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Cetaceans, sex and sea serpents: an analysis of the Egede accounts of a “most dreadful monster” seen off the coast of Greenland in 1734

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ABSTRACT: A re-evaluation of the “most dreadful monster” originally described by the “Apostle of Greenland” Hans Egede in 1741 suggests that the missionary’s son Poul probably saw an unfamiliar cetacean. The species seen was likely to have been a humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), a North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) or one of the last remaining Atlantic grey whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) either without flukes or possibly a male in a state of arousal.

KEY WORDS: sea-monster – flukeless whales – whale’s penis – Hans Egede – Poul Egede.

INTRODUCTION

The famous account of the Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede, “the Apostle of Greenland”, of “a most dreadful monster” (H. Egede, 1741, 1745) seen off the coast of Greenland in 1734, has been a regular feature of sea-monster books ever since Henry Lee’s *Sea monsters unmasked* (1883). The case is interesting in that Egede had drawn and described a number of large northern whale species in his book so he obviously felt the “dreadful” monster was something different.

Conjectures about this curious animal have included such known animals as a giant squid (Ellis, 1998; Lee, 1883) or an (extinct) Basilosaurid whale (Thomas, 1996) as well as such speculative animals as a giant marine otter (Heuvelmans, 1968) or a giant long-necked seal (Oudemans, 1892). However most authors have relied solely upon the imperfect 1745 English translation of Hans Egede’s book *A description of Greenland*, rather than the additional accounts of this incident in the original Danish. We consider four early sources for this encounter, one by Hans Egede, two by his son Poul and fourthly some remarks attributed second-hand to another witness, a Mr Bing, and we offer a novel interpretation of what was seen.

ACCOUNTS

Hans Egede (1686–1758) was not a witness and his account is second-hand based presumably on the recollection of his son Poul (1708–1789) which was published separately later (P. Egede, 1741). Nonetheless it contains some information not given in the other accounts. Hans Egede’s (1741: 47– 49) account was as follows¹:

Men ingen af dem ere i vore Tider kommen os til Siuene, uden allene et forfærdeligt stort Hav-Dyr, som 1734 blev seet i Søen uden for Colonien paa 64. Gr. og var af denne Gestalt og Skikkelse. Det var et saa overmaade

stort Bæst, saa dets hovedt ragte sig lige jevnt ved Skibets Mers, der det kom op af Vandet, og Kroppen var nok saa tyk omkring som Skibet, og vel 3 à 4. gange saa lang. Det havde en lang spidz Snude, og blæste som en Hvalfisk havde breede store Laller, og Kroppen syntes at være begroet med Skiæl, og var meget runken og ujevn paa Huden. Den var ellers skabt neden til som en Orm, og der det gik under Vandet, laftet det sig bag over, og reiste saa Stierten op af vandet, en heel skibs lengde fra Kroppen.

But none of them are in our time [by] us been seen except a terribly big sea creature which in 1734 was seen in the sea outside the colony at 64 degrees. And was of this form and shape. It was a so enormously big creature, [that] its head reached the [ship's] yard arm and the body was as thick as the ship and was 3 to 4 times as long. It had a long pointed nose, and blew like a whale, [it] had big broad flippers, and the body seemed to be covered with a carapace ["shellwork" (H. Egede, 1745); "scales" (Thomas, 1996)], and the skin was wrinkled and rough. It was otherwise created at the rear like a serpent and when it went under the water it lifted itself backwards and raised then the tail up from the water a ship's length away from the body.

This passage is slightly misleading as Poul Egede's (1741: 6–7) account makes it clear that the witnesses were on a voyage from Denmark to the Danish settlement at Disko Bay (69° N), three days past the other Danish colony at Nuuk (64° N) on the west coast of Greenland.

