

On the Frisian origin of runic finds

Runes in Frisia



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Leeuwarden, 15th january 2012

Runes in Frisia - Johannes Beers

In may 2011 I visited London. Any student of Frisian Language and Culture knows that the British Museum there holds an important Frisian treasure: a sixth century coin with a name on it, that is regarded to be the oldest recorded word in the Frisian language: skanomodu. The fact that the name was coined in runes was new to me and it sparked a new interest in runes in general. I was surprised that not only a number of runic inscriptions been found in Friesland, but these finds make up a specific corpus of runic inscriptions. My surprise at the time has become the main question for this essay: what makes an object with a runic legend 'Frisian'?

I will be giving the shortest possible introduction into runes in general: the history, the use of runes and a bit of etymology. Then I will look at the aspects that make an object 'Frisian'. To fully understand what these Frisian aspects are, I shall describe the corpus in as far as it is agreed upon. Finally I will have a quick look at the criticism of the Frisian corpus.

Contrary to popular believe, the Germanic people were not illiterate until they became Christian. For centuries they had used their own mode of writing, using an 'alphabet' of characters called runes. Each rune had its own name (for example: the f was called *fehu*, meaning money, wealth, and the u was called *uruz*, wild ox). Twenty-four of these runes made up the Germanic runic alphabet, called *futhark*, after the first six characters.

Although the oldest runic object (160 AD) is found at Vimose, Funen, it is not clear whether or not modern day Denmark is the place of origin¹. What is clear is that runes have spread throughout the old Germanic world. The most in Scandinavia, but also in Germany, the British isles and as far as Rumania, recording early stages of for example Gothic, Swedish, and Frisian.

As the earliest form 'writing' happened to be inscribing runes, it becomes clear why the Old English equivalent for the word writing, *writan*, means to inscribe, engrave. Similarly, the verb reading, in Old English *rædan*, means to interpret. It seems to derive directly from the time runes were inscribed and interpreted.

Reading and writing runes was not something everyone learned, according to the Greenlandic Poem of Atli (*Atlamal*), where Kostbera tries to warn her husband Hogni, not to go to the court of Atli:

*You intend to leave home, Hogni, listen to advice!
Few are very learned in runes - go some other time!
I interpreted the runes which your sister cut:
the radiant lady hasn't summoned you this time.*

The word 'rune' itself is known in different languages, meaning secret conversation, secret meeting or whispering. In fact, before it became associated with the inscribed characters, the word was used to describe secrecy, whispering and enchantment.

¹ for more on the origins of runes, see Looijenga, 1997

The word rune is still in use in the Frisian language as the verb *reauntsje*. This verb - although it may have become archaic and not many Frisian will even be aware of its existence - still means softly whispering and softly rustling².

Runes have been in use throughout the first millennium and in some regions even beyond that. It is often thought that with the introduction of Christianity, the use of runes was forbidden. The coincidence is certainly there, but there is no evidence though, that the church actively tried to ban runes.

Frisian aspects of runic objects

To find an answer to the question what makes an object with runes Frisian, runologists turn to its provenance and runological and linguistic features. Quak (1990) gives an overview of these aspects.

Geographical origin

Although a find in modern-day Fryslân indicates the Frisian origin of a runic object, two more or less complicating factors have to be taken into consideration.

First of all: the boundaries of Frisia in the early Middle Ages are different from the province of Fryslân we know today. The exact boundaries are not known, but the coastal area of the Dutch provinces of Zeeland, North and South Holland, Friesland, Groningen en the German coast of Niedersachsen is generally regarded as Frisian territory in the early Middle Ages.

Secondly, finds in the Frisian area could have been brought here³, which also implies that it's also possible that finds outside the Frisian area can be Frisian. An example is the Amay comb that - although it was found in Belgium - is considered to be Frisian.

Anglo-Frisian runes

Somewhere before the 6th century, Frisians and Anglo-Saxons developed extra runes to respond to sound-changes that had taken place in their language, often referred to as Coastal-Germanic. Two new runes were added to the Germanic futhork of 24 runes. The *a*-sound (*ansuz*-rune) developed into an *o*, which was represented by the so-called *os*-rune *o*. It kept its place in the futhork, but since the sound was changed, the Anglo-Frisian version is called the futhork. Consequently, the original *o* rune for *o*, got a different value in the futhork: *æ*.

As the *a*-sound obviously was still used, a new rune was developed for it, which was the *a*,

called *ac*-rune. The original *a*-rune was also still in use, but with a different value: *æ*.

Some futhork runes were adjusted: the traditional *h* got an extra diagonal twig and became an *h* and the diamond-shaped rune representing the *η* sound got extra twigs and became a *n*.



