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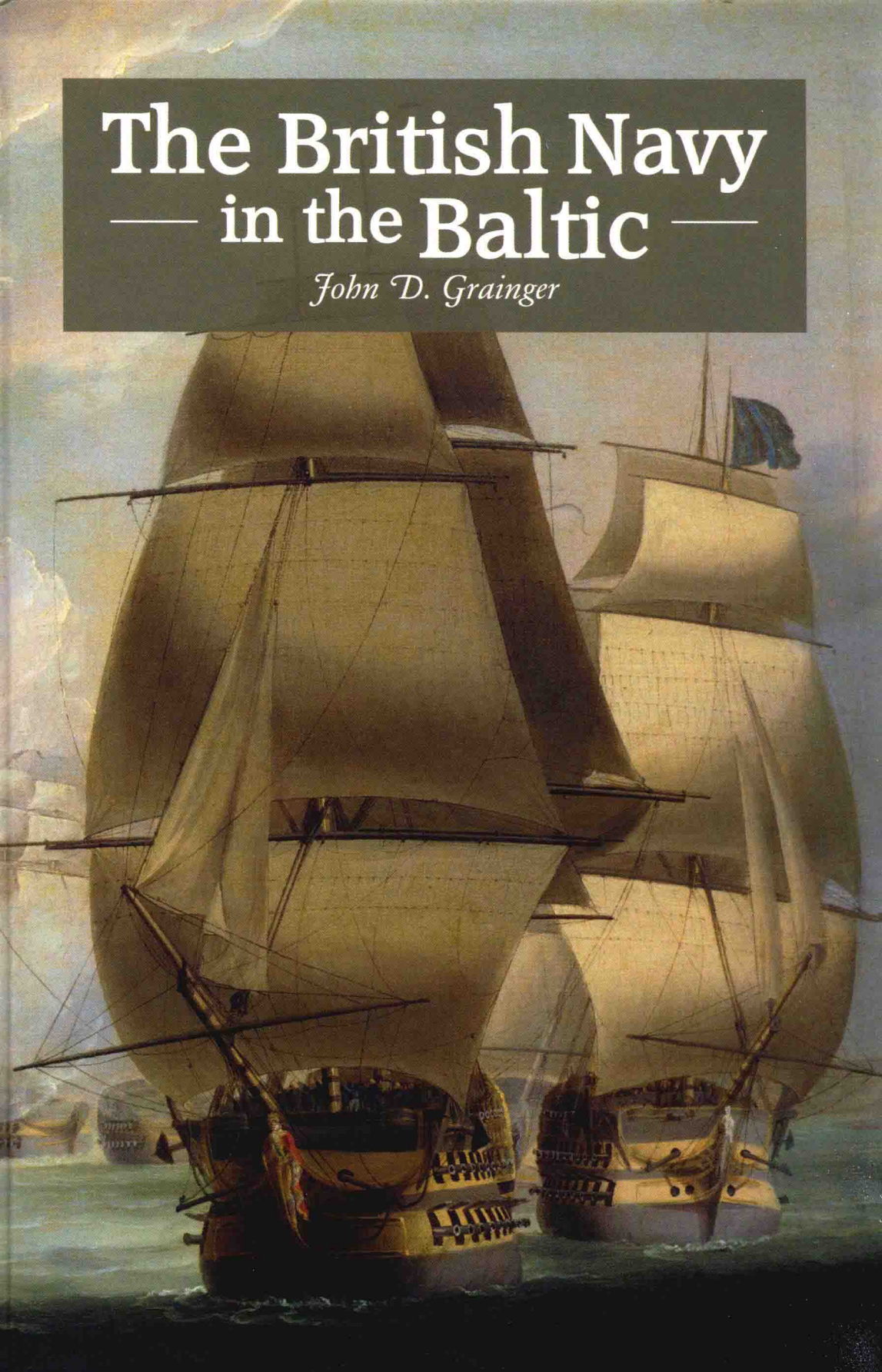

