Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages


Prior to 1970 "...most medievalists neglected archaeological evidence from burial sites in favor of more familiar historical and documentary sources." p. 1 This is primarily in the United Sates, European scholars have long incorporated such evidence

Merovingian a term that was restricted to members of the Frankish ruling dynasty but has come to mean a group of people of both Germanic and indigenous descent

Merovingian Gaul was not a united political entity in the early middle ages

Chapter 1

During the Middle Ages tombs opened for saint veneration or the establishment of a religious house; By 16/17th c. other implications such as royal authority attached

Until the 19th century the study of antiquity in both France and Germany done through historical sources; archaeological data in the realm of local amateurs and “provincial patriots” p. 14

Social and national movements affecting Merovingian finds

   Enlightenment movement led to more scientific methods of collection
   hygienic concerns led to more scientific treatment of exhumed corpses
   the mass movement to “clean” medieval cemeteries led to some scholars recognizing it would be necessary to protect/preserve remains
   growing role objects were playing in building/reinforcing identity

medieval builders often employed remains serendipitously found, particularly architectural, in new constructions, particularly religious ones
recovered portable objects might have been buried with the medieval dead to idealize their image; possibly amuletic power
by 8th c. “some clerics in Gaul formulated blessings to be recited at the discovery of ancient objects in the ground.” p. 17
spolia were both a component of religious rites and practices (e.g., reliquaries) and rejected as impious; such decisions based on local cultural and political contexts and governed by the individual motivations of the cleric involved
throughout high Middle Ages clerics would occasionally order the large-scale exhumation of early medieval burials in conjunction with various religious ceremonies. In the analysis of these burials grave goods and clothing played a central role in elevating and validating the ritual nature of the activity. Thus, in a way, the description and quantification of grave goods, became a central role in the analysis of burials early on.

"Most famously, during his reign, Louis IX orchestrated the reorganization of sixteen tombs dating from the seventh to the thirteenth century in the royal necropolis of Saint-Denis. Each was adorned at this time with a stone likeness of gisant elevated above ground. The French king ordered the effigies in such a way in the church so as to reflect a monogamous model of marriage; he paired each king bearing full royal insignia with his respective queen as a symbol of the perennial nature of the kingdom. Whereas the Carolingians and Capetians were placed on the right and left aisles of the monastery church as a part of an ideological program, Louis excluded from it the remains of the only Merovingian king buried at Saint-Denis. ... During the thirteenth century, the incomography of Saint-Denis thus promoted the aura of royal immortality in France. This ambitious presentation of the Carolingian and Capetian tombs was spurred at least in part by the challenges Louis faced from the Plantagenet dynasty." p. 20 this is just an awesome little nugget of analysis

Protestant and Catholic Reformations condemned preoccupation with death in ritual and sought to exterminate and simplify burial practices; this did not have a direct effect on the treatment of archaeological remains, there was a more removed and critical attitudes towards graves in general
however, royals and nobility grew increasingly interest in the use of medieval artifacts as a way of chronicaling and venerating their lineage only in France; in Germany, interest in early medieval Germany still focused on written documents especially Tacitus’ Germania
Tacitus’ writings led many to believe that few physical remains would exist (due to burial practices) and thus scholars interested in the Merovingian period focused primarily on text
in 17th c excavators quick to assume the royal origin of graves explored undoubtedly rising from the high visibility of royalty in French culture and ceremony
beginning in the 18th c objects excavated by antiquarians began to play a role in understanding the Merovingian past along side the written
sources, however it played a secondary role to the written documents, and was still often relegated to the footnotes

18th c growing occupation with hygiene advocated the movement of of burials to outside of the cities

French revolution recast artifacts and monuments associated with the monarchy as symbols of tyranny

"The wholesale quarrying of public monuments for precious metals and lead, including more than 454 pounds of gold from royal graves used to
mint new coinage, spurred antiquaries to advocate measures protecting historical monuments during the political upheaval." p. 48

some efforts towards preservation helped counter the destruction of Merovingian remains

desire to extend access to national monuments to all citizens and to educate citizenry on the achievements of the nation

