

WHALING
AND
WHALING EQUIPMENT

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Virtually everyone visiting the Nootka Sound area was impressed by the whaling efforts of the Yuquot Nootkans, especially since their equipment seemed inadequate for the awesome task. But whale they did and on a fairly regular basis during spring and early summer. Even though they were often unsuccessful, when they scored not only did the chief whaler's prestige increase considerably, but also a great quantity of food was made available during a time of year usually known for its relative scarcity of consumables. The importance of whaling is further indicated by the constant references to great whalers in Nootkan legends and myths.

EARLY EXPLORERS

Cook and his men were impressed with the Nootkans' ability to hunt and kill whales. Although whether or not the British actually saw Nootkans pursue or harpoon a whale is not recorded, they did glean sketchy descriptions of the hunt and the equipment from little-understood conversations, whaling scenes depicted on Nootkan hats and clothing, and observation of the whaling equipment.

The Nootkans' whaling harpoon was a 12-ft. to 15-ft. long shaft cut into a wedge at one end. The wedged end was set into the socket of a barbed harpoon point about 6 in. long made of two large whalebone barbs lashed together to form an inverted "V" at the base. An oval sharpened mussel shell blade was fixed between the barbs with a sinew resembling catgut and resin. The resin was also used to fill the concave side of the shell point so both sides were smooth and symmetrical. About two or three fathoms of sinew line almost an inch thick were attached to the head of the harpoon and the shaft. Several inflated bladders made of sealskin and possibly whale intestine were attached to the line further down its length and at the end of the line was an eye to which another line could be attached. Porpoises and, in one case, sea otters were hunted with a similar but smaller harpoon.

Men in as many as ten canoes pursued a whale. When the harpoon was forced into a whale, the shaft separated from the head and floated on the water like a buoy. The sinew line and attached bladders remained connected to the head. The canoes, apparently lashed together by a line the occupants held, followed the harpooned whale until it tired from its wound and the effort of trying to pull the bladders down when it dove. Then the hunters killed it with more harpoons and whalebone spears and towed it ashore. The hunters also used a spoutoon-shaped iron spear to kill whales, probably after they had been harpooned (Ellis 1783: 221-2; Ledyard 1783: 77; Cook 1785: 328-0; 1967: 321, 1103, 1324-5, 141901; Zimmerman 1930: 74; ATL; BCA, a).

Henking described and illustrated a whaling harpoon and line apparently collected from the Nootka Sound area during Cook's visit (Cook 1967: 1324). The harpoon head was 16.5 cm. long, had an elongated oval shape and was formed by two bone barbs with broad rounded tips between which was a mussel shell point 11.2 cm. long. The barbs and mussel shell point were lashed together with "animal skin" coated with a resinous substance to bind the harpoon head together firmly. A very strong line, 586 cm. long, was attached to the harpoon head underneath the binding. The core of the line was formed by three thick ropes of an unidentified material, each rope formed by thinner, twisted cords. The three thick ropes were bound together by cords of "animal tendons"; wide cords were used near the harpoon head and narrower ones some distance from the head. The line ended in a loop formed by what the translator referred to as "knotting," but the end of the line was actually turned up and lashed to a point near its terminus with the same animal tendons that encased the entire line. Henking described another harpoon almost identical to the one described above except that the barbs were made of "walrus tusk" and the shell point was missing (Henking 1957: 369-70).

EARLY TRADERS

Unfortunately, Strange merely listed a few unidentifiable terms for Yuquot Nootkans whaling gear; however, Meares's

records were much more complete. According to him the harpoons the Yuquot Nootkans used for whaling and taking other sea mammals except otters had a shaft from 18 ft. to 28 ft. long. A large bone "cut in notches" was spliced to one end of the shaft and served as a "secure hold for the harpoon" fastened to it with thongs. The harpoon point was formed of a large oval mussel shell, sharpened on both sides, set into another piece of bone about 3 in. long to which a line made of sinews of different animals was lashed. The line, several fathoms long was also attached to the harpoon shaft. The shaft floated after the whale was struck, supported by the air-filled seal skins or fish bladders attached to it. Meares was apparently describing a harpoon formed of a wooden shaft, a notched bone foreshaft with a composite harpoon head formed of a shell blade and two bone balves serving as barbs. (His description implies that the harpoon shaft was used as a drogue.) (Meares 1791, 2: 52-3).

The Yuquot Nootkans preferred to hunt "those small whales with hunches on their backs, as being the most easy to kill." Whales were hunted in all kinds of weather. In preparation for the hunt, the chief dressed in sea otter skins, smeared his body with oil and daubed it with red ochre. Only the bravest, most active and vigorous men in his service accompanied him. The whaling canoes were large enough to hold 18 or 20 men; they were smaller than war canoes, but larger than those used ordinarily.

