BARBARIAN JEWELRY OF THE MEROVINGIAN PERIOD

By EDITH B. RICKETSON

Among the most striking exhibits in the newly arranged galleries of mediaeval art are the cases devoted to Merovingian jewelry and related barbarian metalwork. Most of this material was included in the splendid gift made in the name of J. Pierpont Morgan by his son in 1917. The Museum thus acquired three important collections purchased by Mr. Morgan in 1910 and 1911: the Queckenberg collection, composed of objects from about twenty-five graves in a Frankish cemetery at Niederbreisig, a small village on the Rhine between Coblenz and Bonn, in Germany, and two other collections, made up for the most part of material from Frankish graves in France.

Although much of the barbarian jewelry of the Merovingian period possesses artistic merit of a high order, the interest that it arouses in the student of mediaeval history as well as in the casual visitor to the Museum derives almost as much from its unfamiliarity. The period of its use and manufacture—roughly A.D. 400-800—is one about which very little is known and which is often thought of as a cultural void following the disintegration of the Roman Empire of the West. Because of its obscurity, some historians refer to it simply as the Dark Ages. Others describe it as the Period of Tribal Migrations or the Period of Barbarian Invasions, designations which indicate more specifically what was going on in central and western Europe during these centuries. The great ethnic movements shown on the map on the next page helped to lay the foundation of European civilization as we know it today, through the amalgamation of the cultures of various barbarian nations with that of the Romans and the Greeks. The historical backgrounds of these peoples must therefore be kept in mind if one is to have full appreciation of the jewelry they produced and wore.

The usual and perfectly reasonable questions one asks when confronted with a new or hitherto unfamiliar art are these: Who made it? When, where, and to what purpose? In the present instance to answer: The Franks, a people of Teutonic origin, who invaded and settled in what is now northern France and the Rhineland, used these ornaments for the embellishment of their domestic equipment, their weapons, and their persons, during the Merovingian dynasty (A.D. about 450-750), is to give only a part of the picture. The complete picture is complex and confused—manifestly beyond the scope of this article. However, a few pertinent facts may serve partly to clarify it.

A most important fact to bear in mind in connection with the Merovingian jewelry extant today is that it was found in graves. If the Franks and other barbarians had not practiced the custom of burying the dead with all their gear, we should know much less about their taste and skills, the humble objects used in daily life, and the possessions that were their pride. These possessions, it should also be pointed out, were not exclusively Merovingian in origin but included many objects of an earlier era that were presumably found by the Franks in the looted homes and graves of peoples they dispossessed, as well as objects of alien workmanship that they acquired by trade or war from the tribes and nations with whom they came in contact during their wanderings.

Of the non-Frankish material the largest single group is recognizably Celtic and Gallo-

ABOVE: Celtic brooch found in South Russia, iv century B.C.-I century A.D. Bronze with champagne enamel. Diam. 17/8 in. Rogers Fund, 1922
Map of Europe showing the migrations of the Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Burgundians, and Langobards from the second through the sixth century after Christ. Drawn by Lindsley F. Hall
Celtic necklet, Iv-I century B.C., and Gallo-Roman brooches, I-iv century A.D. The necklet is of bronze, the brooches of bronze inlaid with champlevé enamel. Diam. of necklet 53/4 in., w. of brooches about 2 in. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917

Roman. The Celts inhabited the central and western parts of Europe during the Bronze Age. From the sixth to the first century B.C. they spread southward and eastward through Europe and even to Asia Minor. Driven back in the west by Roman legions, they were finally conquered by Caesar, and in the Roman provinces of Gallia, which reached from the Rhine to the Pyrenees, the Roman and Celtic cultures merged into a provincial type known as Gallo-Roman, which flourished during the first four centuries of our era. Like the Romans, the Celts were skillful craftsmen in metalwork and were among the earliest in western Europe to develop the use of enamel decoration on bronze in the champlevé technique: colored vitreous pastes fused onto the metal in designs incised on its surface.

