Has Anyone Seen the Barbarians?
Remarks on the Missing Archeology
of the Visigoths in Gaul

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As a consequence of the Visigothic defeat at Vouillé, the Visigothic kingdom came to an end, and, except for a small strip in Septimania, the future history of the Visigoths would be written in Spain. But after nearly a century of rule in southwestern Gaul, one might well wonder at what the Visigothic legacy was, and in particular, what kind of mark they left in the material culture. This question arose in 1985, at the first major international Visigothic conference in France. The historian Michel Rouche asked rhetorically what traces the Visigoths had left in Aquitaine and then answered: “Il ne faut pas hésiter à répondre: quasiment rien!”\(^1\) Likewise, Edward James, author of the only overview of the archeology of southwestern Gaul, has remarked that, without the written sources to tell us that they had been there, one could never divine their presence from the archeological record.\(^2\) The story of scholarly efforts to apprehend the Visigothic presence in Aquitaine by looking for them in material culture is an instructive one, and it is far from over, as a look at new finds and theories that have emerged since 1985 will show.

The Rise and Fall of the Cultural-Historical Hypothesis
(1892 – 1985)

The idea that such a thing as “Visigothic archeology” ought to exist derives from the assumptions that underlie what the historian of archeology Bruce Trigger calls “cultural-historical” archeology, an approach widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It assumes that ancient peoples had characteristic


material cultures; a corollary, particularly stressed by the influential Gustav Kossinna, is that this was reflected in grave-goods.\textsuperscript{3}

The assumption was convenient, for almost all the archeological vestiges of the various barbarian peoples recovered before rather late in the 20th century came from cemeteries. In France (as well as Belgium and Rhenish Germany) this paradigm first developed in regard to the Franks around the middle of the 19th century, and the Burgundians were soon added.\textsuperscript{4} In 1892 Camille Barrière-Flavy brought the Visigoths to the table.\textsuperscript{5} He catalogued 114 sites of “sépultures barbares” in the 21 modern départements that correspond roughly to the maximum extent of the Visigothic kingdom before the Battle of Vouillé and devoted the second chapter of his text to specious arguments holding that these can be neither Merovingian nor Frank, and therefore must be Visigothic.\textsuperscript{6} The artifacts were copiously illustrated with 35 engraved plates and many line drawings (fig. 1). Although these included grey and orange pottery, some of it with stamped decoration, identified as Visigothic, most of the material consisted of costume accessories, such as plate-buckles with a rectangular plate, sporting chip-carved decor, and eagle fibulae. Citing recent publications by the Baron de Baye and other scholars, Barrière-Flavy was able to point to parallels and prototypes for these objects from southern Russia and Crimea, where the Gothic tribes were known to have been living before their westward migrations, parallels that lent some plausibility to his argument that the Goths had arrived in Aquitaine wearing their traditional national costume.\textsuperscript{7} About the time that his views were meeting with general acceptance (despite the prescient objections of A.-F. Lièvre),\textsuperscript{8} the first proper excavation of an important cemetery, Tabariâne (Ariège) yielded 80 graves with 24 buckles and some other personal items.\textsuperscript{9} In 1935–36 and again in 1946–48 Raymond Lantier excavated 208 graves at the site of Estagel (Pyrénées-Orientales) and published them promptly and fairly completely (albeit in a series of articles rather than a coherent monograph).\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{5} Camille Barrière-Flavy, \textit{Etude sur les sépultures barbares du Midi et de l’Ouest de la France: Industrie wisigothique} (Toulouse, 1892).
\bibitem{7} Barrière-Flavy, \textit{Sépultures}, 22–24.
\bibitem{8} Auguste-François Lièvre, \textit{Les sépultures mérovingiennes et l’art barbare dans l’ouest de la France} (Poitiers, 1894).
For Lantier, around 1950, there was no question but that these were Visigothic graves with Visigothic material culture.

