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Response to Felice Lifshitz's review of **Bonnie Effros**, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World*. University Par: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. xiii + 255 pp. Abbreviations, acknowledgements, maps, figures, notes, select bibliography, and index. $49.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-02196-9.

Response by Bonnie Effros, Binghamton University (SUNY).

I welcome this opportunity to respond to Felice Lifshitz's recent comments and address a number of the important issues she has raised. For the majority of readers of H-France who are not medievalists and are thus likely unfamiliar with the literature on this subject, I will open with the observation that Lifshitz's review of my book differs considerably from its positive reception by historians and archaeologists in the three years since this work has appeared.[1] Having reread my book to identify why her reaction to the work diverged so sharply from that of other colleagues, I find that many of her criticisms derive largely from disappointment in the limited range of evidence for early medieval burial custom, and thus my decision not to organize the extant sources in a sufficiently chronological narrative. In responding to her review, I will lay out the reasons for my structural organization of the evidence marshaled in my book and explain why the varied sources related to material culture did not lend themselves to presentation in a more traditional historical format. I will conclude the discussion by addressing some of the more specific issues raised in her review.

To my surprise, Lifshitz, an accomplished specialist in Merovingian and Carolingian historiography and liturgy, has expected the application of the same rules of evidence for my survey of the written sources related to changes in Merovingian funerary custom and beliefs in the afterlife that she is accustomed to using in her studies of early medieval liturgical manuscripts and hagiographical traditions. Her greater confidence in the written (as opposed to material) evidence has led her to place a very high bar on what demands must be made of the scarce primary sources related to early medieval burial custom in Gaul, which she argues should have been organized chronologically instead of by genre and theme.

At the start of Lifshitz's critique of the book is the fact that the sources, whether narrative, legal, or epigraphical, are so limited in number and scope that they cannot be studied in the manner she finds comprehensive. She complains that the evidence is largely focused on clerics and elites, and thus does not provide a sufficiently rounded picture of the decline in grave goods she would like to see charted more clearly in the extant written documentation of the Merovingian period. She insists that there be more descriptive narrative material, richer and more nuanced legal evidence, a detailed study of early medieval epigraphy (in a field that has been underserved since the late nineteenth century), and the provision of liturgical sources in a period for which we have almost none. Would that this were possible! In undertaking a comprehensive survey of the evidence for burial custom, I was unable to compensate for the woefully inadequate sources for the Merovingian period which focused almost exclusively upon the lay and clerical elite. What documentation survives on burial custom seems to have served the main objectives of promoting and protecting the bodies, possessions, souls, and graves of saints and the nobility. As I will explain below, these shortcomings of the historical record nonetheless did not constitute worthy grounds for rejecting altogether a discussion of this important subject.

To be certain, the written sources on burial practice were never meant to stand on their own, but were better served by being interpreted in conjunction with the evidence of the rites and artifacts with which they were intrinsically bound. The argument contained in the monograph was originally presented in tandem with the archaeological evidence, now published separately in a companion volume, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and reviewed for H-France in September 2003. This forum thus provides a unique opportunity for me to draw attention to the structural difficulties that still exist today for scholars engaged in interdisciplinary research. Because of an ill-founded perception in the publishing industry that one cannot mix fields and effectively sell books, many editors presume that readership for the work would be reduced by the inclusion of evidence from two disciplines (rather than the more logical possibility that the audience might double). I was thus pushed to take the unusual step of dividing the book in two. While certainly the career benefits of publishing two monographs within six months cannot be denied, this expedient solution resulted in the loss of the natural and inherent interplay between the material and written sources. It also obscured one of my central objectives of exposing historians and archaeologists alike to evidence with which they were less familiar. If anything, the work currently under review suffered greater damage in the process of cleaving it from its sister since the written evidence on burial practices was far more limited in scope (and even more exclusively focused on elites) than the archaeological source material discussed in what became the other volume. Yet, the documentary, legal, hagiographical, and epigraphical evidence nonetheless remained essential to my argument, since they provided the most likely possibilities for interpreting the impetus for observable changes in the archaeological and art historical record for mortuary ritual evident over the course of the Merovingian period.

