

Danish rule in West Frisia: a failed Normandy in the 9th century

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Vikings; Frisia; Carolingians; silver hoards; territory

From the point of view of the theme of the Medieval Europe 2002 Conference: Centre-periphery relations, early-medieval Frisia held a very peripheral position in relation to the Frankish Empire. As soon as the independent political development of the Frisians in the coastal region of the Netherlands, which had started in the 7th century under the direction of the Frisian kings, began to pose a threat to Frankish interests, it was terminated in the 8th century by the subjection, Christianisation and integration of the Frisians in the Carolingian Empire. Nevertheless, these politically and geographically peripheral Frisians continued to play a central economic role as long-distance traders across the North Sea, and were the mainstay of Frisian trade via the Carolingian emporium Dorestad. Frisia exemplifies the phenomenon that peripheral regions are often more dynamic due to their political border position which is also influenced by relations with other 'foreign' centres. Frisia's peripheral position and its tenuous connections with the Carolingian central authority become visible, but then in a negative sense, in the 9th century when Frisia was scourged by Viking raids. Frisia became involved in a network of Danish centre-periphery relations in which relatives of Danish kings bided their time in West Frisia, awaiting better opportunities to the Danish throne, sometimes in the service of the Carolingians, and at other times as lawless Viking warlords. This resulted in Danish rule in West Frisia from 850 to 885, legitimised by the Carolingian kings. The emphatically Danish presence in West Frisia in this period has recently become archaeologically visible through the finds of two Scandinavian silver hoards on the former island of Wieringen in

North Holland, which may form a reasonable case for Danish settlement in this period. At any rate, these and other well-datable archaeological finds indicate that the emphasis in the two hundred years of Viking contacts with Frisia was before 885, which was when Danish influence in West Frisia ended.

From Viking attacks to Danish rule in West Frisia

The first Viking attacks, which took place from 810 onwards, may have been a political response by the Danish king Godfred to Charlemagne's threat, and to the support for Halfdan, pretender to the Danish throne and his retinue. Halfdan adapted, was baptised and fought for the Carolingian cause. For four generations his younger relatives were to play a major part in Danish-Frisian relations. When in the 830s internal conflicts between Louis the Pious and his sons revealed the weakness of Carolingian power, attacks on the Frisian coasts increased and assumed the character of forays by Danish warlords and their footloose Vikings, bent solely on plunder. They repeatedly destroyed the emporium Dorestad and had a devastating effect on the Frisian coastal areas. Emperor Louis the Pious appears to have given Dorestad in fief to Harald and his brother Rorik as early as 839, and Walcheren to Harald a year later. After Harald's death, shortly after, Rorik again ravaged Frisia, leaving the powerless Emperor Lothar little choice but to grant him the western coastal area, including Dorestad, as a benefice in 850 on condition that he defend it against other Vikings. Thereafter we continue to encounter Rorik as



Fig. 1: West Frisia in the 9th century. 1 habitation area in Frisia; 2 Pleistocene area; 3 low-lying Holocene area; 4 present coastline; 5 boundary of territory under Danish influence; 6 boundary of largest possible extension of Danish influence sphere; 7 round fortress; 8 probable fortress (drawing B. Brouwenstijn and J. C. Besteman, Amsterdam Archaeological Centre).

warlord and benefice holder in West Frisia and Dorestad until his death, sometime between 873 and 882. In this year Godfred, probably Rorik's nephew, was offered his uncle's former territories in West Frisia. Godfred, however, had political aspirations which brought him into conflict with the increasingly powerful regional aristocracy, resulting in a conspiracy in which he was killed in 885.

