A cultural perspective on Merovingian burial chronology and the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries in Maastricht
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Chapter 2

Cultural Categories of Grave Goods on the Basis of Various Relations Between Grave Goods and the Deceased

In the previous chapter it was concluded that the chronological phasing of early medieval graves is primarily based on the assumption that similarities between grave goods assemblages are an indication of their contemporaneity, but that the exactness of this phasing can be questioned (especially when the short-phase model is the analytical point of departure). This presumed exactness raises questions which are concerned with the method of seriation, but also with certain cultural variables such as the age at death, the possibility of deviating circulation periods of objects and the various (hypothetical) acquisition moments of objects during the lifecycle of the deceased as integral components of chronological research. Theorising on these cultural variables and their implications for the chronological debate, however, has rarely been initiated in early medieval burial archaeology. In order to add this cultural dimension to the chronological debate, one central theme will be further explored in this chapter: the identification of various cultural categories of grave goods. Such a categorisation serves to elucidate the nature of the connection between the deceased and their grave goods, and, following this line, the various circulation trajectories of objects in society before their interment as grave goods. The nature of the archaeological evidence has directed the archaeologists of the last few decades to focus on the funerary role of objects that were selected as grave goods. This development in theoretical thinking related the funerary role of these objects mainly to the aspirations of the survivors. The analysis of the development of the interpretative debate in early medieval mortuary archaeology will shape the discussion in this chapter. The focus in this analysis will be on the identification of the various scholarly positions towards the relation between the objects and the deceased, both in life as in death. The same point of departure is chosen for the analysis of a selection of interpretative models that can be considered to cover theoretical thought in early medieval mortuary archaeology of the last few decades. The analysis of grave goods and their role in funerary practises have always been the main concern of archaeologists of the early medieval period, but a shift in their assigned meanings can be observed in the research history of this discipline.

2.1 The development of the debate on the meaning of early medieval grave goods

In the traditional (and in some instances modern) scholarly debate regarding mortuary practises in the early medieval period, it is often assumed, explicitly and tacitly, that the objects found in graves, or at least a selection of them, were the personal belongings of the dead.91 This initially seems justified considering the fact that the dead were regularly interred with dress-related objects such as jewellery and belts and complementary objects such as weapons or purses with a variety of items, all of which it is reasonable to assume were once used by the deceased. Alternative interpretations that consider the

91 Although this premise based mainly on historical sources has already been questioned for some time, references to the burial of personal possessions can still be found in recent publications such as for example “Le propriétaire de cette tombe richement dotée avait manifestement un statut particulier mais lequel?” (Vrellynck 2008, 33). Numerous other examples can be found (see Chapter 1 and 4). The question is how the recent references should be understood: as a prolongation of the legal interpretation or as a ‘common sense assumption’ of which the need to explore it is not acknowledged?
nature of the relation between the dead and the variety of grave goods, and, above all, the reasons why
the dead were buried with their assumed personal possessions were rarely a matter of discussion in the
early stage of the debate. In the previous chapter, it was reasoned that the nature of this relation
requires further reflection in order to broaden the one-dimensional chronological discussion, but also for
further interpretative research. The first question is whether burial with personal possessions existed,
and if so, at which moments in the course of life these possessions were acquired, and what roles the
objects had in the lived life of the deceased and in the community. In addition, can burial objects be
chosen from contexts other than the property of the deceased, and are questions regarding the influence
of prolonged circulation on chronological analysis relevant with respect to this choice? The dead and
their grave goods become one entity in the grave, but whether the burial items actually formed the
personal belongings of the deceased is the basic question in this chapter. It forms the point of departure
from which various alternative relations between grave goods and the deceased will be explored, first,
by sketching the development of the scholarly position towards this subject in the historiography of early
medieval mortuary archaeology.

The development of the theoretical and interpretative debate in early medieval mortuary
archaeology has already been reconstructed along the line of the general consecutive paradigms in
archaeology. A general consensus regarding the function of funerary activities can be found in the
general death and burial debate in archaeology; in essence, the activities are understood as ‘rites-de-
passage’, the reproduction of society, dealing with the disruption and unease a death causes, and/or the
integration of individuals in the ancestral community. In particular the meaning of object deposition
with the dead has been explained against the background of these abstract points of view in the
interpretative models in early medieval archaeology. The rest of the funerary remains, and their
complementary research potential, such as cemetery structures, the interpretative possibilities of the
study of skeletal remains, and the grave structures themselves are only sporadically used in the search
for a theoretical position regarding mortuary behaviour in the Early Middle Ages.

