

## Review

**John Hines and Nelleke IJssennagger-van der Pluijm (eds):**

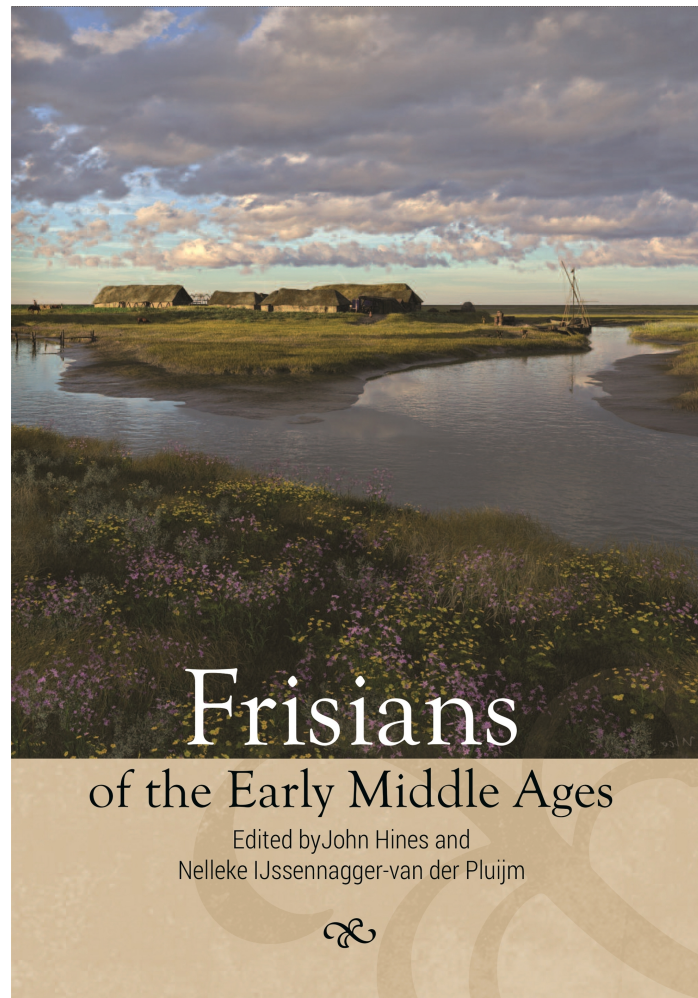
### ***Frisians of the Early Middle Ages***

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*Reviewed by Catherine Hills*



This book is a collection of papers resulting from a symposium held in 2018 in Leeuwarden, Friesland, Netherlands. This was an interdisciplinary event, with papers from historians, archaeologists, and linguists on the topic of Frisians in the Early Middle Ages. It forms the latest in a series of published symposia on early medieval peoples of western Europe and it shares the format of the previous volumes by including discussion by the contributors as well as their individual papers. In some previous volumes the discussion sections reflect the reality of wide-ranging and sometimes not well focussed debate. This volume has been well edited, with discussion confined to mostly brief and relevant comments. However, this still amounts to a total of about 70 pages and after skim reading most of the discussions I remain unconvinced they contribute significantly. I am also cautious about the concept of historical archaeoethnology, described by the founder of the series, the late Giorgio Ausenda, as the recovery of the life-styles and sociocultural conditions of past populations. This seems to me to be the aim of archaeology, no need for an extra name.

However, the papers themselves are interesting and well informed. The theme which links them is that of the extent to which it is possible to identify separate ethnic groups in the early medieval period and, specifically, the meaning of the name “Frisian” at that time. It clearly referred to people living in the southern coastal regions of the North Sea in parts of what is now the Netherlands and north Germany, but beyond that it is more difficult to be precise. The identification of separate peoples in the past has often been based on a simplistic concept of ethnicity and national identity derived from traditional histories, which is at odds with much current scholarship. Instead of clearly separate groups defined by common genetic heritage, geographical location and material culture, we perceive fluid situations and changing relationships with complicated connections to material culture and language. The papers in this volume convey that complexity, perhaps at the expense of the clarity non-specialist readers might prefer.

An important initial point is that the Frisians recorded very occasionally by classical authors may not have been directly connected with those who appear in later written sources. Between the two is a period between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD when archaeological evidence indicates there was a break in occupation in the coastal region, although not in other parts of the modern Netherlands. The possibly Celtic-speaking Frisii mentioned by Tacitus seem to have disappeared to be replaced after this hiatus in settlement by Germanic-speaking people who had moved westwards along the coast from the Elbe-Weser region. Traditionally these would be named as Anglo-Saxon and equated with people who also moved across the North Sea to England, but that version of events has been significantly problematized, by, amongst others, Annet Nieuwhof

whose analysis of ceramics, presented in one of the papers, provides part of the evidence for the new story, together with excavations of sites which show a break in occupation.

