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The Frisian Tribe: from Caesar to Charlemagne

At the beginning of the common era a race of people known as the Germans dwelt beyond the Rhine frontier of the Roman Empire. Among these peoples was a civilization that differed markedly from that of their Latin neighbours. Their organization was tribal; their leaders were chosen for their valour and their might, their distinction, and for their presence in the van of battle.¹ The chief, in turn, was surrounded by his companions, who provided him with dignity and power both in times of peace and in war.² This allegiance was symbiotic; in return for loyalty unto the death, the chief provided his faithful retainers with the means to live, often taken from the booty of war.³ The Germans were not a centrally based civilization, even within their respective tribes. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that "the peoples of Germania never live in cities, and will not even have their houses set close together. They live apart, dotted here and there..."⁴ The small Germanic villages were loosely knit, with ample space around each building, and the tribes were scattered in many of these small settlements throughout the forested and marshy land of Northern Europe.

This organization contrasted with the highly organized and centralized civilization of Rome, where the chain of command supported the supreme power of one man over the empire, the *princeps* or emperor.⁵ There is no evidence that the German tribes were conscious of any ethnic unity and any intertribal organization, chiefly for the purpose of repelling or attacking the Romans,⁶ was infrequent and brief. To the individual peoples of Germania, the neighbouring tribes

were as separate a people as the Romans themselves.

One such people, the Frisians, is our concern here. About 50 B.C. the territory of the *Frisii* began west of the pre-Frankish tribes of the Chamavi and Angrivarii near the mouth of the Rhine.⁷ Indeed, to this day there exists a people who identify themselves as Frisians in roughly the same region, the northern Netherlands. Unlike many of the Germanic tribes during the late Roman empire – the Franks, the Angles and the Saxons, for example – the Frisian people have continued to inhabit the same marshy terrain of the Lowlands bordering on the North Sea. From there their influence on many of the European events of the early Middle Ages was not insignificant. As the inhabitants of an intermediate destination for tribal migration from the Baltic Peninsula to Britain, the Frisians must have interacted with many Anglo-Saxons passing through or around their territory. Some, according to Procopius, even joined in the migration.⁸ As renowned coastal traders, the Frisians also established colonies throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages and thus provided the medium for inter-cultural contact and exchange. Finally, as one of the last tribes of Europe to convert from paganism to Christianity, they were the focus of much of the lifework of the missionary Saints Willibrord and Boniface in the fifth and sixth centuries, and fought one of the most powerful Christian kingdoms of that time, the Franks. This surviving people had a significant impact on the history of Europe. I propose to trace their history from the time of Augustus Caesar until their

widespread conversion to Christianity and the conquest of the Franks in the eighth century.

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The Frisian territory extended along the coast of the North Sea from the mouth of the Old Rhine to the River Ems, at which point the territory of the neighbouring Chauci is said to have begun.⁹ From the time of the Roman general Nero Claudius Drusus' conquest of Frisia in 12 B.C.¹⁰ until the Batavian revolt of A.D. 70,¹¹ Roman records provide us with a glimpse of the Frisian people and of their encounters with the Roman Empire.

Drusus sailed from the North Sea into the vast lakes of the Frisian territory. There he "won over the Frisians"¹² in such a way that initially caused no irrevocable enmity; the Frisians not only joined his expedition against their neighbours to the East, the Chauci, but also freed Drusus' warships after they became grounded on the shores of the ocean. The Frisians maintained peace with the Romans for 40 years under a relatively lenient taxation of cattle hides assessed by Drusus. However, in A.D. 29 the Frisians revolted against the severity of an official named Olennius, under whom the taxation had been reassessed. The Frisians lost their cattle, lands and finally their wives and children to slavery¹³ as a result of the greater demands placed on them. Their protests were ignored, and so they rebelled. After forcefully expelling all Roman officials and troops, they successfully held out against the retaliatory forces that governor Lucius Apronius sent to suppress the uprising. The Romans soon gave up hopes of retaliation. The Roman loss became a source of embarrassment to Emperor Tiberius¹⁴ and the Frisians gained independence and fame among the German peoples.

The Frisians enjoyed independence from the Roman Empire until A.D. 47, when Corbulo became the newly appointed governor of Lower Germany.¹⁵ Corbulo sailed his force up the Rhine and soundly conquered a marauding band of Chauci, who took advantage of the interregnum between Corbulo and his predecessor to plunder the Gallic coast with small ships. Corbulo's

severity made an impression on the Germans. The Frisians quickly surrendered hostages and were resettled on lands designated by the governor, who also imposed on them a senate, governing Roman officials and new laws. It appeared that Roman control was well on its way to becoming firmly established in Western Germany under this effective new governor, but the opportunity was lost when emperor Claudius ordered a surprised Corbulo to withdraw his garrisons to the west of the Rhine,¹⁶ ending Roman control over the affairs of the Frisians within their own territory.