In the collection of barbarian jewelry newly reinstalled last spring in the Metropolitan Museum's galleries of mediaeval art there are some typically Celtic forms, such as bronze necklets (torques), armlets, and safety-pin-like brooches (fibulae), and a large group of Celtic and
Frankish brooches in the form of birds, vi-vii century A.D. Gilt-bronze, with red glass inlay. H. 1 1/4 in. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917

Gallo-Roman fibulae, generally wheel-shaped and decorated with enamel in blue, white, red, yellow, green, and violet. Shown with these ornaments are various small objects made for daily use. The silver spoons, styluses, and knives were probably imported from Rome; the bells, scales, keys and so forth, probably locally made copies of Roman originals.

Several ornaments from a warrior's tomb in Vermand, France, are included with the Celtic and Gallo-Roman pieces, although they are in a different style (ill. p. 143). These are a belt buckle and three ornamental mounts from a spear, of silver parcel-gilt and decorated with niello and conventionalized figures of animals in relief. The dates of coins found in this grave indicate that the burial could not have been made earlier than A.D. 475-500.

The Germanic tribes, who during the first four centuries of our era moved steadily west and south from the area around the shores of the Baltic Sea, were numerous and closely related. Some of them need not concern us here. The Franks, the Burgundians, and the Alamans pursued a westerly course into Gaul and what is now southern Germany and Switzerland. The Goths, Langobards, and Vandals at first kept more to the east in their southward push—the Goths settling for some time, roughly A.D. 150-350, in the Black Sea region of southern Russia, called "Pontine" because the Roman name for the Black Sea was Ponticum Mare. Here they encountered a mixed culture, partly Hellenistic, partly Scytho-Sarmatian, and partly Iranian. The Pontine region was apparently a meeting ground of Eastern and Western cultures. Two great trade routes led from the Black Sea to western Europe—one by way of the Dnieper and Vistula Rivers to the Baltic, the other by the Danube and the Rhine to the North Sea.

As a result of the interchange of ideas and commodities thus made possible, Germanic art clearly reflects the influence of the East. This is especially apparent in the art of the Goths and Langobards, precisely the same tribes whose styles were most affected by the more refined work of the territories they raided and temporarily occupied. Among the Gothic and Langobardic ornaments in the Museum's collection are to be found many gold objects of delicate workmanship closely allied to that of Byzantine jewelry (ill. p. 142). The resemblance is not fortuitous, as the Goths and Langobards were in continuous contact with the Byzantine civilization during their migrations through eastern Europe and Italy.

As stated above, the Franks were barbarians


of Teutonic origin. During the third, fourth, and fifth centuries after Christ, they swept down into Roman Gaul, occupying territory now coincident with northern France and western Germany, including a large part of the Rhineland. They were secure enough in possession to fight the Vandals in 406, when with the Alans (a people of Iranian origin) they advanced through Gaul into Spain. In 451 the Franks helped the Romans and the Visigoths to repel an attack made by Attila the Hun against the Western world. Under Clovis (481-511), the most powerful king of the Merovingian dynasty, the Franks enlarged their territory to include the whole of Gaul except Burgundy, the Mediterranean coast, and a strip close to the Pyrenees. It was under this king too that the Franks were converted to Christianity. Clovis had married a Burgundian princess who was a Catholic although most of her family were Arians, and in 496 he embraced his wife's religion. This fact is of historical importance because the Franks aided the Roman Church in its struggle to become the dominant religious force of the Western world and in turn received support in their political ambitions. The last king of the Merovingian line was deposed by Pipin the Short, son of the great Frankish leader Charles Martel ("the Hammer") who defeated the Muslims under Abd ar-Rahman at the battle of Tours in 732. Under Pipin's son Charlemagne (768-814) Frankish dominion was extended to its utmost limits.

Frankish jewelry is well represented in the Museum's collection. There are three types of fibulae. One type, which may be either round or quatrefoil, has a bronze back and pin and an upper face of gold and silver decorated with filigree and set with stones or glass. The second, which may be either round, S-shaped, or in the form of birds, is characterized by glass and stone decorations set in cloisons and sometimes covering the surface (ill. pp. 139, 141). The third type is more closely related to earlier, Pan-Germanic brooches. It consists of T-shaped and digitate bow-fibulae decorated with conventionalized ornament and geometric designs in the Kerbschnitt, or chip-carving, style. These
brooches are most often found in pairs (see p. 139) and would seem to have been worn in several ways. They have been found with skeletons, variously distributed: one on each shoulder; two in vertical file on the same shoulder; or one in the region of each hip. Contemporary representations of Franks wearing cloaks are comparatively rare, but those which exist show either a single pin or a knot used to hold the ends together. The handsome buckles and belt plaques shown on page 140 are typically Frankish ornaments. They are of bronze or iron, inlaid with silver in intricate designs.

