

# An opportunistic drive hunt of long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) in the Netherlands in 1825

Phil W. Koken<sup>1</sup>, Justin J.F.J. Jansen<sup>2</sup> & Erwin J.O. Kompanje<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Regulusweg 10, 3453 HK De Meern, the Netherlands, e-mail: catman@ziggo.nl

<sup>2</sup>Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Darwinweg 2, 2333 CR Leiden, the Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Natural History Museum Rotterdam, Westzeedijk 345, 3015 AA Rotterdam, the Netherlands

**Abstract:** In this article, a reconstruction is made of an opportunistic drive hunt of a pod of about 38 long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) which took place on 9 April 1825 near St. Philipsland (Zeeland, the Netherlands). The reconstruction is based on published and non-published documents, artistic impressions, and five complete skeletons and one stuffed skin in Belgian and Dutch museums. For at least five, maybe even six but perhaps even up to twelve, whales of this drive hunt a partial or complete timeline is reconstructed.

**Keywords:** long-finned pilot whale, *Globicephala melas*, drive hunt, Tholen, Van Trig, Ver Huell, watercolour.

## Introduction

The long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*) is a highly socially cohesive oceanic dolphin species. Males measure from five to six metres in length. Females are significantly shorter, typically between four to five metres. They travel in groups (pods) in numbers ranging between about 20 and 1000 individuals. These groups are often genetically related, suggesting a matrilineal social unit in which males remain with their mothers for life. Pods are usually composed of around 60 percent female dolphins. Mating occurs in the spring or early summer, and births take place approximately twelve months later, in late summer or early autumn in the Northern Atlantic. Females can reach an age of up to 60 years, males around 45 years (NOAA 2022).

Long-finned pilot whales are the most common cetacean species involved in mass strand-

ings. This often involves the whole pod. Most probably, their highly strong social bonds result in these mass strandings: if one animal strands, almost all others follow. Another form of mass stranding is as a result of human actions in the form of a drive hunt, of which the best-known example is from the Northern Atlantic Faroe-islands. Each year during summer, approximately 700 long-finned pilot whales and hundreds of Atlantic white-side dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) are driven onto shallow shores and killed for their meat. Drive hunting involves men in several boats herding a large group of dolphins into shallow water; subsequently the animals are beached and slaughtered. The largest known catch of pilot whales on the Faroe Islands in a single season was 1203 animals in 2017. The hunting and killing of these highly social mammals is highly controversial, although more than 80% of the Faroe islanders still support this tradition (Mamzer 2021). More general information about today's drive hunts can be found elsewhere (Wikipedia 2023).

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Two drive hunts of long-finned pilot whales in the Netherlands are documented. Both took place in the nineteenth century. The first, further discussed below, took place on 9 April 1825. It involved a pod of 36 or 38 individuals driven to shore between St. Annaland and St. Philipsland at Tholen, Zeeland (estimated GPS 51.612N, 4.145E) (Anonymous 1825a, Anonymous 1825b, Hoogkamer 1825).

The second (partial) drive hunt took place on 2 April 1856 when eleven whales were driven onto shore near Arnemuiden, Zeeland (estimated GPS 51.822, 3.905). In the 1856 event, the entire pod probably numbered between 300-400 animals in total. Besides the animals that were driven to shore, several groups of other individuals stranded alive at different locations in the same area. Sixty-one animals were reportedly stranded near Ouddorp, Zuid-Holland (estimated GPS 51.822N, 3.905E) (van Deinse 1931, Heerebout 2007) and eleven others were surrounded by fishermen in boats after which they came ashore with the low-tide on a beach close to Arnemuiden, Zeeland (estimated GPS 51.519N, 3.690E), where they were slaughtered (Anonymous 1856a, Heerebout 2007). We found only very limited information about the 1856 event, and do not describe it further.

The purpose of the present article is twofold:

1. The event of 1825 is mentioned in the literature as a ‘mass stranding’. Our first aim is to correct this. It has the hallmarks of at least an opportunistic ‘drive hunt’. The animals were surrounded by boats and driven onto shore, such that their escape was prevented by closing off the route to the open sea.
2. Our second aim is to describe the drive hunt of 9 April 1825, present a timeline of what happened to several of the killed animals and highlight its documentation in Belgian and Dutch museum collections.

