

Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity

THE ROLE OF POWER AND TRADITION

EDITORS

TON DERKS & NICO ROYMANS

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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The early-medieval use of ethnic names from classical antiquity. The case of the Frisians

Jos Bazelmans

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I INTRODUCTION

We first encounter the names of most northwest European early-medieval tribes in literary and epigraphical sources from the 3rd or 4th centuries. This is generally thought to be linked to the collective ethnogenesis that had its roots in the large-scale migrations that began in this period.¹ These migrations are believed to have made deep inroads into the old tribal order, leading to a fundamental transformation of the original ethnic geography of *Germania magna*. The Frisians are an exception, however: they are one of the few early-medieval tribes whose name we know from 1st- and 2nd-century sources.² The obvious explanation for this exceptional continuity would be to assume that the early-medieval inhabitants of the North and West Netherlands coastal region were the direct descendants of their older namesakes and that successive generations of people living there had continued to call themselves Frisians. If so, Frisian ethnogenesis would not be a phenomenon of the Migration period, but of prehistory.³

However, since the beginning of the 20th century some scholars have raised doubts as to whether the Frisian tribe did in fact survive undisturbed for over two millennia. In 1906 the archaeologist Pieter Boeles first put forward the notion of a far-reaching Anglo-Saxon invasion of the Frisian area from the east, in the eventful years between the Roman period and the early Middle Ages.⁴ According to Boeles, large numbers of Anglo-Saxons conquered the Frisian area in the 5th century and subdued the Frisians; the new Anglo-Frisian conglomerate, however, continued to be known under the old Frisian name. Although Boeles' thesis found few adherents during the 20th century, recent archaeological, toponymic and linguistic research has given his ideas new impetus. There is strong evidence of complete or near complete depopulation in the North Netherlands coastal region in the 4th century, with colonists from the east encountering nobody – or almost nobody – there in the early 5th century. But how then can

¹ Cf. Wenskus 1977 (1961).

² E.g. Ptolemaeus, *Geogr.* 2,11,7; Tacitus, *Germ.* 34; Dio, *Hist.* 54, 32, 2-2.

³ According, for example, to Halbertsma 2000 (1982), 20-23.

⁴ Boeles 1906. See also Boeles' 1951 *magnum opus*.

we explain the continued use of the name Frisians if the original inhabitants either underwent profound social and demographic changes – which would certainly have affected their ethnic self-definition – or disappeared altogether? In this contribution, I shall investigate two alternative possibilities that could explain the survival of the Frisian name. The first is that the new inhabitants named themselves after the almost empty area they colonised or after the former or residual inhabitants of the colonised area.⁵ The second is that the Franks, outsiders who were familiar with the classical ethnographic tradition, reintroduced the name in the 6th and 7th centuries to designate the new ethnic amalgamation that had emerged in the Netherlands coastal region in the Migration period.

Ethnicity research has undergone a fundamental change in perspective in past decades in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and early-medieval historiography. Although this is not the place to discuss these changes,⁶ for a proper understanding of the position adopted in this article, I would like to emphasise that the cultivation and codification of myths, stories, genealogies, rituals and law always play a key role in ethnogenetic processes. It is often difficult or impossible to determine whether these ‘new’ traditions, which make no distinction between myth and history, have preserved the facts about the origin and history of the group. Not that this should be the purpose of research. It is more important to understand how a tradition derived its authenticity and credibility for a broader public from the way in which it was handed down in symbolic, oral or written form. For a proper understanding of early medieval sources for example, we need to place them in a complex intertextual matrix, which includes Greek and Roman ethnographic works.⁷ In early-medieval sources, ethnic names are more than descriptive categories; they also evoke complex associations that are deeply rooted in the literary past. By mentioning certain ‘canonical’ names, authors could show off their knowledge or add weight to the actions of prominent people.⁸ And names of groups that played a key role in the author’s time could retrospectively gain a place in tribal histories.

With these considerations in mind, I intend below to focus once again on the Roman/early-medieval continuity of the Frisian name. Doubts about the most obvious explanation – that continuity of name implies ethnic continuity – have been prompted by the growing body of evidence of profound changes in the Netherlands coastal region in the late-Roman and Migration periods.

2 A LATE-ROMAN POPULATION HIATUS IN THE NETHERLANDS COASTAL REGION?

Russchen’s *New light on dark age Frisia* from 1967 is to date the best, most comprehensive rebuttal of Boeles’ thesis that the Frisians were the victim of a large-scale, destructive Anglo-Saxon invasion in late-Roman times.⁹ Nevertheless, new research compelled Russchen to modify his case for continued habitation in the North Netherlands coastal region: the physical anthropologist Huizinga had discovered an interruption in skull shape development in North Netherlands populations between Roman and early-medieval times; the onomastician Gysseling had demonstrated that place names in the Frisian-Groningen region did not predate the Migration period; and the archaeologist Halbertsma had pointed to the possibility of a late-Roman population hiatus in the *terp* area.¹⁰ By adding linguistic research, we

⁵ Cf. Gerrets 1999.

⁶ See the introduction to this volume.

⁷ Research should shed light on the nature and strength of the relationship between specific texts. Cf. Wolfram 1994.

⁸ Cf. Heather 1998.

⁹ See also Russchen 1970.

