

# Viking-Age sailing routes of the western Baltic Sea – a matter of safety<sup>1</sup>

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Included in the Old English *Orosius*, compiled at the court of King Alfred the Great of Wessex around 890,<sup>2</sup> are the descriptions of two different late 9<sup>th</sup>-century Scandinavian sailing routes. These originate from Ohthere, who sailed from his home in Hålogaland in northern Norway to Hedeby, and Wulfstan, probably an Englishman,<sup>3</sup> who travelled from Hedeby to Truso. The descriptions are not detailed to any degree concerning waypoints or anchorages, and in spite of the fact that lands passed are mentioned in both accounts, the information provided is sometimes unclear or confusing. For example, departing from Hålogaland, Ohthere refers to both Ireland and England on his starboard side even though he obviously has been unable to glimpse these lands when sailing along the Norwegian coast.<sup>4</sup> The same peculiarity applies to Wulfstan, who mentions the present-day Swedish landscapes Blekinge, Møre, Öland and Gotland on his port side.<sup>5</sup> It is more likely that neither of the two were describing sea routes, but rather describing the general geography to an audience with limited knowledge of this area.

Most interesting in the accounts of Ohthere and Wulfstan are the description of two very different ways of travelling. While Wulfstan's ship sailed for seven days and nights from Hedeby to Truso, Ohthere described how a voyage from Hålogaland to *Skiringes healh* (Kaupang) took at least a month in fair wind and anchoring every evening.<sup>6</sup>

In his paper, Johan Callmer sketches the assumed manner of sailing in the early Viking Age, and the inspiration has obviously come from Ohthere's way of travelling. Callmer sets out in a relatively small sailing ship with an insignificant draught; he is aware of

weather conditions, currents, shifting sand bars on the sea floor and coastal morphology. Being able to cope with the elements of nature is important for a safe journey, but equally important – not least when travelling like Ohthere – is a guarantee of safety for ship and crew when coming ashore. Callmer suggests convoying as a form of self-protection, but at the end of the day it would be vital to negotiate a safe passage with “supra-regional or regional lords”.<sup>7</sup> They controlled the landing sites that punctuate Callmer's route as stepping-stones.

In consequence of the latter, Callmer focuses on settlement patterns in order to identify political and military centres – centres with lords who controlled certain areas of land (and sea) and were able to guarantee safety within their ‘jurisdiction’. This approach is important because it introduces an obvious question regarding Ohthere's travelling pattern: how many lords would he have had to negotiate with on his trip? Would it have been 35, 15 or just two or three?

## Denmark and Danes – the kingdom and people ca 890

Callmer states that the level of political organisation and control must be considered low and unstable in the (early) Viking Age.<sup>8</sup> According to Callmer, a Danish kingdom did exist, but not in a state comparable to the situation of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

According to the Old English *Orosius*, Norway (*Nordweg*) stretched from the north side of the Polar Circle to Vestfold. No Danish supremacy is mentioned. Going south from Skiringssal along the west coast of

1. This paper is the extended version of a comment on Johan Callmer's contribution at the seminar.

2. See Bately this volume: 20.

3. See Jesch this volume: 30.

4. Lund 1983: 24.

5. See Bately this volume: 15.

6. Anton Englert argues that Ohthere's statement indicates a way of measuring the distance more than a description of a specific voyage (Englert 2007: 118, 122-125). He may be correct, but anchoring at night was apparently a common sailing procedure, otherwise Ohthere's account would not make sense.

7. See Callmer this volume: 115.

8. See Callmer this volume: 114.

contemporary Sweden, Ohthere states that he had Denmark (*Denamearc*) to port (Figs 1-2). On the starboard side were Jutland (*Gotland*, Danish *Jylland*) at first, later *Sillende* “and many islands”, and – Ohthere adds – this was the ancient homeland of the Angles before immigrating to England.<sup>9</sup> *Sillende* is, therefore, thought to be the southern part of the Jutland peninsula, where the present-day region of Angeln is situated between the Flensburg and Schlei fjords. Another identification of *Sillende* is put forward by Bent Jørgensen, who connects the name with Zealand (Danish *Sjælland*).<sup>10</sup> While passing “*Sillende* and many islands to starboard”, Ohthere had “the islands belonging to Denmark” to port.

