17. Jahrhundert sind textliche Hinweise auf skandinavisches Kunstgewerbe aus den Zähnen dieses Meeressäugers bekannt. Im Anschluß an die Präsentation dieser Quellen wird ein konkretes Beispiel vorgestellt: Es handelt sich um ein beschnittenes und graviertes Salbenhorn aus Pottwalzahn, das sich in der Sammlung christlicher Kunst und Kultur des Museums der Universität Bergen, Norwegen, Inv. MA 437, befindet. Aus dem massiven Dentin wurde ein Greif herausgeschnitzt, der Ausguß wurde wie der Kopf eines gotischen Wasserspeiers gestaltet. Auf einer glatten Seitenfläche wurde später ein kleines Tondo mit Pflanzen- und Vogelmotiv eingraviert. Es trägt eine Inschrift, die vom Bergenser Museum als griechisch, hier aber als russisch identifiziert wurde, deren Sinn aber unklar bleibt. Anlaß, die vom Museum vorgenommene Datierung des Zahns in das 13. Jahrhundert zu revidieren, besteht allerdings nicht.