

**Northern Europe's East Sea:
The challenge of so many names for one sea**

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ABSTRACT

The Baltic Sea, which is bounded by nine littoral states, has a wide variety of variant names. The origins and evolution of parallel names are discussed in the context of the Dutch involvement in the so-called 'Baltic Trade' which emerged in the 12th century and the development in Holland during the 16th and 17th centuries of one of Europe's leading centres of cartography. Despite centuries of geopolitical conflict and change around the shores of the Baltic Sea, there have emerged names used internally by individual littoral states as well as a mutually acceptable form widely used in an international context.

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Introduction

In a paper on the *Principles of Toponymic Standardisation*, presented in 2011 at a Roundtable discussion on the Name *East Sea*, I highlighted how the consistent application of toponymic principles and guidelines can help in selecting the most appropriate name to be used in representing geographical features. The aim of standardisation is the avoidance of ambiguity and misunderstanding which for maritime areas in particular has implications with respect to safety at sea. First published in 1929, the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) Special Publication S-23 set out to assist cartographers producing nautical charts by using one internationally agreed name. This has been made more difficult by the subsequent politicising of the oceans as a result of the various Law of the Sea conferences (Kerr 2002). Names have consequently become political and while maritime names or hydronyms may be widely accepted internationally, they may also be the subject of local dispute, as in the case of the naming of the sea between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago.

In the context of what toponymists call endonyms, Woodman (2009) discussed the use of names in the languages of those living on the shores of the sea in question – Dong Hae (Korean), Nihon-kai (Japanese) and Yaponskoye More (Russian). Describing this body of water as “The sea of the three endonyms”, he highlights the fact that many seas have quite legitimate variant names in the languages of littoral nations. This paper proposes to look at the naming of the sea in Northern Europe conventionally known as the Baltic Sea, with a view to exploring how a multiplicity of donor names have evolved and why this has apparently not led to the politicising of this name despite centuries of conflict and name changes around its shores. The names of the sea and its littoral features have been influenced by a variety of factors including maritime trade, the development of cartography in Northern Europe and even a changing physical landscape. These factors will be briefly considered.

The Baltic Sea

Occupying a basin formed by glacial erosion during the Ice Age, the Baltic Sea is one of the world's largest brackish inland seas with an area of 377,000 km². It extends from latitude 53°N to 66°N and longitude 20°E to 26°E with an average depth of 30 fathoms (180 feet). To the west, the Baltic Sea drains out through the Øresund, Great Belt and Little Belt into the Kattegat before flowing on through the Skaggeiak to the North Sea. The principal inlets of the Baltic Sea are the Gulf of Bothnia, Gulf of Finland and Gulf of Riga. A total of 85 million people live within the drainage basin of the Baltic and nine countries border its 8,000-km (5,000-mile) coastline.

The Baltic Sea – Variant Names

The United States GeoNames Database lists a total of eleven toponymic variants for the Baltic Sea, nine of which are endonyms in the local languages of littoral states (**Table 1**). This “Sea of the nine endonyms” has all the potential for confusion but in his review of “consent and dissent” in relation to bi- and multi-lingual maritime names Kadmon (2004) quickly dismisses the Baltic Sea on this count saying that, with respect to the politicisation of the name, “no problem is involved”. Pokoly (2004) also made reference to the Baltic Sea in his paper on the naming of European seas based on historical maps available in Hungary, pointing out that a number of countries in the region call this body of water the East Sea while the rest of the world names it the Baltic Sea.

Table 1. The Baltic Sea - Variant Names

Baltic Sea	English language conventional name
Mer Baltique	French
Baltijas jūra	Latvian
Baltijos jūra	Lithuania
Baltiyskoye More	Russian
Morze Bałtyckie	Polish
Balti meri	Estonian
Itämeri	Finnish
Östersjön	Swedish
Östersöen	Danish
Ost-See	German
Läänemeri	Estonian

Source: US GeoNames Database

Of the twelve names in **Table 1**, the first two are the English and French language names for the sea. The remainder, which are names used by littoral states, fall into three categories. One group of five names are variants using different language versions of the conventional English form Baltic Sea (Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish and Estonian). A second group of four names are variants referring to a cardinal point translated into English as East Sea (Swedish, Danish, German and Finnish) and a third group includes a single name which refers to a different cardinal point, the West Sea (Estonian). Which of the two Estonian names is used depends on the product. On most Estonian maps, including the 1:1,150,000 scale map of Administrative Divisions of Estonia appended to the *Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors Estonia*, compiled by Peeter Päll of the Institute of the Estonian Language, the geographically accurate name Läänemeri (West Sea) is used. The variant form Balti meri is often used on Estonian websites such as the *Kalaapedia*.

