

28 Whales as a Nordic speciality

Collecting cetaceans for Natural History Museums (1860s–1910s)

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Abstract: *Whales are not specifically Nordic animals, but Nordic whales have been central in European natural history collections since the second half of the nineteenth century; this article analyses how this came to be. Several factors came into play: the interest in whales among many researchers and curators working in natural history museums, the development of modern whaling from the 1860s, and the development of networks of exchange and sale of scientific specimens. We study these three factors through the traces they have left in the museums' catalogues, in archives, and in the collections themselves and argue that, individually, these factors would not have had such a big impact. It is their combination in this period that has given Nordic whales such a central place in natural history collections.*

Keywords: Whales, whaling, natural history, scientific collecting, natural history museums, Norway, Denmark, Greenland, France.

Whales are not specifically Nordic animals.¹ The approximately 80 current species are found throughout the world's oceans and in some freshwater habitats. Whales as a group include the large-sized filter feeding baleen whales, among them the blue whale, as well as the toothed whales, which use echolocation and range in size from species such as porpoises to the large sperm whale. Many whale species are widely dispersed, and some large whales, including baleen and sperm whales, are known for long-distance migrations, even between the Southern and Northern hemispheres. Their deep evolutionary history also started elsewhere: like humans, whales are mammals, and they evolved a fully aquatic lifestyle from ancestors

on land, probably in today's Asia (Pyenson 2017).

Whales are thus not inherently Nordic, yet most of the whales in the collections of the Natural History Museum in Paris that were collected in the second half of the nineteenth century came from Norway or, secondarily, Iceland and Greenland. In this article, we endeavour to analyse why, when it came to natural history collections, whales became a Nordic speciality in the period from the 1850s to the First World War. We look in particular at the whales that entered and left the collections of three natural history museums (NHM) during that period: the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris (Paris NHM), the University Museum

in Bergen (Bergen NHM) and the Natural History Museum in Copenhagen (Copenhagen NHM). We also mention other natural history museums that appear in our sources through their exchanges with Bergen, Copenhagen or Paris. Comparing these three museums allows us to highlight the similarities and differences between them, and to understand the networks of scientists and collectors better than if we analysed only one museum.

We discuss both baleen whales and toothed whales, with collection entries varying in size from one tooth or baleen to whole skeletons, and with specimens both dry and wet (the latter usually body parts or foetuses preserved in ethanol or formalin).

We aim to improve on the understanding of the history of both the collecting of natural history specimens, and the collecting of Norden in particular, by highlighting changes in the collection process of whale specimens in the second half of the nineteenth century. We analyse the context of this collection from three different angles: the changes in the research and exhibition practices in natural history museums, the role of whale hunting and in particular that of the modern whaling that developed from the 1860s in Norway, and the development of networks of sale and exchange of scientific specimens. We argue that, while each of these three evolving factors is important, it is only by considering them together that one can understand why Nordic whales gained a central place in natural history collections.

Analysing these overlapping contexts presents difficulties linked to three limitations of the available sources: they downplay the role of some actors to the advantage of others, they seldom focus on the collection context, and their chronology corresponds to that of the museums rather than to that of the collection process. These sources are therefore far from

ideal; however, sometimes information about the collection process was recorded, and it is on these traces that we have conducted this study. Our analysis is based on the three museum collections' specimen labels, catalogues and databases, and letters sent to and from the museums, as well as visits to the collections in Bergen and Copenhagen by LLD².

A first limitation of these sources is that they often focus on the scientists and secondarily on the curators, but only some of the specimens were collected by them: natural history museums usually encouraged private collecting and donations and produced guides as to what should be collected and how (Driver 2001; Collini & Vannoni 2005). These private donors were usually acknowledged when they were Western, but not when they were local assistants and guides, no matter how much expertise they had. Likewise, even when scientists collected in person or when their name was on the label, much of the work of killing, dissecting and packing the specimens in the field was not done by them but by assistants, either local or from the museums. As a result, knowing how specimens were actually collected often proves difficult. Analyses of scientific collecting during scientific expeditions and in the context of colonial empires show how the work and knowledge of the many local guides and assistants employed by the European collectors are ignored or downplayed in the sources, and how this has influenced the historiography (Das & Lowe 2018, Juhé-Beaulaton & Leblan 2018b).