¹⁰ Huizinga 1954 and 1955; Gysseling 1965; Halbertsma 1958 and 1959. Little value is attached to Huizinga’s work nowadays. Also important for the discussion of place-name material is the work of Kuhn, who was much more outspoken than Gysseling (Kuhn 1966). On the basis of a study of North Netherlands toponyms, he spoke of a complete rehabilitation of Boeles’ thesis.

can use this tripartite division in the field of study to review research findings since 1967. My focus will not be the coastal region of the North Netherlands alone, but the West as well. After all, the Roman/early-medieval continuation of the Frisian name might also go back to continuity of habitation outside what is traditionally regarded as the Frisian heartland (i.e. Westergo and Oostergo or the North Netherlands coastal region), namely in North and South Holland – according to classical sources the territory of the *Frisii* (or *Frisii minores*) and the *Frisiavones*.¹¹

We can be brief about physical-anthropological research in the Netherlands coastal region since Huizinga: there is almost none to speak of.¹² Without adding new material, and influenced by the criticism of Boeles' thesis, Constandse-Westermann modified Huizinga's pronouncements in the late 1960s and concluded that 'without too complicated an explanation, the skulls of the *terp* Frisians and Groningers [...] [can] be linked to the present-day population of these provinces'. She argued, however, that synchronous and diachronous variation in skull shape did not rule out the possibility of 'one or several waves of invasions or a gradual infiltration from the east or south-east by new tribes'.¹³

The study of place-name material offers more clues when it comes to making assertions about continuity or discontinuity of habitation in the West and North Netherlands coastal region. The very small number of archaic (i.e. pre-medieval) place and river names in North and South Holland is generally interpreted as proof of continuity of habitation on a modest scale on the Netherlands barrier beaches in the late-Roman period and early Middle Ages and of continued use during that time of the watercourses in the peat area behind the barrier beaches.¹⁴ However, the situation is very different in the North Netherlands coastal region. Whereas pre-medieval place and river names are very rare in Groningen, they appear to be absent altogether in Westergo, Oostergo and East Friesland.¹⁵ Because we can also demonstrate that early-medieval place names of the North Netherlands area are not of a great age and that there was no artificial fashioning of pre-medieval names into new, medieval ones, we can almost certainly interpret the virtual absence of archaic place names in terms of either a population hiatus or habitation on a very small scale.¹⁶ The survival of old river names may go back to the use of rivers in the coastal region by inhabitants of the pleistocene hinterland, which was continuously inhabited.¹⁷

Since the mid-seventies, archaeology in particular has shed new light on the habitation history of the West and North Netherlands coastal region in the first millennium.¹⁸ For the part of South Holland relevant to this article (the area near and north of the Oude Rijn), we can say that no new data has appeared since Bult and Hallewas' survey, published in 1990, of the history of habitation in South Holland between 250 and 1000.¹⁹ They found that the second half of the 3rd century saw an end – within one or two generations – to the highly intensive occupation of the area in Roman times²⁰ and that there is almost

¹¹ The widely-held notion of an original Frisian homeland or core area, where they always lived and have persisted to this very day (see, for example, Russchen 1967, 27), is also an example of the prevailing romantic perspective on ethnicity.

¹² Given that physical-anthropological research has shown little interest in the Frisian area, I will not go into the complex relationship between population-genetic developments and ethnogenetic processes.

¹³ Constandse-Westermann 1968, 220 (cf. 177–178).

¹⁴ Blok 1959a and 1959b; Gysseling 1959; Henderikx 1987, 43, appendix IV and map V, Besteman 1990, 98; Bult/Hallewas 1990, 73.

¹⁵ Gysseling 1965; Blok 1973 and 1996; Gildemacher 1993.

¹⁶ Blok 1996, 28–33. Cf. Taayke 1996, V: 197–198.

¹⁷ For habitation developments in Drenthe, see Waterbolk 1995.

¹⁸ Cf. Van Regteren Altena/Heidinga 1977; Heidinga 1987 and 1997.

¹⁹ Bult/Hallewas 1990.

²⁰ Cf. Henderikx 1987, 39–41. A recent excavation at Katwijk (Zanderij Westerbaan) suggests that far-reaching social changes even in Roman times may have influenced ethnic self-definition: two houses were built in the 2nd and 3rd centuries on top of a burial mound dating from the 1st century with 25 cremation graves (Van der Velde 1997).

no convincing evidence of habitation from the 4th, 5th and the first half of the 6th century.²¹ Despite intensified archaeological activity in the region, the possibility always remains of a *Forschungslücke*, certainly on the beach barriers. Nevertheless, we have no choice but to conclude that the area was either completely depopulated or only sparsely populated in the Migration period.

The situation is slightly different for North Holland. Here too we witness a sharp drop in population in the course of the 3rd century, but not everywhere.²² In his survey (also published in 1990) of the habitation history of North Holland in late-Roman times and the early Middle Ages, Besteman shows that some settlements (Den Burg, Schagen and Uitgeest) were still inhabited in the 4th century but that archaeological material from the 5th through to the 7th centuries is poorly represented: 5th- and 6th-century habitation may be archaeologically invisible due to the lack of imported, i.e. recognizable and dateable, pottery and our unfamiliarity with indigenous types of pottery.²³ Recent research at Schagen²⁴ and Castricum²⁵ has produced a clearer picture of 4th- and early 5th-century habitation in North Holland, while the results of excavations at Uitgeest have provided the first clear evidence of habitation in the 5th and 6th centuries.²⁶ At the same time, however, the end to the 4th- to 7th-century gap in habitation makes it clear that successive major changes occurred in this period in the number, location, scope and structure of settlements.²⁷

The discussion about changes in the North Netherlands coastal region in the late-Roman and Migration period was given a major new impetus in the 1980s, although the research on which it is based – despite recent excavations in the Frisian villages of Wijnaldum, Dongjum and Peins²⁸ – is still limited in scope.²⁹ Thanks to the work of Waterbolk, we have a clearer understanding of how the well-known settlement of Ezinge developed.³⁰ In terms of evaluating Boeles' thesis, however, his new insights are not unambiguous. On the one hand, a closer look at the excavation data from Ezinge has revealed that Van Giffen's village of Anglo-Saxon immigrants does not exist; on the other hand, the new reconstruction of Ezinge's habitation history suggests a dramatic change in the spatial organisation of the settlement in the Migration period.³¹ According to researchers of the Tjitsma *terp* near Wijnaldum in Friesland, a compara-

²¹ Bult/Hallewas 1990, 73–74. The sharp drop in population is also clearly evident in the gradual return of the natural vegetation.

