

**CO-OPERATION IN TIMES OF WAR?**  
**BASQUE EXPERTISE AND DUTCH ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ARCTIC**  
**WHALING, 1612-1642**

**Recibido:** Noviembre 2013  
**Aceptado:** Enero 2014  
<https://doi.org/10.14603/1F2014>

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**¿COOPERACIÓN EN TIEMPOS DE GUERRA? EXPERTOS VASCOS Y EMPRENDEDORES**  
**HOLANDESES EN LA CAZA BALLENERA DEL ÁRTICO, 1612-1642**

**RESUMEN:** Durante las primeras décadas del siglo XVII, la joven República de Holanda experimentó un sorprendente *boom* económico. Debido al uso creciente de las conocidas rutas desde el Báltico al Mediterráneo se establecían compañías de comercio una tras otra. En este contexto, y a causa de una serie de factores demográficos y económicos, los holandeses comenzaron a realizar expediciones balleneras en 1612. El desarrollo de los marineros vascos de España y Francia resultó decisiva para el éxito o el fracaso de este negocio ballenero. Este trabajo describe el despliegue de los vascos por los holandeses.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Vascos, caza de ballenas, guerra, Spitsbergen, Compañía del Mar del Norte, Tweenhuysen.

**ABSTRACT:** During the first decades of the seventeenth century, the young Dutch Republic experienced a unprecedented economic boom. One trading company after another was established, while the usage of old familiar trade routes to the Baltic and the Mediterranean was intensified. Due to a number of demographic and economic incentives, Dutch started whaling expeditions in 1612. The deployment of Spanish and French Basque mariners turned out to be decisive for the success or failure of this whaling business. This article describes the deployment of Basques by the Dutch.

**KEY WORDS:** Basques, Whaling, Warfare, Spitsbergen, Noordse Compagnie, Tweenhuysen.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The early years of the seventeenth century are of great interest to many scholars who have a particular interest in the Dutch Republic. These first two decades or so seem to have provided *momentum* for a number of important developments to occur more or less simultaneously. As of the mid-sixteenth century, the Northern Provinces of the Low Countries were at war with the mighty Habsburg Empire ruled by King Philip II. This war is generally

referred to as the Eighty Years War or the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648). However, despite this war, the Dutch continued to conduct trade with Portugal and Spain. Numerous products from the New World, Asia or other areas in Europe were shipped in at the ports of Cadiz, Lisboa and other places and transported by Dutch ships to Amsterdam. From here, these commodities found their way all over Europe. Amidst these bewildering years —when war and trade went hand-in-hand— three major globally operating trading companies were established in a relatively short period. Two of these focused on trade on equatorial latitude, the third one conducted commercial enterprises in the high latitudes of the Arctic regions.

A strong desire to compete with Spaniards and Portuguese, and, consequently, challenge their monopoly in the spice trade brought several merchants in Amsterdam together in the 1590s. It was wartime, after all. Merchant Jan Hugen van Linschoten had accompanied the archbishop of Goa on his way from Portugal to Goa (India) in the 1580s. During the voyage, Van Linschoten kept notes about the route followed by the Portuguese. His manuscript, later published under the title *Itinerario*, enabled the Dutch to plan a voyage to the East Indies and have ships equipped for that purpose. Several so-called pre-companies were established in a number of towns in Holland and Zeeland. In March 1602, these companies merged into one trading company: the Dutch East India Company (VOC). At the conclusion of the Twelve Years Truce with Spain (1609-1621), while plans were made in the Dutch Republic to resume war and seize Spanish interests in Asia and the West Indies, initiatives to create settlements in the New World (New Netherland; New Amsterdam) resulted in the establishment of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in 1621<sup>1</sup>. By the establishment of these two trading companies, the Dutch managed to expand commercial activities and fight vested Spanish interests in these large areas.