Anglo Frisian a-runes on the Harlingen solidus (photograph: Fries Museum)

² "...gezegd van het 'geheimzinning ruisen van de wind in de bladeren der bomen' en het 'geheimzinnig influisteren van iets' (Buma, 1957)

³ which is the case with the bracteat from Hitsum (Fr.) with the inscription *foRo*, which is thought to be a female name of Scandinavian origins.

Linguistic features

The language spoken in the Greater Frisia of the early Middle ages, was rather undistinguishable from the languages spoken in England and the north of modern day Germany⁴. Around the 6th century some features can be recognized that indicate a differentiation of this Coastal Germanic into Old English, Old Saxon and Old Frisian. Most importantly, monophthongization took place in the Westgermanic *au*, resulting in Old Frisian *a*. Across the Northsea, a similar innovation took place, resulting in Old English *ea*.

Another linguistic feature is the suffix *-u* that is thought to be a Frisian form, coming from Gmc *-a* ending.

The corpus of Frisian runic inscriptions

Geographical, runological and linguistic features can be used to determine whether or not an object with runes is of Frisian origin. Apart from some objects that have proven to be falsifications, the corpus that is agreed upon, consists of over twenty items,.

In 1939 Arntz and Zeiss were the first to describe a Frisian runic corpus, which consisted of the nine items⁵ known at the time and was published in their work *Die einheimischen Runendekmäler des Festlandes*. They also considered the skanomodu-coin to be of Frisian origin. To Arntz and Zeiss the most important feature to define an object as Frisian was that it had to have been found in Frisian territory.

When Tempel came to Leeuwarden and Groningen in the 1960's to look at the bone combs kept at the Frisian and Groninger Museums, he discovered that some of them had runic inscriptions on them that were overlooked to that day. The corpus he and Dúwel described (Dúwel & Tempel, 1970) could therefore be extended with another four items, as well as with some recent finds. They were also the first to underline the *-u* ending as a criterion for the Frisian runic corpus.

A more recent description of the Frisian runic corpus is by Quak (1990). His nineteen items were disputed by Looijenga's checklist (1996). The corpora agreed on eighteen items, but Looijenga did not recognize the Eenum bone to be Frisian and added Hamwic and Wijnaldum B. In her thesis (Looijenga 1997) she added another object, the Midlum bracteat, bringing the total of Frisian runic objects to twenty-one⁶.

Whether eighteen or twenty-one objects are agreed upon, the corpus remains very small, certainly if compared to the dozens of runic stones found in Sweden. Most runic objects we know of, have been found in the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, the period when in Friesland and Groningen the *terps* were dug out for their fertile soil. This waterlogged terp-soil is also believed to be the reason that these objects have been preserved rather well. The materials used to engrave runes in Frisia were mainly bone or wood. Apart from the five coins, no Frisian inscriptions have been found on precious materials, like gold or silver in the shape of jewelry or weapons. All Frisian objects are portable (no standing stones) and have been dated - for as far as possible - from 400 to around 800 AD.

The objects are generally known by their finding place, so a coin comb found in the terp soil of the village of Kantens, is named Kantens, a coin found near Schweindorf (Germany) is called Schweindorf and so on. In two cases, more objects have been found at the same place. They have been given an alphabetical numbering:

Westeremden A and B and Wijnaldum A and B.

This list of Frisian runic finds is based on the corpora of Arntz & Zeiss, Dúwel & Tempel, Quak and Looijenga.

⁴ Looijenga, 1997, 35

⁵ Arum, Britsum, Ferwerd, Hantum, Harlingen, Westeremden A and B, Wijnaldum (A) and Amay

⁶ Looijenga also lists the Bergakker find, which I consider not to be Frisian, since it doesn't bear any Frisian runological or linguistic features

It is believed that king George III had a coin in his possession, which he may have brought from Germany. It became part of the collection of the British Museum. As the original finding place is not known, the coin is named **Skanomodu** after its runic inscription *skanomodu* (*skanomodu*, name, meaning great courage, or beautiful mind). Not only does it have the Anglo-Frisian *a*, it is also one of the best examples of linguistic features in a runic text, as it has both the *a* sound (which replaced the Gmc. *au*) and the *-u* suffix. As the coin is dated 575-610, it is thought to be the oldest recorded Frisian word.

Folkestone is believed to have been lost at the British Museum⁷. Another example of the coin is kept at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. It has the inscription *aniwulufu* (*aniwulufu*, a name) and dates from around 650. Apart from the presence of the *a*-rune, the 'Frisian' *au* > *a* monophthongization is present in this legend.

