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# The Character of Commercial Fishing in Icelandic Waters in the Fifteenth Century

Mark Gardiner

*From the early fifteenth century English vessels began fishing in Icelandic waters. They adopted a mixed approach of fishing and trading to spread the risk of the enterprise. These long-distance expeditions are identified as an example of second-stage commercialization of fishing which was marked by the greater investment of capital, use of larger vessels and the adoption of different methods of processing and preserving fish. The strategies of the English merchants, Icelandic fishermen and Hanse traders are all considered. The different behaviour of these groups are interpreted in terms of the concept of situated reason. Economic decisions were made according to the perspectives and value-systems of each group. The development of the Icelandic fisheries was also affected by the diplomatic aims of the Danish crown, which was struggling to reassert control within a distant territory.*

Commercial fishing by its very nature was intimately connected with trade. Yet the subjects of fishing and trade in the Middle Ages have generally been studied separately. Without the ability to distribute and sell fresh fish very rapidly or to preserve fish for later sale and consumption, large-scale fishing was impossible. Some work on the connections between trade and fishing has been undertaken and the broad outlines of their relationship are beginning to emerge. Barrett *et al.* (2004, 631) have argued that the advent of fishing on a substantial scale and the development of the fish trade around the end of the first millennium coincided with an increase in commerce in western Europe more generally. Kowaleski (2003) has identified a second stage in the commercialization of fishing which took place at the end of the fourteenth and during the course of the fifteenth century during which the scale of production was substantially increased. The present paper examines further the concept of second-stage commercialization by looking at fishing in Icelandic waters. It begins with a review of commerce between Scandinavia and northern Europe and sets the development of fishing within the context of the struggle for power between the four parties, the English fishers and traders, the Icelanders, the Danish crown, as overlords of Iceland, and later in the fifteenth century, Hanseatic merchants. The second issue considered here is the practical operation of fishing and trade. The paper concludes with an examination of the strategies adopted by all the parties as a means of understanding the rationality of their actions.

It would be possible to take a simple view of trade and fishing, and argue that a larger market led to more extensive fishing; that the two were simply an example of demand stimulating supply. At the heart of this analysis is the view that fishing and trade must be studied as the result of social processes as well as an economic activity. This approach has much in common with the culturalist position adopted by anthropologists, such as Gudeman (2001). This is a contextual approach which regards trading systems as embedded within or contingent upon the societies in which they operate. Economies operate according to a rationale defined by their society, a view termed 'situated reason' (Gudeman 2001, 38-42). Behaviour is reasoned and structured according to the perspectives and value-systems of the participants. However, the problems become more complex when we begin to consider trade between cultures. This necessitated an imperfect compromise between the different economic and social values. The parties suppress or set aside their differences while they both benefit through the exchange in goods. Trade, however, carries a cost in terms of its social and economic side-effects. The practices and regulations which surround the exchange seek to limit those undesired consequences, though inevitably they cannot entirely contain them.

### **The historical context**

Commercial contacts between the north Atlantic and north-west Europe date to at least the Viking period and continued through the eleventh century. Trade between Grimsby and Norway in the reign of William I is implied the escape of a hostage on a boat sailing between the two places. The Icelandic *Saga of Earl Rognvald* also records that merchants from Norway and Orkney came to Grimsby about 1116 (*Symeon Monachi* 2, 202; *Icelandic Sagas* 3, 97-98). Norwegian merchants were certainly established in London by 1130 when they are mentioned in regulations for foreign merchants, but it is possible that these might even date to the eleventh century (Bateson 1902, 499; Brooke and Keir 1975, 267). Such links have also been demonstrated by the quantity of medieval pottery from south-east and eastern England found in Bergen. The pottery suggests that there was intensified contact between England and Norway in the later twelfth century, but the quantity of London-area pottery shows a sharp decline in the thirteenth century (Blackmore and Vince 1989, 112). The falling away of pottery may have been due to a number of reasons, but the historical evidence does not suggest a decline in commerce between the two countries.

The strength of trade between Britain and Norway and the mutual benefit which was perceived by both sides led in 1223 to the first trade agreement concluded by either country (*Calendar of Patent Rolls 1216-25*, 384). The spirit of this agreement was reflected the following year in the exemption for Norwegian ships from a general arrest of ships made (*Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, I, 606-07). The main imports to England were fish and also wood which were supplied in return for grain and cloth. The level of Norwegian trade seems to have been largely maintained until the end of the thirteenth century, but diplomatic relationship gradually cooled in the second half of the century as Norway moved closer to Scotland in its interests (Helle 1967, 12-13, 16-17, 32-33; Lloyd 1982, 125-26).

