The task, indeed duty, of recording provenances is one to which medieval numismatists increasingly are turning their attention. Not only is it a help in the detailed reconstruction of purely numismatic evidence, and a check often upon its accuracy, but it is also the essential first step towards any description of the pattern of monetary circulation and towards the writing of monetary history. The total of provenances at the student’s disposal increases only slowly if surely as new finds are made and recorded, but recent work on early find-records encourages the hope that rather quicker progress in adding to their number is to be made by sifting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century topographical and antiquarian works, sale catalogues, diaries, &c., not to mention some even more unpromising sources from which forgotten finds can be “rescued” by the numismatist with the patience and the experience of actual coins necessary for their exploitation.

For the earliest phase of the Anglo-Saxon penny, that is for the late eighth and early ninth centuries, very few finds have been published, and none systematically. In Keary’s first volume of the British Museum Catalogue virtually no find-spots are recorded—though to some extent this deficiency may have been remedied by Mrs. J. S. Martin’s recent paper on the provenances as such—and comparatively few are listed in Brooke’s admirable supplement. In Mr. J. D. A. Thompson’s recent Inventory there are no penny hoards recorded of which the date of deposit is likely to be earlier than c. 835. Consequently the readily accessible tally of find-spots for the coinage of c. 770-c. 820 is really very small indeed, and any addition which can be made to it should be welcome. It is with this in mind that we offer here a few notes on a penny of Offa and a denier of Charlemagne, both found at St. Albans and both already published, but in places where the numismatist can be pardoned for having overlooked them.

The discovery of a coin of King Offa of Mercia is recorded in the first edition of Gough’s Camden’s Britannia, and must therefore have been made before 1789. The coin is illustrated at the bottom of one of the plates, and clearly belongs to the late group struck on a wide flan which omits the royal portrait. The moneyer is the well-known Ethelnoth to whom there has recently been attributed a penny of the Kentish rebel Eadbearht Praen struck from a reverse die earlier used.
Two Stray Finds from St. Albans of to strike coins of Offa. An enlarged photographic reproduction is given here:

It will at once be apparent that the L in the moneyer’s name is very peculiarly drawn, the lower stroke ending in a hook instead of being straight. It is our submission that this epigraphic curiosity is entirely due to the artist, who has been misled by the fact of the coin having been pierced, and support for this view may perhaps be derived from an attentive study of the lettering on the obverse. Here the apparent serif at the top of the R is a suspicious feature, and again we would suggest that the explanation is that the artist was making good a deficiency in his original. If, too, the coin had the 180° die-relationship that is very commonly met with on coins of this period a damage to the upper part of the R on the obverse would exactly coincide with the lower part of the L on the reverse.

Relatively common as are late pence of Ethelnoth it occurred to us that there could be no harm in checking through those preserved in the National Collection to see whether a duplicate of the St. Albans coin existed which would enable us to determine the accuracy or otherwise of the Gough illustration. Since, however, not one of the British Museum coins is described as having been pierced, we did not expect to find what is very clearly the actual coin described and engraved in Gough. Nevertheless B.M.C. 48 must be that coin. Not only does it correspond in all other respects to that illustrated, but when it is examined closely it becomes at once obvious that it has been very skilfully plugged, and the plugging has no less obviously been occasioned by a circular piercing which on the obverse coincides with

the upper part of the R and on the reverse with the lower part of the L. The alteration does not appear in the illustration in the British Museum Catalogue because the collotype is from a plaster-cast—another argument in favour of direct photography—but we reproduce here an enlarged photograph of the actual coin on which low-angle lighting has brought out very clearly what is after all one of the most interesting features. In daylight, too, there is visible to the naked eye a subtle contrast on the actual coin between the original metal and that of the plugging, and this must of course be ascribed to differences of composition which have led to variations of discoloration during the century and a half during which the coin has been exposed to the London atmosphere.