The Baltic trade, geopolitics and cartography – an historical perspective

Amongst the earliest names applied to the Baltic Sea by writers such as Tacitus were Latin forms such as the Mare Suebicum, Mare Sarmaticum, Mare Gothicum and Mare Germanicus, all of which were derived from the names of various peoples occupying the region. These names have long gone out of use. The name Mare Balticum is said to have been first used by the 11th-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen who is supposed to have likened the sea to a belt or strait (as in the names Little Belt and Great Belt). The origin of the name may also refer to the ‘White’ or ‘West’ Sea.

It was some time, however, before the name Baltic Sea was to achieve a more common currency amongst cartographers.

The early Scandinavian name Gandvik (The Eastern Lake), thought by the 12th-century writer Saxus Grammaticus to refer to the Baltic Sea, dates from the time when the Vikings were building their trading empire all around the Baltic and eastwards down the rivers of Russia into Asia. This was a precursor to the Baltic trade that developed in the Middle Ages when the Hanseatic League established trade routes linking its member cities. By the beginning of the 16th century the Dutch were playing an increasingly important role in this trade. The northern provinces of Holland in particular had developed a strong maritime tradition, initially drawing much of their wealth from deep sea fishing but later engaging in trade with the Baltic ports where they exchanged fish for goods such as timber, tar, copper, iron, flax and hemp. Soon they began to dominate the Baltic trade and Dutchmen were to be found all around the Baltic coast. Numerous settlements were founded by the Dutch, often carrying the name Hollandt. One of these, the Polish city now called Pasterka, was founded by settlers from Holland as early as 1297 and was for many years known in German as Preußisch Holland (Prussian Holland).

The Dutch seamen who dominated the Baltic trade had very little difficulty in making themselves understood since along much of the Baltic coastline Platt German, a Low German form quite close to the Dutch language was spoken. Aboard many foreign ships Dutch captains were in charge and the main language of communication was Dutch. In addition to this, the strong maritime tradition in Holland led to the development of one of Northern Europe's greatest centres of map making. We see in the 16th century the emergence not only of the Dutch marine charts widely used by sailors and merchants plying the Baltic trade but also of maps and atlases with a wider distribution across Europe.

Amongst the earliest maps to be produced by Dutch cartographers who emerged in the 16th century were the 1526 *Caerte van de Oostercher zee* (Map of the Eastern Sea) of Jan van Hoirne and the 1543 *Caerte van Oostlant* or 'Map of the Eastern Lands' by Cornelius Anthonisz (see **figure 1**). The latter was published along with a rutter or pilot guide describing how to navigate between Amsterdam and the sea ports of the Baltic. Dutch maritime charting was to take a great leap forward when Lucas Waghenaer set about the compilation of his *Spieghel der zeevardt* (The Mariner's Mirror) which was published in two volumes in 1584-85 and later translated into Latin, French, German and English. Pretty well all of the charts produced in Holland to that date naturally used Dutch names. The Oost zee (East Sea), a name still used by some Dutch speakers today, was the name to be found on all of these charts, with variant forms Mare Orientale and Ooster Zee (Eastern Sea). To the Dutch, the Baltic Sea was geographically a sea to the east, hence the name East Sea used by them. This name was adopted by Germanic language merchants and seamen engaged in the Baltic trade. Given the definition of an endonym as the "name of a geographical feature in an official or well established language in the area where the feature is situated", could the Dutch Oost zee that was used in common parlance and nearly all maritime charts be considered an endonym, or at least the progenitor of several endonyms that were to find their way into common usage amongst littoral states of the Baltic today?