Wulfstan contributes to the geo-political setting mentioning that he had the islands Langeland, Lolland, Falster and Scania (Swedish *Skåne*) to port, and they were subject to Denmark.<sup>11</sup> Still to port he passed an independent island of Bornholm (*Burgenda*

*land*) and then Blekinge, Møre, Øland and Gotland belonging to the Swedes (*Sweon*). All the way he had Wendland to starboard.

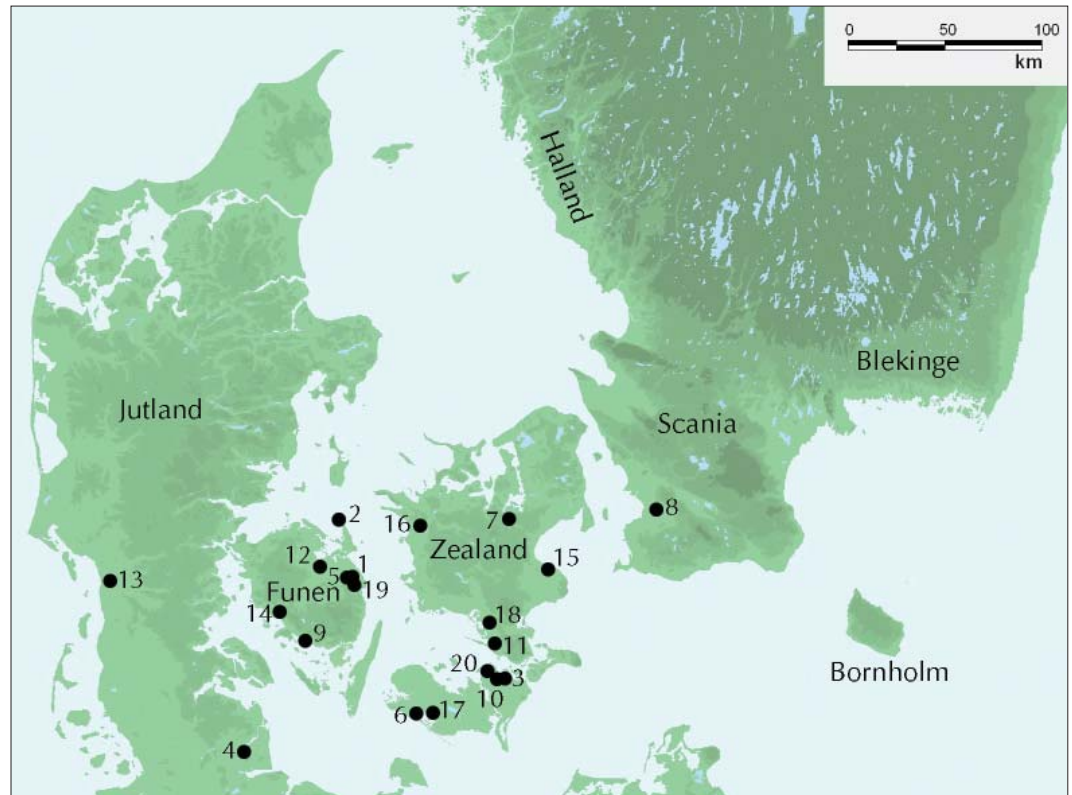
Therefore, there was an area called *Denamearc* consisting of a rather substantial region including the west coast of contemporary Sweden, Scania, and the islands of Langeland, Lolland and Falster. To this we can surely add Zealand. West of here were *Gotland* and, perhaps, *Sillende*. The lands are not described as an entity, and no ethnic group (but the emigrated Angles) is connected with these areas. It is noteworthy that Ohthere describes Hedeby as situated between Saxons, Angles and Wends, but belonging to the Danes (*hyrð in on Dene*),<sup>12</sup> not to Denmark. Positioning Funen (Danish *Fyn*) ethno-politically and geographically on Ohthere’s route is not straightforward. As mentioned above, he noted that he had *Sillende* and many islands to starboard and at the same time the islands belonging to Denmark to port. Of course it is difficult to know ex-



Fig. 1. Landscapes mentioned by Ohthere and Wulfstan. Redrawn after Crumlin-Pedersen 1983.

