CHAPTER FIVE

BURIAL, RITUAL AND MEROVINGIAN SOCIETY*

Frederick Paxton has written that:

Archaeological finds are rich but anthropologists and archaeologists have not solved the vexing problems of the relations between ritual behaviour and mortuary remains, or between religious change and forms of burial. In neither case is there an easy way to derive the former from the latter.¹

Identifying religious change from burial forms is indeed a thankless task as numerous studies have shown,² although these have not yet made much impact on early medieval archaeology. However, if we turn to the first of Paxton’s problems, the relationship between mortuary remains and ritual behaviour, then there are greater grounds for optimism, and it is on this subject that some ideas will be proposed in this essay.

The paper is grounded primarily in the data of the Merovingian region of Metz.³ The relevant evidence almost exclusively comprises archaeological data: burials with grave-goods. Written descriptions of funerals come mainly from further south, where different burial styles were in use, and this makes it difficult to match up the plentiful archaeological data from north of the Loire with what we know about funerals from written sources. Nevertheless, general comparisons can be suggested. Study of Anglo-Saxon and Alamannic

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³ S&S contains the empirical basis for this paper: cc. 3–4 for discussion of cemetery sites, the problems of the data, and references, and cc. 8–9 for interpretation. This paper develops some aspects of that interpretation. Some elements also derive from a paper, ‘Burying the author? Graves as texts in the study of gender in sixth-century Merovingian society,’ given to the Gender and Medieval Studies Group’s annual conference in Cardiff in January 1992.
cemeteries also suggests that this paper’s general points might be more widely applicable in ‘grave-good-burying’ regions.

The advantage of the archaeological evidence is that it allows us to study a ritual over two hundred years of development, permitting us to introduce both the temporal element which is all too often absent in anthropological studies of ritual, and to look at practice, rather than what people periodically said should be done, something rarely possible in documentary historical analyses. In the early medieval period it is very rare, too, to be able to follow the workings of a frequent ritual over two centuries.

Burial north of the Loire can be divided into a number of constituent components, all of which are visible in the excavated evidence. It should be stressed that each of these components represents the outcome of particular, active choices. First of all, the body seems to have been dressed for its burial. The funerary clothing could be elaborate or extremely simple (maybe just a shroud), leaving no archaeological trace; it is extremely unlikely that anybody was actually interred naked. The body was, however, dressed in a very deliberate way, as will be seen. At about the same time, the grave was dug at the cemetery site. A number of variables were, again, open: the grave’s shape and size, the means, if any, of revetting its sides; the possible construction of chambers within the grave for the deposition of particular grave-goods.

[327] Then the body was transported to the cemetery. As far as one can tell, sixth-century Merovingian cemeteries, like Roman graveyards, lay away from the centres of habitation, so the transportation of the body must have processed at least a few hundred metres. The body was then interred. Like the clothing of the body, its positioning appears to have been another variable, resulting from conscious choices. Any grave-goods could include other dress adjuncts, like belts and purses or pouches, not worn but placed by the body, and it is important to note the difference between these options. Other accessories to costume, such as weaponry, could, in the case of swords or scramasaxes, be worn in their scabbards, or deposited next to, or otherwise on the body. Finally, there was an array of other grave-goods, such as pottery, glass-ware, other vessels, and so on, deposited around the body. The positioning of the grave-goods was, again, deliberate and meaningful.

A final element of the funeral process was feasting by the grave. This is suggested by a number of archaeological features: pits on cemetery