6.4. The Early Days of Merovingian Archaeology
Bearbeiterin: Bonnie Effros

Until the 1970s, the objectivity of archaeological research on the early Middle Ages was largely taken for granted. However, with the rise of more introspective theoretical approaches to archaeological excavation such as ‘new archaeology’ in Britain, scholars began to question whether material remains from this distant era were as straightforward as was once thought. This issue was particularly acute in the analysis of grave sites, which were, until recently, the main source of archaeological information about the early Middle Ages. Archaeologists recognized that graves were not chance deposits or a mirror of the identity of the dead but rather symbolic or performative sites constructed with an eye toward impressing the living, securing safe passage to the afterlife, or reaffirming the identity of surviving kin or communities. In the last decade, scholars have delved still deeper into the issue of archaeological objectivity. Recent studies have reassessed the way in which archaeologists’ own biases (often a product of the historical and geographical contexts in which they worked) have shaped their interpretation of the symbolism of archaeological material. One of the main issues addressed by such work on the history of archaeology is the longstanding privileging of ethnic identity over other kinds of expression (whether that of status, gender, age, etc.) in grave analysis.

My own work in conjunction with the Wittgenstein project on identity has focused on the earliest decades of the discipline of archaeology in France. In particular, I have been interested in identifying some of the contemporary preoccupations that influenced the work of nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeologists excavating and studying the remains of the Merovingian period in France. By pointing to the interpretive challenges these trailblazers faced in working with unfamiliar archaeological remains and suggesting some of the structural obstacles that prevented them from finding sponsorship and an audience for their publications, I have been able to demonstrate how certain concepts entered into common archaeological parlance in this period. Indeed, the question is not an irrelevant one since many of the concepts we have long taken for granted in archaeology, including heavy emphasis on ethnic identity, date from this epoch and are a product of the nationalist struggles that dominated politics in France (just as the rest of Europe) in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

My research on nineteenth-century archaeology began with the support of a postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Medieval Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (200-2002); I also received research funding in subsequent years from the American Philosophical Society as well as Binghamton University (where I was based until 2009). My interaction with the scholars who form a part of the Wittgenstein project began with participation in two conferences in 2005 and 2006. At the first, “Vergangenheit und Vergegenwärtigung: Frühes Mittelalter und europäische Erinnerungskultur”, I gave a paper on the lack of impact early archaeologists on anyone outside their immediate circles. In particular, I focused my analysis on a case study of artists, whose depictions of the Merovingian period were completely anachronistic, and failed to reflect contemporary advances being made in archaeology. At the second gathering the following year, “Archäologie der Identität”, I
presented research in progress on the way in which physical anthropology contributed to nineteenth-century debates about ethnic identity. Both were published in volumes of the Institut für Mittelalterforschung (see bibliography for details). A longer stay in Vienna in spring 2007 allowed me to interact closely with the Wittgenstein project members, whose work on various aspects of identity-building was invaluable to my thinking about this project. During this research visit, I completed work on a chapter of my book manuscript “Uncovering the Germanic Past: Merovingian Archaeology in France, 1830-1914” (Oxford, forthcoming).

**Publikationen**


**Uncovering the Germanic Past: Merovingian Archaeology in France 1830-1914** (book manuscript under review).