9. Lund 1983; Batley this volume: 15.  
 10. Jørgensen 1994: 249-250.  
 11. See Batley this volume: 15.  
 12. Lund 1983; Batley this volume: 15.

Fig. 2. Sites mentioned in the text. 1. Avnslev Overby, 2. Fyns Hoved, 3. Gundslev, 4. Hedeby, 5. Hjulby, 6. Hoby, 7. Lejre, 8. Uppåkra, 9. Nabbe-Kildegård, 10. Nr. Alslev, 11. Næs, 12. Odense, 13. Ribe, 14. Strandby-Gammeltoft, 15. Strøby-Toftegård, 16. Tissø, 17. Vejleby, 18. Vester Egesborg, 19. Vindinge, 20. Vålse.



actly what he means by “many islands”. If the number five – or seven, including Samsø and Endelave – is “many” he could have entered Little Belt between Jutland and Funen. Alternatively, his route passed through the Great Belt separating Funen and Zealand. Consequently the “many islands” to starboard were situated south of Funen, while “the islands belonging to Denmark” must have been Zealand and the islands to its south. However, this theory is not entirely in accordance with Wulfstan’s mention of Langeland’s affiliation to Denmark.

Several 9<sup>th</sup>-century Western European annals and chronicles give us the impression of a kingdom of Danes of some significance that was strong enough to challenge Charlemagne and his successors in the border areas. In the Old English *Orosius* we learn that there were two kinds of Danes: “North Danes” and “South Danes”, the latter also being mentioned on a rune stone from Sædinge on Lol-

land from the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary written sources speak of “kings of the Danes” rather than a specific Danish group or Denmark. However, both Ohthere and Wulfstan refer to “Danes” and “Denmark”, but whether or not this indicates the ethnic group of the Danes at this time, having the same king is uncertain. Moreover, the people on Bornholm (the ‘Burgendan’) are mentioned separately, a peculiarity underlined by Wulfstan, who states that they had their own king. The question is whether differentiation between ‘Danes’ and ‘Denmark’ is important. In later documents, King Knud the Great calls himself “king of England and Denmark and the Norwegians and a part of the Swedes”,<sup>14</sup> “king of the English”<sup>15</sup> and “king of the realm of England and the Danes”.<sup>16</sup> He randomly uses both the ethnic name and the name of the kingdom. During the reign of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Danish king Svend Estridsen, he is called “king of the

13. Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: No. 217.

14. *Danmarks Riges Breve* 1. rk., 1. bd., nr. 422 (1975).

15. *Danmarks Riges Breve* 1. rk., 1. bd., nr. 411 (1975).

16. *Danmarks Riges Breve* 1. rk., 1. bd., nr. 448 (1975).

Danes”<sup>17</sup> and Pope Alexander II mentions “the realm of the Danes”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, there is no absolute contradiction between the “areas belonging to the Danes” and “Denmark” in this period, and the same might have been the case in Ohthere’s and Wulfstan’s time.

In the Annals of Fulda it is noted for 873 that the peace between King Louis and the Danish kings Halfdan and Sigurd was confirmed so that trade between the kingdoms could continue unhindered. This ‘trade pact’ could solely have been aimed at the traffic across the border in Schleswig. On the other hand it might also have meant that the kings could guarantee safe passage and trade within their realm. If we assume that Halfdan and Sigurd controlled ‘Denmark’ as defined by Ohthere and Wulfstan, Ohthere could travel safely most of the way from Oslo Fjord to Hedeby if he was granted the protection of the Danish kings. But how did Ohthere gain safe conduct in the first place? Was it a time-honoured privilege handed down through generations and centuries to travel along established routes? Was it necessary to negotiate with each and every magnate with a landing site along the route? Or, did the king decentralise the power of issuing safe conduct to his trusted magnates, who controlled larger or smaller areas of their own, and could Ohthere then fly a banner from his mast, showing his acquired status to everyone?

