

## BESPREK

**Gisela Hofmann, *Mittelalterliches Alltagsleben im Spiegel der altfriesischen Terminologie mit Ergänzungen aus zeitgenössischen niederländischen Quellen. Nach der handschriftlichen Materialsammlung von Dietrich Hofmann für das Altfrisische Handwörterbuch*** (Estrikken/Ålstråke 98). Kiel - Groningen (2015), Institut für Skandinavistik, Frisistik und Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft - Stifting FFYRUG, 423 pp. ISBN 978-3-945743-00-3.

This book, which appeared a few months before the author's death, is the culmination of about a decade of hard work in the field of Old Frisian studies. Dr phil. Gisela Hofmann (née Kienitz; 1927-2015), widow of Dietrich Hofmann (1923-1998; he needs no introduction for students of Frisian), studied German and Scandinavian at the university of Hamburg. In 1953 she defended a Ph.D.-thesis at the university of Kiel, supervised by the famous Hans Kuhn, on falconry in the Germanic countries from the earliest times until 1200. Part of this unpublished thesis became available in an article (1957), in which she demonstrated, with the help of charters, that a lively trade of trained birds of prey existed between England and Norway even before the end of the eleventh century, while trade in these birds between Germany and Norway did not start until about two centuries later. From the late 'fifties onwards, she kept a low scholarly profile, but after her husband's death she appeared to have developed a keen interest in Old Frisian. She was actively involved in finishing Dietrich Hofmann's "unvollendete": a concise dictionary of Old Frisian, a lifetime's work that was brought to completion by Anne Tjerk Popkema (Hofmann and Popkema 2008). Once the dictionary was out, Dr Hofmann took it upon her to delve for the as yet hardly unmapped riches contained in the dictionary. In quick succession she published a series of articles that intended to sketch a picture in words of aspects of daily life in medieval Frisia: an exploration of the use of gold and silver in dress and jewellery (2009), a study of the vocabulary of fur dresses (2013a), an essay on the manufacturing and use of clothing and textiles (2013b), and a survey of the world of the child (2015).

As announced in the Preface, Hofmann's book intends to design a picture of every-day life in medieval Frisia with the help of a vast number of words and terms that the author selected after "a systematic search" (eine systematische Durchsicht, p. 5) through the *Altfrisische Handwörterbuch*. Since this dictionary is only concise – it offers the complete Old Frisian vocabulary but neither contextualizes words nor indeed provides precise text references – Hofmann embarked on a project that would seem daunting to anyone else. However, she was in the fortunate situation to have access to her husband's vast collection of handwritten annotations with text- and line-references (as illustrated on the front cover). The model for her

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investigation which she wanted to follow was that presented by Moriz Heyne (who acquired his doctorate in 1864 on a thesis on Old Frisian alliterative formulas) in a series of studies dating back to around 1900. These books carried titles such as *Das deutsche Wohnungswesen von den ältesten geschichtlichen Zeiten bis zum 16. Jahrhundert* (1899) on housing, *Das deutsche Nahrungswesen*, etc. (1901) on food, and further volumes on body care and clothing (1903) and, posthumously, on arts and crafts (1908). A volume planned on trade never materialized. For this project, Heyne had quarried the entire Old and Middle High German *Wortschatz*. Since for Old Frisian such a treasure of words is not available by far, Hofmann decided to extend her source material to Middle Dutch charters and other administrative documents produced in late medieval Frisia so as to gain a completer picture of every-day life.

Hofmann's book is divided into two main parts. In Part I (pp. 9-150), the lexis of seven domains is presented: 1. Building a house and its construction; 2. Dividing the inner space of a house and furbishing it; 3. Furniture and utensils; 4. Diet and food products; 5. Agriculture; 6. Cattle breeding, domestic and wild animals; 7. Clothing and other textiles. For each of these domains, the available vocabulary is presented in a detailed way. For example, domain 1 begins with the word for 'house', followed by twenty-four compound nouns with 'house' as its initial element (but none with '-house' as the second element), one adjective (*hûslâs* 'homeless') and one verb (*hûsia* 'to house'). Without any further comments or analysis the conclusion that is drawn is that the house was very important in every-day life in medieval Frisia (p. 9). Part I is concluded with a brief summary (pp. 149-50).

