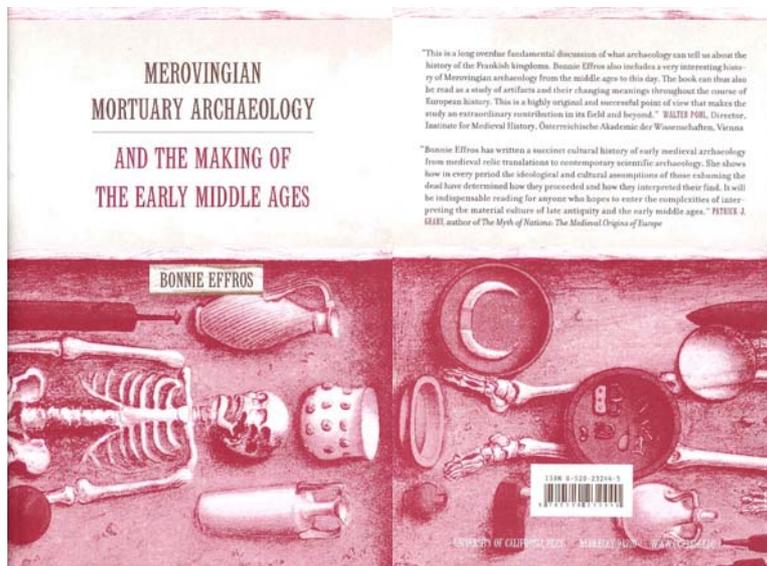


**Effros, B. 2003. Merovingian mortuary archaeology and the making of the early Middle Ages. – Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press (The transformation of the classical Heritage 35)**

Book review by R. Annaert



The subject of this book is the Late Roman and Frankish mortuary practice all over North-Western Europe. Effros does not give a summary of different mortuary rituals in different regions and different centuries nor an explanation and interpretation of the various practices which were in use during the Merovingian period. By writing this book she rather wants to focus attention on how mortuary practices were interpreted and misinterpreted in the past. Hereby she tries to explain why such interpretations and misinterpretations came into being. On one hand there is the political national identity under which influence scholars came to interpretations (French scholars against German scholars) and on the other hand there are the scientific points of departure for interpreting mortuary rituals (written sources, archaeological and material sources, ecclesiastical sources, ethnical and anthropological sources, historical sources). Her conclusion however is that only a balanced and objective study of all available sources can lead scholars to the most acceptable interpretation of the various mortuary practices in the Early Middle Ages. In each chapter of the book she debates on the importance of multidisciplinary in the interpretation of early medieval sources. In some cases, a renewed study of excavations executed in the past and of old material sources is indispensable.

In chapter 1 and 2 Effros gives a chronological résumé of the history of the inquiry into Merovingian mortuary practices. In the first chapter she constitutes a historiographical essay in which she addresses the way in which contemporary events and intellectual and political developments affected scholarly interpretations of Merovingian mortuary remains from the Middle Ages through the early modern period (antiquaries, historians and archaeologists). In the second chapter she discusses the way in which professional scholars dealt with the antiquarian legacy (significance of grave goods).

In chapter 3 and 4 Effros overviews some mortuary rituals and the interpretation given to them. In the third chapter the attention is focussed on the invisible practices: grave goods and the ritual expression of identity (royal graves, grave goods as an idealized image of the deceased and some examples of some local graveyards with their own practices and traditions). The fourth chapter deals with the visible aspects of mortuary rituals: grave markers, coffins and sarcophagi, spatial organization and topography of cemeteries, constructions and burial churches.

It becomes clear that in the first period of the Merovingian dynasty, an unstable political period, different powerful families tried to express and consolidate their power by interring their deceased in lavishly furnished graves. In the later period the accent for expressing familiar power was shifted from the material grave goods to a high level position of the grave in the cemetery or church.

Effros' work however is founded on a rather incoherent mass of arguments and repetitions. It seems to me that the greatest lack in this work is the opposition of examples of old excavations and those of recent excavations. Recent research is yielding a lot of multidisciplinary findings in one report. Archaeological researchers nowadays are scholars beware of the danger for misinterpretation. One can ask which audience this book is written for. Nevertheless Effros is giving a complete historiographical review. Of particular interest are

the good indexes, the numerous footnotes and the extensive bibliography covering the whole Merovingian society in North West Europe.

Effros, B. 2003. Merovingian mortuary archaeology and the making of the Early Middle Ages. – Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press (The transformation of the classical Heritage 35). 272 pp. ISBN 0-520-23244-5. Price \$ 70.00/£ 45.00 (hardback).