## Material & Methods

Internet sources, such as [www.delpher.nl](http://www.delpher.nl), were searched using terms such as the event

date (9 April 1825), location (St. Annaland or St. Philipsland, Tholen, the Netherlands) and long-finned pilot whales. The majority of more than 25 Dutch archives were visited for published and non-published sources such as books, diaries and notes, book inventories and journal articles. Furthermore, the Ghent University Museum (Ghent, Belgium) and Naturalis Biodiversity Center (Leiden, the Netherlands) (hereafter referred to as Naturalis) were visited to study the collected skeletons and mounted skin of long-finned pilot whales from the 1825 event. Finally, the Arnhem Museum (Arnhem, Gelderland) and the Teylers Museum (Haarlem, Noord-Holland) were visited to study two preserved artistic impressions made within days after the drive hunt. A third artistic impression, made more than 100 years after the drive hunt, was found at Naturalis. Based on all uncovered sources, a chronological reconstruction of the drive hunt and the events which followed the stranding was made.

Measurements of the animals, such as size and weight, mentioned in the publications of 1825 and after are assumed to be according to the standardized Dutch metric system in 1820 unless indicated (Maenen 2002). These have been converted to the S.I. metric system, i.e., a ‘Dutch pound’ equals 1 kilogram and the ‘Dutch el’ equals 1 metre. It is of interest to note that even five years later after its introduction the standardized system was still not in common use, e.g., the measure of length in the text of an artist’s impression by Stephanus van Trigjt (see paragraph on ‘Watercolour made by Stephanus van Trigjt (1825)’) mentions explicitly the “Rijnlandse voet”, which equals to 0.3140 metres.

## Results

### Written evidence

According to two locals, 36 or 38 “*visschen*” (old Dutch plural for fishes) swam into the

bay of Mosselkreek in the afternoon of 9 April 1825. The Mosselkreek is a sand trench not far from St. Annaland (north) but as shown in Figure 1 it appears to be closer to St. Philipsland, on the island of Tholen (just south of it) in the southwest of the Netherlands (Anonymous 1825a, 1825b, 1825c, Hoogkamer 1825). Local fishermen chased the animals with their boats until they were stranded on the beach after which they were killed for their flesh and other valuable body parts. Only one animal was able to escape the massacre (Anonymous 1825a, 1825d). The pod of animals was possibly observed earlier near Veere, about 33 km south-west of Tholen, after a heavy storm in February of 1825 (Anonymous 1825a).

Initially there was uncertainty and discussion about the identification of the species (Hoogkamer 1825). A correct determination of the “*visschen*” to be long-finned pilot whales was perhaps firstly made by Bonifacius den Jonge (1788-1854) after one of the animals had been transported to Middelburg for display (Anonymous 1825b). But even after this some newspapers would still refer to them using an incorrect species name, for example North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) (Anonymous 1825d, 1825e).

At the time of the drive hunting and beaching, the temperature was 9-10 °C (Anonymous 1825f). At this temperature, the whales would soon start to decay and to rot. Within a few days of the massacre at least five, possibly twelve, animals were transported elsewhere. Our findings did not give a conclusive answer as to who initiated and organised the transport.

## Artist impressions

Two watercolours, which were made shortly after the drive hunting and slaughtering of the long-finned pilot whales, were discovered in collections of the Arnhem Museum (Arnhem, Gelderland) and the Teylers Museum (Haarlem, Noord-Holland) in the Netherlands.

A third artistic impression, an ink drawing made in the twentieth century of one of the skulls preserved in Naturalis, was found in the archives of this museum. The latter impression will be described further on in the paragraph on ‘Collected skeletons and skin’.

### *Watercolour made by Stephanus van Trigt (1825)*

The Dutch surgeon and artist Stephanus Hendrik Willem van Trigt (1788-1840), who lived and worked in Dordrecht, not only made several hundreds of watercolours of Dutch and exotic birds but he also made watercolours of mammals. One of the latter concerns a dead male foetus of a long-finned pilot whale. Almost all watercolours made by van Trigt do not have a date or a description of the animal or the conditions during painting. It was therefore exceptional that the watercolour of the pilot whale foetus was accompanied by both a text and a date.