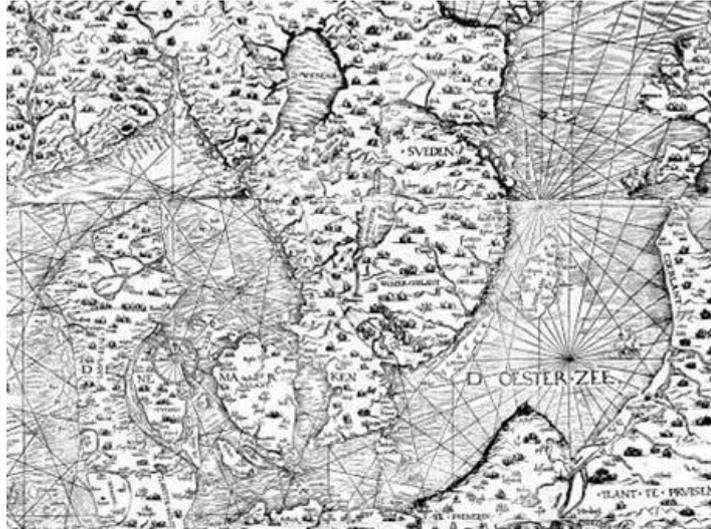


Figure 1 Detail from the 1543 *Caerte van Oostlant* by Cornelius Anthonisz showing the Oester-Zee (Eastern Sea)

The parallel existence of the Latin form *Mare Balticum*, however, began to make an appearance on maps such as Gerard Mercator's *Svecia et Norvegia*, contained within his great *Atlas* of 1596. There is clearly a trend towards the use of the classically derived *Mare Balticum* by leading cartographers selling atlases to rich clients whilst at the same time maritime charts commonly used by ships' captains continued to use the name *Oost zee*. Many cartographers, including the Dutch map maker Johan Blaeu (see **figure 2**), started to employ dual naming of the sea on their maps but it was the Amsterdam cartographer Henricus Hondius in doing this on a map of *Svecia, Dania et Norvegia*, published in 1635, who made a distinction in terms of usage when naming the Baltic Sea - '*Mare Balticum vulgo de Oost Zee*', that is '*Baltic Sea or commonly East Sea*'. Commonly here refers to the wide use of the name *East Sea* by mariners and merchants engaged in the Baltic trade. Based on the surveys of Anders Bure (1571-1646), the 'father' of Swedish cartography, the Hondius map is illustrated in **figure 3**.

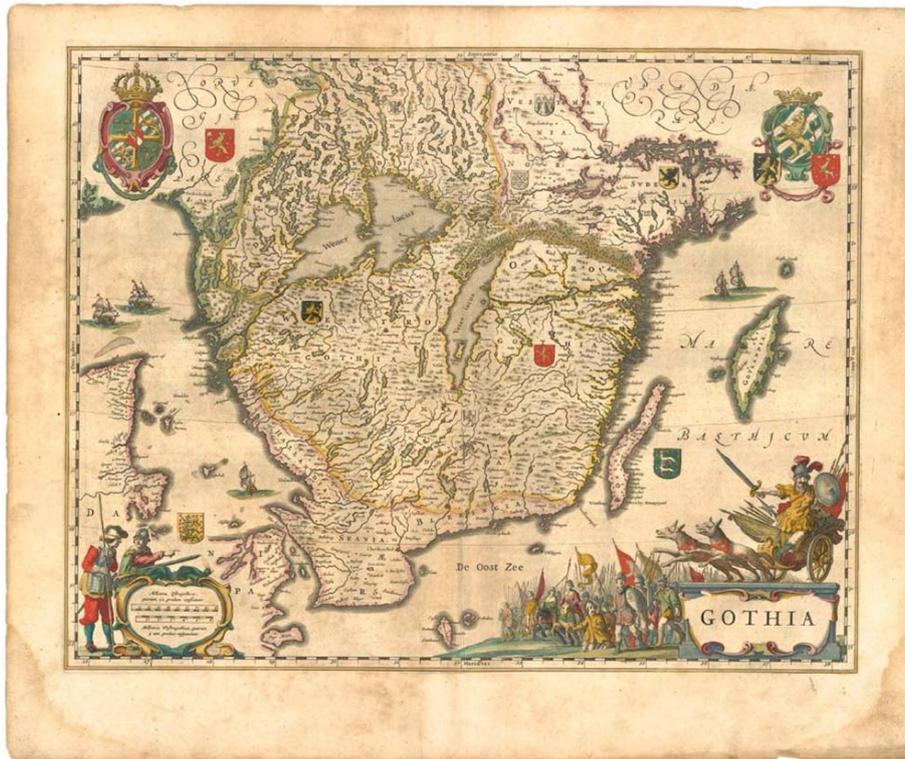


Figure 2 Map of 'Gothia' from Johan Blaeu's 1654 *Atlas Novus* showing both the 'Mare Balthicum' (Baltic Sea) and 'De Oost Zee' (East Sea).