Inactivity of the Roman military in Western Germany followed Corbulo's withdrawal, prompting a rumor amongst the Germans that hostilities had been forbidden to the commanders of the empire. In A.D. 58 two Frisian leaders, Verritus and Malorix, took advantage of the quiet frontier and led their people to the Rhine, where they settled on vacant land. They were soon discovered by Roman officials and quickly informed that the land was in fact reserved for Roman use.¹⁷ Avitus, the governor of Lower Germany at that time, issued orders that the Frisians were to return either to their original land or to new land granted by the emperor. Verritus and Malorix, however, went to Rome to appeal these orders, where they were entertained at the Theatre of Pompeii. Tacitus gives an amusing account of this visit and of the bold leaders' pride.

They saw, seated among the senators, men in foreign clothes. On inquiry they learnt that these were delegates who received this compliment because their nations were conspicuous for courage, and friendship for Rome. Crying that no race on earth was braver and more loyal than the Germans, they moved down and sat among the senators. The spectators liked this fine, impulsive, old-fashioned pride of race: and Nero made them both Roman citizens. All the same, he ordered the Frisians to evacuate the land.¹⁸

Auxiliary cavalry were used to enforce these orders, killing or capturing those who resisted. Thus, one of the last significantly detailed Roman

references to the Frisians ends with a forced retreat from the Rhine, presumably back to whence they came. The Frisians are later mentioned briefly by Tacitus as participants in the successful Batavian Revolt of A.D. 69-70, in which they constituted one of three army divisions that victoriously fought the Romans on the banks of the Rhine. After this defeat, the Romans seem to have settled on the Rhine as a definitive frontier and accordingly we see the final disappearance of the Lowlands from Roman territorial interest.¹⁹

The Lowlands had been flooded since the melting of the last great ice-age until c. 5000 B.C., at which time the northwestern coastline of Europe began to develop largely as a result of two natural phenomena. The first was the process of sedimentation, in which rows of dunes began to form as masses of sand were washed ashore. These sandy mounds subsequently partitioned floodlands from the sea and, isolated, this land gradually became marshy peat bogs and, eventually, dry land.²⁰ The second, opposite phenomenon was the tendency for the coastland to sink beneath the sea,²¹ flooding low-lying areas. Gradually, a maritime habitat developed. The newly shaped sandy heaths of the Lowlands were largely uninhabited at least up to the fifth century B.C. as traces of the Iron Age of this time are few and far between.²² The Dutch historian Boeles places the earliest significant settlement of coastal Frisia at 300 B.C.,²³ when the *terpen* culture of the Frisians first appears. (We should point out that more recent archeologists have found traces of earlier settlements, but we believe they are not Frisian, since there are no signs of *terpen*).

The first proto-Frisians, being Germanic, were drawn from the East, probably by the excellent pastures along the coasts.²⁴ The Frisians, along with the Saxons, differed from the rest of the Germans in that they were exclusively raisers of cattle rather than practitioners of broader sedentary agriculture.²⁵ Once settled, they protected themselves against frequent flooding by constructing small artificial mounds known as *terpen*, upon which refuge from the invading waters could be found. These mounds were

composed of layers of a sod and clay mixture alternating with a compost of vegetable matter and dung.²⁶ Groups of homes would then be constructed upon these mounds amidst grazing land and, of course, within the general vicinity of a body of water. Even today the *terpen* remain the basis for many modern urban sites of the Netherlands.²⁷ Over 500 traces of such mounds have been found in the northern Dutch provinces of Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe, the origins of which range from 300 B.C. to the sixth century A.D. In addition, smaller mounds known as *wieren* are found nearby; these, it has been theorized, probably served as refuges for livestock.

One particular *terp*, that at Ezinge in the northwest of Groningen, was excavated early in this century. It offers an individual instance of the ways that the *terpen* culture showed both development and resilience through the centuries, until the beginning of the migration period into Frisia c. A.D. 450.²⁸ This settlement's history is divided by a series of phases, each marked by an increased elevation of the *terp*. Either the water level rose or the coastline sank, and it is indeed thought that the coast along the Lowlands experienced a significant "rise in the water level"²⁹ in the later Roman period. But, while Pounds rightly associates each enlargement of the *terp* with an effort to further defend the settlement from incursions of the sea, it must not be forgotten that a larger population would also warrant a larger *terp*, and it is indeed evident in each phase that the population had expanded notably. However, as demographic growth is less measurable, archeologists have avoided assessing the population size in different phases.

Excavations have shown that during the earliest phase of Ezinge, c. 300 B.C., a single farm stood on virgin soil, approximately 0.20 metres below the present sea level. The structure was about 6m by 13m, with the stables separated from the living area by a woven partition. Within the stables, a single pathway separated a double row of stalls. Ezinge, it appears, was initially inhabited by a small group, probably a single family, which raised livestock. The low altitude of this

settlement would have put it at risk of flood damage, so it is small wonder that there was rapid change.

The second phase shows a growth to four farmsteads, each similar to their predecessor. Artifacts from this phase also date it c. 300 B.C., and thus it was constructed shortly after the first phase³⁰. These structures were built upon the first farmstead and mark the first constructed *terp* of the site, a mound of turf that is believed to have reached 1.20m above today's sea level. Just as an ancient city wall is used by historians as an indication that a people felt threatened, the initial construction of the *terp* shows us that the inhabitants must have been threatened by floods from the nearby North Sea in the time that would have elapsed between the first and second phases. However, those floods must also have been felt to be enduring because, rather than abandoning what otherwise must have been a desirable homestead, the enterprising inhabitants of Ezinge constructed a defense, raising their dwellings by approximately 1.4 metres.