Norwegian control over foreign trade with the north Atlantic was strengthened in 1294 when merchants were forbidden to sail beyond Bergen in Norway without licence and in the early fourteenth century it was further decreed that they could not sail to the Norwegian colonies, including Iceland, Faroe and Shetland (*DN* 5, no. 23; *Norges gamle Love* 3, no. 53). This is unlikely to have caused many problems for English merchants at first since most of the trade was conducted in Norwegian vessels and there was little, if any, trade between England and the north Atlantic islands. Trade between Norway and England was substantial in the first decade of the fourteenth century. There were seventy-five ships at King's Lynn in the three trading seasons from February 1303 to November 1305, and smaller numbers at Ravenser at the head of the Humber and at Hull which were the main ports visited by Norwegians. In addition, there were an estimated twenty ships carrying fish operated by Hanse merchants (Nedkvidne 1983, 579). The numbers began to fall in the second decade with allegations of ill-treatment of merchants. It was said in 1312 that four hundred English were detained in Norway, though no doubt the numbers were much exaggerated (Lloyd 1982, 125-26, 151-52). By the second quarter of the fourteenth century the trading activity by Norwegians was substantially curtailed by competition with Hanseatic merchants who largely took over the export of fish. The Norwegians maintained links with the north Atlantic islands where the Hanse merchants were not allowed to trade, but these were limited in scope and commerce there also declined in the second half of the fourteenth century (Gelsinger 1981, 185-86; Thorsteinsson 1957, 168).

The Hanse created a firm foothold in Bergen, the main trading port in Norway, and had established a *køntor* there by c. 1350 (Gade 1951, 55). Relations between the Hanse and the Norwegian government deteriorated and the German merchants withdrew in 1368 on the outbreak of war which allowed English merchants briefly to

establish themselves in Bergen. When peace was re-established in 1370, Hanse merchants returned and attacked the English (*DN* 19, no. 591). Nevertheless, trade by English merchants continued, and it has been argued by Schreiner (1941, 93) that it expanded during the 1390s with shipments of grain and malt being traded for stockfish (*DN* 19, nos 618-20, 624, 628-29, 631).

It is rather more difficult to trace fishing by foreign vessels than trade, since the former was less closely regulated. Fishing vessels in foreign waters were rarely subject to the payment of dues unless they sold their catch abroad. Nevertheless, it is apparent that English fishing vessels were venturing out into the north Atlantic by the end of the fourteenth century. Boats from Norfolk were working in Scottish waters and in 1383 fishermen from Cromer and Blakeney complained that their doggers had been arrested for use in the navy and asked that they should be allowed to leave to fish off the coasts of Denmark and Norway (*Chronica Monasterii: Historia Anglicana* 2, 246; TNA, SC8/102/5100; for doggers, see Marcus 1954). It was said that in 1406 that one hundred fishermen from the same ports and elsewhere in Norfolk were working off the Norwegian coast when they were attacked and driven into 'Wynford' or Fensfjord near Bergen (*DN* 19, no. 707; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1408-13*, 384). The accounts of the early voyages to Iceland recorded in the *Nýi Annáll* suggest that the one of the first boats to arrive in 1412 was a fishing vessel which appeared at Dyrhólar at the southern-most tip of the island. The following year a trading vessel appeared with a licence from the Danish king, and in the same year thirty or more doggers, which were fishing vessels, also made the voyage to Iceland (*Annales Islandici* 1, 18). However, this may not have been the start of trade there since it had been reported that there were foreign, possibly English, merchants in Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands) in 1396/97 (*Annales Islandici* 1, 8-9).

Trading and fishing activity in the north Atlantic expanded considerably during the early fifteenth century. Within a few years of the appearance of a fishing vessel in Iceland in 1412, it had become one of the major fishing areas for vessels from the east coast of England. In 1417-18 eleven ships went from Scarborough alone (Heath 1968, 63). At about the same time German merchants had begun to sail to Shetland, presumably to purchase stockfish and perhaps coarse cloth. The earliest recorded trader there is mentioned in 1415 and the following year the Hansetag forbade voyages to Orkney, Shetland and Faroe, perhaps suggesting that such journeys were already taking place to the other islands as well (Friedland 1973, 68; ). There were substantial profits to be made from fishing in the north Atlantic. Scarborough fishermen going to Iceland in the period had average gross incomes of £85 (Heath 1968, 57). Similar voyages were

made up the Norwegian coast as far north as Finmark, well beyond Bergen to which foreign vessels were supposed to be restricted (*Rotuli Parliamentorum* 4, 79; DN 1, no. 670).