Another limitation of the archival sources is that they centre on the specimens themselves rather than on their collection. This is by design; as Mark Carnall points out, the organisation of natural history collections is taxonomic, by species, thus separating the specimens collected for instance by the same person or

during the same year. Carnall explains that the situation is usually worse for the bigger specimens, like those from whales (Carnall 2020, 112). It is not easy, for instance, to know which specimens were bought from other museums and which were exchanged in return for other specimens. The catalogues are not always precise on whether specimens were received as a gift, bought, or exchanged in return for other specimens. In the case of the Bergen NHM, we also do not know how the largest whale specimens were prepared in order to remove the fat and preserve the skeletons.³

A third limitation of the archival sources is their blurry chronology. The catalogues often include re-cataloguing of specimens already present in the collection. In the catalogue of the Laboratory of Comparative Anatomy of the Paris NHM, almost a thousand entries between 1840 and 1923 concerned whales, but fewer than half were actual new entries in the collection. The rest were specimens found in the collections without labels and re-catalogued as well as possible. Furthermore, in some cases, it was several years after the specimens physically arrived in Paris before they were entered into the catalogue.

These archival traces are thus incomplete and sometimes misleading, yet they allow us to show a trend towards the procurement of whales from Northern Europe rather than other places in the second half of the nineteenth century, as we will explore in three steps in this article. In the first part of this article, we focus on factors internal to the three NHMs. We present the museums and the role of their employees who curated their collections and their exhibitions and produced anatomical research from them: we point out that particularly interested scientists developed significant whale collections. In the second part, we focus on the moment of collecting, when living whales were

turned into scientific specimens. Some of them were stranded, others were hunted: we argue, after others, that modern whaling significantly opened the possibilities for collecting whales. Finally, in the third part, we look at the role of international networks of museums, scientists, whalers and specimen dealers that allowed these NHMs to receive whale specimens without sending their employees into the field: we demonstrate that, far from modern whaling being the sole factor, it is the insertion of the Bergen and Copenhagen NHMs in these networks that led to Nordic whales being so dominant in European natural history collections.

THE AIMS OF COLLECTING: STUDY AND DISPLAY

The possession of stuffed animals or pelts by private individuals was relatively common in the nineteenth century (Amato 2015). Whale teeth and baleen in private homes were not uncommon either, especially in Norway. Tourists to Norway bought various whale parts from whalers (Simon-Ekeland 2021a). However, very few private individuals had the space to store and display complete whale skeletons. A few dead whales were exhibited to the public in different European and American cities, but the smell of their decomposition usually led the authorities to stop these exhibitions after a few weeks (Jones 2017; Delsett & Spring 2023). On the other hand, public natural history museums permanently exhibited parts of their whale collections. This first part of the article explains when these three particular museums collected these whales, and what they did with them.

For the NHMs, one use of the whale specimens was to allow researchers to scientifically describe the anatomy of an animal group that

was still often surrounded by myths. Research in the nineteenth century focused on descriptions of the skeleton as well as soft tissue, embryology, species delimitations and nomenclature, and evolution of the clade including a search for the ancestors and closest relatives of whales. Whether whales were fish or not was hotly debated in court in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, and discussed in *Moby Dick*, even though scientists already knew that whales were mammals (Burnett 2007). This highlights the need for scientists to communicate what they knew to broader audiences, and specimens were useful for this: some of them were used in exhibitions open to the public in the three museums that we analyse here.

The Paris NHM has been claimed as the oldest natural history museum. Originally founded as a royal botanical garden in 1626, it became the National Museum of Natural History in 1793, during the French Revolution (Laissus 1995; Lane 1996). The oldest documented whale specimens at the Paris NHM date from the beginning of the nineteenth century, although older ones existed but were not catalogued. The Zoological Museum in Copenhagen was established in 1862 by grouping collections from several older museums, including the Royal Kunstkammer, itself based on a private museum established in the middle of the seventeenth century. Its oldest whale specimens date from 1838. This museum opened its exhibitions to the public in 1870.⁴ Finally, what is today called the University Museum in Bergen was established as Bergen Musæum in 1825 by Wilhelm Koren Christie, and moved to its current location in 1865 (Aslaksen 2019). The oldest whale specimens in Bergen date from 1834. The collection of the whales in these museums, however, was far from a gradual process, as Figure 1 shows: whale

collecting reached its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century in these museums, and there were strong year-on-year variations (Delsett 2024).

