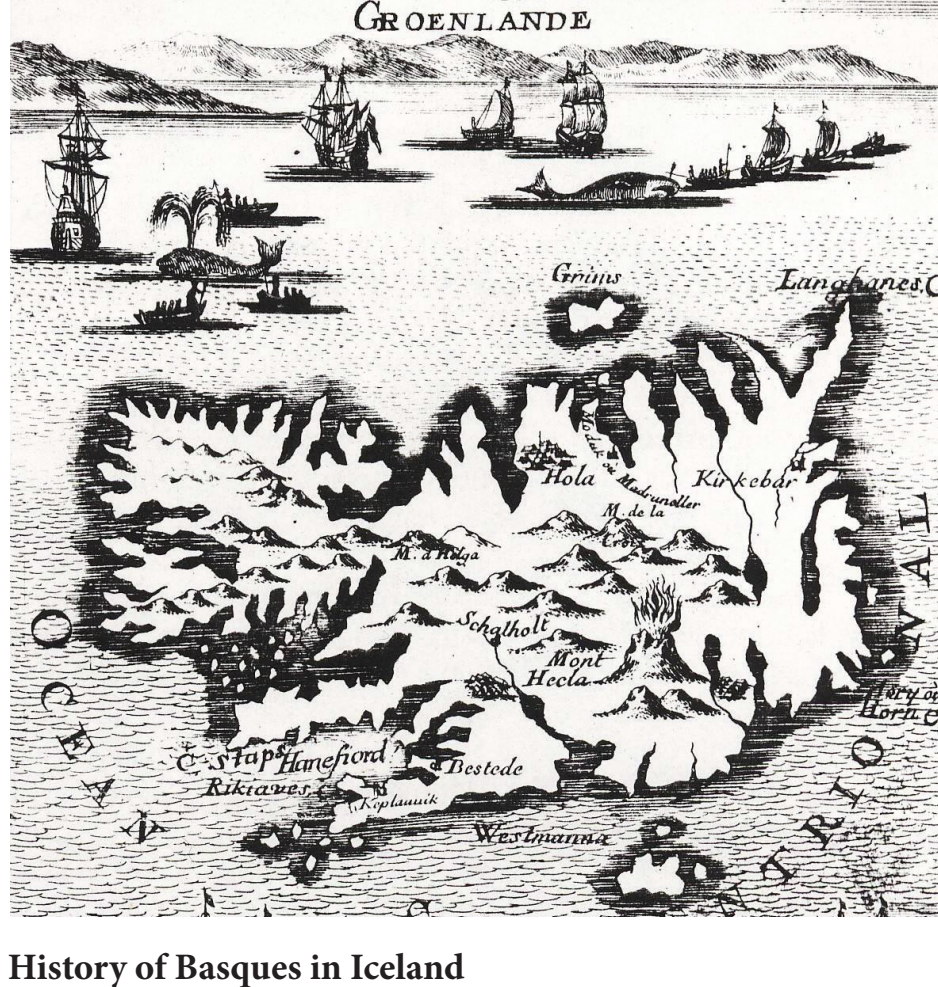


BASQUE CENTRE



History of Basques in Iceland

Basques are believed to have been the first nation to exploit whales for commercial purposes and they monopolized whaling in the middle ages. In the years 1604-1608 they started whaling around the Icelandic West-fjords and in 1615, there were reported to be sixteen Basque whaling ships in the Strandir region. During this period, pirating was common and Icelanders wary of the dark-skinned seafarers.

In the early summer of 1615, many whaling ships were seen at Strandir, most of them kept going away but at least three of them were left fishing. Those ships perished in a storm on the 21st September 1615 in Ytri Naustvík, Reykjarfjörður at Strandir. Their captain's names were Pedro de Aguirre, Stephan de Tellaria and Martin de Villafranca. Icebergs drifted into the fjord and broke the ship of Pedro and Stephan. Martin's ship drifted ashore and broke there. Three crew members perished but some goods were saved. Several small whaling boats were still ashore when the ships perished and 82 or 83 shipwrecked survived. As a result, a scenario began that is unique in Icelandic history with the slaying of 31 of the shipwrecked that connected these two small nations forever.



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. Undoubtedly, the royal monopoly on whaling imposed in 1615 by the king of Denmark in his domains, condemning offenders to the death penalty, contributed to straining relations. 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.



Basque whaling

The Basques started early to take an advantage of whale products. The oldest written source dates back to the 9th century as it was already a consolidated activity. 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. Between 1530-1600 the Basques sent an average of thirty whaling ships a year there. 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 Basque whaleboat - txalupa

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 galleys 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.

This replica of a txalupa is made in collaboration with Albaola - The Sea Factory of the Basques and the Icelandic boatbuilders Hafliði Aðalsteins-son and Einar Jóhann Lárusson.