Fishing and trade grew so rapidly that in 1414 the Danish king sent a letter to Iceland forbidding trade with foreigners. The following year King Eric also wrote to the king of England complaining about damage done in Iceland and to the fisheries around it. The English response was merely to confirm that fishermen should continue to take fish to the staple at Bergen for the payment of custom, and this was proclaimed in towns on the East Coast, including Newcastle, Scarborough, Hull, Boston, Lynn and the fishing settlements of Whitby, Grimsby, Dersingham, Blakeney, Burnham and Cromer (*Annales Islandici* 1, 20; DN 20, nos 733, 735-37). This was largely ignored. The emphasis of English activity in Iceland at this time seems to have been on fishing rather than trade, although a list of the rates of exchange rates for (stock)fish and goods at Vestmannaeyjar suggests that there was some commerce too (DN 20, no. 742, 753).

The fishermen and traders continued to circumvent the restrictions placed upon them by the Danish king until 1429 when voyages to both Finmark and Iceland were forbidden in the English parliament and merchants were restricted to the staple town of Bergen (*Rotuli Parliamentorum* 4, 347). However, this statute was little more effective than the earlier proclamation. Within a few years the English crown, which had no great enthusiasm to enforce it, began to issue licences to trade, and fishing also continued unabated (Childs 1995, 18, n. 22 indicates the numbers of licences issued).

The murder in 1467 of the Danish governor (*birðstóri*), Björn Þorleifsson by English sailors in Rif triggered a new crisis in the relations between England and Denmark (Þorsteinsson 1970, 209-12). Though the Danish king was lacked leverage in Iceland, it was possible to take action against English ships trading in the Baltic and in June 1468 seven ships were seized in the Øresund. The event led to war between England and the Hanse which was only concluded by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1474 (*Rotuli Parliamentorum* 6, 65). Agreement between the English and Danish crowns was not reached until 1490 when English boats were again allowed to trade with Iceland and to fish if they purchased licences at seven-year intervals. However, when the treaty was presented to the Icelandic *Alþing*, it struck out the clauses concerning fishing rights and limited it only to those vessels who were also trading. Their concern expressed some years later was that the larger English vessels operated further out at sea were catching fish and so preventing them from coming inshore where they might be caught by the Icelanders (Baasch 1889, 58). A decree forbidding foreigners from over-wintering in

Iceland was reiterated, and, if they were forced to stay in the country out of necessity, they were required to sell goods during the winter at the same price as the summer (*DI* 6, no. 617; see also TNA, HCA 13/93, f. 253).

Ships from Hanse began journeying to Iceland in increasing numbers in the 1470s and this inevitably brought them into conflict with the English vessels. In 1474 there was a fight between merchants from Hull and Bristol on the one hand and German traders on the other (*DI* 6, no. 66). The continuing lawlessness in Iceland led Richard III in 1484 to direct ships from Norfolk and Suffolk to assemble in the Humber and go in convoy with those from Hull (*Letters and Papers of Richard III and Henry VII*, 2, 287). Conflict persisted throughout the latter part of the fifteenth and into the sixteenth century between the ships of the Hanse and those of England, even though hostilities had been formally concluded (Carus-Wilson 1954, 140-41; Seaver 1996, 205).

### **Fishing and trade**

The businesses of fishing and trade were rarely separate activities for English merchants voyaging to Iceland. Routes pioneered by trading vessels seeking to obtain stockfish, caught by Icelanders and preserved by wind-drying, were followed by fishing vessels seeking to catch fish themselves and preserve it by salting, and vice versa. Once these routes were opened up, fishing and trading often took place on the same voyage. The evidence for this is abundant in the sixteenth century, but it is almost certain that the same was true in the fifteenth. The *Christopher* of Hull bought 4½ lasts and sixty stockfish (5460 fish), train (fish) oil and some cloth while fishing in Icelandic waters in 1430 (Childs 2000, 22). Three further examples drawn from the sixteenth century serve to illustrate this in greater detail. In a deposition Richard Cutbert of Southolt (Suffolk) gave details of a voyage to Iceland c. 1535. He had chartered a boat, the *Anne*, from Snodland (Kent) to go to Iceland, but its departure was delayed. Eventually it returned with 6000 salted ling and 4695 salted cod worth about £450, and twenty-seven lasts of stockfish (equivalent to 35,400 fish), twelve ‘wode’ of coarse cloth and two hogshead of train oil, worth about £250 in total (TNA, SP 1/99, ff. 170-78). The salted ling and cod were probably caught by the *Anne*. Salt was not produced in Iceland and so fish caught by native fishermen there were wind-dried in the winter and spring, and exported as stockfish. The fish carried back by the *Anne* was thus a mixed cargo obtained by fishing and trade.

The second example illustrates the opportunistic nature of trade in the north Atlantic and way in which it did not always run along the neat lines sometimes imagined. The *Jesus* of Tenby set out in 1564 to sail to Newfoundland to go fishing, but it was so late in the year that during the course of the voyage the ship turned back to Scotland and went to Orkney where it met with two Flemish busses. It hailed these and bought from them 144 barrels of herring. Subsequently, it encountered a ship from Hamburg which may have been sailing back from Iceland or Shetland since it was loaded with stockfish. It bought part of that cargo. Then the *Jesus* came into Papa Stour in Shetland where it met another ship and bought from it salted ling and cod which that vessel had evidently caught itself. Finally, the *Jesus* spent a couple of days fishing before returning to Tenby in the third week of September (TNA, HCA 13/15, f. 11).