## Centres

Callmer’s proposed sailing route focuses on settled areas in order to make the presence of a protected landing site probable. According to Callmer, protection relies on a “centre”, and he adds the adjectives “most important” (Odense), “small” (Hjulby), “regional” (Vålse, Gundslev and Nørre Alslev). However, it is not very clear which criteria lie behind the terms used in describing the centres. Although the term “centre” is not

discussed in any detail here, it is paramount to elaborate further on the use of the term “regional” when pointing out two or even three “regional centres” situated very close (5 km) to each other on the northern part of Falster (Fig. 3).<sup>19</sup>

Sites with extra-ordinary buildings and other constructions as well as lay-out and artefacts like Tissø,<sup>20</sup> Lejre on Zealand<sup>21</sup> and Uppåkra in Scania<sup>22</sup> seem insignificant in Callmer’s presentation while other sites on northern Funen are described. But how shall we consider the relations between the proposed centres Odense, labelled “the most important centre of the island of Funen” and Hjulby, referred to as a “small centre”, with regard to safe passage at sea? Odense, situated 9-10 km upstream on the Odense river, has an indicative name,<sup>23</sup> while the archaeological finds are not older than the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The artefacts – dominated by local pottery – are primarily retrieved from scattered pits and odd pit houses, and at least one of the archaeological sites is connected with a village structure called “Hetby”.<sup>24</sup>

At Hjulby, situated 4-5 km from the Great Belt coast, 15 pit houses have been excavated, along with a cultural layer with workshop refuse and a variety of metal objects dating from around the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, all found within a 150 m x 250 m area.<sup>25</sup> Some 4 km to the south, at the village of Vindinge, post-built longhouses and pit houses from the late Viking Age have recently been found, as has a nearby workshop area with artefacts dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>26</sup> Approximately 3 km north-west of Hjulby, at Avnslev Overby, yet another site with a long house, pit houses and a workshop area has been partly excavated.<sup>27</sup> The artefacts date from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and a rune stone has been found by the church. Which of these sites is the “centre”? Hjulby is by far the largest at this point, both in regards to the area of activity and the number of artefacts. But it has also been a site of focused archaeological research for a decade, while Vindinge

17. *Danmarks Riges Breve* 1. rk., 2. bd., nr. 5 (1975).

18. *Danmarks Riges Breve* 1. rk., 2. bd., nr. 5 (1975).

19. Vålse, Gundslev and Nørre Alslev; see Callmer this volume.

20. Jørgensen 2003.

21. Christensen 1993.

22. Helgesson 2002: 45-62; Larsson 2002.

23. Odense means “the sacred place (‘vi’) of Odin” (Jørgensen 1994: 218).

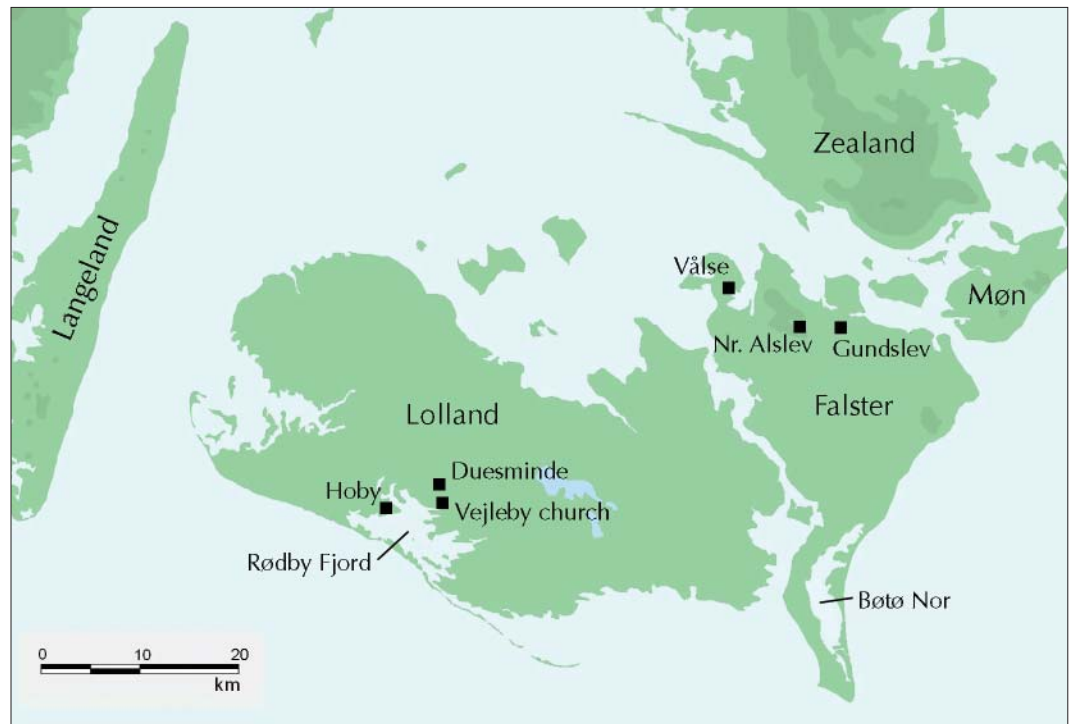
24. Jacobsen 2001: 72-73; Vestergade 70-74 (OBM j. nr. 8236).

