

THE SPANISH PROVINCE OF TERRANOVA¹

by

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To any careful reader of Champlain it is unlikely to seem surprising that all precise references to Basque whaling stations in Canada, recently found in 16th century Spanish documents, show that these ports were located along the southern coast of Labrador, particularly along the Strait of Belle Isle. To Spanish historians, however, this fact may come as a surprise since until now Spanish history books have made the assumption that the main bulk of Spanish 'Terranova' fishing endeavours were off the south, east and west coasts of Newfoundland. Spanish cod-fishers did indeed participate in the international fisheries based on Newfoundland, but according to the documents, the whalers did not.

There has been a plethora of published work with rather general statements about Terranova, originating very often in late 18th and early 19th century transcripts in the Vargas Ponce collections in Madrid,² but the purpose of this article is to show the entirely new type of information which is coming to light as a result of research done for the Public Archives of Canada in the archives of northern Spain, and to give some indication of the location of this information.

¹The dates 1545-1585 might be placed after this title, but I hesitate to do so until more research has been undertaken. For practical purposes, the Spanish whaling in Terranova may be considered to have begun not much before the 1540's and to have been in decline by the 1580's, although a few ships continued to go out to the Grand Bay into the 1600's.

²This is not intended to deprecate the value of the collection, but it seems obvious that when there is such a mass of original documentation available to researchers the Vargas Ponce transcripts should be used as a supplement to but not a substitute for the original documents. The collection is in two parts, housed separately in the Biblioteca de la Marina and the Real Academia.

During the past year, this research has produced some interesting results, not only because of the earliest Spanish references to date found for the Labrador whaling stations, but also because it has shown in a very definite way that Basque exploitation of Canadian natural resources had a profound impact on the development of the Basque provinces.³ Although Basques had been renowned sailors for at least three centuries before the Cabot voyages, the sudden increase in output of Spanish-Basque shipbuilding and allied industries towards the middle of the 16th century is in no small part due to the number of men who wished to send ships to the New Found Lands. Many of these ships were later sold in Seville or came to grief during the disastrous wars in Flanders, but their maiden voyages were directed with amazing frequency towards 'las partes de Tierra nueva', later termed 'la provincia de Terranova'.

A similar research project undertaken by Mlle Raymonde Litalien on behalf of the Public Archives of Canada in southwestern France is bringing to light large quantities of unpublished source material which will eventually provide a fascinating basis for comparative study of the twin economies on either side of the Pyrenees and their relationship to Canada. At the present time it may be said that the basic distinction between the French and Spanish Basques in their approach to the New Lands appears to lie in the fact that French Basques had an adequate supply of local salt⁴ while Spanish Basques had

³ Whale oil during the third quarter of the 16th century was the third most important export of the Cantabrian coast, after wool and iron products. The Cantabrian fleet of vessels over 200 tons (i.e. large ships) was apparently less than 50 ships, constantly being sold in Seville and replaced by new ships built in the provinces of Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa. The whole West Indian fleet was not more than 70-80 ships (according to Ortiz and Vicens Vives). Antonio Dominguez Ortiz - Historia de España Alfaguam. To have an average of 20 large ships going yearly to Terranova during this period is highly significant.

⁴ A few of the insurance policies in the Archivo del Consulado de Burgos (hereinafter, ACB) indicate that some French ships went down to Lisbon for salt, but these seem to have been a minority. A great many Spanish charter agreements and insurance policies stipulated that salt and other supplies were to be picked up in La Rochelle. Several documents recording the importation of French salt have been located. Prof. David B. Quinn has identified one source of salt, 'the bay ... that is in Brittany' as Bourgneuf (ACB, Reg. 99, fol. 298b - 1570).

practically no local salt but an abundant supply of iron and iron products. For codfishing salt was essential in the same way that metal products such as cauldrons, barrel hoops, harpoons, lances, knives, large hooks and other specialized equipment were essential for whaling. French salt was used on Spanish codfishing vessels, and probably the French Basques used some Spanish implements, but there is no doubt that whaling was the most important of the fishing industries for the Spanish Basques, while codfishing was more important for 16th century French Basques (although the latter seem to have done more whaling in the 17th century).⁵