Figure 1 is based on data that is only partly reliable because of the limits of the sources noted in the introduction – we have not included the Copenhagen NHM in this graph because only a minority of the whale specimens have labels that include a collection year. Nevertheless, it clearly shows that in the cases of both the Bergen and Paris NHMs the collection of whale specimens really took off from the 1860s onwards and peaked in the 1880s and 1890s. This is due in part to the presence in these two museums of researchers who were particularly interested in whales. In Bergen, the many specimens and especially the foetuses of different sizes meant that Norwegian scientists made contributions to research on whales. Research based on the collection started in 1844 and historically includes founder and researcher Wilhelm Koren Christie, curator James Grieg, Holmboe, medical professor Gustav Adolph Guldberg and researcher and polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen (Kalland 2014; e.g. Guldberg & Nansen 1894).

In Paris, research on whales has a long history. Georges Cuvier, often seen as the founder of comparative anatomy, published on whales and many other species at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the period in which the international reputation of the Paris NHM was at its peak. In the second half of the century, it was common to see the Paris NHM as in decline, but Limoges and Schnitter show that, in fact, the scientific production from the Paris NHM was strong from the second half of the 1860 to the Great War, and that the NHM found a new legitimacy from the 1890s by focusing on helping with the colonisation of the French empire (Limoges 1980; Schnitter 1996). When it

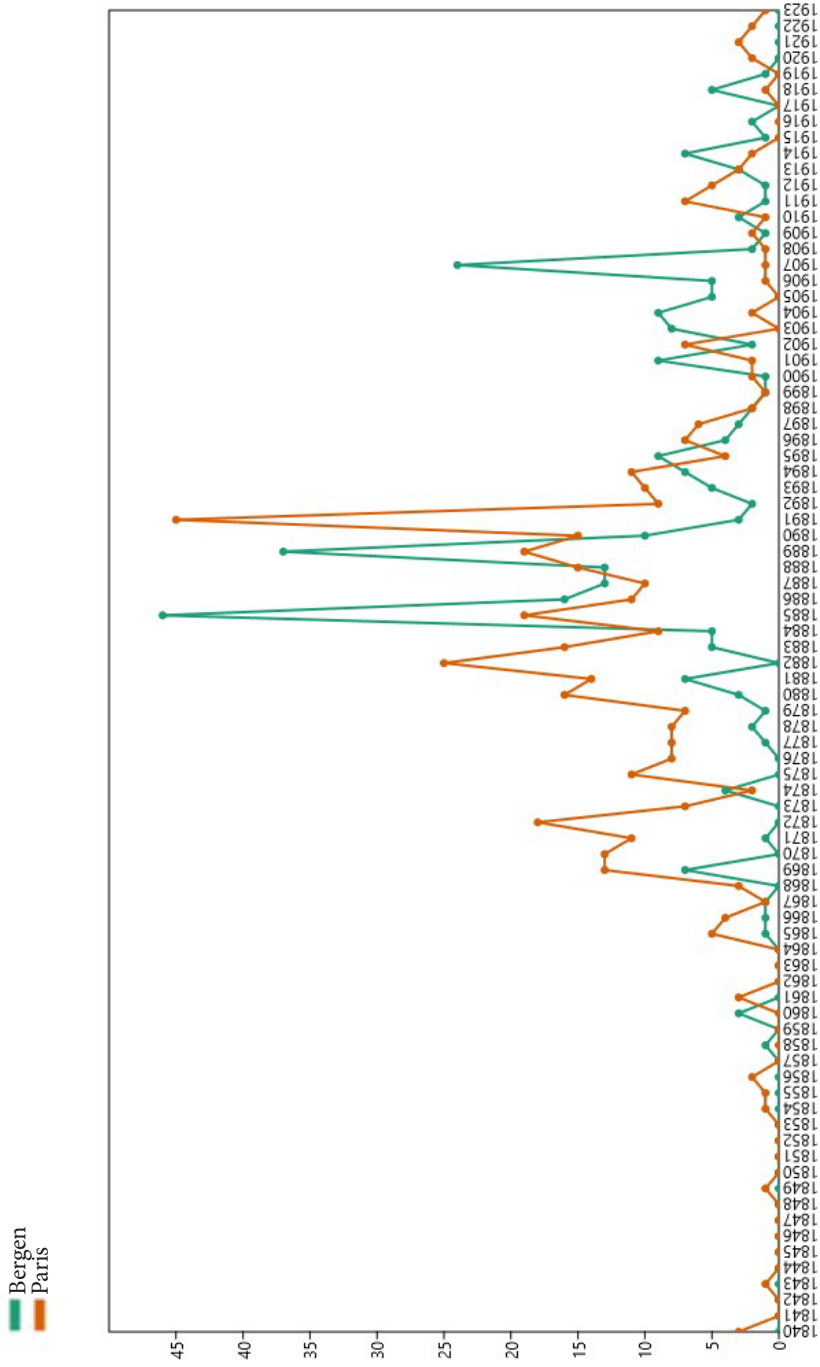


Fig. 1. Number of new whale specimens entering the collections of the Bergen and Paris Natural History Museums per year, 1840–1923.

comes to the whale collections, they grew the most and were the object of most publications before this colonial turn, between the 1860s and the 1890s. Comparative anatomy professor Paul Gervais, and Georges Pouchet, who succeeded him when he died in 1879, were both interested in whales: they expanded the collection and published on whales (Jaussaud & Brygoo 2004).

