

RESEARCH NOTE

Basques? Beothuk? Innu? Inuit? or St. Lawrence Iroquoians? The Whalers on the 1546 Desceliers Map, Seen through the Eyes of Different Beholders

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THE PIERRE DESCELIERS *mappemonde* of 1546 is a large, beautifully coloured world map, decorated with many drawings of Native people as well as Europeans, in different parts of the world.¹ One of these scenes depicts whale hunting between northern Newfoundland and southern Labrador, near the eastern entrance to the Strait of Belle Isle (Plate 1). This decorative sketch shows five persons in a small boat harpooning a large cetacean.² These whalers have been taken by some scholars to be Basques, by others Beothuk, or Inuit or even St. Lawrence Iroquoians.³ The fact that various authorities arrive at four different ethnic identifications is intriguing. This paper provides a detailed description of Desceliers' whaling scene, reviews the context in which hypotheses about it were formulated, and re-evaluates these interpretations.

Although the original Desceliers *mappemonde* is brightly coloured, reproductions of it have been most commonly printed in black and white. The resulting image effectively obscures a variety of details, and thereby reduces the reliability of such photographs for specialized studies. A redrawn and hand-painted copy, in the

form of lithographic facsimile (Plate 2), was published by Jomard (1842-1862). This is the only version of the map available at the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. Some researchers have used it for colour illustrations, because it is easy to access.⁴ Use of the Jomard copy introduces a complication, however: the possibility of copying errors or intentional modifications. Parts of the original 1546 map are faded and it exhibits many discoloured blotches. To make up for this, the Jomard copyist doctored his reproduction in a number of ways, for instance by defining figures more sharply with black outlines, adding details, changing facial features, and introducing certain changes to clothing and colour. The Jomard facsimile therefore needs to be closely compared with the original 1546 map to determine whether any differences exist in the whale hunting scene which might affect the question of cultural identification.

The authenticity of the illustrations on the original map is itself conditioned by several factors. First, the restricted scale of the drawings does not favour accuracy where minute detail is concerned. For instance, the leather thong (*estrobu* or *estrepu*) by which the steering oar at the rear of a Basque whale-boat would have been attached to the gunwale is not shown, nor the tholes or wooden pegs (*toletak*) set upright in blocks of wood (*brogak*) within the gunwales to serve as fulcrums for the oars.⁵ Second, neither Desceliers nor any assistants would likely have much first-hand knowledge of the foreign people, animals, objects and activities which they wanted to depict. There is no evidence that Desceliers ever visited eastern Canada, as did certain other French priests, as naval chaplains.⁶ As the King's hydrographer, he would have travelled occasionally to Paris and to French ports, where he would have had a chance to see and even meet people from foreign lands.⁷ He may well have met mariners who had been to the New World — but, to the extent that he relied on travelers' tales (or other illustrations), any lack of detail was an invitation to embellishment or recourse to artistic licence. In the end, Desceliers could only draw approximations of what he was trying to depict. Given these limitations, the scene near the Strait of Belle Isle was necessarily an incomplete and stylized representation of whaling. It must therefore be interpreted with caution and certainly not taken at face value.

THE DEPICTION OF THE WHALING CREW

In both the Desceliers' original and in the Jomard copy, the five crewmen in the boat appear in profile.⁸ Each of their faces is endowed with a nose and an eye, but their arms resemble stumps, for no fingers are indicated.⁹ On the original map, both harpooner and steersman sport black moustaches, but these were eliminated by the Jomard copyist, who instead accentuated the eyes of the whalers. On the original map, the five all wear pointed caps, three of them red in colour and the others bluish-grey. In the Jomard version three of these caps are depicted as hoods attached to

reddish outer garments, reminiscent of fur parkas, with both types of headgear shown in red. These modifications introduce a misleading Native American aspect.¹⁰ On both versions, the three seated men are clad in short-sleeved garments of varying lengths: in the case of the harpooner almost knee-length, but in the case of the figure holding a bow, reaching to his feet.

Starting from the left, the first crew member is seated, facing backward towards the stern of the boat, rowing a single oar with both arms, the blade out of sight in the water.¹¹ His pointed cap and garment are both red. The second boatman is a harpooner, whose pointed cap and garment are both bluish-grey with streaks of red shading. The Jomard copyist has added a black belt and painted his cap completely red. Somewhat unexpectedly, the harpooner is standing behind the first rower rather than in the bow of the boat. Slightly bent over, he balances himself in readiness to cast a harpoon into the whale, a short distance away. His weapon is shown as an open triangular point fitted on a relatively short shaft to which a line has been tied at the lower end.¹² Part of this line is slung in front of him, over his left arm, but the other end is cut off near the boat's bow. The whale has already been harpooned twice, as indicated by shafts stuck in its body. From these odd looking objects, vaguely resembling the shafts of feathered arrows or darts, two long lines trail in the water at the front of the boat, giving the impression that they are attached to it. The third figure is another seated rower, also facing the stern, who appears to be sculling with two oars. His pointed cap and garment are bluish-grey, but the Jomard copyist has transformed them into a red hooded parka. The fourth person is an enigmatic figure with dark hair, and a red pointed cap, clad in a loose garment marked by thick vertical red and yellow stripes, which reaches to his feet. He stands upright, facing forward, holding a bow. There is a hint of a small beard on his chin, but the rest of his face is a mere blob. The Jomard map version shows him wearing a pointed cap and a long garment, both of them coloured red. In addition, Jomard depicts a mysterious, elongated, brown-coloured object standing upright beside the Bowman, reaching up to his waist, on his left side. It is cylindrically shaped with an asymmetrical pointed top, and a line lashed around it three times. As shown on the Jomard copy, it could be interpreted as a float, a drag, or perhaps even a shield. This represents another misleading introduction of elements that might be taken as Native American. The fifth person is a steersman, hunched down in the stern, facing forward and turned leftward in a semi-frontal position, guiding the boat on its starboard side, with a steering oar which extends lengthwise at the stern. There is no indication of a rudder. The boat itself is nondescript, the waves almost completely obscuring the profile. Both fore and aft ends are angled steeply, as opposed to curved, while the gunwale is quite level.

The Desceliers whaling scene of 1546 thus incorporates a number of anomalies: the position of the harpooner, the appearance of the harpoons stuck in the whale, and the presence of a man holding a bow. Some may be attributable to a lack of familiarity with whaling techniques, the impressionistic nature of the sketch, or

to a prolific imagination. Others derive from the inherent limitations imposed by the artistic medium utilized, which rendered attention to minor detail difficult, if not impossible.