By this time, however, challenges to the viability of the cultural-historical hypothesis as regards the Visigoths in Gaul had arisen. In 1947 the Swedish archeologist Nils Aberg devoted a chapter to Aquitanian belt-buckles in his monumental study *The Orient and the Occident in the Art of the Seventh Century*. Aberg showed that these were derived formally from Frankish prototypes (in other words, from prototypes in northern Gaul, which by the 7th century had become Francia) and that in regard to decoration they draw mostly on the native Mediterranean traditions of southern Gaul.¹¹ The style of these buckles, he writes, “is certainly Roman in character” and “does not suggest any direct connection with Germanic quarters”;¹² their distribution within both Aquitaine (conquered by the Franks after 507) and Septimania (Visigothic until the Arabs

¹² Ibid., 40.
takeover) proved, for Aberg, that they derived from a native population that had “on the whole preserved its Gallo-Roman personality.”

In 1950 Edouard Salin was still under the spell of the cultural-historical hypothesis when he set out, in the first volume of his monumental synthesis *La civilisation mérovingienne*, to define the archeological features of the barbarian peoples in Gaul, but he recognized that the Visigoths presented problems. There are almost no weapons in their graves, he noted, citing Barrière-Flavy's catalogue, the recent Estagel excavations, and data from Visigothic graves in Spain which had become available after the publications of Hans Zeiss in the 1930s. Pottery was quite rare in graves in Visigothic regions, and he admitted (unlike Lantier, who was still speaking of “Visigothic” pottery at this time) that the regional ceramics were in the Roman rather than the Germanic tradition.

Over the next generation, ceramic studies by J. and Y. Rigoir, among others, would clearly establish that the Late Antique stamped wares found throughout southern Gaul had nothing to do with the Visigoths (except as consumers); they were a continuation of Roman productions, now called *dérivées-de-sigillées*.

This left costume—personal ornament. Here Salin agreed with Barrière-Flavy that the rectangular plate-buckle was characteristically Visigothic, distinguishing an earlier type, with its cloisonné decor, from the chip-carved bronze type (fig. 2). He also accepted the *fibula ansée*, with a semicircular head (also called a radiate bow-brooch), noting its parallels in Spain. He acknowledged, however, that Barrière-Flavy had falsely attributed to the Visigoths many plate-buckles that came into use long after their expulsion from Aquitaine and, like Aberg, concluded that many of the dressed-burial graves must be those of Gallo-Romans, though he also pointed to cemeteries showing Frankish influence in Charente and elsewhere, anticipating in this regard later scholars.

With the publication in 1977 of his Oxford thesis, *The Merovingian Archaeology of Southwest Gaul* (a title that carefully avoids mentioning either Visigoths or Aquitaine), Edward James masterfully demolished the cultural-
historical hypothesis as applied to the Visigoths of the kingdom of Toulouse. What could reasonably be called Visigothic ornament were objects that turned up in graves in Spain—such as radiate bow brooches and the rectangular cloisonné buckles—but their chronology starts in the mid-6th century, after the expulsion of the Visigoths from Gaul. They turn up in southwest France only in Septimania, the region that remained under Visigothic control; north of that one finds the Aquitanian buckles (James agrees with Aberg here), as well as others that are Frankish or show Frankish influence. He singled out Herpes, in Charente-Maritime, as “eccentric” in southwest Gaul not only for the variety and wealth of ornament deriving from dressed burial, but for an abundance of weaponry in graves, the very trait which Salin had noted as most un-Visigothic. Indeed, he advances as possibly valid a suggestion first made by E. T. Leeds in 1936 that the people buried at Herpes were likely to be a Frankish military

![Fig. 2: Salin’s typical Visigothic ornament. Source: drawn by Edward James, used with permission.](image)

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20 Edward James, *The Merovingian Archaeology of Southwest Gaul*, BAR Supplementary Series 25 (Oxford, 1977). See in particular vol. 1, chap. 5, “The Burials” (161-86), where he notes quite unequivocally: “Burial customs are not accurate ethnic indicators, nor are they trustworthy indicators of men’s religious beliefs” (164).