Figure 1 also shows a gradual, albeit irregular, diminution of the whale entries in Bergen and Paris in the 1900s. In the Parisian case, it is due to the death of Georges Pouchet, replaced by a professor less interested in whales, and the aforementioned colonial turn. For both Bergen and Paris, as well as Copenhagen, it was also a question of space and usefulness: were more specimens from the same species really useful, especially when they took up this much space?

Although the Danish sources do not allow for such a quantitative perspective, the boom in whale collections in the Copenhagen NHM appears to have started earlier, around the beginning of the 1850s: it was due in large part to the professorship of Daniel Friedrich Eschricht, an important cetologist in that decade, and his connections to the Danish administration of colonised Greenland. Here as well, the importance of some researchers appears: Eschricht's interest in whales was a central reason for the development of the Zoological Museum's whale collection (Eschricht 1858).

Whale specimens were thus important for scientific research, but not only that. These three museums were part of a trend that saw the number and importance of natural history museums grow both in Europe and in the United States after 1850. NHMs became central in the popularisation of science: Susan Sheets-Pyenson dubs them 'Cathedrals of Science' (Sheets-Pyenson 1987). Much of the scholarship on

NHMs has focused on those established in the British Empire, with several studies showing the ample variety of cases from small, private museums in the colonies to larger, state-owned and -sponsored ones (Sheets-Pyenson 1987; Barringer & Flynn 1998; MacKenzie 2009; Longair & McAleer 2012). This scholarship shows that smaller museums usually focused on exhibition, whereas the bigger, often state-sponsored ones did both research and public outreach; such was the case for the NHMs in Paris, Copenhagen and Bergen. Like the British ones, our three natural history museums were transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century so as to display their collections to the public in more attractive ways. This implied particular attention to the buildings' architecture and the diverse paintings that usually surrounded the exhibited bones and stuffed animals (Jovanovic-Kruspel 2019). There was often a strong similarity between the animals exhibited in natural history museums and those exhibited as hunting trophies: in both cases, great emphasis was put on making the animals impressive (Michaud 2018). Whales, due to their size, were ideal for this approach, and museums often endeavoured to display several complete whale skeletons in one room.

New buildings, adapted to new ways of displaying natural history, opened in all three museums we consider here in the second half of the nineteenth century. The whales' size influenced the architecture of these new buildings: in Bergen, the building's dimensions were calculated to accommodate eight mounted whale skeletons, several of which were hanging from the ceiling (Aslaksen 2019). The way the specimens were to be exhibited was a topic of debate in many natural history museums (Langebeek 2011). At the Paris NHM, most of the buildings were rebuilt in the late nineteenth century and Georges Pouchet wanted to create a 'cetaceum'

dedicated to whales, but his project was rejected (Fischer 1997; Crémière 2004). This shows that even the professors of the Paris NHM, who held a prestigious position and controlled the collections, were not all-powerful and could not do as they wished with regard to the exhibitions. There were many tensions between the scientists, the curators, the museum directors, and the funders of these museums (in this case the French state); the archives do not keep track of all the conflicts. The repartition of the roles between scientists and curators is especially difficult to assess when the titles meant very different things between one country or even one museum and another, and these roles changed over time.

There were similar plans to make a whale museum in Oslo, as part of the local Natural History Museum, for housing a donation of baleen whales from the whaling industry. Limited funding meant that the plans had to be abandoned, also in this case highlighting the structural and financial constraints under which scientists and curators worked.⁵

There was thus a double reason for collecting scientific specimens: they served for research purposes, and were displayed to the public. The researchers working in these museums were central actors: in Bergen, there was a fruitful loop between the availability of whale specimens and the local researchers' interest in them (Kalland 2014; Delsett 2024). Scientists' need to publish to further their careers thus fuelled an appetite for specimens – as Dolly Jørgensen argues, it was a contributing factor in the overhunting and sometimes extinction of some species (Jørgensen 2021). The example of the Paris NHM shows that, even in a case where whale specimens were not as readily available, the interest of researchers in positions of power could lead to the collection of many specimens. While this is a factor in

explaining why these whale collections grew, it does not explain why, in the Parisian case for instance, most of these specimens would come from Nordic areas as they did. The two following parts of the article thus explore further the ways in which these specimens were collected: either on site or by correspondence, both of these modes favouring the collection of Nordic whales in the period under consideration.

