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*The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*. Edited by Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020. Pp. 1141.

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The careful reader may learn at least as much about our cultural world, the one from which *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* has sprung, as the historical world it examines. Scholarship has certainly moved away from Edward Gibbon's rather dim view of the Merovingians. This dynasty of the first Frankish kings, founded by Clovis, ruled the people and the land occupied by the cultural ancestors of France, Belgium, Germany, southern Luxembourg, and parts of Switzerland from the late fifth to the mid-eighth centuries. Editors Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira spotlight work that privileges material culture over historical sources, questioning previous assumptions and showing how what was previously understood by many as merely a transitional period of decline from Antiquity, began to be seen as worthy of study in its own right. The political and cultural interactions of the Merovingians are examined in detail, but this is not a history book in the classical sense. The juxtaposition of disciplines provided here may certainly create future opportunities for a closer marriage of evidence and interpretation.

The first of the forty-six essays in this book is an introduction written by Effros and Moreira establishing their methodology. The remaining forty-five essays are grouped into eight thematic sections. Contributions of women are well-represented in both the authorship and subject matter. Issues important to many scholars today, including explorations of gender, identity, and power dynamics, as well as deconstruction and reinterpretation of historical accounts, are omnipresent. Scholarship from both the natural and social sciences stimulate interdisciplinary engagement. Individual chapters can be

appreciated on their own, but they are organized to facilitate a richer experience of the whole when read in order.

The first section, “Merovingian Historiography and the History of Archaeology” consists of three essays written by Fouracre, Graceffa, and Effros, respectively. Fouracre examines how the Franks laid the groundwork for cohesion and stability in a time of struggle over resources. Graceffa shows how Merovingian history has been used ideologically over the centuries. Finally, Effros identifies how historical narrative can be challenged by archaeological excavations.

Expressions of identity are then explored in section two. Coumert contrasts the understanding of a “civilization shock” between Gallo-Romans and “savage barbarians” with a theory of ethnogenesis which calls for a reinterpretation of the historical sources “based on the perpetual remaking of an ethnic group as the product of circumstance” (100). Drews shows how the “cultural diversity and vitality of the Merovingian world” (132) was enriched by Irish, Scottish, Syrian, oriental and Jewish identities. Czermak looks at the conclusions that can be drawn “about social structures and relations within a population” (139) by examining bones and teeth from the period; quantitative methods allow for a more generalized understanding, while micro-historical analyses can teach us about individual life stories. Halsall offers an analysis of gender informed by Judith Butler, attempting to create distance between gender as a social category and biological sex in a reading of the Merovingian world. Finally, Perez examines what we can learn about children of the period from their remains.

The third section deals with power structures. Hen examines polity, preparing the reader for James’s chapter on elite women of the period. Sarti outlines the role of the Military, while Halfond provides a sketch of the conflict resolution between bishops. Horden addresses

care of the sick and the poor, and Diem challenges the grand narrative of unified Merovingian monasticism.

The theme of power is continued in the fourth section. Esders focuses on diplomatic, military, and religious relationships between Gaul and Byzantium. Fleming discusses trade at the borders of Britain and France at the time, while Picard returns to Irish monasticism and the use of patronage as a tool to solidify power and identity. Mathisen explores the tension between the Franks and the Visigoths as competing barbarian powers, and with Hardt, we reencounter ethnogenesis as he explores the formation of Bavarian and Slavic identities, Avar attacks, and the Merovingian quest for dominance. Arnold explains how the Lombards consolidated their territory and dealt with Merovingians and Ostrogoths.

Five chapters on Merovingian literary culture follow. Reimitz argues for the absence of a “dominant historical narrative” (479), suggesting that authors of Merovingian historiography had sophisticated views and were more educated than was previously thought. Similarly, Rio argues that the use of multiple legal systems operating simultaneously meant that “law was less a function of government than a form of cultural capital, manipulated and lent meaning by its end users” (503). Kreiner contends that hagiography was a place for conversations about the nature and responsibilities of leadership, while Gillett discusses the epistolary correspondence of the time and provides a useful compilation of all extant Merovingian letters and references to letters. Handley gives a summary of the epigraphy from the period.