The interpretative models discussed below have a key position in early medieval mortuary
archaeology. They are all founded on a selection of the burial evidence, either from one region or from
one limited period of time, or on a specific category of grave goods. It can be stated that this selection
of interpretative models represents the range of theoretical standpoints. For their analysis, it is first
useful to identify the models as either dead-centred or mourner-centred approaches (Table 4). Dead-
centred approaches focus on the role of the individual dead in mortuary practises, whereas the latter
concentrate on the participation and socio-political agendas of a group of mourners (organisers of the
burial) in funerals. The supposed burial strategy in each model is translated into a theoretical position.
The theoretical positions, in chronological order from the top down, of the dead-centred approaches can be
found in the columns to the left and those of the mourner-centred approaches in the columns to the
right. The associated cultural categories of grave goods are listed in the column in the middle.

The traditional dead-centred models (Table 4: Upper left corner) can either be placed in the
culture-historical tradition or the processual tradition in archaeology. The burial evidence was generally

92 The assumption that people were buried with personal belongings suggests that objects were appropriated as
‘personal possession’ and implies that an awareness of individuality or ‘self’ was a component of social life in the early
medieval period. The concept of individuality or personhood in ancient societies is a separate discussion (see for
example Fowler 2004), which is, despite a preoccupation with personal possessions, rarely touched upon by early
medieval archaeologists (for an exception, see Bazelmans 1999, 156-160).
93 Good examples are Pader 1982; Härke 1989; 1997; 2000a; Stoodly 1999, 4-8; Lucy 2000, 174-186; 2002; Effros
2003; Williams 2006, 4-9; Hasall 2010, 21-88.
94 Fundamental works in social sciences to which archaeologists often refer in studies of death and burial are those of
the anthropologists Van Gennep (1960: The Rites of Passage), Hertz (1907: Contribution a une étude sur la
representation collective de la mort), Metcalf and Huntington (1979: Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of
Mortuary Ritual) and Bloch and Parry (1982: Death and the Regeneration of Life).
95 Smal (in prep).
96 Williams (2004b, 263-265) introduced the term ‘mourner-centred’ approach in early medieval archaeology, on the
basis of which the opposite ‘dead-centred’ approach is formulated.
considered to be the result of the factual image production of the deceased in life by the burial with their personal possessions. Originally, the concept of burial with personal possessions derived from legal historians and was later embraced as a ‘theory’ that explained furnished burial by archaeologists.97

Table 4. The development of the theoretical positions in early medieval mortuary archaeology and the associated cultural categories of grave goods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dead-centred models</th>
<th>Theoretical position</th>
<th>Cultural categories of grave goods</th>
<th>Theoretical position</th>
<th>Mourner-centred models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture-historical and processual approaches</td>
<td>Direct representation of legal status, ethnic affiliation, religious affiliation and socio-economic status</td>
<td>Personal possessions</td>
<td>Neutralise social stress and competition</td>
<td>Halsall 1995; 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family possessions</td>
<td>Occasional objects</td>
<td>Representation of new claims on land / Creating community of ancestors</td>
<td>Theuws 1998; 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gifts</td>
<td>Personal possessions</td>
<td>The rhetoric of giving</td>
<td>King, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasional objects</td>
<td>Personal possessions</td>
<td>Technologies of remembrance</td>
<td>Williams, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, 2006</td>
<td>Mnemonic agency of the dead body</td>
<td>Occasional objects</td>
<td>Personal possessions</td>
<td>Gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannon, 2006</td>
<td>Agency of women</td>
<td>Personal possessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this ‘theory’, grave goods were considered to be the *Heergewäte* (weapons and clothing of a man) and *Gerade* (jewellery and clothing of a woman), which were interpreted as inalienable (not to be passed on (as heirlooms)). This was considered to be a strong argument for the explanation of furnished burial as the result of interment with personal possession. However, the individual who actively acquired possession in life was not the subject of research, but rather the community of the dead as a reflection of society. This offered opportunities to explore themes that were related to group identities such as ethnicity98 and religious affiliation (pagan versus Christian)99, to processes such as migration and cultural

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97 An important legal historian who contributed to the development of this interpretative framework for furnished burials was Brunner (1898: *Der Toteanteil in germanischen Rechten*). See Härke (2000, 22-23) for references to the construction of this interpretative framework, and Effros (2002, 3-4, 25, 41-43; 2003, 72-79) for an overview and deconstruction of these early scholarly interpretations of Germanic law in relation to funerary practices. The erroneous legal interpretation of furnished burial will be further discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

98 It was assumed that the furnished graves were those of Germanic people and the less furnished or unfurnished those of Gallo-Romans because the transmission of personal property through inheritance was an accepted custom amongst the latter group (Effros 2002, 42). Material culture was also assumed to be an ethnic marker which made it possible to identify the graves of ethnic groups such as Alemanni, Lombards, Visigoths, etc.

