

Lexical Approach to Cultural Aspects of Death in the Old Frisian Writings

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Abstract: Death as a phenomenon was in Germanic culture both feared, celebrated and respected. Personalized, it was supposed to take the deceased to the afterlife world. That is why the way somebody lost his life or the circumstances of his death were very significant. After the introduction of Christianity, death was treated as the end of the worldly life and the beginning of the eternal life in haven or eternal damnation. Church's teachings were reflected in the mediaeval legal codes, which tried to keep a tight rein on the society and regulate the earlier dominating tribal laws. The main task of the study constitutes the linguistic analysis of the notion of death on the basis of the Old Frisian texts. The first part of the paper focuses on the cultural treatment of death by Frisians in the past. Here, the death as an ultimate and natural end of life is counterpoised to the death that is conceived as a consequence of punishment or murder. The second part of the paper provides the analysis of the vocabulary taken from the texts included in two manuscripts, the Rüsting and Brokmer Manuscript (both edited by Buma (1949 – 1963)), connected with the account of death. Here, the preference for the choice of lexical means which are present in these texts is detected and estimated. Expressions referring to death as a punishment are compared with those connected the natural decease of family members or nobilities.

Keywords: Old Frisian, Germanic culture, lexical analysis, manuscripts, death

1. Cultural Aspects of Death

Death in Germanic culture, especially honorable death of a warrior, was valued and glorified, whereas the death of a traitor or coward severely condemned. It was to certain extend due to the fact that in Germanic religion the dead were believed to retain their faculties and to have influence on the fate of their close ones and relatives.

In the Germanic belief system the afterlife was dependent on other factors, such as social status, gender, and the manner of death. Whoever dies an honorable death in battle goes to *valhall*; whoever drowns goes to *Ran's* underwater realm; whoever dies of old age or disease goes to *Hel*. (Augustyn, 2002, p. 30)

Due to this, the choice of the burial place was also considered to be important. Thus, the localization of barrows intended for the interment of criminals, may have been influenced by the wish for the criminal to be tormented in the afterlife by the evil spirits which dwelt in the mound. With the arrival of Christianity and the church's teachings, death became an inevitable end of a mortal, earthly life. It was a natural phenomenon,

nevertheless, still one could undergo a temporary or a permanent death. All, similarly to the Germanic beliefs, depended on the deceased's deeds.

When we look at the notion of death caused by the act of killing, there is no denying the fact that it was strongly condemned by both secular and church authorities of medieval Frisia, which had its reflection in the legal acts and codes. The punishment for murder was severe and could even lead to the death of the villain. All that was due to the deep rooted tribal traditions of the revenge which put an obligation on the victim's family to punish or even kill the murderer (Modzelewski, 2004, p. 121). All that was done in the name of the unwritten law that death should be punished with death and "all flesh wounds inflicted during a conflict ought to be compensated according to their size and to their seriousness" (Nijdam, 2000, p. 180). Nevertheless, authorities in order to prevent the bloodshed, introduced the material or financial compensation for the loss. Frisian law, deeply rooted in the Germanic tradition, worked on the assumption that the traditionally called *wergeld* or in the majority of Frisian writings '*ield*' was an adequate compensation for the deceased family member. Bremmer (2009, p. 4) notices, however, that "the value of someone's life expressed in money [was defined] in relation to his position in the society". The amount of money to pay depended also on the place where the act of murder took place. There were certain so called peace places like churches, churchyards, courts where any act of violence should not take place. Therefore killing there had to be punished with a bigger fine. The legal texts discussed in this paper indicate that the *wergeld* for killing a person amounted to twelve marks or thirty marks if the crime had been interpreted as the unjustified murder. What is more, the criminal had to pay additional fine for peace, the so called peace money, to the treasury as a punishment for breaking the law. Still, someone who had been accused of a crime could avoid conviction and punishment by swearing that he was innocent. He had to do it, however, in front of witnesses, who if he lied, would take the moral responsibility for crime.

The death of a person, no matter whether resulting from natural causes or criminal actions, was considered in Germanic and therefore in Frisian culture as a transition into a different form of existence. Those who passed away were still connected to the earthly life, therefore, in accordance with the Germanic customary law, their death – if resulting from a murder – had to be avenged, and if natural – had to be honoured and followed by actions in conformity with the law and the deceased wishes.

