

From: Medieval English Literary and Cultural Studies, ed. Juan Camilo Conde Silvestre and Nita Vásquez González. SELIM XV (2004), 3-31

THE FRISIANS IN *BEOWULF* - *BEOWULF* IN FRISIA:  
THE VICISSITUDES OF TIME

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ABSTRACT

*One of the remarkable aspects of Beowulf is that the scene of the main plot is set, not in England but in Scandinavia. Equally remarkable is that the Frisians are the only West Germanic tribe to play a considerable role in two of the epic's sub-plots: the Finnsburg Episode and Hygela's raid on Frisia. In this article, I will first discuss the significance of the Frisians in the North Sea area in early medieval times (trade), why they appear in Beowulf (to add prestige), and what significance their presence may have on dating the poem (the decline of Frisia after 800).*

*The second part of the article deals with the reception of the editio princeps of Beowulf (Thorkelin 1881) in Frisia in the first half of the nineteenth century.*

In the summer of 1991, the small winding road between Harlingen and Wijnaldum was seeing far more tourist traffic than usual. Harlingen is a modest seaport on the coast of the Dutch province of Friesland/Fryslân,<sup>1</sup> Wijnaldum an insignificant hamlet not far north from Harlingen. Surely, the tourists will have enjoyed the sight of the lush pastures leisurely grazed by the Friesian cattle whose fame dates back to Roman times. The sightseers will no doubt have admired the stately farmsteads reflecting the wealth that generations of cattle breeders has brought to these parts. Some may even have frowned when spotting endless rows of modern two-winged mills reaching to the sky to grind electricity from wind. Yet, such scenic views were not

the purpose of their driving along this Frisian country road. It was the news of a spectacular archaeological excavation that had begun early in the spring and which had organized an open day. Well over 3,000 visitors were allured by newspapers announcing the project with such sensational headers as “Digging for Finn’s Hall” and “The Site of Finnsburg Retrieved.” Evidently, *Beowulf* and his world were still alive in Friesland, a millennium after the poem had been entrusted to the vellum of a manuscript now known as Cotton Vitellius A XV. I really wonder whether the rumour of the rediscovery of Grendel’s lair somewhere on the island of Zealand would have attracted similar crowds of Danes. What then is it that makes *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon poem about a Scandinavian hero, to have such an appeal to a modern Frisian audience? Obviously, it has something to do with the fact that the Frisians and Frisia play a prominent part in the Old English *Beowulf*. But here again we are confronted with problems. Why do Frisians play such an important part in a poem the contours of whose world are mainly confined to Denmark and South-Sweden? And why were Frisians so interested in the poem soon after it was first published in 1815? These two problems – the presence of the Frisians in *Beowulf* and the early reception of *Beowulf* in Frisia – make up the two poles of my paper, a kind of diptych as it were.

*Beowulf*, as I suppose you all know, is a story in two parts.<sup>2</sup> In the former, a young Geatish prince, Beowulf, learns about a cannibalistic monster, called Grendel, who is wreaking havoc in the land of the Danish King Hrothgar. Beowulf leaves home and sails to Denmark with the firm intention to rescue the king from this monster. During his three-day sojourn at the Danish court, he eliminates Grendel in the first night of his stay, and on the third day he kills Grendel’s mother, no less a monster than her son. Beowulf’s second night in Hrothgar’s hall is spent in joyful celebration of the hero’s defeat of Grendel. As part of the merriment, Hrothgar’s court entertainer sings a song about a bloody tribal clash. It concerns Hnaef, a Danish prince, and his

retinue on the one hand, and on the other Finn, king of the Frisians. The place of action is Frisia, to be precise Finn’s hall, called Finnsburg. Hnaef, accompanied with no mean force of sixty men, was visiting there his sister Hildeburh, Finn’s wife. Apparently, Hildeburh had been married to Finn to strike an alliance between the Danes and the Frisians. Above all, she was supposed to play the role of *freoðuwebbe* [peace weaver], that is, a role so often assigned to princesses in an attempt to confirm the peace between neighbouring or rivalling tribes. For the Danes to be at peace with the Frisians must have been of the utmost importance in view of the politically motivated marriage. Unfortunately, a violent quarrel between the Danish visitors and the Frisians led to fighting and many casualties on either side. They included Hildeburh’s brother Hnaef as well as her and Finn’s nameless son. A truce was negotiated and it was agreed that the Danish guests would share part of Finn’s hall and participate *æt feohgyftum* [in the dispensing of treasures] (1025). The Danes expected to be *weorþode* [honoured] with *hringum* [rings] and to be entertained *sincgestreonum/ fætted goldes* [with treasures of plated gold] (1092b-93a) equally much as Finn would want lavish upon his own men in his hall. The day following upon the fight and the truce, the dead were burnt on the funeral pyre with due ceremonial: *icge gold ahæfen of horde* [fine gold was brought from the hoard] (1107b-08a). Upon the pyre was easily seen:

swatfah syrce, swyn ealgylden,  
eofor irenheard, æþeling manig.

(1111-12)

[blood-stained mail-shirt, the swine-image all-golden, a boar  
hard as iron, many a prince]

Apparently, in the poet’s imagination, there was no shortage of gold and treasure in Finn’s hall. As a true warlord, Finn is expected to distribute rings to his own men, but with the truce agrees also to have his Danish guests share in the receiving of rings and jewels.

