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Bonnie Effros, *Uncovering the Germanic Past: Merovingian Archaeology in France, 1830-1914*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xxiv + 427 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$150.00 U. S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-969671-0

Review by William J. Diebold, Reed College.

*Uncovering the Germanic Past's* subtitle is an exceptionally accurate guide to its contents. This makes Effros's a kind of book that I suspect many scholars have thought about writing, but few have carried out. The situation (at least as I imagine it) is this: Effros was trained as a historian of early medieval Europe; her first book, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* grew out of her doctoral dissertation. In the course of her research for that book on pre-modern history, Effros will have often found herself using sources collected, edited, and published in the nineteenth century, the heyday of European modernity. This situation is common enough for students of the past, but is perhaps especially striking to medievalists; our chronological field was essentially defined under modernity, but our subject was usually construed as the very opposite of the modernity that defined it.<sup>[1]</sup> Many scholars have been struck by this poignant, trenchant situation, but relatively few have acted on it in the form of a publication. And, when they have acted on it, they have often done so less than professionally, engaging in a kind of off-the-cuff historiography.

Effros is aware of the dangers of her task ("a project on modern France did not seem the most accessible path for a practising medievalist whose work usually ended at the accession of the Carolingian dynasty" [p. viii]), but in *Uncovering the Germanic Past* she displays all of the first-rate training she first received as a historian of the early Middle Ages. (Witness the book's forty-page bibliography of both published and unpublished sources.) She carried out her task with consummate skill and professionalism and it produced real results, not least because her subject, unlike most involving the early Middle Ages, was essentially unstudied before her book. As she dryly remarks: "The path taken by my research...was not overcrowded by outsiders" (p. viii).

In the course of seven chapters (plus an introduction and epilogue), Effros tells her story in no-nonsense, jargon-free prose. Her narrative is likewise straightforward. The book begins with the July Monarchy, "when efforts to document national antiquities first found firm footing in liberal government policy in post-revolutionary France" (p. 12) and ends with World War I, which Effros sees as a watershed for many reasons, including the deaths of many of the scholars who figure as key to her story. The book's overarching narrative describes how archeology, especially Merovingian archeology, still loosely defined in the early 1800s, "quietly emerged as an academic discipline and professional calling" in the early twentieth century (p. viii).

Effros begins by laying out the state of archeological research in nineteenth-century France. This involves, at least for the early part of her story, studying her subject from a provincial perspective. She concentrates especially on the learned societies that were so important to the development of archeological research (and lots of other antiquarian fields) in the nineteenth century and that are, for the contemporary American scholar, one of the most baffling, but also most charming, features of nineteenth-century French intellectual culture. (Effros rightly points to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as

a telling guide to the spirit that motivated such societies; she might also have pointed to an even more famous novel by Flaubert to make her point, for M. Homais, the pretentious town apothecary in *Madame Bovary*, is explicitly a member of one of these societies and is a perfect guide to their world.) Having myself always been fascinated with these societies, but not having been able, as Effros has, to tap into what turns out to be a now rich scholarly literature on them, I found her discussion of their mechanics fascinating. Nor is this discussion itself solely of antiquarian interest. These societies were not a marginal phenomenon; as Effros tells us, there were more than 600 provincial learned societies by 1885, with more than 100,000 members. They were, then, a significant historical phenomenon.

The research these societies promoted was generally positivist, but it was also political; this point is nicely expressed in the exhortation of a scholar writing in 1871 (so during the Franco-Prussian War): “explorers of all things obscure, let no German ever penetrate the underbrush of history without finding the footprint of a Frenchman who passed there before him” (p. 66). Politics and knowledge were thus deeply intertwined in nineteenth-century France (and probably everywhere else, although Effros is admirably historical on this point and argues her case from her facts, rather than simply assuming the contemporary view that politics lies behind all intellectual productions), so it is neither surprising nor inappropriate that the core of Effros’ book is devoted to “the politics of Merovingian archeology.”

Effros ranges widely across this subject. She treats the introduction, development, and spread of professional archeological techniques for excavation and documentation, delving into such specialized subtopics as changing views of archeological ethics or the issue of distinction, what defined a professional. Here, as elsewhere in the book, while Effros focuses on particular cases to make her points, we are not dealing with case studies *per se*; rather, Effros uses particular cases as a forum to present her deep and synthetic research. This ability to see the larger picture, without missing the power of details, is one of Effros’s great strengths and distinguishes her book from many other, more amateur, efforts at historiography by outsiders, efforts that fall very much under the sign of antiquarianism, fascinated with the detail for the detail’s sake.

Effros rightly views the representation of archeology and its discoveries as a crucial part of the history she is telling, so she has extended treatments of museums (including the story of the creation of the national museum of antiquities at St. Germain-en-Laye), the display of Merovingian-era artifacts at those characteristic nineteenth-century phenomena, the *expositions universelles* and world’s fairs, and the ways in which the Merovingian era was represented, both textually and pictorially, in newspapers and illustrated magazines.

It will come as little surprise that Effros is able to make her case that there was a politics of Merovingian archeology. The question of the origins of France, and especially the role of “Germanic” invaders in those origins (as Effros tells us early on, that term is to be understood as surrounded by scare quotes whenever it appears, as it frequently does, in her book) was, of course, a political one in nineteenth-century France. Thus, “[T]he attempt to integrate archaeological finds believed to be Germanic into a national narrative was largely unsuccessful due to the unwelcome message that they conveyed about France’s mixed origins” (p. 27). The story may be unsurprising, but its conclusion is nonetheless sobering as a deeply ironic example of unintended consequences. “A high price was to be paid for belittling this largely unwelcome evidence in French national narratives, especially since German nationalist scholars working in the interwar period would use the data to map ancient Germanic presence in large parts of Western Europe” (p. 29). This is a story that would have deep, negative consequences, including for France, in the years around World War II.[2]

Effros’s book is likely one that not many readers will consume cover to cover. Rather, it is her many detailed studies of a range of topics, always based on thorough primary and secondary research, that will likely attract most users of the book. But the text is certainly not just of antiquarian interest. Rather, it confirms the validity of a number of narratives about the history of nineteenth-century France and

Europe. These include the importance of nationalism, whose crucial role to Effros's topic I have been a pains to emphasize; of professionalization; of industrialization (railways are important to Effros's story both as a means for getting to sometimes far-flung sites but also, thanks to the process of their construction, as a means for finding sites to be excavated); and of the often-told nineteenth-century French story of centralization. None of these narratives are unfamiliar. This means that what Effros practices in this book is the kind of science Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, dubbed "normal science;" she is not shifting paradigms, but rather is filling in, in exquisite detail, a picture whose outlines have been sketched by others. As such, her book is a very welcome addition to a growing literature that traces the story and importance of the modern interest in the medieval.

## NOTES

[1] I follow here the position Otto Gerhard Oexle has expressed in many publications. See especially "Das Mittelalter und das Unbehagen an der Moderne. Mittelalterbeschwörungen in der Weimarer Republik und danach" in Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus. Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Modern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 137-162.

[2] For a thorough exploration of this historiography, see Hubert Fehr, *Germanen und Romanen im Merowingerreich. Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie zwischen Wissenschaft und Zeitgeschehen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

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