Distinctions between Whaling and Codfishing Records

In several recent books there has been a tendency to lump information about codfishing and whaling together, as if they had been a joint enterprise, whereas in reality there are very few Spanish documents in which evidence for such joint expeditions can be found. The whole pattern of codfishing voyages was quite distinct from that of the whalers. Codfishing ships usually left Spain much earlier in the year, as they normally had to pick up salt on their outward voyage, in La Rochelle, Lisbon, Setubal or Seville⁶, while the whaling vessels left, fully equipped, often as late as July, and generally did not return from their Labrador ports until just before Christmas. Some documents specify repayment on codfishing loans as early as August, but the accounts for whaling voyages were usually settled in January or February of the following year. The documents make it quite clear that whaling was still in progress in the Labrador ports in

⁵ Whaling had been part of the Basque tradition for at least four and a half centuries before Terranova whaling became popular. Basques had been going along the Cantabrian coast to Galicia and Asturias for winter whaling expeditions, which continued even during the heyday of the Terranova whaling, but in much smaller ships.

⁶ Iron products were carried by a very large number of Spanish Basque vessels going down to Lisbon or Seville. Those going south during the winter or early spring frequently went on to 'Terranova' directly after buying salt. In northern Spain there is an abundance of documentation in evidence of this triangular trade. More may be found in the notarial archives (Protocolos) of Seville and in Portugal when these are investigated.

November, and occasionally ships were iced in.

Another vital distinction between codfishing and whaling was that much less money was needed for outfitting an ordinary codfishing vessel, as can be seen, for example, in the Burgos insurance policies. The whaling policies can nearly always be distinguished at a glance from codfishing policies by the large difference in the amounts insured and the higher percentage charged for insurance on whaling expeditions.⁷ Whaling ships - galleons - were nearly always larger and better equipped than the codfishing vessels. As many as 120 men went aboard the whalers⁸ - men who often came from widely dispersed areas for the same reason that the capital for a whaling voyage never came from one town: neither sufficient money nor sufficient men were available for these voyages in any one place. Yet though the complications of outfitting a whaling vessel were quite considerable, the rewards were enormous. Well over 1000 barrels of whale oil were brought back on each of the larger ships, a cargo worth a minimum of 6000 ducats, depending upon whether the oil was sold locally or in Flanders, France or England. Spanish codfishing voyages made a profit too, but a profit that was not remotely in the same category, and the cod was nearly all for the home market.

Whether or not a few codfishing vessels patronised the Labrador coast as well as southern Newfoundland in the 16th century is still a moot point. Although the only definite locations for codfishing found this year have been in Placentia⁹ and Trepassey¹⁰ bays, it is not unlikely

⁷ An example of the difference in premiums charged is an insurance policy of 1570 for a ship from Laredo (ACB, Reg. 98, fol.138v): the charge was 14% if the ship returned with whale oil but only 11% if with cod. Policies for whalers were often at 15% in the 1570's for the complete voyage: 'yda, estada e buelta'.

⁸ A few references have been found to larger crews, but only in cases of voyages with a piratical intent.

⁹ Parish archives of Pasajes de San Juan, Book I (the 'Difuntos' are not indexed but appear on folios 115-142). The most interesting item appears on f. 120: 14 August 1585 - from Plazencia Bay had come news of the death of Gracian de Caselis, 'vecino de este lugar, aviendo en la dicha Placencia recibido los sacramentos' - which presupposes that a priest was there at the time.

¹⁰ Parish archives of Lezo, 'Provision para recibir informacion sobre los milagros del Santo Crucifixio de Lezo' (written in San Sebastian in 1605 but recopied in 1788 - parts of the 95-page manuscript have been filmed). Several witnesses testified to miraculous aid near Trepassey Bay about 1570.

that some codfishing also took place in the Labrador whaling ports. The one point that is most undoubtedly clear is that whenever definite locations are mentioned in a whaling document, they are always in 'la Granbaya', and nearly always one of four ports: Puerto de los Hornos¹¹, Butus¹², Chateo¹³, or Puerto Nuevo¹⁴.

Types of Documentation

The first unequivocal references so far found to whaling in Labrador are in the records of hearings in 1554 concerning the ships BARBARA and MARIA, from the Guipuzcoan port of Orio, which were captured with two ships from Pasajes by 13 French Basque ships from St. Jean de Luz, Cap Breton and Biarritz.¹⁵ The four Spanish ships were whaling in Puerto de los Hornos when they were attacked 'by sea and by land', from Butus and seized, the odds being overwhelming. The crews were held prisoner at Butus for a time, then shipped back to Spain, all crowded into the MARIA. The story has many points which require clarification, but one thing is obvious from other documents of 1554: the Spanish Basques were in a weak position that summer in Terranova, as several Basque ships had been placed under embargo to ensure transport for Prince Philip

¹¹ Modern East St. Modeste - with two islands off the coast when approaching the harbor, the entrance tallies with the description, in Hoyarzabal's 1579 routier, of Furx, which is Labeeta in the 1677 Basque version by Pierre Detcheverry Dorre, and Les Fours on Detcheverry's 1689 map. All the names signify ovens.

