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Friesland's oudheid

Halbertsma, Herrius

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
1982

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Halbertsma, H. (1982). *Friesland's oudheid*. s.n.

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SUMMARY

The Frisian people can boast that they have kept their own name and lived on the same lands for more than two thousand years. The footprints of their ancestors in the Iron Age have been found on the mud-flat deposits on both sides of the Vlie-stream. There is, moreover, every reason to believe that their culture was the direct continuation of that of the mud-flat farmers who came to settle on the creek deposits of Drechterland in Westfriesland in the Bronze Age. The etymology of the name "Frisian" has not yet been determined, though the word should be Germanic. Initially their language was the so-called Belgian, which stood between Germanic and Celtic. In Roman times the "Frisii" thought of themselves as belonging to the "Germani".

Classical writers bestowed considerably attention upon the Frisians in view of the fact that expeditions by Drusus, Tiberius, Germanicus, and Corbulo to the mouth of the Eems, the Wezer, and the Elbe went through and along the regions where they dwelt. Subjugated by Drusus in the year 12 BC, they gained great renown among the Germans by the success of their rebellion against their Roman governor Olennius in AD 28. They besieged Castellum Flevum, defeated the Roman army sent to relieve this military stronghold, and could only again be brought to heel in 47: "Clarum inde inter Germanos Frisium nomen".

Shortly thereafter, Augustus' Elbe policy was abandoned, and the Neder-Rijn and its tributary, the Oude Rijn, which empties into the North Sea at Katwijk, were declared to be the "limes" of the Roman empire. The territory of the Frisians, a "trans-rhenana gens", accordingly came to lie just outside the empire. To ensure the safety of this frontier, a wide strip of land along the northern border of the Rhine-limes was kept unpopulated. For the rest, the territory of the Frisians for the next three centuries was confined to the area between the Oude Rijn

and the mouth of the Eems. Their dwelling-mounds lay in a narrow fringe spread over the clay along the coast, and also deeper inland around the great lakes.

It was a society that was dominated by cattle raising and completely orientated on water transport. Excavations have shown that the Frisians were quite prosperous, owned large farmsteads and were able to obtain bronze utensils, pottery, ornaments, and the like from the Gallo-Roman hinterland.

At the time of Emperor Nero, the Frisians under the command of Verritus and Malorix tried to take possession of new dwelling-ground on the strip depopulated for military reasons but were prevented from doing so by force. But even before the arrival of the Romans, groups of Frisian emigrants had already swarmed southward. The Frisiavones were probably a branch of the Frisians. They settled between the estuaries of the Maas and Scheldt rivers. The Romans did not disturb them there. Later on they formed their own "civitas", similar to those of the Batavi and the Cananefates, and supplied auxiliary troops for the occupation of Britannia until the fifth century. Among these troops were also Frisians who did not call themselves Frisiavones, and who apparently served in the army voluntarily, since after the year 47, inhabitants of the coastal regions north of the Oude Rijn were no longer conscripted into military service.

As soon as the written sources of history again start to flow after the period of mass emigration of peoples, the Frisians prove to have both remained loyal to their old home sites, and to have expanded them considerably. The Beowulf epic mentions a "Frēscyning" whose kingdom on the mouths of the Rhine was alarmed by an attack by Hygelac, the Swedish ruler. This event took place around the year 523. In 678 there is once again a Frisian king, called Aldgisl. He probably resided at Utrecht where he extended hospitality for the winter to Archbishop Wilfried, who had fled from York, and protected him against Ebroin, the Frankish maior-domo. In those days busy trade relationships

already existed between the land of the Frisians and York, as well as London. Wilfried's experiences provided the impetus to the arrival of various Anglo-Saxon missionaries, of whom Willibrord, Boniface, alias Winifred, Willehad, and Lebuinus, alias Liafwin, are the best known.