"Following the Revolution, growing recognition of France’s patrimony and the rise of nationalism led to the foundation of multiple scholarly
institutions in France geared to meet increased demand for the study, preservation, and protection of endangered artifacts. The French arrived at
this stage relatively late in comparison with the English, who had opened the Society of Antiquaries in London nearly a century earlier in 1707....In
France, by contrast, the Revolution of 1789 led to widespread damage of monuments and a corresponding reaction to protect them." 53

France institutions

- Académie celtique (1804)
- Société royale des antiquaires de France (1814)
- Inventaire général (1810)
- Comité des travaux historiques (1834)
- Congrès scientifique et archéologique de France (1834)
- Musée des antiquités nationales (1867)

Germany also saw an explosion of local antiquarian clubs in the early 19th century and the creation of collections dedicated to local history

Also occurred in Belgian with the est. of a independent monarchy and was in part an effort in the creation of national identity

It was not until the 1830s that scholars first began to use the word archaeology “specifically to refer to the excavation and study of prehistoric and
other physical remains.” Meanwhile, antiquarianism "suffered a loss of prestige and was increasingly used disparagingly to refer to the amateur
collection and study of artifacts in a philosophical or historical context." 55

In France scholars were increasingly interested in systematic organization and standardization of analysis

- called for standardization of archaeological exploration, more efficient description and cataloging system, and greater display of artifacts
- however, enforcing measures on preservation and excavation very difficult especially when so many Merovingian cemeteries found in the
  path
- of railroad construction

increase in # of finds>>increase in collectors>>increase in value of Merovingian artifacts>>increase in commercialization of artifacts

Jean-baptiste Lelaurain (the Otto Hauser of the Merovingian archaeology trade?)

Émile Socoly antiquarian who documented finds but also kept, sold, and/or donated

Philippe Delamain collector whose collection is largely now at the British Museum

"To tell the truth, when a beautiful object comes out of the ground, when a important piece is revealed under the spade, I am never indifferent to it;
but once it is taken from the earth, it loses for me half its value, and when it has been studied, it has no more value at all. I place it with goodwill
in a public collection and almost resign myself to never seeing it again." --abbé Jean-Benoît-Désiré Cohet 1855 p.63

"Just as the growing sophistication of the techniques used to date archaeological materials had allowed for the acknowledgment of the existence
of prehistoric societies in Europe, Merovingian archaeologists made important advances as a result of their increasingly reliable chronologies of
Merovingian artifacts." 65  The realization of a deep time in terms of geological and and human history stretched the chronological timeline of the
past. Rather than the medieval being an understandable blob of the near-past, new datation methods showed that a number of changes and
tweaks had occurred and pushed the medieval farther back into the realms of history not understood without study.
strong predilection at the time of Cochet for scholars to assumed much of burial tradition as a consequence of superstition, thus Cochet argued for the superficiality of the Franks' conversion to Christianity.

in the 19th century history and ethnology distinct; history was the realm of civilized people while ethnology focused on "savages"; thus, in both France and Germany, Merovingian culture was vilified while Carolingian culture was lauded.

Merovingian archaeological studies increasingly isolated because of the lack of classical or monumental artifacts as well as the perception that such objects were more Germanic than French.

emerging antiquities trade and growing public interest changed these views; display at the Petit-Palais not only reinforced the aesthetic value of these objects but also recognized their historical significance.

"ate nineteenth-century perceptions of antiquarianism and the function of grave goods, in some cases highly negative, thus left a mixed legacy for historical and archaeological studies of Merovingian mortuary remains in France and Germany during much of the twentieth century." 70

Chapter 2 Modern Assessments of Merovingian Burial

antiquarians important for suggesting that study could do more than establish chronologies

rift between professional historians and artifact amateurs continued to grow throughout the late 19th century

during the 19th century interdisciplinary approaches considered unscientific

"Fustel de Coulanges's feigned ignorance, a scarcely veiled critique of German successes in the Franco-Prussian conflict in 1870-1871, caused French scholars to portray Germanic invaders as little more than seminomadic bands of warriors cloaked in imperial legitimacy who brought with them a dislike of civilized, sedentary society." 74

European anthropologists more interested in "primitives" rather than their own ancestors' traditions and were thus disquieted by the "barbaric" nature of Merovingian funeral customs and sought legitimacy of such ideas through the argument that the development through human stages still occurred much earlier in western Europe than elsewhere.