Den 6. loed sig Tilsuene et meget forskrekligt Haf-Dyr, hvilket reiste sig saa høyt over Vandet, at Hovedet af det, ragte over vores store-Mers. Det havde en lang spidz Snude, og blæste som en Hvalfisk, havde breede store Laller, og Kroppen syntes at være begroet med Skiell, og var meget runken og ujevn paa Huden; den var ellers skabt nedentil som en Orm, og der det gik under Vandet igien kastet det sig bag over og reyste saa Stierten op af Vandet en heel Skibs længde fra Kroppen.

The 6th [July] let itself show [be visible] a very horrible sea-creature which rose itself so high over the water that the head of it reached above our big yard arm. It had a long pointed snout and it blew [spouted] like a whale [it] had broad big flippers and the body seemed to be grown [covered] with carapace and [it] was very wrinkled and uneven [rough] on its skin; it was otherwise created below like a serpent and where it went under the water again threw itself backwards and raised thereafter the tail up from the water a whole ship's length from the body.

This account was illustrated in a map (drawn by Egede senior: Figures 1–3).

Poul Egede ([1789]: 45 – 46) gave a slightly different account many years later; the undated book was probably published in 1789.

Her lod sig tilsyne et usædvanligt forfærdelig Dyr, der reiste sig saa høit over Vandet at Hovedet syntes at rekke til vor Mers. Dens Aande var ei stærk som Hvalfiskens, da den anden gang kom op af Vandet. Første Gang blev vi den ikke vaer, førend den stod saa got som over os paa et Pistol skud nær. Hovedet var smalere end kroppen, som syntes blød og runken, havde brede nedhengende Laller, det var 3 Gange over Vandet. Sidste Gang langt borte. Naar det dukkede under, kastede det sig bag over. Siden kom den lange Hale op bag efter, meer en Skibs Længde fra Kroppen.

Here let itself be shown [be visible] an extraordinarily horrible creature, that rose so high over the water that its head seemed to reach to our yard arm. Its breath was not strong as the whale's, when it the second time came out of the water. The first time we did not notice it until it stood as good as over us at a pistol shot close [to us] [at a pistol shot's distance]. The head was narrower than the body, which seemed to be soft and wrinkled, [it] had broad down-hanging flippers, it was 3 times above the water. The last time far away. When it dived under, [it] threw itself backwards. Then came the long tail up behind more than a ship's length from the body.

The earlier account (P. Egede, 1741) appears to be a more-or-less verbatim transcription from his diary, whereas this later one seems a more considered work, with diary-like material as well as commentary.² Whether the additional material was from memory or from the original diary is unclear. The later account has a revised picture of the monster from the map in a more naturalistic setting although the morphology of the animal is the same.

The meagre fourth source for the encounter is an indirect quotation in Pontoppidan's (1755) *Natural history of Norway*: "Mr Bing ... informed his brother in law, that this creature's

eyes seemed red, and like burning fire, which makes it appear it was not the common Sea-snake.” This eighteenth-century translation of the original Danish of Pontoppidan (1753) retains the essential meaning of the original.

ANALYSIS

The original language of all accounts is ambiguous and the images of the monster are at least partially stylised (Figures 1–3). Only one pair of limbs is mentioned but there is a strange protuberance visible in the drawing half way down the body, which could represent one of a second pair of limbs, or it could be a penis (but see below) or dorsal fin (depending on the orientation of the body). This assumes the diagram is an accurate representation of the encounter. It is only the rear end/underside of the monster that is described as serpent-like; Egede (1789) omitted this simile. The only estimate of size was provided by Hans Egede (1741) who stated that the monster was three to four times the length of the boat. The boat has been estimated by Landstrøm (1994) to be between 21 and 24 metres long which, accepting Egede senior’s account, could mean an animal between 64 and 98 metres long; an implausible estimate of length. Furthermore, Hans Egede’s (1741) estimate contradicted his own illustration, which suggests a creature about twice the length of the boat. Length estimation of animals in the field is notoriously unreliable (Murphy and Henderson, 1997).