Moreover, there seemed to be such plenty in Frisia that an abundance of gold objects could be taken away from the circulation of gift-giving and be disposed with the dead to be consumed with fire in an ostentatious display of defining status in the presence of visiting bystanders. After the funeral rituals, Winter prevented the Danes from sailing back to their homeland and forced them to pass the time in Finn's hall. When Spring arrived in the land, the truce melted along with the ice, and in a second fight, Hengest and his men revenged their leader's death: they killed Finn *æt his selfes ham* [in his own home] (1147b) –what a dishonour for the Frisians! Hildeburh–widowed and childless –*was numen* [was taken] (1153b). The verb suggests her to be an object, almost as if she were abducted or raped (*niman* is frequently used in these two senses in Old English, in the latter case usually with the prefix *nied-*, *nyd-* (Coleman 1999: 174-175). After Hildeburh's capture, Hengest's men proceeded to carry to their ships:

Deal ingesteald eorðcyninges,  
swylce hie æt Finnes ham findan meahton  
sigla searogimma.

(1155-57b)

[all the household-property of the king of that country, such  
jewels, skilfully-wrought gems as they were able to find in  
Finn's home]

In triumph, they sailed back home to Denmark.

The Finnsburg Episode numbers about 100 lines, which makes it one of the longest of the many digressions in *Beowulf*. The event was also celebrated in a separate poem that survived only as a fragment, known as the *Finnsburg Fragment*. Is it coincidence that the poet chose the Finnsburg Episode with its Frisian locality to illustrate the joys and miseries of the heroic tradition? All the ingredients are there: loyalty between a lord and his retainers, revenge and feuding, the hall as a symbol of harmony but also one of incumbent strife, the hoard as

a symbol of a ruler's power and his generously sharing its contents, the brittleness of dynastic alliances, and the significance of the intimate bond between brother's sister and sister's son (Bremmer 1980).

However, the Finnsburg Episode is not the only incident in *Beowulf* in which Frisians play a key role. Four times, once in part I and three times in part II of the poem, references and allusions are being made to a raid carried out in Frisia by King Hygelac and his men (1202-14a, 2354a-66, 2501-08a, and 2910b-21). Initially successful, Hygelac had to pay for it with his life, while Beowulf barely escaped from the *Freswæl* [Frisian field of slaughter] (1070), by swimming home to Geatland.

What was Hygelac's purpose with this raid and why did he venture so far away from his homeland? Was the underlying motive *for wlenco* [out of pride] (1206), as the poet censures Hygelac's risky venture? Or was there more to it? Perhaps not surprisingly, because of associative reasons, the first mention of the raid is made shortly after Hrothgar's *scop* has finished his lay of Finn and Hnaef. Let us listen – in translation– to the poet himself:

A cup was carried to (Beowulf) and friendship offered in words,  
and twisted gold was presented with good will: two bracelets,  
dress and rings, and the greatest necklace (*healsbeag*) of those I  
have heard spoken of on earth [...] . Hygelac of the Geats [...] had that necklace with him on his last expedition when beneath the banner he defended treasure, guarded the spoils of slaughter. Fate carried him off, when, out of pride, he went looking for trouble, a feud with the Frisians. The powerful prince (*i.e.* Hygelac) wore that ornament [...] across the cup of waves; he perished beneath his shield. The body of the king then fell into the hands of the Franks, his breast-armor and the collar together; lesser warriors plundered the slain after the slaughter in battle; men of the Geats prevailed on the field of corpses.

(1192-1214)

The poet is clearly looking back at an event in the past, and, as often from such an advantageous position, in hindsight he is the better judge. He interprets Hygelac's setting sail for Frisia as "looking for trouble, a feud with the Frisians."

Staging a marine expedition to fight for the sake of fighting would depict these early medieval kings as more bellicose than is warranted. The trouble and the feud were the effect, not the purpose of Hygelac's raid. His objective must have been the treasure (*sinc*) and spoils of slaughter (*wæltreaf*). Had Hygelac's Frisian enterprise been successful, he surely would have been as lavishly praised by the poet as Hengist and his men after their victory at Finnsburg. As the lord of a band of retainers, Hygelac had to keep a constant flow of precious objects circulating among his followers. In doing so, he maintained and added to his status and continued to tie his retainers to him. One way of filling his treasure-chest was exacting tribute from neighbouring tribes that depended on him for their protection. Another was the plundering of more distant tribes in a hit and run attack, so as to avoid immediate retaliation. Quite strikingly, Hygelac's attack on Frisia was recorded by a contemporaneous historian, albeit with some modifications. In his sixth-century *History of the Franks*, Book III.3, Gregory of Tours related how a Danish King Chlochilaicus raided the coast of Gaul, but was defeated by an army led by Prince Theudebert, son of the Frankish King Theuderic. Although his name, if in Latinized Frankish garb, is the same, in Gregory's account Hygelac is king of the Danes instead of the Geats, and the attack is on Gaul (*i.e.* Franconia) rather than on Frisia.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, for his account of the raid the *Beowulf*-poet must have had his reasons to change such details of tribal identity and local geography, assuming that Gregory's report reflects the historical 'truth'. Gregory, by the way, is our only external contemporaneous witness to confirm the historical existence of Hygelac. The Frisians and the Franks, too, are historically

documented. All the other participants in Hygelac's raid on Frisia seem to live in an extra-historical reality. They are, first of all, Beowulf himself, as Hygelac's champion; Dæghræfn, the Frankish king's champion; a king of the Frisians whose name the poet does not reveal to us; and two tribes with dubious IDs, the Hetware and the Hugas. So let me turn to the Franks and Frisians first in relation to the problem of dating *Beowulf*.

Dating the composition of *Beowulf* has been a much vexed question that has kept many generations of critics occupied. Basically, there are two factions: early daters and late daters. Until the 1970s, the early daters held the ground. Most of them advocated the seventh and eighth centuries. This situation changed dramatically when Kevin Kiernan in 1981 published a detailed analysis of the *Beowulf* manuscript in which he defended the thesis that the poem was composed more or less at the same time as British Library, Cotton Vitellius A XV, that is ca. 1000 or just before that date.<sup>3</sup> A conference was held in Toronto in 1980, devoted especially to the problem of dating the *Beowulf* poem. The outcome of three days of papers and discussion was adequately summarized by Eric G. Stanley (1981) in his retrospective contribution to the conference papers: "The Date of *Beowulf*: Some Doubts and no Conclusions."

