

Review of: Soulat, J. (2018). *Le mobilier funéraire de type franc et mérovingien dans le Kent et sa périphérie. (Europe Médiévale, 13). Drémil-Lafage: Editions Mergoïl. 436 pp, 326 figs. ISBN 978-2-35518-078-1.*

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In this extremely valuable contribution to international archaeological scholarship on the Migration Period, Jean Soulat complements his 2009 monograph on the archaeological finds of Saxon and Anglo-Saxon character in Merovingian Gaul (*Le matériel archéologique de type saxon et anglo-saxon en Gaule mérovingienne*, Mémoire de l'AFAM XX) with a detailed presentation, analysis and interpretation of Frankish and Merovingian objects found as grave goods in south-eastern England from the fifth century AD to the seventh. Reflecting the relative amounts and range of material in question, this volume is more than twice the length of its earlier companion. The study is preceded by an English-language 'Abstract', and opens with a general historical introduction to what in both France and England is regarded as the start of the post-Roman Early Middle Ages. That is followed by a critical historical review of research in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, and from within the latter field it is indeed extremely interesting to read a French perspective on this. Moving into the heart of the research, there is then a very detailed review of relevant sites in England, from the Isle of Wight and Hampshire round to Essex but most of them, inevitably, in Kent; and especially of the classified artefact-types in question. Equal attention is paid to the analysis and interpretation of this evidence, combined with a comparison – or rather a contrast – with the range of Anglo-Saxon material known from these dates in northern Gaul. The final chapter, headed 'Conclusion', is in fact a briefer version of the opening Abstract in French.

Soulat's approach is empirically attentive, highly systematic and descriptive. In many scholarly circles for a long time now those would not be complimentary labels to attach to the work, but they are very much this publication's strengths and what recommend it. The study explicitly adopts the typological scheme used for the *Chronologie normalisée du mobilier funéraire mérovingien entre Manche et Loire* (Bulletin de liaison de l'AFAM: most recent edition 2016), although it also pragmatically and productively uses paired adjoining chronological phases (e.g. MA1/MA2) alongside the individual stages of that scheme in order to trace the development of the cross-Channel rela-

tionship over time. Soulat notes that in some cases broader attributions to undivided *Mérovingien Ancien* or *Mérovingien Récent* phases are possible, but regards those as too broad to be interpretatively useful. His survey of the typology has assembled a great deal of genuinely useful detail on specific types which will make this a valuable reference source for years to come. Alongside his adoption of the *Chronologie normalisée* framework, Soulat explains his own more individual distinction between *franc* and *mérovingien* as cultural and chronological labels. The distinction certainly has validity in historical terms, and underlines substantial changes in cross-Channel relationships between the fifth century and the sixth, although perhaps at the cost of begging questions about how continuous the development of such relationships may have been – and what it may actually mean in the wider critical perspective to label material types as 'Frankish' as opposed to 'Merovingian'.

I have to admit to causing raised eyebrows in a (Standard Class) carriage on a train from Paddington to South Wales for laughing out loud upon reading, just as we were passing the English Heritage offices in Swindon, concerning the 2013 report *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework* (Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 33) edited by myself with Alex Bayliss, "cette étude remarquable perd probablement au fil des pages le lecteur dont le but premier n'est pas la connaissance méticuleuse de l'élaboration de l'analyse mais ce qu'il peut en tirer dans l'objectif d'une utilisation régulière." Je ne peux que dire "Oui, c'est vrai, d'accord." It would, however, have been better in the wider context if Soulat's study had made more use of the revised typologies produced by Karen Høilund Nielsen in that volume, especially for weaponry (shield bosses and spearheads), and of the evaluation of the dating of Continental types of belt-fitting in the English chronology. It is worth emphasizing, too, that glass beads remained outside the scope of Soulat's analysis but should in the future provide both extensive and important supplementary evidence.