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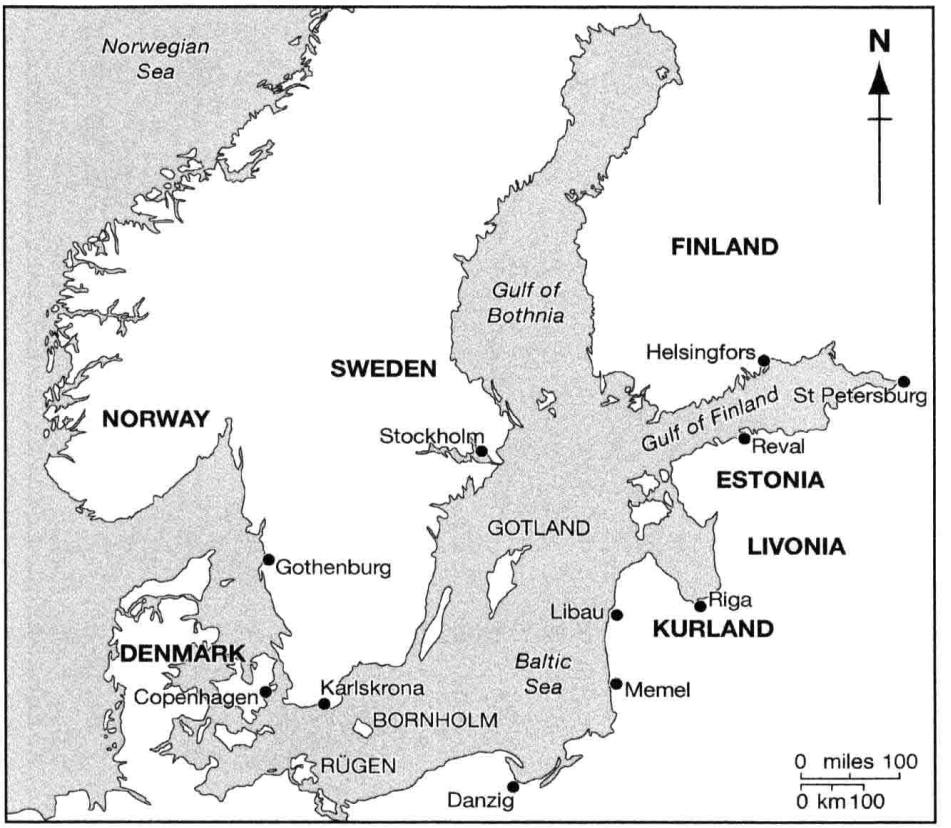
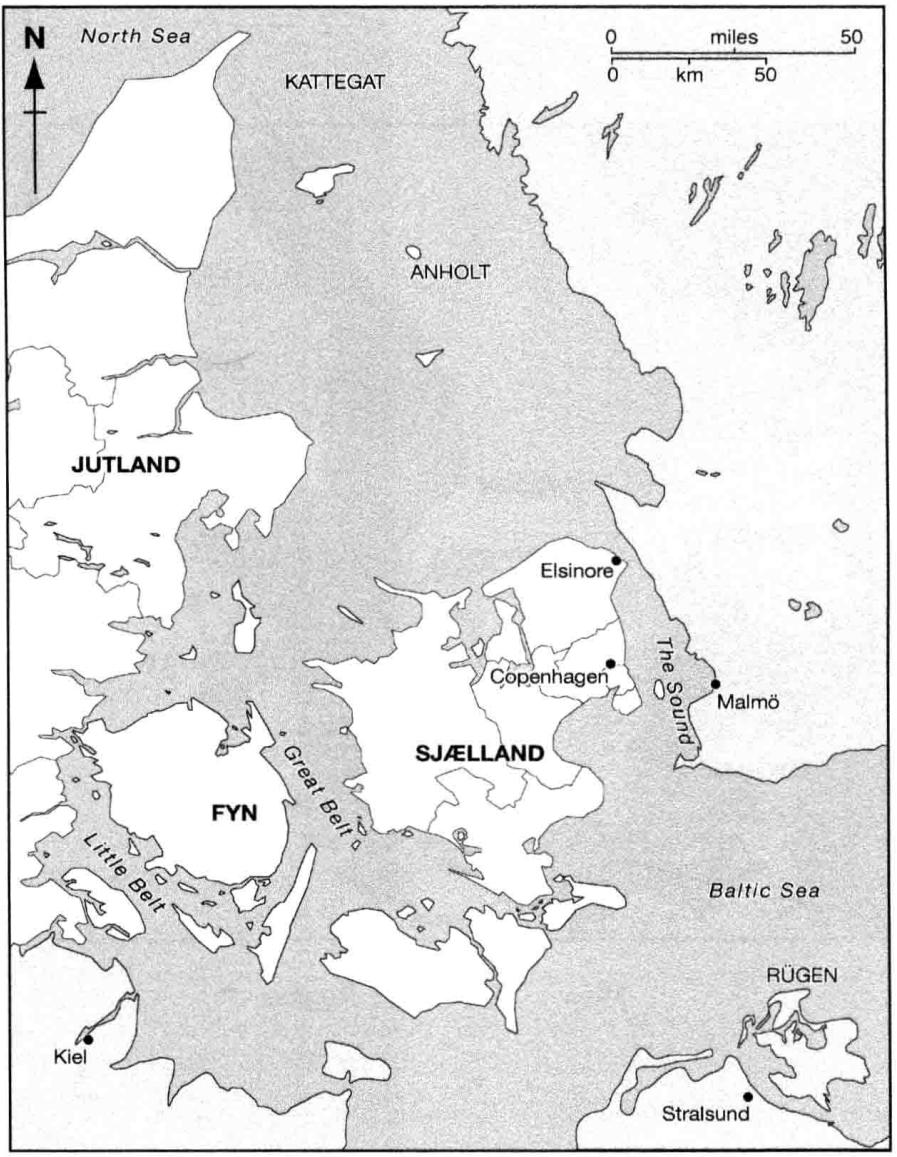