If dating the composition of *Beowulf* appears to be a matter of much debate and little certainty, there is little contention about the date of the action. All critics agree that the scene of the poem can be dated to the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Scandinavia was still the scene of small tribes and alliances, in which petty kings rivalled for prominence. Occasionally, successful kings emerged from this intertribal competition for hegemony and managed to extend their sway over more than one tribe. King Hrothgar of Denmark is a good example in point. His success was based on *heresped* [prosperity in war] (64) and on *wiges weorðmynd* [honour in battle] (65). As a result of these qualities, his *winemagas* [friends and kinsmen] (65) followed

his command. The core of his group of retainers consisted of loyal relatives. Owing to his political prosperity, Hrothgar attracted more and more adventurous young warriors. The position he had thus acquired called for material visualisation, and therefore Hrothgar decided to build that splendid hall Heorot. His hall paralleled the size of his magnanimity, for in it he dealt out rings and treasure during the drinking bouts. From the poem we get the impression that Hrothgar's power rested particularly in subjecting neighbouring tribes to become his tributaries. Nonetheless, the fact that the *scop* sang the adventures of Hnæf in Frisia, reveals that the more distant Frisians also figured lively in the world of Hrothgar's Danes.

His neighbouring friend and colleague, Hygelac, was likewise seeking this prosperity in war to maintain his position as an attractive warrior-king of the Geats. However, whereas King Hrothgar sought and found his fortune close at home, Hygelac ventured on a daring expedition to supply the contents of his treasure box, and set sail for what in the seventh and eighth centuries was one of the most prosperous regions of Western Europe, Frisia.

Where the poet found his information for these two raids remains undecided. One of the contributors to the Toronto conference, Walter Goffart (1981), argued at great length that for Hygelac's raid, the poet must have been inspired by what he read or heard from a passage in the *Liber historiae Francorum*, an early eight-century chronicle that made much use of Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*. The later chronicler sometimes abridged Gregory's information, but frequently elaborated upon it with significant and often fanciful additions. Thus, whereas Gregory does not mention the *Hetware* in his account of Chlochilaicus' raid, the *Liber* does. Goffart has made much work of this point of difference. He sees the presence of the *Hetware* in *Beowulf* as evidence for his hypothesis that the *Beowulf* poet somehow or other must have had access to the *Liber*. There is a problem, though: no manuscripts of the *Liber historiae Francorum* have turned

up from England thus far. According to Goffart (1981: 87 n. 24), "pending a full investigation, the assumption that, sooner or later, this popular text was known in England seems safer than the contrary hypothesis that it was confined to the continent." In the more than twenty years following Goffart's article, no such evidence has come to light. For example, the *Liber* is not mentioned in the preliminary list of books known to the Anglo-Saxons for the ongoing project "Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture" (Biggs, Hill, Szarmach 1990: 230). The *Liber* is not included either in the well-nigh exhaustive handlist of manuscripts produced or owned in England up to 1100 by Gneuss (2001). The absence, then, of any tangible evidence for familiarity in England with this Frankish chronicle considerably weakens Goffart's argument.

There is an additional objection against Goffart's hypothesis of the *Liber* being the poet's source of information on Hygelac's raid to Frisia. In the *Liber*, the passage relating the raid numbers only three lines, and is not found until the nineteenth chapter. Nothing special is made of it, which makes it very questionable for a critic to suggest that the *Beowulf* poet should precisely have picked out this passage and have referred to it four times in the poem.

Frisia, then, played a remarkable role in the political realities of both the Danish and the Geatish courts. It is remarkable that the rather prominent presence of Frisia in *Beowulf* has never to my knowledge been made a problem in the secondary literature on *Beowulf*. Most comprehensive commentators, from Johannes Hoops (1932) and Frederick Klaeber to, most recently, Andy Orchard (2001: see Index, s.v. Frisa, Frisians), seem to take it for a given fact. Why does Frisia as the only West European region figure so significantly in the otherwise wholly Scandinavian world of *Beowulf*? In order to suggest a satisfactory answer to this question I will now introduce the Frisians to you.

When the Frisians enter history, they do so in the writings of the Roman historians, notably of Pliny and Tacitus. According to these spokesmen, the Frisians lived on the northern half of the Rhine estuary on the coast. Pliny the Elder (23-79AD), who participated in one of General Corbulo's campaigns, has given an eyewitness description (*Historia naturalis* XVI.1) of their habitat which concurs with what we now know through archeological and geological investigations. The Frisians, according to Pliny, lived on mud flats which were so low that it was sometimes impossible for him to see where the land ended and the sea began. There were hardly any trees growing in Frisia, so that for fuel they burnt soil –peat dug from the marshes was apparently a novelty to Pliny. Their main occupation was cattle breeding. Tacitus (*Annales* IV, XI) supplies further detail on their political situation. In the early years of the first century of the Christian era, the Romans tried to extend their authority across the Rhine up to the Ems river, so that Frisians now fell within Roman controlled territory. They were forced to pay tribute in the form of cowhides. After two violent rises, in 28 and 69 AD, the Romans retreated southwards and made the Rhine their definitive border. From then on the Frisians lived just outside the Empire, but close enough to enjoy a semi-dependent status. Their relation with the Romans remained peaceful in the following centuries, it would seem from the scanty documentation. More than once, we hear of Frisians serving in the Roman legions, for example among the forces that patrolled Hadrian's Wall (Collingwood and Myres 1965: 508). Quite remarkably, nowhere in the regions north of the *limes* have more Roman objects come to light than in Friesland. Tiles, *terra sigillata*, the shining red, typically Roman pottery, mass-produced in the area around Cologne and Trier, jewellery, statuettes of gods, as well as votive stones. One of the most remarkable objects no doubt is a writing tablet recording the sale of cattle between a Roman legionary and a Frisian farmer (Bos 1995).