It is the juxtaposition of Native and European traits which calls most insistently for explanation. Are we looking at a Basque whale-boat, an Amerindian canoe, or an Inuit umiak? Are we dealing with a stylized depiction of a Basque harpoon or a Native implement? Is the reddish colour of various garments meant to be suggestive of aboriginal fur clothing, or some kind of European skin clothing? Would a Basque sailor use a bow, or dress in a long robe? Did Basques wear pointed red caps? Were Natives in that time and place adept at using oars? Was a whale-boat or a umiak normally steered with an oar or with a rudder? Are any Native groups in eastern Canada actually known to have been open-water whale hunters?

BEOTHUK?

C.A. Burland appears to have been the first author to attempt an ethnic identification of the Desceliers whaling crew.¹³ He was personally familiar with the original 1546 map, having examined it in detail at the John Rylands Library in Manchester.¹⁴ Although neither anthropologist nor professional historian, he was clearly widely read:

Let us enter the world of the map near the great whale off the coast of Newfoundland. There we see a canoe-load of Indians engaged in hunting it. They are not Eskimos, although there is archaeological evidence that Eskimos once lived on both sides of the Strait of Belle Isle. These Indians, however, use darts with lines attached, and without detachable heads or floats of the Eskimo type. Their costume is different: one man wears a kilt, another a long gown of skins; they all wear their hair tied up into a cone on top of the head. We recognize the Beothuk here, natives of Newfoundland who dressed in just this way. Their canoe is wrong, and although the steersman paddles properly, the crew appears to be rowing rather than paddling. This is either an error, or else the Beothuks had learnt to row from white sailors in a surprisingly short period.¹⁵

Right from the beginning then, Burland drew attention to the existence of cultural anomalies in the whale hunt drawing. In 1951, when his article was published, large scale archival and archaeological research on Basque whaling in eastern Canada had not yet been undertaken. Given the absence of alternative data, he simply assumed a Native origin for the whaling scene and interpreted European traits as cultural borrowing.

Burland's suppositions can be questioned on a number of points. While the Beothuk may have scavenged beached whales on an opportunistic basis, no ethnohistorical documents or specialized objects of material culture confirm that

they actually hunted large cetaceans on the open sea. The archaeological record at Beothuk sites includes faunal remains of small cetaceans, namely porpoise or dolphin, and at one site a single beluga tooth.¹⁶ But these species can be killed with clubs or axes at shoreline locations, when trapped by ice, or after being driven towards land and stranded in shallow water. The faunal remains are not necessarily evidence that such animals were hunted with harpoons or arrows from canoes.¹⁷ Burland's claim that Desceliers' watercraft is an Amerindian canoe, does not hold up.¹⁸ He concedes, at least, that it is not a Beothuk type. (Beothuk canoes were noted for their high peaked ends and the pronounced hogged sheer or upcurving of their gunwales at midsection.¹⁹) His interpretation of the pointed hoods of the garments and of the harpooner's cap is also rather surprising. He takes these to represent an Amerindian hair style "tied up into a cone on top of the head". Furthermore, he calls the stylized picture of the weapon a "dart", which begs the technological question. Finally, while the use of skin clothing by the Beothuk is well attested, this trait was common to other groups within the general region, including the Innu (Montagnais), Naskapi, Mi'kmaq, and Inuit.²⁰ Significantly, the Basques were well known for their leather and skin clothing.

Bernard Hoffman, a noted ethnohistorian, also supported a possible Beothuk identification for the whaling crew.²¹ He hesitated, however, between them and another Native group, the St. Lawrence Iroquoians. His research led him to conclude that the latter were seasonally present in the Strait of Belle Isle, during the period in question. Hoffman drew on Burland's article, but does not appear to have been familiar with the coloured original of the 1546 Desceliers map itself, and apparently relied on a black and white reproduction. For him, the drawing seemed to depict:

Indians in a canoe off the north Newfoundland shore or the Strait of Belle Isle. They may, therefore, either represent Beothuks or St. Lawrence Iroquois. The sketch seems to represent Indians having (a) a conical-shaped headdress, (b) using a harpoon, (c) rowing with oars, and (d) using a straight-topped canoe or boat.

As presumed examples of the "conical-shaped headdress", Hoffman cited descriptions from the accounts of early explorers regarding hair styles affected by several Native groups encountered in the Gulf of St. Lawrence region. The same basic pattern repeated itself: the hair was worn long, gathered on the top of the head, "like the tail of a horse". He admitted that this common hair style could not serve to distinguish between different peoples. Like Burland before him, Hoffman remarked on a number of anomalies in Desceliers' sketch, namely that the harpoon was "also not diagnostic", that the depiction of the oars "poses a problem", and that "the center-hump characteristic of later Beothuk canoes seems to be absent" — but argued that "this may not be conclusive, since the stem and stern do not seem to be correctly depicted either". He noted the consensus that "Indians of the area used

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only paddles”, but went on to quote the following extract from John Guy, regarding Beothuk met at the southern end of Trinity Bay in 1612:

They have two kind of oares, one is about fower foote long, of one peece of firre, the other is about 10 foote long made of two peeces, one being as long, big & rownd as a halfe pike made of beech wood, which by likelihood they made of a Biskaine oare, th’other is the blade of the oare, which is let into th’end of the long one slit, & whipped very stronglie. The shorte one they use as a paddle, & thother as ane oare.²²

Hoffman also wrote before the extent of the early Basque presence within that region was widely appreciated, and this restricted the scope of his reflections on the cultural content of Desceliers’ whaling scene and perhaps prevented him from envisaging anything apart from a Native interpretation. Even so, his Beothuk identification was not forcefully argued, and he never raised the crucial question of whether, historically, they were known to have been whalers.

ST. LAWRENCE IROQUOIANS?

