

Indigenous and Early Fisheries in North-Norway

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Langs kysten av Nord-Norge utviklet de eldste kjente kommersielle torskefiskeriene seg i løpet av 1000-tallet. I den første fasen ble hovedproduktet, tørrfisk, eksportert av norske handelsmenn. Men krone og kirke engasjerte seg også tidlig i denne handelen. Fra 1300-tallet ble eksporten overtatt av tyske kjøpmenn fra Lubeck, og den ble sentralisert til Bergen. Det avanserte handelssystemet til hanseatene sikret tilførselen av kornvarer til Norge, og dette ga grunnlag for ei rask utvikling av fiskevær langs kysten, særlig i nord. I løpet av seinmiddelalderen forsterket denne utviklinga seg, og deltakelse i de store sesongfiskeriene (Lofoten og Finnmark) ble også vanlig for bøndene i landsdelen. Samene som opprinnelig var et fangstfolk, deltok også i salgfsket fra nå av, og samene som bodde i fjordstrøk ble også spesialister i båtbygging.

Historikerne har hatt ulike oppfatninger angående størrelsen av den norske tørrfiskhandelen og betydninga av den for det europeiske markedet. Men uansett førte den til store økonomiske og sosiale endringer i de kystsamfunnene som produserte tørrfisken. Et særtrekk ved Norge er likevel at fiskeriene forble organisert av lokalsamfunnene og holdt på et enkelt teknologiske nivå. Den store etterspørselen etter norsk tørrfisk som et høykvalitetsprodukt gav rikdom til fiskeristrøkene gjennom flere hundre år, inntil konkurransen fra klippfisken sendte tørrfisknæringa inn i ei langvarig krise fra ca. 1600 til 1750.

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In 1997 a book entitled *The History of the Cod*, written by the American journalist Mark Kurlansky, was published. Strangely enough, this documentary book soon became a bestseller. In the book Kurlansky pays quite a lot of attention to the early cod fisheries, giving ample space to the legendary pre-Colombian

Basque fisheries in North America. In general Kurlansky did extensive background work for his book, with particular emphasis on Newfoundland, where Europeans opened the commercial cod fisheries in the 1500s. He also utilises the literature about Iceland, where the large-scale cod fisheries seem to have started in the early 1400s.

Here, however, we will consider the North-East Atlantic, that is, the fisheries of the Norwegian waters and the Barents Sea area. Here we find one of the real cradles of the commercial cod fisheries – which however Kurlansky does not discuss in his book – in the Lofoten islands and in Finnmark, both areas on the Norwegian coast north of the Arctic

Circle. Both places are spawning areas of the cod from the Barents Sea. The commercial cod fisheries in Lofoten seem to have started already in the 11th century, in Finnmark a century or two later. The beginning of these cod fisheries then coincides with the starting point of the general population growth in Europe, combined with urbanisation. The urbanisation created a demand for food supplies and became the most important factor in the trade development of Europe.

One of the early Norwegian kings, Eystein (1103-1117), had, according to the historical sources, “fishermen cottages built in Vággar” in Lofoten. Vággar developed into a small trading town for the two next centuries, and had very important functions as the central market of the fish trade in the north. Much of the dried fish was exported to ports in England (the east coast; Boston, King’s Lynn and Ravensere), by ships belonging to the crown, the nobility, the church and individual tradesmen. But soon after the Black Death (1349-50) the golden era of Vággar was over, and the whole fish trade was centralised in Bergen in the Southwest, far away from the most important areas of production.

But from then on it is easy to see the connection between the fish trade and the general development of trade in Northern Europe. German merchants from Lubeck took over the fish export trade from Bergen, and one of the four main Hanseatic (foreign) *offices* was established there after 1350 (the others were in Bruges, London and Novgorod). A “colony” of Hanseatic merchants lived under their own rules and were granted wide trade privileges by the king. The number of people connected with the Hanseatic office in Bergen seems to have varied between approximately 1,000 and 2,000 persons.

Much of the fish from Bergen was, as said before, sent to ports in England, but Bruges in Flanders seems to have been one of the most important destinations on the continent, together with Dutch and German towns like Deventer, Kampen, Hamburg, Lubeck itself and Bremen. It is extremely difficult to establish quantitative figures for the export of dried cod from Bergen in the medieval period, and there has been quite a lot of discussion among historians about the size of it. The historian Arnved Nedkvitne has calculated the export to East England in the early 1300s to be c.2000 tons a year, while Kåre Lunden has calculated the export to Lubeck to be about 200 tons a year in the second half of the century. The figures are not too high, but one must have in mind that the statistical material is incomplete. But, dried cod was a product which soon found its way to various markets. The price data shows that dried cod was brought very high prices up to the 1500s. From the 1200s characteristics of a mass trade seem to develop.