The retreat of the Romans around 400 AD coincided with a temporary rise of the sea-level. The artificial dwelling mounds on the mud-flats –*terpen* as they are technically called– no longer provided protection against the rising sea. Hence, the area suffered considerable depopulation. At least, this is suggested by a dramatic decline of archeological finds from the fifth century. However, by the middle of the sixth century trade is flourishing again. More importantly, the Frisians appear to have extended their territory considerably, compared to their domicile in Roman times. They now had come in control of all the major river estuaries of North-Western- Europe: the Scheldt, the Meuse, the Rhine, the Ems and the Weser. With these strategic positions they had access to an enormous hinterland (Bremmer 1990: 360-363). All kinds of luxury goods –including glass, wine, pepper, pottery, querns, jewellery and woolen fabric– passed from the Rhineland through Frisian staples and were shipped by Frisians to England and Scandinavia. On their return home the Frisian skippers carried other commodities, including grain, amber, fir, wool, wood and slaves (Lebecq 1983).

A remarkable aspect of the growing Frisian trade is the near-absence of major trading centres. The exception is Dorestad, an emporium conveniently situated on a junction of various rivers not far from Utrecht. This position made Dorestad accessible from the Rhine, the Meuse and the Scheldt. The emporium was the gateway for Frankish trade with the north and for Frisian trade with the south. Recent excavations have revealed the size of Dorestad. The quays of this port were almost one mile long. Trade was not just the monopoly of a king or a ruler of comparable rank, but appeared also to have been an affair of local chieftains. As a result, wealth was quite evenly distributed in Frisia (Van Es and Hessing 1994: *passim*).

Judging by the archeological data, there was a concentration of riches in the *terpen*-area, the heartland of Frisia. Here, some *terpen* developed into supralocal centres, especially those that were

accessible from the sea, such as the one at Wijnaldum, with which I began this paper. The excavations carried out in the 1990s on this *terp* have begun to be reported. The results are rich but also limited. The entire *terp* complex measures some 11 hectares, of which only 7% was excavated during this campaign. One of the main activities on this *terp* in the seventh century, as appeared from this excavation, was craft production, notably that of gold jewellery and ironware. Amongst the objects recovered were a touchstone to establish the quality of the gold, a touch needle, drops and ingots of gold, a considerable number of gold coins as well as a matrix for stamping foiled gold as an underground of brooches on to which the red almandine garnet could be laid in. The find of an exquisite gold and cloisonné fibula suggests the place to have been a major settlement, perhaps the base of a ruling elite-group. The fibula, according to the Sutton Hoo expert, Rupert Bruce Mitford (1955), resembles so closely the one found at Sutton Hoo, that it seems to him to have been made by one and the same craftsman.<sup>4</sup> Such a conclusion suggests that Wijnaldum was part of an international network of maritime powers joined by the North Sea. This network included links with England and Scandinavia. Other luxury crafts practised at Wijnaldum included weaving and the production of glass beads. Finds from neighbouring *terpen* confirm the wealth that was concentrated in this part of Frisia. Especially, in the period between 600 and 750, gold was the most important precious metal. The total amount of gold found in the province of Friesland up to 1998, and then from its western, coastal part only, is no less than 1.5 kilograms (Bazelmans 1998). This figure is in stark contrast to any other area of the coastal area of the Netherlands and Germany. Gold was not a local product, but was imported in the shape of coins and ingots. The amount recovered bespeaks the enormous wealth that the Frisians amassed during the early Middle Ages. However, in the course of the eighth century silver was to take over the role of gold. This change is confirmed, for

example, by the number of about 2,000 silver *sceattas* recovered from Frisian territory as well as by three mid-ninth-century Viking silver hoards recently discovered there since 1996 (Besteman 1996: <http://www.vikingen.nl/schatten.html>). The first Viking find weighed 1.7 kilograms, a considerable fortune probably belonging to a merchant, the second one 319 grams, while the third contained only a few coins. By the year 1000, however, Frisia's economy had gradually turned away from the sea to the land (TeBrake 1978) and could have given little occasion to the *Beowulf* poet of fantasising about this area as a land abounding with gold.

How are we to relate these archeological data to the imaginary world of *Beowulf*? As I see it, the political and economic importance of Frisia in the seventh and early eighth centuries was such that it exercised an attraction not unlike Eldorado did on the Spanish conquistadores of the sixteenth century. Like Cortes in historic reality, Hnæf and Hygelac were imagined by the *Beowulf* poet to find their pots of gold in Frisia. Because the seventh and early eighth centuries make up Frisia's golden age, the prominence of Frisian gold in *Beowulf* provides us with yet another criterion of dating the poem's composition early rather than late.

Dirt and dung settled on the Frisian *terpen* and the introduction of dikes from the year 1000 onwards made their existence redundant. The centuries rolled by and the rich historical past of Frisia was well-nigh forgotten, until the nineteenth century. In 1845, the learned Dutch journal *Konst- en Letterbode* (or *The Art and Literature Messenger*) contained an anonymous contribution entitled "Caedmon, father of Anglo-Saxon Poetry."<sup>5</sup> After some introductory remarks on the importance of the "immortal" seventeenth-century Dutch scholar Franciscus Junius and the "distinction, also abroad" which had been imparted to the contribution of Joost Halbertsma to Joseph Bosworth's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1838), the author comes to talk about

Albert ten Broecke Hoekstra “who devoted his entire life to the study of the Germanic languages, and who particularly concentrated on Old Frisian and Anglo-Saxon.” The author carried on by quoting from the minutes of a meeting of the Second Class of the Royal Netherlandic Institute in 1826 in which it was recorded that:<sup>6</sup>

[T]he attention of the Class had recurrently been drawn to the poetry of Caedmon, edited by Junius, but without any commentary, being a piece in the Anglo-Saxon language, and which, with numerous judicious annotations had been enriched and clarified in such a way that the class ventured to hope that ere long it would be able to publish a decent edition thereof.