This may not have been a typical voyage, but equally it not wholly unusual. It reflects the pragmatic approach to the gathering of fish by English, or in this case Welsh vessels. Like many English ships, the *Jesus* was not just fishing, nor just trading, but sought to fill its hold with whatever fish, or indeed other cargo, might be obtained, wherever it might be obtained.

The third example is the *James* of Dunwich which went to Iceland in 1545 and suggests a quite different approach. There survives for this a list of laded goods. This is in some ways the most illuminating source of all, since we can infer the intentions of the venturers who equipped the ship for the voyage. Most of the materials listed are victuals for feeding the ship's company and fishing gear, including hooks, lines for catching and salt for preserving the fish. The employees sent to Iceland included a merchant, Geoffrey Smythe, and the goods for sale are recorded separately from the company's victuals. These included food (butter, meal, wine), fabric, clothing and footwear (linen, broad cloth, shirts, shoes, boots) and utilitarian items (kettles, horse shoes, whetstones, wax)(Cooper 1939; Webb 1962, 82-83). Smythe would have been left off with their goods, presumably shortly after reaching Iceland, perhaps at one of the major ports in south-west Iceland – perhaps Vestmanaeyjar. There he would have set up a booth to store the merchandise and the stockfish taken in return. Towards the end of the season, in July, or August the *James* would have picked up Smythe and the stockfish which had been obtained in exchanged before the ship set sail back to England.

Merchant ships required no adaption to undertake fishing. The fish were caught from small boats, skiffs or dogger boats, which were launched from the ships. The skiffs set long lines with hooks, often far off from the coast (on such boats, see Webb 1962, 78, 81 and TNA, SP 1/99, f. 170; on methods of fishing, see Jones 2000, 109). The mother



ships might trade at small settlements when they came to land to take on fresh water, but this can only have ever been a minor activity. The greater part of trade was conducted by merchants who set up booths or ‘caves’ as they are termed in contemporary English sources, close to the shore in ports.

The advantage of a mixed strategy combining fishing and commerce was that it ensured a return for the merchants, even in years when there was a paucity of stockfish to be obtained in Iceland. There was considerable competition between merchants for supplies of stockfish, and ships which arrived late in the season might find that others had already purchased all that was available (Childs 1995, 26). It was said that the violent events which led to the deaths of 40 English sailors in Grindavík in 1532 were precipitated by competition over supplies of stockfish. The English sailor, John Bray bought stockfish which were to be had by Hamburger merchants and then taunted the Germans to come and obtain them by force (*Annales Islandici* 1, 92-93; Þorsteinsson 1957-61, 82).

Some smaller vessels engaged only in fishing. They may have lacked the expertise to trade or the capital to purchase goods to exchange for stockfish. The *Margaret Bonaventure* of Dunwich, a craft of 55 tons was sent to fish between Scotland and Iceland was equipped in the 1560s only with victuals for the crew and fishing gear (Williams 1988, 93). Though quite small, this vessel was close to the mean size of ships from the East Coast and London voyaging to Iceland in 1533. As we might expect, ships from the major ports such as Lynn, the Orwell (Ipswich) and London tended to be amongst the largest. The twenty-two ships recorded under the heading of Dunwich, and presumably including the nearby ports of Southwold and Walberswick, were notably smaller with a mean size of 37 tons (TNA, SP1/80, ff 60-78). It was evidently similar vessels – twenty-two fishing boats and thirteen barks – which were drawn up on the beach at Walberswick in 1451 and were engaged in fishing and trading with Iceland, Faroe and the North Sea (Oppenheim 1907, 211).

The character of trade and fishing can be investigated further by examining English customs accounts and for this purpose those of Hull have been chosen (for limitations of accounts of other ports, see Childs 1995, 21). Hull was one of the major ports involved in Icelandic trade and fishing in the fifteenth century. Its commerce was as large or larger than Bristol and greater than London. The destination of the ships is not recorded, but it can be concluded with some certainty that it was Iceland from the goods exported and the return cargo which was formed exclusively of stockfish (Childs 1995, 20-21). Table 1 shows the Hull ships which, according to the surviving custom

accounts, made the most frequent voyages to Iceland and the number of stockfish which they bought on their return. The figures have been calculated on the basis that a 'hundred' of stockfish was often measured by a long hundred (120). (For salted fish the figure was 124 fish to the 'hundred'.) A last was a 'thousand' stockfish was counted in a similar manner and so equal to 1200 fish (*Select Tracts and Table Books*, 17, 29; British Library, Lansdowne MS 21, f. 137).