The third phase saw the *terp* raised to 2.10m above sea level by a layer of organic materials and dung. Again, similar farmsteads, one of which could stable as many as 52 cows, were built above the remains of their predecessors. Archeologists can tell that during this phase the cattle in their stalls faced the outer walls of the structure, a manner which is still today considered particular to the Frisians. One could imagine the advantages of such an arrangement: having already grazed in the pasture, the cattle would then be suitably arranged both for milking and for the collection of manure for fuel and fertilizer. This phase marks the beginning of a proto-Frisian culture that has developed through the ages and still exists in the northern Netherlands. Indeed, because this *terpen*-culture, which exclusively raised cattle, was so particular to the north coast of Europe, the ancient Frisians were already comparable to few other tribes³¹ of the time, and their characteristic stable arrangement marks them as distinct from the other *terpen*-cultures further East.

This third phase lasts through Frisia's encounters

with imperial Rome described above, until c. A.D. 140. A slight change in pottery can be traced to sometime after 50 B.C., around the time that Frisia probably first encountered Roman merchants.³² As mentioned above, Frisia disappeared from the Roman military consciousness c. A.D. 70. George H. Copeland cites this fact as a source of Frisian pride in his article "Friesland Free", in which he refers to the Frisians as "too tough for Caesar's legions".³³ It is more likely, however, that these Frisian marshes on the fringes of Northern Europe were not desirable enough for any significant military expenditure by the Romans.³⁴ The people themselves were no real threat to the Roman frontier, and the land bore no great strategic importance. Nevertheless, trade between the Romans and the Frisians continued until Germanic pressure along the frontier made it impossible, indicating that they were at least an economically worthwhile acquaintance. Archeology has revealed that aspects of Roman religion and elements of technology persisted long after the wane of their expansionist military power in the north. The artifact-rich *terpen* of the Netherlands have produced coins, jewelry, pottery, sculpture and even textual fragments,³⁵ with the most rich of these finds dating from the period of the Roman *pax*. A further indication of Frisia's interest in trade can be found in Tacitus' *Agricola*, in which the Frisians mistook a band from a neighboring tribe for pirates and had them rather severely "cut off".³⁶ Only a tribe whose interests lie in unimpeded travel for the merchants of the region would exhibit such vigilance against piracy.

Roman trade with the Germans was decidedly vibrant before the frontier wars, especially in pottery. The municipal origins of goods traded by the Romans to Germany were not constant throughout the life of the empire, however. *Sigillata* (earthenware) bowls from Trier and Rheinzabern, two towns relatively near the Rhine frontier, were found in Frisia until c. 250, when the peace of Gaul was disrupted by Alamanni and Frankish incursions. Then, after a brief interval, we find pottery from Argonnes, a town east of Paris, through the fourth century and ending

around the middle of the fifth.³⁷ It would seem that Trier and Rheinzabern no longer enjoyed the stability necessary for trade production, but that merchants, whether Frisian or Roman, continued their activities using sources farther from the frontier, such as Argonnes. In return for Roman goods, the most common exports from Germany were cattle, forest products and slaves; there is no reason to believe that the Frisians were not able to supply all three, although forest products to a lesser degree.³⁸

From A.D. 140 until c. 450, Ezinge had more layers of clay, ashes and waste added. The height of the *terp* during this time is not determined, but as well as a significant amount of earthenware, we see a further increase in Frisian dwellings in this period.

Traditionally, the fall of Rome is placed at around A.D. 476, the year in which the last emperor of the West was deposed by the barbarian Odoacer and, more importantly, a date by which most of the Roman West was occupied and ruled by the Vandals, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks and Burgundians. However, for the outer fringes of the empire, Roman influence diminished long before. Teutonic pressure forced withdrawal from the Rhine around the middle of the first century, and from then on the Romans struggled to maintain dominance in this region. Pounds refers to mass Germanic migrations into Roman territory as well as heavy racial mixing of restless tribes beyond the border.³⁹

The effects on the Frisians of the tumultuous period in which the Roman empire slowly waned, and especially that following the fall, are unclear. The years A.D. 450-c. 600 remain the most obscure period in Frisia's history. However, in lieu of written sources, archeology has provided information from which we are able to gain a glimpse of events during the Dark Age. We can combine this information with the knowledge that we have of the region before and after. Thus we can tackle what Dutch historians have called the "Anglo-Saxon problem:" to what extent, if any, were the Anglo-Saxons in Frisia? Did they conquer the Frisians and occupy the land, or were

they merely passing through, using Frisia as a migratory route toward their ultimate destination, Britain? While we are unable to gain any definitive knowledge of these events, we can perhaps arrive at an understanding of what is most likely.

Around the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, the Eastern neighbours of the Frisians, where the Chauci were previously, began to be known as Saxons⁴⁰ and, beyond them, the Angles. The migrations of the Saxons and the Angles from this region, now the north-west of Germany, to Britain are well known. This movement is generally thought to have occurred in waves, beginning shortly after the Roman withdrawal from Britain in 407.⁴¹ At first the Saxons came in small swift raiding parties, or as mercenaries hired to combat the marauding Picts, but then they began to take a more long-term interest in Britain. Following the momentum of the first colonists, among whom Bede tells us there were Angles and Jutes as well as Saxons, waves of immigration continued well into the sixth century and kingdoms such as Wessex, East Anglia and Mercia were established in the eastern half of the island. By the eighth century nearly the whole island was occupied and an Anglo-Saxon culture had been established, which differed from its continental origins.