¹² Variouslly called Buetes, Bultus, Buitres and Boytus. It is not on Detcheverry's map but appears in both the routiers. Two islands are mentioned in the harbor of Butus, which corresponds with Red Bay on modern maps. Ramos de Borda's ship the SAN JUAN was sunk in this harbor in 1565 (Protocolos de Guipuzcoa, Onate - hereinafter PG - Partido de San Sebastian, no. 1792, Orio, f. 48-49).

¹³ Chateo or Xateo is easily identifiable as Chateau Bay in both the routiers and on all maps.

¹⁴ St. Peter's Bay is the equivalent of Puerto Nuevo - P. Neuf - on Detcheverry's map, but there is no mention of this port in either of the routiers.

¹⁵ PG, Partido de San Sebastian, no. 1781, Orio, ff 116-122v, 8 and 9 October 1554.

his troops and retinue, to England for his marriage to Mary Tudor in July.¹⁶ In previous years a great many documents record Spanish ships being armed for piracy against the French, so perhaps it was only fair that the French had a chance to get their own back.

Until Mary's death in 1558 and Philip's subsequent marriage to Elisabeth de Valois, there were constant skirmishings and acts of piracy between Basques from both sides of the border, but an underlying element of economic interdependence is also apparent in many of the notarial documents in the *Protocolos of Guipuzcoa*. Salt, wheat and bacon were only a few of the items to come along the coast from France to help with the outfitting of Spanish ships, while later on it can be seen in the Burgos insurance policies that French coastal vessels were carrying Terranova whale oil from Spanish ports up to Bordeaux and Rouen. Frequently a good proportion of the capital invested in French Basque ships came from San Sebastian, Bilbao, Pamplona and other northern Spanish towns, and, until the last quarter of the century, Spanish ships attracted many French Basques as crewmen. By 1580 the trend seems to have been reversed. As more and more ships were pressed into King Philip's service for his English and Portuguese ventures, Spanish Basques began to go out in French ships to Terranova.

During the 1560's, while Elisabeth de Valois shared the Spanish throne, a period of peace and great prosperity appears to have been enjoyed by both French and Spanish Basques in Canada. It is curious but possibly quite logical that about 1560 the expression 'la Provincia de Terranova' begins to displace 'las partes de Tierra nueva' in the documents, as if the captains of the galleons considered themselves to be lords of this new land. Indeed, it is hardly to be wondered at that these men with their summer establishments in Labrador were beginning to feel they owned the country. Not only did they build cabins and ovens, and leave their shallows over the winter to use again the following season, but they also took priests along. There are three separate references to priests on whaling voyages between 1549 and 1566, and one of them acted for the officers and crew

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Ibid., ff 14-15, 15 and 19 January 1554: copy of the royal decree sent to Juan Martinez de Recalde, 'General y Proveedor de sus Magestades en su costa de la mar', for an embargo on all ships over 100 tons. The MARIA and the BARBARA were on the list as embargoed, but did not go to England.

of several ships in the summer of 1551.¹⁷

Nearly all of the most detailed information about this activity emerges as a result of lawsuits. Evidence for reconstruction of the Spanish contribution to 16th century Canadian history lies mainly in eye-witness accounts of some disaster which occurred in Terranova, although considerable supporting evidence can be found in contracts for chartering and outfitting of ships, loans, receipts, powers of attorney, last wills and testaments, and other legal acts, writs or judicial decrees. Differences often arose because of damages to or loss of ships. The differences were sometimes settled amicably, as between the outfitters of LA MADALENA and the owners, Jacobe de Ybaseta of Motrico and Martin Lopez de Ysasi of Eibar, in February 1562, after the ship had suffered heavy damage while returning from a 1561 voyage to 'las partes de la gran baya'.¹⁸ More frequently, however, there were protracted lawsuits that only terminated after the litigants were dead and the heirs and descendants were worn down with legal expenses.

