An itchy problem: the etymology and meaning of Old Frisian skūr

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Abstract
The purpose of this contribution is to contextualize and explain the meaning and etymology of *skūr*, spelled <schuur>, a *hapax legomenon* in the Old Frisian corpus. It is found in a passage dealing with matrimony and divorce in the *Jurisprudentia Frisica*, an amalgam of indigenous and Romano-canonical law. It is argued that the word means 'skin disease' and derives from Gmc **skurfa*-.

Jurisprudentia Frisica is a systematic manual for lawyers that was drafted in Frisian around 1480; it has survived in one manuscript, Codex Roorda, dated to 1504.[1] The book comprises a modernized version of indigenous Frisian law, heavily influenced by canon and Roman law. Title 85, called *De diuorcijs et impotencia coeundi* ('About divorces and the inability to have sexual intercourse'), begins with the following rule:

> *Fiouwerhanda wys mey ma dat hellighe aeft scheda. Dat aerste: joff se mogen neen meenscip to gara habba joff dy ora kalder natura is. Dat oer is om diin mislauwa. Dat tredde is om wrhuer. Dat fyaerde om tijefte. Ende also wel joff hiara enthera wil to conweynt. Om ielkirs neen secken mey ma dat aeft scheda: hor om schuur ner om dyn quada adema ner om onstedicheit iefta om haesticheed* (Hettema 1834f.: 298f.).
>
> ('There are four ways possible to dissolve holy matrimony. The first is if they [the spouses] cannot have sexual intercourse or if one of them is frigid. The second is because of erroneous belief. The third because of adultery.

[1] Leeuwarden, Tresoar, Richthofen-collectie, Hs. 6. On the dating and history of this manuscript, see van Thienen (1999: 147f.); Popkema (2022: 294f.). On contents and purpose of this handbook, see Gerbenzon (1989).

> The fourth because of theft and also if one of them wants to enter a convent. For no other reasons can matrimony be dissolved: neither because of schuur nor because of bad breath nor because of inconstancy or temper.')

It is the purpose of this contribution to contextualize and explain the meaning and etymology of the word *schuur* in the above passage, since this *hapax legomenon* in the Old Frisian corpus has hitherto received inadequate attention.

A marriage can break up, now just as well as centuries ago. However, because matrimony in the course of the Middle Ages had been declared a sacrament, and was hence 'holy', dissolving the bonds of matrimony was only permitted by the Church in a limited number of cases, which are here summed up, if not exhaustively.[2] The purpose of matrimony was seen first of all as the proper institution within which to procreate children. Consequently, if the couple for whatever reason could not have sex, then their union was deemed not to have been consummated and therefore invalid (see, e. g., Harrington & Kickham 1958). This was a biological-physical condition. The second proviso concerns orthodoxy. If one of the two spouses became a heretic, or equally abject, adhered to another religion than the Christian faith, usually Judaism (Brundage 1988), then it was a valid reason to negate the marital bond. The third condition for an annulment is marital infidelity, as it still is today. The fourth ground seems somewhat odd to us: theft. In all probability this refers not just to ordinary larceny, but to embezzling goods from the property held in common by the spouses. Also, the wish of one of the spouses to take monastic vows – here fumbled into the text as a fifth ground – allowed the couple to be divorced, or more likely, to be separated *a mensa et thoro* 'from table and bed' (Helmholz 1996: 247ff.).

Next, the rule in Tit. 85.1 sums up four reasons which are not effective for dissolving a marriage. The four have in common that they make it impossible, whether physically or mentally, to entertain an ordinary life in matrimony. The last two of the impediments enumerated concern aberrant behaviour. If one of the spouses was capricious and could therefore not be relied on, still the other spouse had to live with it.[3] The same applied to a hot-tempered spouse.