What did the witnesses see? Several diagnostic features were given (Table 1). The animal “blew like a whale” (P. Egede, 1741), or “its breath was not strong as the whale’s” (Egede, 1789). Assuming the 1741 account is the more correct (early source), then the statements can be interpreted in a number of ways. Poul Egede obviously did not think it was a whale, hence the simile and the fact it was referred to as a “creature”. Nonetheless things that blow like whales are, all other things being equal, most likely to be cetaceans. It had a long snout or the head was narrower than the body. The word “Skiøel” can be variously translated as “carapace”, “shell”, “scales” (for example Thomas, 1996), or as “shellwork” (for example Egede, 1745), the latter in this context might signify encrusted with barnacles or callosities. It had at least two (observable) flippers (pectoral limbs). If these were the only limbs, then the animal would have to be a cetacean as most fishes have two pairs of paired fins (although eels have only a single pair of fins). However there is the strange protuberance depicted in the midriff of the animal (Figures 1 and 2). The monster lifted itself backwards when it dived. It is difficult to know what exactly this description means but possibly it was an attempt to say that the creature came out of the water and fell back again on to its side or back. The animal had a serpent-like tail that appeared out of the water when the rest of the beast had disappeared. The creature had red eyes that, according to the interpretation of the (exaggerated?) metaphor of Mr Bing, were glowing. Assuming the encounter took place in daylight (as it was the Arctic summer), this luminosity would seem unlikely.

Most of these features could apply to a cetacean, especially one of the few species to exhibit obvious “shellwork” (notably barnacles and callosities). Possible cetacean candidates for the creature are compared in Table 1. Three species of whales which might have been seen in the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century could be described as possessing “shellwork”. One species, now locally extinct, is the grey whale (*Eschrichtius robustus* (Lilljeborg 1861)) which, if still present (Mead and Mitchell, 1984) in the North Atlantic in the 1730s, would have been quite rare and thus may not have been recognised, even if the Egedes were