Thus a new provenance has been established for one of the British Museum coins which before now could not be traced back beyond the Tyssen collection. The exact pedigree, however, is a little uncertain. From the hands of the actual finder the penny passed to the cabinet of James West, who was M.P. for St. Albans from 1741 to 1768, and who held other office in the town from 1758 onwards. The West collection, however, was auctioned in January 1773, and there is no mention in the sale catalogue of any coin of Offa, let alone of an example found at St. Albans. Tyssen, however, was an enthusiastic collector with a special interest in Anglo-Saxon coins—the year 1802 in fact is a landmark in the history of the Anglo-Saxon portion of the National Collection—and it is a very reasonable presumption that he persuaded West to part with his penny privately.

The coin under discussion has been in the British Museum since 1802, and there is no question of the plugging having been done since that date. Presumably the operation was performed during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and it provides new testimony to the skill of the "improvers" of that period. The question is not entirely without interest in that an "improvement" of this quality—comparatively harmless in this instance—has an obvious relevance to the problems presented by certain critical coins acquired by the British Museum at the end of the eighteenth century of which the authenticity is either exploded (e.g. the Type XIX penny of Cnut) or at best suspect (e.g. the unique "Short-Cross" penny of the Lichfield mint). Recently, too, Messrs. Baldwin have been kind enough to present to the National Collection what would be a coin of an entirely new Dover moneyer of Edward the Confessor were it not in fact a most skilfully altered penny of York, and the Offa penny from St. Albans provides most useful proof that there was in the eighteenth century at least one craftsman in London who was possessed of the skills necessary for successful tampering with a legend.

There is perhaps nothing particularly significant about our new findspot—as we shall see, it lies within the area where Offa's coinage was generally current—but "the fantastic explanations of antiquaries" have done too much in the past to bring numismatics into disrepute.

with economic historians to allow of our even seeming to trace any connexion between a single stray find and the pattern of monetary circulation. Accordingly we have decided to include in our note a map giving a provisional picture of the total find-assemblage for southern England in respect of the period c. 770–c. 820. It should be stressed that the map is based only on find-spots where the presumption is that the coin was not only struck but also lost within those limits; and no account is taken of coins occurring in later hoards. In a future paper we hope to cite the evidence for each “dot”—and also to attempt a further breakdown of the material by mints and periods—but here it is sufficient perhaps to state that most but not all of the essential information has been derived from two independent but also interdependent card-indexes, the one compiled over many years by Mr. C. E. Blunt and the other, of more recent origin, maintained at the British Museum where it is the especial concern of Mrs. J. S. Martin. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, the map would suggest that the circulation of the “Mercian” penny was limited for all practical purposes to the area south and east of a line from the Solent, through the Northampton uplands, to the Wash:

The St. Albans find-spot lies well to the east of this arc, and thus occasions no surprise. It is worth pointing out, however, that there is a definite historical connexion between King Offa and St. Albans, the Mercian king being the traditional founder of a Benedictine monastery erected in 793 in honour of the Protomartyr of England, the abbey occupying the site of an earlier church. There is too a tradition of royal munificence, and if we cannot accept that it was Offa who obtained a papal grant to the monastery of the Romescot raised throughout Hertfordshire—the opinion of a majority of modern scholars inclining to the view that the Romescot proper was instituted by
Alfred—so important a foundation would doubtless have been one of the more important centres of monetary affairs in the Mercian kingdom.

Some slight corroboration of this view may possibly seem to be afforded by the fact that the Offa penny is not the only coin of the late eighth century to have been found at or near the abbey. At some date not long before 1851, a denier of Charlemagne was found near the west entrance of the present abbey church. An engraving of it, taken from a nineteenth-century guide, is here reproduced:

It is one of the earlier deniers from the Frankish mint of Dorestadt (Wijk-bij-Duurstede) and was issued in all probability between 768 and 781. Dr. H. Enno van Gelder of the Royal Coin Cabinet at The Hague has very kindly drawn our attention to a close parallel in the piece illustrated by Boeles as Pl. 1. 1 of his important study of Carolingian coins found in the Netherlands, and there seems little doubt but that we are dealing with a genuine early issue of the Carolingian mint of Dorestadt. The date at which the coin came to England also may be considered early, and it may well be that it was lost a decade or more before the Offa penny already discussed.