Hoffman’s familiarity with the ethnohistory of the Amerindian groups in the Strait of Belle Isle made him aware there were Natives other than the Beothuk who might have been depicted in the region. He was an authority on the explorations of Jacques Cartier, who left extensive descriptions of his sixteenth-century encounters with the St. Lawrence Iroquoians.²³ This people were concentrated in agricultural villages between Quebec City and Montreal, but a down-river segment of their population also engaged in seasonal exploitation of marine resources, within the St. Lawrence estuary.²⁴ They seem to have been reported at least once in the Strait of Belle Isle, in testimony given to government officials by a Spanish Basque fisherman, Clemente de Odeliça, when questioned in September 1542 about Cartier’s third expedition.²⁵ He stated that while in the Grand Bay (i.e. the Strait) that summer, his ship was visited by Amerindians from whom he gathered “that one of their number was Chief in Canada [presumably the Stadacona/Quebec City region]. And that they killed more than thirty-five of Jacques’ men, and their arms are bows and arrows and pinewood shields”.²⁶ The account did not provide any information regarding their subsistence activities. A possible seasonal presence of St. Lawrence Iroquoians in the Strait of Belle Isle would likely have occurred only for a few decades.²⁷ The primary purpose of these lengthy voyages might have been to trade with the Basque and French vessels which congregated there annually. At that time European fishermen were not yet sailing into the Gulf and River of the St. Lawrence to fish, hunt whales or trade. The failure of Roberval’s colonization attempt at Cap Rouge in 1542/43 aroused animosity among the local Native population. Following that there was little or no European presence until around 1580 when European

vessels began regular trading voyages up the St. Lawrence River, probably making Iroquoian visits to the Straits superfluous.²⁸

In the St. Lawrence estuary, several Late Woodland sites on Île Verte, opposite the mouth of the Saguenay River, have produced faunal remains of Beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*), revealing its importance to the diet of the eastern Iroquoians.²⁹ As in the case of the Beothuk, it is not known how this group captured these small cetaceans.³⁰ According to Cartier, they made large sea-going canoes, which could seat as many as 16 persons and were used in seasonal excursions in the St. Lawrence estuary, up the Saguenay River, down the north shore of the Gulf, and to the Gaspé Peninsula.³¹ There are, however, no archaeological remains or ethnohistorical accounts to show that the St. Lawrence Iroquoians had developed techniques for hunting larger species of whale in deep waters.

INUIT?

Charles Martijn proposed a different identification for Desceliers' whalers in a special issue of *Études/Inuit/Studies* devoted to the Inuit of southern Quebec-Labrador. In an article on the "Esquimaux" in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cartography of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, he made summary observations of the 1546 Desceliers whale hunters, based on a cursory examination of a black and white reproduction of the Jomard copy:

They are clad in fur clothing and wear pointed caps. One man is about to throw what appears to be a harpoon with a line attached. Two such weapons have already been thrust into his wounded prey. Another man is standing upright, a bow ready in hand. The steersman is paddling but the remaining two persons seem to be rowing. It is always possible that this scene could be a reference to late Thule Tradition or historic Inuit who are known to have hunted whales from open boats.³²

Martijn also noted the use of umiaks by historic southern Labrador Inuit whalers.³³ Later examination of a colour copy of the Jomard version convinced him that the pointed caps, except in the case of the harpooner, were actually hoods attached to parka-like garments, reminiscent of Inuit seal skin clothing. The atypical form of the harpoon, so unlike the heavy, multi-component, arctic version, he attributed to limitations imposed by the scale of the drawing, or by the artist's unfamiliarity with the intricacies of the subject. He even entertained the possibility that the strange cylindrical object might be an inflated Inuit seal skin float (*avataq*), or possibly even a St. Lawrence Iroquoian pine wood shield.

Yet Martijn was struck by certain aspects of the whale hunting scene that seemed more European than Inuit: the stern-facing rowers, their use of oars, the harpooner's clothes. Although research on the Basques in Atlantic Canada was by

then well along, Martijn did not connect them with the Desceliers drawing.³⁴ This came about only recently when, having obtained a colour reproduction of the original 1546 Desceliers map, he compared it with the nineteenth-century Jomard copy, and noted the modifications introduced in the latter. The grounds for an Inuit identification were thereby seriously undermined, prompting the present paper.

BASQUES?

Selma Barkham was convinced, from the beginning, that the Desceliers whalers were Basques. In 1978, when the late David Beers Quinn was preparing his remarkable collection of historical documents, *New American World*, he and Barkham worked closely together on all aspects of the volume relating to Basque activities along the eastern Atlantic seaboard. At that time, they discussed and rejected the conclusions of certain authors, notably Hoffman, that the Desceliers drawing could be interpreted as Amerindians in a Native watercraft. However, neither then nor in her later publications did they offer a detailed explanation for their view. The discussion here is intended to rectify this omission.

In her major work on the Basques, Barkham published a colour reproduction of the Jomard map copy (from the National Archives of Canada).³⁵ She saw a direct association between the whaling scene and the early sixteenth-century European ship, depicted immediately below, with its sails furled and hence most likely at anchor (Plate 2).³⁶ This larger vessel is as close to the whale-boat and its crew as is the whale itself. Furthermore, this was precisely the type of ship used by Basque whalers of the first half of the sixteenth century to reach *Terranova*, in the New World. Here, these large vessels remained at anchor in protected harbours until the end of the whaling season, when the time came to transport their valuable cargoes of whale oil back to Europe. In other words, the European ship, the whale-boat with its crew of five men and the harpooned whale are all parts of one scene — just as the Native chief with his followers and the Sieur de Roberval and his armed men, drawn at the head of the Saguenay River, appear to be one scene. The Desceliers' whaling episode, with its three principal elements, is placed off northeastern Newfoundland and southern Labrador, in the Strait of Belle Isle — the precise region where Basque whaling was already concentrated.

There can be little question that Desceliers would have known that the Basques had for centuries engaged in coastal whaling in the Bay of Biscay, off the shores of southwestern France and northern Spain, whence they regularly exported whale products to European ports.³⁷ By the mid-1540s, Basque whaling activity in *Terranova* waters was becoming increasingly well established. When Desceliers heard of this, it may have occurred to him to depict this daring and unusual marine pursuit, as he imagined it to be taking place in North America. Although Basque whaling in Atlantic Canada at that date had not reached nearly the scale it eventu-

ally would, in the 1560s and 1570s, the expectations aroused by this new commercial undertaking had already captured the interest of merchants in French ports, likely prompting Desceliers' illustration.