²² For habitation in a substantial part of North Holland in the Roman period, see Meffert 1998.

²³ Dekker/De Weerd 1975, 49; Besteman 1990, 98–99. For Texel and Den Burg, see also Woltering 1996–1997, 324 ('At the present stage of the study little is understood of the 4th- and 5th-century AD occupation.' However, he then goes on to say: 'Despite the lack of finds which can be dated to the 4th and 5th centuries AD, there is no reason to assume that Texel was mostly or completely unoccupied during these centuries' (see also Woltering 1996–1997, 335 for a Roman/early-medieval continuity in orientation of elements in the settlement at Den Burg).

²⁴ Diederik 1996.

²⁵ Hagers/Sier 1998.

²⁶ De Koning in prep.

²⁷ Although more or less formal depositions of human material are known from different settlements, little is

known about the late-Roman/early-medieval burial ritual in North Holland.

²⁸ For Wijnaldum, see Besteman et al. 1999.

²⁹ For the entire Netherlands *terp* area, Knol reports six modern and for the most part relatively small-scale excavations that are relevant for painting a picture of this region in the late-Roman period and the early Middle Ages: Wijnaldum–Tjitsma, Tritzum–dorpswierde, Foudgum–dorpswierde, Driesum–Driesumerterp, Ezinge–dorpswierde and Heveskesklooster–dorpswierde (Knol 1993, 119–136). The number of relevant burial grounds is larger but only a few have been well or fully excavated (Knol 1993, 150 ff.).

³⁰ Van Giffen 1936; De Langen/Waterbolk 1982–1988; Waterbolk 1991.

³¹ De Langen/Waterbolk 1982–1988, 104. De Langen and Waterbolk do not see this change as marking a break or interruption in habitation because the pre-Roman/Roman radial structure has clearly been maintained outside the direct core of habitation until the present day (De Langen and Waterbolk 1982–1988, 104). Cf.

ble change is visible in the settlements of Tritsum and Wijnaldum, both in Westergo.³² In Wijnaldum we observe not only a fundamental change in the organisation of the settlement in the 5th century, but also in the construction of houses. Simple sod houses gained the upper hand over wooden, three-aisle farmsteads. In addition, the presence of imported pottery, coins and other metalware (jewellery in particular) tells us that there was a clear break in habitation in the period 300/350–425.³³ After 425, according to the *terp* researchers, immigrants from the east (i.e. Schleswig-Holstein and the area between the Elbe and Weser rivers), who are discernibly different from their predecessors in house construction, burial rituals³⁴ and material culture, took possession of Tjitsma. Some researchers, such as Knol and Galestin, doubt whether this interruption is representative of the northern coastal region as a whole,³⁵ but others, like Erdrich and Taayke, support the Wijnaldum hypothesis.³⁶ According to Erdrich, among the hundreds of metal objects from Roman times (predominantly *fibulae*) found in the North Netherlands coastal region, there are almost no examples from the period 300–425.³⁷ And following an extensive study of the ceramics, Taayke believes that there was continuity of habitation in Groningen, Oostergo and Westergo (in descending order of probability) in a very small number of places but that, in contrast to Drenthe, there is very little evidence to support this. In the first-mentioned areas there is an almost total absence of 4th-century handmade pottery. Significant here too is the fact that the pottery characteristic of the late 3rd century in the coastal region differs markedly from the subsequent ‘Anglo-Saxon’ pottery and that there is a complete absence of transitional forms or of both forms found in association.³⁸

Finally, I must discuss developments in the field of linguistics, although these are controversial.³⁹ Nevertheless, there has been recent consensus concerning the linguistic situation in the area along the

Knol 1993, 129 and 133. De Langen distanced himself in 1992 from the idea that the medieval radial arrangement of many *terps* dated back to the Iron Age (De Langen 1992, 155–186). He says that the radial organisation of the settlement of Oostergo is not representative of the medieval *terp* village and that such an arrangement only arose within level landscapes and if a settlement consisted of more than four farmsteads.

³² Gerrets/Heidinga/De Koning 1996; Gerrets 1995, 41–44 and 1999; Gerrets/De Koning 1999. For the late-Roman/early-medieval change in the spatial organisation of settlement and a possible population hiatus in Tritsum, see Taayke/Knol 1992, 87.

³³ Cf. Erdrich, who concludes on the basis of metal finds from Wijnaldum that ‘the Tjitsma *terp* came more or less to an end even before the end of the 3rd century, or at least dropped to a level which is hardly evidenced archaeologically’ (Erdrich, 1999; see also note 171). There appears to be a comparable hiatus on a *terp* in the neighbouring *terp* clusters of Dongjum and Peins: not only is there an absence of 4th-century imports there, but the entire surface of the Roman *terp* was completely ploughed and incorporated into a layer of arable land in the Migration period (unpublished excavation data 1998). See Bos and Jager (1996, 80) for a 4th-century population hiatus in a *terp* north of Goutum (Oostergo).

³⁴ Cf. Knol 1993, 156.

³⁵ Knol 1993, 109–110 and 240–241; Galestin 1996–1997.

³⁶ Erdrich 1999; Taayke 1988 and 1996, V: 193–198 and the relevant passages in Taayke’s sub-studies.

³⁷ It is important to realise that this cannot be attributed to a decline in Frisian/Roman contacts and the resulting reduced influx of Roman imports because these find types should be seen as indigenous ‘Germanic’ products.

³⁸ *Contra* Knol 1993, 202. The introduction of Driesum-style pottery in the 3rd century also meant a complete and rather abrupt change in the pottery repertoire (Taayke 1996, V: 192–193). Taayke interprets this as Frisian compliance with growing Chaucian power or the result of joint participation by Frisians and Chauci in acts of piracy. It must be said that Taayke is very quick to establish a link between pottery and ethnic groups; in other words, he gives no theoretical underpinnings for the relationship between stylistic forms of pottery and ethnic appurtenances.