Map 1 The Baltic Region



Map 2 The Danish Straits

Map 3 The Gulf of Finland

Abbreviations

Albion, *Forests and Sea Power*	R. G. Albion, *Forests and Sea Power*, Cambridge MA, 1926
Anderson, *Naval Wars*	R. C. Anderson, *Naval Wars in the Baltic*, London 1910
Barton, *Scandinavia*	H. Arnold Barton, *Scandinavia in the Revolutionary Era 1760–1815*, Minneapolis, MN 1986
BL	British Library
Clowes, *Royal Navy*	W. Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy, A History from the Earliest Times to 1900*, 6 vols, London 1897–1903
James, *Naval History of Great Britain*	William James, *The Naval History of Great Britain* ... 7th ed., 6 vols, London 1887
Mitchell, *Russian Sea Power*	Donald W. Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, London 1974
MM	*Mariner's Mirror*
SEHR	*Scandinavian Economic History Review*
TNA	The National Archives
ADM	Admiralty documents

Maps

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Prologue

Ohthere, Wulfstan and King Knut 800–1200

The Baltic is not usually a sea one associates with activities by the Royal Navy, yet for three centuries it was a region for the navy's work, if in a less than usually violent form. Apart from battles at the entrance, there were few instances where the navy was used in its aggressive role, for once into the sea – past the barrier of the entrance at Copenhagen – opposition tended to hunker down into its ports and let the navy rule the sea at least while it was present. As soon as it was gone, the local forces reappeared. The role of the Royal Navy in the Baltic was thus one of intermittent interventions, best characterized, in Admiral Jackie Fisher's term, as 'Baltic cruises'. The purpose of the navy in the first century and a half of its activity in the Baltic was above all to supervise and protect the trade of the sea, much of which was in goods that were required for the navy itself to function. The trading involvement of British ships preceded the navy's presence by centuries, and developed slowly and, for Britain, in a typical pattern that can be paralleled in other seas; the combination of the threat of force and the exercise of trade was prefigured long before the Royal Navy came into existence in the actions of King Knut and in the accounts of two traders who visited King Alfred's court.

The Baltic Sea is one of the enclosed seas that surround Europe on three sides. The North Sea, the Irish Sea and the English Channel have wide and open entrances, which communicate easily with the outer Atlantic Ocean; the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Baltic Seas all have narrow and difficult connections with the oceans, and these choke-points allow states to control those passages. For the Baltic the connecting passage is in two parts. The three narrow Danish Straits run through the Danish islands, the Sound between Sjaelland and the Swedish mainland of Skåne, the Great Belt

between Sjaelland and Fyn, the Little Belt between Fyn and the Jutland peninsula. In the twentieth century these have all been bridged, and the Kiel Canal has been cut through the base of the peninsula, replacing two earlier canals, which has supplemented the older access routes, but the Sound is still the main route from the Atlantic Ocean into the Baltic Sea. The other part of the entrance is the wider channels of the Kattegat and the Skagerak, respectively east and north of Jutland. But these then only lead into the North Sea before reaching the ocean. There is a rather pointless controversy over where the North Sea ends and the Baltic begins – here Denmark will be included as a Baltic state, which it always has been, even though in some formulations the Baltic does not begin until one has passed the Sound.