Part II (pp. 153-359) presents the words used in Part I in alphabetical order per domain, but this time the words are not only provided with their dictionary meaning, but also with the word in context. For example:

*hûslâse*      Adj. hauslos, ohne Unterkunft L<sup>2</sup> 3.N.: E<sub>1</sub> VIII 94 (*sine nakeda lite. and sin huus lase*), F IV 40 (*stoc nakene lithe. and sin huslase*), U, D, J VIII 2d (*sijn nakeda leda ende sin huuslas*) (T.f.H.)

Next follows an alphabetical word-index (pp. 361-401), referring the reader to the page numbers where a particular word is mentioned. Underlined page numbers refer to the lists in Part II. The book is completed with a bibliography (pp. 403-15) and a list of sigils used (417-27; but what the signification is of the abbreviation 'T.f.H.' in the quotation above has remained a mystery to me). All in all, an impressive book in size.

However, size is not necessarily equivalent to quality. While acknowledging the use for such a book, it suffers from a number of short-comings, as I shall try to show. First of all, the author has embarked on the project without making clear to the reader (and perhaps to herself) what problems are involved in (re)constructing a world from the past with the help of the vocabulary only. From the book it appears that what the author had in mind was a reconstruction of the material culture of

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everyday life in medieval Frisia with the help of words and textual records. But precisely what she meant with ‘everyday life’ is left undefined, an omission that causes problems as I shall show. That the interpretation of words and texts can be complex is a reality that the author seems to have overlooked on occasion. Time and place, for example, is a factor that is rarely taken into account, as if medieval Frisia was monolithic. To mention an important change: the earliest legal texts have survived in thirteenth-century manuscripts that themselves were written in a pre-Gothic script; the material world that can be distilled from these texts still very much belongs to the late-Romanesque era. Most of the charters, on the other hand, from which the author has greatly profited, belong to the close of the medieval period (and beyond into the Renaissance) and reflect in many respects Gothic or even later fashions. Only at the close of the section on clothing (p. 147) is the reader warned that fashions will have changed and may point to “foreign influences” – a qualification suggesting that before that time the fabrication of cloth and dress and the way they were fashioned in Frisia were completely autochthonous. “Foreign influences” abound in everyday life, ranging from wine (*wîn*), pepper (*piper*), cheese (*tsîse*) and butter (*buter*) in the kitchen (*kokene*) or fork (*forka*), can (*kane*) and beaker (*beker*) on the table, to containers such as kettle (*tsetel*), chest (*kist*) and basket (*bin*) – all of them loanwords directly or indirectly from Latin.

No use or even mention is made of that other source of material information, viz. archaeology. Not once in the book a reference is made to an existing object. Conspicuously absent are illustrations, whether provided from medieval seals or frescoes from church walls (e.g., the famous ‘Friesenbild’ painted ca. 1250 on the north wall of the western transept of Münster Cathedral, destroyed during World War II, but surviving in drawings and photographs (cf. van Lengen 2003, 68-69) or modern artist’s impressions to help visualize, for example, the construction of a Frisian wood-frame house (G *Ständerhaus*). The reader must do with occasional references, such as those to the printed edition of the illustrated Heidelberg *Sachsenspiegel* (p. 17; for instant access to the digitized manuscript, type “Heidelberg Sachsenspiegel” in your browser). By way of example, I will focus on the pages in which Gisela Hofmann deals with the house. P. 10 (my translation): “Wood/timber (*holt*) was needed, of course, [...] for the construction of half-timbered buildings (G. *Fachwerkbau*), for wood-frame houses particularly the support beams (*leid*) [...]” Here I would have liked a drawing of such a house. What place did the *leid* have in the construction? Was it a vertical beam? Probably not, because medieval Frisians used *sêle* and *stîl* for upright beams (p. 12, but was there a difference between the two?). Or was the *leid* a horizontal beam (E *girt*, *joist*; G *Queralke*)? Here it is helpful to move to part II, where *leid* is presented in context on p. 175. First the dictionary information is repeated “Balken, Stützbalken”, followed by the attestations in which the word is given in its context. These in turn are followed, within brackets, by a comment made by van Helten: “In view of the attestations, the noun signifies a component of the house ... one could

