Beauties and Beasts: Whales in Portugal, from Early-Modern Monsters to Today's Flagship Species

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Summary

Among the general population in most Westernized societies—Portugal included—there is today a consensus about the positive value attributed to whales and their great ecological importance. But throughout history, whales have been portrayed as strange and contradictory marine animals. Sometimes considered monstrous and frightening, at other times as valuable or beautiful, whales figure in the imaginary, myths, practices, and uses of different human cultures across the globe and in different time periods. Even to this day, as they are largely seen as true conservation icons of the oceans, they still are paradoxical. The past and present of whales in Portugal and their relationship to human activities and perceptions are here presented.

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The sea monster chart, taken from Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina*, including different depictions of whale species from the North Atlantic. In spite of the incorrect and contradictory features represented, the inclusion of the whales' double blows in three "strange" marine animals may be indicative that these are baleen whales (unlike the odontoceti or toothed whales, the mysticeti, or baleen or "true" whales, have two blowholes).

Illustration by Sebastian Münster, ca. 1544. Click here to view Wikimedia source.

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There is a current consensus in Westernized societies about the great value and ecological importance of whales. Portugal is no exception, with various research and conservation programs focusing on this issue from the late twentieth century onwards. Yet, was there ever in history any animal more controversial than the whale? The largest animal ever known and still living on Earth is also a great paradox. Living in the ocean realm, the whale—like the sea itself—represents contradiction. It represents within itself ideas of proximity and distance, fear and attraction, and the imposing nature of shores and oceans relative to people. For centuries, the monstrous, large, frightening, stranded, captured, useful, valuable, strange, odd-looking, and beautiful whale caused both repulsion and attraction. Over time, humans scanned sea basins searching for whales and observed them through a wide ethnical, cultural, economic, social, and scientific lens, forming a kaleidoscopic image. They portrayed the whale as a divine work, a mythological beast, a symbolic mirror of human features and behaviors

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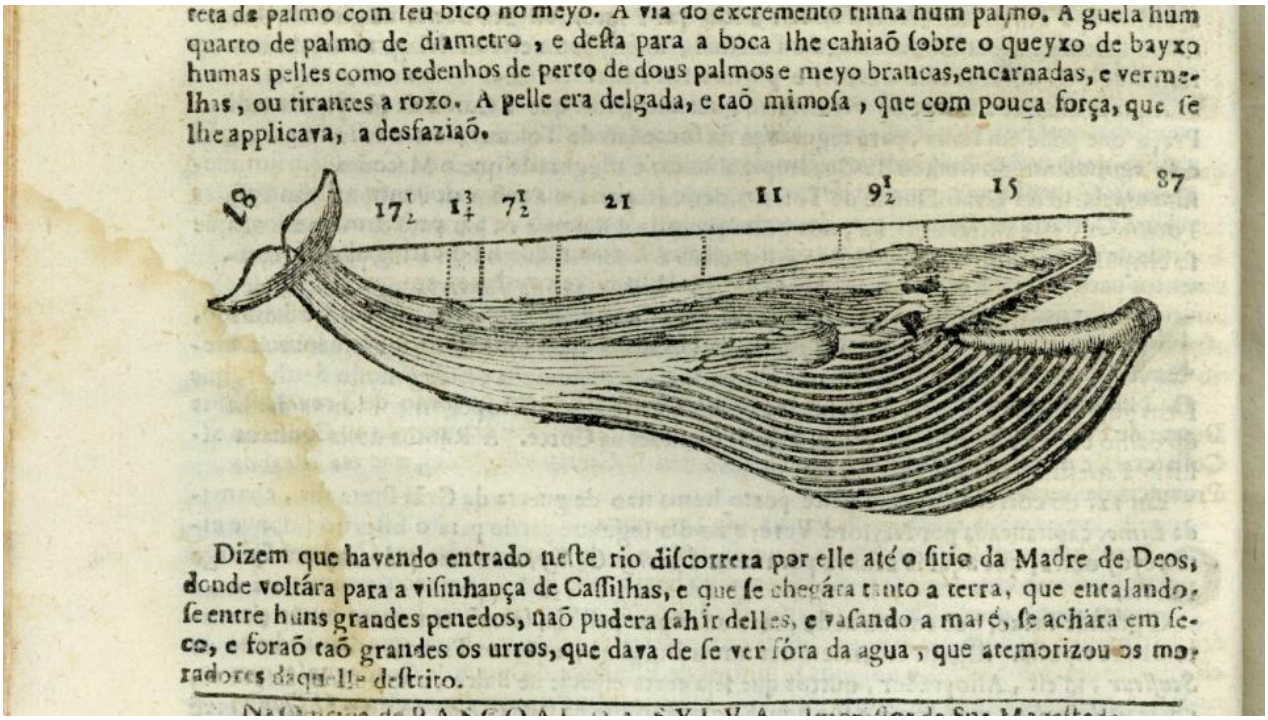
(mostly sins and errors), an omen of tragedies and catastrophes, and a monster made of fat and meat to control and tame.



In the newspaper *Gazeta de Lisboa Occidental*, 21 January 1723, the "large and strange fish" that entered the seaport at the Tagus estuary (Lisbon, Portugal) is described and depicted. This was a stranding of a common whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*), a frequent habitant of Portuguese shores at that time, a target of shore-based industrial whaling in the mid-twentieth century, and presently sighted only occasionally.

© Hemeroteca Municipal de Lisboa. Unknown illustrator. *Gazeta de Lisboa Occidental*, 21 January 1723.

