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Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul. Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World*. University Park: 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.

Review by Felice Lifshitz, Florida International University.

Caring for Body and Soul was already several years old at the time I was asked to review it (in Fall 2005). The book is packed with interesting information and insights about death and burial in the Merovingian period and beyond (e.g. the fascinating but apparently irrelevant points about embalming practices on pp. 70-75), and as such can be profitably mined for details. However, I had to struggle to discern and follow Effros' argument, the gist of which I seek to convey here. Moreover, the argument (once discerned) was not persuasive, for reasons both structural and substantive.

Effros contends that "whereas grave goods and epitaphs seem to have been the most visible ingredients of funerals from the fifth through the seventh century, church burial and commemorative Masses were likely the most notable investments made at least by elite families from the eighth century onward" (p. 6). Responsible for the change were clerics, who "insinuate[d] themselves into funerary practices" and "developed new rites that met the needs of the Christian population" (p. 6), specifically "in response to growing fear of purgatorial suffering" (p. 9). The widespread acceptance of the new clerically-dominated rites ultimately "promoted clerical status by suggesting that the clergy alone determined membership in the celestial kingdom" (p. 12).

Effros abrogates the sort of chronological treatment which normally facilitates proving a thesis of change over time, such as the one sketched here. She instead adopts a thematic approach, dividing the book into topical chapters on clothing, regulation, grave markers, liturgy and so forth.

In chapter one, Effros explores the ways in which clothing (broadly understood) had symbolic value and was used to express identity and status. She notes examples of luxurious objects (not limited to clothes) found in fifth- through early eighth-century elite graves, saints' tombs, and reliquaries. She adduces testamentary evidence to show that people sometimes bequeathed luxurious cloaks and jewels to their heirs, and legal evidence to show that penalties existed for the theft of jewelry or for despoiling dead bodies. She cites narrative descriptions of funerals to suggest that kings were buried in royal robes, and that nuns with a reputation for sanctity were buried in white shrouds and hair shirts. She raises the important methodological caveat that material evidence from burial contexts is best treated as specific to those contexts, and does not provide an unproblematic opportunity for "the faithful reconstruction of the habits and customs of early medieval populations" (p. 17). She does not, however, forge the material together so as to argue cogently for the decline in the use of grave goods. That such a decline took place remains a tacit understanding, not an explicit feature of the argument. Yet the subject is more problematic than it might at first appear, and should have been accorded explicit attention. It has long been recognized that the use of grave goods by the general populace decline dramatically after the seventh century. However, Effros' discussion in this chapter focuses exclusively on the elites of the Merovingian world, many of them venerated as saints. Similarly eminent personages continued to be buried with richly embroidered cloaks, signet rings, miniature chalice and paten sets, and the like well beyond the ninth century.

In chapter two, Effros considers Merovingian-era legislation (both secular and ecclesiastical) concerning burial. There was, in fact, virtually no such legislation, a function of the fact that Merovingian clerics sought neither to control, nor to benefit from control of, funerary practices. However, specialists have long been aware of the relative lack of regulatory fervor in the Merovingian as opposed to the Carolingian period. Effros missed the chance to make a valuable contribution through more trenchant analysis of the rare legislation which did exist. She fails even to comment on the fact that almost all of it was produced by the diocesan synod of Auxerre (561-605), which banned the interment of Eucharistic wafers and relics with deceased Christians (p. 45), forbade the apparently common practice of adding bodies to existing graves (p. 68), prohibited interments in baptisteries (p. 77), and prohibited Christians who had committed suicide from receiving certain forms of commemoration (p. 203). Yet Effros tells us nothing about this synod or its participants, or about the latter's colleagues who, at nearby Mâcon in 585, formulated penalties for the reuse of graves (p. 69)—one of the very few other examples of funerary regulation. Effros also notes the existence of a certain amount of secular legislation against robbery or disruption of graves, but does not make a full case for why regulations against theft and vandalism should be seen as primarily funerary in orientation (and therefore relevant to her study). She advances a very intriguing (albeit unsupported) explanation for the fact that grave robbery took place despite the penalties against it: that “aggrieved heirs” desired to recover property with which they were loath to part (p. 56).