A pair of legal hearings held at Burgos before the Prior and Consuls of the Consulado, now filed in the Real Chancilleria de Valladolid¹⁹, provide invaluable lists of provisions and equipment for two Labrador voyages of 1566. A bird's eye-view of the type of cross-references which turn up for a voyage can be obtained from a look at documents connected with the voyage of NUESTRA SENORA DE GUADALUPE, the ship which figured in the first of these hearings. The registration of this galleon is mentioned by Teofilo Guiard both in his Historia del Consulado y Casa de Contratacion de la Villa de Bilbao²⁰ and in La Industria Naval Vizcaina²¹. During a routine check through the original documents in the Municipal Archives of Bilbao, trying to correct various misprints related to ship tonnages in the aforementioned books, the first of a series of documents for the GUADALUPE turned up among a few damaged pages bound into a large

¹⁷ Ibid, no.1780, Orio, ff 27-27v, 21 March 1552 - the mother of Don Domingo de Oribar filed a claim to recover his share of the voyage profits plus the contributions for officers and crew due to him as a priest.

¹⁸ PG, Partido de Vergara, no.2578, Motrico, ff 14-14v of the 4th part of 1562.

¹⁹ Real Chancilleria de Valladolid (judicial archives of the Chancilleria), Masas 250, cajon 1043.

²⁰ Bilbao, 1913: facsimile reproduction, 1972, by La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, vol. 1 - p. 154.

²¹ 2nd edition, Bilbao, 1968, Biblioteca Vascongada Villar, p. 95.

register titled 'Pleitos y Autos, Registro No. 5'.²² In the original the ship is registered as 425 tons, not 485 as stated in the La Industria Noval Vizcaina, her master and part owner is given as Martin de Sertucha,²³ and the galleon is described as having left on a whaling voyage for the Province of Terranova on the date of registration, 26 April 1566. This last proved untrue, as the ship was held up for a considerable time by the royal embargo of that year.

By itself, the registration of the GUADALUPE in Bilbao is not very enlightening. But, fortunately for posterity if not for the ship and crew, the GUADALUPE was very nearly iced in at St. Peter's Bay - Puerto Nuevo - during a sudden onset of winter storms in November 1566. As a result of being unable to complete her potential cargo of 1700 barrels of whale oil and of having to leave barrels, shallops, anchors and other items on shore when the decision was made to cut the cables and get free of the ice, the captain, Miguel de Cerain, became involved in legal difficulties with Martin de Sertucha and, separately, with the Burgos merchants who had underwritten the insurance on the voyage. Thanks to this misfortune a great deal of sworn evidence was collected, which together with the second hearing about a similar event at Chateo harbour, experienced by captain Ynigo de Ybartola, in the same year, has enormously added to our understanding of the nature of the life led by these Basques in Labrador, summer after summer and autumn after autumn. The advantages of staying on late in the season must have outweighed the disadvantages, possibly because the whales migrated through the straits late in the autumn. It is to be hoped that biological research may clarify this point.

Although Miguel de Cerain did not receive all the compensation he would have liked, or that his list of damages amounted to, he did eventually receive, 9 April 1568, 2-1/3 per cent of the 1000 ducats²⁴ for which his outfitting had been insured by the Burgos merchants. Some of his claims were considered impertinent, probably because he included in the total the losses he had incurred on land. The Burgos policies were for marine insurance, (apart from a few life insurance policies) so Cerain was only reimbursed for the loss and damage

²² In 1973 there was no catalogue available for either the Bilbao Consulado Archives or the Municipal Archives. Dr. Manuel Basas Fernandez, archivist of both collections, has published works on the Burgos merchant families and the Burgos Consulado (merchant guild).

²³ This is Guiard's spelling for Sertucha - the documents give many others.

²⁴ A.C.B. Reg.35, fol 42v.

the ship had suffered at sea, during a violent tempest on the eve of St. Nicholas, when he lost his rudder and had to put in to Lisbon for repairs. Whether or not he ever went back to St. Peter's Bay (Puerto Nuevo) to recover all his lost property we may never find out - unless some careful archaeologist investigating the debris of several generations of whalers turns up 6000 tiles. These tiles were rather surprisingly among the items claimed by Cerain as having been left on land, together with more than 400 barrels and 10 shallops. It is known that he went back to Terranova several times between 1566 and 1573, the year in which he was lost in the SAN PEDRO, and it is not likely he would have forgotten to seek out his barrels and shallops. But it is doubtful that he would have sought avidly for the tiles, (apparently carried over for roofing or repair of cabins)²⁵ simply in order to carry them home again. It is interesting to note that while he had enough nerve to claim the tiles, he did not mention in his claim some 20 barrels of earth or clay brought out for the construction of ovens²⁶ - the underwriters might have considered his attitude not merely impertinent, but flippant had he done so.

