
The last of the Ingvaeones: The special importance of relict languages

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The paper discusses the role of Frisian as a surviving North Sea Germanic (Ingvaeonic) language, and an out-group member with respect to English. Its position near the base of the Ingvaeonic complex — combined with the fact that in addition to the fairly well-documented mediaeval Frisian language and its more recent stages we have their extant descendants at our disposal — makes the Frisian evidence an extremely valuable, though still insufficiently appreciated, source of data on the early diversification and subdivision of West Germanic. In particular, the historical roots of English cannot be adequately understood without examining its Anglo-Frisian and Ingvaeonic background.

The position of Frisian will be compared with that of other relict languages in order to highlight its “key witness” status, and an argument will be made for undertaking a more radical re-evaluation of its significance. Needless to say, Frisian deserves to be studied for its own sake, but Frisian studies have so much to offer beyond their traditional scope that their progress, on an international scale, should be stimulated also for the benefit of English and Germanic historical linguistics.