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assume *lagið* ‘what has been laid as a support by the construction’, i.e., ‘beam’ as a basis” (my trans.). The author gives no further help what to do with this comment, but it would seem to me that van Helten’s etymology rather suggests a horizontal than a vertical position. Finally, I wonder why *leid* is mentioned on p. 10 and not together with the other beams on p. 12. Among the further construction parts mentioned there, I missed *bord* ‘board, plank’ and *weinskot* ‘board, plank’ (on the latter, see Bremmer 1993: 30-31). After the house, she briefly mentions the stone house (*stênhûs*, contracted to *stins*), which was inhabited by the rich and powerful. They were the Frisian equivalent of castles, for which there was also a word, *kastêl* not quite surprisingly, but which is not mentioned, perhaps because there were no castles in Frisia in real life, but only abroad. But in fiction they certainly figured, at least with the words *burch* (*borg*) and *slot* (e.g., in *Thet Freske Riim*). Frisia also abounded with less secular buildings, such as *klâster* ‘monastery’ (the first generations of which were built with *dufstên*, a natural stone that had to be imported from Germany, a word which is missing from the account, as are other vernacular Frisian words that are found interspersed in Latin texts; see Bremmer 2004: 77), *jesthûs* ‘spital’, and *kapelle* ‘chapel’? No village or town that was without one or more of these buildings. The church (*tzerke*) was not meant for ordinary folks to live in, but was the permanent house of God, who was present in the host (*witad*, *tha heliga* [pl.]; Galama 1990). And next to the church, the village parson had his manse (*wathemhûs*) while nearby the verger had his *kusterhûs*, neither of which is mentioned. In any case, as far as the eye could look around, medieval Frisians would have seen spires and towers (*tor*, *turn*; according to the word-index mentioned on p. 16, but not to be found there), some of them up to 80 meters high (Marienhafte in Brokmerland). On the other hand, how often would medieval Frisians have seen a *bordelhûs* ‘brothel’ also called *hôrhûs* (*hôrahûs*, *hôrnahûs*) and *hôrkot*, the workshop for prostitutes (*mênwîf*) and whores (*hôr*)? Or did that house of delight not belong to everyday life? And what about man’s last abode, the grave? The well-to-do would probably end up in an oak (*etsen*; passage not mentioned on p. 157, s.v. *eiken*) coffin (*serk*), the lid (*hlid*) of which was secured with four nails, like that of the famous homeless orphan’s father. Examples of such omissions may go to show that it must have proved difficult for the author to decide what to include and what not, a difficulty that could at least have partly been avoided, had she defined what she meant by ‘everyday life’. In this way, all the seven domains are filled with words, sometimes accompanied with some comment, but more often the reader will have to do without.

I must confess at this point that I am not impressed with the aesthetic care which the publisher has bestowed upon this book: from page 9 the reader is caught in a helter-skelter of italicized words, underlined italicized words and boldfaced underlined words, while long words are never divided at the end of a line. Knowing that German has a propensity for long, compounded words, this omission has created numerous awkward blank spaces between words. The simple opportunity

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was missed to use headers at the top of the page that would have helped users to find their way through the book more quickly.

A two-page summary (pp. 149-50) concludes this part of the book. Its opening sentence (in translation) runs as follows: “It has been shown that in Old Frisian sources a large number of terms have been preserved that enable one to gain a certain insight into everyday life in medieval Frisia, for example, as far as the construction of houses and their accommodation are concerned.” I wonder if such a conclusion is very helpful. It is to be deplored that the author did not consult some more modern studies than those more-than-a-century-old books of Heyne. The exception is the secondary literature on clothing and dress, which apparently occupied a special place in the author’s fields of interest. One misses such titles as Rösener (1985) or Epperlein (2003). For anyone to profit from Hofmann’s book, which will certainly serve as a good starting point for exploring aspects of daily life in medieval Frisia, it would be helpful first to consult some general, more up-to-date surveys, ranging from light to tough going, such as Borst (1983), Borst (1997), Großbongardt and Saltzwedel (2014) or Hyer and Owen-Crocker (2011). Nevertheless, even though the results are open for improvement, Gisela Hofmann’s project – which seems to be intended as a series of semantic field studies without her being aware of it, or without her mentioning it explicitly<sup>1</sup> – has demonstrated that much can be gained by exploring the Old Frisian vocabulary in order to obtain a glimpse of everyday life in medieval Frisia.

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1. But see Hofmann (2013b, 91), where she claims, as Oebele Vries points out to me – I translate – that “a student of Old Frisian should not only be at home in legal matters (like von Richthofen) or in phonology, morphology and etymology (like van Helten), but should also be competent in the field which is called in German ‘Wörter und Sachen’. Is the translation of a word in line with that to which the word refers?” On this early twentieth-century methodological approach that sought to combine the study of language with the study of culture, resembling what is called ‘ethnography of communication’ today, see also Glück (2005, 741).

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