The question which I suppose will be raised by the reader is: why were people in the Netherlands interested in Old English in those days? What moved them to study the literary remains of the Anglo-Saxons even before, or at best, at the same time that scholars in England were once more discovering the beginnings of their literary history? In order to answer these questions, and especially to give a proper background to the reception of *Beowulf* in the Netherlands in the early nineteenth century, I will try to depict the principal motives that lay behind this concern.<sup>7</sup> Two Frisians have played an important role in this respect: Albert ten Broecke Hoekstra (1765-1827) and Joost Halbertsma (1789-1869).

The name of Albert ten Broecke Hoekstra today enjoys a moderate familiarity amongst Frisian literary scholars mainly for his efforts to produce a scholarly edition of the collected works of the Frisian Renaissance poet Gysbert Japix (Breuker 1989: II, 49-50). However, only very few people know –and certainly Anglo-Saxonists are unaware of this– that Hoekstra also attempted to make a new edition of Junius’s *Caedmonis monachi Paraphrasis poetica Genesios*, published in Amsterdam in 1655.<sup>8</sup> An important part of this envisaged new edition was an etymological glossary to the Old English text which Hoekstra had compiled. Moreover, Hoekstra has also left to us

his unpublished annotations on the epic *Beowulf*, a work that has hitherto gone unnoticed.

Albert ten Broecke Hoekstra was born in Friesland in 1765 and studied Law and Classical Languages at the University of Franeker in Friesland. After his graduation, he became governor (*grietman*) of one of the thirty districts into which Friesland was divided at the time. In 1795, when the French occupied the Dutch federal republic was occupied, he was forced to leave the country because of his support of the Prince of Orange. During his exile, Hoekstra lived in Germany and England. Around 1811, he inherited an impressive library with many philological books. The collection included works by the German philologists Johann C. Adelung (1732-1806) and Gottfried W. Leibnitz (1646-1715), and important English lexicographic tools such as William Somner’s *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum* (Oxford, 1659) and Stephen Skinner’s *Etymologicum linguae Anglicane* (London, 1671). These and other books aroused Hoekstra’s interest in Old Frisian, Gothic, Old English, Middle Dutch and other cognate languages of Frisian and Dutch. His ardent study was first of all directed towards preparing a new annotated edition of the collected works of Gysbert Japix,<sup>10</sup> for which enterprise he published two appetizing articles so as to solicit funds for the production costs. But since he could find no publisher for his ambitious plans, the project foundered. Meanwhile, in 1815, after the French had left, the Dutch republic was changed into a centralized monarchy. In gratitude for Hoekstra’s loyal support of the House of Orange during his exile, the new King, William I, appointed Hoekstra *professor ordinarius* at the (Catholic) University of Louvain. Louvain was situated in what used to be the Habsburg Netherlands (now Belgium), but after the Treaty of Vienna its territory had been added to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In Louvain, Hoekstra lectured on the Grammar of Dutch, Dutch History, and Latin Poetry.



In letters to friends, written in 1818, Hoekstra mentioned his plans to edit the *Caedmon* poems.<sup>11</sup> He used his lectures at Louvain for try-outs, but the students did not appreciate their Protestant professor's interest. Much to his annoyance, his lectures were frequently disturbed by students setting off firecrackers, and in 1822, he resigned a disappointed man and settled in Amsterdam.

From a letter to a Dutch fellow philologist, it appears that Hoekstra's interest in Old English stemmed from Frisian chauvinist motives:<sup>12</sup>

It is known to you that I committed the unforgivable crime in political respect of remaining true to my oath, my duty, my fatherland, and also that I clung as a Frisian to the language, which as it were is the last bulwark against all tyranny and alien servitude, and I hope to carry on working until my last breath in this spirit now considered old-fashioned and derided as being beneath each level of civilization, and unsuitable for the timidity currently prevailing. And I am determined to publish the *Caedmon*.

For Hoekstra, his work on the *Caedmon* was a deed of patriotism, strange as this may seem to us today. In 1826, seven years after he had started, the minutes of the Royal Dutch Institute of Sciences and Arts record submission of the manuscript copy of his edition for publication, called *Specimen glossarii etymologici-philosophici* [A specimen of an etymological-philosophical glossary]. A Committee reported on the project in 1827, and returned the manuscript to Hoekstra demanding that he should condense and order his text. Unfortunately, Hoekstra died the next year, leaving the revision unfinished.

Soon after Hoekstra's death, the Institute invited another Frisian scholar, Joost Halbertsma, to report on the unfinished revision. Halbertsma's recommendations reveal a real chasm between Hoekstra's scholarly ideas and his own. Of the two scholars,

Halbertsma was the younger. He had the advantage of having acquainted himself with the new historical linguistic methods as had recently been developed by Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm. Halbertsma's opinion of Hoekstra's work was not high. As he reported it, "the papers of the late Mr. Hoekstra, which consist, beside the glossary, of more than twenty indexes on ancient Germanic or Low German authors, are of such a nature that it is impossible to read them in one breath." Halbertsma complained of the "fatal chaos" of the indexes. At best, this disorder could be remedied "by spending money on a copyist who should compile an index on these indexes. But an incurable, festering sore is the flying haste, the negligence and the ensuing unclarity with which everything has been written, except for the glossary."<sup>13</sup>

There was little that Halbertsma valued in Hoekstra's work: his knowledge of Gothic was insufficient, his Latin was so bad that he was often writing nonsense and "he had the habit of saying everything, in which his quotations sprawled to very side, revealing themselves like a torture rack." In short, Halbertsma found Hoekstra's writings impressive not for their contents, but for their sheer weight in paper. After so much deadly criticism, it comes as no surprise that Hoekstra's work was never published.