The states surrounding the Baltic have had their fair share of conflict in the past. The Swedish empire expanded over most of the area from the 12th century until their domination was ended by the Great Northern War with Russia. In the 16th and early 17th centuries the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth made inroads into the Swedish empire whilst at the same time Sweden fought wars with Denmark to maintain its control over the Baltic Sea which they often referred to as 'Mare Nostrum Balthicum' (Our Baltic Sea). The name East Sea, originally promoted by Dutch cartographers and sea captains, has survived to the present day amongst those speaking Germanic languages. To Germans, Danes, Norwegians, Finns, Swedes and the Dutch the sea most of the rest of us call the Baltic Sea is still the East Sea. Geographically speaking, the Baltic Sea lies to the north of Germany and Poland, but still within their own countries they refer to the sea as the Ost-See and Morze Bałtyckie or East Sea while recognising the international use of the name Baltic Sea. The Finns also use an East Sea variant – Itämeri – which seems geographically wrong but can be explained by their long association with Sweden. Finnish and Swedish are both recognised as official languages in Finland.



Figure 3 *Svecia, Dania and Norvegia (Sweden, Denmark and Norway)* by Henricus Hondius (1635) showing the text 'Mare Balticum vulgo De Oost Zee'

A changing coastline

While the geopolitical map of Scandinavia and Northern Europe has changed with the ebb and flow of empires and the march of history, the physical coastline has also changed. This is most marked at the northern end of the Gulf of Bothnia and is the result of post-glacial isostatic uplift. The weight of ice having pushed the land down during the Ice Age, the land, now ice free, has been rising for the past 10,000 years or more. In southern Sweden the rate of uplift is virtually zero, but at Lulea, where the land is rising at a rate of 9mm per year, the Gamlastad (old town) built in the early 17th century is now some five miles inland beyond the new town which is now also some way from the harbour. The Baltic Sea and its inlets are getting smaller as 1 km² is added to the littoral land area each year. In the process, while the names of the sea remain the same, names of former bays disappear and new names of features and settlements appear on the map.

Conclusion – “diversity by consent”

The emergence of a parallel naming of the Baltic Sea/East Sea emerged with the dominance of the Dutch over the Baltic trade and map making in the Middle Ages, one name being used internationally, the other being used by mariners and merchants. Subsequently, variants of the name East Sea continued to be used within those littoral states where Germanic languages are spoken, even if the name did not make sense geographically. The weakening of the Dutch maritime influence by the end of the 18th century coupled with the rapid 19th century rise in international trade and the publication of maps and geographical texts has resulted in the continuation of this parallel naming with the name Baltic Sea being used more consistently in an international context. Littoral states who use variants of the name east Sea are happy to defer to the use of the name

Baltic Sea in an international context. It is an uncontroversial, apolitical name that has been used for centuries and does not imply territorial ownership. Though conflicts have raged all around in the past and the Baltic Sea has occasionally been claimed by one country or another as “their sea”, the names applied to this body of water today are therefore not currently contested. The majority of countries with shores on the Baltic Sea are now members of the European Union and the 1992 *Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area* was ratified harmoniously by all nine countries in 2000. Such treaties enhance a spirit of co-operation amongst the Baltic States.

Today, in dealing with geographical names such as these, the choice of names made by the user may be by national preference or it may depend upon what is perceived to be the most widely and consistently used form internationally. In the case of IHO’s S-23 publication the use of a single name – Baltic Sea – is based on the latter principle.

The contention that resolving conflict over politically sensitive names by the use of dual naming might lead to a sudden and dramatic increase in applications for dual names on documents such as IHO’s S-23, discussed by Dormels (2011), is not supported if we consider the Baltic Sea where one name has emerged as the most commonly used out of a number of names. The end result in this case is what Kadmon (2004) aptly described as “diversity by consent”.

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