The **Schweindorf** solidus was found in 1848 and was cast around 575-625. The runic text is *weladu*, with the typical *-u* ending.

The **Harlingen** solidus (6th c.) has the runes *hada* cast on it, the *h* is double barred and both *a*'s are typical Anglo-Frisian *ac*-runes.

The most recent find of a coin is the **Midlum** sceat, dated at 750 with the runic legend *apa*. Interesting is that these sceattas are rarely found north of the Rhine. This one is and what is more, there are Frisian features in the runes, with the *a* and *a* rune.

Ferwerd is an antler comb from the 6th century, without any particular Anglo-Frisian runes in the inscription *mura* (*mura*) but found in Frisian terp soil. The *a* rune could stand for Germanic *a*, but could also be a OFr *æ*.

The Frisian origin of the **Amay** comb is under debate because of its finding place (Belgium). It does have the Anglo-Frisian *a*-rune in its inscription *eda*⁸. Apart from this rune, it is suggested that the shiny surface of the bone comb is the result of it having been buried in Frisian terp soil, before it was buried at Amay.

The runes on the **Hoogebeintum** comb remained unnoticed for years, because an adhesive label with the inventory number was stuck on the inscription. It is not known what the runes mean. The finding place is the sole reason to regard this object/inscription as Frisian.

The bone combcase from **Kantens** is the oldest rune find in Frisian territory, dating to the early 5th century. There are only two runes, the first is agreed upon to be an *l*, the second rune could be an *i* or a *w*, but the inscription is too small to be intelligible.

The **Oostum** comb (8/9th century) actually exists of two halves, both sides have been inscribed. Side a) reads *alb kabu* (*ælb kabu*), side b) reads *deda habuku*⁹ (*deda habuku*), which could mean: *ælb*'s comb, made (by) *habuku*. In this case the use of the Anglo-Frisian *a* and *a*-runes, as well as the finding place make this an undisputed Frisian runic object.



The inscription on the Ferwerd comb
(photograph: Fries Museum)

⁷ Looijenga, 1996; according to the curator Early Medieval Coins the Folkestone tremissis was not lost, but is in a private collection

⁸ Düwel & Tempel (1970) and Looijenga (1996) and Quak (1990) suggest that the inscription 'ade' should be read from right to left: 'eda'.

⁹ the actual *h*-rune has three diagonal bars and the *b*-rune has three bows

The inscription in the 8th century bone comb of Toornwerd includes the *o*-rune in the inscription *kobu*, *ko(m)bu*¹⁰, a legend that is very recognizable as ‘comb’.

Westeremden A is a weaving slay of taxus wood which has not been dated. The inscription is very hard to distinguish, but some of the known ‘Frisian aspects’ are the finding place (province of Groningen), a double barred *h*, an *a* rune and monophthongization of *au* > *a* (in *adu*).

Westeremden B is an undated, little, threesided stick of taxus wood, with inscriptions on two sides. Although the meaning of the inscription is hindered by some unique runes, the Anglo-Frisian *a* and *o* runes are present.

A miniature sword of the late 8th century found at **Arum** shows the inscription *eda 2 boda*, *edæ : boda*. Several translations are possible, as *edæ* could be a name or be related to the word oath. Looijenga (1996) suggests oath-messenger, as it is known that a sword was used to swear oaths on.



The Arum sword (photograph: Fries Museum)

Another little stick was found at **Britsum** (no date), with a rune that could come from the younger futhork and represent *k*, although others have suggested a vowel should be read. Certainly an Anglo-Frisian *o* is present and an *a* that could be read as a Frisian *æ*.

The function of the ivory object found at **Hantum** is unknown. It is interesting that besides a runic inscription, one side has an inscription with roman characters: *ABA*. The runic inscription *izahazk* is hard to interpret. As the date of the object is unknown, it is also unknown whether the *a*-rune has to be interpreted as a Gmc *a* or an OFr. *æ*.

Rasquert (province of Groningen) is a symbolic swordhandle (whalebone) of the late 8th century. It's inscription contains the *a* and *o*-runes and a *a*-rune which has the *æ*-value. On one side the inscription has been erased and the other side is badly weathered.

Wijnaldum A - a piece of antler - also has other inscriptions besides runes. In this case ornamental crosses, squares and triangles. The runic inscription is rather incomprehensible, as it is embedded in a cartouche and some runes could be mirrored.

These are the objects Quak and Looijenga agree upon¹¹. One object has been found since the publication of Quak's list. **Wijnaldum B** is a gold pendant of ca. 600 with the inscription *hiwi*. Remarkable is the *h*-rune that only has one diagonal bar and the *w*-rune of which the loop is not closed.