2. The Lexical Field of Death

As far as the lexical field of death is concerned, Old Frisian texts, which are predominantly legal texts, refer to the notion of death mostly as to the offence against human life or the penalty for the earlier committed crime. Nevertheless, when analysing the texts, there can also be found lexical items referring to the death by natural causes.

The analysis of legal texts taken from The First and the Second Brokmer Manuscript as well as from the First and the Second Rüstring Manuscript enables us to divide the lexical field of death into the following categories:

- a) Natural phenomenon
- b) Suicide
- c) Death due to wounds
- d) Death caused by killing:
 - Killing in a fight
 - Murder
 - Manslaughter
 - Death punishment

As it has already been stated, the vocabulary connected with natural death, due to the legal character of Old Frisian Texts, was not particularly common. Legal codes, when referring to the death by natural causes, were in the majority of cases acts regulating the hereditary processes in the family or the legal responsibility of the relatives to support the immediate family members of the deceased (Gilberto, 2007, p. 150).

2.1. The Lexical Items Connected with the Natural Death

Old Frisian law in the vast majority of cases regulates the issues connected with crimes committed on people. Nevertheless, rules of conduct, the matters of property, inheritance and family obligations are also of great importance here. The texts focusing on these issues very often refer to the situations in which someone from the family or clan dies.

When we analyse 24 Land Laws taken from the First Rüstring Manuscript, we find a narrative text listing certain conditions on which a mother can sell an inheritance of her child. One of them is the threat of the death of the child caused by hunger. We can read:

- (1) “ (...) *also dure iar synt vnd de hunger ouer dat lanth gheit vnd dat kinth **hunger steruen** wolde (...)* [(...)when difficult years and hunger come, and the child dies of hunger (...)]

The lexical item denoting death that is of the main interest in this discussion is the verb *sterva* ‘to die’, to be more specific *hunger sterva* ‘to die of hunger’. This fragment gives us a clear picture of the person subjected to death- the child and the cause of death- hunger. Later on in the same passage, we can read that the mother’s actions are to protect the child from any kind of miserable death:

- (2) “*thet hit nahwedder froste ne hungere ne nanena unidella **dathe** ne **urfari***” [that it (the child) would neither perish with frost nor with hunger nor ever with any other horrible death]

Here, the lexical items to be noticed, are the noun *dathe* ‘death’ and the verb *urfara* ‘to pass away’, ‘to die’. The scribe puts two signifying the same thing words: *dath* and *urfara* probably to stress the seriousness of the presented situation and give a broader interpretation of the law. Not only hunger but any sort of threat of the death of a child is a justified reason for a mother to sell their property or land and protect the offspring.

In the 6th Land Law, we can read

- (3) “*Sa hwersa twene brother send and thi other thenne en wif halath and bi there wiue thenne en bern tivcht, sa weldegath him sin feder efter sine **degon** enne riuchtene swesdel*” [If there are two brothers and one marries a woman and has a child, he is entitled to an inheritance after his father’s death]

We come across the notion of father’s death expressed by the phrase *after sine degon* ‘after his death’. As far as the two manuscripts are concerned, the phrase appears only once – in the First Rüstring Manuscript. There is, however, no mentioning of the cause of the death, thus we can assume that the act refers to a natural situation. In the same Land Law, the scribe paraphrases his words and further on uses the structure :

- (4) “*sa thes kindis alder nawet **ne leuath**, (...)*” [when the child’s father no longer lives]

16th Land law, on the other hand, provides us with example of natural death expressed again by the verb *sterve* ‘to die’:

- (5) “*sa hwersa en mon ieftha en wif **steruat** (...)*” [if a man or a woman / wife dies (...)]

This example also doesn’t provide us with the circumstances of the death. Due to lack of scribe’s further suggestions how to interpret the possible reasons of death and the reference to both man and wife, we may assume that it is the death by natural causes.

We can add the verb *forfalla* ‘to die’ to the group of lexical items referring to the notion of natural death. It appears only twice in the Rüstring Manuscript and in both cases the verb is used when referring only to the death in a family:

- (6) “*ief hi **forifelle** and kinder lefde (...)*” with ‘he’ referring to the son or to the father.