No doubt the demand for dried cod and the good prices for the product made participation in the fisheries an attractive economic activity for the population of the shores of the North-east Atlantic. And participation surely increased from this century onwards.

The organization of the fisheries was simple. The typical fisherman was a peasant who owned his own small fishing boat (*Nordlandsbåt*). The crew were neighbours, servants or relatives. Fishing was a part-time activity. The fisheries mainly took place in the late winter and spring at the spawning places of the cod near the coast between Lofoten and Finnmark.

In the first centuries the fish was brought to the Vággar market and sold to tradesmen there.

But after 1350 the local population had to organise their own transport all the way south to Bergen by larger ships (*Jekt*). The voyage to Bergen was undertaken by the fishermen themselves – they also took the full risk of the transport. The Hanseatic merchants could sit in Bergen and wait for the fish, pay for it with cereals and then sell it on the international market with a high profit.

It is important to note that a credit system was developed through these relations. Credit made it possible for the fishermen to secure supplies for the next fishing season. But it also benefited the merchant, since through the credit system the fisherman was bound to deliver the next year's production to the same merchant to pay his debt. But the fisherman owned his boat and got supplies for the fisheries also from the animal husbandry at his own farm. So there was a strong element of independence in his status. We see that in periods of poor fishing seasons, the peasant fisherman could withdraw from the commercial fisheries for some time and depend on farming. The merchant could not force him to go on with the fisheries.

Did the commercial fisheries then lead to great social changes?

The parts of northern Scandinavia facing the Atlantic were inhabited by two quite different ethnic groups. The area of Hålogaland was inhabited by Norwegian farmers or peasants. They lived within the area where climatic conditions were good enough for growing cereals, especially barley. But animal husbandry was more important in the farming economy, and fishing for consumption constituted a regular part of the economic activity of each farm. The area was ruled by mighty chieftains from the first centuries A.D. Various grave finds from the first millennium indicate a luxury trade with Europe where fur, walrus teeth and other products from hunting at land and at sea were exchanged with items of gold and silver and iron weapons. Besides furs from reindeer, fox, wolves, beavers etc., products from the hunting of whales, walrus and seals were essential in the foreign trade of this period.

The other ethnic group in the area were the Sami (or the Lapps as they traditionally have been called). Their area was Finnmark (which means the land of the Sami). The area covered most of northern Scandinavia, the northern parts of both Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sami were the aboriginal people of the area - looking different, having a different language and culture from the others. Their economic specialisation was hunting and fishing, and many of the historical sources indicate that a large part of the trading commodities of the Norwegian chieftains were obtained from the Sami.

When trade expanded in the 1200s, both Norwegian and Sami seem to have increased their efforts in the commercial fisheries. Norwegian farmers and Sami hunters sought the same coastal fishing grounds in the cods' spawning period in late winter and spring. The economy of both ethnic groups was involved in an international trade system, but more for the Norwegians than for the Sami.

While the Norwegian fishermen were most eager to exploit the commercial fisheries, the Sami developed another sort of specialisation related to the new economy. The majority of them were living in fjords where there were good pine forests. The great demand for fishing boats at the coast had to be met, and the Sami became skilful boat builders.

It was within the frames of the Norwegian society that permanent fishing villages were established from the mid 13th century. The appearance of the Lubeck merchants in Bergen at this time triggered this development. It was their advanced trade system and its stability which made permanent and specialized fishery settlements possible. It gave security for yearly supplies of cereals to the families in the fishing villages. Earlier this kind of settlement had been considered too risky an affair, but now people took the chance. In the Finnmark area, too far north to cultivate cereals, about 30 fishing villages developed during the period 1250-1500, and the population size was approximately 3000 persons at its maximum. Also on the coast of Hålogaland some large fishing villages developed, but in this part the majority of the population continued living on farms, although they responded to the improved market situation by increasing the length of their fishing seasons.

While cereals could be imported to the fishing villages, it was more difficult to do the same with products from animal husbandry. Therefore the fishermen and their families regularly kept a cow or two, some sheep and some goats to supply the household with milk, wool and some other products. Warm inner clothes were, for instance, made from wool, and the hides of goats were the raw material for making waterproof clothes and boots to be used in fishing boats. They did not completely leave the adaptation of the farm. But fishing for the market was by far their most important economic activity.