21 Ibid., chap. 3: “The Aquitanian Buckles” (97-151); fig. 47 (244) clearly shows the cluster of “Visigothic” buckles within (or close to) Septimania.
colony settled in the wake of Clovis’s victory in 507.\textsuperscript{22} This hypothesis has now been generally accepted.\textsuperscript{23}

Tabariane must also be struck from the roster of Visigothic cemeteries. Not only, as Salin had already noted, is its lyre-shaped plate-buckle typical not of Spain but of Aquitaine (and dates to the 7th century), but its funerary practices overall also are eccentric in their regional context, as at Herpes; indeed, James guessed that it was the burial place of an Aquitanian military colony guarding the frontier against Visigothic Septimania just down the road.\textsuperscript{24} It is in Septimania that we find Estagel, which Salin and James agree does have a strongly Visigothic character—both for the grave goods it does yield (rectangular plate-buckles and fibula pairs; many parallels in Spain) and those that it does not (absence of weapons, absence of any grave goods in many tombs, notably of children). As James notes, it is not comparable to other cemeteries in the southwest, except in Septimania. However, here, as in Spain, Visigothic grave assemblages do not date as far back as the days of the Toulouse kingdom; they date to the later 6th and 7th centuries.\textsuperscript{25} It was in the content of reviewing the archeological problems of southwest Gaul for the 1985 AFAM meeting in Toulouse, that James remarked how, if we did not know from written sources that the Visigoths had ruled from Toulouse for almost a century, we would never guess it from the archeology. No archeological vestige characteristically “Visigothic” dating to that period had been found there, he said bluntly.\textsuperscript{26} In 1977 he had allowed one vestige: a rectangular plate-buckle with an eagle-head ornament found on the site of a villa at Valentine (Haute-Garonne), held to resemble 5th-century Gothic buckles from Crimea. But now that Hungarian scholars see this as resembling 6th-century Gepid buckles, it can no longer be counted as unquestionably Visigothic.\textsuperscript{27}

Two Decades On: The Visigoths in the Brave New (Archeological) World (1985–)

Even as Edward James was speaking, a new publication showed he had been too categorical. The excavation of a late Roman villa, later the site of a Merovingian cemetery, at Beaucaire-sur-Baïse (Gers) turned up a type of comb, both Gothic

\begin{footnotes}
22 Ibid., 166–68.
24 James, \textit{Southwest Gaul}, 169–70; Salin, \textit{CM} 1.393–95.
26 James, \textit{Les problèmes}, 149.
27 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
and 5th century in date.\textsuperscript{28} It is commonly found in graves of the Černiakhov culture in central and eastern Europe, and it is precisely the increasing accessibility, since the 1980s, of archeological data from the east that has had a major influence in reshaping our understanding not only of the Visigoths, but also of how better to integrate archeology into our understanding of the late antique world (fig. 3). The work of Kazanski has been particularly valuable in this regard. His contribution to the 1985 colloquium showed that the appearance of Černiakhov-style material in the Carpathian basin, north of the Danube, in the later 4th and early 5th century correlated with the presence of Goths coming in as subject allies of the Huns.\textsuperscript{29} He also saw the disappearance of Černiakhov culture in this region in the mid-5th century as correlating with the breakup of the Hunnish Empire, but not before an elite mode of dress had developed that was destined to live on.\textsuperscript{30}

Artifacts such as the large radiate fibulae and the square plate-buckles with bright cloisonné decoration were thus not specifically Visigothic, but Danubian features adopted by Gothic, as by other, members of the barbarian military elites and known by chieftain’s tombs of the later 5th century. Jaroslav Terjal discussed this process in more precise detail at an AFAM colloquium held at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1997.\textsuperscript{31} This and other recent studies suggest that during the middle and latter part of the 5th century a style of elite personal display that developed in the middle Danube spread (fig. 4)—along with the funerary custom of taking the goods into the grave—westward, where it was adopted by certain barbarian leaders such as the Frank Childeric.\textsuperscript{32} If this reading of the archeological evidence is correct, it means that the assumptions underlying the

\textsuperscript{28} Mary Larrieu, Bernard Marty, Patrick Pépin, and Eric Crubézy, \textit{La nécropole mérovingienne de la Turraque, Beaucarne-sur-Baise (Gers)} (Sorèze, 1985), annexe 1: “Le peigne en os” (257–69).
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 14.
old cultural-historical hypothesis were wrong in one fundamental regard. Barbarian peoples did not bring a distinctive funerary culture with them into the Roman Empire: rather, in the process of getting there and of interacting with Romans and other barbarians, they developed one, or even several.

