

[0870] [Besprek] Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., *An Introduction to Old Frisian: History, Grammar, Reader, Glossary*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009. 237 pages. ISBN 9789027232564.

The first book on Old Frisian that I ever bought was Bo Sjölin's *Einführung in das Friesische* (1969). It was September 1987 and I had just begun auditing my first course in Old Frisian at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit. In those days I was still in the process of learning Dutch, and I spoke no German to speak of. Lucky for me, the section on Old Frisian in Sjölin's *Einführung* comprised just 40 pages, which made it infinitely more accessible than any of the dusty German tomes on Old Frisian that I discovered in the library stacks. And it was considerably more up-to-date, too: less than 20 years old at the time. [T.L. Markey's more recent and more comprehensive *Frisian* (1981) would have made the most sense for me in those days, but its reputation among the VU Frisian faculty as being indefensibly flawed – Markey even referred to the celebrated Frisian novelist Anne Wadman as a woman! – made it seem too unreliable.]

More than any book, of course, it was my professor's infectious enthusiasm and engaging lectures that quickened my interest in Old Frisian. But as my battered copy of Sjölin's little book attests – with its nutshell sketch of Frisian history, its handy list of the salient features of North Sea Germanic and Old Frisian, its terse survey of the principal texts and the manuscripts that contain them, its discussion of the purported provenance of the linguistic variants found among those sources, and especially its overview of the phonological and morphological features of Old Frisian in general – *Einführung in das Friesische* was clearly a big help to me in those days. It was also my introduction to reading in German.

How much easier life would have been for me if Rolf H. Bremmer's *An Introduction to Old Frisian: History, Grammar, Reader, Glossary* had been available back then! Not only does it provide – in English – the basic grammar and a selection of accessible texts, but it also gives the reader up-to-date information on issues of interest to anyone who approaches Old Frisian from “the outside”. The close relationship between Old Frisian and Old English is no doubt foremost among those – at any rate it was what beckoned me to Frisian in the first place.

As university courses in Old Frisian are rarely if ever given in English, Bremmer understandably wrote this book in the first place “to afford students who first come to the language sufficient information for reading the texts on their

own...” and to prepare them for “further independent reading and study”. The fact that he has translated nearly all the Latin fragments in the Reader texts as well as the passages he cites from earlier German scholarship means that he assumed that his primary readers might be unable to read those languages. But Bremmer also aimed to serve readers who “have already acquired some knowledge of Old English”, if not also of various other Old Germanic languages. And for “the advanced student who is interested in the earliest period of the Frisian language and/or in comparative Germanic linguistics”, he has included more detailed information.

In Chapter I, Bremmer introduces “the when, where and what of Old Frisian”. After briefly sketching the history and culture of the Frisians, he discusses the character and function of the Old Frisian literature. He catalogues the principal texts and the manuscripts (and an incunable) in which most of those texts have come down to us. Bremmer’s rendition of this information is novel in that he also mentions a few online editions in addition to the current printed ones. Unfortunately, some of the URLs he gives are already no longer valid: the online version of the *Altfriesische Rechtsquellen* series is now available at <http://drw-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/drw/>, for example, while the current URL for the digital facsimile of De Haan Hettema’s edition (Vol. 2) of “Codex Roorda” is [http://www.wumkes.nl/bronnen/wumkes/pdf/HettemaM\\_JurisprudentialFrisicaFriescheRegtkennis\\_2.pdf](http://www.wumkes.nl/bronnen/wumkes/pdf/HettemaM_JurisprudentialFrisicaFriescheRegtkennis_2.pdf).

Under the heading “Language”, Bremmer introduces the issue of the periodization of “Old Frisian”, a topic he deals with in more depth in Chapter VII. Another – and not unrelated – question that he broaches in this section is how best to explain the subtle differences between the language of the older manuscripts from the East of the Lauwers river and that of the younger sources from west of that geographical and political divide. In characterizing the debate between the proponents of the traditional, geographically based dialectal distinction (East vs. West) and those – chiefly Sjölin – who have argued for a chronological distinction within Old Frisian (“Classical” vs. “Post-Classical”), Bremmer sets the scene here for his later treatment of this topic in Chapter VI. Finally, under the heading “Scope”, he describes how the language has traditionally attracted the interest of historical linguists and legal historians. More importantly, however, he mentions a number of areas in which there is real potential for new scholarship in the field of Old Frisian.

The four-chapter section on grammar that follows begins with the phonology of Old Frisian, which predictably lists the various sound changes that distinguished Proto-Frisian (in a few cases via North Sea Germanic) from West Germanic. In each case, Bremmer describes the process involved, giving various examples and usually also an indication of the relative chronology. The chapter on the phonology ends with an overview of the Old Frisian phonemes. Bremmer’s treatment of these standard items is much more comprehensive and accessible than that in both

Sjölin's *Einführung* and Markey's *Frisian*. The same holds for his chapter on the morphology, where he likewise presents examples taken from the texts in the Reader. Chapter IV, on the lexicology of Old Frisian, essentially catalogues the various suffixes and prefixes. If it weren't for the interesting final section on loan words and calques, the material in this short chapter could as easily have been presented within the previous one. Chapter V, on the syntax, is understandably short as well, as it only aims to cover "those syntactic phenomena that might present problems in reading an Old Frisian text".