The Baltic itself is relatively shallow, mostly less than 600 feet deep, and it is littered with islands; the larger and most important, besides the numerous Danish islands, are Rügen, Bornholm, Oland and Gotland, the Ålands, the Latvian Islands and Kronstadt, but there are hundreds of others, largely skerries along the coasts. Its shores open into bays, small ones along the southern coast, intricate ones on the Swedish coast, large ones on the east coast (Gulf of Riga), and great ones in the north, the Gulf of Bothnia, the Gulf of Finland. It receives the waters of some substantial rivers, notably the Oder and the Vistula and the Dvina from the south and east; meltwater from the Arctic winters flows into it along innumerable rivers in Sweden and Finland and Russia; for long distances along the south coast there extend low-lying sandbanks, which have enclosed lakes and bays, as at Danzig and Memel. And the whole sea lies at such a northerly latitude that parts of it freeze over every winter, and in a hard winter the whole sea freezes. And to cap the distinctiveness of the sea, it is largely composed of fresh water, thanks to the many rivers, and its relative smallness means it is virtually tideless. An added ingredient is that the whole Scandinavian region is rebounding upwards after the depression of the weight of the ice sheets of the Ice Age. For the sea this means a gradual change in the coasts, the islands, the bays. It is, more than most, a sea in the process of change.[1]

The Baltic is, that is to say, a distinctive body of water. This

[1] A useful summary of the geography of the sea is in David Kirby and Merja-Luisa Hinkkanen, *The Baltic and the North Seas*, London 2000.

is, of course, hardly a surprise – all seas are different – but the Baltic has peculiarities that must be taken into consideration when looking at the naval history of the area. The contest between the littoral communities to control the sea – and therefore access to its shores – has been continuous since the time of the Vikings, and perhaps even before. The navies of Britain have intervened in this almost private contest on half a dozen occasions over three centuries, but with very variable results.

The sea must have been familiar, at least in a general way, to the Saxons and Angles and Jutes who are said to have composed the invaders of Roman Britain during the fifth century. The Jutes and Angles occupied the northern and southern parts of the Jutland peninsula respectively; the Saxons came from an area of northern Germany south of the Angles.[2] All these regions faced both the North Sea and the Baltic, and all three, judging by the ships that archaeologists have found in their territories, such as the Nydam ship, dated to about AD 400, or those excavated at Skuldelev from Viking times, were capable of sailing over both seas – as the arrival of the new settlers in the abandoned Roman province of Britannia demonstrates. They came west, of course, because Britannia was rich, fertile, politically divided, and quite possibly some at least of them were invited.

If these peoples were familiar with the Baltic in their continental homelands, as they obviously were, it seems they forgot about it once they were settled in their new island home. Two-way traffic certainly took place at the start, as scouts visited Britannia and returned with the good news, and some return traffic probably took place for some time, but their new home was apparently too attractive to be abandoned even for a short time. Bede records that the Anglian homeland was deserted in his time.[3] He was surely exaggerating the emptiness, but the fact that he could say this suggests that some connections remained, and he has a good deal of information about Germany, mainly in relation to the activities of Anglo-Saxon missionaries. But the fact is that there is no mention of the Baltic Sea in any English source until its existence

2 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1, 15; Bede is the origin of the trio Angles, Saxons and Jutes; archaeologists also note the arrival of Franks and Frisians, and possibly Goths; the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* deals with Goths.

3 Ibid.

was brought forcibly to English attention by the arrival of the Vikings.

It was King Alfred, inquisitive, intelligent, and concerned to understand his enemies, who recorded the earliest details of the Viking homelands. He received at his court a Norseman, Ohthere (probably Ottar in his native tongue, but he will be called by his English name here) who retailed to him details of his homeland and his travels.[4] He was from northern Norway, and described a voyage he had made round to the White Sea, and another whose route took him south as far as the Sound and the Danish trading city of Hedeby. The explanation is clear and detailed enough for the route used to be mapped by modern experts.

Ohthere's account was taken down, it appears, by one of the literate scholars whom Alfred attracted to his court. The oral account was listened to, he was questioned, and the result was a new fragment of information, which was inserted into the translation of a sixth-century description of the world by Orosius, which was being prepared for Alfred's use.[5] This contained details of Europe as far north as northern Germany, but had nothing on the Baltic or Scandinavia; hence the interest in Ohthere's description of the region from which Alfred's enemies came, but which was apparently unknown to the standard geographers to which he had access, though it is hardly credible that he only knew of Denmark from Ohthere's account. The account Ohthere gave therefore supplemented Alfred's knowledge, probably mainly anecdotal, of Scandinavia, and introduced to him the Baltic Sea, though Ohthere only referred to the entrance, the Belts and the Sound. He explained his voyage south along the Norwegian coast, and he called at the trading town of *Sciringes heal* in the south of Norway. There he described looking out at the Skagerak, which he said was a great sea that was too wide to see across (and was thus not to be voyaged over, for Ohthere kept close to the coast wherever he could, landing every night). He then sailed south along the coast of the Kattegat and through the Danish islands to land at the trading town of Hedeby in southern Jutland. The man who wrote up the account afterwards commented that it was

4 Most conveniently available in Niels Lund (ed.), *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred*, trans. Christine E. Fell, York 1984.