The irony, where the Visigoths are concerned, is that although they passed through Pannonia in the early 5th century and shared in new styles of dress,
they did not adopt the funerary custom of lavish display that spread, as we have seen, somewhat later.\textsuperscript{33} By that time they had become established in Aquitaine, where, as James showed, their burials cannot be distinguished from any others datable to the period of their residence there. Although that may not be quite true. As Michel Rouche pointed out, a man buried in a later-5th-century sarcophagus in Bourges was armed with a lance bearing the inscription \textit{PATRICIVZ REGIVS}\textsuperscript{34} (fig. 5). It is at least plausible to assume that a high ranking military official in Bourges would have been, at that time, a Goth. But if so, his burial in a sarcophagus, that most characteristic Roman mode of elite funerary display, underlines the larger point that he has chosen to express in burial a multicultural, rather than a strictly Visigothic, identity. This example lends some support to James’s rather heretical (but most logical) suggestion that a likely marker of elite Visigoths in the kingdom of Toulouse might well be the highly decorated sarcophagi of the Aquitaine school.\textsuperscript{35} The larger point would be that the Visigoths, by so many accounts, sought to integrate into the Roman Empire, and we should not be surprised that their material culture looks Roman. The spectacular discovery, in the late 1980s, of what are probably the remains of the Visigothic royal palace in Toulouse underscore this: what else should this resemble but an elite Late Antique administrative building?\textsuperscript{36}

There is, however, a further irony. In the 1997 Saint-Germain colloquium Völker Bierbrauer pointed out more than 40 typical female Visigothic graves in Gaul, but none of them in Aquitaine. They are in Francia, scattered throughout typical Frankish cemeteries in the Merovingian heartland.\textsuperscript{37} Tomb 140 from Nouvion-en-Ponthieu in Picardy, for example, offers a woman whose personal ornament includes two pair of \textit{fibulae}: one of them, an S-shaped pair in gilded silver, worn on the upper chest, would raise no eyebrows in a Frankish burial, but the \textit{fibula ansée} pair worn at the waist, with a semicircular head, provides the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Rouche, “Wisigoths et francs,” 146. A description of this tomb, with a photograph of the lance, can be found in \textit{A l’aube de la France, la Gaule de Constantin à Childéric: Catalogue de l’exposition} (Paris, 1981), notice 223, 141–42.
\item \textsuperscript{35} James, “Les problèmes,” 151–52. Note how he qualifies his suggestion: the sarcophagi were made for the elite, including the Visigoths along with Roman senators and bishops.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Jean-Paul Demoule, ed., \textit{La France archéologique: Vingt ans d’aménagements et de découvertes} (Paris, 2004), 167.
\end{itemize}
“Gothic” clue. This type turns up often in Visigothic Spain: Bierbrauer provided a number of examples from Duraton and other cemeteries. Another interesting example comes from tomb 756 at Vicq (fig. 6a–b), a site southwest of Paris: not only does it offer two pairs of fibulae (a silver aviform pair this time, as well at a rather larger pair of “Visigothic” radial-headed fibula ansée), but also sports the square plate-buckle with a cloisonné decor recognized as Gothic ever since Barrière-Flavy.

