
First published: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XXXV (2013), 1

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

The history of nineteenth-century archaeology has seen significant growth over the past few years. Moving beyond former trends which simply saw the nineteenth century as the ‘birth’ of modern archaeological concepts and practices, it has connected the development of the discipline to important themes in social, cultural and political history.¹ Driven forward by provincial learned societies, integrative states, and aspirational metropolitan authorities, archaeology has been presented as an important new intellectual force in the period. Archaeological excavation was entangled with experiences of modernity, being based on new techniques of comparison and collection, often taking advantage of railway and building projects which unearthed vast numbers of artefacts, and becoming tied to new discourses on the preservation of the tangible past. And the ancient periods studied, ranging from strange and formerly unknown prehistory, already esteemed Roman antiquity, and migration period and medieval societies, have also been shown as vital constituents within local and national identities, as these became based around a distinct ‘sense of the past’. However, while this literature has been extensive and speaks to issues of wide interest to historians of modern Europe, it has not been as closely drawn into the broader historiography as it possibly should. There still seems to be something of an assumption that it is primarily of interest to archaeologists rather than historians—and the fact that much of it has been published in archaeological journals and edited collections ensures that it still sits slightly outside the mainstream.

This ensures that wide-ranging systemizing books in this field, such as Bonnie Effros’s Uncovering the Germanic Past, are especially welcome. This work examines the rise and problematic reception of Germanic archaeology in France across the length of the nineteenth century, tracing how the remains of the Burgundian, Visigothic, and

(especially) Frankish invaders of late antiquity were uncovered and interpreted by new disciplinary formations and (to a lesser extent) wider political and national culture. In doing so, the author, a specialist in Merovingian archaeology, has produced a book which deals with an important case-study and ties together the above processes. The result of deep research in a wide range of archives and libraries in France and Germany (including departmental, national, and museum), it presents a huge store of information. Organized in a series of thematic chapters, it traces the institutional, methodological, and political implications of Germanic archaeology in France and beyond, examining: learned associations and state institutions; methods of archaeological excavation, instruction, and arrangement; the role of museums and expositions; and archaeology’s impact on the popular media. In many of these fields (and particularly the chapters on learned society operations and changes in archaeological methodology), it is probably the most detailed study yet produced for any country, and is very well illustrated and documented, replete with lively anecdotes, photographs, and document images.

As a result, there are numerous agendas in this book. The most interesting by far to historians are the social and political dimensions. The relationships between provincial and metropolitan scholars in building the sense of the past in modern Europe have been covered in other works. However, the view which emerges here of the frequent messiness of this project, is refreshing within a literature that has historically (although much less so nowadays) presented itself in terms of drives of professionalization, institutionalization, centralization, and the casting away of early modern stereotypes. Bringing a penetrating expert eye to the methods of nineteenth-century archaeologists, Effros is able to highlight the deficiencies as well as the gains within these new trends. The French state is shown to be relatively inactive in protecting ancient monuments, supporting archaeological instruction, and gathering material, while local agencies are often seen

---

to be less than effective, despite their importance on a regional level. Showing blockages and resistance in discipline-formation and institutionalization, it contributes a great deal to deepening the literature. These themes continue with regard to the role of the Merovingians (and Germanic elements more generally) within French national identity. A key element presented throughout is that these periods of Germanic invasion were intrinsically problematic for the ‘official view’ within French society, which preferred to focus on more amenable Republican virtues and use ancient Gaul as its integrative founding myth. As a result (perhaps contrary to the title), much of this book tells a story of either implicit or active marginalization of the Germanic past—an important hidden theme. This involves a sustained comparison and entanglement with contemporary developments within the German lands, which saw similar archaeological interest in similar Germanic periods, but in a much more historically valorized manner, as the tribes of the Völkerwanderung became seen as integral heroic ancestors. This becomes especially interesting given that the international dimensions in Germanic archaeology are drawn out well and effectively. The relations between French archaeologists and their German and British equivalents are examined throughout the various chapters (with a particularly close look at Ludwig Lindenschmit’s work in the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz). This investigation of the concrete operation of transnational connections and influences gives a highly conducive international dimension to the work, making it of relevance to those more widely interested in cross-national connections and entanglements in the nineteenth-century human and historical sciences.

There are, however, some drawbacks to the work, the primary being that it sometimes does not engage with the contextual frame as closely as a historian of modern Europe might like. One issue concerns the relationship of Germanic archaeology with other approaches to the past and potential ‘ancestors’. This is acknowledged as crucial in a variety of areas, especially in one of the final chapters, which surveys the influence of Merovingian motifs in popular education.

3 This has been traced in Hubert Fehr, Germanen und Romanen im Merowingerreich: Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie zwischen Wissenschaft und Zeitgeschehen (Berlin, 2010); and Ingo Wiwjorra, Der Germanenmythos: Konstruktion einer Weltanschauung in der Altertumsforschung des 19. Jahrhunderts (Darmstadt, 2006).
historical literature, and the media. However, the lack of sustained observation in the bulk of the work of other means of knowing the past (such as history-writing) or other potential views of history means that it is often difficult to place the reception of the Germanic peoples within wider contemporary historical conceptions. Particularly problematic is the interpretation of Augustin Thierry’s *Récits des temps mérovingiennes*, which is persistently cited as the ‘dominant historical narrative’ of the Germanic period in France, providing an overall negative image of the Merovingians as barbaric oppressors. In a curious omission, however, Effros does not investigate this work in depth, and leaves much of this interpretation to (quite old) secondary works, which means that Thierry’s complex attempt to integrate the Merovingian period into modern French history in line with his romanticist vision of the nation’s development is not given the nuance it deserves. Another potential gap is that the sharp conflicts in contemporary French society over the past are occluded: as works by Christian Amalvi, Eugen Weber, and others have shown, elements drawn from Frankish history were a key part of Catholic and conservative discourse throughout the century (tending to trace the origin of France back to the baptism of the Merovingian Clovis as the nation’s first Christian monarch). The question of how or whether Merovingian archaeology interacted with this central motif of the ‘other France’ is hinted at occasionally, but left largely unanswered.

Yet despite this, the close focus and attention to detail bring benefits in a wide range of areas, providing a deep investigation of national and local consolidation of scholarship, transnational connections, and the relationship of new disciplines to popular ideas and nation-building projects. That this is shown to be problematic rather than of ‘key significance’ is highly refreshing and convincing, implying that more studies of difficult areas would lead to similarly interesting results. Paying close attention to all aspects of the archaeological project within a closely identified theme, this should become a key text not only on the development of French archaeology, but also wider European approaches to the past in the nineteenth century.

Book Reviews

CHRIS MANIAS is a Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Manchester (since 2012). He works on the transnational and comparative history of the human and biological sciences in modern Europe, and is the author of Race, Science, and the Nation: Reconstructing the Ancient Past in Britain, France and Germany (forthcoming 2013).