³⁹ The question remains as to what historical linguistics of the Germanic – and more specifically the Frisian – language area can contribute to the present discussion if we accept, with Nielsen (1994), that:

– the earliest Old Frisian manuscripts are of relatively recent date (13th century and later) and there is disagreement about the extent to which the characteristics of

continental North Sea coast before the Migration period: until 400 an Ingvaemonic or Northwest Germanic language continuum existed here, from which Old Frisian, Old English, Old Saxon and Old Low Franconian later derived.⁴⁰ According to most researchers, this means that there cannot have been an ‘original’ Anglo-Frisian entity: the strong linguistic affinity between Frisian and English is not the product of a 5th-century Anglo-Saxon invasion of the Frisian area, but of a differential development within Northwest Germanic, whereby the precursors of English and Frisian developed in a different way and at a different pace from other Northwest Germanic languages.⁴¹ According to Seebold, however, there is no explanation for how language boundaries, such as those between Frisian on the one hand and Frankish and Saxon on the other, can arise within such a continuum.⁴² He also believes that Saxons from the Danish and North German region, known as Jutes, settled in a relatively peaceful manner among the Frisians in late-Roman times.⁴³ The language of the Jutes then became dominant in the Frisian area while the Frisian name prevailed for the new Frisian-Jutish conglomerate: Boeles’ thesis in a new guise!

Without making a definitive statement about continuity or cessation of habitation in the West and North Netherlands coastal region in the 4th or 5th century as a whole or in one of the sub-regions, we can nevertheless say that there are good reasons for doubting the continued survival of the Frisians in the late-Roman and Migration period. Using linguistic, place-name and archaeological data, there is reason to believe that radical changes occurred in the Netherlands coastal region in the 3rd and 4th centuries, and that the relatively substantial populations of the mid-Roman period were reduced to a minimum or disappeared altogether.⁴⁴ In the 2nd century, but particularly from the mid-3rd century onward, this drop in population went hand in hand everywhere with fundamental changes in the local and regional organisation of settlements and in the material culture.

Various explanations for these changes have been put forward over the course of time. Even today, as of old, people point to the political and social unrest and the economic decline brought about by a combination of two factors: the gradual decline of Roman authority and the migration of large groups to the Roman or former Roman area. Recent decades have seen a focus on deteriorating natural conditions in the coastal region. To explain the regular alternation of pockets of clay and peat layers in the Netherlands coastal region, a model was developed in the 1950s (also very popular among archaeologists and onomasticians) of a succession of marine transgressions and regressions. According to this model, the influence of the sea changed regularly ‘through differences in the speed and direction of sea-level movements and through differences in climatological conditions, mainly with regard to the frequency and extent of storms’.⁴⁵ Thus the late-Roman period supposedly saw a powerful transgression (the Dunkirk

Old Frisian that are typical of these texts can be traced back in time;

- the place-name and runological material stems almost exclusively from the 5th century or later, is often difficult to interpret and offers few clues to link the early-medieval Frisian dialect of the Netherlands coastal region to other contemporary Germanic dialects;
- none of the Germanic languages around the southern part of the North Sea developed into independent languages until the early Middle Ages, and in the case of Frisian possibly not until the 8th century, and that therefore language would initially have played only a very minor role in the formation of ethnic identities in this area in the Roman period and the early Middle Ages;
- we do not know the language of the North and West

Netherlands coastal inhabitants from the late Iron Age and the Roman period; it is even possible that it wasn’t Germanic.

⁴⁰ For a recent summary, see Van Bree 1997.

⁴¹ Stiles (1995, 212) speaks of English and Frisian as ‘Ingvaemonic relict areas’.

⁴² Seebold 1995.

⁴³ For the relationship between Jutes and Frisians, see Seebold 1995, 10-13.

⁴⁴ There was also a marked interruption in habitation in the *terp* area of North Germany; however, it began later (in the mid- to late 5th century) and lasted longer (until well into the 6th or 7th century).

⁴⁵ Beets/Van der Spek/Van der Valk 1994, 10.

II-transgression) that rendered large parts of the Netherlands coastal region uninhabitable. Nowadays people are sceptical of these area-independent processes⁴⁶ and focus instead on regional, coast-forming developments, which are affected by factors such as sediment supply, water-storage capacity and human intervention. These had very different effects in the 3rd to the 7th centuries in Zeeland and Goeree-Overflakkee,⁴⁷ the estuaries of the Maas and the Oude Rijn, North Holland, the area between Texel and Friesland, Westergo,⁴⁸ Oostergo and Groningen. In none of these areas are we able to establish a clear causal link between deteriorating natural conditions and the decline or disappearance of the population. Therefore, although the Frisian area was not exactly a land of milk and honey in the late-Roman period, doubts remain as to whether changes in the natural environment were the 'prime mover'. For large parts of the coastal region, however, the above circumstances do appear to explain why there was little or no habitation for long periods in some sub-regions.⁴⁹ In my conclusion, I will return briefly to the possible causes of the demographic changes in the Netherlands coastal region in the late-Roman period.

3 THE SURVIVAL OF THE FRISIAN NAME

In the previous section we have seen that the West and North Netherlands coastal region was subjected to such far-reaching changes in the 3rd and 4th centuries that habitation fell dramatically or ceased altogether. In the latter case the new 5th-century inhabitants will have come from outside, which raises the question of how we can explain the continued use of the Frisian name. The former case gives rise to the same question. To what extent would the residual population have been in a position to generate the substantial population growth of the 5th and 6th centuries? Or should we here too be thinking in terms of immigration from other areas? However we answer this last question, the changes in the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries were so far-reaching that they must have influenced the ethnic self-definition of the residual Frisian population.