99 The religious aspects of burial customs require some remarks in this context. It will appear in this chapter that religious sentiments are rarely discussed as a component of burial rites and the selection of grave goods in the interpretative models of the last few decades. Although it can be concluded that early medieval Gaul was confronted with an increasing Christian infrastructure, it remains obscure to what degree Christianity was experienced as a religious component of life and what role it had in burial practices of various social groups. On a very general level, the spread of Christianity was used to explain furnished burials as those of pagans, and the empty or soberly furnished burials as those of Christians. It is now generally acknowledged that the earliest form of Christianity in Gaul did not
change, and to the economic (rich versus poor) and the legal (status) organisation of society. These early dead-centred models will not be discussed in this chapter, as their worth and flaws, which will appear in the following sections, are already firmly established and require no further evaluation.\(^\text{100}\)

The main incentive for this change of thought was that it was recognised (due to changes in theoretical standpoints in other fields of archaeology and formulated in the schools of the so-called post-processual and interpretative archaeology) that the ideological components of death and burial and the active role of individuals and social groups in the process of consolidation and change in mortuary behaviour had been underexposed.\(^\text{101}\) In the archaeological ‘death and ritual’ debate of the last few decades, it is repeatedly stressed that the appearance of a person in a grave is not simply a ‘mirror of life’ and that ‘the dead did not bury themselves’.\(^\text{102}\) In other words, socio-economic status, ethnicity and internalised or practised religion cannot be ‘read’ directly from the appearance of a person in a grave, and consequently, the variety in the graves of a cemetery is not the same as the structure of society.

The way the body was dressed and deposited with grave goods is now considered to be an ideal representation of the dead and its relations, brought together by the burying community, which does not necessarily reflect the ‘reality’ of the lived life of the deceased.\(^\text{103}\) How was the burial shaped and perceived by the burial community and funeral attendees? What ‘goals’ were pursued with the performance of ritual activities (such as the selection, display and deposition of objects)? Does it do justice to the complexity of early medieval life to consider the objects deposited with the dead merely as the ‘disposal’ of inalienable personal property? Generally, a shift in the identification of the role of the burying community from passive to active can be observed. Mourner-centred approaches are much more concerned with the active role or agency of the living (burying group) in order to define themselves in society through various activities of which the burial of a group member is a specific and important one, as illustrated below. Grave goods are, in light of mourner-centred approaches, considered as actively chosen by the burying community, and can be perceived as occasional objects. Consequently, both the lived life of the deceased, its relation to the associated grave goods, but also the relation between the dead and the living, remain underexposed topics. With regard to funerary objects, the focus currently lies on their role and meaning in the specific burial context. Their circulation and role in society before this ritualised event has rarely been a fundamental subject of discussion in the mourner-centred

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| 100 | See Halsall (1992) for an elucidating argument of how furnished burials have been wrongly identified as representations of ethnic groups. The development and pitfalls of ethnic reconstructions on the basis of material culture (from graves) is also discussed in a selection of essays (‘On Brabarian Identity. Critical approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages’) (2002)) and especially by Brather (2004), Curta (2007) and Theuws (2009). Effros (2002; 2003) and Crawford (2004), discuss the interpretative problems of religious sentiments in relation to burial rites, and Härke (1990), the problems of socio-economic reconstructions on the basis of burial remains.
| 101 | Effros (2002; 43).
| 102 | Effros (2002; 2003) already discussed the various interpretative directions in early medieval burial archaeology, but this is more of an overview, rather than an analysis of these directions from a specific point of view. The question of how the nature of the connection between grave goods and the deceased should be perceived is the point of departure in the analysis of various theoretical standpoints in this chapter.
| 103 | This was convincingly demonstrated by Härke (1990; 1992) through the unexpected relation between graves with weapons that were generally perceived as ‘warrior graves’ and the analysis of the associated skeletal remains on the basis of which an active ‘warrior status’ in life was considered impossible. |
approaches. Hence, both the past of the deceased and the interred objects disappeared into the background in the mourner-centred models.