Since October 1897 this watercolour has been part of the collection of the Teylers Museum (collection item KT 2009 028-370) (Figure 2). The artwork is not signed, which is also typical for almost all of van Trigt’s work. Besides the placenta, the non-rigid tail clearly shows the animal was unborn. Our translation of the Dutch text above the drawing is:

*A young of Delphinus globiceps, about 2 metres long, taken out of the mother which was 5 metres long and 1,25 metres wide measured at the thickest place, the tail fin was 1 metre wide. The pectoral fins 1,15 metres. On April 10, 1825 this fish stranded together with 37 others of the same species in de Mosselkreek near Sint Annaland, and was slaughtered. The length of the others varied between 3.1 and 6.9 metres and their weight was estimated from 800 to 4000 kg (?). Multiple animals were pregnant.*

A non-specialist comparison (performed by the authors) of the text on this watercolour with other texts on van Trigt’s works suggests

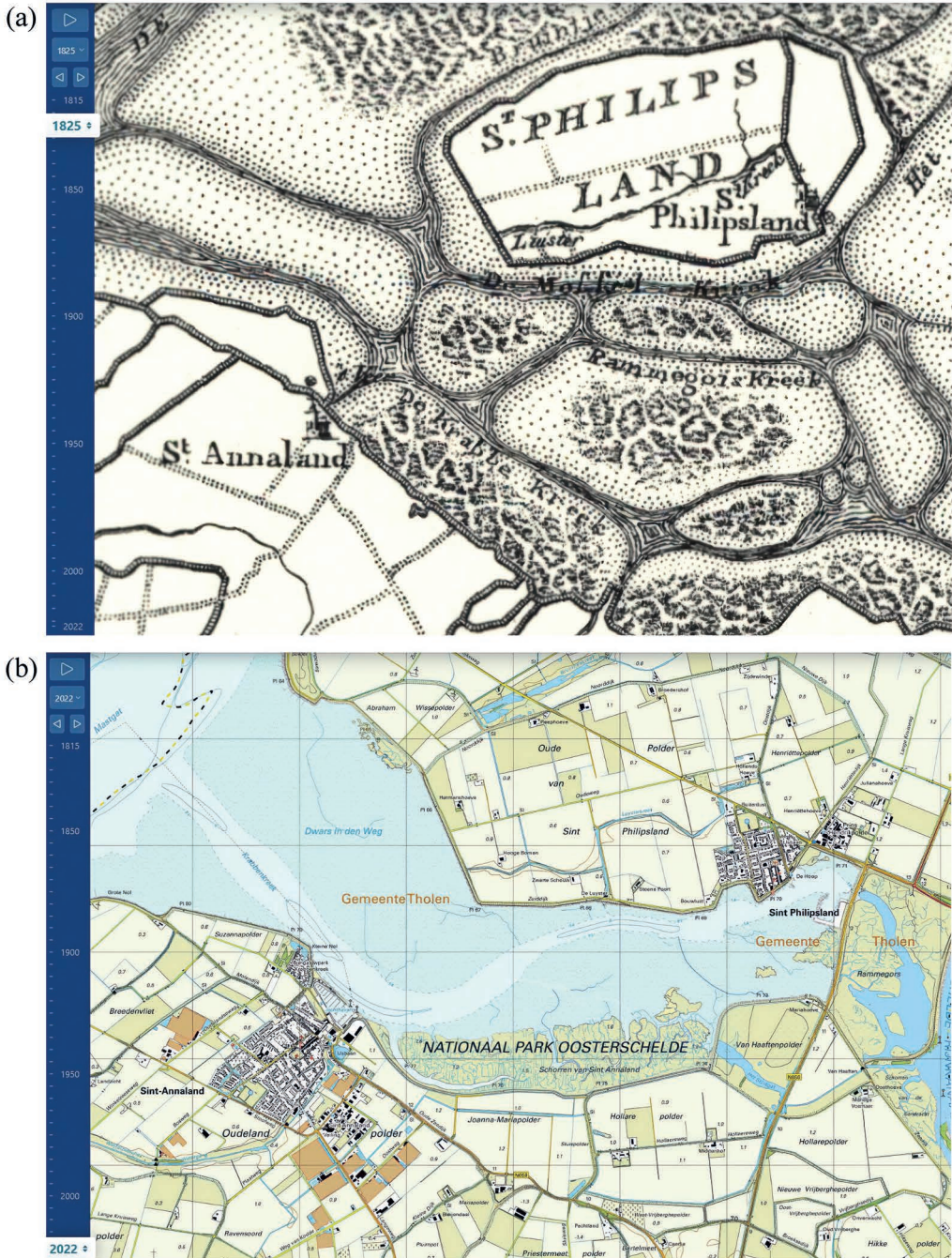


Figure 1. Topographic maps from the drive hunt in 1825. (a) shows the situation in 1825 and (b) shows the situation in 2022. It shows that in 1825 the Mosselkreek was nearer to St. Philipsland than to St. Annaland. Both maps were derived from [topotijdreis.nl](http://topotijdreis.nl)



Figure 2: Watercolour by Stephanus van Trigt, dated 10 April 1825. This is the first documented male foetus of long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*) in the Netherlands. It is possibly also the first document with the correct species determination (© Teylers Museum).

that the handwriting is by the same person. The year 1825 has been added later, and the handwriting suggests this was not done by van Trigt.

