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Guy Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization: The Merovingian Region of Metz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). xx + 307 pp., 100 illustrations.

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Early medieval burial remains in Gaul have received scholarly attention since at least the seventeenth century owing to the precious nature of the artifacts which were interred with the dead. By the nineteenth century, skeletal traces in these graves also attracted notice due in part to the dubious contributions of phrenology to academic debates on national origins. In his first book, Guy Halsall has therefore rightly noted the problematic nature of the Merovingian archaeological evidence excavated during the past 150 years in the region of Metz. By collecting this often poorly published data and organizing it more scientifically, he has better ascertained what material may be reliably salvaged for a the study of distant communities which have left scholars few other clues.

Halsall's underlying assumption in looking both at written and archaeological evidence from the region of Metz is his confidence that "cultural practices are deliberate, meaningfully constituted and historically contingent." (3) He has employed for this reason anthropological models which lend more weight to burial as a ritual process than studies which have oversimplified the custom as a passive marker of religious belief or ethnic identity. Instead, Merovingian graveyards constituted "an arena for competitive discourse, with burials as statements." (247) During the uncertain sixth century, they reflected the status and ambitions of the families who laid their dead to rest publicly before the larger community. In his highly original study, Halsall also succeeds in demonstrating that at this time, age and sex often influenced the composition of an individual grave more than family wealth. He suggests that in the seventh century, in contrast, as the number of cemeteries increased in proportion to the communities they served, the potential audiences for funerals grew smaller. These changes, in conjunction with greater economic and political stability, led to the decreased importance of the fleeting display of grave goods, and contributed to interest in more permanent, above-ground markers ultimately used in late-seventh century aristocratic funerary churches in the region of Metz.

By concentrating on Metz, Halsall provides a holistic analysis of Merovingian social interaction reflective of its geographical context that will influence the manner in which historians and archaeologists view this subject. His methodology, which incorporates a sharp critical assessment of many well-known written and material sources, seeks to avoid the generalities of "gradualism" that have plagued more imprecise studies of early medieval

mentalities. (279-280) He addresses multiple factors which contributed to social interaction, including ethnic identity, legal status and privilege, production and trade, marital custom, inheritance, gender construction, life-cycle ceremonies and settlement size, function, regularity and composition. By adopting a limited geographical scope for greater accuracy in assessing a rite of great local variability, Halsall has not narrowed but rather broadened and raised the level of the historical discourse. Through original analysis of individual cemeteries, he has revealed the enormous potential and complexity of Merovingian social structure including previously neglected factors of gender and age.

The majority of Halsall's text focuses on extant and written archaeological evidence giving meaning to sixth- and seventh-century cemeteries and settlement. Establishing more exact definitions for various categories of social hierarchy and habitation used in legal sources, charters, and hagiographical and historical accounts, he has demonstrated the value for historians and archaeologists of terminological precision gleaned from a close assessment of contemporary sources rather than reliance upon the interpolation of more recent sources. Although this intensive analysis does not make for light reading, the preponderance of maps, graphs and charts supports the text and contributes to the careful documentation of dynamic change identified by Halsall. These chapters represent meticulous building blocks to support the heart of Halsall's argument regarding the nature of Merovingian social change following the breakdown of the *civitas* in the late fourth century, and in response to the increased stability of this landscape during the seventh and eighth centuries. He is able to penetrate beyond the sparse number of documented events of this period to glimpse certain values upheld by the immediate kin at the funerals of the deceased, although admittedly his portrayal of the institution of slavery is rather optimistic. (55-59) Halsall's assumption that poorly furnished children's graves indicate that they did not inherit social status from their parents is likewise uncharacteristically inconsistent, (254) since he admits that the status of elderly women might be expressed otherwise than through grave goods. (257)

Of great importance are Halsall's ground-breaking observations regarding gender construction in Merovingian mortuary rites. By dividing goods into male, female, and "neutral" categories on the basis of their distribution in graves sexed solely by means of physical anthropology (which one indeed hopes was the case in some of his less reliable archaeological samples), he demonstrates that burial rites reflected social mores in the particular communities where they were practiced. He argues convincingly that the construction of gender did not reflect a simple polarity, nor was it expressed similarly among members of different levels of the social hierarchy. (61) Images of masculinity and femininity, moreover, were constantly refined. Most interesting among the conclusions of the monograph is his suggestion based on the number of gender-specific artifact-

types buried with the deceased, that sixth-century women appear to have been acknowledged as adults at puberty whereas their male counterparts rarely received weaponry as adult members of their community before the age of twenty. These observations contrast with contemporary legal codes in Frankish lands, which proclaimed that male and female children came of age at the same time, events marked by women being betrothed and men receiving their first haircut. (72) Instead, burial customs appear to have reflected the value placed on such individuals, just as the Salic and Ribuarian legal codes awarded some of the highest compensation (*wergild*) to free families who lost women of childbearing age. This prestige was nonetheless fleeting. After the age of approximately forty, women tended to be buried with more neutral objects and few gender-specific goods, indicating that their role in the community had again changed. Halsall observes that this practice is rather different from that for men, since even males over sixty years of age were occasionally buried with gender-specific objects. This discussion contributes to a recognition that especially in the sixth century, the rite of grave good deposition was an active one in which gender interacted with ethnicity, rank, age, legal, status, and a variety of other dimensions of social organization to form the multi-faceted and mutable identity of each individual as expressed by her or his kin group.

Readers will gain a great deal from Halsall's critique and assessment of archaeological reports of Merovingian Metz; with his grasp of historical as well as archaeological evidence, he is able in some cases to render comprehensible the significance of these sites far better than the archaeologists excavating these sites. He conveys a clear interpretive model for the expression of social status and the distribution of settlement in early medieval Metz in as much as such is possible within the constraints of the surviving evidence. Although Halsall agrees with his mentor Edward James regarding the impossibility of establishing "an overall theory" for the study of cemeteries, (149) he has nonetheless set a very high standard for the interpretation of this complex and often contradictory wealth of archaeological evidence. The "social theatre" of early medieval cemeteries will hopefully not again be viewed as merely fashionable but a locus for the competitive expression of dynamic and diverse human relationships.

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