There is no denying the fact that Old Frisian legal texts are different from other legal codes in their usage of the language. Here, we have not only simple conditions ‘if you do something, you have to be punished in this or that way’ but also a range of sophisticated structures and metaphors. Due to this, when looking at vocabulary connected with death, we come across not only simple, straight forward expressions, but also some elaborate and complex literary structures. Thus, in Rüstring manuscripts we can find

- (7) “*sa hwersa en mon anda **ende leith** (...)*”

The scribe instead of saying here ‘when the man is dying’, uses quite a poetical structure ‘when a man is on his deathbed’. The Brokmer Manuscript gives us another example of sophistication in style presenting the phrase

(8) “*after sine liwe hebbe tha reia tha wald (...)*” [after his life has come to an end]

All the analysed examples referring to the notion of ‘natural death’ let us conclude that the texts, though legal, present a variety of lexical choices, not only when describing legal matters but also when talking about everyday life and the connected matters.

2.2. The Lexical Items Connected with the Suicidal Death

As far as the topic of suicidal death in the analysed texts is concerned, it has to be stated that there were no legal regulations dealing with suicides in Medieval Frisia. The codes remain silent but for the introductory part in the First Rüstring Manuscript, where the reader is acknowledged with all the kings and rulers, starting from the Roman period, who played their role in the establishment of the free Frisia.

The first mention of the suicidal death is done with the use of the word *overdwa* – a compound of *over* meaning ‘against’ and *dwa* ‘to do, perform’ – in other words, to act against one’s life.

We can read in the passage:

(9) “*Magnencius, ther hini selua overdede (...)*” [Magnentius, who killed himself]

The text, however, doesn’t expound upon the details of this death. The second example is more specific as far as the sort of death is concerned. The scribe continues his story about the rulers, and writes

(10) “*(...) the kining Vascencius, ther hini selua heng (...)*” [(...) the king Vascencius who hanged himself (...)]

Additional information we get, is that both unfortunate rulers were brothers.

2.3. The Lexical Items Connected with the Death Caused by the Act of Killing

Before analysing the notion of death caused by the act of killing, one should focus on the way the death resulting from wounds was expressed. The analysed groups of texts give us seven lexical representations, five from which are to be found in the Rüstring Manuscripts and the other two in the Brokmer Manuscript. In the Rüstring Manuscript, the scribe consequently uses the noun *daddolch* / *dathdolch* meaning ‘deadly wound’ and being derived from the combination of two words: *dad* meaning ‘dead’ and the suffixal *-dolch* meaning ‘wound’. In all the cases where the noun can be found, the scribe does not state clearly who is wounded, but uses the typical for the legal language construction *sa hwetsa* ‘if a man... [than]’:

- (11) “(...) *sa hwetsa ma fiucht an dolgon sa an **daddolgon**, thet hit allea iechta se (...)*”
 [(...)if a man was wounded during a fight and therefore died (...)]

In the Brookmer Manuscript, on the other hand, the word *daddolch* is not used at all. Instead, we can count two examples where the word *wndad* is used with the reference to a deadly wound.

When we talk about death as a consequence of another action, especially violent one – death caused by the act of killing, we have to divide the lexical items into four other categories:

- killing in a fight
- murder
- manslaughter
- death punishment

With reference to the subject of death in a fight, we find three evident examples in both manuscripts where it is stated that the death was the result of a fight. In the First Rüstring Manuscript, as mentioned above, we can read:

- (12) “(...) *sa hwetsa ma fiucht an dolgon sa an **daddolgon** (...)*” [(...) if a man was wounded during a fight and therefore died (...)]

Another example of the death in a fight, but this time due to self-defence, is shown in the 8th part of the First and Second Rüstring Manuscript – in the Older Rüstring Küren. The law states here that if one kills in self-defence *nedwiri* he cannot be punished.

- (13) “*Sa hwersa ne en mon of there **nedwiri** sin lif wird and sin god and hi thenne mon sle, and thet brange tha redieua, thet binna tha fiardandele se, the hine of there **nedwere** wird hebbe, alsa hi nenne fretho breken nebbe*” [If someone killed a man in self-defence, and if the judge from the district claimed that it was self-defence, there is no need to burn his house as he broke no peace]

In the Brookmer Manuscript, we find a reference to a fight between two people from neighbouring land:

- (14) “*Hwersar sketh en case tuisca fiardandelem, and hir sle ma to eider sida enne mon (...)*”. [When there is a fight between people from different districts, and one of them is killed (...)]

The scribe does not use any specific words to illustrate the circumstances of death, but only gives a further situational description, which associates the death with the ‘death in a fight and prevents the reader from literal understanding the verb *sle* as ‘to murder’.