Another horse's bone-piece, a knucklebone, found at **Hamwic** (Southampton) carries the inscription *kataæ*.

¹⁰ as was often done in runic inscriptions with *m* and *n*, the *m* in this legend has been left out

¹¹ Different objects have turned out to be falsifications, like the Jouswier bone plate (falsification), a bronze book-mounting (scratches turned out not to be runes), an item, probably a stone, with the inscription *hilamodu* that has once been described by professor Brouwer, but the whereabouts of the object are unknown, Westeremden C (in private possession, not accessible for inspection) and the Hitsum bracteate (although authentic, it's not Frisian, and may be related to Northern German bracteates).

According to Looijenga (1997) the runes on the **Eenum** bone-piece of a horse's leg, described by Quak, turned out to be just scratches, perhaps slaughtermarks.

Criticism of the Frisian corpus

Certainly when compared to the wealth of Scandinavian runic finds, the Frisian runic corpus is rather small. It is also significantly smaller than the English number of finds (around seventy inscribed objects) and the Southwestern German number (about sixty objects). Even more, the Frisian corpus lacks runological uniformity as not all of the objects show the Anglo-Frisian runes. Some objects, like the Westeremden B yew wand, have very particular runes, that haven't been found anywhere else. Some of the inscriptions are too small to interpret, others are longer but still hard to understand. It is no wonder that some people have cast doubts over the question whether or not to recognize these twenty objects and their inscriptions as being typically Frisian in origin.

Professor Nielsen from the University of Southwest Denmark has criticized the corpus of Dúwel & Tempel¹². First of all he pointed out multiple-line runes on Britsum and



Scandinavian influences in multiplelined runes on Wijnaldum A? (photograph: Fries Museum)

Wijnaldum A, which are also found on an amulet found at Linsholm and a spearshaft found at Kragehul. These Scandinavian influences on the Britsum and Wijnaldum A inscriptions had been disregarded by Dúwel & Tempel.

Furthermore Nielsen disputed the Frisian origin of some inscriptions, on the basis that there were no indications for it

to be Frisian, other than the assumption that they were: Harlingen, Arum, Hantum and Amay could just as well be English. Looijenga (1997) does not agree with Nielsen as he discards the Frisian corpus because of it "hotchpotch of geographical, archaeological, numismatic, runological and linguistic criteria", as she finds that this is also the case with other corpora. Nielsen's claim that the monophthongization *au* > *a* is not typically (Old) Frisian, but can also be found in Old Saxon, has been criticized by Gilliberto (1998). She states that in Old Saxon the *au* > *o* monophthongization is predominant and the *au* > *a* form can only be found in "sources with a greater adherence to the Ingveonic roots and, consequently show a greater affinity to Old Frisian".

Nielsen also disagrees with the theory that the *-u* ending is a Frisian linguistic feature, since there is no evidence for it in the oldest Oldfrisian manuscripts. Gilliberto agrees with him on this point although no other inscriptions with this *u*- ending have been found outside Frisian territory, apart from the Skanomodu and Folkestone coins.

Generally speaking, I feel there is a strong case to recognize the objects described above as Frisian. As long as a clear distinction can be made between different corpora, there is no problem recognizing a Frisian corpus. Distinction can be found in the finding place, as eighteen of the twenty-two described runic objects in this essay, have been found in Frisian territory, ie. the provinces of Groningen and Friesland, and Ost-Friesland.

¹² Nielsen, 1996

The Anglo-Frisian runes set the Frisian objects apart from other corpora, like the Southwest German or Scandinavian ones, though not from the Anglo-Saxon corpus. One needs to combine the runological features with the geographical finding place and/or linguistic features to narrow the Anglo-Frisian corpus down to a Frisian one. The objects that combine geographical, runological and linguistic aspects, form the ‘backbone’ of the Frisian corpus: Oostum, Toornwerd and Westeremden A. If Nielsen’s criticism of the *u*-ending as a Frisian feature is accepted, Westeremden A would be the only one combining geographical, runological and linguistic aspects. In the cases of Folkestone, Amay, Hoogebeintum, Kantens, Britsum, Eenum, Wijncaldum A en B, the evidence is limited to just one aspect, mostly the finding place. It is easy to doubt the Frisian origins of these objects, as there is no guarantee that they have not been imported from elsewhere.

It would be worthwhile to see how the other corpora have been defined, but that’s beyond the context of this essay. In my opinion a critical look of the Frisian corpus is certainly appropriate, but with fourteen objects that include two or even three Frisian features, there is no need to doubt the existence of a Frisian runic corpus.

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