There is notable variation in the figures with, for example, the *Anthony* of Hull bringing back three times as many stockfish in 1462 as in 1465 and the *Anne* with a cargo in 1468 which was apparently four times as large as that in 1471. The general pattern of trade with Iceland from Hull suggests that there was a significant change after 1468 when it declined considerably. There are problems in refining this overall picture because the customs accounts in some years open too late or close too early to allow us to be certain that they include all ships trading with Iceland. Moreover, the volume of trade must have depended on the number of ships making the voyage which was always rather small. Nevertheless, it is very likely that much smaller numbers of stockfish imported in 1471 reflect the crisis following the murder of Björn Þorleifsson in 1467. The impact of this was not felt in 1468, but in June that year the English were banned from sailing to Iceland and war broke out with the Hanse. The persistence of trade, albeit at a lower level, suggests that, as in the past, Danish decrees were not fully effective so far from the seat of power, but they clearly did have a significant impact on the volume of commerce.

If we set these particular events to one side, we might suggest three different reasons for the varying quantities of stockfish bought back in the same ships. First, the cargoes unloaded at Hull and subject to customs dues there might not represent the full contents of the ship. It may have sailed on elsewhere with a hold part full of stockfish. Second, the return cargoes may be affected by the catches of fish by Icelanders and the competition to obtain stockfish from them. In short, the size of cargo was supply-led. Third, the cargo of stockfish might be demand-led. Merchants decided not to send large volumes of goods to Iceland and consequently the volume of fish obtained in return was smaller.

The first of these can be rejected. We have for customs accounts of a few voyages recording not only the individual merchants importing stockfish, but also the goods which were sent out for exchange. There are twenty-four merchants who loaded goods on to the *Mary* of Hull in 1461 and are recorded as importing stockfish. Two more export, but do not import, and seven import stockfish and have no recorded exports. The two exporters both have locative surnames - John Richemond and John Hebden -

and it is possible that they appear amongst the unaccounted importers under different surnames. Similarly, the *Trinity* of Hull which sailed the same year had sixteen merchants who exported and brought back goods to Hull in return. There were two exporters without imports which we can recognize, and six unaccounted importers. Clearly, in most cases the merchants laded and off-loaded goods at Hull and we must reject the first explanation.

It is more difficult to determine between the other alternatives. The second possibility is that the ships left Hull with a cargo of goods to exchange for stockfish, but found too few fish offered in exchange. We might be able to explore this hypothesis by looking at the match between the goods exported and the fish imported. If we find that the two are poorly correlated, then it would be likely that this was because the merchants in Iceland were unsuccessful in obtaining supplies of stockfish. Unfortunately, this is not easy to do. We can examine three voyages for which we have the customs records for the exported goods and the stockfish obtained in return, and sum the most common goods taken on each voyage (Table 2). This excludes items, such as kettles and belts, swords and silk, which were only freighted occasionally. Proper comparison requires that we know that the relative values of each of these goods in Iceland. We do have a lists of values in terms of stockfish proclaimed in Vestmannaeyjar in 1420, but it is difficult to translate that into the units of measure used by English merchants (*DI* 4, no. 337). Furthermore, we need to be aware that the fish listed the 1420 table may be *vattir* fish, that is ‘fish’ used as a unit of currency rather than actual stockfish (Gunnarsson 1983, 18-19; Hastrup 1990, 139-41).

Given these uncertainties, we have inadequate evidence to decide between the second and third hypotheses. We cannot tell whether the variation in the size of imported cargoes of stockfish in the same ship in different years was a consequence of the availability of stockfish in Iceland or the volume of goods exported from Hull for exchange. Whichever was the case, it clearly had an impact on the profitability of the voyage. The hire of the ship, the wages of the crew and the supply of victuals were fixed, regardless of the volume of goods obtained in exchange in Iceland. If the variation in imports was due to the availability of stockfish in Iceland, then this was more serious for merchants who had invested in goods for export and were unable to exchange them. There was a clear commercial logic in fishing from merchant boats since it provided an alternative source of fish for import, though we cannot know whether this was what actually happened on the Hull ships examined here.

The emphasis in the discussion so far has been on the fishing and trade by English merchants. However, much of the fishing was undertaken by Icelanders. The Hanseatic ships did not fish at all and their cargoes were entirely made up of dried fish purchased from Icelandic fishers. We need to turn now to Icelandic fishing practices, but we must start off by acknowledging that the historical evidence in the fifteenth century for these is very limited. We may be able to use evidence of traditional fishing practices, but we need to be cautious. We run the risk of creating an ‘ethnographic present’ if which we imagine the medieval past to be no different from more recent practices (Krivogorskaya *et al.* 2005, 45). Nevertheless, it seems probable that in the fifteenth century fishing took place in the winter or spring when there was otherwise little call on labour, so it did not compete with work on the farm (Kristjansson 1982, 485-86). Farmers from inland areas may have moved to temporary settlements or outstations (*útlver*) on the coast where they occupied huts (*verbiðir*), as they did in later centuries. Fish were prepared and dried at the fishing stations (Amundsen *et al.* 2005). The fish could either have been brought back to the home farm at the end of the fishing season, or may have been kept at the fishing stations and taken by sea to the trading sites.