The other trading company might be less well known. However, in its field it soon grew out to be a major global player. In February 1614, the States General granted a number of merchants the right to commence whaling activities under the protection of war ships, and also of a monopoly. This «Noordse» or «Groenlandse Compagnie» remained in existence until 1642. Thereafter, whaling was free to all. During the second half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, this movement of free enterprise resulted in a vivid maritime boost; after 1642, customarily over 200 whale ships and 8,000-10,000 crew left

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the works on the Dutch East and West India Companies are Gaastra 1994, with a new revised edition in 2002. Both others deal at length with both issues of commercial expansion and warfare against Spain. See for a clear overview of the intertwinement of these two phenomena also one of the most influential standard works on the rise of the Dutch Republic: Israel, 1997, in particular 233-594 for Dutch-Spanish relations.

Dutch ports annually for the Arctic waters near Jan Mayen Island, the Spitsbergen Archipelago and later —from 1720 onwards— the Davis Straits.

Whaling in particular is a maritime industry where the dangers of the hunt, and difficulties of the harpooning, killing, flensing and trying-out are manifest and omnipresent. Whalers require good instructions. During the nineteenth century, the Dutch hired American and British whalers as tutors. After the second World War, when various European nations resumed whaling to feed their peoples, Norwegians came to the aid of the Dutch who had not been involved in whaling as of 1871 —almost three generations had passed by then<sup>2</sup>!

For this article, written in the context of collaboration between The Netherlands and Spain during the early modern period, attention will be focused on the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup>. A number of questions will be addressed: why did the Dutch start hunting whales, why and how did whalers from the Basque provinces join these Dutch crews, and to what extent did the presence of these Basque whalers affect Dutch whaling<sup>4</sup>?

### **FRIENDS AND FOES BETWEEN THE FLOES: DUTCH, BASQUES AND ENGLISH WHALERS**

The Basques were the first to hunt whales commercially. They started their business sometime in the Early Middle Ages. Around 1150, whaling had spread to the Basque provinces of Spain. King Sancho the Wise of Navarra granted San Sebastian certain privileges. Among the lists of commodities for which merchants had to pay duties for warehousing «boquinas-barbas de ballenas» («plates of baleen») are listed. Later, whaling privileges spread to Santander (1190), Fuenterrabía (1203), Motrico and Guetaria (1204), Asturias (1232), Burgos (1237) and, finally, Galicia (1371).

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<sup>2</sup> See for more information regarding seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch whaling among other de Jong, 1972, 1978 and 1979. Nineteenth-century Dutch whaling is recently discussed at length in Schokkenbroek, 2008. Dutch post-war whaling is described in Bruijn and Schokkenbroek, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Those who wish to familiarize themselves with the contacts between Spain and the Netherlands in times of war and peace during the early modern era are strongly advised to read Parker's, 1990, and illuminating book where the author provides wonderful insights in various aspects of the relations between the two countries over a long and fascinating period.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that the term Basque whalers refers to whalers from Basque ports on either side of the Pyrenees. While their respective countries were at war during the sixteenth century, these whalers made non-aggression pacts between themselves. This should serve as a clear indication of their willingness to consider themselves not French or Spanish, but Basques. See Ciriquian-Gaiztarro, 1961: 220-225. Quoted in Vaughan, 1984: 123.

Centuries of expertise made them the world leading experts in the whaling trade. It is generally believed that Basque whaling shifted from the Basque shores, via Iceland around 1400 to Newfoundland after 1530<sup>5</sup>. However, after several prosperous and adventurous centuries, the Spanish Basque whaling trade started to decline in the 1580s. Ships started to return to port half empty. Also, with his demands on Basque participation in his Gran Armadas (1588/1596), King Philip II placed a heavy burden on experienced Basque sailors and, by consequence, on their whaling activities.

In the early years of the seventeenth century, both the English and the Dutch sought Basques as tutors «for [they] were then the only people who understand whaling» (a quote from explorer Jonas Poole). Indeed, in those years foreign whaling merchants were quick to acknowledge the value and importance of Basques amidst their crew. The English, whaling in Spitsbergen waters under the aegis of the Muscovy Company (established in 1577), have been the first to recruit Basques both from France and from Spain.

