

**A GRAMMAR OF
THE OLD FRIESIC
LANGUAGE**

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BY
ADLEY H. CUMMINS, A.M.

"Felix ea gens præ reliquis Germanis populis, quod antiquas sedes
non solum felici Marte tuta est, sed et fines ferro longe lateque protulit,
et vetus ac nobile nomen in hodiernum diem retinuit."

—HEINECCI ANTIQ. GRAM., L. I. c. 2, sec. 29.



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INTRODUCTION.

IN the year 13 B.C., Drusus, the Roman general, who was afterwards surnamed Germanicus, found a tribe of Germans, called by themselves Fresar and by the Romans Frisii, dwelling on the north-west coast of Germany, between the mouth of the Rhine and of the Ems, together with the Batavi, Bracteri, and Chauci, and not far removed from their more northern brethren, the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons.

We find references made to them by Pliny, Tacitus, and Ptolemy, all placing them virtually in the same position. They came into collision with Drusus and experienced a terrible defeat, but in 28 A.D. retaliated upon the Romans by rising in rebellion against them. They were, however, soon again brought into subjection, and yet shortly thereafter began to expand their borders, absorbing the Chauci, occupying the lands to the southward as fast as vacated by the Franks, and spreading along the shore of the German Ocean to Jutland, where they were known as Strand Frisians. We soon lose sight of them as connected with the Roman Empire, and in the fifth and sixth centuries the Germanic flood swept away all traces of the Imperial dominion over them.

The Frisians did not as a body accompany the other members of the common Gothic stock to Great Britain, but there are scattered evidences to show that many adventurers of that tribe did find a home in those western islands.

It is even said (in old Dutch) of the redoubtable Hengist himself:—

“ Een hiet Engistus, een Vriese, een Sas,
Die ute Land verdreven was.”

‘ There was Hengist, a Frisian or a Saxon,
Who was banished from his land.”

It has been characteristic of the Frisians that they have ever retained, as a nation, their primitive location. "Ex antiquissimis Germaniæ populis sola Frisiorum gens et sedem suam quam ab initio æræ Christianæ ac temporibus primorum Cæsarum tenuit, et idem nomen sine mutatione ad hæc usque tempora retinuerit retineatque."—*Emmius in Præf. ad rer. Fris. Hist.*

Their language has been equally enduring, though now spoken by but a small number of persons.

In the seventh and eighth centuries their dominions were the most extensive, and during those centuries they came in contact with the Frankish power. In 689 Radbod, their chief, was defeated by Pepin de Héristal. These were the *Frisii Majores*, or West Frisians, and they were compelled to embrace Christianity. Poppo, the chief of the East Frisians, was defeated in 734 by Charles Martel, who sent to them, as an apostle, St. Boniface.

In 785 they were finally subdued by Charlemagne, who gave to them a code of laws in Latin termed the "Lex Frisonum." For some time thereafter the country was under the control of the Franks, and in 843 Frisia was divided into three parts, Lewis the German receiving East and Central Frisia, and Charles the Bald the West.

Shortly after its subjection by the Franks Frisia was overrun by the Normans until A.D. 1024. After their departure the country was parcelled out among several petty princes and powers, and has so remained until modern times.

Old Friesic literature consists almost exclusively of law-books, each district having its own. They have been printed in full by Richthofen and Hettema in various works. Their laws extend from the twelfth century to a date late in the fifteenth, and consist of the following:—The laws of the Rüstinger, those of the Brocmen, the Emsiger Recht, the laws of Westerwold, Langewold, Fivelgo, Hunsingo, Fredewold, Sevenwold, North Friesland, Drenthe, Eiderstede, and the Siebenhardenbeliebung. These laws possess the same peculiarities as those in vogue among the other ancient Germans. The spirit of the hardy Gothic race was such that it could not

brook the idea of imprisonment as a punishment for crime, but crimes were punished by fine and the ordeal.

The language is one of the Low German family, very similar to Anglo-Saxon. It is indeed stated that the missionaries sent to the Frisians—who were Anglo-Saxons—immediately upon their arrival in those regions commenced active labour among the people, preaching and exhorting, and experiencing no difficulty in making themselves understood by their hearers,—such was the close agreement of their respective forms of speech. It is peculiar in this, that up to comparatively modern times, it retained its archaic purity, so that while other members of the common stock were undergoing a change into their middle and modern aspects, it was still spoken in uncorrupted form in its primitive home. Thus about the time of Chaucer might perhaps be placed its most flourishing period.