We can provide some historical substance to these suppositions. There survives an account book drawn up by the Bremen merchant, Claus Monnickhusen for 1558, which lists fishers those who owed him for goods which had been supplied in advance (Hofmeister 2001). Monnichausen had a trading site at Kumbarvogur on the north coast of Snæfellsnes facing Breiðafjörður which was an important fishing area (see Gardiner and Mehler 2008, 415-18 for details). It was one of a number of trading sites in the area. Others were to be found on the south side of Snæfellsnes at Buðir, Arnarstapi and on the north at Rif, Grundarfjörður and Nesvogur (Fig. 1). The account book lists the names of the individuals and their farms from which they came allowing us to identify the location of indebted fisher-farmers within the hinterland of Kumbarvogur. We have no way of knowing whether these represented all the fisher-farmers who regularly came to trade at that site, but it is sufficient to provide an understanding of the Icelandic practice of fishing.

The distribution shows that most fisher-farmers selling stockfish at Kumbarvogur came from the north coast of Snæfellsnes, from the coasts of Fellströnd and Skarðsströnd, and islands in Breiðafjörður. Almost all of these were from farms that were situated on or very close to the sea and the fishers could have operated from their homes. It is likely that they would have brought stockfish to Kumbarvogur by boat. Indeed, there would have been no alternative for those fishers based on islands in

Breiðafjörður. A smaller number came from the east end of the south coast of Snæfellsnes and even from inland farms in Hnappadalur. Presumably, those fishers based to the west of Gaul and Stakkhamar were trading at Arnarstapi and Búðir, and therefore had no dealings with Monnichausen at Kumbaravogur. Again most of the fishers operated from farmsteads close to the sea. Only two farmsteads were very far inland: those at Staðarhraun and nearby Hítardalur, and even these were little more than 10km from the coast. It is much less likely that those from the south of Snæfellsnes and Hítardalur transported fish to Kumbaravogur by sea, since the journey around the west end of the peninsular is very long. It is much more probable that they brought fish by land over the pass through Hjarðarfellisdalur or one of the passes to the east climbing up from Hnappadalur.

In this area of Iceland no farm was very distant from the sea, since all the better land is situated towards the periphery. Most fishers would have been able to operate from home and many from bases situated on their own land (*heimraði*). Only a few outstations are known from more recent times and some of these may have been used in the sixteenth century for farms, particularly those in Hítardalur, which were further from the coast. The broad bays of Flaxaflói and Breiðafjörður were good fishing grounds and the evidence from Monnichausen account book suggests that many farmsteads practised fishing. It suggests that in the mid-sixteenth century there were few constraints in getting access to the sea or selling dried fish to foreign merchants. Much the same was probably the case fifty years earlier at the end of the fifteenth century. Kumbaravogur and Grundarfjörður had both been used as trading sites from before 1523, and there were other similar sites in the vicinity, including Rif ('Gamelwick') which had been used since at least the late fifteenth century (*DI* 16, nos 234, 268, 285).

The evidence both from England, Germany and Iceland has allowed us to construct a reasonable picture of fishing and trading patterns in the fifteenth century which can now be summarized. Substantial numbers of ships were sailed northward each year from England to Icelandic waters. In 1528 as many as 149 ships made the voyage, though this was perhaps after some decades of growth in fishing and in the fifteenth century the numbers may have been rather smaller (Jones 2000, 105-06; Williams 1988, 95). English activity included both fishing and trading, often from the same vessels, though some smaller ships may have only engaged in fishing. Hanse activity by contrast was solely limited to trading: there is no evidence for fishing by Hanseatic vessels. Trade was carried out at a series of established centres around the coast of Iceland, particularly in the south-west, west and north-west, the areas with the best fishing grounds (Gardiner

and Mehler 2007, 389-95). The trading sites allowed dried fish prepared by numerous fisher-farmers to be bulked for transport back to England and continental Europe. Fishing by Icelanders remained a small-scale enterprise in spite of the demand from foreign merchants.