During these migrations, archeology reveals, Frisia also underwent changes. Saxon urns, buckles and brooches have been dug up in great numbers from *terpen* along the coast; it is in fact "exceptional when they are lacking."⁴² Also widely discovered in Frisia was a new style of pottery called Anglo-Frisian, a new decorated style which supersedes the 'primitive' Frisian style of plain undecorated pottery without handles.⁴³ Most strikingly, the settlement at Ezinge underwent a radical change in design. By c. 450, the larger farmsteads had been burned down and small compact huts without attached stables were erected,⁴⁴ in a way that reminds us of early Anglo-Saxon villages.⁴⁵

What this information in fact indicates has long been the subject of debate among scholars. One

can see how a strong Anglo-Saxon presence, or even occupation, can be quickly deduced from these findings, but such a hasty conclusion was cautiously resisted by those holding a more traditional view of early medieval Frisia. Until the twentieth century, it was believed that Frisia had been relatively untouched by the migrations of the Dark Ages and had retained its "tribal integrity." It was argued that, firstly, the terrain of the land was so surrounded by inaccessible bogs and water that Frisia was impenetrable, according to some historians,⁴⁶ or unhealthy according to others. Secondly, scholars pointed to the continuity of the Frisian name and people, stressing that virtually all England was reshaped by the Anglo-Saxons, who eliminated nearly all signs of the previous indigenous culture.⁴⁷ It seemed unlikely that the Anglo-Saxon invasions would have two such opposite effects in different places.

A recent proponent of this traditional view of Frisia, the Dutch historian A. Russchen, offers two possible explanations for the existence of Anglo-Saxon style huts in Ezinge during the Dark Ages. His first suggestion is that these structures could have been auxiliary huts to larger Frisian style homesteads that may have escaped the archeological eye.⁴⁸ This, however, seems a highly speculative theory as it is based on the *absence* of archeological evidence.⁴⁹ Furthermore, he does not elaborate on where these undetected farmsteads would be found nor why they are removed from the original settlement site. The second and perhaps more plausible of these theories is that these more modest huts represent an age of economic decline. This is a likely scenario, as trade in Western Europe dwindled until the early Middle Ages. Economic change, in fact, could equally explain the increased finds of Anglo-Saxon goods.

Despite these arguments however, it seems more likely that there was a significant Anglo-Saxon presence in Frisia during this migration period. That Frisia was impenetrable or unsavory territory to migrating tribes is unlikely. Bogs and water to the East and South of Frisia would have little effect on peoples traveling by ship in the North Sea from the base of what today is Denmark.

From what little we know of the fifth-century ships used in such excursions, we can see that most "voyages from Lower Saxony to Britain must have hugged the coast"⁵⁰ including that of Frisia. The ships were small and wholly dependent on oars for motion; these were not the Viking vessels of the ninth century. Not only were stops in Frisian territory possible, they were probably necessary. Also, while it is true that the survival of the Frisian name and people indicates that Frisia did not undergo an invasion and conquest such as was experienced by the indigenous British population, it does not in my opinion indicate that Frisia was necessarily untouched. That no Anglo-Saxon kingdoms appeared in Frisia, to the best of our knowledge, is perhaps more of an indication of the limits of Anglo-Saxon strength and organization. The fact that most traces of Saxons – urns, buckles, etc. – are found specifically within the coastal *terpen* rather than the inland settlements⁵¹ suggests a more regional than widespread settlement. Thus, the question is perhaps not whether there was an Anglo-Saxon presence in Frisia, but how much.

Opponents of the idea of Anglo-Saxons in Frisia are faced with more compelling archeological evidence than brooches, buckles and burned farmsteads. In 1904 a vast cemetery was unearthed at Hoogebeintum, in the northernmost region of present day Friesland. Some 20 Anglo-Saxon urns of a type that had previously been found in other *terpen*⁵² were unearthed, along with 37 skeletons. The grave goods of this site, the cruciform brooches and pottery, make the tribal identity of this cemetery clearly Anglo-Saxon⁵³ in the view of many historians. Another 60 urns of a similar but plainer Anglo-Frisian style, thought to be less ancient, were also unearthed, for a total of at least 117 burials. Archeologists date the use of this cemetery to A.D. 450-650.

As is always the case with archeology, caution ought to be used to interpret these data; the view that they give us is still obscure at best. Some would say that Anglo-Saxon relics found in Frisia could just as likely be a result of a close relationship that had always existed between these tribes;⁵⁴ we have already seen evidence of Frisian

interest in trade both from Tacitus and the unearthing of plentiful Roman goods. The fact that Procopius puts the Frisians alongside the Angles and the Saxons in his account of the migrations to Britain further suggests some familiarity between the tribes. There is also the possibility that the Anglo-Saxons settled along coastal Frisia long enough to introduce such relics into *terpen* such as Hoogeteintum, but that the tribal identity of the inhabitants never actually changed.