In addition to the usual answers, I believe there are two additional ways of explaining why the Frisian name continued to be used. Both disregard the hypothesis that the early-medieval Frisians were the true descendants of the Roman Frisians, which could be possible even if we accepted that there was a population hiatus in the assumed core Frisian area (i.e. present-day Friesland and Groningen). Yet, as recent research shows, there seems to have been a certain continuity of habitation in North Holland. As I have already indicated, I find this hypothesis implausible because the far-reaching changes which are also archaeologically visible in North Holland would certainly have influenced the ethnic self-definition of its residual population. If this were not the case, then the Frisians must indeed be the exception to the late-Roman rule. I have one more reason to doubt this explanation and that is the absence of the Frisians in 4th, 5th and 6th-century historical sources. But more of that later.

The first alternative answer is that new inhabitants called themselves after the more or less empty area that they colonised or after the former or residual inhabitants of the colonised area. It is accepted by anthropologists that groups devote considerable space in their foundation myths to the origin and nature of their relationships with the original inhabitants.⁵⁰ It is therefore interesting to quote from the work of the 7th-century writer Fredegarius. Discussing the Trojan origin of the Franks, he says:

'The first king they had was Priam; it is written throughout books of history how later they had Frigas as their king. Afterwards they were divided into two groups. One group reached Macedonia and they were called

⁴⁶ Beets/Van der Spek/Van der Valk 1994, 11.

⁴⁷ Vos/Van Heeringen 1997.

⁴⁸ Vos 1999.

⁴⁹ Cf. Henderikx 1987, 45.

⁵⁰ E.g. Platenkamp 1993. However, I know of no examples in which the immigrants were renamed after the original inhabitants.

*Macedonians after the people by whom they were received and after the region of Macedonia. They had been invited by these people, who were oppressed by the neighbouring tribes, so that they could offer them help. After they were united with these people, they grew numerous in offspring. From this tribe the bravest Macedonian warriors were created and their reputation later confirmed this in the days of King Philip and his son Alexander – such was their bravery’.*⁵¹

In other words, in the eyes of scholarly contemporaries, it was possible for immigrants to rename themselves after the original population and the area they inhabited. Interestingly, Fredegarius’ story shows strong parallels with the early-modern/modern picture of Frisian history: did the residual Frisian population not have much to endure from neighbouring tribes (first the Chauci, and later the Franks and Saxons), and could they not have used the support of others? Did their numbers not grow again quickly after a time? And, finally, in the days of Aldgisel and Redbad were they not regarded as a people who once again inspired awe? Perhaps these similarities reveal the deep historical, literary roots of prevailing but stereotypical notions about Frisian history. The question is whether, in their descriptions of the peoples occupying the northern periphery of the civilised world, early-medieval authors were similarly and perhaps even more directly indebted to an older tradition.

The second answer, and the one I wish to elaborate on here, is that the Frisian name was brought into circulation once again by outsiders in the course of the early Middle Ages. In a socio-political and ethnic sense, the Frisian area may have become so heterogeneous during the Migration period that when it came to naming the area, people reached back to the familiar – to the name of the inhabitants who had lived there in classical times. For these outsiders, I am thinking mainly of Frankish and/or Gallic senatorial elites. They had access not only to Roman documents that made frequent mention of the Frisians, but also to late-antique maps and encyclopaedic descriptions of the world, in which the Frisians played an enduring role. In their increasingly intensive contact with the Franks, it became natural for the inhabitants of the Netherlands coastal region to adopt the ethnic terminology of their more powerful neighbour.⁵² In a similar fashion, when it came to naming themselves, groups to the right of the Rhine had centuries earlier allowed themselves to be influenced by the Roman custom of referring to them as *Germani*.⁵³ The most important foundation for this hypothesis is the lack of references to the name Frisian in 4th, 5th and 6th-century sources: there was no mention of Frisians for almost 300 years.

It is remarkable that the last report of Frisians in Roman times was in the early 4th century when imperial eulogists commented that the *Frisii* had been defeated and were settled in Gaul, where they ‘exhaust themselves working the muddy soil’.⁵⁴ Although the Lower Rhine area moved further and further away from the Roman field of vision in the 4th and 5th centuries and late-classical authors came to see the Frisians as part of the Franks or Saxons,⁵⁵ it is nevertheless surprising that the Frisians do not feature in the many reports about the often violent confrontations between Germanic groups and the Romans. And it is all the more surprising if we wish to view the Frisians as a developing *Grossstamm* like the Franks and the Saxons. Nor do we encounter Frisians, as we do for instance the Franks, as German officers in Roman service, and nothing is known about Frisian army units in the late-Roman period. A long silence followed the early 4th-century mention, which is perhaps not so surprising in the light of the changes observed by archaeologists.

⁵¹ Fred. *Chron.*, SSRM II, 45; translation after Gerberding 1987, 14.

⁵² See Wood 1994, 54 and 160-161 for the few clues to Frisian political independence from the Merovingians in the 6th and early-7th centuries.

⁵³ Lund 1991, 1956-1988.

⁵⁴ *Pan. Lat.* 8 (5) (cf. De Boone 1954, 57 and 61). I will not discuss here the early 5th-century reference to ‘Frisian horses’ in Vegetius’ *Mulomedicina* (cf. Boeles 1951² (1927), 196) because such a ‘brand name’ can survive quite separate from the eponymous ethnic group.

⁵⁵ Hiddink 1999.