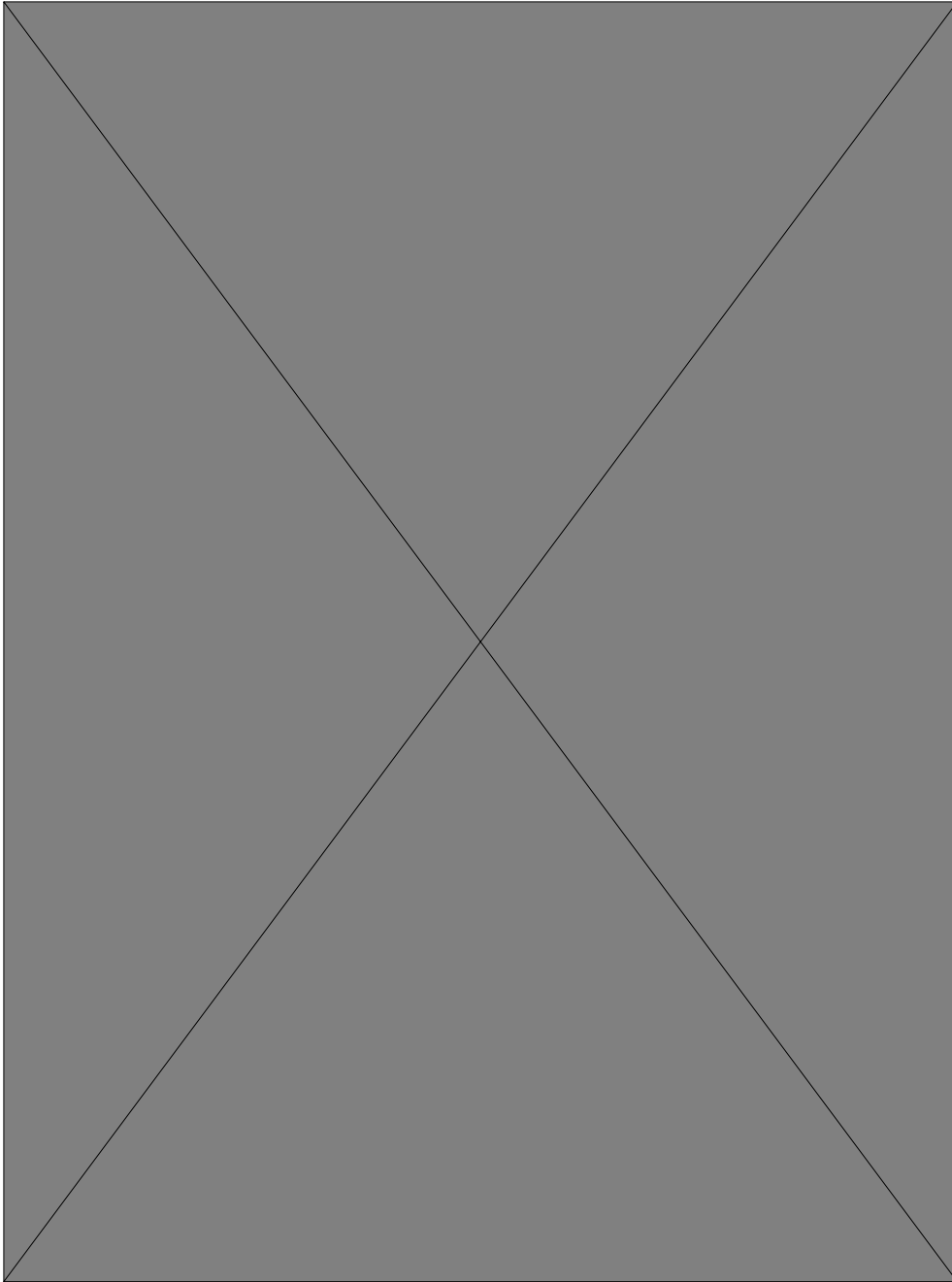


Figure 1. Pictorial map of the Godthaab (Nuuk) region, Greenland, published in P. Egede's account (1741) (original map 28.5 × 37.3cm). Note the stylised depiction of the creature (lower right) and the drawing of the serpent-like tail (middle left).

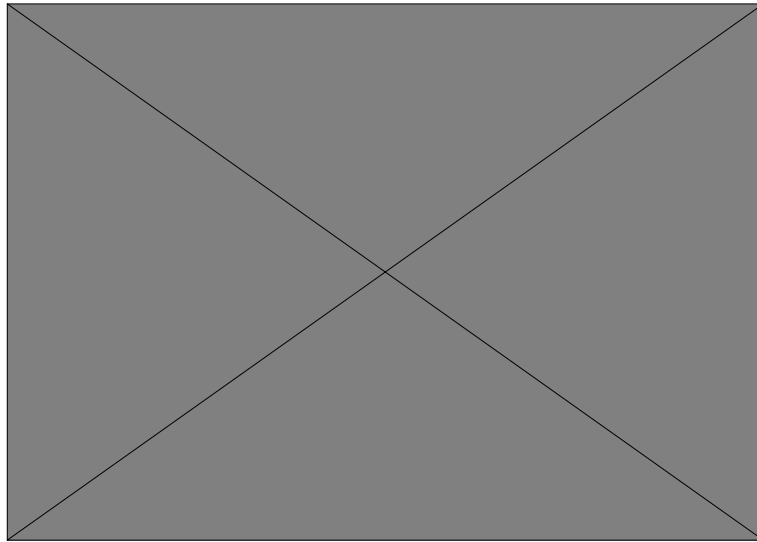


Figure 2. The creature as depicted in P. Egede (1741) (see Figure 1). Enlarged.