The chief, as principal harpooner, was the first to strike the whale. The harpooned whale dove, carrying the shaft and all the attached bladders with it. The chief and his companions in several other canoes of the same size as the chief's followed the whale and when it broke surface, used their harpoons until the whale could no longer dive because of the large numbers of buoys attached to the harpoons. After the whale drowned or died of some other cause, it was towed to shore amidst shouts and general rejoicing. The whale was butchered immediately, part of it eaten at a feast and the remainder divided among those who had participated in the hunt (Meares 1791, 2: 22, 53-4).

SPANISH OCCUPATION

According to Haswell, the whaling harpoon had a 9-ft. long shaft. The butt of the shaft was as thick as a man's arm, but tapered toward the other end fitted into a small socket in the harpoon head. The harpoon head, formed by a strong mussel shell point, was attached to barbs with "gum and worp" made of whale sinew. The attached line was also made of whale sinew. A number of seal skins turned inside out and inflated served as buoys and prevented the whale from diving too deeply (Howay 1941: 66).

Ingraham generally described harpoons as made of bone or mussel shell fixed into a bone shank. Although most of the Yuguot Nootkans' lines were made of kelp or cedar bark, those used for whaling were made of whale sinew, were about as thick

as a man's thumb and generally were not more than five fathoms long. One end of the line was attached to the harpoon and the other to a bladder. When the harpoon entered a whale, the shaft separated from its socket and the harpoon point remained in the whale, the line connecting it to a bladder.

The most expert young whalers and six companions would paddle some distance from shore near the entrance to the sound. As soon as they sighted and struck a whale, a lookout onshore alerted the men of the village who rapidly launched 30 to 40 canoes and went out to assist the crew who had harpooned the whale. As each of the arriving canoes approached the whale as it came up to breathe, the men struck it with harpoons. When the whale could no longer dive, it was killed with more harpoons and spears, then towed ashore (AGN, 65/18).

According to Mozino, the Yuquot Nootkans' whaling canoes were not quite 15 ft. long (along the bottom), were slightly less than 2½ ft. wide and only held three or four men. When the hunters approached a whale, one threw a harpoon mounted on a heavy shaft. The shaft was withdrawn from the imbedded harpoon head by a cord attached to it and at the same time another hunter threw his harpoon. A line linked this harpoon to an inflated bladder. Nothing the Yuquot Nootkans hunted was more profitable to them or was more solemnly celebrated than a whale. The chief was present at the distribution of the catch and then gave a feast for all the village residents (Mozino 1913).

Eliza and Pantoja described a whale hunt in which 20 or 30 canoes of hunters participated. The hunters surrounded the whale and a man in one of the largest canoes threw the first harpoon. One end of a cedar bark line $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick and 50 fathoms long was attached to the harpoon and the other end of the line was attached to an inflated sealskin buoy. Each buoy was painted with the chief's mark so the chief to whom the whale belonged could be identified if the whale eluded the hunters but died and came ashore in a territory not belonging to that chief. The chief who owned the dead whale invariably presented a gift to the chief who had rights to the area where the dead whale was found. The writer of the Log of the Chatham added that whaling was not limited to the sea coast, but extended to the various inlets where many whales were found. The Yuquot Nootkans preferred whale flesh although they also hunted seals and porpoises (AGN, 69/7; PAC, MG 12 A, Adm 55/17; Wagner 1933: 161).

SPORADIC CONTACT

According to Jewitt (and most before him) the harpoon head used in whaling was formed by two bone barbs with sharpened outer edges. A space between the two barbs formed a socket into which the shaft was placed. The barbs were firmly lashed together with whale sinew and their tips fitted to hold the sharpened mussel shell point secured with pine resin. A 9-ft. long whale sinew line was attached to the harpoon head and a

cedar bark line from 50 to 60 fathoms long was attached to the first line. Twenty to 30 sealskin floats were attached to the second line at intervals. The harpoon shaft was a pole about 10 ft. long and thicker at the middle than at either end. The harpooner detached the shaft from the harpoon head as soon as he struck a whale.

Jewitt was not overly impressed by the Yuquot Nootkans' whaling skill which is understandable considering the many times Maquinna and others went whaling and the few whales they took. Even before arriving at Yuquot, Maquinna would prepare for whaling by spending all day on top of a high mountain singing for whales to come so he could kill them. During the whaling season, from about mid-March to about the ^{middle} ~~middle~~ or end of May and sometimes as late as mid-July, Maquinna went whaling almost daily. He spent so much time in this pursuit that Jewitt and Thompson made him a tent of one of the Boston's sails so he could "look out for whales" in comfort. However, Maquinna's luck was not good. During the two and one-half seasons Jewitt observed the whaling activities of Maquinna, his brother and others from Yuquot privileged to hunt whales, Maquinna went out 53 times, struck and lost 8 whales and killed 1 (Jewitt 1807). On three occasions Maquinna struck a whale, but his harpoon "drewed." On two other occasions Maquinna struck a whale, but lost it when his line parted. Once his mussel shell harpoon point broke when he struck a whale. On another hunt he had to cut his line

after successfully harpooning a whale because his was the only canoe made fast to the whale and it was being pulled underwater, endangering Maquinna and his crew. On another occasion Maquinna's harpoon shaft broke. Other Yuquot Nootkan chiefs killed four whales during the same time period.