Between chapters two and three (i.e. between pp. 78 and 79) are eleven unnumbered photographs of Merovingian-era objects such as brooches, fibulae, glass beakers and the like. No reference is ever made to them in the text, nor do their lengthy captions relate them to arguments in the body of the book.

In chapter three, Effros turns to the practice of erecting inscribed grave markers. Such monuments became somewhat less common, and declined in quality, in the course of the Merovingian period, although “...epitaphs remained an effective mode of burial expression among elite Christians in the seventh and eighth centuries” (p. 111). Effros particularly emphasizes the altered tenor of the inscriptions over the period. “Funerary inscriptions [in fifth- and sixth-century Gaul] expressed great confidence in the eternal well-being of the soul in the afterlife and reassured readers of the benefits of a pious lifestyle” (p. 99). In contrast, seventh-, eighth-, and early ninth-century epitaphs sometimes betrayed uncertainty concerning whether the deceased were saved. They manifested this uncertainty either by requesting prayers for the deceased from observers, or by wishing peace to the deceased (rather than stating that they had found it). This important feature of the epigraphic evidence is solidly documented by Effros (see pp. 116-117, 126-128 and 131-132), and may well indicate the birth both of anxiety concerning purgatorial punishments, and of new liturgies and prayers to help deceased Christians overcome those punishments (as Effros argues).

However, Effros forces the evidence—with unnecessary rigidity—to conform either to a “confident” or an “anxious” modality. For instance, she interprets all seventh-century and later epitaphs which expressed confidence that the deceased had already achieved salvation not as indicators of a certain level of theological continuity from the late antique situation, but rather as signs of a newfound confidence in the efficacy of clerically-run funerary liturgy to overcome newly-perceived obstacles to salvation. The argument here is extraordinarily tenuous, and turns on the purported (and indeed very scant) resemblance between one monumental epitaph (on the one hand), and prayers for the dead in the (later) Gelasian sacramentary on the other (p. 119 note 141). In fact, the differences between the epitaph and the prayers far outweigh any similarities. The tomb confidently announces that God has given the deceased woman rest, whereas the Gelasian prayers request eternal peace. Nothing warrants Effros' (tacit) assumption that the superficial semantic similarity between the inscription and the prayers results from a societal belief that the deceased had benefited from clerical prayers. Finally, nothing guarantees that all or most of the requests for prayers found on seventh-century and later grave markers were addressed exclusively to clerics, rather than to the (literate) faithful as a whole. It seems almost a willful

misinterpretation of the sources for Effros to leap from Amatus of Remiremont's (d. 627/628) biographer's report of his inscriptional request for prayers (p. 135), to the conclusion that "Amatus's biographer recognized that the monks' performance of the Mass had become essential to the abbot's escape from the purgatorial fires" (p. 136).

Chapter four contains a mixed bag of themes and details, gathered under the rubric "Membership in the Kingdom of the Elect." Included here are descriptions of numerous grave goods which Effros omitted from Chapter 1, as well as repeated descriptions of items and issues already discussed there. Central to the larger thesis of the book is the argument that theological texts of the late Merovingian and Carolingian periods contained "a growing number of horrifying tales of the fates of unrepentant sinners in the afterlife" (p. 150). While this appears to be a matter of fact in connection with textual evidence (surveyed on pp. 162-167), Effros's readings of the physical evidence, in this case inscribed artifacts found in tombs, are forced along the same inconsistent interpretive lines applied in the previous chapter to monumental grave inscriptions. For instance, she interprets seventh-century and later images linked to the theme of resurrection as signs of increased anxiety about damnation and purgatory (p. 159), yet interprets pre seventh-century images linked to the theme of resurrection as signs of confidence and complacency (e.g., p. 170).