Here is how Samuel de Champlain described Basque whaling in Terranova in 1610:

The cleverest men at this fishing are the Basques, who, in order to carry it on, place their vessels in a safe port, or near the spot where they judge there are many whales, and then they man with stout sailors a number of shallops, and equip them with lines. These are small ropes made of the best hemp that can be found, having a length of at least one hundred and fifty fathoms. They have also many halberds, half a pike long, armed with an iron blade, six inches wide, and others a foot and a half or two feet long and very sharp. In each shallop there is a harpooner who is one of the most nimble and wide-awake among them; and since his part is the most dangerous, he, after the masters, draws the highest pay.

When the shallop has come outside the harbour, the men look in all directions to catch sight of a whale, whilst they tack from side to side. If they see nothing, they land and place themselves upon the highest point they can find in order to have as wide a view as possible. Here they station a look-out for the whale. They are able to discover it both from its size and by the water which it spouts from its blow-holes, which amounts each time to a hogshead, and is blown as high as the length of two lances. From the quantity of water thrown up one estimates the amount of oil which the whale will produce. There are some from which you can get as much as six score hogsheads, but others give less.

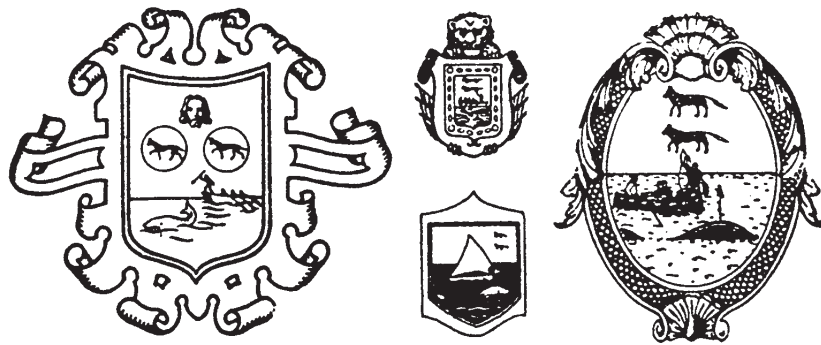
Now when they see this enormous fish, they quickly get into their shallop and by dint of rowing or by help of the wind, reach the spot where they are over the whale. When it is seen near the surface, instantly the harpooner is in the bow of the boat with a harpoon, which is an iron weapon two feet long and half a foot wide at the lower part, set in a shaft half a pike in length. At mid-length there is a hole, where the line is fastened. As soon as the harpooner sees his chance, he throws his harpoon, which penetrates very deeply into the whale. Directly the whale feels itself wounded, it goes to the bottom, and if by chance in turning it strikes with its tail the shallop or the men, it crushes them as easily as a tumbler. This is the only risk they run of being killed, while harpooning; but as soon as they have thrown the harpoon, they let their line run out, until the whale reaches the bottom. And sometimes when it does not go straight down, it sometimes drags the shallop some eight or nine leagues, travelling as fast as a horse. And very often the men are forced to cut the line, for fear lest the whale should drag them under the water. But when the creature goes straight to the bottom, it stays there for a while, and then it slowly comes up to the surface. As it rises they haul in their line little by little. And when the whale comes up, two or three shallops surround it, and the men with their halberds give it many thrusts. Feeling itself struck it goes down again under the water, losing blood, and growing so weak that it has no more strength or vigour. When it comes again to the surface, they finally kill it. When dead it no longer sinks to the bottom, and they tie strong ropes to it and tow it ashore to the place where

they do their curing, that is to say where they melt the fat of the whale, in order to obtain the oil. That is the way whales are caught ...³⁸

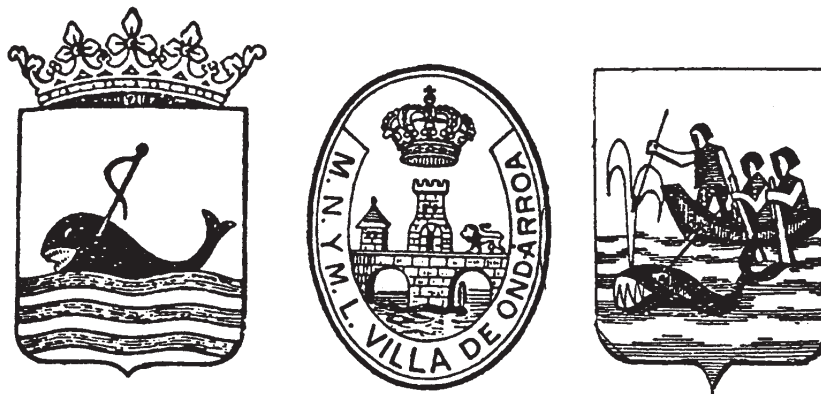
Using Champlain's account as a yardstick, we can see that although Desceliers' scene is not an exact pictorial reconstruction of the whale hunt, it gave contemporaries all the basic elements necessary to comprehend how Basques went about hunting whales. As for anomalies and omissions, one should not read too much into them. A symbolic representation of the activity, rather than rigorous authenticity, was what mattered to the map makers. Compare, for example, Basque *escudos*, that is, municipal seals and coats of arms. While often depicting a whale or whaling, details in the *escudos* were usually reduced to a minimum (Figure 1).³⁹ For example, although we know from the archives that sixteenth-century Basque whale-boats normally carried six or seven men, only a single coat of arms (of Lekeitio) shows that many. The remainder depict between three and five, as in the Desceliers scene. Furthermore, the anomalous form of the Desceliers harpoon is replicated not only in several armorial bearings (e.g., Figure 1), but also in two coats of arms of the Spanish Basque port of Mutriku, dating to 1507 and 1562.⁴⁰

If we allow for artistic licence and the omission of fine detail, the varicoloured clothing worn by the whaling crew on the original 1546 map actually fits documented Basque marine attire. This type of European garb contrasts with that of the near-naked or scantily fur-clad North American Natives shown elsewhere on the Desceliers map. Sailors on the Terranova voyage brought with them special sets of purpose-made sea clothes or *ropas de mar*.⁴¹ Nicolas Denys wrote in 1672 that the Basques had an advantage over fishermen of other nationalities because they possessed "good garments of skins" which kept them dry during wet weather.⁴² A sixteenth-century Basque source, Juanes de Yraçaval, who had made several whaling trips to Terranova, listed the following items among the garments absolutely necessary for every sailor: "his long coat [*gaban*] and woollen cape ... four pairs of thin leather shoes and a pair of skin boots and five pairs of woollen socks and seven shirts and five pairs of woollen trousers and one *bestido* of thin leather and one *bestido* of hide ..."⁴³ The *gaban* was a kind of overcoat, with sleeves and an attached hood, made of coarse, heavy, untreated wool, with its natural grease for a waterproof effect.⁴⁴ The *bestido* seems to have been some form of leather or skin tunic, to be worn over woollen clothes.⁴⁵ One type of woollen cloth, a serge called *carisea*, was blue.⁴⁶ Are the harpooner and the second seated rower on the original Desceliers map perhaps wearing blue-grey garments made of this cloth? And are the first rower and the steersman clad in reddish-brown leather or skin *bestidos*?