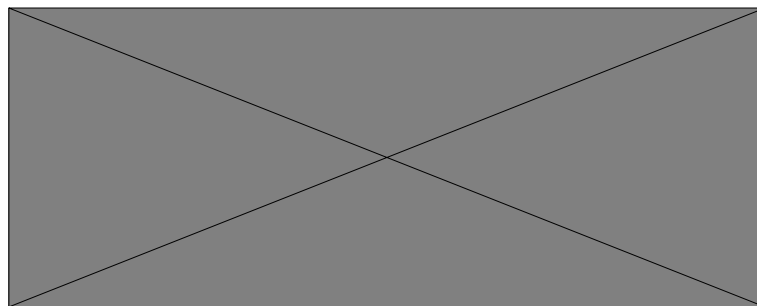
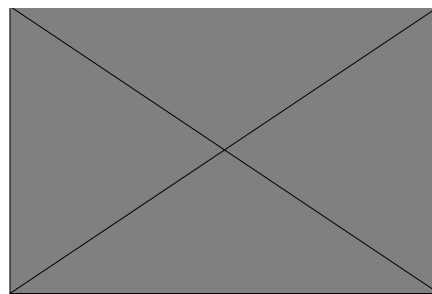
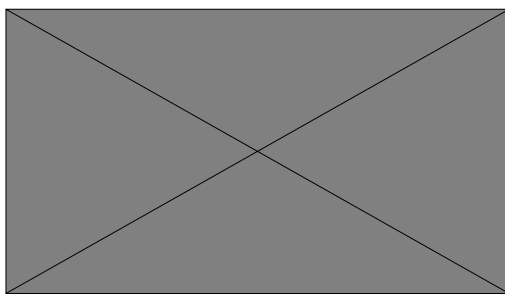


Figure 3. The figure of the serpent-like tail from the map (see Figure 1) in P. Egede (1741). Enlarged.



Figures 4 (left) and 5 (right). Serpentine penises of whales. Figure 4: North Atlantic right whale photographed on 15 August 2001, Bay of Fundy (© New England Aquarium. Reproduced by permission of New England Aquarium, Boston, Massachusetts). Figure 5: grey whale, photographed 1970s, Pacific coast of Baja California (© Steve Leatherwood, reproduced by courtesy of Randall Reeves).

Table 1. Diagnostic features of the “monster” and some suspect large cetaceans (● = present; X = absent).

	“Monster”	<i>Eubalaena glacialis</i>	<i>Balaena mysticetus</i>	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>	<i>Balaenoptera</i> spp.	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	<i>Physeter catodon</i>	<i>Hyperoodon ampullatus</i>	Other Ziphiid whale
Visible blow	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	● (generally)
“Shellwork” (callosities / barnacles)	●	●	X	●	X	X (but tubercles on head)	X	X	X
Limbs / “flippers”	2 or more ?	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Dorsal hump / fin	?	X	X	● (hump)	●	● (hump)	● (hump)	●	●
Red eyes	● (but see text)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wrinkled skin	●	X (where no callosities)	X	●	X	X	●	X (but scarring)	●
Narrow jaw / head	●	X	X	●	● (generally)	X	X	Broad head, narrow protruding beak	Sometimes

familiar with most species of North Atlantic whale. This species has a dorsal hump which might explain the protuberance shown in the diagram (Figure 2). The Pacific representatives of this species are often not uniform in coloration, are covered in whale lice and barnacles and can have wrinkles (or at least visible lines) (Jefferson *et alii*, 1997). A second species is the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalena glacialis* (Müller 1776)). It is not regularly found as far north as Greenland although its range is thought to have extended there in the recent past (Brown, 1986; Reeves and Mitchell, 1986). The third species is the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski 1781)) which has tubercles around the jaw and can have a small number of barnacles primarily on the lower surface of the body (Carwadine *et alii*, 1998) although they may not be readily noticeable to the casual observer.³ Did the witnesses see a large unfamiliar baleen whale, perhaps exhibiting a relatively infrequent behaviour, for example breaching?

One objection (Gould, 1930) to the monster being a cetacean is that both Egedes were familiar with whales. There are descriptions and figures of several species in Hans Egede's works (1741, 1745). Hans Egede described eight "types" of whales (including porpoises) in detail, and distinguished between whales and "fishes properly so called". The whales described by Egede (1745) were as follows.