Pointing to close parallels in Spanish cemeteries such as Duraton and arguing for a chronology covering the very end of the 5th century and the first quarter of the 6th, Bierbrauer proposed that these graves were the archeological survival of an unrecorded historical event: a group of Visigoths who had left their patria (Spain/Septimania) at the time that Clovis was expanding and consolidating his power and settled among the Franks. We know them only by these female graves, for male burial custom was not then ethnically marked, while female was. This latter point deserves underlining: a number of recent studies of burial practice and culture among the barbarian peoples, notably Germanic, of this era, stress that female costume can be taken as a conservative expression of ethnic distinction. It is not only the durable costume artifacts


38 Ibid., 183 (pl. 4); no. 28 in his catalogue (the grave is misnumbered there, 14 instead of 140).
39 Ibid., 184–85 (pls. 5–6).
40 Ibid., 180 (pl.1). Compare this assemblage with Duraton, tomb 573, 193 (pl. 14).
41 Ibid., 174–75; he stresses that archeology here provides evidence of a Visigothic group which settled in the core Frankish area at a time of steady hostility between the expanding Frankish power of Clovis and the Gothic kingdom of Toulouse. He stresses that the written sources, which he terms “confused,” offer no hint of this hypothesized migration and settlement.
42 Hypothesis proposed in Joachim Werner, “Zur Verbreitung frühmittelalterliche Metal- larbeiten (Werkstatt-Wanderhandwerk-Handel-Familienverbindung),” *Early Medieval Has Anyone Seen the Barbarians?* 193
themselves that signify, but how they were worn, as their disposition in the grave tells us. Visigothic women wore their fibulae by pairs up on the shoulder. But were they indeed Visigothic women? Such is the riposte made by a team of Russo-French scholars to Bierbrauer’s hypothesis. Since the 1990s this group


43 Périn and Kazanski, “Identity.”
(F. Vallet, P. Pépin, M. Kazanski, A. Mastikova), centered on the Musée d’Archéologie nationale (MAN), has been studying the larger problem of barbarians within the late Roman military as well as beyond the frontiers. In a
paper given in the same 1997 colloquium\textsuperscript{44} and in a recent, not-yet-published paper\textsuperscript{45} they criticize the Bierbrauer hypothesis, partly on chronological grounds. Bierbrauer dated all the graves in his group to after ca. 480; but the

\textsuperscript{44} Kazanski and Pépin, “Les barbares ‘orientaux’ dans l’armée romaine en Gaule.”
MAN team thinks that some of them are older. Bierbrauer thought the prototypes came from the Visigothic *patria*, where the dressed burial custom was already in effect—for example at Duraton, in Spain—and that the examples in Francia derived from these. The MAN group counters that this type of radial-headed *fibula ansée* with aviform appliqués found in Gaul north of the Loire (e.g., from tomb 359 at Saint-Martin-de-Fontenay in Normandy or tomb 756 at Vicq southwest of Paris) is more archaic than those from Duraton, or any Spanish example, and thus that the influence must go the other way.\(^46\) Bierbrauer’s “Visigothic” group in northern Gaul should instead be rebaptized the “Eastern German Military Elite and Wannabe” group.

The argument that seems most persuasive is that the female dress mode fossilized in these graves derives from imitation of the elite burials of the Smolin horizon in the Danube (about the middle third of the 5th century). In Périn’s words, they “correspond en fait à une réplique ‘populaire’ du costume prestigieux danubien.”\(^47\) He further suggests how the transition may have occurred. In the years between the checking of Attila’s invasion of Gaul (451) and Clovis’s defeat of Syagrius (486), the vigorous Roman army in northern Gaul was reinforced by contingents of German warriors from the east, like mercenaries except that they came with their wives and families. Notably, there were the forces led by the Ostrogothic prince Vidimir, who came to Gaul after a detour in Italy in 472–74.\(^48\) Their women wore the rectangular plate-buckle with cloisonné decoration and, on the shoulders, a pair of silver-plated fibulae ansées with a long foot, a type that was to go out of fashion in the Danube by 480 but to survive more than a generation longer in north Gaul, in the kind of vestimentary conservatism typical of self-conscious ethnic groups eager to preserve their sense of distinction in a new, heterogeneous environment.\(^49\) Many of the soldiers, and their wives, were no doubt Goths, like Prince Vidimir of the prestigious Amal lineage. But, as the historical sources confirm, in the western “Roman” armies of the time—notably those of Majorian and Odovacar—there also were Huns, Alans, Skiriens, Herules, and Rugians. Thus, the graves where

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\(^{46}\) Ibid. Bierbrauer, in his 1997 paper “Les Wisigoths,” 174–75, had rejected the hypothesis that the women buried in northern Gaul wearing this type of fibula could have been eastern Germans on chronological/typological grounds deriving from the assumption that the Gallic examples derive from the Spanish, the argument challenged by Kazanski and Périn in this paper.