Merovingian landscapes form a sixth focal point. Loseby sets the tone by discussing the privileged role of cities “because of their greater concentration of functions and their continuous and multivalent associations with power” (601). Bourgeois examines how “the reciprocal acculturation of elites of Gallo-Roman and Germanic origin” (637) can be seen in changing rural structures, while Arnau

posits reasons for the abandonment of Roman villas in southern Gaul during the sixth to seventh-century. Chevalier discusses the “intense flowering of religious construction” (682) during the period. Peytreman analyzes the relationship between the people in northern Gaul and the land, which is complemented by Squatriti’s exploration of their relationship with local plant life. This is in turn followed by Yvinec and Barme’s discussion on animal husbandry, which allows them to draw conclusions about the northern diet.

“Economies, Exchange, and Production” are then given in-depth treatment. Tys examines trade via waterways, arguing for the need to gain a clearer understanding of rural environments to better understand these dynamics. Strothmann argues for numismatics as a corrective to the history by Gregory of Tours, taking Merovingian coinage into account to show how Roman political culture lived on in Gaul as a part of the “invisible Roman Empire” (814). Constantin Pion et al. discuss how Indo-Pacific glass beads and garnets made their way into Merovingian Gaul, while Bonifay and Pieri concentrate on ceramics and other objects obtained through Mediterranean trade. Theuws argues that the economy of northern Gaul was unique because it was driven by the rural population rather than elite demand (907). Patrello uses the findings of mortuary archaeology to show how belt buckles were used to create social and economic connections.

The final section deals with the supernatural and the afterlife. Amulets are explored by Kornbluth, who demonstrates how women could be identified by the amulets that were buried with them. Klingshirn looks at how magic and divination were understood, both inside and outside the Church. Moreira discusses how visions and the afterlife protected Western orthodoxy from heresies such as monotheletism, and also strengthened perceptions of papal control over the afterlife. Rose examines how the ritual of reciting names in public worship created a sense of belonging in the community, while

Bailey demonstrates how the laity engaged with and shaped liturgical practices of the period. Uhalde explains how the life of the penitent could bring “clergy, monks, and laity together around common cause” (1052). In the final chapter of the *Handbook*, Coon offers a particularly speculative imagining of how the incorporeal Christ “could be embodied again and again through contemplation and heroic self-denial” (1073) by ascetics like the Frankish Queen Radegund. The word “theology” is used occasionally in these last seven chapters, but there is no expectation that theology itself is within their purview. Any engagement with the metaphysical would need to acknowledge it as a real phenomenon; while that would be very true for the Merovingians, it is not attempted in this volume.

Editors Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira have given us an exceptional reference book with *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*. While knowledge of languages other than English is not necessary, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, and Greek scholarship is brought to the attention of the reader, often for the first time in an English publication. For detailed research, it would be helpful to have some French, German, and Latin, but many of the citations referring to secondary sources are available in English, and most primary sources discussed in depth are available in a modern-language translation.

There are some idiosyncrasies in the presentation of this book; primary sources are occasionally listed with secondary sources, and the titles of untranslated manuscript texts are not always provided in Latin. A compilation of cited works would have been helpful in demonstrating where overlaps in reference to secondary sources may be found. For example, the work of Ian Wood is cited in twenty-eight chapters, but this information is not immediately apparent. The online version is only searchable chapter by chapter, so the problem does not have a digital workaround.

One of the editors' goals is "to make the Merovingian world more accessible" by bringing together "studies and disciplinary voices that do not often share the same publication space" (28). Another is to show that the Franks encountered here will "give the lie to Gibbon's extraordinarily reductive assessment of them" (27). *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* succeeds on both counts. However, I cannot help but ask: is attempting to form an understanding of sixth century European cultures on their own terms desirable, or even possible? Can we immerse ourselves in a past intellectual world to a degree that will allow for a sympathetic understanding of their reality? An implicit message of this volume seems to be that peoples and their cultures can only be understood by examining material evidence. And we can learn about their relationships to certain socio-cultural aspects such as identity and power through the materials they leave behind, rather than relying on the people whose testimonies survive. In this way, the post-modern hermeneutic of suspicion that underlies this book may ultimately prevent some from gaining more generous insights into one of the societies that shaped the Western world.