1. A "fin whale": there is no reason to think that the Egedes could necessarily distinguish between different *Balaenoptera* species.
2. Another sort of unnamed whale which was figured (H. Egede, 1741: figure opposite p. 79): appears to be a bowhead (*Balaena mysticetus* Linnaeus 1758).
3. "Northcaper": a term later used exclusively for North Atlantic right whale (*Eubaleana glacialis*) but Hans Egede (1741) did not describe it in any detail.
4. "Swordfish": a confused account of something like a killer whale (*Orcinus orca* (Linnaeus 1758)) that eats the tongues of larger whales.
5. A "sperm whale": clearly *Physeter catodon* (Linnaeus 1758).
6. A "white fish": the beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas* (Pallas 1776)).
7. A "butthead": from the description almost certainly a northern bottlenose whale (*Hyperoodon ampullatus* (Forster 1770)).
8. The "unicorn": the narwhal (*Monodon monoceros* Linnaeus 1758).
9. Porpoises: not described in detail.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Poul Egede, having grown up in Greenland and having read his father's book, would have recognised at least some of these species. The mention of "Northcaper" (North Atlantic right whale) by Hans Egede (1741, 1745) may weaken the case of the monster as a right whale because it should have been recognised. Nonetheless this would not necessarily preclude the monster being a right whale if the Egedes were not familiar with, or had a confused concept, of the "Northcaper". The account of the "Northcaper" does not give any diagnostic characters and Hans Egede was clearly confused about other species. There was nothing in Egede's list of whales resembling a humpback whale, unless it was classified as a "fin whale". It can be said with certainty that Egede made no mention of a grey whale suggesting he was not familiar with this animal.

A more serious objection to a cetacean is that the rear of the animal was described and drawn as serpent-like. Although whales are found, and can survive, without flukes (for example grey whales (Gilmore, 1950)), serpent-like or eel-like bodies are not usually associated with the rapid thrust (Webb, 1978) that would be required to rear the whole body high out of the water.

However, there is an alternative explanation for the serpent-like tail. Many of the large baleen whales have long, snake-like penises (Figures 4 and 5). If the animal did indeed fall on its back then its ventral surface would have been uppermost and, if the whale was aroused, the usually retracted penis would have been visible. The penises of the North Atlantic right whale and (Pacific) grey whale can be at least 1.8 metres long (calculated from Collett, 1909), and 1.7 metres long (Rice and Wolman, 1971) respectively, and could be taken by a naïve witness for a tail. That the tail was seen at one point a ship's length from the body suggests the presence of more than one male whale.

DISCUSSION

Like Owen's (1848) interpretation of the famous sea-serpent observed in the South Atlantic Ocean from HMS *Daedalus*, we have no "unmeet confidence [*sic*]" in our interpretation of the Egede creature. Nor are we suggesting that whales' penises are a universal source of sea-serpent sightings although we do think that one other sighting, that from the merchant vessel *Pauline* in 1875 when a sea-serpent in the form of a "whitish pillar" was seen amongst a pod of sperm whales "frantic with excitement" (Heuvelmans, 1968; Oudemans, 1892), could be a misidentification (the sperm whale penis can be pale (Harrison, 1938)). In the case of the Egedes, we are assuming that the use of the serpent simile and the drawings were not wholly accurate. If they were accurate, then the strongest objection to the baleen whale interpretation of the Egede sighting is the presence of obvious teeth in the drawing. Our explanation also assumes that the witnesses would not have recognised a whale's penis and that some species would display their penises in the summer off Greenland. Hans Egede (1741, 1745) described the large "membrum virile" of a whale but the Egedes may not have realised it could be seen at sea.

Despite these objections, even if the monster was an unknown species, the diagnostic features (the blow, the two obvious flippers and the possible breaching behaviour) suggest a cetacean. Ultimately, we will never know for certain. Whatever it was Poul Egede saw that day, be it an amorous wandering grey, humpback or North Atlantic right whale, a flukeless whale or an unknown species, it was a most unusual sight both at the time and now.

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NOTES

¹ The English translations following are by E. Knatterud. Interpolations (in square brackets) include variant readings of the original Danish text.

² We have been unable to determine if the original diary still exists.

³ S. L. Hedley, personal observation, South Atlantic Ocean, 2000.

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