Much resistance to the notion of Anglo-Saxons settling in Frisia seems to stem from a desire to counter the exaggerated importance attributed to the auxiliary science of archeology early in this century. From the evidence discussed, historians in the early part of this century deduced a wider Anglo-Saxon conquest than seems necessary. In fact, as A. Russchen points out,⁵⁵ the very notion of a conquest is misleading. Any incursions by the Anglo-Saxons were almost certainly local and probably incidental to a greater movement toward Britain, and not Frisia-wide. Even the migration toward Britain was not that of a nation making an exodus to a destined land. It occurred slowly over centuries, and if any groups migrating in this period perceived a region along the coast of Frisia that seemed to them desirable, it is not unlikely that they would take it if they could.

Certainly, critics have failed to discount the archeological evidence and disprove the presence of Anglo-Saxons in Frisia. Perhaps Russchen's concern that such a scenario would "destroy the essential values of the tribe"⁵⁶ betrays a personal preference for an alternative explanation. That these remnants of Anglo-Saxons in Hoogeteintum roughly coincide with the changes to the village at Ezing, and that in both cases these traces retain some degree of resilience over roughly two centuries, strongly hints at a newly introduced Anglo-Saxon presence during the migrations of the Dark Ages. This hypothesis also provides a possible explanation of the expansion of Frisian territory southward toward the Rhine at this time, which had already occurred when written records about Frisia again began to be kept in the seventh century.⁵⁷ If Frisians were expelled from their

former homes such as Hoogeteintum and Ezing,⁵⁸ they would have moved in this direction, away from invading Anglo-Saxons. Perhaps this is why we hear from Venantius Fortunatus of King Chilperic⁵⁹ (561-584) being faced with the task of keeping the "Fresones" out of the Frankish Empire.

Unfortunately, little else is known of Dark Age Frisia. We can only imagine that Frisian life continued to be for the most part characterized by animal husbandry, as the stable dwellings previously characteristic of Ezing continued elsewhere⁶⁰ in regions untouched by Anglo-Saxon influence. Along with drastically reduced Roman wares and increasing Frankish pottery, further evidence of the change in commercial activity in the region is provided by the fifth-century appearance of coinage.⁶¹ The currency was minted in imitation of that circulating in the Mediterranean world; Roman and Byzantine standards as imitated by the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths, the Burgundians and especially the Franks. Such coins would only be minted by a people actively interested in commerce and either direct or indirect contact with the originators of their currency exemplars.

In the seventh century Frisia began to gain renown for its merchants. Shortly after the year 600, we know of Frankish strongholds at Utrecht and Dorestad, in a region near the mouth of the Rhine known as Frisia Citerior. Founded by merchants from Maastricht, Dorestad was to become an important trading centre and thereby largely responsible for initiating the Frisian reputation for commerce in the Middle Ages.⁶² By the time of the Carolingians, the Frisians are thought to have established colonies at Mainz, London and York. They shipped cloth, wine and other goods from the monastic houses and fairs such as that at Saint-Denis to an area extending from the mouth of the Rhine as far as Switzerland.⁶³ It was during this time that the North Sea was known throughout Northern Europe as the Frisian Sea.⁶⁴ Frisian merchants, however, had little impact on Frisia Proper, west of what is now the IJsselmeer. There is no evidence of trade within this region, as in the

seventh century it did not yet have any centres capable of hosting such activity. The Franks supported the commercial activity of Dorestad and the slightly smaller Domburg and provided the only opportunity for Frisians to ply their coastal trade.

We know that the fortress of Utrecht was in the hands of the Franks by the reign of King Dagobert (623-638), for he built a church there and entrusted it to Bishop Kunibert of the diocese of Cologne on condition that he Christianize the neighbouring Frisians.⁶⁵ This condition was never fulfilled, and thus when Wilfried, the bishop of York, travelled to Rome via Frisia in 678 he was courteously greeted by the still pagan people and their king Aldigisl, as Bede tells us.⁶⁶ This is the first mention of a Frisian king. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly where in Frisia Aldigisl resided nor whether he was the king of all Frisia Proper or only of part of it.⁶⁷

Ten years later another Anglo-Saxon cleric, named Wigbert, arrived in Frisia to Christianize the Frisians, perhaps at the instigation of Wilfried. He was greeted by another ruler by the name of Radbod, no doubt the successor to Aldigisl. Wigbert had little success during his two year stay and, discouraged, he returned to England.⁶⁸ King Radbod occupied Utrecht and Dorestad at this time. Whether these cities were taken by Radbod himself, who indeed was ambitious, or whether they came into Frisian hands before, is unknown. That a conquest by the Frisians would escape mention in the writings of contemporaries is unlikely; these cities on the border of Frisia and the Frankish kingdom probably came under Frisian control without bloodshed.