Desceliers has all five whalers wearing pointed caps, three of them red-coloured. No written descriptions or illustrations of Basque sailors sporting such hats are known in the literature. However, they did favour other kinds of red-coloured headgear. According to a seventeenth-century Basque-Icelandic



Distintos sellos municipales de Bermeo.



Escudo de Guetaria

Escudo de Ondárroa

Escudo de Motrico



Sello de Fuenterrabía del año 1297



Escudo de Lequeitio

Figure 1. *Escudos* or Basque municipal seals and town coats of arms, depicting whales or whaling (Ciriquiain Gaiztarro 1961: 69).

glossary, Icelanders were accustomed to greet Basques with the words *Saell raude hattur!* or in English, “Welcome, red hat!”⁴⁷

Clearly then, there is strong evidence for identifying Desceliers’ whalers as Basques. We are left, however, with the enigma of the tall standing man in the whale-boat, clad in a long robe, and holding a bow. Was Desceliers under the impression that at some point during the chase feathered arrows attached to lines were shot into the whale? Or should this be attributed to fanciful artistic licence on his part? This extraordinary representation warrants some elucidation.

CONCLUSION

A whale hunting episode between northeastern Newfoundland and southern Labrador, on the 1546 Desceliers *mappemonde*, has been variously interpreted as depicting Beothuk, St. Lawrence Iroquoians, Inuit or Basques. There is, however, no evidence from ethnohistorical accounts or archaeological investigations to show that either the Beothuk or the St. Lawrence Iroquoians had developed the necessary skills and technology to pursue and kill large whales in open water, although they are known to have hunted small cetaceans such as the beluga, most likely by herding them into shallow water. While the historical Labrador Inuit did hunt whales from umiaks, and are therefore more likely to have been depicted, several cultural discrepancies in the scene cast doubt on a Native identification. An even more insistent doubt arises from the fact that ethnohistorians have based their interpretations on a nineteenth-century hand-drawn copy, rather than on the original 1546 map itself. Several modifications made during this process, whether by error or otherwise, can now be seen to have introduced some misleadingly Native American elements, which betray Desceliers’ original intent.

We are still faced with the mysterious man and bow. Perhaps a new hypothesis is needed. Is it possible that some early sixteenth-century Terranova whale-boat crews consisted of Basques and Amerindians working together? Desceliers may have intended to signify this symbolically, by placing a bow in the hands of one of the whaling crew.⁴⁸ The ethnohistorical record indicates that the Basques maintained friendly relations with the Innu, who frequented the Strait of Belle Isle region (unlike the Inuit, with whom they were often at odds).⁴⁹ As early as 1542, the Spanish Basque mariner Odeliça, who fished for cod in that area, testified that “many Indians [likely Innu, possibly Iroquoians] came to his ship in Grand Bay, and they ate and drank together, and were very friendly, and the Indians gave them deer [caribou] and wolf skins in exchange for axes and knives and other trifles; and for Indians dressed in skins they are men of skill ...”⁵⁰ Similarly, a French Basque sailor, Robert Lefant, describing his experiences in 1537, reported that the Indians of the region “understand any language, French, English, and Gascon, and their

own tongue”.⁵¹ Apparently, they communicated with Europeans in a pidgin language.⁵²

A Basque historian, Lope de Isasti, writing around 1626 about events of the later 1500s and early 1600s, relates that in the Strait of Belle Isle there were Amerindians called *Montañeses* who could speak some Basque, and “talk and associate with our men and help to prepare the fish on shore in exchange for a little biscuit and cider that they do not have over there”.⁵³ By then Grand Bay whaling had largely ended, but confirmation of Native involvement in whaling is furnished by the English fishing master Richard Whitbourne who made his first voyage to the Grand Bay around 1580. In his *Discourse of Newfoundland*, of 1622, he recalled the “naturall inhabitants ... living in the north and west part of the country” and reported:

the French and Biscaines (who resort thither yeerely for the whale-fishing, and also for the cod-fish), report them to be an ingenious and tractable people (being well used): they are ready to assist them with labour and patience, in the killing, cutting, and boyling of whales, and making the trainoyle, without expectation of other reward than a little bread, or some such small hire.⁵⁴

In other words, during the later 1500s and early 1600s, the Innu sometimes worked with Basque whaling expeditions. (Gaspé Mi’kmaq crewmen on mid-nineteenth-century whaling vessels in the Gulf of St. Lawrence provide an interesting parallel, three centuries later.⁵⁵)

However, there is no historical evidence whatsoever of Amerindians participating in the Basque whale hunt during the first half of the sixteenth century. About half a century of Basque-Native contact took place in the Strait of Belle Isle, between the events described by Lefant and Odeliça from 1537 to 1542 and the events described by Isasti and Whitbourne in the early 1600s. The first allusion to Native participation, by Whitbourne, dates to the second decade of the 1600s. If we can correctly interpret Whitbourne as meaning that by the later 1500s Innu helpers were taking part in the actual whale hunt, there are several good reasons why that might have come to pass. After many decades of contact, some Natives may have become proficient in whaling techniques, just as fishermen in northwestern Spain were then learning such skills from Basque whalers, who also frequented the coasts of Asturias and Galicia, every year.⁵⁶ From the late 1580s onwards, there was an increasingly serious shortage of Spanish Basque crewmen available for fishing and whaling voyages, as mariners were pressed to serve the large number of ships committed by Spain to a series of wars with other European powers.⁵⁷

The participation of Native whalers in the early sixteenth century remains in question. The Basques had spent centuries developing their unique whaling techniques and the documentary record suggests that whale-boat crews were specialized close-knit units. Basque whalers began making regular voyages to Terranova



Figure 2. Regional detail of the Pierre Desceliers, *Mappemonde* [1546], depicting two knights in armour jousting in the interior of Labrador. (North is down). From the Esme-François Jomard facsimile (1842-1862), courtesy National Archives of Canada.

only in the 1530s. From this point of view, it seems unlikely that in the 1540s, while their contact with Natives was still in its infancy, the Basques would immediately have employed Amerindians to take part in the highly skilled teams who approached and killed their large cetacean prey.⁵⁸ From the point of view of Amerindian ethnohistory, on the other hand, it seems clear that by 1600 Natives were working in the Basque whaling industry and the possibility that they were already involved in the hunt a half century earlier cannot be completely dismissed.

