

Frisians and their North Sea Neighbours from the Fifth Century to the Viking Age, Edited by John Hines and Nelleke IJssennagger, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2017, xx and 279 pp., Illus 78. Price: £75.00. ISBN 978 178327 179 5.

This thoroughly multidisciplinary collection of essays is a welcome addition to the relatively sparse available literature on early medieval Frisians. Or perhaps that should be restated as ‘the available literature on Frisia’, as the contributions here are rather more grounded in the continental North Sea coast and the behaviours this context engendered than in the investigation of any one definable identity group. The Frisians themselves repeatedly evade delineation, tending to emerge only when facilitating a connection between other people and places, which is almost as true of the archaeology as it is of the written and linguistic sources. This is a remarkable and relatively unusual state of affairs in northwest Europe, which probably stands to tell us rather a lot more about the formation of groups and naming of places in post-Roman Europe, though such wider aspects are not explored beyond the self-stated aim of the book to illustrate the unpredictability and complexity of convergences and divergences, mainly of material culture and language, around the North Sea between the fifth and ninth centuries AD.

Following two short introductory chapters by Hines, IJssennagger and Knol – who do a good job of elucidating a complex historical, archaeological and linguistic background – Hines returns for a succinct interpretation of the recurrent ‘Anglo-Frisian’ question, describing a dynamic similarity between the populations either side of the North Sea in terms of their material culture as well as their language. In the next chapter, Schrijver hunts for traces of a Celtic accent in pre-Old Frisian, testing the hypothesis that a Celtic language was spoken north of the Rhine during the Roman period. Next Dijkstra and de Koning explore the difficulties of multiple sources of evidence in the western Netherlands, suggestive of the changing but often peripheral context of this location in the Migration Period. Nicolay then offers a romp through the very finest jewellery of the period, drawing large-scale connections between the exchange of precious metals and the dynamic influences drawn between geographically remote regions by artefact styles. The next chapter by Waxenberger provides a technical analysis of pre-Old English elements in pre-Old Frisian runes, which is followed by Versloot and Adamczyk’s linguistic analysis of North Germanic elements found surprisingly far inland in Eastphalia, explained perhaps by the connectivity provided by the Elbe and Weser river networks. After this, Aufdehaar presents a survey of a number of fortified sites in the same broad region of the Elbe-Weser triangle, demonstrating their likely roles in controlling the flow of people and goods along these waterways. The next chapter by Deckers shows a deft combination of evidence from artefacts, architecture and linguistics to illustrate the dynamism of convergent and then divergent behaviours between the coast of Flanders and the rest of the North Sea. Next up, Pestell synthesises an impressively diverse spread of historical, archaeological and numismatic evidence concerned with the specific place of East Anglia in the North Sea system. The penultimate chapter by Nijdam compares the Kentish and Old Frisian legal traditions in terms of injury tariffs, which, by way of an intriguing discussion of the literal embodiment of honour and revenge, demonstrates the difficulty of reconstructing any kind of proto-Anglo-Frisian legal code. The final chapter explores a single find of a rune-inscribed worked bone fragment from Groß Strömkendorf in its context of a multi-cultural, multilinguistic,

bustling emporium, to conclude that it was precisely this diversified and cosmopolitan setting that makes its interpretation so difficult to achieve.

All in all, this is a fine collection of learned work spanning history, historical linguistics, legal history, archaeology, runology and palaeography. While some of the chapters remain firmly planted in their disciplinary traditions, many successfully achieve synthesis between history, linguistics and archaeology, and both types of chapter prove valuable to the overall coherence of the volume. The approaches showcased here knowingly place emphasis on empirical evidence rather than theory, and as a consequence there are certainly some parts of the collection where conceptual issues deserved greater emphasis, although for the most part the interpretations and conclusions drawn are full of insight drawn from deep knowledge of difficult evidence. Not all of the content of this book is for the faint of heart, and archaeological readers will certainly find the technical elements of some contributions challenging. Nevertheless, most contributions have done a good job of communicating their specialism, and the editors should be commended for bringing together such an excellent array of scholarship.

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