Frisia *proper*, according to Halbertsma, is a district surrounded by the Zuyder Zee on the north-west and south, almost forming a peninsula. Here was the original seat of the Frisians, and here is their modern home. Friesland is divided at present into the provinces of East and West Friesland, embraced respectively in Hanover and Holland. Only the Country Friesic, North Friesic, Saterlandic, Schiermonnikoogian, and Hindelopian have remained until these times as spoken dialects. The language is spoken, too, on the islands of Föhr, Sylt, and Amrum.

“The Frisian which is spoken on a small area on the north-western coast of Germany, between the Scheldt and Jutland, and on the islands near the shore, which has been spoken there for at least two thousand years, and which possesses literary documents as old as the twelfth century, is broken up into endless local dialects. I quote from Kohl’s ‘Travels:’—‘The commonest things,’ he writes, ‘which are named almost alike all over Europe, receive quite different names in the different Frisian islands. Thus in Amrum *father* is called *aatj*; on the Halligs, *baba* or *babe*; in Sylt, *foder* or *vaar*; in many districts on the mainland, *täte*; in the eastern part of Föhr, *oti* or *ohitj*. Although these people live within a couple

of German miles from each other, these words differ more than the Italian *padre* and the English *father*. Even the names of their districts and islands are totally different in different dialects. The island of Sylt is called Söl, Sol, and Sal.' Each of these dialects, though it might be made out by a Frisian scholar, is unintelligible except to the peasants of each narrow district in which it prevails.

"What is therefore generally called the Frisian language, and described as such in Frisian grammars, is in reality but one out of many dialects, though, no doubt, the most important." *

A volume of poems in Country Friesic was published by Gysbert Japicx about 1650, denominated *Friesche Rymlerye*, and one or two minor works and a few unimportant specimens of the modern dialects have from time to time been printed, especially in grammars and handbooks of the various dialects, to illustrate the folk-speech.

The body of laws that has come down to us from the classical period of the speech is naturally looked upon as a monument of inestimable worth. This brings us to regard a matter which cannot be passed over without a brief remark. It might easily be conjectured that the discovery of any more old Friesic texts would be warmly and eagerly welcomed by philologists and others. In 1872 a work entitled *Thet Oera Linda Bók*, purporting to be written in more ancient Friesic than any theretofore known, was published in Holland, for another person, by Dr. Ottema—a work which has deceived some of the most eminent Frisian scholars. Its contents can hardly be summed up in brief, for they set history, chronology, mythology, and almost conjecture itself at defiance. It professes to give the history of the race for 3000 or 4000 years, laying down a system of theology, laws, &c., and may well in every sense be termed a "Wonderboek" by the learned doctors of Holland.

It is, upon thorough examination, found to be a hodge-podge, a *mengelmoes* of ancient Friesic, modern Friesic, and

* Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 1st Series, p. 59.

modern Dutch, and it is not free from great errors in grammar—just such mistakes, in fact, as its alleged author was wont to make in writing his mother-tongue. From all the facts adduced by its critics there is no reason to doubt that they have conclusively demonstrated it to be the work of Cornelis Over de Linden (lately deceased), Superintendent of the Royal Dockyard at the Helder, in the Netherlands, who undertook and performed the prodigious task—the work of many years—of writing in uncials, in a dead and obsolete language, a lengthy volume for the glorification of his own family and of his presumptive race. Thus did this singular man—to use an inelegant phrase in vogue in Holland—“take the learned world by the nose and lead it around the yard.”

Much that is interesting regarding the history, language, and literature of the Frisians may be consulted in Mr. Hewitt's treatise entitled *The Frisian Language and Literature*, 8vo, Ithaca, New York, 1879, and in the preface by Halbertsma to the larger edition—that of 1838—of Dr. Bosworth's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, to which, for further details, the curious are respectfully referred.

It becomes me to acknowledge my indebtedness in an eminent degree to Dr. Helfenstein's excellent *Comparative Grammar of the Teutonic Languages*, and to Richthofen's *Altfriesisches Wörterbuch*, which might most appropriately be denominated a *Grammatisches-Kritisches Wörterbuch* of that dialect. Few forms of speech are favoured with so thorough and complete lexicographical apparatus as is the Friesic with Richthofen's *Wörterbuch* and Hettema's *Idioticon*. If this grammar prove to be a useful contribution towards the speedy and thorough acquisition of the language by those who interest themselves in the study of the old Germanic languages, it will give sincere pleasure to its author.

SAN FRANCISCO, January 1, 1881.