As far as the notion of manslaughter in two analysed manuscripts is concerned, no direct evidence could be found. In the 23rd Land Law, the scribe gives us an insight into

a situation in which a pregnant woman, being attacked, later on gives birth to a dead child

(15) “(...) *and thiu berthe ofliude werthe* (...)” [(...) and the unborn child dies (...)]

There is no clear interpretation here whether the death of a child can be treated as a manslaughter or as a murder. However, when we look at the legal regulations concerning the *wergeld* the villain has to pay, we note that it is as high as for a murder.

When we consider the lexical items referring to murder, the analysed legal manuscripts provide us with plenty of examples. This is mainly due to the fact that legal acts were to regulate two main legal matters: first, property and possession regulations, and second, protection of life and taking measures to keep order in the society.

The Brookmer Manuscript gives us 40 instances of legal regulations concerning murder. Majority of them (22) use the words derived from *dadel / dadil / dadl* ‘murder’. Another lexical item used is the verb *sla* ‘to kill, to slay’. There could be found 17 cases where the verb *sla* or its derivation was used. Finally, there is one example in which the reader knows exactly due to what kind of attack the person dies:

(16) “*Hwasa ene monne sine hals frith, and werth hi **aslain*** (...)” [if the man’s throat is slit (...)]

Rüstring Manuscripts provide us also with a numerous instances of legal acts which expound upon the crime of murder. The most common means of expressing the act of murder here is, similarly to Brokmer Manuscript, through the usage of the verb *sla*. We can find 19 forms of the verb, all meaning to kill or murder. Next frequently used, but only in the Rüstring Manuscripts, word is the noun *morth*, which appears 11 times in the texts with the meaning ‘murder’. There are also 27 cases when the noun *dath / dada / daddolg* is used either independently or for example with the verb *sla* as in *dada sleith*. Furthermore, in the First Rüstring Manuscript we get 3 examples with the verb *falla* ‘to kill’. These are:

(17) “*Alder thi blata **falt** enne mon* (...)” [if a landless person kills someone (...)]

(18) “*Sa hwersa thi blata enne mon **falt*** (...)”

(19) “***Fallath** ther thre ieftha fiuwer* (...) and tha honda alle se blat (...)”

All these cases talk about the murder committed by a person who owns no property (*blat-a*) and therefore is under the power of the free, equipped with land Frisian.

Finally, we have to mention the phrase *lif onawinna* meaning ‘to take the life’, which appears thrice in the Second Rüstring Manuscript. We can read there:

(20) “(...) *thenne sin **lif onawnnen*** (...)” [(...) if one’s life is taken (...)]

(21) “(...) *mon ene otheron sin **lif onawit*** (...)” [(...) if a man takes other man’s life (...)]

Similar meaning has the phrase found just once and only in the First Rüstring Manuscript, mainly *liue bilese* in:

- (22) “*Sa hwersa thi blata fiuchte and ena monna tha lieu bilese (...)*” [if someone kills the landless man (...)]

Even though we can find so many instances of murder in the texts, the murderer is always referred to as ‘a man, someone’ with or without properties. Surprising as it may seem, there was just one case when the person who commits a crime is called a murderer – *bonahond*. The word may be understood figuratively as murderer or literally as murderer’s hand.

Having shown different means of presenting and referring to death, we cannot forget about the notion of death being a lawful punishment. Old Frisian legal codes are based on the spoken tradition passed from generation to generation. Thus, in writing, it very often refers to the Germanic legacy saying: *tht ma morth mith morthē kela* in other words ‘death for death’.

Death penalty is also very often presented in a slightly more metaphorical way:

- (23) “*thet lif skil wesa frethlas and thi hals skil lidzia withir thene othere (...)*” [one should pay for this death with his own neck/throat(...)] ,

- (24) “*(...) sa skil hi ielda mith sines selues hales (...)*”

or in the Brookmer Manuscript

- (25) “*sa stoned hit oppa sinne hals*”

3. Conclusions

In both, the Rüstring and Brokmer Manuscripts we could trace, as you can see in Figure. 1 and the table in the Appendix below, 139 words or phrases connected with death. 92 of these, nouns and verbs are to be interpreted as causing the death through murder, killing or punishment. The remaining words or phrases can be placed within the field of the lexical items representing natural death, death resulting from the wounds or suicide.

