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Guy Halsall, *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009*, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2010. pp. xvii, 417. 126£. ISBN-10: 9004179992.

Review by Bernard S. Bachrach, University of Minnesota.

The Merovingian period is traditionally dated from the accession of Clovis as *rex Francorum* in 481 to the deposition of Childeric III and his replacement as king of the Franks by Pippin, Charlemagne's father, in 751. The region the Merovingians ruled was somewhat larger than modern France and covered in the neighborhood of 600,000 square kilometers. It is often characterized as the hexagon because it was bounded by the Atlantic on the west, the Channel on the north, the Rhine on the east and the Alps, the Mediterranean, and the Pyrenees on the south. During the 280 years of the Merovingian era some ten million people, on average, lived within the borders of the *regnum Francorum*, and during the course of that period somewhere in the neighborhood one hundred million men, women, and children died.

Figures of such an order of magnitude deserve our attention because they provide a perspective for any study that purports to focus on what can be learned for the study of history from Merovingian cemeteries. This background would be crucial even if someone were to assert that the population of Gaul during the Merovingian era amounted on average to no more than five million or perhaps even three million. If such were the case, the number of dead during this period would still have been in the tens of millions and there likely would have been a great many millions of people whose bodies were buried rather than left to rot in the fields or consigned to be eaten by insects and wild animals.

The title *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul* is misleading. Halsall, professor of history at York, focuses his work only on a limited area, the Metz region, where he believes "306 possible Merovingian cemeteries can be catalogued...." Of these, however, he recognizes that "Only a handful of small sites have been excavated and published." (p. 292). Halsall's arguments, by and large, are based on fewer than 600 furnished burials from this area. As a result, he is forced to recognize that his information is of "statistical insignificance" (p. 298). Halsall does not, however, regard such a limitation as an impediment. Rather, he tends to treat the information he finds as though it were statistically robust (e.g., pp. 369, 370), and defends this flawed method with the tendentious observation, "We will never have perfect data...." (p. 298).

*Cemeteries*, by and large, is a reprint of seven of Halsall's articles of which two have been revised, largely because of repetition. Something should have been done with the others as even Halsall admits, "areas of overlap and repetition remain"(p. 1). In fact, he recognizes that this collection will "probably have a wearisome effect on anyone reading this book cover-to-cover"(p. 11). In addition to the reprints, there are two previously unpublished pieces, which owe much to his previous studies. There is also an introduction and five commentaries. The latter are ostensibly scathing and largely tendentious attacks on scholars who have not agreed with Halsall's published arguments. His defense, *au fond* is self-referential and often based on claims that his critics have not properly understood him. An inadequate index of fewer than five pages rounds out the volume. There is no conclusion and no cumulative bibliography, which would have been useful.

Early on, Halsall sets out his belief that "excavated data" can "speak for themselves" (p. 13). The extreme nature of this view becomes more clear when he defends his position by characterizing as "unfortunate" the epistemologically sound observation by Philip Grierson (1959) regarding "the spade being unable to lie because it cannot speak" (p. 61). Halsall's approach not only is epistemologically unsound but more to the point, he undermines his own position as he constantly speaks for the archaeological data. His technique is to build speculation upon speculation until even an untrained reader will see that his arguments fall of their own weight. See, for example, his extended discussion of the gendering of children, despite the fact that he believes they cannot be "sexed" by anthropological methods. In another context, Halsall speculates in an extended manner regarding double male graves with much attention to homosexuality. Halsall, however, does not consider the possibility that the young men at issue may have been members of the same family. Such facts, like sexing children, can be established by DNA, a research tool in which Halsall seems to have little interest.

Halsall's main thesis, carried throughout his abuse of basic epistemology, e.g., his failure to understand the nature of a definition as necessary and sufficient (p. 21), is that the furnishing of graves in the Metz region during the Merovingian era was the result of social and political stress. As he often reiterates: "As discussed earlier, the fundamental reason for these rites should not be sought in religion but in social instability and the difficulties in the transmission of power" (p. 281). Halsall speculates that large crowds attended funerals and assumes that these crowds had the opportunity to view the corpse with its adornment for an extended period of time. There is no compelling evidence for such a ritual. However, this scenario is required for Halsall's argument because after the coffin was closed and the grave was covered with earth, the viewers would have to remember the adornment.

Halsall believes that the adornment informed observers about a wide variety of matters, e.g., status within gender. A woman of childbearing age, according to Halsall, was adorned differently from one past that age. If such a conclusion were to be drawn by crowds at a funeral, it would be necessary for the onlookers to spot two broaches, perhaps each no larger than a half-dollar, their value ascertained, and their placement remembered. It may be asked what evidence can be produced to show how the supposedly remembered adornment found on a twenty-year-old woman strengthened her relatives' social and political position? In addition, Halsall believes that both the sexing and ageing of skeletons is highly problematic, and these problems result in circular arguments. In general, it is far more likely that relatives, who buried a corpse with grave goods, were participating in a belief system regarding some aspect of an afterlife.

On the whole this book is rife with epistemologically unsound speculations, tendentious assertions, and slipshod research. Halsall defends his research methods by pointing out that one or another study was a rush job, that he faced "hostility and obstruction" from French archaeologists, his failure to examine earlier scholarly literature, which largely had preempted his views on the *Reihengräberzivilisation* (1992), was due to his youth and the inadequacies of the library at York. He withdraws his earlier views regarding the Bagaudae in regard to the so-called "Row Graves" admitting that his conclusions were founded on insufficient research. When dealing with Gregory of Tours, Halsall does not use the works of Breukelaar (1994) and Heinzelmann (1994). In his 1996 work, female status in the Metz area (chapter eight), Halsall failed to examine Alain Simmer's key study (1993) on the cemetery of Ennery which looms large on the subject. In commentary 5, Halsall tries to explain away the significance of this lapse.

The major value of this collection of essays is the insight it can provide to the careful reader regarding the problems inherent to Halsall's approach to both archaeological and written sources, which might escape attention if only one or two articles were read in a widely spaced period. For a detailed examination of Halsall's approach to both history and archaeology, see Bernard S. Bachrach, "Fifth Century Metz: Later

Roman Christian *Urbs* or Ghost Town? Antiquité Tardive 10 (2002), 363-381, which is neither refuted nor even mentioned in *Cemeteries*.

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