In 690 Wigbert's abbot Egbert again sent a mission into Frisia, this time twelve men strong including the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord. They landed first at the castellum of Utrecht, but when they received no support from Radbod, they instead turned southward and appealed to the Frankish king Pippin the Younger.⁶⁹ The king designated Frisia Citerior, south of Utrecht, as Willibrord's mission field, and supported his initial trip to Rome in order to receive papal

benediction. As we learn from Bede, Pippin had conquered this terrain from Radbod the previous year,⁷⁰ in his first offensive against the Frisians. From a chronicle by Fredegarius and the *Liber Historiae Francorum* dating from 727, we begin to understand just how formidable an opponent Pippin considered Radbod to be. Fredegarius makes mention of "repeated invasion of the Frank empire"⁷¹ by the Frisian king; Pippin was compelled to keep him in check by making an alliance and marrying his son Grimoald to Radbod's daughter.⁷²

Pippin's second offensive against Radbod came sometime between 690 and 695. Having driven Radbod from Utrecht, in 695 Pippin installed Willibrord there as archbishop of the Frisians. Willibrord found the church constructed there under Dagobert "razed to the ground... trampled upon by pagans and abandoned by the neglect of bishops."⁷³ He rebuilt the church and consecrated it in honor of St. Martin. The Franks clearly did not penetrate far beyond Utrecht, as we know that the Frisian king was still in possession of the region of Werina,⁷⁴ to the north. Therefore, since Radbod continued to deny support to the mission, Willibrord's field was still confined to Frisia Citerior. After meeting with little success in his attempts to convert the people there, he went to the land of the Danes in 700.

The Frisians are known to have been among the last of the nations of Northern Europe to convert from paganism to Christianity. Frisia Proper remained independent of the Christian empire of the Franks well into the eighth century, and Radbod seems to have led the people in stubbornly retaining the traditional gods of their predecessors. These were difficult obstacles for the missionaries to overcome. In the Life of Wulfram, bishop of Sens, we hear a tale of human sacrifice performed by Radbod and a crowd of Frisians in Wulfram's presence. Radbod offered to spare the lives of the two children if Wulfram could prove that the sacrifice was not in accordance with the will of the gods. The tale shows that Radbod "merely considers himself to be the executor of a task, from which he cannot escape and which has been entrusted to him."⁷⁵

Such piety indicates that it was more than international enmity that fuelled Frisian resistance to Willibrord's mission; the Frisians must not have responded well to the strategy of defaming pagan gods as demons and dialectically demonstrating that the Christian God was the Creator to whom these pagan gods were subservient.⁷⁶

In 714 Pippin died and fierce conflict within the Frankish empire ensued. Radbod took advantage of the death of the Frankish leader and allied himself with Neustria, west of the Franks. In 716 he went on the offensive and brought the entire region of Frisia Citerior south of the Rhine under Frisian control and also, according to several monastic annals, led a Frisian fleet as far south as Cologne.⁷⁷ There Charles Martel was defeated and, with Utrecht once again under Frisian control, Radbod burnt down the churches of Frisia Citerior and drove out the priests, thus restoring the situation as it was before 690.

The year 716 also marks the first mission to Frisia by Boniface. Born around the year 675 in the kingdom of Wessex, he entered the monastery at Exeter at a young age and remained there throughout his childhood. After he was ordained a priest c. 705, the missionary impulse began to assert itself, as it did for so many other Anglo-Saxon clerics.⁷⁸ Having received its culture and religion from the continent, Anglo-Saxon England felt compelled to repay the debt of the Christian message to their cousins across the Channel; more missionary effort was directed toward the continent than ever before. Boniface himself was acutely aware of his own Germanic origins, and it seems that his "love and loyalty for his own kinsfolk was one of the most evident motives of his reforming zeal."⁷⁹ In 716, he left England for what was considered to be one of the most critical mission points of Europe, Frisia. Upon his arrival, however, his hopes to aid in the Christianization of the Frisians were swiftly disappointed. Radbod was at war with Charles Martel and had no time to give audience to yet another missionary. Boniface, perceiving the time as inopportune, returned to England without accomplishing anything.

It was not until after Radbod's death in 719 that Boniface would return, together with Willibrord, whom Boniface assisted until 722. They travelled to Utrecht and began their work in building up the Frisian diocese. These events are the subject of Abbess Bugga's letter to Boniface when she congratulates him on his success in Frisia: "He laid low before you Rathbod, that enemy of the Catholic Church. Then he revealed to you in a dream that it was your duty to reap the harvest of God, gathering in sheaves of holy souls into the storehouse of the heavenly kingdom."⁸⁰ With renewed zeal, the missionaries destroyed the pagan holy places of the Frisians and established churches throughout Frisia Citerior. The stubborn resistance of the pagans that characterized the reign of Radbod was gone and, for the first time, the Anglo-Saxon mission to the Frisians met with considerable success.