25. Henriksen 2000: 35-55; Henriksen 2002.

26. Henriksen 2002: 156-157.

27. Henriksen 2002: 174.

Fig. 3. Sites on Lolland and Falster.



and Avnslev Overby are ‘virgin’ sites in comparison. Further excavations could change the picture completely. The truth is that these sites could be nothing more than production sites tied to the true centre of power: a magnate’s manor yet to be revealed.

The southern Danish island of Lolland is another point of focus in Callmer’s paper (see Fig. 3). In the southern part of the island is the reclaimed Rødby Fjord, originally comprised of several fine natural harbours in shallow and protected waters. From the hinterland of the fjord, there are five rune stones dating from the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and one from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Callmer mentions the island as a “mini-region” suggesting a centre of a 9<sup>th</sup>-century “regional lord”, approximately 1 km north of the present-day village of Vejleby. From fields at Duesminde, silver hoards were retrieved during the 1960s and in 2002,<sup>29</sup> and 12 poorly-furnished Viking-Age graves were revealed 1.5 km to the west in 1923. The hoards are indeed spectacular, but the “manor of Dues-

minde” mentioned by Callmer is yet to be found. The most convincing traces of a settlement of this period have been found in Gloslunde Parish at Hoby on the banks of the reclaimed fjord.<sup>30</sup> The excavations have been limited, and it is too early to conclude whether Hoby was a magnate’s residence, an ordinary farm or a landing site during the Viking Age. Another potentially interesting site is situated between Vejleby church and the reclaimed shore of Rødby Fjord, where metal detection has identified several artefacts of bronze dating from the Viking Age.<sup>31</sup> This situation is paralleled at a number of landing sites throughout southern Scandinavia.

### Landing sites

In his paper, Callmer defines maritime sites as “primarily functioning as ports, shipyards and contact zones between natives and visitors”. This must be seen in contrast to what Callmer calls coastal sites – “settlements of

28. Jacobsen & Moltke 1942.

29. Schilling 2003.

30. *Archaeological excavations in Denmark 2001*: nos 185 and 186.

31. ‘Vejleby Kirke’, no. 07.03.10 - 10 Vejleby parish, Fuglse herred, Maribo amt. See [www.dkconline.dk](http://www.dkconline.dk).

normal agrarian type situated close to the sea”.

He suggests a typology of five categories of maritime sites, but it is difficult to appreciate the definitions as useful tools in real-life archaeology. As mentioned previously, the concept of the term “regional” is somewhat obscure. Therefore it is not very helpful to label maritime sites “local”, “regional” or “supra-regional” as long as these terms remain undefined. There is also no estimate of size or physical presence. What is “small” compared with “middle-sized” and “extensive”? If a “semi-permanent” element is a house (type C),<sup>32</sup> which kind of construction is “permanent”? The presence of houses does not make a landing site more “regional”.