Another consequence of these now commonly accepted standpoints is that the discussion on the possible use of personal possessions in mortuary practices is perceived as old-fashioned. It became a general understanding that the presumed historical proof for the inalienability of personal possessions should be interpreted differently, in a broader context. However, despite the rejection of the historical evidence for this perception of material culture, grave goods are often still, more or less implicitly, regarded as personal possessions, especially in the catalogue-like publications of early medieval cemeteries, which often do not incorporate modern interpretative research. In general, the modern debate has resulted in various interpretative models that share a standpoint which is the opposite of the one in the previous approaches: objects in graves are mainly considered to have been selected by the burying group for strategic purposes by which several aspirations of social groups are negotiated during ritual performances.

The shortcomings of the mourner-centred approaches are not yet firmly grounded in a debate. However, some interpretative models tend towards a re-evaluation of the role of the deceased individual in the (archaeological) outcome of graves, although from a different perspective than the early dead-centred models. These modern dead-centred approaches explicitly incorporate the concept of human-based agency in early medieval archaeology, by which an effort is made to bring the influence of the lived life of the deceased (negotiation of personhood in life and death) on burial practices into scope again, next to the active role of the survivors. The re-appreciation of the role of burial objects in society prior to their burial is a consequence of these new perspectives on burial rites. The two models that will be discussed as examples of modern dead-centred approaches in early medieval mortuary archaeology can be identified as the onset of a reaction to the limitations of the theoretical standpoints in the now generally accepted mourner-centred approaches.

Nearly all the theoretical standpoints in recent mortuary archaeology of the early medieval period are captured in the following analysis of a selection of mourner-centred and modern dead-centred models. The discussion of these models concentrates on their interpretative framework in relation to the implicit and explicit references to the connection amongst the grave goods, the dead and the living, including the reflections on the influence of the lived life of the deceased, the role of these objects in these lives and in society and if and how this is reflected in the graves. The aim is to identify cultural categories of grave goods on the basis of their relation to both the dead and the living in order to generate a basis for discussions that require consideration, especially in the chronological debate. Whether each of these interpretative models has to be considered exclusive, or whether their complementary use or rejection needs to be considered options for the development of theoretical thinking in early medieval mortuary archaeology will also be explored.

2.2 Social stress and the competitive display of grave goods

Halsall discovered some interesting patterns regarding the grave goods distribution in the sixth- and seventh-century cemeteries of Lorraine (north-eastern France). These patterns form the basis of his interpretative model. First, the associations of grave goods with the gender and age of the deceased

104 It has already been mentioned how historical documents were interpreted incorrectly with regard to furnished burial (see note 97).
105 Halsall 1995; 1996. The cemeteries that were analysed are: Ennery 'Les Trois Arbres' (mainly sixth century, 82 graves), Altheim 'am Knopp' (mainly seventh century, 116 graves), Berthelming 'Alt Schloss' (seventh century, 24 graves), Bettborn 'Bienenzaun' (seventh century, 11 graves), Bouzonville 'Au-dessus du four à chaux' (seventh century, 32 graves), Gudingen 'Fransfeld' (sixth-seventh century, 8 graves), Hayange 'Forêt d'Hamévillers' (seventh century, 64 graves of which 17 grave goods assemblages have survived), Moyeuvre-Grande 'kleiner Vogesenberg' (seventh century, 23 graves), Walsheim 'am Dorf' (seventh century, 13 assemblages) and Wittersheim 'von dem langen Zaun' (seventh century, six graves). The model was tested against the evidence from cemeteries outside the civitas of Metz (Halsall, 1995, 110-163).
106 This model also formed the basis of his article (Halsall 1996) which discussed female status and power in early medieval Gaul (central Austrasia).
were analysed (Table 5). Three groups of objects could be identified on the basis of the gender of the deceased: two groups of gender-specific objects, and one group of so-called ‘neutral objects’, which appear in the graves of both men and women. The conclusions that were drawn from the observed correlations are that the sixth-century graves of men were generally more elaborately furnished than those of women, considering the number and variety of grave goods, and that more than one object of the same category was more frequently found in the graves of men. The multiple occurrences of similar object-types in the graves of men could indicate, according to Halsall, that individual ‘feminine’ objects had stronger symbolism and needed less reinforcement by repetition than certain ‘masculine’ objects. The analysed association of object-types with age groups also revealed a strong correlation, especially in the sixth century (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Women (biological sex)</th>
<th>Men (biological sex)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-7 (Child)</td>
<td>Few gender-related artefacts</td>
<td>Few gender-related artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-14 (Child)</td>
<td>No gender-related artefacts</td>
<td>No gender-related artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-22 (Juvenile)</td>
<td>Full range of female-specific artefacts</td>
<td>No gender-related artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-40 (Young Adult)</td>
<td>Female-specific artefacts, less jewellery</td>
<td>Full range of male-specific artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-60 (Mature Adult)</td>
<td>Female-specific artefacts, jewellery becomes rare</td>
<td>Full range of male-specific artefacts, no swords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ (Old Adult)</td>
<td>Gender-related artefacts become rare</td>
<td>Gender-related artefacts become rare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Associations between gendered artefact-types and age and biological sex in sixth century Lorraine on the basis of Halsall’s research in the civitas of Metz (Halsall 1995; 1996; see also Halsall 2010).