Due to restricted quantity of written sources, the strictly chronological organization favored by Lifshitz as the appropriate methodological approach to the subject would have necessitated comparisons of largely unrelated sources, something which Lifshitz deplores in her review on the occasions I engage disparate sources in the book to make a point. Rather than suggest that the written sources on burial tradition built upon one another in a linear fashion, which they did not, the book focuses on change occurring on a broader scale and in multiple contexts. These issues were most effectively dealt with together with other similar sorts of evidence, which I present thematically by chapter. While this approach by necessity overshadowed the peculiarities of regional developments, which Lifshitz rightly suggests, it had the advantage of allowing me to pool together extremely fragmented remains which could not stand on their own. The strength of the sources is in their independent witness to adaptations of ritual custom that corresponded to changing needs of the inhabitants of Gaul over the course of three centuries. This revolution in burial tradition may be seen in evolving formulae employed in burial inscriptions, the types of artifacts and locations chosen for the burial of early medieval inhabitants, the liturgy employed in funerary ceremony, and more basic changes in perceptions of the afterlife in far-flung parts of the Merovingian kingdoms (and for that matter, well beyond the regions highlighted in this book).

In responding to Lifshitz's specific criticisms, I will limit my comments on particulars since, as noted above, many derive from Lifshitz's misgivings about the scarcity of written documentation on issues related to burial custom. Certainly, as I repeatedly acknowledge in the volume with respect to the problems of the evidence, I make no claims to having solved the many difficulties that exist in understanding burial ritual in the early medieval period. There is no doubt that the surviving written sources provide a largely clerical perspective of mortuary ritual, and do not explain satisfactorily much of the archaeological evidence at our disposal. Like studies of the material remains of early medieval burial practice, early medieval documents are virtually exclusively focused on the customs, beliefs, and appearance of elite inhabitants of the Merovingian kingdoms. I thus recognize that most of the sources at my disposal are best suited to a discussion "meant to increase recognition of the many types of rituals that helped to create and reinforce and idealized vision of a community's divine and human hierarchies" (p. 5).

In general, legislation of any sort related to burial is scarce, and surviving legal sources concentrate for the most part on theft from dead bodies (in the Frankish law codes just as those of other Germanic kingdoms) and the reuse of tombs (in legislation promulgated in ecclesiastical councils held periodically in different parts of late antique and early medieval Gaul like Auxerre and Mâcon that both regulated against the reuse of tombs). In discussing measures formulated in secular and religious contexts, I concentrate in chapter two on their impact on the treatment of graves and the dead which I felt to be most prescient given the aims of the study. Indeed, much of the narrative and archaeological evidence suggests that these laws were not applied effectively since grave robbery was rampant in many regions. My suggestion that family members may have been interested in retaining the goods from the graves of family members was posited in part on the basis of the wealth involved in high status burials and the intimate knowledge of kin groups of what possessions had been deposited in the graves of relatives (pp. 54-56). The strong possibility of jilted survivors was proferred in a story narrated by Gregory of Tours, who described Gunthram Boso's orchestration of a bold robbery of the grave of an affluent relative shortly after her burial.[2] Although there is no way to judge how typical this case was, the archaeological evidence suggests that the likelihood was high that the incident was not unusual. There is repeated archaeological evidence pointing to the fact that early medieval thieves seem to have known enough about their victims buried in largely unmarkered graves to concentrate their digging on the parts of the sepulchers most likely to contain jewelry or weaponry (p. 59).

The bulk of Lifshitz's criticisms in the latter half of her review narrow in on what she sees as the "unnecessary rigidity" of my reading of increasing attention to the uncertainty of salvation from the seventh century onward expressed in grave stones and the liturgy. In her characterization of my work, Lifshitz has reduced and distorted the thrust of my argument by highlighting one or two issues to the exclusion of all others. Some of my analysis in chapter three indeed addresses the epigraphical record of the seventh and eighth century, an epoch much neglected until recently because of the misdating of many inscriptions to an earlier period by the nineteenth-century epigrapher Edmond Le Blant. In light of the recent advances by scholars like Nancy Gauthier and Françoise Descombes in recognizing the late dates of these tombstones, I concentrate in part on identifying some of the significant features of these stones in their new chronological context.[3] In my discussion of some of the emerging patterns of these stones, I highlight some of the innovations of these epitaphs that included requests for prayers on behalf of the deceased (p. 116ff) and confident acknowledgement of the efficacy of prayer in achieving eternal rest (p. 119). Indeed the reference made to prayers later contained in the Gelasian Sacramentary, which Lifshitz singles out for attention, is not central to the argument but illustrative of a general progression exhibited in the epigraphical evidence. Nowhere do I state that requests for prayers included only priests but instead, on repeated occasions, I refer to the prayers of the faithful (p. 116; 117; 128). Lifshitz's misreading of the text, which seems to have been intended to establish a foil against which to contrast her own interpretation of these issues, has little connection with anything explicitly argued in the work under review here.