The large amount of data assembled is nonetheless carefully, accurately and informatively explored, primarily in terms of its chronological and spatial distribution. In terms of the early Frankish material – which is inevitably sparse – Essex, through Mucking, surprisingly outscores Kent in numbers of identified finds, while there is a smaller amount from Sussex, and a few finds from both Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Chronologically, the influx of Merovingian material rises markedly

to a peak in phase MA2 (c. AD 520/530–560/570). The chronological profile, which is clearly presented in Soulat's figure 247 and discussed particularly over pages 307–11, does need to be viewed in light of the overall changes in frequency of datable Anglo-Saxon graves from the fifth century to the seventh: nevertheless its peak may actually coincide with a phase in which the overall frequency had already passed its zenith in Anglo-Saxon cemetery archaeology. This suggests then, perhaps not directly a causative factor, but at least a further dimension to be built into attempts to contextualize and explain the dramatic fluctuations in burial practice in the Early Anglo-Saxon Period. Even in this mid-sixth-century phase there are clearly marked concentrations of the Continental material around Canterbury in East Kent and Rochester towards the mouth of the Medway.

Soulat proceeds to select eleven Anglo-Saxon cemeteries for closer evaluation, all in Kent except Mucking, and particularly looks to see if the burials with this material are grouped in any way. Some clustering is indeed evident, although it is rarely strongly pronounced, and indeed contextually one might add that many other variables also tend to suggest comparably faint but detectable patterns. In interpreting the material, the author's neatly categorical approach is very much to the fore, as he sub-divides the possibilities into aspects of shared costume, social relationships which might be matters of Continental influence/Anglo-Saxon emulation or of the presence of incomers, and finally the practical display of a Continental (Frankish or Merovingian) identity. In broader terms, he finds it helpful to employ an opposition between 'direct' and 'indirect' diffusion of material culture: those terms in fact represent two poles of a spectrum of relationships between the objects and the people who are associable with them, the former very directly representing the presence of Continental individuals, the latter contacts and exchange. Soulat's interpretation of the evidence leads him to note very clearly that there is no single, nor even any one dominant, explanation; it is, all the same, interesting to note the room he gives for what he calls 'commercial' factors, and particularly his interest in the possibility of travelling craftsmen and the influence on local production they might have had. It should be a useful supplementary point to note that it is perhaps away from the south-eastern corner of England, not least in Cambridgeshire and East Anglia, that we may find more persuasive examples of Merovingian-derived types such as the radiate-headed brooches (*fibules ansées à cinq digitations*) which display a regional consistency that implies local production.

That is, of course, a further, although closely adjacent zone of research to which the material in this book can be applied in future work. Similar, and particularly intriguing in light of the quantitative density of evidence of Frankish/Merovingian influence in south-eastern England represented by buckles and other belt-fittings is the increasing assemblage of Quoit Brooch-style belt-fittings that have been found in Brittany. Soulat can otherwise quite rightly stress that the Anglo-Saxon material found reciprocally across northern Gaul from Normandy to Flanders is markedly different from what went the other way: not least the hand-made pottery that strongly implies resettlement at a demotic level. In social terms, Soulat does not find the Frankish/Merovingian material in the more typical cemeteries of south-eastern England to represent a really high-level, royal elite but rather what can be called 'secondary' or even (meaningfully) 'ordinary' high status. This is contrasted to Ian Wood's argument – put forward long ago now – for Merovingian political dominance and royal ambitions in south-eastern England. However, the archaeological material really represents a different, possibly a supplementary, level from that represented in the historical sources Wood was interpreting, not a decisive counter-argument.

Presentationally, this publication is of excellent quality. One may have a few small quibbles about the consistency of illustration in certain cases, but without doubt it is a most important contribution to European archaeology. It is very pleasing too to see such a work offering a Francophone readership not only the opportunity but also encouragement to engage more fully with international and comparative archaeological study – and concurrently to show the primarily British group of specialists working on Anglo-Saxon archaeology why it should engage with French archaeology and French-language scholarship. This book is essential to any serious library collection in this field, and represents outstanding value for money.

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