

BONNIE EFFROS, Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World. Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 2002. \$45,-. ISBN 0-271-02196-9. xiv, 255 Seiten mit zahlreichen Abbildungen.

As its title implies, Bonnie Effros's misleadingly diminutive-looking book "Caring for Body and Soul" makes an ambitious attempt to deal with both the beliefs and the practices involved in the treatment of the dead in the Merovingian realm of the 5th to 8th century A.D. The idea of an afterlife beyond the grave, both in a spiritual form and a bodily resurrection, is crucial to the Christianity that was the public religion of this area. Yet there were detailed difficulties with this doctrine – not least the whereabouts and experiences of the soul between death and resurrection – that exercised the Church Fathers severely. On the practical side of things, burial archaeology provides extensive evidence of how this society dealt with its dead throughout the period. A few of the known graves are the burials of the sort of high-ranking secular and ecclesiastical officials whose obsequies are also described or referred to in historical sources. These, however, are a small and exceptional minority in the archaeological whole, and it remains a difficult task to link the two forms of evidence, and the two aspects of the study, in an inter- or cross-disciplinary approach.

Effros's general thesis is that the story of developing burial practices in her area of interest – in many respects a pre-eminent place in the earliest post-Roman centuries of western Europe – is that of how the clergy fought for greater influence through their control of the dead. By tradition, both Roman and Germanic, burial had been a means of expression through which families asserted their identity and their status. This could hardly be fully supplanted by ecclesiastical interests, but *inter alia* by encouraging a greater emphasis on the performed aspects of funerary rituals at the expense of material investment in grave goods, memorials and tomb-structures, the clergy could insinuate themselves into a literally vital role. Effros emphasizes how early regulations against the burial of objects in the grave were concerned only with ecclesiastical articles such as eucharistic utensils or wafers, relics or vestments, so that the Church could retain the use and control of these items. Although this proposition is entirely credible, a complicating factor that is not addressed as directly as it might be is the question of how distinct secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies ever really were at any stage in this process. Another lurking worry is the fact that we know so little about the meanings of pre-Christian burial practices, especially in the Germanic traditions, and the vague though confident declaration that these "unwritten rites ... served important cosmological functions" does not allay this concern. Similarly the author documents the Church's dislike of the particularly southern practice of successive interments in stone sarcophagi, but does not provide a clear explanation of the clergy's interference in this case.

The first main chapter is on 'The Symbolic Significance of Clothing for the Dead', a well-worn topic in recent archaeology though no less relevant for that. The survey is helpful and appropriate but has little new to say. Chapter II, on 'Lay and Clerical Regulation of Grave Goods and Cemeteries', opens with a summary of the historiography of this topic since the 19th century which is valuable not least in explaining peculiar, continuing concerns in German-language as contrasted with Francophone or Anglophone scholarship. Chapter III, on 'Grave Markers as *Memoria*' [sic], provides a thorough overview of the provision of memorial epitaphs on stone in Merovingian Gaul. Particularly interesting here is the analysis and classification of the contents of the inscriptions, and the evidence there for a shift from a confident emphasis on the well-being of the soul of a good Christian in the afterlife earlier in the period to growing anxiety over the destiny of the soul later on. However, the provision of epitaphs declined severely from the

later 7th century; again, it seems, displaced by performative rituals such as prayer and psalmody.

Placing both the character and the significance of the Merovingian evidence in the broader context of western Europe at this date, it is striking that this is one of several features where the state of affairs on the Continent contrasts quite remarkably with what was going on in Anglo-Saxon England. Memorial epigraphy became well established in the newly consolidated Christian communities of England. Anglo-Saxon practices and regulations were also quite different on the burial of ecclesiastical vestments and objects, and on the separation of ‘pagan’ and Christian burial places. The Anglo-Saxons are also noted to have developed cults of royal saints well in advance of the Merovingians.

The last two substantial chapters of the book, Chapters IV (‘Membership in the Kingdom of the Elect’) and V (‘Christian Liturgy and the Journey to the Next World’) are concerned largely with Christian funerary rituals and liturgy. Inevitably this reinforces the picture drawn of a steadily increasing clericentricity in this area of cultural practice, although progressing only slowly from clerical selectivity over who could be afforded a special Christian burial to the involvement of priests in funerary provision at anything like a public level. The role of liturgical ceremonies in the social manipulation of the commemoration of saints in the 7th century is nicely revealed. The gradual introduction of the sacraments of extreme unction and final communion to the preparations for an imminent death is also usefully charted. Greater emphasis on such preparedness inevitably went hand-in-hand with the greater anxiety over the destiny facing the soul already noted. An especially important doctrinal element that was elaborated alongside these ritual developments was the concept of purgatory. Effros comes teasingly close to enunciating the powerful proposition that an ideology of individualism was promoted by the Church as a means for it to challenge, undermine, and rebuild an earlier social order around itself.

Overall, then, this book can be commended as a stimulating discussion of a substantial body of evidence concerning cultural practices of genuinely far-reaching significance. It provides a detailed introduction to much of the relevant evidence, although admittedly at the expense of becoming somewhat slow-paced and on occasions repetitive. It is also, perhaps inevitably, the case that there are certain areas within which the author is solid and secure, others less so. A few potentially useful archaeological contributions are either missed or rather poorly handled: the amount of work done on textiles and garments of this period is greatly under-estimated, for instance, and it is strange that cremation is discussed as a non-Christian funerary practice only in its Roman manifestation. A missed opportunity for exploration is the links between the *Goldblattkreuze* and the symbolic use, and even iconographic decoration, of coinage. From literary sources, the tradition of “Soul and Body” poems – which admittedly on the whole prove what difficulty early-medieval Christians had in conceiving of and expressing a coherent view of the relationship between the spirit and the flesh – is also neglected. It is perhaps most disconcerting of all to be advised that the author has another book due (published, in fact, in February 2003) on “Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology”. How much, one wonders, has she held back?

There is certainly space left for a further book on this general subject, but this does not make Bonnie Effros’s first book of the pair any less one that can be warmly recommended both to students, as an introduction, and to a more advanced readership, as an informed and thoughtful contribution to a significant area of debate.

Cardiff CF10 3XU
Wales UK
E-Mail: hines@cardiff.ac.uk

John Hines
Cardiff University
School of History and Archaeology
PO Box 909