Although Desceliers was well able to depict a ship of his period, he could not possibly have seen the events illustrated in his depiction of North America. The question of what degree of artistic licence he took with such images remains outstanding. Was the scene near the Strait of Belle Isle an attempt to record something that he had heard about Native participation in the Basque whaling industry? Or should the tall erect figure with the bow be understood as a fictional space-filler, like the two knights in armour, jousting on their white steeds, drawn by Desceliers far in the Labrador interior (Figure 2)? For the time being, opinions may differ.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our gratitude to Oriana Alvarez-Barkham, Edward Dahl, Josu de Bascaran, Dale Kennedy, G. Malcolm Lewis, Brad Loewen, Peter McNiven, and Roland Tremblay for their comments and for services rendered, and to Peter Pope and Iona Bulgin for their editorial work. Permission to reproduce the whaling scene from the original 1546 Pierre Desceliers *Mappemonde* was granted by the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester, England.

Notes

¹Biographical information on the French cartographer, Pierre Desceliers (1487-1553), is scanty. He appears to have been a native of Normandy, and was described in 1537 as a priest living in Arques, a town just southeast of Dieppe, where close relatives also resided. The 1546 *mappemonde* was made for the Dauphin, later Henri II, at the request of François I. Desceliers is considered by some historians to have been the founder of French hydrography. Two other large world maps by him (1550, 1553) have survived: Anon. ["L.D."], "Le cartographe dieppois Pierre Desceliers", *Journal des Savants* 4 (1902), 674; A. Malte-Brun, "Un géographe français au XVI^e siècle retrouvé, Pierre Desceliers et ses deux portulans", *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 12 (1876), 295-301; Theodore E. Layng, *Sixteenth Century Maps of Canada* (Ottawa, 1957); Ronald Vere Tooley, *Tooley's Dictionary of Mapmakers* (New York, 1979), 159. Summary discussions of the North American section of the Desceliers 1546 world map, now located in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, England, are provided by Cottie Arthur Burland, "A Note on the Desceliers' *Mappemonde* of 1546 in the *John Rylands Library*", *Bulletin* No. 33, 1950-1951 (Manches-

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ter, 1951), 237-241; “A Map of Canada in 1546”, *Geographical Magazine* 24 (1951), 103-110; and William F. Ganong, *Crucial Maps in the Early Cartography and Place-Nomenclature of the Atlantic Coast of Canada* (Toronto, 1964), 232-233, 328-331. For background information on artists and illustrators in the early mapping of North America see David Beers Quinn, “Artists and Illustrators in the Early Mapping of North America”, *Mariner’s Mirror* 72 (1986), 244-276.

²This rather odd-looking sea mammal is endowed with what looks like an enormous handle-bar moustache. Kirsten A. Seaver, in “‘A very common and usuall trade’. The Relationship Between Cartographic Perceptions and ‘Fishing’ in the Davis Strait circa 1500-1550”, *British Library Journal* 22 (1) (1996), 1-26, 15, suggests that its two long ends may have been intended to represent walrus tusks, and affirms that “even in 1546 the otherwise well-informed Dieppe cartographer Pierre Descelier [sic] confused whales and walrus and had no clear idea of either animal’s appearance when he depicted American [sic] whaling off the Strait of Belle Isle”. On the other hand, the whale’s magnificent moustache may be Desceliers’ eccentric idea of what whale baleen looked like, commonly referred to by the Basques as *barbas de ballena* or “beards of the whale”. Regretfully, an exemplary study regarding the identity of animals on ancient maps does not deal with marine fauna “because their distribution is less restricted than that of many land mammals and birds”; see Wilma George, *Animals and Maps* (Berkeley, 1969), 25.

³For Basques, see Selma Huxley (Barkham), ed., *Los vascos en el marco Atlántico Norte. Siglos XVI y XVII* (San Sebastian, Spain, 1987), 166; David Beers Quinn, *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612*, vol. 4 (New York, 1979), 453; Quinn, “Artists and Illustrators”, 255; Seaver, “Common and usuall trade”, 12; for Beothuk, see Burland, “A Map of Canada”, 106; Bernard G. Hoffman, “Account of a Voyage Conducted in 1529 to the New World, Africa, Madagascar and Sumatra, Translated from the Italian with Notes and Comments”, *Ethnohistory* 10 (1) (1963), 1-79, see 77-86, see 46, 52-53, 55; for Inuit, see Charles A. Martijn, “The ‘Esquimaux’ in the 17th and 18th Century Cartography of the Gulf of St. Lawrence: a Preliminary Discussion”, *Études/Inuit/Studies* 4 (1-2) (1980), 78; for St. Lawrence Iroquoian, see Hoffman, “Account of a Voyage”, 46, 52-55. Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage* (Edmonton, 1984), 238, uses the non-specific phrase “Europeans whaling off the northern end of the Straits of Belle Isle”. Conversely, Bernard G. Hoffman, *Cabot to Cartier. Sources for a Historical Ethnography of Northeastern North America 1497-1550* (Toronto, 1961), 165, fig. 46, calls the chart “unusual in depicting Natives in canoes off both the New England and Newfoundland coasts”.

⁴See notably Huxley (Barkham), *Los vascos en el marco Atlántico Norte*, 166; and Seaver, “Common and usuall trade”, 12, plate II.

⁵The Basque terminology was kindly supplied by Josu de Bascaran. As an example of such minutiae being included in a graphic representation, given a sufficient scale, see the illustration by the artist Richard Schlecht of a Basque whale-boat (*chalupa*) as the cover of James A. Tuck and Robert Grenier, *Red Bay, Labrador. World Whaling Capital A.D. 1550-1600* (St. John’s, 1989).

⁶Pierre de Neufville to Pope Clement IX, 1669, Archives of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide, Rome, SOCG, vol. 418, ff.234-235.