Chapter 5 primarily addresses liturgy. Effros asserts that "in the seventh century...the funerary liturgy lost its predominantly confident tone" (p. 170) and that "over the next two centuries, clerics attributed ever greater powers to the liturgy" (p. 193). Finally, "with the growing influence of liturgical means by which the living might aid the dead, clerics theoretically gained the ability to determine which individuals merited or would be denied access to such coveted honors" (p. 201). These would be very large claims to make even had the author systematically examined all of the extant liturgical manuscripts of Merovingian Gaul. They are far too large to make on the basis of (editions of) a total of four liturgical manuscripts (the Bobbio Missal, the *Missale Gallicanum vetus*, the *Missale Gothicum* and the Gelasian Sacramentary; references pp. 217-218). More importantly, any claims for the existence of changes in Christian liturgical practice between the fifth and the eighth centuries need to face squarely (as Effros does not) the potentially de-stabilizing evidentiary imbalance for the period. The extant evidence for the details of liturgical practice before the seventh century is virtually nil. The existence of seventh-century and later liturgical manuscripts providing instructions for the sacrifice of the mass is taken by Effros as evidence for an increased confidence in masses and for the more frequent celebration of masses. Yet 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. The impression that--from the seventh century--more masses were performed, and that more confidence was placed in those masses, may be mistaken. The purported trend is not supported by Effros' supplementary evidence (pp. 199--201), none of which actually refers to a desire for masses in particular, as opposed to a desire for prayer or commemoration in general.

The absence of a chronological organization for the study rendered this chapter especially baffling. Effros draws indiscriminately and simultaneously on sources and scholarship relevant to the fifth through the eighth centuries to illustrate numerous aspects of burial practice (not all of it liturgical), and fails to show that or how there was any dramatic difference between the situation in the sixth century as opposed to the eighth century. Perhaps there were major changes, but they cannot be seen through her organization and treatment of the evidence in the volume as published. It is simply confusing to learn that prayers in both an early-sixth-century Rule for nuns and the eighth-century Gelasian Sacramentary "pleaded forgiveness for any minor sins...indicat[ing] that even the most righteous individuals were thus perceived as facing insecurity during the transition into the next world" (pp. 182-183), or that "in the early sixth century, clerics also linked the faithful application of prayer to the liberation of tormented souls from their purgatorial state" (p. 189). How does it support Effros' thesis about the

growing importance of clerically-controlled liturgy to know that both Radegund in the sixth century and Bede (not even a resident of Gaul) in the eighth considered alms-giving useful for salvation (pp. 193-194)?

Chapter six (a brief seven pages long) returns to the dual theme of clerical appropriation of responsibility for funeral rites and the increased prestige of the clergy: “In establishing the necessity of funerary liturgy to the salvation of Christian souls, members of the clergy promoted their authority as the only persons qualified to perform this duty (p. 209). As will be evident to all readers of this review, I was not persuaded that the Merovingian clergy either established, or sought to establish, such a monopoly. The evidence adduced is ambiguous, and its interpretation forced. The absence of more explicit evidence, such as an explosion of late Merovingian-era ecclesiastical legislation concerning burial, which could have justified Effros’ readings of the more cryptic materials, is disturbing. The thesis of *Caring for Body and Soul* may in fact be correct, but it is not proven by the study in its present form.

On balance, it is questionable whether all Christians in all regions of Merovingian Gaul moved in lock step from a state of total confidence in their own salvation to one of intense anxiety concerning their own salvation, or that male clerics in all regions of Gaul moved with group solidarity to seize greater control of liturgy and elevate their own positions. It is, for instance, probable that Merovingian Christians—over the course of the period—harbored different degrees of confidence in the salvation of persons venerated as holy, than in that of those who were not. Finally, more attention to the specificities of each piece of evidence (such as the Burgundian ecclesiastical legislation noted in chapter two) might have yielded a different and far more nuanced view of the situation.

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