### **The strategies of fishing and trade**

Trade between peoples of different cultures involves careful negotiation to establish both the practices by which exchange is performed and agreement on systems of value. Once agreement has been reached on these matters, it needs to be continually re-negotiated, since trade affects both socially and economically all those that it touches. By the end of the fifteenth century in Iceland there were three parties at least to the trade - the Icelanders, the English and the Hanse merchants. The Danish crown was a fourth party, who though not engaged in trade, was seeking to regain power and control over activity in an area in which it had little influence. It is useful to examine each of the parties in turn to look at their strategies as they had evolved by 1500 in terms of their situated reason (see above for this term) and consider the impact these had on fishing.

Fundamental to the Icelandic conception of trade was that view that fishing should always be an adjunct of farming and not a separate activity in itself. The farm (*bú*) was treated as the unit of production and consumption. During the fifteenth century, when there were labour shortages due to decline in population following the outbreak of plague in 1404-05, a series of measures were enacted to tie labourers to work on farmsteads. The *búalög* or household law, which is known from a manuscript dating to the mid-fifteenth century, regulated the duties and rights of farm servants (Hastrup 1990, 54-57). Cottagers (*búðsetumenn*) who did not own enough cattle to provide a living were not allowed to make a boat or to employ others at sea (Hastrup 1990, 109). The result was that fishing did not develop as an industry itself, but was always as an appendage which was subordinate to farming. The aim of fishing by Icelanders was not to accumulate capital, which was difficult in a coinless society, but to provide a source of food and through exchange to acquire imported food and other goods. Fishers did not seek to build larger ships for this purpose or expand their enterprise. It was necessary only to satisfy the needs of the farming household.

The failure of urban development in Iceland was a corollary of the centrality of the farm. The existence of towns depends upon trade and craft-production, but in Iceland the latter could only take place within the context of the farm. Trade was

accepted as a necessary part of Icelandic life, but traders were not. The sagas portray a society in the thirteenth century in which commerce was deeply alien. Instead gift-giving, both willing and enforced were more common. 'There was little time spent bargaining over price, the hasty abandonment of which marked the rejection of the mercantilist mode' (Miller 1986, 46). There is little evidence that attitudes had changed by the fifteenth century when prices for trade in fish were still being set (*DI* 4, no. 337). Traders themselves were tolerated as a necessary evil, but were kept at arm's length and largely excluded from Icelandic society. One of the principles was that foreigners should not be allowed to settle in the country and this was achieved by preventing over-wintering. A decree against the year-round presence of foreigners was first recorded in the *Jónsbók* in 1281 when it was aimed at Norwegians. It was repeated in 1431 (*DI* 4, no. 506) with the English in mind and again in the *Piningsdómur* of 1490. The result of both the emphasis on farm and measures against the permanent settlement of traders was that urban centres failed to develop, even in major places of trade such as Vestmannaeyjar and Hafnarfjörður.

The strategies of the English traders have already been discussed in part. The investment in chartering and outfitting a vessel for Iceland was considerable and the risks also very substantial. The *James* of Dunwich is one of the few Iceland-bound ships for which we have complete records for the expenses of outfitting. In 1545 the costs of equipment and victuals were £151, of goods for sale were £37 and wages for the crew were £99, a total of £287 (Cooper 1939). The costs were not always as great as this. The expense of chartering the *Christopher* of Southwold in the 1530s with its equipments, stores and salt for preserving the catch was £120. It was reckoned by deponents in a subsequent trial that the two venturers would have made a profit £20 each, equivalent to a return on capital of 33%, a figure comparable with Newfoundland voyages by French vessels in the mid-sixteenth century which produced a return of 27.5% (TNA, SP 1/99, ff. 170-78; Innis 1954, 21). The investment and profit had to be set against the risk of the ships floundering, being captured by pirates off the Scottish coast or attacked by Hanse merchants (Williams 1988, 90). One means to reduce the investment was to involve a larger number of parties in the costs of equipping a ship. This was clearly the approach to the ships leaving Hull in the fifteenth century, and some merchants chose to diversify their risks further by investing in goods dispatched on more than one ship. An example is Nicholas Stubbs who in 1461 sent cloth, barley meal, honey and iron on the *Mary* of Hull and cloth, beer, belts, rye meal, knives and iron on the *Trinity* of Hull, both of bound for

Iceland, and returned with cargoes stockfish obtained in exchange (*Customs Accounts of Hull*, 32, 33, 35, 37).