Much barbarian jewelry is intrinsically interesting from the standpoint of both design and workmanship, but to appreciate its full effect one should picture it in its original setting. Sidonius, a Gallo-Roman noble born about 431 at Lyons, gives us not only many hints but several complete descriptions, including one of a young Frankish prince on the way to the palace of his Burgundian father-in-law: “I can imagine your delight if you could have seen... Sigismer... in all the pomp and bravery of the tribal fashion. His own steed with its caparisons, other steeds laden with flashing gems, paced before and after; but the conspicuous interest in the procession centered in the prince himself, as with a charming modesty he went afoot amid his bodyguard and footmen, in flame-red mantle, with much glint of ruddy gold, and gleam of snowy silken tunic, his fair hair, red cheeks and white skin according with the three hues of his equipment. But the chiefs and allies who bore him company were dread of aspect, even thus on peace intent. Their feet were laced in boots of bristly hide reaching to the heels; ankles and legs were exposed. They wore high tight tunics of varied colour hardly descending to their bare knees, the sleeves covering only the upper arm. Green mantles they had with crimson borders; baldrics supported swords hung from their shoulders, and pressed on sides covered with cloaks of skin secured by brooches. ... In their hands they grasped barbed spears and missile axes; their left sides were guarded by shields, which flashed with tawny golden bosses and snowy silver borders.”

The male guests at another Frankish wedding party Sidonius describes as follows: “Their eyes are faint and pale, with a glimmer of grey-


ish blue. Their faces are shaven all round, and instead of beards they have thin moustaches which they run through with a comb. Close-fitting garments confine the tall limbs of the men; they are drawn up high so as to expose the knees, and a broad belt supports their narrow middle."

From other sources we learn that the Franks sometimes wore their yellow hair loose, sometimes wound in a knot and skewed in position with a long hairpin. This was pointed at one end and rounded and slightly bent at the other. It brings to mind the implement used to extract snails in modern France, and it may well have served the same purpose in Merovingian days, as quantities of snail shells have been excavated in Frankish graves. Sidonius mentions the Burgundian custom of greasing the hair with rancid butter and the Saxon one of shaving the forehead to make the face look longer, and he speaks of an aged Sigambrian warrior who shaved the back of his head in token of defeat. Frankish women wore a loose gown held in by a belt similar to that of the men. In cold weather they too wore a cloak secured by a brooch or brooches at the shoulder.

Both men and women wore earrings and as many necklaces, finger rings, and bracelets as their wealth allowed, but perhaps their most conspicuous ornament was the belt. This was of leather fastened by a buckle between two large plaques of bronze or iron, decorated with silver. It supported a sheath containing a knife and also one or more ornamental mounts with openwork designs or open ends (see ill. p. 141) from which hung small objects such as keys, scissors, tweezers, combs, amulets, and the steel for making fire. Men sometimes wore a leather or skin purse with an ornamental frame, possibly hanging in front like a Scotch sporran. In combat they wore a baldric which supported a sheath, often beautifully decorated with gold, containing a spatha, or long sword.

The attributions in the present article are based on notes by Dr. Herbert Kühn, who made a study of the Museum’s collection of barbarian jewelry and metalwork in the winter of 1936-1937. The Morgan pieces, which constitute the major part of the collection, are fully illustrated in the three-volume catalogue compiled by Seymour de Ricci (Paris, 1910-1911). For more general information the reader is referred to the following works: Herbert Kühn, Vorgeschichtliche Kunst Deutschlands (Berlin, 1935); H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages (London, 1935); and Édouard Salin, Le Haut-Moyen Age en Lorraine (Paris, 1939).