At this point we should digress to cite a most apt illustration of the difficulties that beset the numismatist who ventures into such para-numismatic literature as abbey guide-books of a century ago. Nicholson’s Guide, our authority for the finding of the Dorestadt denier, also illustrates the Offa penny of Ethelnoth with the comment that “it was not found at St. Albans, but is given for purposes of illustration and comparison”. The origin of the paradox would appear to be that the St. Albans provenance of the Tyssen coin had been lost when Hawkins selected the piece for illustration as no. 62 in the first edition of English Silver Coins. In this connexion we must always remember that the ticket under the coin records no more than the bare fact of its acquisition from Tyssen. As befitting a disciple of Taylor Combe, Hawkins was keenly interested in find-spot and hoard-provenances, and silence on his part may be assumed to indicate ignorance. When, therefore, Nicholson wished to illustrate a typical coin of Offa, he turned naturally to Hawkins’s masterpiece, and found there a very suitable coin. Not unnaturally, perhaps, he assumed that a coin without provenance or find-spot had not been found in a neighbourhood he knew so well, and hence an honest statement which is in fact the very opposite of the truth, and a coincidence which may seem almost too far-fetched to be credible.

1 Were the ELIMO(sina) coins the first payment?
3 Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde, 1915, Pl. 1. 1.
Quite apart from its possibly fortuitous connexion with the other St. Albans find of the same period, the Dorestadt denier is of interest for the continental as well as the English numismatist. It is, or so we believe, the only British find of a Carolingian coin of Dorestadt that has been published, or indeed that is known. It would also appear to be only the fourth coin of Charlemagne to be published with an English find-spot, the others being two early deniers found at Southampton in the nineteenth century, and a Mainz denier of a later issue which occurred in the celebrated Middle Temple Hoard (Thompson 366—"unknown site") which would seem to have been deposited some thirty years after Charlemagne’s death. A fifth Charlemagne denier in a recent find from Wales (Thompson 305) may well complete the tally of coins of the emperor found in the whole of the British Isles. One wonders, though, whether Carolingian influence may not have been somewhat more pronounced than this meagre total might seem to suggest. Is it fanciful, for example, to suggest a stylistic affinity between the Dorestadt penny and two other coins of Ethelnoth in the British Museum (B.M.C. 50 and another from the Richborough excavations)? The curiously eccentric “cross” at the bottom of the reverse type on such coins might well be derived from the “axe” which is an essential part of the Dorestadt type, and we would throw out this suggestion as deserving consideration without committing ourselves closely to it.

In conclusion we revert to the map. As we have seen, the distribution of finds of early pennies is confined to the area south and east of an arc running from Southampton Water to the Wash, and it would seem that it was in Kent, East Anglia, and the Home Counties that the new coins were current. It is, of course, very difficult to decide exactly what was the boundary of the circulation area, since the use of currency would seem to have thinned out westwards, and an added complication is the fact that an uncertain proportion of our single finds of the late eighth and early ninth centuries may represent later losses of odd survivals. Hoards deposited even as late as the second half of the ninth century still contain such pieces—for example there is really no reason to suspect the Trewhiddle provenance attaching to a penny of Offa (Rashleigh 34)—but the overwhelming concentration of find-spots south and east of the arc already described cannot be disregarded. Even at this early stage of our investigation we can begin to detect a quite unlooked-for pattern. The new “Mercian” penny did not circulate in Old Mercia, and there would seem to have been indeed a monetary boundary which bisected the Mercian “empire”. For practical purposes we can say, too, that the penny was unknown in Wessex, the Severn basin, Lindsey, and Northumbria, but in Middle Anglia, East Anglia, and Kent it would seem to have enjoyed a startling popularity. Comparison with later periods is difficult—an Offa penny has always had a certain cachet denied to the humble penny of Æthelstan, say, or of Æthelred II, with the result that a substantially

Coins of Offa and of Charlemagne

greater proportion of single finds have been published—but a few general observations are possible.