Although there is some (modern) reasoning to Callmer’s site typology,<sup>33</sup> the archaeological documentation is as yet too flimsy to support it. The number of documented sites is fairly limited and the size of excavations often inadequate to determine chronology, layout and function. The studies of landing sites in Denmark and southern Sweden have shown that the majority date from the late Iron and Viking Ages, demonstrating a large variation in physical presence and artefacts.<sup>34</sup> Only large-scale excavations can reveal their true nature. Callmer suggests Strandby-Gammeltoft and Nabbe-Kildegård on Funen as examples of type C sites, but at this point they are not comparable at all. At Strandby-Gammeltoft more than an acre has been excavated and amongst the features were 29 pit houses dating from the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>35</sup> The site has produced artefacts consisting of pottery, metal objects and workshop refuse. At Nabbe-Kildegård, a single pit house has been found in a sewer trench, containing uncharacteristic pottery of Iron-Age type and animal bones.<sup>36</sup> Stray finds from the vicinity consist of four spindle whirls, two glass beads and a gold arm-ring (dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century). The true size, structure, function and chronology of Nabbe-Kildegård can only be revealed through further excavations.

The difficulty of making early conclusions can be illustrated by a locality from southern Zealand. Vester Egesborg is a landing site situated on the bank of the Dybsø Fjord some 10 km south of Næstved.<sup>37</sup> It was found in the early 1960s and a trial excavation was carried out in 1965.<sup>38</sup> Surveying with metal detector in the 1990s produced an extraordinary amount of high-quality metal objects from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. A large-scale excavation has been conducted on the site during recent years, and every year has delivered surprising results, especially concerning the layout of the site. If excavations had stopped in 1999, the interpretation of the site would not have been adequate and as a consequence the conclusions would have been incorrect.

Indeed, there are different types of Viking-Age landing sites.<sup>39</sup> Classifying settlements connected in a network founded on a theory of extensive and systematic trade relations in the early Viking Age is another matter. There is no convincing argument that the level of 9<sup>th</sup>-century economics were in need of a fine-meshed trading network with numerous sites of sizes “small”, “medium” and “extensive”, widespread along the coasts and rivers of Scandinavia, frequently visited by independent merchants during the sailing season. The number of landing sites in Roskilde Fjord and the Limfjord in mind<sup>40</sup> – perhaps paralleled by the Schlei fjord<sup>41</sup> – would imply a rather abundant ‘class’ of persons who produced a surplus of their own large enough to put on the market. This market should, then, also take place on their own beach, having a standard and goods of such a quality that it attracted merchants.

The increase in the number of archaeologically-known landing sites of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries is evident, but only a few were participants in fixed trading networks. The long-distance trading sites differ from the majority in their layout, their plots and the amount of refuse from production. It is also these sites that are mentioned in the contem-

32. See definitions in Callmer this volume.

33. See Callmer this volume.

34. Callmer 1991; Carlsson 1991; Ulriksen 1990; Ulriksen 1998; Ulriksen 2004.

35. Henriksen 1997.

36. Ulriksen 1998: 153.

37. Gärtner & Ulriksen 1997; Ulriksen 1998: 169-178; Ulriksen 2006.

38. Ørsnes 1966: 262.

39. Ulriksen 1998: 189-194.

40. Ulriksen 1998.

41. Dobat 2002; Dobat 2004.

porary written sources: i.e., Ribe, Hedeby, Skiringssal and Birka. They were legs in a Northern European trading network, and connected Scandinavian magnates and their surplus with the rest of the world. The majority of landing sites only occasionally were in contact with this sphere of trading. They were multifunctional<sup>42</sup> and their maritime connection was mostly based on their situation on the coast/beach, not by ship-finds or imported goods. Generally, they contrast with the average agrarian settlement site by having no farmsteads or fenced plots, and if there are buildings, pit houses are dominant. A number of these landing sites are characterised by stray finds of women's jewellery and refuse from small-scale craft production, typically iron, bone and antler working, bronze casting and cloth weaving. An average landing site has between three and four types of crafts documented through the archaeological material.<sup>43</sup> At the rural settlements there are rarely more than two types of handicrafts represented and these are dominated by cloth weaving followed by iron working.<sup>44</sup> Rural settlements that have the same spectrum of handicrafts as the landing sites, including comb making and glass bead production, are typically magnate's sites like Lejre, Tissø and Strøby-Toftgård on Zealand.