As we have seen, Hoekstra's *Specimen glossarii* was not wholly unknown amongst Dutch nineteenth-century scholars, unlike his annotations on *Beowulf*. The existence of these annotations makes it clear that *Beowulf* was indeed studied by Frisians very soon after Grimur Thorkelin had published the *editio princeps* in Copenhagen in 1815. It was of course Thorkelin's edition which Hoekstra had used for his studies. His copybook is leather-bound and contains 68 pages with notes.<sup>14</sup> The cover is adorned with a heart-shaped label provided with the title *Annotationes de rebus gestis danorum poemata Asaxonica a Thorkelin edito [...] anno 1826 initio*. The leaves have been divided into columns which are headed with letters in red ink, in

alphabetical order. Hoekstra had ordered his annotations as follows: First he copied a passage from *Beowulf* and underlined the words to be commented upon. Next followed the line reference to Thorkelin's edition, together with a Latin translation which does not usually deviate from Thorkelin's rendering. His first entry is *aeswyga*, his last *ythlaf*. The etymologies that follow are his own addition. For each Old English word Hoekstra provided as many cognates from related languages as he could, stretching beyond the various Germanic languages to French, Latin, Greek and, occasionally, Hebrew. Most of his etymologies, however, appear to be speculative, based as they are on superficial similarities, assonance and intuition. From our point of view, his annotations on *Beowulf* are a remarkable document, illustrating Hoekstra's interests in comparative linguistics, but contentwise it has nothing to offer to the modern student of *Beowulf*.

Hoekstra was not the only reader of *Beowulf* in the Netherlands at the time. Today, at least seven copies of Thorkelin's edition are to be found in Dutch public libraries. The Leiden University Library owns two copies, one of which bears a dedication by Thorkelin himself (1222 D 32). The Royal Library also holds a copy. A fourth copy is held by the University Library of Groningen. The shelf numbers of each of these four copies show that they were acquired soon after publication. None of them contain marginal annotations or reveal any sign of having been used. The remaining three copies all have a Frisian provenance, one of which was acquired by the university library of the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the 1960s. One of the two Leeuwarden copies formerly belonged to Joost Halbertsma. This copy (Tresoar, 1787 TL), shows no sign of heavy consultation either, but this is misleading, as we shall see.

Frisians had a special reason for being interested in *Beowulf*. The poem is the earliest non-classical source to provide historic information with respect to Scandinavia and the eastern shores of the North Sea. Its narrative matter dates from the migration period and

prominently includes Frisians, as we have seen. The latter element was immediately noticed by Frisians. One of the first reviewers of Thorkelin's edition was the North Frisian, the Rev. Nicholas Outzen (1752-1826) in 1816, only one year after its publication. Outzen was quick to emphasize the Frisian participation in *Beowulf* and attributed the familiarity of the narrative in England to Frisian traders.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to the language in which the poem was written, Old English, there had been a long tradition in the Netherlands, both in Holland and in Friesland, dating back to the Middle Ages, that Old English and Frisian were actually identical. The principle reason for this opinion was that Frisians would have played a significant part in the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain (Bremmer 1988). In the seventeenth century, the Dutch scholar Franciscus Junius (1591-1977) especially learnt Frisian as an aid to his study of Old English.<sup>16</sup> An anonymous essay on the origin of the Dutch language, published in 1788, claimed that "Anglo-Frisian, from which language, besides Anglo-Saxon also Frisian stemmed, had exercised its influence on Dutch, which language therefore had partly become Frisian." A similar opinion is found in a book on the history of the Dutch language, published in 1812 by a professor of Theology, Annaeus Ypeij (1760-1837), born and raised in Friesland.<sup>17</sup> Ypeij's book was the first modern one in its kind to appear in the Netherlands. In it, he discussed the interrelationship of the Germanic languages at great length, and he did not fail to include Old English. A specimen of that language from the Gospel of St Luke, provided with a Dutch gloss, served to illustrate his argument. His comments were as follows:

What a pure language! [...] Everyone must be wholly convinced by this specimen that the Anglo-Saxon language with respect to its component elements is perfectly the same as Dutch [...]. But which language does it most closely resemble? [...] By far the largest part of it contains Frisian, as we know it from later writings. This is only natural, for the Anglo-Saxons, as we have

seen, originally were partly Frisians, and partly compatriots of the Frisians.

(Ypeij 1812: 182-183)

In this intellectual atmosphere, the Frisian Antiquarian Society was founded in 1827. Both Ten Broecke Hoekstra and Halbertsma belonged to its founding members. As was customary for such learned societies, prizes were offered for the best essay written on a certain topic and the Frisian Antiquarian Society was no exception to this. The first essay topic they called for, in 1828, was "What recent works in England and Scotland with respect to the history of the Anglo-Saxons, have been published, and to what extent can they serve to shed light on the Frisian history?" The topic seems to allude to Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, a very popular work on the history and literature of the Anglo-Saxons, which had first appeared in 1805 and had often been reprinted afterwards.<sup>18</sup> Even before Thorkelin published his edition in 1815, Turner had drawn attention to the *Beowulf* manuscript and had translated certain passages from it. Yet, Turner was not the only scholar in whose work Frisian scholars were interested. In 1828, Rasmus Rask, Jacob Grimm and J.C. Adelung were named honorary members of the Frisian Antiquarian Society. The following years they were joined by John Coneybear, Richard Price and James Ingram, all of whom had occupied themselves intensely with the study of Old English literature. The honour that was thus bestowed on them in Friesland at once indicates a thorough familiarity with their publications and the value they were supposed to have for Frisian interests.