"Scholarly rejection of antiquarianism as unprofessional and the attraction of more exotic societies in Africa and the Pacific heralded the increased isolation from mainstream academia of early medieval archaeological studies." 84

most Merovingian publications under funded, local descriptions of grave good and chronology that were not widely read and had little influence on broader trends in intellectual circles

decline in use of grave goods over 6th and 7th centuries in Gaul–become a focal point in the study of changes in Merovingian society

"Categorizing individual rites as pagan or not entirely Christian on the basis of modern standards undermines a full understanding of the adaptability and flexibility of early medieval Christianity....Christianity as inextricably tied to other social systems operating in early medieval communities, and metamorphoses in burial ritual often resulted from factors other than changes in religiosity." 86-87

economic reasons along with "Christianization" often combined to explain the changes in grave goods

Heiko Steuer
Chris Arnold

total reasons also cited
Heiko Steuer
Martin Last/Rainer Christlein

often have looked at grave goods in relation to gender/age
Guy Halsall

third line of argument is to look at grave goods in relation to ethnicity
Joachim Werner
Kurt Böhner Horst Wolfgang Böhme
Mermann Ament
Louis Maurin
Bailey Young
Heinrich Härke

"To date, the most convincing analyses of grave goods in Merovingian Gaul, including costume, have sought to categorize surviving funerary objects by function." 111

Alain Dierkens—objects associated with religious/cultural traditions and objects of status

"In the early merovingian period, when great instability existed and the political future of many elite families was uncertain, expenditure on burial represented a means of solidifying a family's position in the community or region. By the seventh century, these needs were no longer as marked" 118

Chapter 3 Grave Goods and the Ritual Expression of Identity

“A direct reading of early medieval graves therefore oversimplifies the situation, since contemporaries did not necessarily portray everyday conditions of existence in their relatives' burials. In addition, many current scholarly interpretations of funerary tradition have overvalued the goods most favored in modern society, such as gold, precious stones, and weaponry. Concentration on elite burials with objects of the finest workmanship and most precious materials has promoted a romanticized vision of early medieval male warrior culture by playing down less "extraordinary" evidence. Subjective analyses of grave material have thus too often served to reaffirm the beliefs of their modern investigators." 127

late 4th c. distinct lavishly furnished groups in western Rhine Roman cemeteries

south of Loire stronger continuity in cemeteries

both in the north of Gaul and south of the Loire decline in quantity and general diversity of mortuary goods occurred in the 6th/7th c along with an increase in number of burial grounds in relation to settlements

7th c. cemeteries served single communities and grave good deposition largely abandoned largely due to social competition

“The impact of this looting was especially marked in the south of France, where the visibility of stone sarcophagi rendered early medieval sites vulnerable to exploration and thefts....Many of the looted [Civaux] sarcophagi were thereafter used as animal troughs or steps in homes by local residents.” 132

Chapter 4

2 transformations in cemeteries from Roman to Merovingian times

1. change from incineration to interment (end of 3rd into 4th c)
2. change in orientation of graves from N-S to W-E

6th/7th c saw greater separation of elite burials from the rest of the population

“Not until the reign of Charlemagne was mound burial specifically identified as a pagan custom. This situation resulted from Charlemagne's politicization of tumuli in his legislative campaign against the newly conquered and recently converted Saxons. The Carolingians specifically forbade the Saxons to honor their relations with burial in raised mounds and mandated on pain of death that they inter their dead in Christian cemeteries.” 199-200

7th c burial in rural private churches most common form of high-status burial