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Whales stranded frequently on the shores of Portugal, reportedly since the Arabian period in the Iberian Peninsula. They were captured and used from very early on, and familiar to people closely connected to the sea and those interested in curiosities. Nevertheless, for most people whales were a strange novelty, an appealing natural event, worth seeing for oneself or experiencing through second-hand reports. In eighteenth-century Portugal, especially in the Tagus Estuary and on the Algarve's coasts, stranded whales offered room for speculation, poems, illustrations, translations, and news across Europe. However, when the same whales (or similar large cetaceans, as species identification is impossible in most sources) stranded in the Tagus River, just before 1531's Lisbon earthquake, they brought fear, horror, and awe. Similar responses were had when whales were sighted by navigators off African shores, prior to a storm or shipwreck, or in the open waters of *Mar Oceano* during early Portuguese exploration of new parts of the world. In early-modern Portuguese written sources on the Atlantic Ocean, whales emerged as "valuable/usable," "abundant," and "large." The "dangerous," "monstrous," "marvellous" whale was soon supplanted, becoming an undoubtedly valuable marine resource, fully controlled by the Portuguese Crown monopoly. Continuous shore-based whaling in Iberian Portuguese waters since the Middle Ages, and on the South Atlantic shores of former Portuguese colonial territories since the

early seventeenth century, has led to local extirpations of several whale species.



A captured adult male sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) is pulled, by a steam winch, up a ramp to the quartering platform of the EBAM whaling factory in Caniçal (Madeira, Portugal), mid-twentieth century. EBAM stands for Empresa Baleeira do Arquipélago da Madeira, Whaling Company of the Madeira Archipelago.

Photograph by Jacques Soulaire. © Museu da Baleia da Madeira.

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A blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) was sighted off Sagres (Portugal) during a whale-watching trip in October 2017, in what was considered a rare encounter on Portuguese continental shores and consequently made headlines across the media.

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In medieval Portugal, whaling was an important economic activity, boosting coastal centres and villages. It decayed after the mid-sixteenth century, with an eventual exhaustion of local populations. Back then, northern right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) were probably Portuguese whalers' main targets, similar to Basque whaling. Four centuries later, traditional and industrial whaling in twentieth century Portugal targeted mainly sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) in the Azores and common rorquals (*Balaenoptera physalus*) in mainland Portugal. Since around the eighteenth century, there have been no signs of right whales on the horizon except for two occasions—a sighting off Algarve in 1995 and off the Azores in 2009. Dolphins were occasionally captured in Portugal in the early-modern and modern periods, but apparently there was never a direct hunting effort. Captures only ceased following major efforts by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to ban whaling and the hunting of small cetaceans. Cetaceans became legally protected in 1981 in mainland Portugal and the Madeira Archipelago and in 1984 in the Azores. Currently, humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are occasionally spotted and make headlines in mainland Portugal, along with pods of common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) and coastal resident bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*). A sighting of a blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) in the Algarve and a pod of orcas (*Orcinus orca*) off Lisbon in 2017 made the news. Whales are rather common in Madeira and the Azores, turning these places into important observation hotspots for whales and dolphins. Conversely, in mainland Portugal occasional stranded and sighted whales easily catch the media's

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attention and the public's imagination, increasing interest in these animals and in marine conservation.



In a rare sighting, two male orcas (*Orcinus orca*) were seen off Costa da Caparica (the west coast of mainland Portugal), 2017. The animals were individually recognized through photo-identification, as a part of a larger collaborative study on cetaceans in the Iberian Peninsula.

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Nowadays, most people in Westernized countries feel empathy towards whales. This perception—of whales as beautiful ambassadors of the Ocean—is only recent. Although such perceptions vary across human societies, the whale is currently a marine conservation icon. Several species have been extirpated due to centuries-long exploitation, but following the mid-twentieth-century IWC ban on commercial whaling, the whales are slowly recovering, occupying former areas of distribution and becoming a flagship species for conservationists. Simultaneously, whale watching has emerged as a sustainable way of using the whale as a valuable economic resource and bringing it closer to people's lives. Portugal followed global trends on marine conservation, species protection, and whale watching, influencing the public perception of whales. In turn, scientific development emerged rather late, with the implementation of stranding networks in the 1970s and continuous research and teaching since the early 1990s. In Portugal, like most European countries, whales have turned from sea monsters into valuable, exploitable resources, and eventually, into global conservation icons due to their being in imminent danger of extinction. No doubt these giants of the sea still astonish generations of people.

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Further readings:

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Related links:

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- Brito, Cristina. *New Science from Old News*. https://issuu.com/escolademar/docs/new_science_from_old_news_bq
- Oceans Past Platform. *From Sea Monsters to Sea Darlings*. https://www.youtube.com/watch

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Cristina Brito has a PhD in History of the Portuguese Discoveries and Expansion, NOVA FCSH (2005–2010), with a background in Ethology, ISPA (1998–2000) and in Biology, FCUL (1993–1998). She was awarded a Research Contract by FCT (IF/00610/2015) at CHAM, NOVA FCSH to investigate "Cow-fish, Ngulu-Maza or Iguaragua? Local and Global Knowledge Production, Changing Perceptions and Practices on Marine Animals in the Atlantic, 1419–1758" (2016–2021). Cristina Brito has an interdisciplinary, comparative, and cross-cultural approach to her research. Her scientific interests include early modern marine environmental history, local and global perceptions and uses of the seas, and Atlantic and ocean history. She is the Executive Director of OPI, Oceans Past Initiative (2014–2018), a member of the Management and Synthesis Committees, and working group leader at OPP – Oceans Past Platform, EU COST Action (2014–2018). She also coordinates a thematic line of research at CHAM (the Sea), the UNESCO Chair on Oceans' Cultural Heritage, and the H2020 RISE project CONCHA (2018–2021).
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