Whenever Maquinna lost a whale, he returned to Yuquot in a bad humour and accused his men of having violated their obligation to practise sexual continence in preparation for whaling. He gave Jewitt and Thompson little to eat during these periods which was a double hardship for them because the women were not allowed to cook while the crew was out whaling. In an attempt to remedy Maquinna's problems with breaking whaling gear and thereby placate him, Jewitt made steel harpoon heads for Maquinna and his chiefs. One proved to be an immediate success and Maquinna gave Jewitt 100 pounds of blubber in thanks. Jewitt and Thompson also spent several days making new lines -- apparently of European materials -- but whether or not these were superior to Yuquot Nootkan lines was not recorded. Jewitt also made steel lances about 18 in. long for lancing whales when they tired and were more approachable, and a large spade to cut the whale's fins.

When Maquinna finally took a whale using Jewitt's steel harpoon, a lookout standing on the headland alerted the villagers. With great rejoicing the men launched 40 canoes and, equipped with harpoons and sealskin floats, went out to assist in buoying the whale up and towing it in. As soon as the canoes appeared

at the entrance to Friendly Cove, the crews singing a slow, triumphal song to which they kept time with their paddles, the people on shore climbed onto the houses, drummed furiously on the roof planks and shouted "Wocash - Tocash Tyee!" to congratulate Maquinna. The whale was butchered as soon as it was drawn ashore and Maquinna gave a great blubber feast at his house to which he invited everyone in the village. Because of their extreme hunger in the post-winter season of scarcity, everyone ate to excess. Maquinna (ritualistically) hung 100 pounds of whale blubber over the place where he slept (Jewitt 1807: 11, 19, 21, 36; 1896: 122-3, 178-80, 212).

EUROCANADIAN PERIOD

Drucker's respondents supplied him with much more data on whaling in the late historic period than are available in ethnohistories. Although Drucker's data basically agree with the early accounts, there are a few differences in details such as number of crew, canoe size and length of harpoon shafts and lines. During the late historic period, the whaling canoe was said to be from five to six fathoms long, not a smaller canoe like the one Mozino described. A whaling crew was formed of eight men: the harpooner who stood in the bow of the canoe, a steersman and six paddlers. The harpoon sealskin floats, line and line baskets and boxes of food and water were neatly stowed in a particular order in the whaling canoe.

The whaling harpoon shaft Drucker described was three fathoms long and formed of two or three pieces of yew wood spliced together, (in a technique not previously recorded in the ethnohistories). The harpoon head was basically the same type as described at contact as were the lanyard and line. As Drucker inferred, the use of a line basket as a drogue did not seem to have been an aboriginal feature; however, the harpoon shaft may possibly have served this purpose during the early historic period.

Harpoons were thrust (not thrown) by a chief who aimed for a point just behind the whale's left slipper when the whale was submerging, its flukes being underwater at this point. After a second canoe approached and the harpooner in it thrust another harpoon into the whale, the whalers recovered the whaling lines marked by the sealskin floats and either attached the drogue-like basket at the end of the line or held onto them (as so often pictured on Nootkan hats), making their prey tow them. When the whale finally died and was towed ashore, the whaler directed the butchering and gave a feast. The whaler's "saddle" was the first piece to be removed from the carcass. Other portions were given to the various men who had helped kill or tow the whale. The whaler also gave pieces of blubber to members of his own group in order of their potlatch rank. Maquinna usually received 600 pounds of blubber on these occasions (Drucker 1951: 27-31, 48-56; 1965: 132-44).

No one now living in Yuquot can remember anyone going out whaling. They can only recount the appearance of a few dead whale that had drifted shore over the past many years. They marked this event by hacking a few strips of blubber off the carcass.

DISCUSSION

Although Drucker considered the prestige value of whaling to outweigh its economic importance, this is difficult to believe. Whaling did indeed have "prestige value," but almost every visitor to Nootka Sound remarked on the great quantities of whale blubber or train oil available there. Even the few poor whaling seasons Jewitt described apparently did not seriously diminish the amount of train oil available to the Yuquot Nootkans. It must have been available from other areas on the coast where whalers were having better luck than Maquinna and his crews.

Although it is at times difficult to explain the different lengths given for such things as whaling canoes and harpoon shafts, the former discrepancies may be due to more than one type of canoe being used for whaling on different occasions due to one inexplicable reason or another. The different lengths for the harpoon shafts may be the result of a journalist describing the wrong harpoon shaft or estimating size inaccurately. The descriptions of the hunt were, however, basically the same through time. In essence,

a chief was the harpooner and skipper of a canoe steered by an older uncle or someone similar and paddled by lower ranking members of the chief's household. Preparations for the hunt were as exhausting as the actual encounter, making the Nootkans not only well prepared but equal to the task of actually harpooning and killing the earth's largest mammals.