Bremmer's further discussion of the Old Frisian dialects, in Chapter VI, starts with a brief sketch of the historical basis for assuming two, geographically distinct dialects. He even proposes that "the macro-dialectal difference must spring from an early intra-Frisian cultural diversity whose origins can no longer be fathomed but which must be very old". Unfortunately we are left to guess about what that might entail, as references for further reading are lacking; the very next sentence merely states that Old East Frisian itself has two distinct representatives. Before going on to present the distinguishing features of each of the three main dialects: Old Weser Frisian, Old Ems Frisian, and Old West Frisian (as well as possible differences between the two main regions represented by the latter), Bremmer lists the principal characteristics that all three dialects have in common, whereby some repetition of material presented in earlier chapters is inevitable. Then, after briefly considering the potential of word geography in terms of establishing geographically based dialects, Bremmer briefly returns to Sjölin's objections in that regard (as recounted in Chapter I). Much of the content of Chapter VI is (nearly) identical to Bremmer's article "The Geographical Division and Periodization of Old Frisian" in Horst H. Munske (ed.), *Handbuch des Friesischen/Handbook of Frisian Studies* (2001).

In Chapter VII, Bremmer tackles two other "long-standing problems" in the field of Old Frisian. The first is whether Old Frisian is archaic enough to justify its being included within the pantheon of Old Germanic languages. After reviewing the various contributions to the debate on the periodization of Frisian, Bremmer applies the criteria that Lass (2000) developed for English – with interesting results. The second issue is the reputedly cozy connection between Old Frisian and Old English. After listing various phonological, morphological, lexical and even syntactic parallels between the two languages and briefly surveying the various explanations that have been offered to account for those (exclusive) parallels (§224–§225), he concludes that the close similarities between the two languages stem as much from cultural developments dating "back to before and after the migration of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain" as from "a hypothetical Anglo-Frisian mother dialect". Here, too, a more extensive discussion, with additional references, would have been more satisfying.

The Reader offers some 20 short texts (a few consisting of multiple fragments from different sources) or manageable excerpts from lengthier ones. Most seem to have

been selected for their distinctively “medieval” content and evocative imagery; many reflect a proclivity for religious themes alongside sex and violence. While hardly representative of the character of Old Frisian literature as a whole, they will certainly appeal to the imagination. The latter also holds for the four brief passages from (mainly foreign) medieval accounts of the Frisians that Bremmer has interspersed among the Old Frisian texts themselves.

The texts in the Reader are presented “in an ascending degree of difficulty”. Bremmer briefly introduces the historical context and/or text genre of each, mentioning also parallels in other manuscripts and references to the most relevant studies. His explanatory notes to each text help the reader by reiterating assorted grammatical aspects discussed in the preceding chapters (including references to the relevant sections), defining certain words – sometimes in slightly different terms than later in the Glossary – and adding further background information. In a few cases, the immediate relevance of that extra information is debatable, such as his reference to an article by Graham Caie (p. 137), which incidentally is missing in the Bibliography.

The Glossary is logically limited to the Old Frisian words that actually appear in the Reader. Certain grammatical forms are labeled there and “etymologies” (in most cases: cognates), primarily from Old English and Latin, are offered “to help recognition”. Directly after this glossary – but not mentioned in the table of contents – is a supplemental list of the proper names and proper adjectives that occur in the Reader. Both of these lists are followed by a relatively extensive bibliography consisting largely of publications since 1992 – Bremmer rightly refers in the Preface to his own *A Bibliographical Guide to Old Frisian* (1992) for additional sources. The book concludes with an index of the Old Frisian words – and the occasional theme such as “Jorwerd breaking” or “Riustring vowel balance” – that are mentioned in the chapters on Phonology (II), Morphology (III) and Dialectology (V). This thus restricted index is supplemented by a far shorter list of the Modern Frisian words (from various dialects) likewise mentioned in those chapters.

Throughout the book, Bremmer’s English can be surprisingly idiosyncratic. The reader encounters off-the-mark phrasing such as: “if vainly so”, “swearing innocent”, “protectory measure” or “turn the case invalid”, but also over-the-top formulations such as: “Due to the introductory nature of this book, it has not been deemed desirable to have realized all of the above items here”. In other places, the author’s native Dutch crops up, for example in his use of “juridical” where “legal” would be appropriate (e.g. “juridical tradition” and “juridical expert”) or “knew” instead of “had” (e.g. “the Frisians knew no feudal lords” or “Old Frisian knew the following long consonants”).

More disheartening, however, is the lack of coherence in numerous sentences throughout the book. Examples include: “The absence of a monopoly of power, where it continued until the end of the Middle Ages (see §6), implied a

continuation of the early medieval vengeance culture”, “Sjölin’s far-reaching conclusions received a mixed response, especially from the side of Munske (1973), who demonstrated [...]” and “The bulk of the Old Frisian vocabulary was is inherited from Germanic, many of which beyond to Indo-European”. Thorough editing could have remedied these and other awkward passages and caught the numerous typographical errors. Given that this book was over 15 years in the making, but especially that it is likely to remain the only one of its kind for a long time to come, that lack of careful editing is unfortunate.

Any such flaws nevertheless pale in comparison with the huge advantage that newcomers to Old Frisian now have thanks to Bremmer’s book. Not only is there now an easy-access primer in English, but it also functions as an up-to-date survey of recent scholarship on a wide variety of topics. Reading *An Introduction to Old Frisian*, I was impressed to note how much work has been done in Old Frisian studies since my first encounter with the field in the late 1980s. Surely it is time for an updated version of Bremmer’s *A Bibliographical Guide*!

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