5 Janet Bately (ed.), *The Old English Orosius*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 6, Oxford 1980.

from this area that the Angles had come to settle in England – another indication that there was some continuing knowledge of the region in England.

The other addition to Orosius in Alfred's translation is more to the point for this study. Wulfstan was a merchant, so it seems, and by his name he was an Englishman. He sailed from Hedeby (Ohthere's southern destination) eastwards as far as the mouth of the Vistula River. Unlike Ohthere Wulstan did not stop on the way, but sailed for seven days continuously. One would suppose that therefore he sailed in high summer, when there was continuous light to see the way. On the other hand, he did probably keep close to the coast, at least making landfall at obvious navigation pointers such as Rügen with its chalk cliffs. But he was also able to list several of the other islands in the sea (Bornholm, Oland, Gotland) and parts of the northern mainland (Skåne, Blekinge, Møre), which implies either that he had sailed these waters more frequently than on this voyage alone, or that he had gathered the knowledge from discussion with his companions.

Wulfstan does not mention the sort of ship he used, other than that it was a sailing ship, or where it came from, but it was probably either a Danish or a Wendish vessel. The Wends lived along all the southern Baltic coast he sailed past.[6] His destination was Truso, a Scandinavian town on the borders of Wendland and 'Witland', which was the later East Prussia. The town was situated on the bank of a distributary of the Vistula River, which led into the 'Estmere', the Frisches Haff or Wislinsky Zilaf. Truso, on the site of the modern Elbing (Elblag),has been partly excavated, and has been shown to have existed from about the seventh to the eleventh century.[7] Modern Gdansk (Danzig) is its effective successor, though Elbing has also survived, on a slightly different site. Truso was a major trading port, mainly Swedish in population when Wulfstan was there, but situated in the land of the Prussians. (Wulfstan had a lot to say about curious Prussian customs, some of them scarcely believable.) It might have been at Truso that he heard about the geography of

6 Ole Crumlin-Pedersen discusses possible ships in *Two Voyagers* (note 3), 31–33.

7 M. F. Jagodzinski, 'Truso – Siedlung und Hafen im slawisch-etnischen Grenzgebiet', in A. Wieczorek and A. M. Hinz (eds), *Europa Mitte um 1000, Beitrage zur geschichte, Kunst, und Archaologie*, vol. I, Stuttgart, 2000, 170–174.

the Baltic, for the Swedish islands and mainland were clearly known to the merchants living there.

The excavations in the town have produced many silver coins of Arabic origin, and four coins from Western Europe, one of which was minted in the name of King Aethelwulf of Wessex, Alfred's father.[8] All these coins had been pierced with two holes, either for conversion to pendants, or for ease of transport.[9] The Aethelwulf coin was hardly worn, which implies that it had moved from England to Truso fairly quickly. It was obviously there when Wulfstan visited the place; he was not, therefore, likely to have been the only visitor to the town from England.

Alfred and his scholars therefore knew of the Baltic at least in its Skagerak–Kattegat approaches, and along its southern coast as far as Truso and Gotland. How far that knowledge percolated out into the wider population is quite unknown, but Alfred's son and grandson had extensive diplomatic contacts with several continental lands, from the emperor downwards, and so a general knowledge of the political geography of the continent was understood, and as the threat of Viking attacks lessened in the tenth century, the sea was accessible to others than Wulfstan.

Between them, Ohthere and Wulfstan reported the existence of three trading towns in and near the Baltic – Truso, Hedeby and *Sciringes heal* – and there were several others, such as Birka in Sweden or Staraia Ladoga in Russia. The fuel for the Baltic trade was silver acquired from the Islamic world, such as those pierced coins at Truso. That is to say, well before Wulfstan's voyage, the Baltic was a busy trading area, and Wulfstan himself was clearly using a familiar sea route and visiting busy and well-established towns. Once the first wave of Viking raids and Danish conquests in England had died away, it was open to other English traders to follow him. In fact, of course, the underlying evidence of Ohthere and Wulfstan is that the region was open to English trade and traders all along, though it seems characteristic of this sea that knowledge of it

8 Stanislaw Suchodolski, 'A Coin of Aethelwulf of Wessex from Truso in Poland', in Barrie Cook and Gareth Williams (eds), *Coinage and History in the North Sea World, c.500–1250,* Leiden 2006, 287–296.

9 'Pendants' is the usual explanation, but it seems to me that the holes are more likely to for storage or transport – otherwise there were an awful lot of pendants.