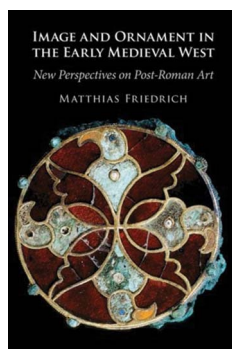


interesting skeletal collections with excellent historical and associated archaeological context, and to suggest interesting opportunities for new research.

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MATTHIAS FRIEDRICH. 2022. *Image and ornament in the Early Medieval West: new perspectives on post-Roman art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-20777-5 hardback £85.



In Merovingian archaeology, a new book does not often offer a large-scale change in perspective, but Matthias Friedrich's monograph does just that. On a mere 174 pages (not including 31 pages of references and 31 coloured plates), Friedrich achieves what early medieval goldsmiths may have intended with their art: that is, to guide our eyes in one direction, make us switch focus and then simultaneously see the same image as before, as well as something else entirely.

In the Introduction, Friedrich states that the main aim of the book is to overcome the binary concepts of Roman/Germanic and Christian/Pagan by identifying their character as scholarly categories rather than mirrors of ancient realities. The first part of the book 'The great divide' (Chapters 1 & 2) sets out to dismantle old constructs, but part II 'New perspectives' (Chapters 3 & 4) offers a new interpretative framework for early medieval art.

Chapter 1 'Problematising the "Germanic"' delves into the history of research of the *Germanenbegriffe*. Four concepts are singled out as having a particularly large influence on the analysis of art and archaeology: *Heilsbild*, *Gefolgschaft*, *Sakralkönigtum* and shamanism (Old Norse *sejdl*/magic). Shorter paragraphs then discuss the problematic terms Roman/Barbarian and Pagan/Christian. The outline is easy enough to follow as it is written in an anecdotal style, with details fleshed out in examples. This lends the book appeal for a larger readership, which is a desirable direction especially in the current socio-political context outside academic research in which so-called 'Germanic' art is received today.

Chapter 2 'The enduring power of images' presents four case studies in which Friedrich pinpoints the hold that Roman Imperial iconography had on early medieval art. Most of the arguments given are thoroughly convincing, except for the case of individual depictions on gold bracteates. Here, Friedrich claims the arguments for identifying Norse gods on bracteates are thin, though offers no other avenues of interpretation. The Imperial derived composition of the bracteates, however, is obvious regardless of the individual figures' meanings and is, in my opinion, separate from them. The next example is studied in much more

detail: the lance bearer on the reverse side of the Niederdollendorf stone, which also reveals an imagery of power at the heart of the composition. Then the author convincingly traces the early medieval compositions of animal warriors with spears back to Imperial ones. However, it is not explained that the warriors are self-referential in their attire, meaning the *Ringknaußschwerter* or the plated helmets in Torslunda show them as warriors of a certain time, and thus alluding to a rather contemporary context. The last case study is Friedrich's most creative stance. The imagery of the Trossingen lyre consists of two groups of warriors with shields and spears and animal style decorations. It can be understood in the context of its use, with the lyre player becoming part of the scene on the instrument, rather resembling a *tableau vivant*. All in all, the reader is led easily through this well-structured chapter, but it relies on more 'telling' and less 'showing'. In some cases, the analysis of composition and motif seem conflated or maybe they were shortened due to lack of space in the book. Fortunately, at the end of the chapter a synopsis pulls all the argumentative strands cohesively together.

This chapter provokes further thoughts on late Roman Imperial imagery and its long-lasting effects. For future research, it will be fruitful to consider other late Roman sources—for example, toreutics and metal artefacts, or mosaics—in which Friedrich's arguments for his 'imagery of power' are all too visible, with a pictorial language of exclusivity, communicating various elements side by side. Following the thinking of Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann, Max Martin (2017) or Stefanie Martin-Kilcher (2018), the elites presented themselves not as Christian or Pagan but primarily as educated and part of the late Roman 'leisure class' with images of hunting, bathing and other expensive pursuits. May we transfer this train of thought to persons like the owner of the Hüfingen phalerae (discussed on p. 68)? Over time, new imagery was added to the depictions of the ancient Mediterranean storytelling corpus as well as Christian elements, which were shared in elite circles. We could pursue this as far as the juxtaposition of multi-origin images and language on the Franks Casket. Portrait medallions on metal artefacts also reflect Imperial elite taste from about Constantinian times onwards—artefacts that were sometimes kept in the world of the living for centuries before being committed as grave goods, for example the late Roman silverware in the Sutton Hoo grave 1.

Friedrich's argument may be reinforced even more by taking a closer look at coinage iconography (which is mentioned in connection with the gold bracteates, but no case studies are provided). Coins are one of the 'Bildträger' (image bearer) that were most easily carried through and beyond the Roman Empire, and their iconography truly endured. Again, predecessors for the lance rider on the Pliezhausen discs can be found here as well as the ones on the Sutton Hoo and Vendel helmets, as the ADVENTVS motif is much more widespread on coins than on tombstones.

Chapter 3 'Art, archaeology and agency' is a refreshing take on early medieval material culture. Friedrich locates his analytical frame of reference within newer trends in material culture studies; namely, relational approaches, touching upon Alfred Gell's concept of agency (1998) as well as actor-network theory, new materialism, symmetrical archaeology and the ontological turn in general. Questioning the historical scope of any material relations, Friedrich regards the objects of art as agents within their (archaeological) context. Next to style and motif, the materiality of a given object is considered, combined with a semiotic and symbolic reading which is, again, feasible only within their context (here, the artefact).

Chapter 4 ‘The bewilderment principle: ornament and surface’ sets out to view early medieval art based on the previous chapters. First, an overview on history of research and interpretation highlights the interpretative pitfalls from Chapter 1. Then, finally, the principle of *varietas* is properly introduced. Drawn from Byzantine art history, it describes the contemporary aesthetic preference for a sophisticated application of various techniques, materials, imageries/styles and colours in one single piece of art. Interestingly, Cristina Murer (2022) has recently compared the *pasticcio* style use of late Roman spoliae with contemporary poetic preferences. The conclusions found there on late Roman taste may not be too far off Michael Roberts’ (‘the jewelled style’, 1989) stance on aesthetic variety in Byzantine art. Could this be evidence for a predecessor for early medieval *varietas*? Friedrich convincingly applies the latter to artefacts as diverse as cloisonné brooches, style II art and glass vessels. Stylistic observation is not central here, the chapter rather considers materialities, technologies, ornamentation and surface, as well as colours, which all contribute to the ‘bewilderment principle’ at the core of early medieval aesthetics.

Without making it explicit, the book illustrates Friedrich’s view that Merovingian art is firmly entangled with, and derived from, the ruling elites’ visual culture. Could this be the next narrative to contest? Or to confirm? Struggle for power through art? This may tie in nicely with Friedrich’s intention of rendering the material relations to their proper historical scope.

A few editorial details are irksome, and descriptions of objects would have benefitted from being accompanied by colour images, but these are minor complaints.

It is just beautiful to see someone acknowledge and explore the vast treasure trove that is early medieval art and archaeology, with new questions and ideas in mind. The book is aesthetically pleasing and readable; deep without dragging. It is a new staple for early medieval archaeology and art history: ‘*varietas delectat*’, indeed.

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