COLLECTING ON SITE:

STRANDED AND HUNTED WHALES

This second part focuses on the collection of whales on site. One way for museums to procure whale specimens was for the museum's own employees to go and get them directly where the whales left the sea, either because they beached and died, or because whalers brought them ashore. While the former had been the only way to procure whale specimens, and was still in use, this second part of the article demonstrates the role that the modernisation of whaling played in the boom in whale collections after the 1860s.

The Paris and Copenhagen NHMs collected specimens from beached whales around France and Denmark. In both cases, this required a warning system that relied on the use of the electric telegraph to alert the museum to the fact that a whale had been stranded. In France, such a system was put in place in the 1860s. Around fifteen cetaceans were added to the Paris NHM's collections this way while Pouchet was professor (1879–1893) (Beauregard 1895). In Denmark, a similar system was established in 1885, taking advantage of improvements in the Danish communications infrastructure, especially the telegraph network. The Copenhagen NHM, however, did not have the funds to collect all the animals and quickly focused on the more

unusual finds, while common ones like the white-beaked dolphins were ignored (Kinze 2018).

Such systems had their limits and the French one, for instance, did not always ensure that the Paris NHM had priority picking of these whales – others sometimes seized the dead animals. In October 1880, for instance, a whale and its calf were captured while still alive on the beach in Aigues-Mortes, in Southern France. They died quickly and a local inhabitant endeavoured to display them for money until the police stopped the smelly exhibition. Pouchet then wrote to the local police to find the exhibitor and asked him for the remains of the whales, which had mostly disappeared by then.⁶ The difficulties in this case were compounded by the distance between Paris and Aigues-Mortes. Longer distances could mean delays in warning the museum and meant that it took longer for the museum employees to reach the whale, lowering the quality of the samples they could obtain because the whales were decomposing. It is therefore not surprising that only one whale skeleton went from Algiers to Paris (in 1888), and that it was an exception: few whale specimens came from the French colonies.⁷

A more effective approach was to buy fresh whale specimens from whalers when they landed with their catch, as Eschricht, professor at the Copenhagen NHM, argued to the French Académie des Sciences in 1858. For him, a proper study of any whale species could not rely only on accidental strandings; one had to use those who hunted these whales. He quoted the few remaining porpoise fisheries located in the straits between Denmark and Sweden as a very good source of information on the migrations of the smaller whales (Eschricht 1858).

In the case of the Bergen NHM, the majority of the whale specimens were locally sourced in this way, taking advantage of the museum's

proximity to hunting areas (Kalland 2014, 248; Delsett 2024). While whale hunting had been practised in France and Denmark as well as in Norway for several centuries, whaling became a Norwegian speciality from the 1860s. Part of the reason was that whaling along the European coasts in the early modern period had overhunted the species that were then technically possible to hunt: the West Greenlandic and North Norwegian coasts were still quite rich in whales compared to the rest of Europe.

Another aspect that made whaling a Norwegian speciality was the role of the Norwegian shipowner and sealer Svend Foyn, who equipped his whaling ships with several technological innovations that greatly increased their effectiveness in the 1860s. Several parts of the whales' bodies were at the time valuable, especially different types of fat used for a wide range of purposes. Steam engines allowed these ships to travel faster, but also to break thinner flakes of ice, which in turn extended the hunting season before and after the summer. Foyn also developed the use of the harpoon cannon and the explosive harpoon, both of which allowed for hunting whales that had previously escaped whalers because of their speed, or because they tended to sink when injured. Thirdly, Foyn improved the shore-based handling of the whales. Zoology professor Robert Collett at NHM Oslo noted the impact this had on knowledge about whales in a 1911 encyclopaedia of Norwegian mammals:

Our knowledge about the whales and their biology has increased in a few years more than in previous centuries taken together. Species that were until now mostly known only through occasional (usually stranded) specimens, such as the blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) and the sei whale (*B. borealis*), turned out to occur in the Atlantic Ocean in large groups (Collett 1911, 557).