According to the timing of the slaughter, the foetus must have been approximately ten or eleven months old and almost mature, which is in accordance with van Trigt's watercolour (NOAA 2022).

#### Watercolour made by Quirijn Ver Huell (1825)

Quirijn Maurits Rudolf Ver Huell (1787-1860), a former marine officer and artist educated at the Royal Academy of Art in Amsterdam, made a watercolour of an adult long-finned pilot whale (Figure 3). The artwork is, since a bequest in 1897 by Ver Huell's son, located at the Arnhem Museum (Arnhem, the Netherlands, registration number GM 4446). The translated text left below on the drawing says:

Q.M.R. Ver Huell – drawn to life on April 15, 1825.

The catalogue of an exhibition in 1989 in the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam mentions that Ver Huell most likely was present at St. Annaland (Reumer 1989). However, we think it is more plausible that Ver Huell made his watercolour in Rotterdam; Ver Huell lived in Rotterdam at that time and worked in the harbour after he returned from Indonesia (van Harderwijk 1860). A local newspaper report on 21 April 1825 describes the arrival of one of the whales in Rotterdam where it was shown for a limited time (Anonymous 1825d). Despite extensive research in archives no solid proof was found to support either of these two scenarios. However, since the drawing shows an intact whale, it must have been made within days after the stranding.

#### Collected skeletons and skin

Five complete skeletons and one mounted



Figure 3: Watercolour by Quirijn Maurits Rudolf Ver Huell, dated 15 April 1825. The work shows a complete rather fresh dead long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*) (© Museum Arnhem).

skin of long-finned pilot whales of the April 1825 drive hunt are still present in museum collections:

*Complete skeleton, Ghent University Museum, Belgium*

The Ghent University Museum owns a skeleton labelled MDV 50405. The skeleton with a length of 4.5 metres was acquired in 1825 by Jacobus Gijsbertus Samuël van Breda (1788-1867) (Anonymous 1825g, van Bree 1975). The notice of purchase states incorrectly that the stranding of 1825 took place near Bergen op Zoom, a town about 20 km south-east of St. Philipsland (Anonymous 1825g). It is more likely that the whale was transferred from St. Philipsland to Ghent through Bergen op Zoom.

*Complete skeleton and stuffed skin, Naturalis*

A complete skeleton of a juvenile whale (van Bemmelen 1864, van Oordt 1918) and a stuffed skin of a juvenile whale were found in Naturalis. Their registration numbers are RMNH.MAM.31215 and RMNH.MAM.31213b, respec-

tively. The length of the skeleton measures 2.90 metres and the skin measures 2.70 metres. Comparison of the sizes of this skeleton and skin and matching the locations of the blow-hole showed remarkable agreement, to within a few cm (<5 cm; Figure 4). Although a DNA analysis of the two items has not been made, we believe the skin and the skeleton belong to the same animal.

Schlegel (1862, page 93) wrote that several objects originating from the 1825 event were acquired by Naturalis (formerly named Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (RMNH)): "... the last example of this nature occurred in Zeeland near St. Annaland on April 9, 1825, where 35 individuals were killed at the same time, the largest of which had a length of 20 feet. Several of these objects were then purchased for the RMNH, where they are still located". Schlegel does not mention the stranding of 1856 at all. He also does not specify the skin or number of skeletons. Neither in Naturalis nor in the Nationaal Archief (The Hague) acquisition data were found.



Figure 4: Comparison of skull skeleton RMNH.MAM.31215 and skin RMNH.MAM.31213b. The blow holes on the skin and skeleton matched with a few cm.  
 Photo: Phil W. Koken / © Naturalis.

#### *Complete skeleton, Naturalis*

A complete skeleton with registration number RMNH.MAM.31214 was found in this museum (Schlegel 1862, van Bemmelen 1864, van Oordt 1918). The length of the skeleton is 5.4 metres.