The first to mention the Frisians (*Frisonnes*) again was the Byzantine writer Procopius, in his books on the history of Justinian's wars, completed about the mid-6th century.⁵⁶ Together with the *Angiloi* and *Brittones*, they were named as the inhabitants of the island of Brittia.⁵⁷ In my view, the reliability of this report is open to question. Firstly, these Frisians are 'out of place', in other words, in England. According to Procopius, a wall divided Brittia into an inhabited and an uninhabited part.⁵⁸ Most researchers are of the view that this referred to Hadrian's wall, but is that really the case? Procopius distinguishes Brittia from Britannia, the designation that he uses for England elsewhere in his work.⁵⁹ Secondly, and this is underlined by my comment on the distinction Procopius makes, his knowledge of the Northern regions was poor, even though he had access, as he himself says, to Frankish and Anglian informants.⁶⁰ Thirdly, the chapter is not about Frisians. Procopius speaks at length about another group – the mysterious *Varni* – who perhaps were located in the Netherlands coastal region, on the Rhine estuary. But this is not the place to pursue the many problems relating to the origin and location of this latter group.⁶¹

The reliability of the next mention of the Frisians, thirty years later in 580, is also open to question. This concerns a reference in a eulogy for the Merovingian king Chilperik by the poet Venantius Fortunatus from Ravenna:⁶²

*'You [Chilperik, JB], inspire fear in the Goths, the Basques, the Danes, the Jutes, the Saxons and the Britons. With your father, as men know, you vanquished them in battle. You are a terror to the furthest Frisians and the Suebi, who seek your rule rather than prepare to fight you.'*⁶³

As we have already seen, historians nowadays attach little value to such lists of tribes in which old names suddenly reappear because the eulogies of late-antique poets often had only a partial foundation in historical reality.⁶⁴ After all, names had to fit the metre and, in order to convey the special status of the subject's deeds, they had to be part of the classical canon. The Frisians did belong to that canon, certainly for scholars such as Fortunatus who had enjoyed a broad classical education in Ravenna and who probably knew at first hand the work of Tacitus.⁶⁵ Because of their participation in the revolt of 28 AD, the fame of the Frisians had spread not only among the Germans, as Tacitus comments, but also – thanks partly to Tacitus himself – among the Romans. It is therefore not surprising that, with a little juggling, we can recognise a garbled version of the Frisian name on the 4th-century *Tabula Peutingeriana*⁶⁶ and in an anonymous late 5th-century description of the world.⁶⁷ In the latter work we encounter *Frusiones* among other important early-Roman groups like the *Cannifates*, *Catti*, *Cauci* and *Haedui*, whose survival into the early Middle Ages is impossible to trace.

But didn't the Frisians nevertheless play a key role in early 6th-century events surrounding the raid by the Danish king Hygelac or Chlochilaichus into the Merovingian kingdom of Theoderic? True, if we accept that *Beowulf*, a poem dating from the 8th, possibly 10th century, is a faithful account of events that

⁵⁶ Proc. BG, VIII, 20.7.

⁵⁷ Proc. BG, VIII, 20.47-58. According to Procopius, some believed that Brittia was the house for the souls of the dead.

⁵⁸ Proc. BG, VIII, 20.42.

⁵⁹ Cf. Cameron 1985, 215 (with further references). Some authors have suggested that this refers to Bretagne, but what were the Frisians doing there?

⁶⁰ Cameron 1985, 214-216.

⁶¹ See, for example, De Boone 1951.

⁶² For Venantius Fortunatus, see George 1992.

⁶³ Ven. Fort., *Op. poet.* 9.1 (poem for King Chilperic on the occasion of the synod of Berny-Rivière; George 1995).

⁶⁴ Pohl 1997; Heather 1998. Pohl even regards this passage from Venantius Fortunatus as a paradigmatic example.

⁶⁵ For Fortunatus' education and extensive knowledge of the Latin and Greek classics, see George 1992, 20-22.

⁶⁶ De Boone 1954, 21-22; 156 note 49.

⁶⁷ *Cosmographia* 13. See also the 4th-century *Laterculus Veronensis* 13, in which the Crinsiani (Frisi(avi)?) are included in a summary of barbarian tribes, and the *Notitia dignitatum* (occ. 40,36), which speaks of *Frixagi*.

had taken place two to four hundred years earlier,⁶⁸ which is unlikely. After all, Gregory of Tours, who wrote about the Danish raid a little more than fifty years after the event, and who may have based his story on eyewitness accounts, makes no mention of Frisians.⁶⁹ *Beowulf* scholars agree that the poem cannot be used as a *Fundgrube* for historical facts. *Beowulf* is not an epic narrative that arose directly out of the oral tradition of the Migration period, but a composition that was immediately committed to writing in the 8th century or later – in other words a *new* composition, from the mind of a Christian author with links to the highest nobility.⁷⁰ As we have seen above, it is in such a context that a Trojan origin was ascribed to the Franks. What then does this mention of Frisians mean in a digression in *Beowulf*? Given the Frankish-Frisian involvement of the 7th and 8th centuries, I think it highly likely that the Frisians did not acquire a prominent place in English narratives until that time. The social space depicted in *Beowulf* is not a historical space but a literary one, to be understood in the specific politico-historical context out of which the poem arose and not in terms of the period in which the events mentioned in the story were supposed to have taken place.

Finally I must discuss a 6th-century reference to *Frisia* from an unexpected quarter.⁷¹ It concerns a coin type with the legend (obverse face) *AVDVLFVS FRISIA* and (reverse face) *VICTVRIA AVDV-LFO* (five examples) or (obverse face) *FRISIA* and (reverse face) *AVDVLFVS* (two examples).⁷² We can confidently date the production of these coins as both types occur in the treasure of Escharen, which was hidden in the ground around 600. Although the edge inscription is open to interpretation,⁷³ different numismatists have stated that this involves a mintage by an unknown Frisian king or ruler.⁷⁴ Such a hypothesis would shed new light on the continuation of the Frisian name because it suggests that the name *Frisia* was once again used, or was still in use, around 600 in the Frisian area. Pol, however, points out two important problems regarding Frisian claims to this coin type. Firstly, as Boeles has already suggested,⁷⁵ it is difficult to reconcile the fine stylistic quality with Frisian coin production; instead, it seems to point to a northern Frankish origin.⁷⁶ Secondly, the use of a country name would be unique, since geographical names on early-medieval coins are generally associated with *pagi*.⁷⁷