The second of the disorders mentioned here within wedded life that was not eligible for a divorce is bad breath, or *halitosis* by its modern scientific name. A quick browse on the Internet with the search items "bad breath" and "sex" reveals the size and acuteness of the problem. Oral malodour, not quite surprisingly, appears to present a serious obstacle for physical intimacy. Indeed, according to the Talmud, the early-medieval Rabbinic guide to daily Jewish life, bad breath was a major ground for divorce (Shifman et al. 2002: 843). Likewise, in medieval Wales a wife had the right to divorce herself from her husband, if he had stinking breath (Owen & Jenkins 2017: 21, 56, and 89). Welsh law, in addition to bad breath and impotence, offered women a further ground for divorce, namely if the husband suffered from leprosy (Owen & Jenkins 2017: 21, 56, and 89). What if <schuur> was referring to some kind of skin disease?

The meaning of <schuur> has not yet satisfactorily been explained. Hettema, the first editor of the text, left the word untranslated in his rendering on the facing page of his

[2] Lacking are, for example, consanguinity, affinity, minority, *ligamen* (already engaged to another) and mistaken identity; see Brundage (1987: 242ff.).

[3] Instability was a characteristic notably ascribed to women, see, e. g., Bloch (1987: 19).

edition. However, he provided it with an asterisk that referred the reader to an explanatory note, which runs as follows:

> *Schuur*, scabies, schurft. Tit. 85,1. Kil. *schorft*, *schurft*; *scharluyn*, schaerluyn, *scherluyn*, *scurra*. Homo incompositus et ignavus, et *scurra*, *nebula*, *vappa* (Hettema 1834–35: 185).
>
> (*Schuur*, scabies, skin-disease. Tit. 85,1. Kil. *schorft*, *schurft*; *scharluyn*, *schaerluyn*, *scherluyn*, *scurra*. A disorderly and cowardly man, and 'dandy', 'good-for-nothing-fellow', 'fop'.)

As can be seen, Hettema glossed the word both in Latin (*scabies*) and Dutch (*schurft*), clearly taking the word to mean some kind of skin disease. Whether this disease is English *scabies*, caused by the itching mite, or *scurf*, another morbid condition of the skin, is a nicety that most people in the early nineteenth century were probably still unaware of.[4] What follows next is an attempt at an etymological explanation. Linguistically speaking, Hettema was still living in the pre-comparative philology era, ushered in by the likes of Jacob Grimm and Rasmus Rask. Hence he relied on the method of speculative etymology which based itself on the meaning of words, while taking a great deal of license with the forms involved (Geeraerts 2013: 556). No better place for a Dutch philologist in the early nineteenth century to find an etymology than in Kiliaan's time-honoured Dutch etymological dictionary, published in 1599. Looking for the entry *Schurft*, Kiliaan refers to *Schorft*. There, on p. 570, it says: "Schorft / Schorftigheyd. scabies. *Ital. scabbia*. Ang. *scurfe*, *scurfines*", a clear reference to the disease, but makes no mention of *scharluyn* and variant spellings. This additional word must therefore have been Hettema's own attempt at etymologizing <schuur>. By linking Dutch *schorft*, *schurft* 'scabies' to Latin *scurra* 'a worthless man', Hettema seems to suggest that he was thinking here of an impotent man. However, if he had limited himself to *schorft*, he would have been very close to the right solution. Indeed, when at the end of his life Hettema published an Old Frisian dictionary, he included the entry *schuur*, glossed as "*scabies*, schurft", with a reference to "Tit. 85.1" (de Haan Hettema 1874: 436).

The explanation of *schuur* in Hettema's *Idioticon* deviated from what the great Freiherr von Richthofen had written more than thirty years earlier in his Old Frisian dictionary (Richthofen 1840: 1034). There we find the entry: "(skur), schur (schauer, eine krankheit)", with a reference to Title 85.1, followed by one to p. 387 in volume 3 of Johann Schmeller's dictionary of the Bavarian dialect (Schmeller 1836). On inspection, though, this reference appears to have been a wild shot, because on the page to which Richthofen referred the reader Schmeller only discusses and illustrates the meaning of German *Schauer* 'shower of rain or hail, tempest'. Perhaps Richthofen was thinking of *Schauer* in the sense of 'anfall von frost und fieber, wodurch die haut wie vor heftiger kälte erschüttert wird; paroxismus',[5] i. e. 'a shivering fit'. However, *Schauer* in this sense is a form of *Schauder*, a noun derived form the verb *schaudern*, a loan from Low German and related

[4] Note, e. g., that the specific meaning of *scabies* as 'a contagious skin-disease, due to a parasite' is first recorded for English in 1813; see OED, s. v. *scabies* 2.

