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Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003. xvi + 272 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-23244-5.

Review by Deborah M. Deliyannis, Indiana University.

Written sources for the early middle ages are much more scanty than for either earlier or later periods in history. As a result, other types of evidence, such as archaeological remains, play an important role in helping us to understand early medieval history and society. The relationship between archaeological and historical research for this period has a long and complex history, as Bonnie Effros demonstrates in *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology*. Her book has three aims: first, to provide a comprehensive survey of mortuary remains from Merovingian (fifth to eighth century) Gaul; second, to explain how these remains were interpreted in the centuries in which they were excavated; and third, to explain how these interpretations have intersected with concerns both within and outside of the scholarly community interested in the early middle ages (p. 3). As Effros notes, the most recent survey of Merovingian archaeology is Édouard Salin's *La civilisation mérovingienne d'après les sépultures, les textes et le laboratoire* (Paris, 1952), and there have been significant changes in both archaeological technique and interpretation since that time (p. 3). This book is therefore of great interest to early medievalists, to scholars of archaeology and material culture, and to scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography.

Cemeteries have the longest history of excavation and interpretation of any type of archaeological site, which make them an ideal subject for the type of analysis Effros undertakes. She demonstrates a superb understanding of both the remains and the scholarship. As she shows, burial practice differed widely in time and space in what is known as "Merovingian" territory. Moreover, Merovingian mortuary remains have been uncovered in various circumstances over the course of several centuries, and analysis of the material has reflected contemporary concerns and historical interpretations. As Effros observes (pp. 219-20), Merovingian burial evidence is used most often to help understand two main questions: the ethnicity of the peoples of Gaul in light of arrival of the Franks, and the extent and rate of christianization, both of which took place in the fifth to seventh centuries, precisely the period for which burial evidence is the most interesting. These concepts have been influenced by nationalistic and ethnic agendas from the nineteenth century, through the Nazi era, and down to today, with the advent of the European Union.

Effros' first two chapters deal with the history of the interpretation of Merovingian burial material from the middle ages to the present. She does not go into detail about debates over the style and chronology of artifacts, which have often been condemned as antiquarianism by professional historians and archaeologists (pp. 71-72) although it is crucial for the dating of sites. Instead, she focuses on the ways that mortuary material has been interpreted in social, political, and cultural terms, especially by scholars who are also using written sources from the period. Chapter one, "Antiquaries, Historians, and Archaeologists," provides a fascinating history of encounters with Merovingian mortuary material from

the middle ages to the late nineteenth century, and leads into chapter two, "Modern Assessments of Merovingian Burial," which covers the twentieth century. Effros usefully subdivides chapter four into sections on mortuary rites, beliefs in the afterlife, christianization, economic and legal factors, gender and age, ethnicity, and burial ritual, which makes it easier to follow the way interpretations have changed over time.

The tradition of placing grave goods with inhumed corpses, which was widespread in the fifth century, declined in the seventh century and had disappeared by the eighth. This is one of the most interesting aspects of early medieval mortuary archaeology, not just in Francia but throughout western Europe. Effros provides a very useful survey of the reasons proposed for the decline of grave goods, including the increasing christianization of the people (now generally rejected as an explanation), economic factors, and changes in social and legal status. Effros agrees with modern scholars who see little relation between burial and religious practice or ethnicity, but instead recognize that burial rites "construct and project an idealized image of the place of the deceased in human society" (p.89). After describing a variety of specific interpretations, she concludes that "[b]urial objects and customs were polysemic, potentially fulfilling religious ends and expressing social standing simultaneously. The same type of artifact or clothing had different significance and symbolism depending upon the individual for whom and the time and context in which they functioned. Mortuary rites might augment or diminish the perceived value of such commodities and thereby have an impact on the perception of individuals involved in the exchange" (p. 115). Effros' presentation of the various theories is excellent; it must be said, however, that she makes little attempt to contextualize late twentieth-century scholarship, with the result that the "right kind" of modern analysis appears to be unbiased and free of the kinds of polemical and ideological baggage that influenced earlier studies. Is this in fact the case?

In chapters three and four, "Grave Goods and Ritual Expression" and "The Visual Landscape," Effros provides a very useful account of the different ways that people were buried in the Merovingian period. She uses the examples of particular cemeteries, the ways they were excavated and recorded, and the ways they were interpreted, to "highlight not only the diversity of cemeterial practice but also the controversies associated with the interpretation of grave goods" (p. 119). In chapter three, she begins with the presumed royal burials of Childeric I at Tournai and Aregund at Saint-Denis, discusses in detail the excavation and interpretation of the cemeteries of Köln-Müngersdorf, Frénouville and Lavoye, and then describes features, such as abnormal positioning of bodies or reuse of tombs, found in other cemeteries that relate to ritual practices involving cemeteries. In chapter four, she examines the way cemeteries were laid out to preserve the memories of the deceased for the community. Evidence from a wide variety of sites is used in an extremely interesting discussion of the existence of grave markers, the varieties of sarcophagi or other methods of placing the body in a tomb, cemeterial topography, and burial in and around structures such as churches.

Effros notes in the introduction that she hopes this book will be useful both to beginners and to those with some knowledge of the field. It is difficult to evaluate how well it lives up to her intention. Certainly for someone who is familiar with early medieval mortuary archaeology the book is a very rich source of information, analysis, and bibliography. For beginners, on the other hand, it might be somewhat hard to follow. Chapter two, especially, assumes a certain amount of knowledge about what Merovingian cemeteries were like; however, the evidence of the cemeteries is not presented until chapters three and four. While the theory presented in chapter two is helpful in understanding these later chapters, the information in chapters three and four is even more necessary for understanding the theory. I would therefore suggest that those unfamiliar with Merovingian mortuary material read chapters three and four before chapter two.

While Effros comprehensively covers the history of interpretive theories, she does not provide a history of early medieval archaeological investigation in France, which also has changed radically in the past two centuries. Changes in interpretation impacted the way that cemeteries were excavated, and vice

versa, and this is particularly true for the last fifty years. While Effros alludes to these changes in her analysis of the cemeteries in chapter three, she does not provide a concise summary. The book also would have benefited from the use of more comparative material from other parts of Europe. Considerable work on early medieval cemeteries has taken place in England, Spain, Italy, and eastern Europe, and, while Effros mentions some conclusions, her study is not put into a broader European context. It would have been nice to know in what ways the Franks were similar to the peoples in other parts of Europe, and in what ways they differed, according to both older and more recent analysis.

Overall, however, Effros has written an interesting and readable analysis of an important body of evidence for understanding the early medieval history of France.

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