The Danish sphere of influence can be reconstructed from an important historical document, a property list of St Martin's of Utrecht, compiled after the bishop had fled his see in 858 (Henderikx 1986, appendix III). It listed all the Utrecht possessions and rights which had been lost as a consequence of the Danish presence in West Frisia. From it we may conclude that Rorik's benefices were spread over

the coastal districts of North and South Holland, and the river area at least as far as Dorestad (fig. 1). Central Frisia in the north, however, did not belong to it, whereas Zeeland with the island of Walcheren in the south probably did. Apart from this, the Danes also had some isolated estates in the Betuwe, east of Dorestad. In this extensive area where only the coastal strip, the islands and the stream ridges of the great rivers were inhabited, the process of territorialisation under the leadership of local aristocrats was still far away. These distant areas were separated by vast inhospitable peat bogs, tidal marshes and other wetlands (fig. 1) and were, in fact, best controlled by ship.

In this respect it is interesting to see that the characteristic Westfrisian tax, the so-called *cogsculd*, a tax for the purpose of equipping a ship per district in times of war, originated from the Viking period (Blok 1978, 39–40). It is the only Dutch medieval institution which may perhaps be attributed to the Danish influence in West Frisia.

Archaeological evidence for Danish presence: The two Viking hoards of Westerkliëf

Two separate silver hoards with a Scandinavian character which have recently been discovered by metal-detectorists at Westerkliëf on the former island of Wieringen (province of North Holland) provide the first archaeological information on the period in which Danes are in control of West Frisia.

Westerkliëf I (fig. 2)

The first silver hoard, Westerkliëf I, contained: 6 penannular armrings, 1 twisted armring, 1 twisted neckring, 1 strap-end, 3 coin ornaments (2 with a Sassanian and one with an Arabic coin), 17 ingots and 78 Carolingian pennies. The hoard, weighing 1663 grammes, was found together with the container of the hoard, a medium-sized globular pot of Badorf ware, filled with the remains of a quantity of grass (Besteman 1999).

The neckring, the armring, the coin ornaments and the ingots clearly have a Scandinavian, preferably Danish origin. The coins, the six penannular armrings and the strap-end though

are Carolingian. The Badorf pot originates from the German Vorgebirge near Bonn. The Carolingian pennies present are representative of the money in circulation in Frisia at that time. They date the find quite accurately to about 850. Because the grass sample from the hoard contained an innumerable quantity of grass pollen and not a single seed, we may assume that the hoard entered the soil sometime in the first half of May when the grass was flowering but had not yet produced seeds.

Westerkliëf II (fig. 3)

The second silver hoard, Westerkliëf II, was found in the same field and consisted of one complete ingot, 24 pieces of hacksilver, 95 Arabic coins, or imitations of them, 53 of which are deliberately fragmented, 39 Carolingian coins and an imitation solidus of Louis the Pious mounted in a brooch. The hoard, weighing 457 grammes, was found with fragments of a small globular Badorf pot (Besteman, forthcoming).

Although the find was very different from the Westerkliëf I hoard, the hacksilver fragments of ingots and ornaments and the dirhams did also point to a Scandinavian provenance, as did the bends, cuts and peck marks on the dirhams. Arabic coins from the Near East, hundreds of thousands of which were brought into circulation by the Vikings in the north, are hardly found in Western Europe south of the Scandinavian world (Moesgaard, forthcoming). The date of Westerkliëf II is based on that of the youngest coins: 872 for the dirhams and 877 for the Carolingian coins. Allowing for the length of the route the coins had to follow, the hoard would have entered the soil in the early 880s.

Comparison of the Westerkliëf hoards

The two silver hoards have a definite Scandinavian character and are the first Viking hoards found far outside the Scandinavian cultural sphere. The composition of the Westerkliëf I hoard shows a clear preference for complete ornaments and objects. Westerkliëf I is, as such, representative of the traditional early Viking hoards whose social function is deter-



Fig. 2: The silver hoard of Westerklijf I (photograph A. de Kemp, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