On 12 June 1611, Basque whalers from St. Jean de Luz in the service of the English sighted the first bowhead whale. There are also early examples of the reverse: equally eager to explore and exploit new whaling grounds off Spitsbergen, merchants from San Sebastian equipped a number of whaleships. In 1612, one of these ships under the command of Juan de Erauto had an English pilot by the name of Nicholas Woodcock. Thomas Edge, a contemporary whaler, is quoted by Samuel Purchas in his book on sea voyages when reporting that the Basque ship had ‘made a full voyage in Green-harbour’ (present day Gronfjorden on the southside of Isfjorden – Ice Sound)<sup>6</sup>. Optimistic reports about the abundance of whales delighted Don Alonso de Idiàquez, conde de Aramayona and Viceroy of Navarra, to such extent that he granted a patent for whaling off Spitsbergen<sup>7</sup>.

In these early years most waters were still under control of the English Muscovy Company. Several nations experienced this supremacy in 1613. That year, a large number of whaling expeditions from Holland, France and the Basque provinces set sail for the Arctic whaling grounds. Three or four ships left from St. Jean de Luz, no fewer than twelve were equipped by merchants from San Sebastian. In the Spring of 1613, attempts were made through the intermediary of Dutch merchants in France (Jean Macain and Samuel Georges in La Rochelle), and Spain (Gillis and Jehan Vermeulen in San Sebastian) to have Dutch master

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<sup>5</sup> See among other studies Tuck and Grenier, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Purchas, 1625: reprinted 1906; Hart, 1957: 34.

<sup>7</sup> See Senning, 1968: 239-260.

mariners be hired by these Basque merchants, and have them navigate the Spanish ships to Spitsbergen. Fearing that this expedition might not be limited to whaling alone, but eventually would be destined for Asia, the States General put this plan to a halt.

The absence of Dutch mariners did not effect Basque whaling initiatives. On 16 June 1613, the whaleship *Grace de Dieu* (about 750 tons), commanded by Mignet de Haristiguy and one of the French Basque ships (in this case from St. Jean de Luz), arrived into Schoonhoven (Recherchefjorden) on Spitsbergen. Here, the French Basques met with Dutchman Willem Cornelisz van Muyden. They agreed to hunt whales together and keep away from their harbour any other ships – truly the first sign of co-operation between Dutch and Basque whalers. However, as the English discovered these foreign vessels in what they considered to be their waters, collaboration was swiftly brought to an end. On 11 July, Van Muyden was detained, while De Haristiguy decided to hand over half of the oil he and his men had extracted.

Now that they had smelled blood the English continued to seize foreign vessels and crew: at least seven San Sebastian vessels were captured. Baleen, oil, and whaling gear and equipment were confiscated. The remaining five ships left the area in fear. Facing possible revenge in Spain, many English merchants fled from San Sebastian and settled in Bilbao. However, despite the tense situation on the whaling grounds, Basque merchants continued to dispatch their ships to the Arctic, at least in 1614 and 1615.

#### **VAN TWEENHUYSEN AND THE FIRST EXPEDITION**

At the end of the sixteenth century, rapid demographic growth combined with spectacular increase in economic and maritime activities led to a growing demand for oils. Until then, plant seeds had provided sufficient oil for industries like leather manufacturing, roperies, and ship building. Due to the rapidly increasing demand, new sources had to be discovered and exploited. Some suggested to cultivate more expensive seeds, others realised that whaling could solve the problem. Through Basque whaling, but also as a result of strandings, contemporaries were familiar with the fact that these mysterious yet wonderful creatures could provide huge amounts of oil once their blubber was being processed.

Merchant Lambert van Tweenhuysen is generally considered to have been the genius behind Dutch whaling<sup>8</sup>. It was Van Tweenhuysen who in 1612 put up the money to have Cornelis van Muyden and others set sail to the Arctic to search for Greenland Right Whales, hunt them, kill them and process them —initially for the domestic market. As mentioned, a few years earlier the English under the aegis of the Muscovy Company had started their whaling activities in the coastal waters of Spitsbergen. Dutch presence near Spitsbergen raised English eyebrows —and conflicts. Ships were taken, crew imprisoned, and cargoes discharged.