Miguel de Cerain may have been unable to sign his name, but he had considerable business acumen. Two contracts stand out among the documents for this 1566 voyage as demonstrating his ability. They are to be found at Onate in the notarial archives (Protocolos) of Guipuzcoa. The 1567 files for Deva have been lost, but the register for Motrico contains two entries for 23 August 1567.²⁷ In one, Juan de Ibiri and Pedro de Corostola are informed that their loan to Cerain would be repaid at the value of 9 instead of 12 barrels of whale oil, as originally agreed, and in the other Dona Maria Sebastian de Aycarnaçabal is informed she would receive the value of 10 instead of 15 barrels. The reason given for the change was that less oil than expected had been brought back, the ship had suffered damage and loss of equipment, and costly pilgrimages had been engaged in as thank-offerings for safe deliverance. Despite misfortune, the voyage had some success: just under a thousand barrels of oil, which if sold at the rate mentioned in the two contracts, 8 ducats, would have grossed nearly 8000 ducats. Even at 6 ducats the

²⁵ PG, Partido de Azpeitia, no. 2990, Zarauz, ff 39-41v - charter agreement for the ship of Francisco de Elorriaga, 3 February 1563.

²⁶ For further details about these building materials, see the article by S. Barkham in the Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 93-94.

²⁷ PG, Partido de Azpeitia, no. 2580, Motrico, ff 3-3v of 1567.

barrel, the cargo would have comfortably covered outfitting, expenses and damages.

Due to the very large amounts of capital involved in these whaling voyages, the documentary sources are widely spread. Sources for Cerain's ventures have been found in five archives, and he is only one of several hundred men known to have engaged in Terranova whaling between 1547 and 1580. There is much yet to be investigated before the picture begins to come clear.

Despite the difficulties and tragedies, including at least one disastrous wintering of several ships in Butus and Chateo and other Labrador ports, the whaling expeditions were part of the golden era of 16th century Basque prosperity. During the unhappy last decades of the century, the Spanish Basques looked back on former glory and tried to find remedies for economic problems, but although, occasionally, Spanish ships still went to Labrador, the days of the great whalers were over.

Exploitation of whales is no longer considered laudable, but massive modern destruction by floating whale factories can hardly be compared to 16th century Basque methods. Then, the fight was a little more even between man and whale, as Champlain's description of Basque whaling makes clear. Basque success did not depend on "coups de canons" but on skillful harpooning from small boats, and a system of trained watchers who stood on high points of land and signalled to the men below when whales were sighted. The galleons were simply used as depots and anchored in safe ports.

The southern shore of Labrador, where the strait and the northeast corner of the Gulf were relatively narrow, was ideal for this type of whaling, and this was the area called the Grand Bay which Champlain names with precision as the place "où les Basques vont faire la pesche des balaines". Where the Grand Bay ended and the strait or "Northern passage" began varied with each cartographer, but from a documental point of view the "Northern passage" was part of the Grand Bay. Further research may well reveal when the Basques started going up the St. Lawrence, and whether, possibly, only French Basques went up the river to the other Portneuf and the Saguenay area.

Brest is the only Grand Bay port found on a Spanish document²⁸ actually identified on Champlain's maps. However, this is not surprising as Labrador was not an area where Champlain could claim to be most expert; nor, of course, can the cabins drawn on his map be taken

²⁸ P.G. Partido de S.S. #1785 (orio) f.192, 5 Nov.1561
(but for an event which occurred 10 years previously).

as seriously indicating permanent settlement of either Basques or Eskimos. Nevertheless, perhaps those cabins can serve as a reminder to both historians and archaeologists that there were in fact several well-populated whaling stations along the Labrador coast in the 1500s, and in the abundant archives of northern Spain can be found every conceivable type of detailed information about the men and ships who came to this coast year after year.

Note - A short film of selections from the Protocolos of Guipuzcoa and the Lezo MS mentioned above has been received at the PAC (a test run, not the formal commencement of filming). It is hoped that filming could be undertaken within the next year, as investigation has progressed very well and a calendar of identified sources at Burgos and Onate has been prepared as a preliminary step.