[5] As defined in DWB, s. v. *Schauer* I.9.

to English *to shudder*; hence *schuur* is unlikely to be related to it (Kluge & Seebold 2011, s. v. *schaudern*).

Following the trip through dictionary land, the word *schuur* appears not to have been given an entry in Willem van Helten's (1896) lexicological study of Old West Frisian. This is different with Ferdinand Holthausen (1925), who copied Richthofen's explanation straight into his slim lexicographical tool: "*skūr* m. Schauer, eine Krankheit [ahd. *scūr*]".[6] However, his etymological pointer is new. What precisely Holthausen was thinking of, is not clear. The Old High German word is a homonym with two different meanings and etymologies: the one means 'shower' (< WGmc **skūra*- m.) and the other 'shelter, shed' (< WGmc * *skūra*-; related to *Scheuer* 'shed') (Kluge & Seebold 2011, s. vv. *Schauer*[1], *Schauer*[2] and *Scheuer*). Neither word seems to have anything to do with diseases. Dietrich Hofmann must have concluded that Holthausen's – and hence Richthofen's – explanation was untenable. At least, in his make-shift revision of Holthausen's dictionary (1985) he placed *Schauer* between top brackets in order to indicate that this meaning should be deleted. What is left, then, is 'eine Krankheit', without any cue to what kind of disease this should have been. On the other hand, Hofmann retained the etymological pointer to OHG *scūr*.

The last to include the word lexicographically is Dietrich Hofmann's concise Old Frisian dictionary, posthumously completed by Anne Tjerk Popkema: at *[1]skūr* Hofmann & Popkema (2008) tentatively suggest 'Krätze?', with a reference to the passage under discussion. *Krätze* in Modern German is the term for scabies, the skin disease caused by the itchy mite, but in the past it covered a wider range of diseases. In Middle High German it glosses such words as *scabies*, *prurigo* 'itchy skin disease', and *impetigo* 'infectious skin disease' (DWB, s. v. *Krätze*).

Hettema was very close to the etymology of <schuur> when he linked it with Dutch *schurft* 'scabies'. The latter noun, with paragogic *-t*, goes back to Middle Dutch *sc(h)orf*, related to Old English *scurf*, *sceorf* 'a skin disease' (see OED, s. v. *scurf* n. 1). Old High German *scurf* serves as a gloss for such diverse diseases as Latin *alōpecia* 'fox mange' and *tinia* 'jock itch'. The variant form OHG *scorf* (cf. Kluge & Seebold 2011, s. v. *Schorf*) is found only in compound plantnames: *scorfletihha* 'curled dock' and *scorfwurz* 'field scabious' (Riecke 2004: 431). The word is also attested for Middle Low German as *schorf* 'scabies, skin disease'. All of these cognates have evolved from PGmc **skurfa*-, etymologically related to a strong verb III, as survived in OE *(ge)sceorfan* 'to scrape, shred'. The disease then is named after the act of scratching performed to alleviate the itching sensation.

To explain the origin of Old Frisian <schuur>, some steps need to be taken. First of all there is the spelling. The sequence <sch> is a late grapheme for /sk/,[7] while <uu> is a common notation in late Old Frisian for /u:/ in closed syllables.[8] The absence of the labial fricative can be explained by a tendency in Old West Frisian for /v/, the voiced allophone of /f/, realized as [w], to be dropped after *-l-* or *-r-*, when followed by a vowel. This pho-

[6] Holthausen (1925) functioned as a prelude towards his *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Holthausen 1934); cf. Bremmer (1988).