Charles Martel also seized upon the occasion of the Frisian king's death to resume the Frankish offensive against Frisia, conquering once again as far north as the Rhine. Martel worked closely with the Church to organize and civilize his own people, and thus he showed special favour to Boniface and Willibrord by ensuring their protection and generously endowing Willibrord's church at Utrecht.⁸¹ In 734 Charles proceeded into Frisia Proper for the first time with a Frankish naval force and there he defeated the force of the Frisian leader Bubo. Pagan shrines were again widely destroyed and Charles withdrew after ensuring that "the conquered land remained occupied and was annexed to the Frank Empire."⁸²

With the death of Willibrord in 739, however, the Frisian archdiocese found itself in jeopardy. The bishop of Cologne, recalling that the church of Utrecht was a gift from king Dagobert to the diocese of Cologne in the early seventh century, claimed the Frisian see for his own. In a letter to Pope Stephen II, Boniface argued that Dagobert's stipulation that the Frisians were to be converted from paganism had been fulfilled neither by Kunibert nor any of his successors. Instead, as he pointed out, in so far as the Frisians had been thus far Christianized, it was solely thanks to the tireless efforts of Willibrord⁸³ and himself. To

safeguard the continuity of the Frisian archdiocese, Boniface himself travelled to Utrecht in the spring of 754 – at this time he was over eighty – and continued to destroy pagan shrines and erect churches in Frisia Proper. But on June 5th, 754, a band of thieves coming from beyond the Lauwers River, then the limit of Frankish control and today the border between the provinces of Friesland and Groningen, fell upon Boniface's encampment in Dokkum at daybreak. Boniface, who had already taken his shroud with him when he left Fulda for Utrecht, ordered his escort not to resist.⁸⁴ Along with Boniface, 52 men were killed.

When the news of these events reached the kingdom of the Franks, it was received with outrage, and shortly thereafter Humsterland beyond the Lauwers was invaded by a punitive force of Franks from Dokkum. Today, a *terp* erected for the construction of a memorial church survives in Dokkum. From that place, the Christianization of the Frisians was completed by 772,⁸⁵ and Charlemagne conquered the entire Frisian kingdom by 785.⁸⁶ Thus the independence of the Frisians was terminated and they were incorporated into what was later to be known as the Holy Roman Empire.

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The Frisians were, from the beginning, one small Germanic tribe among the many of Northern Europe. They did not develop a thriving literary culture of their own, and thus written sources about them are few and invariably the work of outsiders, whether Roman or clerical. Our brief history of the Frisians can be divided into three phases, each of which is concerned by their encounters with other cultures.

Frisia's encounter with Rome was most strikingly that of a small tribe encountering an ever growing empire that had reached its territory. However, Rome's expansion was not that of a military force widely conquering and pillaging, and many regions (such as Gaul) fared well under the dominion of the Roman empire. The initial Roman presence in Frisia was cordial, to say the

least. It was not until Rome began to impose demands that exceeded the means of the Frisians that Roman control became intolerable. Despite the assertion by Dutch historians proud of their nation, it was as much thanks to political good fortune as Frisian resolve that the Romans never maintained permanent control of Frisia. The achievements of the revolt of A.D. 29 would have quickly been eradicated had the emperor Claudius not opted for a more defensive stance in Western Germany c. A.D. 50. Trade was the only relationship that Frisia had with Rome from the second century onward.

On Frisia's encounter with the Anglo-Saxons, we are unfortunately devoid of any recorded information; we can only reconstruct it using archeology. We know only that the Anglo-Saxons migrated from their lands east of Frisia to Britain, and interpretation of the evidence unearthed is speculative at best. Nevertheless, as I have attempted to demonstrate, it seems most plausible that the Frisians did endure Anglo-Saxon incursions at a local level along the coast of the North Sea. That the Anglo-Saxon cultures such as that found at Ezinge and Hoogeteintum eventually became characterized as Anglo-Frisian suggests that these settlers eventually mixed indistinguishably with the local population, and these regions remained Frisian.

The Frankish empire, which extended as far north as Utrecht by the reign of Dagobert (623-638), continued its religiously sanctioned expansion in the late seventh-century. The Frisians encountered a twofold offensive: that of the Frankish kingdom and that of the Roman Catholic Church. Under Radbod they stubbornly resisted both, but with the death of this king in 719, they eventually succumbed. Frisia Citerior, south of the Rhine, fell first as the Franks under Charles Martel took advantage of Radbod's death. The Anglo-Saxons Willibrord and Boniface landed in Utrecht in that year and began their mission work. For the first time they met with success. In 754 the murder of Boniface drew attention to the urgent need for missionaries east of Dokkum and, with the ensuing mission based in that city, the Christianization of Frisia was accomplished by

the year 772. The conquest of Frisia also continued: Charles Martel conquered half of Frisia Proper as far as the Lauwers River, and Charlemagne extended his kingdom to the Ems in 785.