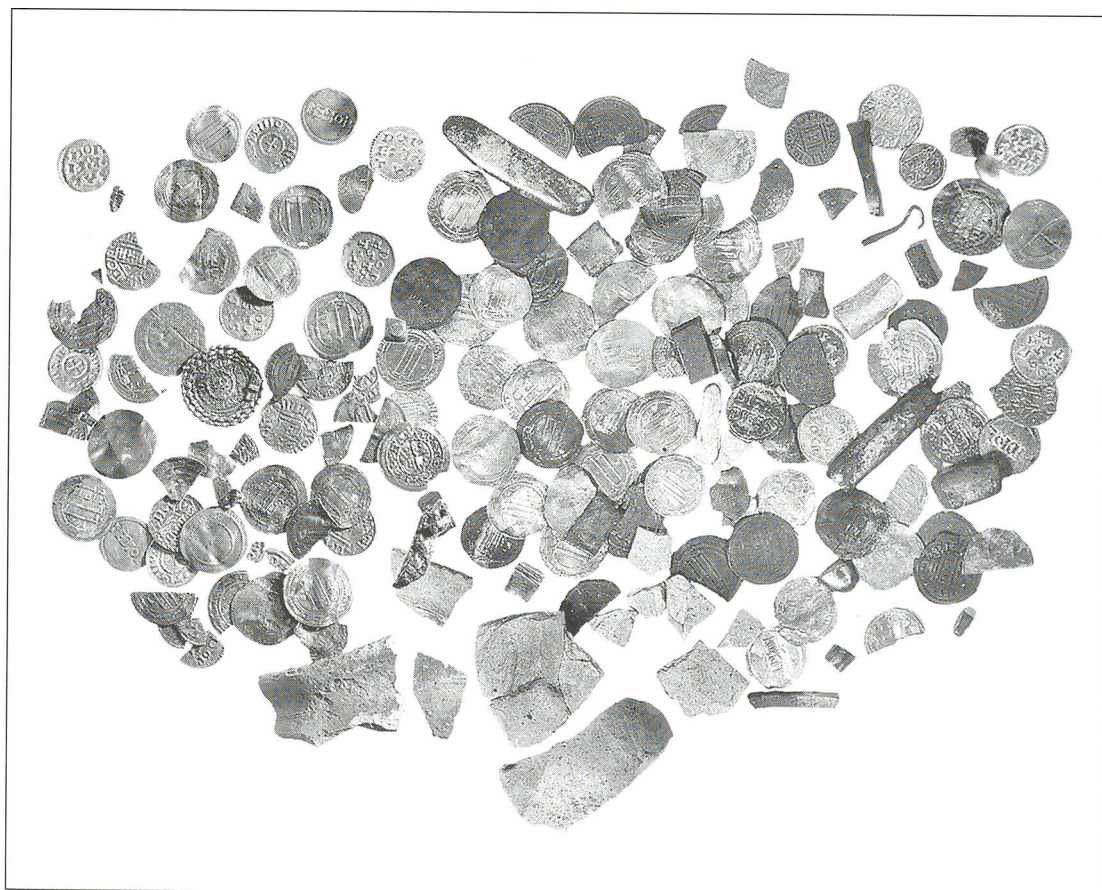


Fig. 3: The silver hoard of Westerklijf II (photograph AAC).

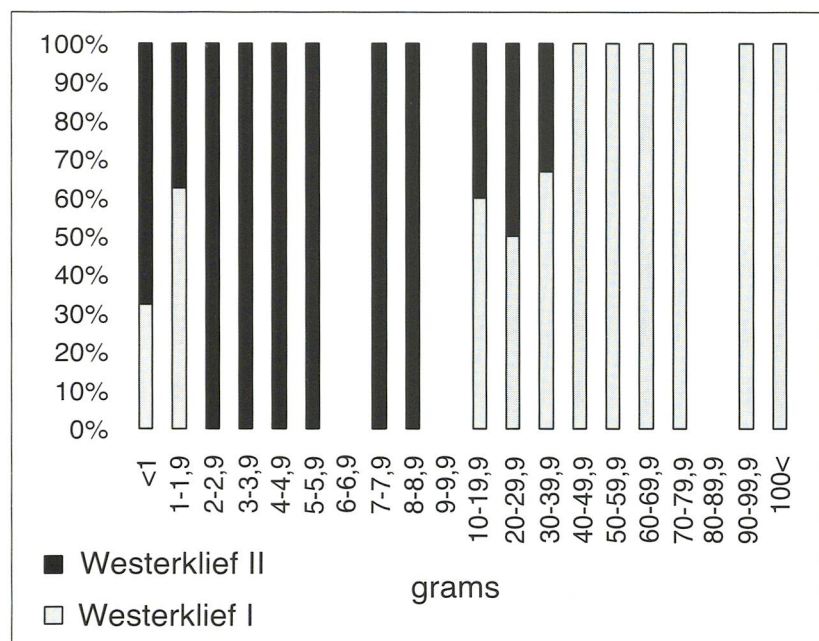


Fig. 4: Westerklief I and Westerklief II: distribution of objects per category of weight (proportional percentages).

