

Whaling in Greenland : Yesterday and Today

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Whaling and use of whale products have a history extending 4000 years or more into the past. Paleo-environmental DNA, a relatively new analytic tool to reconstruct past subsistence activities, alludes to the possibility of active whaling, that is the capture of live whales in the ocean, in the 3rd millennium BC Greenland. Based on data from 18th century ethnographies, I attempt to reconstruct whaling methods (techniques) of that period. Whale meat is said to be even today an important food source. While not denying this postulation, I re-examine this postulation through an analysis of sales records of whale products circulating in markets. Whales and whaling have, and still constitute one foundation of Greenlander (Kalaallit) ethnic identity. However, I was not able to confirm any contemporary ceremonial activity associated with either whales per se, nor whale products as was well documented in ethnographies up until the early 20th century. I discuss this paradox.