⁷Burland, “Note on the Desceliers’ Mappemonde”, 239-240; Dickason, *Myth of the Savage*, 205-229; Charles A. Martijn, “Commentaire sur la ‘frise des sauvages’ à l’église Saint-Jacques de Dieppe, France”, *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* 11 (4) (1981),

320-323. As an example, when Charles IX made his entry into Bordeaux on 9 April 1565, he was greeted by a procession which contained 12 foreign contingents, namely Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Egyptians, Taprobians [i.e., Sri Lankans], [Native] Americans, [East?] Indians, Canary Islanders, [African?] "Savages", Brazilians, Moors and Ethiopians. See Victor E. Graham and W. McAllister Johnson, *The Royal Tour of France by Charles IX and Catherine de' Medici. Festivals and Entries 1564-6* (Toronto, 1979), 281-282.

⁸The body, but not the head, of the steersman is shown frontally.

⁹The throwing arm of the harpooner has the suggestion of a hand.

¹⁰The steersman is crouched so low that the length of his garment cannot be determined. As well, he may be the only one with long sleeves. For a description of the outer fur robe worn by the Beothuk, see Ingeborg Marshall, *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal & Kingston, 1996), 341-342.

¹¹This is presumed to be an oar, even though no oarlocks or tholes are indicated. If it were a paddle, the user would be facing the front of the boat. The rower's left arm has the form of a single line ending in a small bulb which seems to designate a hand.

¹²One commentator has referred to it as a dart (Burland, "Map of Canada", 106). It is, however, doubtful whether such a lightweight weapon would be effective against large sea-mammals. To make serious penetration, it would have had to be hurled with the aid of a spear-thrower (*atlatl*).

¹³Burland, "Map of Canada".

¹⁴Burland, "Note on the Desceliers' Mappemonde".

¹⁵Burland, "Map of Canada", 106.

¹⁶Marshall, *Beothuk*, 294-296, 298, 300t, 308.

¹⁷Marshall, *Beothuk*, 334. Referring to larger, open-water cetaceans, Marshall specifies that "whether and how Beothuk hunted whale is not recorded". She also notes that among the so-called emblems of mythology drawn for William Cormack by Shanawdithit, there is a staff with a whale's tail at one end. Cormack claimed that "the Red Indians consider it the greatest good luck to kill one"; see James P. Howley, *The Beothucks or Red Indians. The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, 1915), 230. Cormack believed that Shanawdithit's effigy represented the medium-sized Bottlenosed whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, which according to him frequented the northern bays in great numbers. In actual fact, this species usually remains off-shore, and Cormack may have mixed them up with dolphins, possibly the Atlantic White-Sided (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) or a Common porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*); see Howley, *Beothucks*, 230; Marshall, *Beothuk*, 334, 546-547, n.111-112.

¹⁸For a discussion of northeast American birchbark canoes, see Edwin Tappan Adney and Howard L. Chapelle, *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*, Smithsonian Institution, Museum of History and Technology, Bulletin 230 (Washington, DC, 1964), 1-98. The 1546 Desceliers map has a second sketch of presumed fishing activity as sea, further southward along the New England coast. The persons depicted are more demonstrably Amerindian, but their long watercraft may be a dug-out canoe.

¹⁹Ingeborg Marshall, *Beothuk Bark Canoes: An Analysis and Comparative Study*, Mercury Series, Paper No. 102, Canadian Ethnology Service (Ottawa, 1985), 9, 101; Marshall, *Beothuk*, 364-374.

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²⁰Marshall, *Beothuk*, 349, states that “Beothuk gowns had hoods and fur collars that could be pulled over head and face if such protection were required ...” and mentions a Beothuk headman, in 1811, who wore a “high cap”.

²¹Hoffman, “Account of a Voyage”, 46, 52-53, 55.

²²Quinn, *New American World*, 158. The longer was most likely a steering oar.

²³Hoffman, *Cabot to Cartier*.

²⁴Michel Bideaux, *Jacques Cartier — Relations* (Montreal, 1986); Henry Percival Biggar, ed., *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier*, Publication No. 11, Public Archives of Canada (Ottawa, 1924); Claude Chapdelaine, “The Maritime Adaptation of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians”, *Man in the Northeast* 45 (1993); Charles A. Martijn, “The Iroquoian Presence in the Estuary and Gulf of the St. Lawrence River Valley: a Reevaluation”, *Man in the Northeast* 40 (1990); Roland Tremblay, “Iroquoian Beluga Hunting on Ile Verte”, in James F. Pendergast and Claude Chapdelaine, eds., *Essays in St. Lawrence Iroquoian Archaeology*, Occasional Papers in Northeastern Archaeology No. 8 (Dundas, ON, 1993); Roland Tremblay, “Le site de l’anse à la Vache et le mitan du Sylvicole supérieur dans l’estuaire du Saint-Laurent”, in Roland Tremblay, ed., *L’éveilleur et l’ambassadeur. Essais archéologiques et ethnohistoriques en hommage à Charles A. Martijn*, Paléo-Québec No. 27 (1998).

²⁵Tuck, 233, reports an Iroquoian pottery rimsherd at Red Bay. Elsewhere, at L’anse-aux-Dunes, a skeleton buried together with a ball-headed war club was once unearthed, but these remains were not conserved (Martijn, “Iroquoian Presence”, 57). In 1534, Cartier described a band of Indians whom he encountered at the west end of the Strait of Belle Isle. He remarked that he had been informed “that their home is not this place but that they come from warmer countries to catch these seals and to get other food for their sustenance”; see Biggar, *Voyages of Jacques Cartier*, 23. This has been interpreted by Hoffman, “Account of a Voyage”, 54, as a reference to the St. Lawrence Iroquoians. However, Martijn, “Iroquoian Presence”, 53-54, has suggested that these may have been Innu (Montagnais) under a chief named Thiennot (from *teelno* or “old man”), who had been to the Strait, but whose winter abode was the region between the Manicouagan and Aux Outardes rivers on the middle north shore, a region marked on the 1546 Desceliers map as “terre de Tionnot”.

²⁶Henry Percival Biggar, ed., *A Collection of Documents relating to Jacques Cartier and the Sieur de Roberval*, Publication No. 14, Public Archives of Canada (Ottawa, 1930), 463.

²⁷Martijn, “Iroquoian Presence”, 56-58.

²⁸Charles A. Martijn, “Gepèg (Québec): un toponyme d’origine micmacque”, *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* 21 (3) (1991), 51-64, see 53; Quinn, *New American World*, III, 32-33.