mined predominantly by prestigious valuables and precious metal as primitive money (Samson 1991, 130–133). Though only 30 years younger, the Westerklief II hoard is totally different. It mainly consists of hacksilver and Arabic coins, most of them also fragmented, which is representative of Scandinavian hoards of the late 9th and 10th centuries, where silver has a more economic function as weight money, used as means of payment also in smaller transactions (Hårdh 1997, 170–171). The striking differences between both hoards as shown in figure 4 represent the remarkable shift from the social to a more economic significance of silver in Scandinavia, which must already have been well under way in the third quarter of the 9th century in Scandinavia.

The two separate coin dates of Westerklief II, one based on the Arabic and one on the Carolingian coins, confirm that Arabic coins were already in circulation in Scandinavia in the 870s. This is endorsed by the dates of some two dozen of Arabic coins finds found in the Netherlands, which almost all even predate the Westerklief II hoard. This conclusion modifies the tendency to assume that Arabic coins older than late 9th century possibly arrived in Scandinavia with the extensive import of silver in the 10th century (Steuer 1987, 127, note 37).

The Westerklief hoards in relation to Danish rule in West Frisia

Most of the silver and the composition of the two hoards indicate a Scandinavian, probably Danish origin and owner. Because there is a gap of almost 30 years between the two hoards and a striking difference in their composition which reflects a totally different attitude of the owner towards hoarding, there must have been two Scandinavians who deposited their silver in about 850 and in the early 880s on Wieringen. These dates coincide with the beginning and end of Danish domination in West Frisia and it is tempting to connect these two Scandinavian hoards with some sort of Danish settlement in the coastal areas which could have accompanied Rorik's enfeoffment with these regions in 850. It is hardly understandable why Vikings would bring their personal riches from the north with them to Wieringen in Frisia unless they had good opportunities to stay and make a living there. After all, Viking hoards are not found in Western Europe outside the territories in which they settled (Moesgaard, forthcoming). The fact that there are two Viking hoards from the same field with a gap of 30 years suggests that there was continuity of Scandinavian activities on Wieringen, and that the Danes may have settled there for longer periods during Danish rule in West Frisia. It was also a foregone conclusion to the Carolingians that the enfeoffment of Rorik and Godfred with the west-Frisian territory implied their settlement there. It is explicitly mentioned that Godfred and his men were granted Rorik's former benefice to live there (Blok 1978, 36).

This presumed settlement of the Danes was not a permanent colonisation by a large group of settlers with family, goods and chattels, but settlement by a Viking leader and his warrior band, replacing the local élite. This type of settlement lasted as long as it would have been profitable for the exploitation of their territory, their Danish interests or the organisation of Viking raids elsewhere.

Since the Danes were not numerous enough to occupy their extensive territory, Rorik would obviously have concentrated his power on one or more strategic places. Two possible bases stand out. The island of Wieringen in the north and the island of Walcheren in the south, with their large ecclesiastical and royal

estates, whose surplus could easily be exploited, and where the numerous flocks of sheep grazing on the extensive salt marshes guaranteed the Vikings a continuous supply of food. Wieringen controlled the trade route from Central Frisia to Dorestad over Lake Almere. Walcheren controlled the Scheldt valley. The intensive Viking relations with the island of Walcheren are well recorded. Since the 830s the Danes Hemming, Harald and Rorik himself had been active there, partly as benefice holders of the Carolingians. Vikings of the Scheldt were recorded in England as "Scaldingi" raiding around York in 866 and 867 (Henderikx 1995, 87). Nevertheless, a legitimised position of Rorik on Walcheren is not absolutely certain.