NOTES

- ¹ Tacitus, *Germania* trans. H. Mattingly (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1948) ch. 7.
- ² *ibid.* ch. 13
- ³ *ibid.* ch. 14
- ⁴ *ibid.* ch. 16
- ⁵ Starr, Chester G., *A History of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 552. Although Roman law and the influence of the senate kept Imperial Rome from being an arbitrary despotism, the power of a single emperor over the provinces and military contrasts with the looser organization of the Germans.
- ⁶ Pounds, N.J.G., *A Historical Geography of Europe*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 108
- ⁷ *ibid.* ch. 34
- ⁸ *Procopius*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940)
- ⁹ Tacitus, *Germania* ch. 35
- ¹⁰ Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, trans. Ernest Cary (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1917), 54. 32
- ¹¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, ed. Arthur Murray, (London: Jones & Co., 1931), ch. 4. 14.38
- ¹² Cassius Dio 54.32
- ¹³ Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. Michael Grant (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1956) 4.72
- ¹⁴ *ibid.* 4.74
- ¹⁵ *ibid.* 11. 18-19
- ¹⁶ *ibid.* 11.20
- ¹⁷ *ibid.* 13.53
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* 13.54
- ¹⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, ch. 4. 15, 16
- ²⁰ Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley, *Frisian and Free*, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 1989) p. 34
- ²¹ Pounds, *A Historical Geography of Europe*, p. 10
- ²² *ibid.* p. 75
- ²³ Boeles, *Friesland tot de Elfde Eeuw*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1951) p. 108
- ²⁴ *ibid.* p. 571
- ²⁵ Musset, Lucien, *The Germanic Invasions*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965) p. 14
- ²⁶ Boeles, p. 70
- ²⁷ In modern Friesland, it is characteristic for the name of each city that is the original site of a *terp* to end with *-um*. Thus, sites of original *terpen* communities can be found at such cities as Bergum, Dokkum, Hoogebeintum...etc.
- ²⁸ The following details of the *terp* of Ezinge as excavated by Van Giffen can be found in Boeles, p. 85-92.
- ²⁹ Pounds, p. 10
- ³⁰ However, there is a considerable margin of error for such dating.
- ³¹ *Terpen* are not, however, exclusive to the Frisians. Such mounds can today be found in Germany and Denmark; roughly where the Chauci and by the third century, Saxons would have been living.
- ³² The first to venture beyond the Roman frontiers were not the military. Rather, the merchants often preceded them in making first contact with tribes; Caesar consulted with them before venturing into an unknown region. Pottery goods have often been excavated from the *terpen*.
- ³³ Copeland, George H., "Friesland Free" in *The New York Times Magazine*, p. 22-23 (March 2, 1952). In reality Caesar never encountered the Frisians.
- ³⁴ Pounds p. 98
- ³⁵ Mahmood p. 17
- ³⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola*, trans. H. Mattingly, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1948), ch. 28
- ³⁷ Boeles p. 167-171
- ³⁸ Pounds p. 166. Frisia was not heavily forested.

- ³⁹ *ibid.* p. 107
- ⁴⁰ Musset, *The Germanic Invasions*, p. 11-12
- ⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 101
- ⁴² Van Bath, Slichter, "Dutch Tribal Problems" in *Speculum*, p. 322 (Vol. XXIV, July 1949); Boeles p. 581
- ⁴³ Boeles p. 178
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 569
- ⁴⁵ Van Bath p. 323
- ⁴⁶ Boeles p. 208
- ⁴⁷ Musset, *The Germanic Invasions*, p. 104
- ⁴⁸ Russchen, A., *New Light on Dark-Age Frisia*, (Drachten: Drukkerij en Uitgeverij Laverman N.V., 1967) p. 26
- ⁴⁹ Russchen himself indicates that these theories are proposed in order to offer explanations which do not involve invasion, rather than for their strengths (p. 28).
- ⁵⁰ Musset p. 98
- ⁵¹ Van Bath p. 322
- ⁵² Boeles p. 215
- ⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 579, pl. xxxiii-xxxv.
- ⁵⁴ Many scholars today think that tribes in the beginning of the Middle Ages contained elements of various peoples. Cf. Van Bath p. 338
- ⁵⁵ Russchen p. 26
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29
- ⁵⁷ Halbertsma, H., *The Frisian Kingdom* (Fries Genootschap, 1965), p. 69; Boeles p. 580
- ⁵⁸ Urns like those exhumed at Hoogebeintum were also found at Beetgum. Dwellings like those found at Ezinge were also discovered at a nearby *terp* known as Burmania II. Boeles p. 215, 218
- ⁵⁹ Venantius Fortunatus in Halbertsma p. 69
- ⁶⁰ Boeles p. 107
- ⁶¹ Russchen p. 41
- ⁶² *ibid.* p. 40
- ⁶³ Pounds p. 217
- ⁶⁴ Mahmood p. 18
- ⁶⁵ Boniface, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), Letter 109, p. 182
- ⁶⁶ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in Halbertsma p. 69
- ⁶⁷ Tacitus presents Malorix and Verritus merely as tribal chiefs.
- ⁶⁸ Bede in Halbertsma p. 70
- ⁶⁹ Boeles p. 270. Pippin the Younger was the father of Charles Martel and grandfather of the better-known Pippin the Short.
- ⁷⁰ Bede in Halbertsma p. 70
- ⁷¹ Halbertsma p. 71
- ⁷² *Liber historiae francorum* in Halbertsma p. 71
- ⁷³ Boniface Letter CIX, p. 182
- ⁷⁴ Russchen p. 51
- ⁷⁵ Halbertsma p. 73
- ⁷⁶ Hillgarth, J.N., *Christianity and Paganism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 81, 172-173
- ⁷⁷ in Halbertsma p. 71
- ⁷⁸ Emerton in Boniface, p. 5
- ⁷⁹ *ibid.* p. 6
- ⁸⁰ *ibid.* letter VII, p. 40
- ⁸¹ Strayer, Joseph R. and Munro, Dana Carleton, *The Middle Ages*, (New York: Appleton Century Crofts Inc., 1942), p. 84
- ⁸² Halbertsma p. 74
- ⁸³ Boniface letter LXXXIX, p. 181
- ⁸⁴ Halbertsma p. 75
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 75
- ⁸⁶ Boeles p. 286

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