#### *Complete skeleton and 20th century ink drawing, Naturalis*

A complete skeleton with registration number RMNH.MAM31213a was found in this museum (Schlegel 1862, van Bemmelen 1864, van Oordt 1918). Its length is 3.55 metres.

An undated and unsigned drawing was found in the van Deirse archive of the same museum. It has no collection item number but was made by Rob van Assen (1944-2022) (Chris Smeenk, personal communication

1995). The drawing shows the left upper and lower mandibula of a long-finned pilot whale (Figure 5a) with several distinct markings on the teeth and maxillary bone. Close comparison with the skulls of long-finned pilot whales at the Naturalis collection revealed that the drawing was made of RMNH.MAM3121a (Figure 5b).

#### *Complete skeleton, Naturalis*

The collection of Naturalis contains a complete mounted skeleton of an adult long-finned pilot whale with registration number ZMA.MAM.7858. Most likely the partly dissected animal with a length of about 4.5 metres was bought by Nicolaas Cornelis de Fremery (1770-1844) to Utrecht (de Fremery 1825). After his death, the skeleton was bought by Pieter Harting (1812-1885) at a public auction for fl. 50 and became part of the collection of the Zoological Laboratory in Utrecht (Anonymous 1856b, de Graaf 1856). Van Bree (1975) mentions that because of lack of space this skeleton was transferred to the Zoological Museum Amsterdam (ZMA) around 1960. In 2011 the ZMA collection was integrated into the collection of Naturalis (Goud 2011).

## Discussion

We found two reports of local witnesses of the drive hunt of 1825 (Anonymous 1825a, Hoogkamer 1825). They mention different numbers of animals caught: respectively 36 and 38. Van Trigt mentions 38 animals. Later sources repeat similar numbers but some mention 35 animals (Schlegel 1862, De Smet 1974) or 37 animals (van Bemmelen 1864). Since the witness reports mention that one of the animals escaped, it could well be that these later sources only refer to the number of slaughtered animals.

Robson and van Bree (1971) suggested that the stranding might have been caused by a light seaquake, but we found no proof that such an event occurred. Besides, the drive

