

# THE FIN WHALE MOUNTED SKELETON OF THE MUSEU DE CIÈNCIES NATURALS DE BARCELONA. DOCUMENTATION AND GRAPHIC RECORD.

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## ABSTRACT

The mounted fin whale skeleton, *Balaenoptera physalus* MZB 83-3084, is a landmark piece at the Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona. Since it first became part of the collection in 1917, it has been transferred, modified, assembled and reassembled several times. In this poster we present the process of documentation and graphic recording of the piece. This study was carried out on June 2010, before the skeleton was entirely dismantled for remounting in a new site with a new support structure.

## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

On 11th June, 1862, a fin whale stranded on the beach at Llança (Girona). This event marked the end of the animal's life but the beginning of its existence as a collection specimen.

That same year, the University of Barcelona bought the fin whale bones and transferred them to its premises where the skeleton was mounted and exhibited for the first time.

In 1917 the piece was deposited with the Museu Martorell, the predecessor of the Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona (MCNB). There was some confusion among visitors at the time because the specimen became known as "the dinosaur" (DACOSTA & PAGES, 1993) (Figure 1).

In 1925, the skeleton was transferred to the "Castell dels Tres Dragons", the current site of the "Laboratori de Natura" of the MCNB, where it was displayed on the first floor.

In 1947 the mounted skeleton was again dismantled and moved to the ground floor of the same building.

In 1986, it underwent intervention once again. This time it was not a transfer but a change of position. It was adapted to hang from the ceiling. With this reform, the ground floor became diaphanous and the hall began to be used for MCNB temporary exhibitions (Figure 2).

Although the ephemeral installations for temporary exhibitions diminished the visibility of the mounted skeleton, the piece never lost its prominence. Due to the display of the fin whale skeleton, the room where it was hung was renamed the "Hall of the Whale" (Figure 3).

In 2009 MCNB launched a new project that involved the transfer of permanent and temporary exhibitions to a new building called the "Museu Blau". The plan included removal and restoration of the fin whale skeleton and complete redesign of its assembly structure. Except for the skeleton itself, the whole display—the anatomical position of the bones, the structure, the materials and the assembly system—will be replaced and completely remodelled to display the skeleton in its new site. It was the scope of this intervention that prompted the MCNB conservation team to carry out a detailed analysis and documentation of the piece. The objectives of study were:

1. Comprehensive documentation of the structure of the piece that will be removed.
2. Developing a detailed mapping of the piece's shape and its mounting elements, as has been preserved to this day.

## METHODOLOGY

1. Collection and study of historical documents that could contain information related to the mounted skeleton:

Sources: Figueres Regional Archive, Llança City Council, Archive of the University of Barcelona, Barcelona Administrative City Council Archive, MCNB Historical Archive, Library of MCNB and interviews with museum staff.

2. General and detailed organoleptic examination and photographic

documentation of the current assembly:

The piece was fully revised and several macroscopic photographs of the mounting system and its construction details were taken (camera: Cannon Powershot G10).

To create the elevation map, two series of macroscopic photographs—one for each side—were taken around the perimeter of the piece, aiming to select the most frontal viewpoint possible (camera: Cannon Powershot G10).

Each series of photographs was overlapped and processed to obtain a continuous assembly (software: Adobe Photoshop CS3). A freehand tracing of the photomontage obtained was then drawn. This was revised by observation and detailed measurements on site. Finally, the freehand drawing was digitized (graphic tablet: Wacom Intuos 3) and a vector drawing program (Adobe Illustrator CS3) was used to map the details and the sections. Notes and detailed photographs taken on site were used to perform a final revision of the map.

3. Drawing of a detailed map of the current assembly: To create the elevation map, two series of macroscopic photographs—one for each side—were taken around the perimeter of the piece, aiming to select the most frontal viewpoint possible (camera: Cannon Powershot G10).

Each series of photographs was overlapped and processed to obtain a continuous assembly (software: Adobe Photoshop CS3). A freehand tracing of the photomontage obtained was then drawn. This was revised by observation and detailed measurements on site. Finally, the freehand drawing was digitized (graphic tablet: Wacom Intuos 3) and a vector drawing program (Adobe Illustrator CS3) was used to map the details and the sections. Notes and detailed photographs taken on site were used to perform a final revision of the map.

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Some small bones are missing (replaced by replicas in wood). Possible cause: vandalism (insufficient protection against vandalism and visitors' easy accessibility to the piece: the phalanges at the ends were accessible to the public for years (Figure 8)).

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1. Museu Martorell, Zoology hall, 1922 (MASRIERA, 2006).



2. Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona, Castell dels Tres Dragons, temporary exhibition hall, c. 1986 (Author unknown)



3. Museu de Ciències Naturals de Barcelona, Castell dels Tres Dragons, temporary exhibition hall, 2010 (Jordi Vidal)



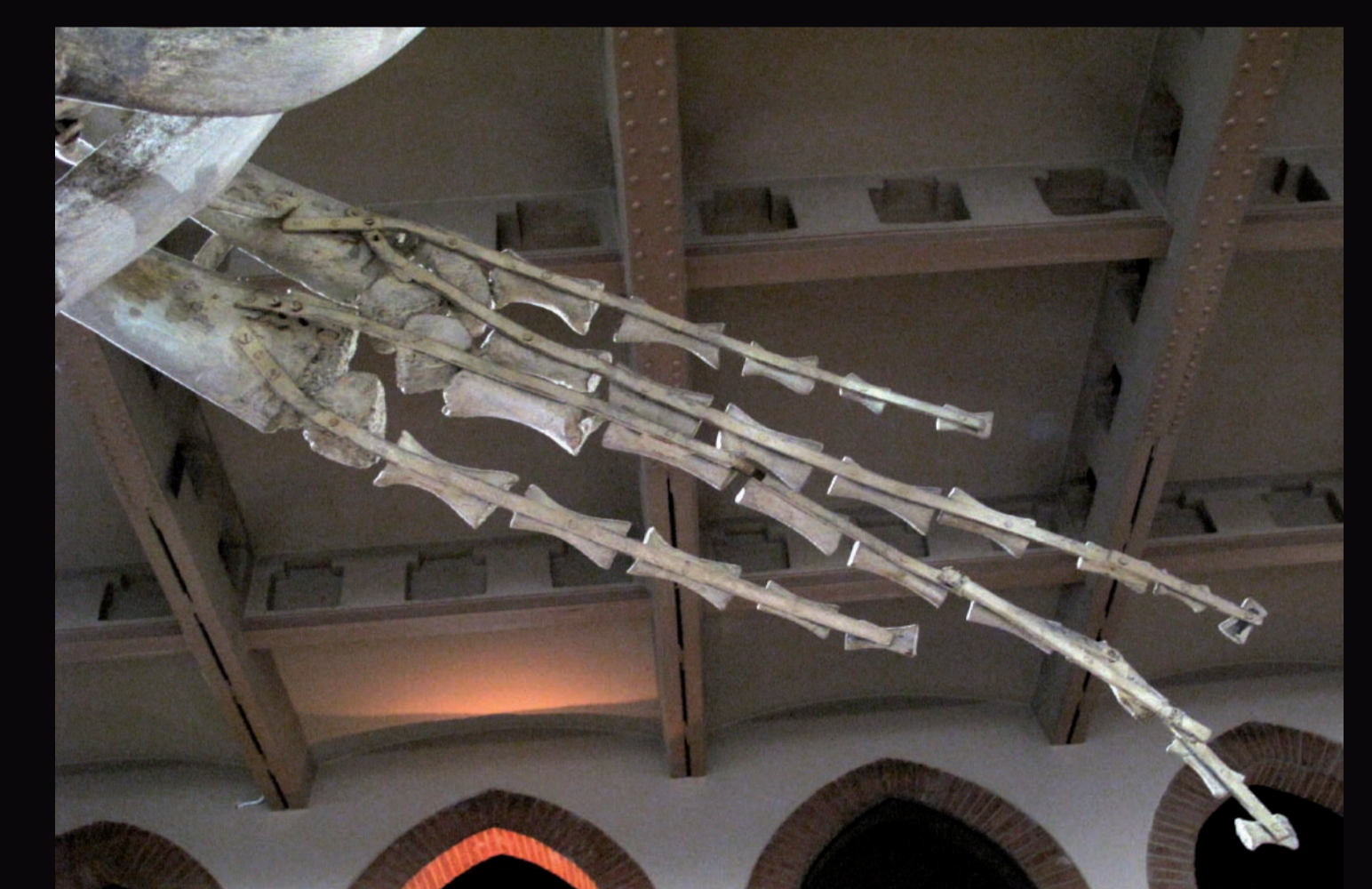
5. Accumulation of dust on the bone surface (Bernat Font Rosselló).



6. Fractured cervical vertebrae (after removal) (Bernat Font Rosselló).



7. Oxidized iron bolt. Migration of the oxidation products to the bone (Bernat Font Rosselló).



8. Replicas of the phalanges at the ends of the right fin, rear view (Bernat Font Rosselló).

4. MZB 83-3084 - *Balaenoptera physalus*. Elevation and detail map, 2010 (Marta Pérez Azcárate and Bernat Font Rosselló).