Lifshitz also contends on a number of occasions that I have unfairly pushed the sources into demonstrating increasing uncertainty about the fate of the Christian soul in the afterlife in the seventh and eighth centuries; she repeatedly asserts that my approach leads me to make a dramatic and forced contrast between the pre- and post-seventh centuries. Yet, here again, the argument contained in the book is not that which is described in her review and has more to do with her emphasis on these issues than my own. The discussion presented in chapter four focuses on significant change in attitudes toward the afterlife occurring not in the seventh (as she has suggested I claim) but beginning as early as the fifth century with the writings of Augustine of Hippo and gaining even greater currency through the particularly vivid and influential *Dialogues* of Gregory I (p.162). My characterization of this transitional process, as documented in my footnotes, builds on the consensus established in the noteworthy studies of Aron Gurevich, Jacques le Goff, Éric Rebillard, Isabel Moreira, and most recently, Peter Brown (whose research on this subject became known to me only after publication of the book).[4] In reading

Lifshitz's comments, I was particularly surprised by her venom regarding a relatively uncontentious issue that provided the backdrop for my interpretation of the burial evidence.

Finally, Lifshitz criticizes my attention to the few liturgical manuscripts that survive for the period due to the inordinate weight I have put on a small amount of evidence (but large in comparison to what little survives for the fifth and sixth century). She suggests that I did so to favor the general contention in my book that priests were claiming an increasingly important role in the funerary ritual by the end of the Merovingian period. She, by contrast, wishes to show greater continuity with the late antique period (which ironically is exactly I suggest in the book, an argument that is supported by Éric Rebillard's magisterial exposition of exactly how little liturgical custom for the dead existed in Gaul as late as the fifth century).[5] I will be the first to admit that the virtual absence of liturgical sources prior to the seventh century is an insurmountable problem, not only in terms of knowing what rites were being performed for the dead, but also with respect to our understanding of how widely they were performed (p.171). This gap means, however, that Lifshitz's comment that "some liturgists have explained the development differently, namely, as a change from a training regime under which young priests learned to perform liturgical rites through oral instruction and hands-on experience, to one under which written guides were produced, disseminated and utilized by celebrants" is equally lacking in firm support in the extant source material.

To be fair, I find Lifshitz's explanation of the dearth in surviving liturgical manuscripts for much of the Merovingian period a thoughtful solution to the difficulties encountered in dealing with Christian practice and the role of priests in early medieval Gaul. At the same time, however, I must decry her distortion of certain segments of my book in this review as an inappropriate setting in which to promote her alternative vision of the role of the Merovingian clergy. It would, after all, be far more constructive in this forum to discuss the underlying and unspoken rift between our approaches and debate the appropriate role to be played by evidence of material culture in our understanding of historical changes that transformed both ritual and belief in the early Middle Ages.

NOTES

[1] See most recently, Howard Williams, "Review article: Rethinking early medieval mortuary archaeology," *Early Medieval Europe* 13.2 (2005): 195-217.

[2] Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 8.21, in Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison (eds.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1.1 (Hannover: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani, 1951), pp. 387-388. Guy Halsall, "Female status and power in early Merovingian central Austrasia: the burial evidence," *Early Medieval Europe* 5 (1996): 1-2.

[3] Françoise Descombes, ed. *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne* {RICG) 15 (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1985); Nancy Gauthier, ed. *RICG* 1. (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1975); and Françoise Prévot, ed. *RICG* 8. (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1997).

[4] Peter Brown, "Vers la naissance du purgatoire: amnisite et pénitence dans le christianisme occidental de l'Antiquité tardive au Haut Moyen Age," *Annales HSS* 6 (1997): 1247-1261.

[5] Eric Rebillard, *Religion et sépulture. L'Église, les vivants et les morts dans l'Antiquité tardive*, Civilisations et sociétés 115 (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2003).

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