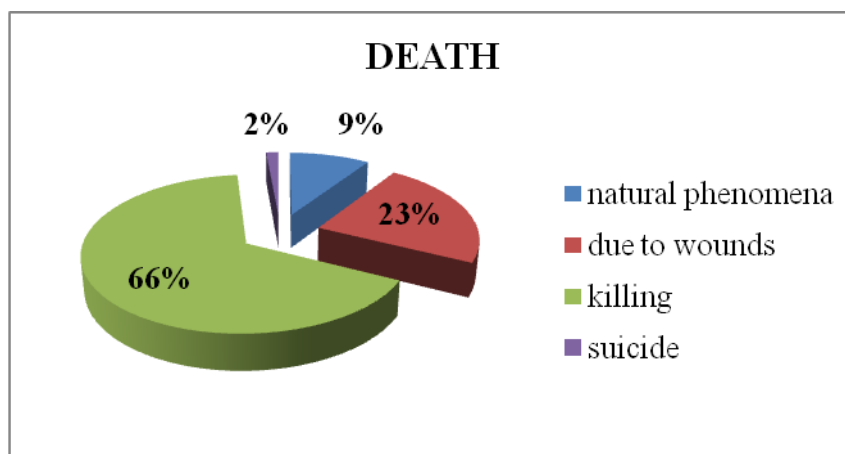


Figure. 1 Categories of lexical field of death in Brokmer and Rüstring Manuscripts

As shown, Old Frisian legal texts give us a thorough insight into the notion of death not only in the texts but also in the culture. The variety of lexical choices, as far as expressing death is concerned, shows the richness of both the language and culture of Medieval Frisia. It can give us an idea how the death was perceived and treated by Frisians of that times, and how valuable life and family bond was.

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Appendix

Lexical item found in the texts

	MANUSCRIPTS	<i>The First Rüsting Manuscript</i>	<i>The Second Rüsting Manuscript</i>	TOTAL:	<i>Brokmer Manuscripts</i>	TOTAL:
VERBS	<i>sla</i> 'to kill, slay'	15	4	19	19	38
	<i>sterva</i> 'to die'	5	1	6	11	17
	<i>forifalla</i> 'to decay / die'	2		2		2
	<i>falla</i> 'to kill'	3		3		3
NOUNS	<i>morth-</i> 'murder'	11		11		11
	<i>bona-</i> 'murderer'		1	1	8	9
	<i>dath</i> 'death'	10	6	16	7	23
	<i>dadel / dalid / dadl</i> 'murder'				22	22
PHRASES	<i>anda ende ledsa/leia</i> 'to put an end to life'	1		1		1
	<i>sin/ hire lif onawnnen</i> 'to take someone's life'	3		3		3

Forms present in the texts:

- SLA : *sloch; toslein; sle; sleith; slaith; sloge; eslein; eslain; aslain; slein; slain; sleit; slait; sleyt; besloten; monslachthoch; monslaga*
- STERVA: *sterue; steruath; steruat; hunger steruen; sterwe; stert; sterfth*
- FORIFALLA: *forifalle; foriffelle*
- FALLA: *falt; fallath*
- MORTH : *morth; grate morth; morthdeda; morthdede; morth sleith; morth*
- BONA- : *bona; benethe; bonahond "murderer's hand" bona- hond; bonahus*
- DATH: *dath; dathe (kill/ killing); dad; wndad(tödlich); dada leith; dada slein; dad eslain; dada sleith; daddolg; dathdolga; daddolges; daddolgon; efter dathe; efter sine degon; hit to dedum; fald hit to dedum*
- ANDA ENDE LEIA: *anda ende leith*
- SIN LIF ONAWNNEN: *sin lif onawnnen; sin lif onawitit*

- DADEL/ DADIL/ DADL: *dadel* (v/ n.); *daddel*; *dadele*; *dadil*; *daddelem*; *hit to dadele*; *hit to dedum*; *epene dadelis*
- *Prestere fon tha lieu dede*
- *Nawet ne leuath*
- *Sa nach ma hini to hwande-*
- *Hini selua heng*
- *sines salues halse alle liodon*:
- *mon unskeldech mith eure hauedleina bebunden werth*
- *riuchta mith tha hales and thet lif ac fretholas biliua*
- *Monne tha liue bilese einem manne das leben nimmt*
- *Alder thi blata falt eune mon*
- *sa stonde hit oppa sinne hals*
- *efter sine liwe hebbe tha redia*