Historical sources are reviewed in papers by Ian Wood and Robert Flierman. They show that much of our information comes through the prism of Christian hagiography and Frankish politics. The best internal written source is the Frisian law code, surviving only in a late version but argued by Hans Nijman here to have an 8th century origin. Other papers include detailed presentation and analysis of specific topics: archaeological evidence including tools, textiles, wooden artefacts, pottery, and brooches; runic inscriptions; language, while others consist of more conceptual discussion: maritime connectivity, religion. A paper by Bente Majchczack reviews recent field work on the north Frisian islands, off the coast of Jutland, where survey and excavation have provided new information. In the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, these islands were connected both with Ribe, to the north, and with the other Frisian regions to the south. All of the papers are worth reading and based on current research, but in a short review there is not space to give detailed accounts of each.

Perhaps the most substantial paper is by Gilles de Langen and J. A. Mol on landscape and trade. They outline the palaeogeography of Frisia, building on recent research by P. C. Vos (Vos & Knol 2015). They highlight the difference between west Frisia west of the Vlie, the western part of the modern Netherlands, and central and northern Frisia, the focus of most of their research. Here occupation lay mostly on a narrow coastal region, separated from inland regions by extensive bogs and subdivided by small streams and rivers. This was a land where transport was only practical via boat. This fragmented landscape prevented the creation of large, concentrated landholdings and the population had a considerable degree of autonomy. The role of the historically recorded leaders Aldgisl and Radbod is discussed in this context. 19<sup>th</sup>-century maps are used to define the size and shape of earlier settlements and fields. The authors take issue with some earlier accounts of this region as depending on cattle, whereas they argue for a mixed economy including arable, playing down the importance of cattle. Some substance for this argument can be found in evidence not included in this paper that limited isotopic evidence suggests that some cattle were not local to the site where they were found. Otherwise faunal remains from excavated sites produce varying proportions of cattle and sheep (Prummel 2001). A more common perception of early Frisia than the view they contest emphasizes sheep, not cattle, on the salt marsh, providing wool for the textiles which historical sources record. Mol and de Langen also argue against the common identification of Frisians as synonymous with traders and point out that the major trading centres, notably Dorestad, lie outside the coastal region, and that “there are no

indications of independent trading settlements in the Frisian regions before the tenth century” (112). Their conclusion that this was “an agricultural landscape with mixed farms basing their existence mainly on agricultural production” (115) seems to play down the role of trading to an extent belied by some archaeological evidence. Distributed across the Netherlands are imported items, such as lava quernstones from the Rhineland or glass vessels in settlements, and beads from as far away as India in burials. The people who lived on the coast were used to travelling by boat and they acquired non-local goods, presumably in exchange for products like wool. Trading could have been a seasonal activity for some members of the community, with some parallels to initial Viking activity in later centuries, with no obvious need for specialized settlements. An interesting and thought-provoking paper.

An earlier collection of papers on early Frisia (Hines & Ijsseknagger 2017) had the same publisher and editors, and shared half of the same authors. There is some, but not too much, direct overlap of content, for example in Nicolay’s papers in both volumes. The previous book had a wider geographical remit, including more comparative discussion of connections around the North Sea and the Baltic, especially with England, and also more papers relating to language history. The initial paper by Knol and Ijsseknagger is a clear and succinct introduction to the topics discussed in both volumes, whereas the 2021 volume is more detailed and sometimes assumes specialist knowledge in the reader. The editors explain that the 2021 volume is designed to focus on the internal diversity of the Frisian areas. Its strengths are in detailed discussion of landscape and historical sources. Both volumes have good archaeological papers and discussions of runic inscriptions. The text and illustrations of both are good, though some of the maps in the more recent volume are over reduced, requiring a magnifying glass to read river names.

Overall, both are interesting collections of papers. As a non-Frisian specialist, it was helpful to have the 2017 book to hand when reading the 2021 volume, but to a great extent they are complementary as intended. Both show the range and depth of recent and current scholarship relating to an area which has often been underplayed, seen as between and peripheral to the Carolingian empire, Britain, and Scandinavia. Here it can be seen as making its own independent contribution to early medieval Europe.

## References

- Hines, John & Nelleke Ijsseknagger, eds. 2017. *Frisians and their North Sea neighbours*. Woodbridge: Boydell.
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### **About the reviewer**

Catherine Hills is a retired academic archaeologist. She was a senior lecturer for many years in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge (UK), and is a Fellow Emerita of Newnham College, Cambridge. Her research is focused on the archaeology of the first millennium AD in north western Europe, especially around the North Sea, including Anglo-Saxon England. She directed the excavation of a large 5<sup>th</sup>-century cremation cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham, Norfolk, a site which throws some light on the recorded migration of peoples across the North Sea to Britain, the so-called "Adventus Saxonum." The topics of other publications include "Spong Man," the lid of a cremation urn in the form of a seated ceramic figure; animal and runic stamped decoration on pots; small copper alloy boxes in 7<sup>th</sup>-century female graves with ornament indicating use as Christian reliquaries; the relationship between history and archaeology and the presentation of archaeology to the public.