Other Norwegian whaling shipowners quickly copied Foyn's innovations (Nielsen 2004; Jacobsen 2008). This effectively made Norway the most advanced whaling nation, and the industry now effectively hunted all the large whale species that could be found along the Norwegian coast and in Arctic waters, drastically reducing the populations. It is therefore not surprising that whale specimens sent or brought back to the Paris NHM were collected chiefly in Norway. A collecting mission led by Georges Pouchet in 1881 mobilised a ship from the French navy to transport whale specimens back to France from Norway (Simon-Ekeland 2021b, 127–29). The ship carried 1.5 tonnes of plaster, boxes to store specimens, and dozens of litres of alcohol for preservation. Pouchet received for instance from Svend Foyn a whale foetus and two complete whale skeletons; he paid 3,000 francs – a significant sum – for a blue whale skeleton and received a humpback whale skeleton for free.⁸

The development of modern whaling is therefore indubitably a central factor in explaining the centrality of Nordic whales in European natural history museums in the second half of the nineteenth century; it provided access to species that little was known about up to that point, and access to fresh specimens if one travelled to the whale fisheries. However, sending employees from the museum to buy and collect specimens from whalers was quite costly, not to mention logistically complex when the hunting grounds were far away; natural history museums therefore made extensive use of purchases and exchanges of specimens from afar, as we will now analyse.

COLLECTING BY CORRESPONDENCE: IMPERIALIST AND SCIENTIFIC NETWORKS

The late nineteenth century saw a considerable

improvement in the ease with which one could send and receive letters and packages between countries, leading to a massive circulation of diverse goods (Laborie 2015). Natural history museums participated in this movement by sending and receiving many specimens. Even though whales are often large, many whale specimens, from small pieces to whole skeletons, were sent internationally before arriving in the collections of these three museums. This last part of the article analyses the networks of diverse actors that facilitated this international circulation of whale specimens. Networks of sale and exchange of scientific specimens were developed during the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century. Coote, Haynes, Philp and Ville describe this as 'the coming together of science, business, and personal collecting' on a global scale. They point out the intertwining of these networks with the progress of taxonomy: trust between natural history specimen providers and their scientist clients grew during the nineteenth century as species classifications became more precise, making the identification and the assessment of the monetary value of the different specimens easier (Coote et al. 2017).

Specimens could be provided by professionals or semi-professionals specialising in sourcing them for museums or for private collectors, who were numerous in the nineteenth century. Mark Barrow describes these kinds of "specimen dealers" as "entrepreneurial" (Barrow 2000). Private collectors often viewed them and their commercial practices with suspicion, and a bird collector like Henry Dresser stressed that he was not a dealer (McGhie 2017, 83–85; 93–94). The growing number of natural history museums was an advantage for these specimen dealers, who could make museums bid on the same specimens. One Charles Traill, who had previously provided whale skeletons,

wrote to the Paris NHM again in 1883 to offer whale skeletons from New Zealand for the significant sum of 3000 or 4000 francs; he warned that he would contact museums in London or Berlin if the Parisian NHM did not reply fast enough – the Paris NHM did not buy them.⁹ Traill was a good example of the specialisation of many specimen dealers: in his case it was whales, for others it could be particular species, for instance, of birds (McGhie 2017, 89–90). At the other end of the spectrum of private providers of whale parts to the Paris NHM were the sellers at the Parisian fish market, from whom the museum bought dolphins and porpoises several times in the 1890s. These were usually used for dissection training.¹⁰

A few semi-professional providers were not paid directly by the Paris NHM itself but through grants from the French State. This was the case for Charles Rabot, who brought several whale specimens to the Paris NHM, as well as many other specimens, in a decade of yearly travels to Northern Europe in the 1880s (Simon-Ekeland 2021b, 129–31). However, a note in the catalogue on whale bones that Rabot had provided read: ‘Portions of maxillaries without any value. Discarded [Réformé]!’¹¹ This shows the difficulties in relying on external providers of specimens, who were not always competent enough to discern what was useful or not.