The most important Frisian contribution to the study of Old English undoubtedly was made by Joost Halbertsma, the man who had so severely criticised Ten Broecke Hoekstra's work on the *Caedmon*. Halbertsma's active part in the completion of Joseph Bosworth's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* of 1838 has recently been described by Eric

Stanley (1990). Stanley has strikingly shown how effectively the English scholar exploited Halbertsma's wide knowledge of Old and contemporary Frisian. It is self-evident that Halbertsma also needed a thorough knowledge of Old English to be able to do his job for Bosworth properly. Halbertsma's library included many books relating to Old English. Of the earlier works, he possessed Lye's edition of Junius's *Etymologicum Anglicanum* (1743). He also owned a copy of the Danish edition of Rasmus Rask's *Angelsaksisk sproglære* from 1817. This copy, however, does not contain any marginal annotations, which suggests that Halbertsma did not consult it for his philological studies, for he usually did not shrink from generously annotating his books. Perhaps his Danish was insufficient to profit fully from the book. Maybe, he was not initially inclined to study Old English. For what profits were there to be had from it? In 1829, he commented as follows on the study of Northern, that is Old Germanic languages:

True, in the practice of the Northern languages there is a bait which others have vainly tried to offers us. To investigate the thoughts of our earliest ancestors about religion and morals, their games and songs, military expeditions and migrations, and to rediscover certain traces of one and the other language of our own mouths – this all possesses attractions for the Dutch and Frisian heart; which the antiquities of Rome and Athens cannot possibly have.

(Shippey and Haarder 1998: 183)

According to Halbertsma, the attraction of studying Old Germanic languages lay in recognizing the roots of Dutch and Frisian. However, he has more to say:

But in vain we look around for the divine poet Job, for Homer and Demosthenes, for Sophocles or Herodotus, high and civilized minds, whose meaning no one ever tried to fathom without finding his efforts repaid tenfold. In the Northern

dialects one learns the language more for the language itself, or for tracing its relation to other languages, and without wanting to claim that the *Beowulf*, the first heroic epic of the later or barbaric Europe would not be expressed in a grand way, or that Godrun's silent grief over her husband would not move the soul, such masterpieces nevertheless are too rare to counterbalance the effort of learning the language.

(*ibid.*)

Two poems from the Germanic epic corpus were singled out by Halbertsma: *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*. Nevertheless, he still considered it hardly worth its while to study Old English or Middle High German to fully appreciate these works.

Halbertsma changed his opinion not long afterwards, when in 1830 Benjamin Thorpe published an English translation of Rask's Old English grammar. Halbertsma also owned a copy of Thorpe's translation, sent to him by Rask himself, witness the dedication on the title page (Leeuwarden, Tresoar, 1763 TL). This copy was densely annotated by Halbertsma. Besides such remarks that anyone makes who is learning a new language, Halbertsma also wrote down many Frisian and Dutch cognates at the relevant places. Perhaps, it was with this textbook that Halbertsma used to prepare himself for assisting Bosworth. As an introduction to his dictionary, Bosworth had invited a number of scholars to write chapters on the languages most closely related to Old English, first published separately in 1836. It was Bosworth's merit to have pressed Halbertsma to write chapter IV on Frisian, or "Friesic" as the language was called then. It was written with clarity, common sense and familiarity with both the Old English language and literature. Halbertsma emphasized the close relationship between Frisian and Old English:

I cannot omit to mention that the leaders of the Anglo-Saxons bear names which are now in use by the Frisians, though by

time a little abbreviated [...]. There are indeed few Anglo-Saxon names which may not be found in use with the present Frisians [...]

(Halbertsma 1836: 53)

With respect to *Beowulf*, Halbertsma praised the metre of the poem, but scolded the scribe for his inconsistent use of length-marks.

Halbertsma deservedly received wide approval for the chapter he contributed to Bosworth's dictionary, both in the Netherlands and abroad. In it, he established, for example, that *Cædmon's Hymn* as it is found in the Old English translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, was not the original version, but a rather late one. He then demonstrated with didactic skill that the original version must have been the Northumbrian one, an opinion still held today.

In England, similar ideas about the Frisian role in the making of Anglo-Saxon England were current. John Kemble, who produced the first scholarly *Beowulf* edition in England (1833, 1835), together with a translation (1837), was also convinced of the close Anglo-Frisian ties. In the epilogue to his translation he wrote:

[H]engist, who cannot have been a Dane, is a Frisian, appears as such in the genealogy of the Kings of Kent, and is the fabled conqueror of Britain: the Hockings it is probable were a Frisian tribe [...].

(Kemble 1837: xlix)

For Halbertsma, who possessed a copy of Kemble's edition (Leeuwarden, Tresoar, 1789 TL), this opinion was grist to the mill. In the margin at this passage he wrote the Frisian patronymic "Hockinga." The comparison of Frisian and Old English proper names is a subject to which he returned later in his life. In the Provincial Library of Friesland there is a manuscript on this subject in which Halbertsma etymologized Frisian names, comparing them to Old Saxon and Old English names. He intended to publish the results of

his investigations, for in 1852 he submitted a proposal to the Frisian Antiquarian Society for financial support (Halbertsma 1852). Either his proposal was rejected for scholarly reasons, or, more likely, the Society was short of money at the time. In any case, the book never appeared.

More studies by Halbertsma have been preserved in manuscripts, all of them in the Tresoar, Leeuwarden, which testify to his interest in Old English, some of them even written in English. They probably all date from the time of his cooperation with Bosworth and carry such titles as *Principles of Anglo-Saxon Pronunciation* (ca. 1334/35), *Studies on the Pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon* (ca. 1834), *Voces Anglo-Saxonicae ex Lyei catalogo excerpta et cum similibus, quas Frisii hodie retinant, collatae* (ca. 1840), and *An Explanation of Words from Bosworth's Anglo-Saxon Grammar* (uncertain date). Halbertsma continued working on these drafts, as appears from the annotations he added after he had visited the British Museum in 1856 in order to make excerpts from seven Old English manuscripts, including from Cotton Julius A II (*Ælfric's Grammar*), Cotton Tiberius A III (miscellaneous texts), and Cotton Vitellius A XV (*Beowulf*).