The first point that comes to mind is that the new penny reproduces the essential distribution of the sceatta which it displaced. There is the same concentration towards the south-eastern coasts of England, and in this context the finding of a very early denier of Dorestadt well towards the western limit of the circulation area of both takes on added significance. However, when seeking to elucidate the significant factors in the economic activity underlying any pattern of monetary circulation, one is bound to attempt at least a provisional assessment of the relative weightings of two broad alternatives, on the one hand purely local transactions of village and market-place, on the other commodity trade over substantially longer distances. Local transactions tend to emphasize the importance of geographical regions of close settlement, commodity trade that of trade-routes. Are we then to look to trade between the shores and inlets of the North Sea for an explanation of the south-eastern concentration of the early penny, or is perhaps the answer to be found in some difference, fiscal or tenurial for example, in the social and economic life of Kent and East Anglia which marked them off from Mercia and Wessex, as well as Northumbria, and made them more apt for a monetary economy?

In a recent paper Homans has discussed the social organization and institutions which gave the so-called East Anglian cultural area its distinctive character, and which even persisted into the later Middle Ages. The trend of his argument is that the formative settlement of the area was not by the Danish invaders of the ninth century, but by Frisians, or by a people very similar to them in culture, probably as early as the fifth century. He points to resemblances with Kent in the systems of landholding and of inheritance, and even suggests, albeit very guardedly, that from an early date Kent and East Anglia may have shared a rural social order much less manorial than that of Mercia and of Wessex.

In another recent paper Dunning has discussed trade between England and the Continent in the eighth and ninth centuries. He suggests that this trade was mostly between the Rhineland and south-eastern England, that commerce was dominated by Frisians, and that Rhineland traffic came to England via the Low Countries where Dorestadt handled the great bulk of the trade. Woollen cloth, embroideries, metalwork, and slaves would appear to have been this country’s principal exports, and stress is laid on the outstanding position of London, while Hamwih (Southampton) would seem to have been the second port. Again there would appear to be a very close concordance between these conclusions and the evidence of our map, and it is gratifying that the Charlemagne denier found at St. Albans should be from the mint situated in the great Frisian emporium of Dorestadt.

It is, however, much too soon to decide even tentatively what

1 Economic History Review, 1957–8, pp. 189 ff.
2 Dark Age Britain, Studies presented to E. T. Leeds, 1956, pp. 218 ff.
Two Stray Finds from St. Albans

economic or other causes underlie the pattern of monetary circulation in early ninth-century England, but we can perhaps begin to see the various problems that are involved. Were there significant differences in the rural economy of the southern kingdoms of the Heptarchy? To what extent was there an important difference of density of population? To what extent, too, may commercial contacts with the Continent have resulted in London and the immediate coastline of the North Sea enjoying a greater prosperity which in turn may have led to a wider use of money both there and in the hinterland? It seems probable that both differences of rural economy and wider trade contacts (themselves perhaps to some extent interdependent) underlie the pattern of monetary circulation that is suggested by our map, but we have as yet little experience to guide us in assessing their relative importance. Much more work remains to be done, and we ourselves are very conscious that the map is no more than a preliminary, and provisional, presentation of the evidence. Even so, we would claim that it gives a reasonably clear and generally valid picture of the circulation-area of the "Mercian" penny, and, in a period for which other records of the pattern of economic life are so defective, it may even be said that it makes a not insignificant addition to the evidence at the disposal of the historian.1

1 The engravings of the Offa penny and of the Dorestadt denier are reproduced by kind permission of the Librarian, the University Library, Cambridge, and the direct photographs of the Offa penny by kind permission of the Keeper of Coins and Medals at the British Museum.