By the time Willibrord arrived in Friesland in the year 690, Aldgisl was no longer there, and King Redbad or Radbod ruled over the "regnum Fresonum". Although this king did nothing to hinder Willibrord and his eleven companions, his negative attitude towards the Christian faith did not foster the favourable condition that Wilfried had formerly had with Aldgisl. Moreover, shortly before, major-domo Pepin II had deprived Radbod of the southern part of the Frisian kingdom, including Dorestad and Utrecht, "citerior Fresia", as Beda expresses it. The Oude Rijn was in the peace treaty between Pepin and Radbod recognized to be the frontier between the area that Radbod had to surrender and the area that he was allowed to keep. On further reflection, Willibrord left Friesland again and went to call on Pepin. For a while he stayed in Antwerp, and from there he applied himself to missionary work in Brabant. Frankish sources call Radbod "dux", not "rex", and make it appear that Radbod was a usurper, who was compelled by war to give up the occupation of the estuaries of the Scheld, Maas, and Rhine. In accordance with this view, Meovingian kings laid a claim to the ruins of the limes-castella along the Neder- and Oude Rijn, and so added them to the crown estates. There are also indications that Aldgisl and Radbod had intended one of these castella, "Vetus Traiectum" or "Vetus civitas", Utrecht, to be their "palacium".

As soon as "citerior Fresia" was pacified, Pepin sent Willibrord and his eleven companions to that area to preach the Christian faith. Willibrord was consecrated bishop at Rome in 695. Subsequently Pepin gave him possession of the Utrecht castellum, so that he could establish the see of the Frisian archbishopric there. In so doing, Pepin not only laid the foundation of the later bishopric of Utrecht but also of the Kingdom of the Nether-

lands, in so far that this bishopric forms the geographical core of the Dutch nation.

The civil war that broke out in France after the death of Pepin in 714 gave Radbod the opportunity to retake "citerior Fresia". After the death of the Frisian ruler himself in 719, however, Charles Martel regained this territory and added Kennemerland to it, so that thereafter the frontier with non-occupied Friesland was fixed by the Vlie-stream.

The power of the Frisian kings must have been considerable. This may also be gathered from the great care with which Pepin prepared for his expedition to Dorestad shortly before 690, which ended in the flight of King Radbod. Yet his defeat did not lead to the complete elimination of the Frisian king because Pepin allowed him to keep that part of his kingdom which extended north of the Oude Rijn. Moreover, a marriage took place between Radbod's daughter, Theudesinda, and Grimoald, the youngest son of Pepin. Apparently, the intention was to join the Frisian and Carolingian families in this way. Due to the early death of both partners, however, the marriage accomplished nothing. Another indication of how powerful King Radbod still was at the end of his life was that the news that he was engaged in assembling an army was enough to fill all France with fear and trembling. Radbod's death produced sighs of relief in many quarters. From England, St Boniface received congratulations on Radbod's demise - it must have been a sign from Heaven, so that Boniface could finally undertake to convert the Frisians to Christianity. In the year 716, Boniface had been in fact courageous enough to make his way to Utrecht via Dorestad. Although no hindrance was placed in his path, the atmosphere was so tense that no one dared to speak up for Christianity. After making an exploratory tour of Radbod's kingdom, Boniface returned to England safely but with nothing accomplished. He was to make a second attempt in 719, but then under a luckier star.

With Radbod's death, the strength of his kingdom also seems to have dissipated. Nothing is known of a successor or the continuation of a "regia stirps", and it apparently required little effort on Charles Martel's part to occupy "citerior Friesland", including Kennemerland. In 734 he was ready for the leap across the Vlie. In that year he defeated a Frisian army at the mouth of the Boorne, the boundary between Oostergo and Westergo, in which battle the Frisian "dux" lost his life. The border of the Frankish empire shifted eastward to the Lauwers, at the boundary between Oostergo and Humsterland.

When Willibrord died, the monastery that he had founded at Utrecht to be the base of his mission to the Frisians faced with an authority vacuum, due to the lack of a successor of his stature. Moreover, it had failed to follow up the recovery of the territory between the Vlie and the Lauwers by converting it to Christianity. The Archbishop of Cologne saw in this situation a ready reason to put an end to the special status of Utrecht. This deeply offended the elderly Boniface. As "custos" of the orphaned Frisian archbishopric, in 753 he left his high office in Mainz to look after itself and set off for Utrecht for the third time. From there he undertook two missionary journeys to the coastal region of the Vlie. The last one, in the spring of 754, was to prove fatal to him. In the early morning of 5 June, 754, a gang of robbers attacked his tented camp on the bank of a creek and killed more than fifty people, including Boniface himself. On the spot where Boniface was felled by the sword, a "tumulus" was erected by order of the "praefectus", Abba, Count of Oostergo, and was to serve as the base for a memorial church. This mound for the church was necessary because of the proximity to the sea, which regularly inundated the surrounding area. Modern Dokkum derives from this tumulus.