Wieringen, however, as a northerly Viking base did belong to the Danish sphere of influence. The two Westerkliëf hoards indicate that Danes did indeed arrive on Wieringen with the intention of staying. Other recent Scandinavian finds, amongst which six dirhams, a silver ingot and probably some ornaments from all over Wieringen prove that the Danes took part in life on the island. From this we may conclude that Danes settled for longer periods on Wieringen during their rule in West Frisia from 850 till the 880s, the same period which is marked by the two Westerkliëf hoards.

Danish-Frisian-Carolingian relations in West Frisia

To the Danish leaders Rorik and Godfred, their legitimised position proved extremely lucrative, but for the opportunists among the Frisians there were opportunities as well, if they collaborated with the Danes. After all, there must already have been longstanding contacts via Frisian coastal trade with Denmark, and the Frisians settled in the coastal area of Schleswig-Holstein. Incidental settlement of Scandinavians in Frisia also occurred, as is shown by a Viking raid on Central Frisia in which the Vikings were defeated by the Frisians under the leadership of a Norseman who had become a Christian (Blok 1987, 31–32). Frisian participation in Viking attacks is perhaps evidenced by the above-mentioned raids around York carried out under a Frisian leader (Henderikx 1995, 87). Frisian-Danish rap-

prochement is certainly likely during the 35 years of Danish influence. One of the Frisians who collaborated with the Danes was Gerulf, who would quickly work his way up after Godfred's downfall.

For the Carolingian rulers the grant of benefices to Danes in West Frisia was not simply a case of setting a thief to catch a thief. We must not forget that many of the earlier Danish attacks were instigated by the individual Carolingian rulers in order to cause damage to their opponents during internal conflicts. In the case of Lothar, it may have been a serious attempt to win over Rorik, as had successfully been done by Charlemagne and Louis the Pious with the older generation of Danish relatives (Coupland 1998, 87–93). Lothar expected Rorik to conform, join the Carolingian aristocracy and protect Frisia from other Viking attacks, and there are signs indicating that Rorik did more or less conform. He even asks Lothar permission to leave his benefice in order to defend his claims to the Danish throne and in 863 he is baptised. Godfred is also baptised, and is even given a royal princess, Gisela, the daughter of Lothar II, in marriage. Both Danish leaders, however, divided their attention between their raids, their Danish and their Frisian-Carolingian interests. Godfred's desire to play an even more ambitious role in Lotharingen by joining the revolt of his brother-in-law, Hugo, was his downfall. Neighbouring counts killed him during negotiations in 885 and subsequently all the Danes in the Betuwe region were killed.

The growing resistance to the Vikings and the rise of the local élite

Godfred's violent death did not only mark the end of Danish rule in West Frisia, but also reflected the rise to power of a strong local aristocracy who concentrated on their territorial power and organised the defence against the Vikings. This territorialisation was stimulated by the fact that most benefices had become hereditary by this time. The Frisian Gerulf, who belonged to Godfred's retinue, took over most of the latter's power in the west after his death and laid the foundation for the later County of Holland. As a result of the shift of power to the local aristocracy, fortifications

were built in the coastal areas of Flanders and West Frisia (fig. 1). Of these, the elaborate round fortresses in Zeeland are best known from extensive excavations in Souburg, Domburg, Middelburg and Burg. The results indicate that the construction of all four fortresses started in the last quarter of the 9th century, which is confirmed by other historical and archaeological evidence (Van Heeringen 1995, 17–39; 50). The same date applies to the Flemish round fortresses which are described

in 891 as ‘recently built’ (Henderikx 1995, 95). These ‘burgen’ prevented the return of the Danes and rendered Viking raids less successful. The effective power of local lords over their territory, held as an hereditary fief, started a process of territorialisation in which there was no room for unpredictable, footloose Viking warlords who did not concentrate on a territorial basis. The chances of the development of a Danish Normandy in West Frisia were definitely over.

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