Whalers, who were by trade familiar with the anatomy of whales, were ideal partners in the commerce of cetacean specimens. Pouchet corresponded with Svend Foyn, who sent whale specimens for a fee from Norway to Paris before the two men met in Norway in 1881. This relationship was not always one of client and provider: the scientists’ knowledge could be useful to the whalers, and Svend Foyn for instance asked Pouchet for advice on chemical ways to separate whale fat from flesh.¹² Pouchet

did not exclusively work with Norwegians; he also established contacts with whalers in the Azores, before travelling there (Beauregard 1895). He also wrote to US and Portuguese whalers to ask them to preserve the whale foetuses they came across.¹³

Likewise, the scientists and curators of the Bergen NHM actively sought specimens from the whaling industry. In the late 1800s, they wrote to the whaling companies to order specimens, and printed a 100-page manual explaining what the museum wanted and how the specimens should be prepared (Kalland 2014). The Bergen NHM also used specialised specimen dealers to procure specimens from exotic whales such as the German Brazil-based taxidermist and collector W. Ehrhardt (Gutsche et al. 2007, Delsett 2024). G. A. Frank, a natural history dealer in Amsterdam with a large global network, was one of Bergen’s most important trade partners. He helped the museum get at least one specimen of an exotic whale to the museum, and he served as an intermediary in exchanges between the Bergen NHM and other museums (Largen 1985; Kalland 2014).

There were many exchanges between museums. In 1880, for instance, Pouchet sent a cast of a whale jaw to an anatomist in Louvain.¹⁴ The Paris NHM itself received many whales, for instance from the Copenhagen NHM at the turn of the 1870s, most of them from Greenland.¹⁵ Likewise, the first beluga to enter the collections of the Bergen NHM came from an exchange with the Copenhagen NHM (Kalland 2014, 247–50). The Copenhagen NHM therefore served as a hub for redistributing scientific specimens from the Danish colony. The Bergen NHM had a similar role: the database of the Bergen Museum shows that, in November 1888, it sent two whales caught along the Norwegian coast to the Paris NHM in exchange for fifteen skeletons ranging from

penguins to a yak, via several snakes and reptilians.

All three museums both received and sent whales, but the Bergen and Copenhagen museums were 'net exporters' of whales, whereas the Paris NHM was more of a 'net importer' and exporter of tropical species collected in colonised areas. The Bergen NHM both collected stranded whales and explicitly ordered many skeletons from the hunting grounds in Northern Norway specifically so as to sell them to, or exchange them with, other museums in Stockholm, Uppsala, Malmö, Göteborg, Copenhagen, Paris, Athens, Vienna, St. Gallen, Washington DC and Prague (Kalland 2014, 149–250; Aslaksen 2019).

In the case of the Copenhagen NHM, this central role was due to the Danish colonisation of Greenland, where the Inuit hunted whales, and in particular humpback whales, narwhals and beluga. Eschricht was very open about his dependency on the specimens brought to Copenhagen from Greenland by Carl Peter Holbøll, who served as Danish governor in different parts of Greenland over several decades until he died in a shipwreck in 1856. In the late 1850s, Eschricht's collection at the Copenhagen NHM was the biggest in Europe, thanks to Holbøll whose early death was still being lamented by a French and a Belgian cetologist in 1880; they noted that many of Holbøll's specimens went from Copenhagen to other European museums (Van Beneden & Gervais 1880, III–IV).

This calls for a reassessment of the importance of modern whaling. While little is registered about the way the Greenlandic whale specimens that Holbøll took to Copenhagen were produced and acquired – stranded, hunted, by Inuit or by others? – they were in any case not products of modern whaling, whose methods did not spread in Norway until the

following decade. It is therefore not modern whaling alone that explains the boom in whale collections, but its combination with the development of exchange and sale networks of scientific specimens.

Many people were implicated in the process that turned a living whale into a museum specimen and not all of them were given equal esteem by the scientists who received these specimens. Eschricht noted the importance not only of the specimens themselves but also of Governor Holbøll's observations for his research (Eschricht 1858). On the other hand, Eschricht only mentioned in passing that the whales he studied were hunted by indigenous people and gave them no credit at all for helping to understand these whales. The people's names registered on the specimen labels are those of the colonial administrators rather than those of the hunters. This speaks to the colonial context in which this collection was performed, although it seems to have been part of a broader disdain that Eschricht had about the non-bourgeois since he was also condescending when writing about whalers. Some Norwegian whalers, and in particular Foyn himself, received more respect from scientists like Pouchet, but on the whole the scientists in these networks do not appear to have had much appreciation for the whalers.