²⁹Tremblay, “Iroquoian Beluga Hunting”, 121, 123-128, 134-135; Tremblay, “Le site de l’anse”, 105.

³⁰Tremblay, “Iroquoian Beluga Hunting”, 127-128, notes that the “evidence of beluga whale exploitation raises a question, about which Cartier unfortunately remained silent, regarding the methods of capture by the Iroquoians. Nothing is certain at present, but we can imagine the Iroquoians using a whaling technique that was still in use on the lower St. Lawrence until the Second World War. High fish weirs made of braided tree branches were installed in shallow waters at low tide. Belugas caught in the enclosed weir end enclosure at high tide were easily harpooned as the tide went down. A variation of this technique is still

used today by Île Verte fishermen. On the other hand, although less likely, it is also possible to imagine an open water hunt using the sea-going canoes in which the Iroquoians traveled on their long journeys into the estuary and gulf. The harpoons found on the Île Verte sites are probably too fragile to pull in a beluga whale, but it could have been used as a toggle to attach a floater. Possibly the belugas were run aground as they are in the Arctic, but the environment of Île Verte doesn't offer the natural traps required for this kind of operation". For additional comments on their technology, including harpoons, see Chapdelaine, "Maritime Adaptation", 16.

³¹Biggar, *Voyages of Jacques Cartier*, 121; Chapdelaine, "Maritime Adaptation", 16.

³²Martijn, "Esquimaux", 78.

³³Martijn, "Esquimaux", 83; Ernest W. Hawkes, *The Labrador Eskimo*, Memoir 91, Geological Survey, Canada Department of Mines (Ottawa, 1916); J. Garth Taylor, "Inuit Whaling Technology in Eastern Canada and Greenland", in Allen P. McCartney, ed., *Thule Eskimo Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, Mercury Series, Paper No. 88, Archaeological Survey of Canada (Ottawa, 1979). In his discussion Martijn drew attention to the variant theories of Burland and Hoffman.

³⁴Cf. Selma Barkham, "A Note on the Strait of Belle Isle during the Period of Basque Contact with Indians and Inuit", *Études/Inuit/Studies* 4 (1-2) (1980).

³⁵Huxley (Barkham), *Los vascos en el marco Atlántico Norte*.

³⁶According to Brad Loewen (pers. comm., 17 July 2000), "the ship is large for its time — probably 3 decks and 200 tons or more. In Terranova, ships this big engaged either in dry fishing or in whaling. Although the pilot on the castle deck seems to be directing crewmen in the waist area, the ship is moored. The sails are tied up and the wind is from the bow, as would be if the ship was anchored. No particular national origin can be suggested. The forecastle style — curved upsweep from waist; high, angled beakhead — corresponds to many late fifteenth-century Mediterranean depictions, by Vittore Carpaccio for instance. English, Flemish and Norman ships are shown similarly into the early 1500s. The sterncastle is very Atlantic, especially in its aft rake or angle of the stern. The shrouds are poorly represented. Those from the main mast should be parallel and descend to the forward part of the sterncastle; the foremast shrouds descend to either side of the forecastle. Many lesser details of the rigging seem to have been invented. I'd guess the ship was just copied from a handy source". Desceliers could have easily seen such a ship in nearby Dieppe, or some other French port.

³⁷Michael M. Barkham, "La industria pesquera en el País Vasco peninsular al principio de la Edad Moderna: ¿una edad de oro?", *Revista de Estudios Marítimos del País Vasco* 3 (2000): 29-75, see 52-54.

³⁸Henry Percifal Biggar, ed., *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, vol. 2 (Toronto, 1922-1936), 149-153.

³⁹M. Ciriquiain Gaiztarro, *Los vascos en la pesca de la ballena* (San Sebastian, Spain, 1961), 69.

⁴⁰Iconographic Archives of the Archivo Municipal de Mutriku, Spain.

⁴¹Michael M. Barkham, "Aspects of Life aboard Spanish Basque Ships during the 16th Century, with Special Reference to Terranova Whaling Voyages", Parks Canada Microfiche Report Series no. 75 (Ottawa, 1981), 24.

⁴²William F. Ganong, ed., *The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia) by Nicolas Denys [1672]* (Toronto, 1908), 323.

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⁴³M. Barkham, “Life aboard Spanish Basque Ships”, 25, 38; Josu de Bascaran (pers. comm., 2000).

⁴⁴M. Barkham, “Life aboard Spanish Basque Ships”, 50.

⁴⁵M. Barkham, “Life aboard Spanish Basque Ships”, 52.

⁴⁶M. Barkham, “Life aboard Spanish Basque Ships”, 40, 52.

⁴⁷Huxley (Barkham), *Los vascos en el marco Atlántico Norte*, 322. The Basque translation is *Ungetorre sapelle gorre!*

⁴⁸Brad Loewen suggested this, in a conversation in 2000.

⁴⁹See S. Barkham, “Strait of Belle Isle”.

⁵⁰Biggar, *Documents relating to Jacques Cartier*, 462.

⁵¹Biggar, *Documents relating to Jacques Cartier*, 453-454.

⁵²Peter Bakker, “Trade Languages in the Strait of Belle Isle”, *Journal of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association/Revue de l'Association de linguistique des provinces atlantiques* 13 (1991), 1-19.

⁵³Lope M. de Isasti, *Compendio historial de le Muy Noble y Muy Leal Provincia de Guipúzcoa* (San Sebastian, Spain, 1850), 154.

⁵⁴Richard Whitbourne, *A Discourse and Discovery of New-found-land* [1622], in Gillian Cell, ed., *Newfoundland Discovered, English Attempts at Colonisation, 1610-1630* (London, 1982), 101-206.

⁵⁵Charles A. Martijn, “Aperçu chronologique: Les Mi’kmaqs de la région de Gaspé et de Percé, Péninsule gaspésienne, Québec”, unpublished research report (1998), 31, 33.

⁵⁶M. Barkham, “La industria pesquera”, 64-65, 72-73.

⁵⁷Michael M. Barkham, “Shipowning, Shipbuilding and Trans-Atlantic Fishing in Spanish Basque Ports, 1560-1630: a Case Study of Motrico and Zumaya”, Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge (1990), 134-137, 249-251.

⁵⁸Nor is it likely that Desceliers was trying to depict an early attempt to train aboriginal friends in the whale hunt.