Early Christian Loans in Old Frisian: The Linguistic Evidence

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the linguistic evidence in Old Frisian which relates to the earliest Christian loans from Latin and Greek to the Germanic languages. This cannot be done in isolation, but must be undertaken in the wider Germanic context, especially in relation to Old High German, but also with reference to Old Low German and Old Low Franconian. Our primary point of enquiry will therefore be: What, if any, light does an investigation of the Old Frisian evidence – which has hitherto largely been ignored or at best treated in a cursory manner – shed on the wider Germanic picture with regard to dating and point of entry, etymology, meaning, usage, distribution and frequency of the earliest Christian loan words?

We are comparatively well informed about the origins of Christianity in Frisia. Willibrord,\(^1\) an Anglo-Saxon missionary, the Apostle to the Frisians, was given citerior Fresia\(^2\) (which had recently been conquered) by Pippin II as his area of activity in 690. He was made Archbishop of the Frisians five years later by the Pope, and in 719, after having been forced to withdraw from Utrecht, after it had been reconquered by the pagan Frisians under Redbad, he was able to return, aided this time by Boniface, who, a few years later would turn his attention to Hesse and Thuringia and become the Apostle to the Germans.\(^3\) An easy assumption might be that all Christian vocabulary entered Old Frisian via these two missionary sources. However, the earliest loans to the Germanic languages from the Roman Empire predate this period of missionary activity by several centuries.

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1. Willibrord was born ca. 658 and died in 739.
2. Frisia to the south-west of the Old Rhine.
The dating of loan words is a notoriously difficult procedure. If there is no firm historical evidence in the form of words attested shortly after their introduction to the recipient language for the first time in contemporary (reliably datable) manuscripts, something that for much of Germanic is sorely lacking, then we are dependent upon phonological and cultural-historical criteria. The Christianization of the Germanic tribes is a tangled skein, with many uncertainties, suppositions, and assumptions. The accuracy of some of attributions of provenance is not only questionable but indeed unverifiable. In the case of Old Frisian, the problems are even greater, since the corpus of Old Frisian texts dates from such a late period, relative to the topic under consideration. It is reckoned that the majority of Christian terms were transmitted to the Germanic tribes in the earliest phases of Christianization, which for the Anglo-Saxons means the late sixth and early seventh century, and for the Frisians the Carolingian period during the seventh and eighth centuries. Nevertheless, it is thought that some basic words of Christian vocabulary were borrowed at a very early stage before the (widespread) conversion of individual tribes through contact with Roman civilization in the late imperial period, dating back to the fourth century. Frisia was situated on the borders of the Roman Empire together with other Germanic dialects, which existed together in a Germanic linguistic continuum, and there is ample evidence for direct borrowings from Latin in the (late) Imperial period, even though historically not much is heard of the Frisians in the period between the beginning of the fourth century and the reign of Clovis (481–511). We may assume that there were trading and military links and that the Frisians did not remain enclosed within an isolated community. The Rhine and Moselle served as important trade routes which

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6 Ibid. 511. The West Frisians were converted at the end of the seventh century, the East Frisians in the course of the eighth century.
7 Cf., amongst others, ibid. 511: ‘ein Teil des christlichen Grundwortschatzes wie die Bezeichnungen für “Teufel” (afries. diövel, dível; ae. döfofol), “Kirche” (afries. kerke, karke, zerke, ziruke [sic, read zierke]; ae. cirice), “Bischof” (afries./ae. bispoc) oder “Engel” (afries. engel, angel; ae. engel) [dürfte] schon vor der Christianisierung als “Fremdwörter” bekannt gewesen sein’.
8 Cf. Halbertsma, Frieslands oudheid, 49.
9 Cf. Dekker, ‘Between Rome and Rüstringen’, 31–32: ‘The earlier contacts between Frisians and speakers of Latin and Romance took place in a spoken linguistic environment. Frisians traded with Romans and Romanized Franks, served as legionaries, or were captured as slaves. In the resulting linguistic interaction the loan words were completely adapted to the Germanic accent system, and developed along the lines of Germanic phonology’.