

The freedom within: On the 19th century changes in the concept of Frisian freedom

Goffe Jensma (University of Groningen)

The alliterative words “Frisian” and “Free” – apparent, for instance, in expressions like “Free & Frisian”, or “Frisian Freedom” – are often used as a key concept for understanding the *status aparte* of what is at present the Dutch province of Friesland. In Frisian history, the period between c. 1250 and 1498 is known as the age of ‘Frisian Freedom’. In the Middle Ages Friesland/Frisia stretched alongside the Dutch and German North Sea coast. The period came to an end in 1498, when the German duke Albrecht of Saxony established a firm central government in the territory (far smaller than nowadays) of what is at present the province of Friesland. In this period “Frisian Freedom” proved to be mythogenic. One of those origin myths held that Charlemagne, in view perhaps of the heroic role played by some Frisians during the defence of Rome against the Saracens (846), had granted the Frisians the freedom to choose their own leaders. This in its turn was held to explain why Friesland always remained exempt from the feudal system.

The subject of my paper is not the period of Frisian freedom as such but rather its representation in the literature and historiography written in the Dutch province of Friesland in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1813/15, after a period of French rule, the province of Friesland definitively gave up whatever autonomy it still possessed during the Ancien Régime, to become a part of the newly founded Kingdom of the Netherlands. Frisians became Dutchmen, albeit Dutchmen of the free and Frisian type (as they did not cease to stress). In nineteenth century Frisian literature, the period of Frisian freedom became once again a favourite subject. The question to be discussed in my lecture is: What shifts in meaning were required to make it possible for the subject to become so popular?