In other words, none of the 6th-century references to the Frisians is without its problems. In fact, not until the 7th century was there regular contact between the Frisians and the Franks, with the Franks using the labels *Frisia* and *Frisians*.⁷⁸ There is a gap of over 300 years, or about ten generations, between the last mention of the Frisians in Roman sources and the first in early-medieval sources. And this despite the fact that the Lower Rhine area does occur in the sources; for example, in the 4th and 5th centuries there is reference to Franks and Saxons for this area and in the 5th and 6th centuries to Varni (or Warni),

⁶⁸ On the contested dating of *Beowulf*, see Bjork/Obermeier 1997.

⁶⁹ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* III-3. Oddly, Frisians do not feature at all in his extensive writings – more food for thought.

⁷⁰ Cf. Bjork/Obermeier 1997, 28–31.

⁷¹ The paragraph below is based on Pol in prep.

⁷² In the past, a copy of an Anastasian *triens* has also been ascribed to Friesland because it bears a legend ending in *FRIS* (Boeles 1951² (1927), 268 (fig. 55.1) and 272). This is unlikely, however, because the quality of the imitation is too good and because *FRIS* probably arose out of *PPAUG* when the coin was double struck.

⁷³ For example, Lafaurie suggests that this was an unknown Frankish luminary who won a victory over the Frisians and assumed the royal privilege of being regarded as a victor (Lafaurie 1959–1960, 205).

⁷⁴ Engel/Serrure 1891, 188–189; Lafaurie 1959–1960, 205 (with some uncertainty: ‘En l’absence de données certaines les solutions proposées au problème posé par ces triens ne peuvent être que des hypothèses’); Grierson 1973–1974, Faber 1998; Felder unpublished.

⁷⁵ Boeles 1951² (1927), 272.

⁷⁶ According to Prou 1892, nr. 615 and De Belfort 1892–1895, nr. 1934, for reasons that are unclear. Both regard *FRISIA* as a place where coins were minted.

⁷⁷ I should point out here that the name *AVDVLFVS* can be both Frankish and Frisian: a Latinisation of the Frankish Odolf or of the Old Frisian Adolf respectively (Bremmer 1982, 185).

⁷⁸ The *vita* of Saint Eligius of Noyon is the first example of this (*V. Eligii*). See the corpus of texts in Lebecq 1983 (vol. II) for later mentions of Frisians and Frisia.

Heruli, Jutes and Suevi.⁷⁹ We should therefore consider the possibility that there were no groups in the area who called themselves Frisians. Instead, the name became current once again when the Franks, in their increasingly intensive contact with the northern world, reintroduced it, partly influenced by the work of men of letters such as Fortunatus, who was familiar with classical ethnography.

Is the scenario I have just described plausible? I believe so. There are various other examples from the southern world of Merovingian/Carolingian interference in the naming of tribal groups, places and regions in the North:

- 1. the name *Frisia citerior*, literally ‘Frisia on this side’. Bede is the only one who uses this name,⁸⁰ and we can only explain it from a Frankish perspective. Bede was probably following the usage of the English mission, under Austrasian patronage, whose members he knew personally;
- 2. *pagus* of *Toxandria*, the generally accepted name, mentioned in 8th-century texts, for a significant part of Brabant.⁸¹ Given the archaeologically well-documented breaks in habitation in this area in the 4th century and in the period from 475 to 550, this cannot be a local survival of the geographical name *Toxandria*, in use since late Roman times (the 1st-century *Texuandri* had long disappeared from history),⁸² but instead a Frankish name from outside;⁸³
- 3. *Sugambri*, the customary name for the Franks under the Gallic senatorial elite.⁸⁴ This group had suffered a crushing defeat in 8 BC against the Romans. Later, the name of their tribe was only found in late-antique poetry, where they lived on as an illustrious people. Once again, this usage is based on a late-Roman example;⁸⁵
- 4. the name *Traiectum* for present-day Utrecht. Bede relates that, at the time of Willibrord’s mission, the *castellum* given to the missionary by Peppin was called ‘*Wiltaburg*, or the *oppidum* of the Wilts, in the ancient language of the people, but *Traiectum* in the *lingua Gallica*’.⁸⁶ In view of the present-day name, the name of the former inhabitants of Utrecht and the surrounding area was obviously no match for that of the more powerful Austrasian elite;⁸⁷
- 5. the name *insula Batavorum*. In accordance with late-Roman usage,⁸⁸ the Betuwe was given a variant of the geographic name *Batavia* in 8th-century and later documents.⁸⁹ This will have reflected the local name. Strikingly, however, this name is not used in written sources associated with the royal court, such as the *Annals of St. Bertin* and Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*. Instead, we encounter phrases like *insula Batavorum* and *insula Batavorum in Rheno* that unmistakably go back to early-Roman descriptions.⁹⁰

⁷⁹ Cf. De Boone 1951.

⁸⁰ Bede *Hist.* V, 10.

⁸¹ See the many charters for Brabant in the *Liber Aureus Epternacensis* (Camps 1979). Cf. Theuws 1988, 109-120.

⁸² Cf. Amm. R. *Gest.* XVII, 8, who speaks of the *Salii* who settled *apud Toxandriam locum* in about 358.

⁸³ According to Theuws 1988, 109.

⁸⁴ See for example Greg. Tur. *Hist.* 2,31, which describes how Bishop Remigius said to Clovis at his christening: ‘Humbly bow your head, Sicamber’, and Sidon. Apoll., *Epist.* V 6, 35, which names an ‘old Sicamber’ at the court of the Visigothic King Euric.