The population of the fishing villages was recruited in part from abroad. Among the settlers in the fishing villages of the north we find especially Scots, Germans, Danes, Swedes, Dutchmen, Faroese and also a few from Flanders. Most of these people must have been recruited in Bergen and come to the north with ships belonging to Norwegian merchants, or with the earlier mentioned local transport ships. In the northernmost parts (Finnmark) we might even talk about a *colonisation* which has some parallels to that in Newfoundland and the neighbouring areas some centuries later. One parallel is that the colonists came to an area settled by an aboriginal population, the Sami. A marked difference, however, is the fact that the Sami for centuries already had been trading with Norwegians, Swedes and Russians. And what we see is that the Sami soon adapted to the new economic possibilities of the fish trade. Conflicts between the Sami and the colonists seem to have been rare – the extremely seabound inhabitants of the fishing villages did not interfere much in the enormous Sami land territories of the north.

One might have expected that the whole industry of fisheries would have become professionalised and capitalised in this region of very rich fishing grounds, as occurred in the North Sea and in Newfoundland. But this did not come about. The cod fisheries continued to be worked using small combined rowing and sailing boats with 4-5 men on each. The only fishing equipment was the handline. Longlines are not known in the cod fisheries until the late 1500s, and nets did not become common until the second half of the 18th century. This simple fishing technology was shared by Norwegian and Sami fishermen.

But there were attempts to establish distant fisheries in the area. In the beginning of the 1400s English ships began frequenting the fishing grounds, in the same way as in Iceland. But this led to conflicts with the Norwegian fishermen and with merchants from the privileged towns of Bergen and Trondheim. The conflict was brought to the highest political

level, that is, between the kings. The meagre source material about these conflicts consists of documents from the negotiation between the two states. In the 1440s it seems that the Englishmen gave up the far away fisheries in North Norway. Some sources also mention German ships, but only sporadically.

But after 1550 British explorers opened the sea route to Archangel in the White Sea for trading purposes. The trading ships frequented ports in North Norway and trade with the fishermen occurred, although it was illegal. Whaling and sealing in the Northeast Atlantic were also taken up by the British, especially in Spitzbergen after the Dutch explorer Willem Barentz had discovered the islands in 1596. In the early 1600s Dutchmen also established land whaling stations on the coast of Finnmark. Longline fishing in Finnmark is known from the 1590s, and is said to have been introduced by Dutchmen.

So there were impulses from the outside world in fishing technology as well.

The opening of the distant fisheries for cod in North America led to changes in the European fish market. The price of the Norwegian dried cod tended to fall constantly during the 1500s and the 1600s. Dried cod became the loser in the competition with salted cod and klipfish from the North Sea, Iceland and North America. Another negative factor for the fisheries was the Lutheran Reformation in Northern Europe, which abolished the previous fast regulations of the Catholic church, where white meat (fish) but not red, was allowed on fasting days.

The 1600s and the early 1700s especially became a period of depression in the North east Atlantic fisheries. The flourishing fishing villages of the northern coasts decayed, and where there had been townlike settlements in the Late Middle Ages the population was reduced to only a few people, most of them poor. People moved away, some far south, others stayed in the north but changed their economic adaptation giving more weight to farming. During this process, the Sami areas were much more afflicted than during the Medieval colonization period.

In the middle of the 18th century a positive tendency in the fisheries returned. Prices improved, longlines and nets became more common in the cod fisheries and the size of the fishing boats increased. The trade monopoly of the towns of Bergen and Trondheim came to an end, and in the 1780s new towns were established in the north. Earlier in the century Russian tradesmen from the White Sea area (Archangel) had started to send ships to North Norway in the summer to buy raw fish which was immediately salted on board. And klipfish production also developed, more in the Southwest than in the north.

CONCLUSIONS

Along the coast of North Norway some of the earliest commercial cod fisheries already developed in the 11th century. In the first phase the main product, dried cod, was exported by Norwegian tradesmen and on ships owned by the crown and the church. In the 13th century the export trade was taken over by merchants from Lubeck, and their advanced trading system secured supplies of cereals to the fishing villages which now developed rapidly. The whole population of the north was engaged in the prospering fisheries in the late middle ages, either full-time (inhabitants in the fishing villages) or part-time (peas-

ants). The Sami, who originally were hunters, also took part in the commercial fisheries and took up boat building as their new speciality. Historians have had different opinions about the extent of the fish trade, and the importance of it for the European market, but there is no doubt that that industry led to great economic and social changes in the coastal societies. Nevertheless the fisheries continued to be peasant-organized and at a low technological level. The great demand on the European market for the high quality product of dried cod gave prosperity in the fishery districts for many centuries until competition from the klipfish fisheries sent the industry into a long-lasting crisis in the 17th century.



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