\(^{47}\) Ibid. I thank the authors for permission to quote from this paper.

\(^{48}\) Périn, “L’armée de Vidimir.”

\(^{49}\) In addition to the studies cited in n 42, this topic is treated with reference particularly to Gaul in a paper to appear in a volume stemming from the 2005 meeting of the Society for Late Antiquity held in Urbana-Champaign: Patrick Périn and Michel Kazanski, “Identity and Ethnicity in the Era of Migrations and Barbarian Kingdoms in the Light of Funerary Archaeology in Gaul,” in *Romans and Barbarians*, ed. R. W. Mathisen and D. R. Shanzer (Ashgate, 2010), 299–330.
this burial mode is displayed should be assigned to Germanic wives of barbarian soldiers from the east coming into a region where Germanic dressed burial customs that had been vigorous a couple of generations before had faded (though not disappeared) in the earlier 5th century and were now being revived, particularly among elite Franks.50

In their most recent paper, Kazanski and Périn push their argument farther. Material culture, as reflected in archeology is not, they warn, by itself a reliable guide to ethnic identity. The cultural self-identification plausibly inferred from a particular set of funerary customs need not coincide, at a particular moment, with a cultural identity given in written sources. The later-5th- to early-6th-century weapons-and-ornament-accompanied burials in northern Gaul/Belgica/Germania need not, and probably were not meant to, identify the subjects as members of a particular “barbarian” group. Most probably they identified them as privileged “foreigners,” members of a new military elite brought into the ethnically very heterogeneous military milieu of the Roman west in the turbulent years after the fall of Aetius. The female costume signaled by such items as the rectangular plate-buckle and the pair of radiate-headed silver-plated fibula pairs with a long lozenge-shaped foot worn at the neck point particularly to the style of prestige that had flourished in the Danube in the mid-5th century, when Attila had been the military master of choice. By preserving this dress style in a funerary context in Gaul in the days of Childeric and Clovis (a time when, in the post-Hunnic Danube, the style had changed), these elite soldiers, through their wives, were proclaiming a new, prestigious, cultural identity, perhaps not yet ethnically definite. Or to put it another way, this “Danubian souvenir style” might have been used by women married to Gothic officers in Vidimir’s army, or to Alans, or for that matter to Franks who had returned from service in Pannonia.51

What is surely significant however, is that by the time of the Battle of Vouillé a funerary horizon characterized by both male burials with weapons-panoplies and female burials with ethnically significant ornament was spreading


widely and rapidly in precisely those regions brought under Frankish control by
Childeric and Clovis. It is reasonable to argue that, by that date, a coincidence
between funerary custom, archeologically recovered, and ethnic identity had
taken place: the successful military elite was proclaiming itself “Frankish” in
allegiance to the successful Merovingian dynasty.

One now might return to the question of the Visigoths in the light of this
suggestion. They had been settled in the Toulouse region since 418, and since
the 480s had been moving into Spain in force, but had not hitherto been
practicing dressed burial (although their women no doubt dressed in a fashion
close to the “Danube souvenir” mode of northern Gaul discussed above,
deriving from the same prototypes). If, as seems possible, dressed burial, focused
on female costume, started to catch on with the Visigoths around the time of
the Battle of Vouillé, might it not have been inspired by the new style in the
north? Would not this adoption amount to another kind of Frankish victory, in
the cultural domain? Thus an ethnically distinctive Visigothic funerary
archeology would have been found at last—ironically, just as the Visigoths
themselves were being expelled from Aquitaine. And from this perspective, the
Frankish victory at Vouillé was even more complete: not only did the Franks
expel the Visigoths from their Gallic domains, they also prevented them from
leaving a record in the material culture.

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