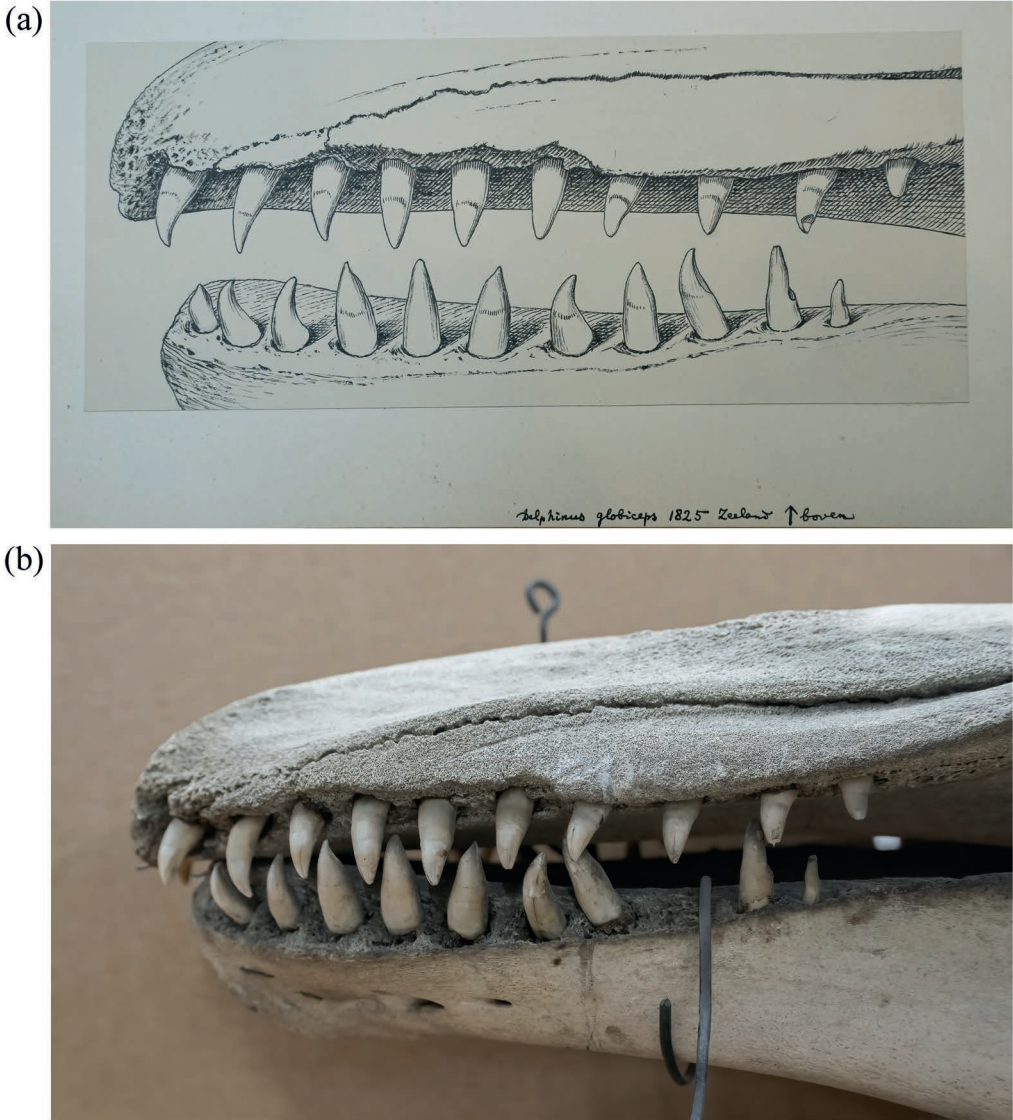


Figure 5. (a) Ink drawing by Rob van Assen, undated but created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It shows the left mandibula of a long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*). Comparison of the drawing showed that it was made after the jaw of RMNA.MAM.31213a; (b) Detail of a skeleton RMNA.MAM.31213a. Photos: Phil W. Koken / © Naturalis.

hunt appears the actual cause of the stranding even though it is not sure whether or not the animals would also have stranded without the presence of the locals. Van Bemmelen (1864) mentioned that the group always follows their leader, irrespective of the cause of the stranding.

Based on old maps, acquired from [topotijdreis.nl](http://topotijdreis.nl), the stranding took place at the Mosselkreek between St. Philipsland and St. Annaland; based these maps the Mosselkreek is a bit closer to St. Philipsland than to St. Annaland. In 1825, St. Philipsland was part of the isolated island of Tholen. We estimated



the stranding and slaughter occurred near the Zuiddijk in St. Philipsland. We therefore refer to the location as St. Philipsland rather than St. Annaland in this article.

Van Trigt wrote on his watercolour that multiple animals were pregnant. The number of pregnant animals remains unknown. No solid proof was found as to where van Trigt observed the foetus; it is possible he depicted the watercolour at the scene near St. Philipsland. But he also could have done this in Rotterdam where a foetus was discovered when a female long-finned pilot whale was dissected (Anonymous 1825e, de Fremerij 1825).

The watercolour made by van Trigt is the first artistic impression accompanied by text of the event after the drive hunt. If the date mentioned in the text on the watercolour was also its creation date, then van Trigt's watercolour would be the first document mentioning the correct species.

Was van Trigt present at or near Tholen at the time of the stranding, and did he actually make his drawing the day after the stranding? Or was he elsewhere when he made his drawing? If he was at or near Tholen, he must already have been there before the stranding took place, given the time taken for news about the stranding to travel to Dordrecht and the logistics to travel from Dordrecht to Tholen which were too cumbersome to be completed in just a single day. Another possibility could be that van Trigt saw the foetus in Rotterdam where an adult pregnant female long-finned pilot whale was dissected after which it was displayed with its foetus in the centre of Utrecht (Anonymous 1825b, 1825h). Despite extensive research in multiple archives we have not found any solid proof for either of these two possibilities.

Van Deinse (1931) mentions in his thesis that an outline of a sea mammal was drawn on the wall of the fish market at Tholen. The drawing was coloured black and based on its size van Deinse reasons it might have been one of the long-finned whales of the 1825 drive hunt. The wall with this drawing was

torn down in 1885.

Besides the RMNH.MAM-labels on the skeletons and skin and Schlegel's description no other specific proof was found that the skin and three skeletons originate from the 1825 drive hunt (Schlegel 1862, page 93). However, in the early years of the RMNH such data were not always as complete as they are nowadays. Schlegel (1862) does not mention the stranding of 1856 at all. All in all, we conclude that the labeled skeletons and skin are correctly dated, and therefore are part of the drive hunt of 1825.