However, there are two sites situated on the coast of southern Zealand that are different. Separated by only 10 km, Vester Egesborg on the bank of Dybsø Fjord and Næs on the bank of the Avnø Fjord do not fit into the description of the average coastal landing site. At Næs, dating from the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there have been excavated 20 three-aisled post-built houses, representing a single farm in four phases, and 79 pit houses. In addition, 58 wells and a 150 m-long canal connecting some of the wells have been identified. The wells were largely used for retting flax in connection with linen production, and pits and ditches with charcoal and burnt stones might have been used for drying the flax before

breaking.<sup>45</sup> Vester Egesborg possesses 18 rather short three-aisled post-built houses as well as 98 pit houses. Wells for retting have yet to be found, but a couple of pits similar to those for drying flax at Næs are documented. The evidence from these two recently-excavated sites might indicate the phenomenon of specialised coastal agrarian production.

The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the majority of the 9<sup>th</sup>-century landing sites were involved in small-scale production, refining of agricultural produce and fishing and also functioned as harbours for local ships. In relation to trade, they were points of departure for a minor group of people controlling the agricultural surplus, which could be exchanged at the long-distance trading sites, with contacts in an 'international' sphere of trade. Here they could acquire luxurious items important for maintaining the social order and political connections. The restricted number of long-distance trading sites in 9<sup>th</sup>-century Scandinavia is no coincidence. Society had no need for competitive sites in the modern sense of the word, and these *emporía* were situated in convenient contact zones. It is noteworthy that Oht here obviously was very focused in his travel behaviour. He did not refer to any incidents of trade or exchange in connections with his numerous stops from northern Norway to the western Baltic. Only Skiringssal and Hedeby were important. They were the focal points in the communication system of the time, and where Oht here could exchange his cargo of raw materials for what he required.

## Sailing routes

The matter of safety is paramount on a sailing route. This implies specific knowledge of the route, as well as the sailor's ability to cope with capricious nature and avoid attacks. If we assume that a skipper was experienced and familiar with the way-points and was granted safe conduct, proposing sailing

42. Ulriksen 1998: 184; Ulriksen 2004: 11.

43. Ulriksen 2002: 9-11.

44. Ulriksen 2002: 12-13.

45. Hansen & Høyer 2000.



Fig. 4. Supposed sailing route from the mouth of the Schlei fjord to Kalmar Sound.

routes is straight forward. He could choose any sailing route and established or uninhabited landing site he liked. Close to the coast he would have numerous opportunities to find a proper resting place. Natural sheltered anchorages and resting places are abundant, especially on the coasts of southern Denmark (see Fig. 3).

However, it is not a necessity only to look for settled and inhabited landing sites. A skipper could choose to anchor at desolate islands and spits of land. A partly-excavated site of the latter type is known at Fyns Hoved.<sup>46</sup> This might very well have been a commonly used and relatively safe way of spending the night. In this way the risk of sudden attacks from local residents looking for easy plunder could be reduced.

A skipper unfamiliar with the waters, responsible for his and his crew's safety, would have to avoid the coastal routes as well as inhabited landing sites and densely-populated areas. He would either choose desolate and isolated camping sites like Fyns Hoved or

prefer Wulfstan's way of travelling. A route from the Schlei fjord to the Kalmar Sound would head for the southern spit of Falster, where the Bøtø Nor provides a landmark and a sheltered anchorage (Fig. 4). From here a northeasterly course towards the Bornholm Gap would bring a ship between the prominent landmarks of Cape Arkona on the island of Rügen and the white cliffs of Møn. A possible anchorage could be the northeast coast of Bornholm, and from here to Utlängen the course is northbound. This trip would take around five or six days and nights.

Even though the winds and currents of the Baltic Sea can be difficult or even treacherous for a sailing ship, it is not the natural conditions that constitute the primary obstacle to navigation. It is more a question of security for ship and crew: a skipper or pilot familiar with the area, the guarantee of a safe journey and landing or showing the ability to defend oneself in an unmistakable way would have ensured the risk of attack would be kept to a minimum.

46. Henriksen 1994.



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