

A sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) washed ashore at Biervliet in 1429

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Figure 1. Map with the location of the former isle of Biervliet (arrow) after the storm surge of 1404.

Around 15 February 1429 (proleptic Gregorian date 24th February) a male sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) was washed ashore on the island of Biervliet (figure 1), just inside the mouth of the Westerschelde (Western Scheldt) in the province of Zeeland, the Netherlands. A pile work for sea defense was hit and damaged. Due to later land reclamations, the stranding locality (51.329 N, 3.690 E) is today situated inland.

The sperm whale is documented by a drawing, clearly depicting the diagnostic features of the species, in the annual account of the town of Biervliet for 1428-1429 (figure 2), which also reported on the repair of the damaged

pile work¹, and the expenses paid for the men, sent from Doornik (Tournai) to slaughter the whale². At that time Doornik was not a part of the county of Flanders, but a domain of the French Crown (nowadays in the province of Hainaut, part of Walloon,) and therefore it is believed that the whale could have been claimed by the French king. No more detailed information about this stranding, such as total length and other body dimensions or oil yield were provided by the account. This re-discovery of the sperm whale stranding is the first well-documented and dated sperm whale stranding from the 15th Century and

¹ Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, Rekenkamer inv no 32076 fol 14 v.

² Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, Rekenkamer inv no 32076 fol 15 v.

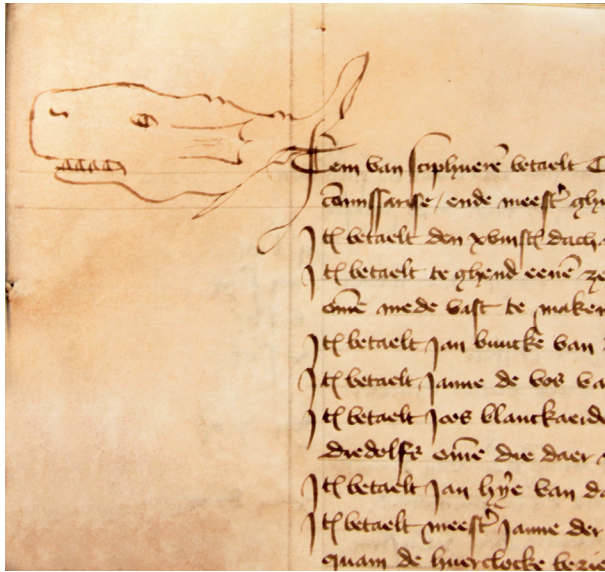


Figure 2. Drawing in the margin of the annual account of the town of Biervliet for 1428-1429.

the earliest reported stranded sperm whale for the Province of Zeeland. The date of the stranding falls into the main known stranding season for sperm whales in the North Sea and provides an addition to the overview of stranded sperm whales around the North Sea (Smeenk & Evans 2018). An integral transcription and retranslation of the relevant medieval text is provided elsewhere (Heerebout, in press).

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References

- Heerebout, G.R. 2022 (in press). Een hele oude vermelding van een potvis. *Zeeland* 31 (1): 1-2
- Smeenk, C. & P.G.H. Evans 2018. Review of sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) strandings around the North Sea. *Lutra* 61: 29-70.

Samenvatting

Een potvisstranding bij Biervliet in 1429

De stadsrekening van Biervliet (Zeeuws-Vlaanderen) over 1428-1429 begint met een marginale, natuurgetrouwe tekening van een potvis. In februari 1429 spoelde aan de noord-oostelijke hoek van het eiland van Biervliet een potvis aan tegen een paalhoofd en dat raakte beschadigd. Het herstel van het paalhoofd werd extra vergoed, zo ook de personen die het dier opmaten en het slachtten. Deze vermelding is een aanvulling van het recente overzicht van gestrande potvissen langs de Vlaamse (Zeeuwse) kust en rond de Noordzee (Smeek & Evans 2018).

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