The approach of Hanse merchants to the Icelandic trade have not been considered so far. The interests of German merchants were well served by the establishment of the staple at Bergen where there was a permanent settlement of merchants and a supply of stockfish from northern Norway. The Bergen *kontor* allowed German merchants to dominate trade in the north Atlantic, particularly after the defeat of the Danes in 1370 when the terms of peace included the exclusion of English and Flemish traders from Bergen (Gade 1951, 92). The nature of trade in dispersed ports in Iceland made the establishment of a virtual trade monopoly more difficult. This may explain the ambivalent attitude of the Hanse towns to direct trade with Iceland. Lübeck and Bergen were opposed to such a move and wished that trade should continue to be channelled through Bergen (*DI* 6, no. 363). However, within a few years ships were regularly travelling from the German ports to Iceland. The Hanse merchants lacked the diversified approach to obtaining fish of their English counterparts and were dependent upon acquiring sufficient stockfish. However, they also developed other exports which had been partially or wholly neglected by the English, including coarse-cloth (*vaðmal*), hides, eider-down and sulphur (Marcus 1980, 154). There was sharp competition for the supply of stockfish, but it was more difficult to establish in Iceland the near-monopoly which had applied in Bergen. Many ports had developed in the south-west of Iceland at Straum, Vatnleysa, Hafnarfjörður, Keflavík, Básendar and Grindavík and it was from these that the English ships were progressively harassed or driven out in the last years of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, though they continued to trade in the Vestmannaeyjar (Þorsteinsson 1970, 246-48; *Calendar of Manuscripts of the Marquis of Salisbury* 13, 70).

The final party which had influence on fishing and trading in Iceland was the Danish crown. Up to 1449 successive kings of Denmark struggled to maintain the Bergen staple through which fish should be traded. and throughout the fifteenth century worked to limit the influence of the English in Iceland and to restrain Hanseatic power in the north Atlantic. Lacking a naval presence and any military capability in Iceland severely limited what it might hope to achieve. The only significant measure which might be adopted to force the English crown to negotiate was to seize ships in the Øresund, a tactic used twice in 1447 and in 1468 (Þorsteinsson 1957-61, 70-71). Though this reduced English activity in Iceland, it did not prevent it. By the end of the fifteen century Danish policy had shifted to taxing both merchant and fishing vessels (Webb 1962, 84). Whether



Danish policy extended to playing off the English against the Hanse merchants is unclear, though it was perhaps hardly necessary since the relationship between the two groups remained very poor. The regulation of Hanse merchants was a good deal easier for Danish officials in Iceland than the management of English ships. The English mixture of fishing and trade was difficult to regulate and tax. Trade might take place when vessels came inshore to shelter and take on firewood or water, or in a more systematic way. In order to prevent this fishing vessels departing for Iceland in 1491 were ordered to take no more victuals than were required for the voyage (*Paston Letters and Papers* 2, no 824). The aim was to ensure that all exported goods paid customs dues in England and to prevent opportunistic trading in Iceland which might otherwise not be taxed there.

## Conclusions

Earlier studies of Icelandic fishing and trade have looked at the problem in terms of politics, economics and practical operation (for example, Carus-Wilson 1954; Jones 2000; Þorsteinsson 1957-61; 1970). This study has sought to examine the strategies of the participants and to consider their aims with an understanding of their different cultural values. It has argued that the Icelandic enterprise was part of what Kowalaski (2003) has identified, though she does not use the term, as second-stage commercialization. This was a step-change in the level of investment and the scale of fishing which took place around the turn of the fifteenth century. It is marked by longer distance voyages in search of fish, the adoption of improved methods of fish-preserving and the use of larger vessels (Kowaleski 2003, 220-27; Unger 1978, 345-49). Like the first stage of commercialization of fishing, which Barrett *et al.* (2004) have identified taking place around AD1000, this phenomenon seems to have affected not only Britain, but also much of north-west Europe at about the same time (see comments by Unger 1978, 348-49, 353-56).

It is important to emphasise that the adoption of capital-intensive fishing did not drive out small-scale family or group fishing enterprises which continued to work local waters (for example, Sweetinburgh 2006, 96). In Iceland the second-stage fishing vessels worked by English sailors operated, though usually further out to sea, with the smaller, first-stage vessels of the Icelanders. The Icelandic fishers were farm-based and their enterprise required less capital investment, particularly when it was working from a home base. Their fishing was complimentary to English fishing and trading practices. It did not

act in rivalry but allowed the English to diversify risk. The two enterprises met at trading sites where the stockfish could be bulked or amassed by English and Hanseatic traders for shipping back to their home ports.

Three key points have been advanced in this paper. The first is that for the English the businesses of fishing and trade in the north Atlantic were inseparable. This does not mean that every vessel did both, but rather that it is wrong to assume that most ships were engaged exclusively in either fishing or trade. This mixed approach stands in sharp contrast to the Hanseatic merchants who were solely traders. They do not seem to have undertaken any fishing themselves. The second point is that the participants in fishing operations were working according to different strategies which become comprehensible if we understand the cultural context in which their decisions were made. The final point is that the study of the fishing by the English and an understanding of the trading operations by the Hanse has helped to clarify the emerging concept of second-stage commercialization of the fishing industry.

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### **Illustration caption**

Fig. 1 The trading hinterland of Kumbaravogur, based on Hofmeister 2001, 31 with outstations (*útlver*) from Kristjánsson 1982.