The second expedition in 1613 was better prepared, as whale ships were accompanied by men-of-war. More importantly, though, was the impressive network Van Tweenhuysen had managed to build up in France over the years: one of his cousins, Jan van Breda, represented him as an agent in important French maritime centres like Caen, Rouen, La Rochelle, Bordeaux and Bayonne. Van Breda and others had managed to recruit a dozen of well experienced whalers from St. Jean de Luz. These twelve French Basque whalers were divided over two Dutch ships. Five of them were deployed on the *Fortuyn*, with a total crew of 25 under command of master Jan Jacobsen Boots of Medemblik. Of a total crew of 36 hands on *Neptunus*, no less than seven came from the French Basque provinces. These twelve Basques held high places, as there were three harpooners, three boat steerers, and six to flens the whales and cook the blubber.

### CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEPLOYMENT OF BASQUES

Hiring Basque whalers had short term and long term consequences. Initially, Dutch whaling entrepreneurs recruited the Basques for the more important jobs: as harpooners, boatsteerers, flensers, cooks, and baleen cutters. Thanks to Hessel Gerritsz, we are informed about functions and origins of the first twelve Basques in Dutch service: three harpooners, three boatsteerers and six cooks and cutters, all from St. Jean de Luz. These whaling experts

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<sup>8</sup> Lambert van Tweenhuysen (1564-1625) was a prominent Lutheran Amsterdam merchant. He was involved not only in organizing the very first Dutch walrus- and whale-hunting expedition. In 1614, he played a crucial role in the establishment of both the Noordse Compagnie and the Nieuw-Nederland Compagnie. His trade in textiles, linseed, soap, wine, wood, salt, furs, spices and pearls (to name a few commodities) touched on Archangel and the Baltic, via Spitsbergen to the Mediterranean and —later— to the New World. For information regarding Van Tweenhuysen's network in France, see von Mühlen: 30.

from abroad were very expensive<sup>9</sup>. In his article on Basque involvement in Dutch whaling, Louwrens Hacquebord quotes figures about payments: in 1617, while serving the Noordse Compagnie, chamber Enkhuizen, four whalers from St. Jean de Luz earned an astounding fl 450 as *pot du vin* (money in hand) and made fl 38 per killed whale<sup>10</sup>. One of these four crew, Joannes Deschevery, also participated in two consecutive expeditions (in 1618 and 1619)<sup>11</sup>. Contracts in notary records in the cities of Hoorn and Delft indicate that the various chambers of the Noordse Compagnie all standardised the conditions under which Basques were hired.

Due to the great expenses connected with deployment of the foreign experts, Dutch merchants were adamant to have the Basques train Dutch whalers in how to harpoon the whale or steer the boat. A contract dated 1616 stipulates that every fifth boat should have an all Dutch crew. The Chamber Rotterdam also negotiated that the Basques should pay fines in case they let go of a whale killed or harpooned by a Dutchman. Does this indicate a fear of rivalry? According to Hacquebord, no evidence of any Basque attempts to compete with the Dutch have been found in the archival and notary sources. On the contrary; the mere fact that many a Basque whaler has been deployed by more than one chamber suggests a co-operative attitude on their part - or at least their willingness to serve various «masters».

Meanwhile, Basques and Dutch were involved in expanding skills. In 1617, the Noordse Compagnie had its first Dutch harpooner Jan Cornelisz van Abbekerk (nick-named den Duvel van Hoorn, «the Devil of Hoorn»). Only thirteen years later, in 1630, no fewer than about half of all whale boats deployed by the Compagnie had an all Dutch crew. Around the same time, larger numbers of Dutch harpooners are being quoted (among other sources in the journals of Michiel Adriaansz de Ruyter who went whaling in 1633 and 1635).

Major differences in payment between Basques and Dutch —so prominent in the early years of their deployment— gradually disappeared. Dutch officers enjoyed equally high pay. After the discontinuation of the Noordse Compagnie, Basque involvement in Dutch whaling seems to have dwindled. The last Basque whalers on board Dutch whaleships are reported around 1670. However, Spanish Basques continued to be dispatched to Terranova (Greenland and Labrador). Various voyages are documented for the 1620s and 1630s. In 1681, the port of Pasajes alone sent no fewer than twelve ships hither. Spanish Basque whaling came to an end

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<sup>9</sup> Hessel Gerritsz, *Beschrijvinghe van der Samoyeden landt en Histoire du pays nommé Spitsberghe*, published by L'Honoré Naber, 1924: 79-103; see especially 86.