The sensational attack did not lead to the immediate annexation of the adjoining coastal area between the Lauwers and the Eems, where the murderers came from. For the time being, it was enough

to despatch a single punitive expedition. Only after the death of King Pepin in 768 did the wars of Charlemagne against the Saxons provide such an opportunity. The missioneries followed on the heels of the army - the justification being that earlier experience had proved that a single expedition accomplished little, and that a solitary missionary risked his life needlessly. Just as Willibrord had waited for the pacification of "citerior Fresia", and Boniface the occupation of the river area of the Utrecht-Vecht and Kennemerland, now Liudger, the first Frisian missionary, went into action after Charlemagne had smoothed the way for him in the coastal areas on both sides of the Eems. Willehad did the same in the coastal regions on both sides of the Wezer, and so did Liafwin, after Hamaland had been opened up from Deventer.

The written sources provide only superficial information on the nature of Frisian paganism, the "fana et delubra", within which the "idola" were placed, and the gruesome sacrificial practices. The most detailed source is the Vita Vulframni, which surprises us with many details on the life of King Radbod, and which already contains all the motifs which we encounter in the Radbod sagas.

The Norman invasions of the ninth century took a heavy toll of the Frisian coastal areas, but it did not totally disrupt the indigenous society. The attempt by Godfried the Dane to found a Frisian Normandy could only be foiled by a conspiracy, in which two Frisian counts, Gerulf and Gardulf, played an important part. The story ended with Godfried's murder at Spijk, near Lobith, in 885. Thereafter Gerulf's star was in the ascendant; his ancestors most probably came from Westergo. His eldest son Waldger built up an empire in Teisterbant and the Utrecht-Vecht region, his youngest son Diederik did the same in the coastal area between the Scheld and the Vlie. Waldger's empire was short-lived, but Diederik laid the foundations for the county of Holland.

The name of Waldger's son, Radbodo, raises the question as to what the relationship could have been with the Frisian "regia stirps". The name Gerulf disappeared from the genealogical tree after the early death of his grandson, "Gerolf iuvenis", to be replaced by Diederik as the leading name. Gardolf we meet once again as count of Suthergo, the hinterland of Staveren.

Towards the end of the tenth century, the first signs became apparent of a tendency which was to lead to the establishment of the "Libertas Fresonum" in course of the next two centuries. The inaccessibility of the Frisian coastal areas obliged the lords to make concessions which in some cases ended in complete independence for the Frisians, a situation rather similar to contemporary developments in Switzerland. In other cases, events took an opposite turn because the population did not become alienated from its lord, but rather the latter became alienated from the king. This is what happened to the counts of Holland. Demographic differences may perhaps explain this development. In the county of Holland, the "silvae" or riparian woods reclaimed on a large scale since the tenth century, acquired much greater dimensions than the sandy and clay soils already inhabited for so long time past. By introducing land rents, calculated according to the land area under cultivation, the count obtained a strong grip on the category of his subjects, who in number began to rival with the population of the adjoining "old land". The lord had little difficulty in subjecting these newly acquired areas to the process of feudalization. In doing so, the focal point of his county shifted to the river region of the Oude Rijn, which - its clay banks already having had a long history of cultivation - became the great artery of the immense, newly reclaimed peat bog polders in the former wilderness of the hinterland. The county even derived its name from "Hollant", originally a modest "comitatus" situated along the Oude Rijn half-way between Leiden and Utrecht.

Reclamation work on such a scale did not occur in Westfriesland. The process evolved as it did in the coastal regions on the farther side of the Vlie, where society retained a more conservative character, and the feudal system had little opportunity to take hold. There too, it is true, reclamations were carried out in the ripuarian woods, or "silvae", between the terp areas and the higher sandy soils beyond. However, the lords no longer saw any possibility of drawing as much profit as in the county of Holland, or the Utrecht "Sticht and Oversticht".

Developments in the county of Holland were largely responsible for the fact that the Frisian language and Frisian judicial system had to yield to the Dutch language and the county judicial system. The transition was completed in the course of the twelfth century, while at the same time, the lord's authority was reduced in the Frisian districts, which lay north of Kennemerland and east of the Vlie. These processes have left their traces on Dutch society to the present day, as can be observed in the survival of a national Frisian consciousness in Westfriesland and the province of Friesland, on both sides of the Vlie.