Other Frisian scholars, too, were capable of reading and appreciating Old English at an advanced level, as appears from an article in *De Vrije Fries*, the scholarly journal issued by the Frisian Antiquarian Society. In 1842, the lawyer Adalbert Telting published three Old English charms, printed in a charming Insular type font, and provided with some learned commentary. Telting had discovered these texts in transcripts from Cottonian manuscripts made by Franciscus Junius in the seventeenth century, and which had turned up in Friesland. In the same year, a Frisian activist praised the powerful poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, notably *Beowulf*, as compared to medieval Dutch literature which he branded as "spiceless" (Brouwer and Kalsma 1962: 73-74).

Nonetheless, Ten Broecke Hoekstra's and Halbertsma's achievements are no doubt the most conspicuous examples of early nineteenth-century historical philology, which was especially geared to the study of Old English in relation to Frisian. Of these scholars, Halbertsma's reputation as an expert has proved to be the more lasting, whereas Ten Broecke Hoekstra's work has sunk into oblivion. In 1868, five years after Grimm's death, Halbertsma mused once more on Hoekstra's work and wrote:

[Hoekstra] began a work which was a desideratum in the study of Dutch (here he refers to the etymological glossary on the *Caedmon*) [...] . Forty years have passed since then [...] The writings had value when they were made, but have now lost them. Scholarship has made gigantic progress and has rendered his work entirely useless.

(Leeuwarden, Tresoar, Hs 290)

Albert ten Broecke Hoekstra indeed belonged to a lost generation of linguists. He was working on the watershed of two philological traditions: the old, pre-scientific, speculative approach and the new method based on historical-comparative principles. He died too early to have assimilated sufficiently the new insights presented in the works of such scholars as Grimm and Rask. Hoekstra did not fall short in energy and industry, but the results of his work were disappointing.

Halbertsma, on the other hand, owing to his familiarity with the new linguistic trends, greatly contributed to the propagation of the study of Old English language and literature, and that of *Beowulf* in particular. That he did do this, not so much because of the intrinsic value of the literary monuments themselves and the language in which they were written, but out of chauvinist sentiments for his beloved Frisian language is something that one will easily forgive him. As a matter of fact, like the Scandinavian warlords in *Beowulf*, both Ten Broecke Hoekstra and Halbertsma were mesmerized by gold. However, whereas the early medieval warlords went for the gold

rather selfishly to add to their personal status, Hoekstra and Halbertsma used the gold of *Beowulf* for more altruistic purposes: the emancipation of their native Frisian language.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, Friesland<sup>1</sup> refers to the present-day province in the Netherlands, whereas Frisia refers to the much larger medieval area.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from Klaeber (1950). Translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> However, a summary of this book was circulating before that ate and published in Chase (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Part of the brooch was found during plowing in the early 1950s. The recent excavations have unearthed almost all of the remaining parts. See Nijboer and Van Reekum 1999.

<sup>5</sup> In order not to burden this article with too much quotations I have silently translated all the original Dutch passages.

<sup>6</sup> W., "Caedmon, de vader de Angelsaksische poëzy" *Konst-en Letterbode* 37 (1845), 322-328. The initial 'W.' Probably refers to the Frisian born Leiden jurist Johan de Wal (1816-1892), see *Biographisch woordenboek der Noord- en Zuid-Nederlandsche letterkunde*, 15 vols (Deventer: van der Sigtenhorst).

<sup>7</sup> What follows is partly based on Gerla-De Bruin and Bremmer (1994).

<sup>8</sup> A facsimile edition of his first edition of the poems from Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, and indeed of any Old English poetry, is given by Lucas (2000). In his extensive and informative introduction to the facsimile, Lucas does not mention Ten Broecke Hoekstra.

<sup>9</sup> As he wrote to his former Franeker professor Everwinus Wassenbergh in a letter, dated 29 October 1811; Tresoar/Provinciale Bibliotheek fan Fryslân, Hs 1006.

<sup>10</sup> See the obituary by Matthijs Siegenbeek in *Handleingen der Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (1829), 25-30. This obituary is the source for most later biographic information on Ten Broecke Hoekstra, e.g. *Biographisch woordenboek der Nederlande*, ed. A.J. van der Aa, 21 vols (Haarlem: Van Brederode, 1852-1878), VIII, 859-861; *Nieuw Nederlands biografisch woordenboek*, é. P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok, 10 vols (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1911-1937, VI, 786-787).

<sup>11</sup> The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 74 B2 (Hoekstra to H. Van Wijn); Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, LTK 1002 (Hoekstra to W. Bidedijk).

<sup>12</sup> Hoekstra to van Wijn (18 January 1818); see previous note.

<sup>13</sup> Notulenboeken der vergaderingen van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Instituut, van Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten. Rijksarchief Haarlem, Archief Koninklijk Instituut, toegangsnummer 175.

<sup>14</sup> The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Hs KAW XIV.

<sup>15</sup> On Outzen, see most recently Shippey and Haarder (1988: 123-131 and *passim*).

<sup>16</sup> On Junius, see most recently Van Romburgh (2001) and Bremmer (1998).

<sup>17</sup> On Ypeij's linguistic opinions, especially concerning Frisian, see Van Rossum (1994).

<sup>18</sup> Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest*, 4 vols (London: Cadell and Davies, 1979-1805); 2nd to 7th eds: 1807, 1820, 1823, 1828, 1836, 1852.

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