<sup>10</sup> In comparison: a ordinary sailor on board a much larger Dutch Eastindiaman received a monthly payment of fl. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Kernkamp, 1898: 366-367. Quoted in Hacquebord, 2001: 42.

in 1697, when they were prevented from sending expeditions to Terranova. The Treaty of Utrecht, concluded after the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, finally expelled these whalers from the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

## **CO-OPERATION?**

What do we know about the extent of co-operation between Basques and Dutch? Firstly, religious differences between Catholics and Protestants (who, by the way, were fighting a Catholic king during the years of collaboration on the whaling grounds!) had to be acknowledged, and if necessary, overcome. Secondly, the foreigners initially earned more money, and possibly consequently also more prestige, than their Dutch colleagues. The Compagnie was fairly quick to control «social damage» by straightening out differences. We do not know how the whalers communicated. However, we have seen that the Basques managed to train Dutch mariners.

So far, we know of only one source in the municipal archives in Amsterdam which implicitly seems to indicate that either conflicts had arisen in the past, or should be prevented by implementing new rules: in 1635, it was announced through notary records that the crew of a whaleship had to treat Basque whalers with respect, and obey them unconditionally during the hunt and processing of the whales<sup>12</sup>.

Interestingly, that same year animosities between France and Spain came to the surface. War broke out, which prevented French and Spanish Basques from joining Dutch crew on their voyages to the northern waters. During this war, the Spaniards destroyed fourteen French whale ships in the port of St. Jean-de-Luz.

Moreover, Basque whalers seem to have excluded themselves occasionally from the Dutch. On archaeological sites in the Arctic where Dutch whaling stations had been active, pottery with very strong Basque connections have been found. In other words: the foreign whaling experts had decided to stick to the usage of their own gear. Due to these finds, Hacquebord and others have their doubts about the level of assimilation between the two nationalities.

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<sup>12</sup> Municipal Archives Amsterdam (GAA), Notary Archives 837b/171-177. Quoted by Hacquebord, 2001: 45.



## CONCLUSION

The English were the first to acknowledge the crucial importance of deploying whalers from the Basque provinces in Northern Spain and Southern France. The Basques were by far the most experienced sailors in this maritime profession. The Dutch were quick in following the English example. In 1613, during the second whaling expedition under Dutch flag, whalers from the French Basque territory were hired as harpooners. Almost no instances of conflicts between Basques and Dutch are known, apart from the very first years when Basques were also deployed by English, and had to fight the Dutch —*no lens volens*. Vice versa, the Dutch had to fight some Basque whalers who had signed up for a Danish expedition to Spitsbergen in 1623.

Differences in remuneration were straightened out by the Dutch Noordse Compagnie. Basques did well in training Dutch how to throw harpoons, steer boats and flens whales. Despite the fact that the French and Spanish experts clung to their own religion, food, language, and clothing, Dutch whaling has undoubtedly benefitted from Basque expertise.

In 1642, the States General did not prolong the monopoly of the Noordse Compagnie. After that year, many dozens of ships left Dutch harbours and set sail to the whaling grounds —with almost exclusively Dutch crew. In other words, already one generation after the first whaling expedition Dutch whalers felt confident enough to chase the monster of the deep themselves – thanks to their Basque instructors<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> In his article on early Dutch whaling, Louwrens Hacquebord reveals the discovery of two notarial acts, written by Rotterdam-based notary Mustelius in April 1658. In these documents, references are found of Dutch whalers cooking blubber on land or *on ship*. Knowing that Basque whalers were the first to introduce this concept of trying out whale blubber on board, it is tempting to assume that they have had their influence in this technical development as well. However, this phenomenon requires additional research – as does Basque presence on Dutch whalerships and in Dutch ports in general. Municipal Archives Rotterdam (GAR), Notary archives 509/207, 3 April 1658, and GAR 509/249, 30 April 1658. See Hacquebord, 1984: 146.

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