Language and Contents of the Old Frisian Manuscripts from Rüstringen (c.1300): A ‘Veritable Mixtum Compositum’

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0. INTRODUCTION

The Old Frisian that has come down to us in medieval manuscripts written in the terra Rustringa / Rustringorum or Riustringalond differs in some remarkable ways from the Old Frisian as we know it from contemporary or near-contemporary sources originating from other Frisian regions. The difference is most exceptional in its vocalism – a brief glance is sufficient to establish whether or not a text is written in Riustring Old Frisian. Most of the sound changes which gave this Old Frisian dialect its peculiar shape have been described long ago. In the present study, I shall first treat of the various medieval and post-medieval sources that together allow us to establish the rules that applied to Riustring Old Frisian. Next I shall draw attention to a number of problematic forms in the Riustring manuscripts that do not follow these rules. I conclude with a discussion of these deviant forms which, I shall argue, are relicts of exemplars written in a non-Riustring Frisian dialect. Their presence has unexpected implications for our understanding of the genesis of the manuscripts in which they have been recorded.

1. WESER OLD FRISIAN – THE BACKGROUND

At least since Karl Freiherr von Richthofen’s dictionary of 1840, Old Frisian has been divided into two main dialects, West and East Frisian.\(^1\) The border line dividing these two branches is the river Lauwers, only a small stream today but in the Middle Ages an important watercourse which discharged the water of vast inland marshes to the North Sea. Even in Carolingian times, as the Lex Frisionum (c.802) tells us, the Lauwers constituted an important territorial barrier. Later, Theodor Siebs subdivided East Frisian into a western branch which he called ‘Ems Frisian’, because it was spoken on

either side of the Ems estuary, and an eastern branch which he termed ‘Weser Frisian’, spoken on either side of the Weser estuary.² Basically, the three main dialect branches of West, Ems and Weser Frisian concur – not entirely fortuitously it would seem – with the late-eighth- and early-ninth-century diocesan division of medieval Frisia: the bishoprics of Utrecht, Münster and Bremen, respectively.

Weser Old Frisian survives in a number of sources of varying quantity and quality, but they have in common that all of them were produced in Rüstringen, the most important terra of the Frisian part of the Bremen diocese. We have no Old Frisian documents from the other Frisian terrae in this bishopric, Astringen, Wangerland, Harlingerland, Norderland and the eastern half of Brokmerland to the west, and the small trans-Weser ‘colonies’, Würden and Wursten, to the east of Rüstringen (see map on p. viii). Economically, socially and politically, these lands did not differ much from the other Frisian lands in the thirteenth century. Agriculture was one cornerstone of their prosperity, trade in agricultural products another. Their merchants plied the ‘water streets’ to Bremen and Hamburg, the coastal waters to Holland, Zealand, and the open sea as far as England, France, Scandinavia and the Baltic shores. They were an adventurous people for whom no horizon seemed too distant. Adam of Bremen, author of the Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum (c. 1075), relates how Frisian sailors living on the Weser estuary ventured beyond the North Cape into the Arctic Ocean. In the late 1270s, the joint judges and diet of Astringen and Wangerland wrote a request to King Philip III of France in which they asked for certain privileges for their merchants. Quite diplomatically, they also reminded Philip of their participation in the crusade which his late father (St.) Louis had undertaken to Tunis not long before.³ By this time, the Weser Frisians had been free from feudal overlordship for more than a century. Instead it was their local aristocracy, consisting of allodial peasants, who steered public life. From their midst they chose judges in rotation to regulate communal and political matters. It was their duty, amongst other things, to conclude treaties with external parties, to send delegations to the inter-Frisian assembly at Upstalsbam in Brokmerland, to draw up statutes for its