They did, however, have a lot of respect for each other. Some scientists in particular played a central role in these networks of whale-interested researchers and were in contact with several of the museums that we consider here. There were intra-Nordic exchanges and collaborations, for instance between Eschricht in Copenhagen and the Bergen NHM. Whale-interested zoologists in Uppsala and London thus sent specimens to Paris. The Belgian zoologist Pierre-Joseph Van Beneden provided specimens both to the Paris

and the Bergen NHMs in the 1870s.¹⁶ Material circulation accompanied the circulation of ideas and the exchange of specimens was sometimes paired with joint publications: Van Beneden and Paris NHM's Paul Gervais together wrote a book on the osteology of cetaceans (Van Beneden and Gervais 1880). Similarly, Georges Pouchet published an article on a sperm whale stranded in the Azores with the young Azorean naturalist Francisco Afonso Chaves, who provided specimens to the Paris and Copenhagen NHMs (Pouchet & Chaves 1890; Reis 2021).¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Whales are not inherently Nordic, and the three museums discussed in this article did not collect whales from Northern Europe alone. Yet during the second half of the nineteenth century, the modernisation of Norwegian whaling contributed to giving Nordic and particularly Norwegian whales a central place in the collections of natural history museums.

Norway was on the periphery of Europe, but the importance of both modern and traditional whaling methods on the Norwegian coast meant that the Bergen NHM had no difficulty finding whale specimens. The Copenhagen NHM could source dolphins and porpoises easily from the Danish coast, and bigger whales from the Danish colonies on Greenland and Iceland; they were already doing so in the 1850s, before the development of modern whaling. Both of these museums exchanged many whale specimens in return for other animals. The Parisian NHM on the other hand did not have as good an access to whale specimens; a warning system when whales beached allowed for the collection of several specimens, but it was complicated compared to the ease

of working with whales obtained from modern whaling. Georges Pouchet therefore travelled to the North Norwegian whaling areas to collect whales.

Our analysis therefore confirms the already well-known importance of the modernisation of whaling for the study of whales, but we also show that one should resist the temptation of technological determinism and that modern whaling by itself is not a sufficient explanation. The importance of Nordic whales in European natural history collections predated modern whaling and was due to the importance of the networks of scientists and museums in the circulation of these natural history collections: whales became a Nordic speciality not only because of the modernisation of whaling but also because of the central role of the Bergen and Copenhagen NHMs in the networks of specimen circulation. The Paris NHM thus received whales from Nordic NHMs in exchange for sending them other animal specimens, in particular animals from the French colonies in Africa and Asia. Many other European and American NHMs did the same. In addition to exchanges between museums, there were also purchases from private sellers specialised in such specimens. Some whaling entrepreneurs like Svend Foyn were included in these networks, thus reinforcing the place of Norwegian whales in the Parisian collection. However, these networks focused on the specimens themselves and the actual collection process was seldom highlighted. Collaboration between museums and scientists overshadowed the crucial work of the labouring hands of the industrial whalers and the indigenous Greenland whale hunters.

40 NOTES

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2. More on these collections can be found in Delsett 2024.
3. Personal communication from Anne Karin Huftammer, Bergen University Museum, to LLD.
4. Website of the former Zoological Museum, archived on the WayBackMachine on 17/10/2015: Historie – Københavns Universitet (archive.org).
5. <https://www.muv.uio.no/uioos-historie/bygninger/arkitektene-planene/hvalmuseet/>. Consulted 24/10/2023.
6. Exchange of letters between 19/10/1880 and 02/11/1880, in Paris NHM Ms AC 196.
7. *Journal d'Anatomie Comparée* (hereafter referred to as *JAC*, catalogue of the laboratory of comparative anatomy at the Paris NHM) 1888–1890 p.14&151
8. Letters from Pouchet to the Minister of Public Instruction, 16/06/1881, 12/07/1881 & 05/08/1881. Archives Nationales F17/2998.
9. Letter from Charles Traill to Georges Pouchet, 12/07/1883; Copy of a letter from Pouchet to Henri Gervais, same date. Archives of the Paris NHM Ms AC 196.
10. *JAC* 1888–1890 p.155, 299; *JAC* 1890–1893 p.152; *JAC* 1893–1897 p.169, 182.
11. *JAC*, 1883–1884, p.358.
12. Letter from Foynt to Pouchet, 18/08/1880, Archives of the Paris NHM Ms AC 196.
13. Letter from Pouchet to the brothers Cook, 18/02/1882; letter from Pouchet to an unnamed recipient in Bensaude in Portugal, 16/11/1881, Archives of the Paris NHM Ms AC 196.
14. Letter to Pouchet, 27/06/1880, Archives of the Paris NHM Ms AC 196.
15. *JAC* 1868–1872 p.102,103,142,229, *JAC* 1873–1876 p.55
16. *JAC* 1868–1872 p.221; *JAC* 1873–1876 p.354.
17. *JAC* 1888–1890 p.159, 210, 300, 301; *JAC* 1890 p.373; *JAC* 1890–1893 p.357; *JAC* 1893–1897 p.374.

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