⁸⁵ For example, Claudian, *In Eutropium* I, 383.

⁸⁶ Bede *Hist.* V, 11. Willibrord may have been confusing Utrecht with Wiltenburg as the latter name was also used in the Middle Ages to refer to the Roman *castellum* of Vechten, which we can show also went by its Roman name in Willibrord’s time (Henderikx 1987, 81-82 and 85-86).

⁸⁷ It is also tempting to attribute the survival to the present day of other Roman names west of Nijmegen to the much-intensified interference by the Merovingians and Carolingians with the Roman *limes* in the course of the 7th century. They probably regarded the *limes* as part of the Roman *fiscus* and therefore as the rightful possession of the king (cf. Lebecq 1983, 112). However, it is striking that many prehistoric names are also known from this area – i.e. the river area from Nijmegen to just beyond Utrecht (cf. Blok 1981, 145).

⁸⁸ E.g. Zos., *Hist.* 3,8,1.

⁸⁹ For example, in the oldest text from 726, there is reference to *in pago Batuvua* and *in Batuvua* (Künzel, Blok and Verhoeff 1989² (1982), 87).

⁹⁰ For a summary of these phrases, see Künzel, Blok and Verhoeff 1989² (1982), 87 (Betuwe). We could add *Ann. Bert.* ad 850: *Batavum insulam* and Einhard, *V. Kar.* 17: *Batavorum insulam*.

The Roman/early-medieval continuation of the Frisian name has always played an important role in the historiography of the North Netherlands coastal region. For many generations of historians and archaeologists, all of whom were influenced by romantic notions of ethnicity, it could only mean that successive generations of coastal inhabitants had called themselves Frisians – quite apart from the vicissitudes of history – from the very beginnings in the Iron Age until the present day. Even Boeles, who believed that dramatic changes had occurred in the Frisian area in the 4th and 5th centuries, could not escape the power of this ‘fact’: he said that although the Frisians may have been caught unawares by the Anglo-Saxons, their old tribal name had become general currency for the new Anglo-Saxon/Frisian conglomerate.

There is, however, an important reason to doubt this seemingly obvious continuation of the Frisian name. Place-name, archaeological and possibly linguistic research has revealed that major changes swept the West and North Netherlands coastal region from the 3rd to the 5th century: in addition to changes in the material culture, the burial ritual, the construction of houses and settlements and the naming of places and regions, most striking is the huge drop in population and perhaps even the temporary disappearance of people in many areas. The reasons for this latter phenomenon are not completely clear, but deteriorating natural circumstances were probably not decisive, except that some parts of the coastal region remained uninhabitable in a somewhat later period. In my view the depopulation could also be the result of intertribal raids on relatively unprotected and small scale societies in an area that was easily accessible by sea.⁹¹ In the world around the North Sea basin, raiding was a socio-cosmological practice that was deeply rooted in late prehistory, vital to the growing to maturity of young warriors and to the reproduction of the society as a whole.⁹² The disappearance of the Roman monopoly on violence left room for the return of raiding, especially in the coastal region to the south of the *limes* and the Southern North Sea region.⁹³ It is no coincidence that the societies in North Germany and Denmark that may have been responsible for these raids underwent important changes in the 4th and 5th centuries.⁹⁴

Historians have pointed out the need, when studying ethnogenetic processes in Europe during this period, to pay particular attention to the much-discussed tribal elites, who had links with one another and with the church and its institutions and who were acquainted with the literary-ethnographic legacy of the classical world. Although the Frisian name may have been passed down in the Netherlands coastal region itself (either by successive generations of indigenous inhabitants or by newcomers who called themselves after the former inhabitants of the colonised area), we should bear in mind the possibility that the Frankish elite, by reaching back to old classical knowledge, reintroduced the Frisian name when naming places and groups in the northern periphery of the empire. There are various indications, and this may be one of them, that the area gradually became incorporated, not just in a specific power-political sense but also in a conceptual sense, despite the naming of place and inhabitants by the indigenous population.

Finally I wish to point out that this hypothesis – that the Franks may have been responsible for naming the Frisians – sheds new light on a number of other questions: the difficulties of demonstrating Frisian participation in the *adventus Saxonum*⁹⁵ and the early-medieval socio-political structure of Frisian society.⁹⁶ If we accept that the *Frisii* underwent a process of change in the 3rd and 4th centuries which strongly influenced their ethnic identity and ultimately led to the loss of that identity, it is perhaps not

⁹¹ Cf. Näsman 1991, 28.

⁹² Cf. Bazelmans 1996 for raiding as a socio-cosmological practice.

⁹³ See Hiddink 1999 for the developments in raiding around the North Sea basin.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Hedeager 1992.

⁹⁵ Cf. Bremmer 1981 and 1990; Fellows-Jensen 1995.

⁹⁶ Cf. De Langen 1995, Nicolay 1998; Bazelmans/Gerrets/Pol 1999.

so surprising that we have difficulties proving a Frisian role in the *adventus*.⁹⁷ The reference point for the early-medieval socio-political structure of Frisian society is usually the united Frisian kingdom of the late 7th century. The question is, however, whether Aldgisl and Redbad's sphere of influence did in fact cover the entire Frisian area. There is evidence to suggest that the Frisian region was much more fragmented in a socio-political and ethnic sense. Why, for example, does the *Lex Frisionum* make a tripartite division between the area between the Sincfal and Vlie, between the Vlie and Lauwers, and between the Lauwers and Eems?⁹⁸ And why did the Carolingians not take possession of the entire Frisian area at once when the Frisian kingdom fell at the death of Redbad? This may have been because – concealed behind a unity constructed by the Franks and ultimately also one that was politically and ecclesiastically engineered – there was originally an amalgamation of different societies.

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⁹⁷ This does not mean, however, that people from the Netherlands coastal region did not take part in the *adventus*.

⁹⁸ *L. Fris. passim*.

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