We reconstructed timelines of at least five (perhaps six), and at the most twelve individual whales beginning directly after the mass stranding (Table 1). If skeleton RMNH.MAM.31215 and skin RMNH.MAM.31213b indeed belong to the same animal, then the number of six whales is reduced to five. Based on documents in archives and literature we could reconstruct a complete timeline after the stranding for one skeleton of a whale and a near-complete timeline for another, represented by skeletons labelled as ZMA.MAM.7958 and MDV 50405. Although we know the current location of three other skeletons (including a skin possibly belonging to one of them), we were not able to reconstruct their complete timelines between 1825 and 1862. But as argued above both were indeed part of the 1825 event.

Despite thorough investigations in more than 25 archives, we could not find solid evidence about who played a key role in what happened with the remains after the drive hunt. An indication could be a letter by Laurens Britting dated May 1825 suggesting that on behalf of government one or more animals were ordered to be transported to Naturalis (Gijssen 1938). Other details related to the drive hunting, but that are not relevant to this article, will be described separately (Koken et al. 2023).

In conclusion, our research has resulted in the first, and most complete, documented overview of a drive hunt of long-finned pilot

Table 1. Timelines of the fate of a number of dead whales after the drive hunting of April 1825. It is possible that animals 1 – 6 overlap with the remains in museum collections.

Specimen	Present location	Known history	Literature
1	-	Arrived in Middelburg on 12 April 1825 by ship, measured 5 m and weighed 1000 kg. Dissected three days after arrival.	Anonymous 1825a, Anonymous 1825b, van Deirse 1950
2	-	Shown in Rotterdam before 21 April 1825 at Westnieuwland, Beurs. It weighed about 1000 kg, indicating it was a non-dissected animal. Species incorrectly referenced to as right whale.	Anonymous 1825d
3	-	Shown in Brussels before 22 April 1825, measured 11 “ellen” [the Dutch standardized metrics of 1820 cannot be applicable here: length of 11 metres would be too much] and weighed 1500 kg, indicating it was a non-dissected animal.	Anonymous 1825i
4	-	Transported to Amsterdam before 22 April 1825, measured “more than 8 m” [most probably exaggerated], purchased for fl. 1000.	Anonymous 1825i
5	-	Exhibited in Maastricht before 28 April 1825 at Boschstraat in the city centre.	Anonymous 1825h
6	-	Adult pregnant female dissected in Rotterdam; displayed with its foetus in Utrecht city centre. Length was more than 5 m, weighed about 1000 kg. Wrong initial determination of right whale was corrected by De Fremery.	Anonymous 1825e, de Fremery 1825
7	Ghent	Skeleton MDV 50405, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton, Ghent University Museum, Belgium’	
8	Naturalis Biodiversity Center (Naturalis)	Skeleton RMNH.MAM.31215, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton and stuffed skin, Naturalis’	
9	Naturalis	Skin RMNH.MAM.31213.b, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton and stuffed skin, Naturalis’	
10	Naturalis	Skeleton RMNH.MAM.31213.a, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton, Naturalis’	
11	Naturalis	Skeleton RMNH.MAM.31214, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton and 20th century ink drawing, Naturalis’	
12	Naturalis	Skeleton ZMA.MAM.7958, see paragraph ‘Complete skeleton, Naturalis’	

whales in the Netherlands. From the drive hunt of 9 April 1825, five skeletons, one mounted skin, and two drawings made within days after the stranding are still preserved in the collections of one Belgian and three Dutch museums.

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## Samenvatting

### Een opportunistische drijffjacht van grienden (*Globicephala melas*) in Nederland in 1825

In dit artikel wordt een reconstructie gemaakt van een drijffjacht op een groep van circa 38 Grienden (*Globicephala melas*) welke plaatsvond op 9 april 1825 nabij St. Philipsland (Zeeland) in Nederland. De reconstructie is gebaseerd op gepubliceerde en niet-gepubliceerde documenten en artistieke impressies, aangevuld met vijf volledige skeletten en een huid van grienden in Belgische en Nederlandse musea die restanten zijn van deze drijffjacht. Van vijf, mogelijk zes en wellicht zelfs twaalf dieren gedood bij deze drijffjacht is een gedeeltelijke of complete tijdslijn gereconstrueerd.

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