Almost forty years have passed since the publication of Joachim Werner’s seminal paper ‘Zur Entstehung der Reihengräberzivilisation’. Here, Werner argued that we should seek the origins of Merovingian burial customs—i.e. interments in cemeteries in more or less neatly-arranged rows (hence *Reihengräber*—row-graves), accompanied by numerous grave-goods, above all weaponry for males and jewellery for females—in a style of burial which appeared in northern Gaul late in the fourth century and which persisted to the mid-fifth century. This funerary custom differed from the prevalent rite of the period—interment with a decreasing number of grave-goods, usually vessels—in that the dead were accompanied by more lavish and more varied goods, again typically comprising weapons for men and items of jewellery for women. These burials had long been identified with Germanic newcomers into Gaul, and Werner repeated the then current idea that they were to be specifically identified with *laeti*. To support this claim, there was indeed a general correspondence between the areas in which ‘early Germanic’ burials were found and those where documentary sources mentioned *laeti* settlements. Werner thus identified some of the more
lavish graves of the series (such as Vermand (Aisne) III, grave B) as those of *praefecti laetorum.* He argued that these *laeti* remained in their Gallic settlements until Clovis’ conquests, when they joined the incoming Franks and reinforced their settlement of northern Gaul. Unfortunately for this idea, there was a noticeable chronological discrepancy between the written and the archaeological evidence. The historical sources placed the first *laeti* settlements in the period around AD 300, whereas ‘early Germanic’ graves began to appear only in the late fourth century. Furthermore, the lowly status of the *laeti* hardly tallied with the lavish nature of many of the graves, and the presence of numerous items of weaponry in the burials seemed to contradict the fact that the *laeti*, like Roman regular troops, did not own their weapons but were issued them from Roman depots.

In his monumental work on Germanic grave finds between the Loire and Elbe, H.-W. Böhme argued instead that these graves were those of *foederati.* In many ways this theory tallies far better with the archaeological evidence, and it is generally followed today. There are, however, problems. The distribution of so-called ‘early Germanic’ weapon-graves covers practically all of Gaul north of the Loire, and the cemeteries which furnish these graves come from all kinds of contexts—forts, urban cemeteries, rural cemeteries, those associated with villas and so on. If these graves are archaeological traces of *foederati*, we must assume that there was a general policy of signing treaties with innumerable small groups of Germans, who then undertook a massive settlement of northern Gaul—yet these processes excited no contemporary written notice. Moreover, no such graves have been found in the areas where *foederati* were definitely settled, such as Aquitaine. Even the heart of Toxandria, ceded to the Franks in this period, remains strangely and consistently blank on Böhme’s distribution maps.

In 1980, Bailey Young drew on the long-known fact that this burial custom was not the product of Free Germany but of northern Gaul, and, to use Böhme’s phrase, the ‘German-Roman mixed civilisation’ which existed there, to ask whether there was any reason why the change in burial custom had to be linked with ethnicity. Despite pre-

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5 Böhme, *Germanische Grabfunde.*