[7] The introduction and dissemination of <sch> for /sk/ in Old Frisian has yet to be studied in detail. For the spread of <sch> for /sk/ in Middle Dutch, see de Wulf & van den Berg (2006).

[8] For a discussion of the various spellings for /u:/, see Boersma (1939: §§ 93ff.).

nological phenomenon resulted in such doublets as *sterva ~ stera* 'to die', *delva ~ dele* 'to delve', and in inflected forms such as *turve ~ ture* 'turf, sod', *halve ~ hale* 'half', *kerf ~ ker(e)* 'carf (obs.), incision' (Bremmer 2009: § 78.2. *v*). The unstressed *-e* itself tended to drop in non-verbals. We must therefore assume that Old Frisian once had a form **skurf*, inflected (genitive, dative, plural) **skurv-*, which then lost the fricative. The lengthening of the originally short stem-vowel, as indicated by the spelling <uu>, will have been compensatory. The *v*-less form lives on in the Modern West Frisian proverb *Dy't skûrrich is, dy skeuket* 'The one who has scabies scratches himself', that is 'Evil betrays itself'.[9]

Even so, I am not the first to have offered this explanation. By some stroke of serendipity, when browsing the Internet, I hit upon a Google Books version of van Helten's *Zur lexicologie des altwestfriesischen* (1896), to discover that he had arrived at the same etymology on p. 33: "*schuur* scabies J[R] 85,1 (ahd. *scorf*)". Unfortunately, the slim volume does not have an index, so when I had earlier consulted the hard copy I would hardly have expected to find it included in a long list of forms that show deletion of /v/ after *-r-* and *-l-* in the entry *hwenachtig (?)* 'resident, living (adj.)'. Incidentally, the discovery should make students of Old Frisian aware that the limited number of digital Old Frisian corpora can be extended considerably to great profit.[10]

Whereas van Helten may have seen the right origin of <schuur>, I do not agree with his glossing the word as 'scabies'. Its meaning must be broader, something like 'serious skin disease', to include the possibility of 'leprosy'. Whether one of the spouses being leprous formed a valid ground for the other spouse to request a separation was a subject of serious debate amongst canonists. To Bernard of Pavia, for example, "leprosy (elephantinus) equated to *scabies* (an itch) and *tigna* (a bad smell caused by a discharge); they neither impeded the ability to contract a marriage, nor separated an already existing marriage, nor negated the conjugal debt" (Eichbauer 2020: 190). Indeed, the spectrum of skin diseases was such that it was often hard to distinguish one from the other. Scabies, for example, was frequently seen as a common symptom accompanying leprosy (Resnick 2012: 141; Grigsby 2004: 85f.; Vos 2012). To what extent leprosy was a reality in medieval Frisia remains a subject for further research. Leeuwarden, to be sure, had a leper hospital in the early sixteenth century, just outside the city walls (Eekhoff 1846: I, 178ff.). In any case, the form <schuur>, with its loss of /v/, is indicative of skin diseases having been present in medieval Frisia for centuries. Unlike in Wales, however, Frisian spouses who had contracted any of these diseases needed not fear a forced break-up of their life in wedlock. Canon law protected them.[11]

[9] The word appears erroneously in WFT, s. v. *skuorrich* 'windy, gusty', an adjective derived from *skeure* 'to tear' < **skur-jan-*, related to, e. g., German *scheren* 'to cut, to shear'.

[10] Available at present: "Corpus Old Frisian", compiled by Rita van de Poel (2019). The corpus in progress at the Fryske Akademy in Leeuwarden has been temporarily taken off the air. It would be useful to have available a list of books dealing with Old Frisian that have been fully digitized and, in addition, are easy to be accessed; cf. Bunčić (2012).

[11] My gratitude is due to Anne Popkema for casting his critical eye over a draft of this contribution and to Jarich Hoekstra for discussing etymological problems with me.

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