The seventh-century graves from this region show that the variability observed in the graves of the sixth century is replaced by a higher degree of standardisation. For example, a less clear pattern of gender and age construction by grave goods can be observed, although some general associations remained visible. It is remarkable that some objects that were specifically associated with men in the sixth century, such as knives and plate buckles, were in the seventh century also deposited in the graves of women, although it was observed that the ‘decorative display’ shifts from feminine artefacts to masculine artefacts of which the elaborately decorated iron plate buckles, characteristic objects for the seventh century, are a good example. Halsall suggests that this decorative display served a renewed material construction of gender, which was expressed differently in the sixth century. This is a short outline of the grave goods patterns of the sixth and seventh century in this specific region. For this chapter, it is more interesting to formulate Halsall’s theoretical position that stands at the basis of his interpretative model.

Theorisation on the meaning of the deposition of grave goods should, according to Halsall, be the major topic of concern for early medieval archaeologists. The socio-political instability of the sixth century forms the background for the proposed model, in which some core elements can be identified as the foundations of Halsall’s theoretical position. Halsall assigns an important function to the temporary display of grave goods for a significant audience. The selection of grave goods was bound to obvious

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107 The overview of the correlations between grave goods assemblages and gender and age was obtained by statistical procedures. The results were also tested against the available determinations of the biological sex of the deceased. Not many differences were observed between the cultural construction of gender (determined by the objects that were assumed to be ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’) and the determined biological sex. The correlations between grave goods assemblages and age were tested with predictive modelling.


109 Significant correlations between gendered age groups and assemblages of grave goods were, for example, also found in the burial evidence from Anglo-Saxon England, see Stoodly (2000); Härke (1989, 1992b, 1997); Lucy (1997), and was also investigated by Brather for Southern Germany, especially on the basis of the evidence from the cemetery of Ploidelsheim (2008) and Stauch (2008).


111 Halsall 1996, 12.
norms, which resulted in a certain ‘grammar of display’ that was understood by this audience. As such, the ritual display of grave goods is part of an ‘active public strategy of a family to maintain or enhance standing within the community’. The relationships of power between families were in the context of funerals redefined or confirmed in a socio-political situation in which power was constantly open for competition. The competition for power can be observed in the variation of lavishness of the graves within the boundaries of the ‘grammar of display’. The amount of experienced social stress relates to the importance the deceased family member had for these positions of power. The more lavish a burial, the more it is expressed how important the deceased was in order to secure or redefine these relationships. Halsall states that the importance of such a person (and thereby the degree of experienced social stress with their death) is strongly related to their age or stage in their personal lifecycle. This hypothesis is founded on both the burial evidence (see Table 5) and historical documents. The most lavish graves can be found in the age category 14-22 of women and 22-40 of men, on the basis of which it was concluded that the amount of social stress, and thus the present or future power position of a family, was related to deaths in these age groups. It was believed necessary to counterbalance the experienced social stress by a temporary display of lavish grave goods, and thus status.

Some difficulties can be observed in this model, mainly because two competing ‘burial strategies’, although not explicitly mentioned as such, are presumed to have operated simultaneously. By assessing early medieval burials as an option for active strategies initiated by the mourners to maintain or alter their perceived social standing, it is assumed that these mourners make the decisions, depending on which message they want to convey, about the grave goods to be displayed and interred. Halsall’s interpretative model is assigned to the mourner-centred approaches on the basis of this position. His model also served to discuss female power and status in early medieval central Austrasia.

In this discussion, some explanations are presented regarding the correlation between the assemblages of artefacts in the graves of women and their age at death. These explanations are based, although not explicitly identified as such, on the presumed relation between objects and persons during their lifetime (acquisition and possession of appropriate objects related to stages in the personal lifecycles), and they suggest that the deceased were interred with their personal belongings. This can be exemplified by expressions such as: “That jewellery was deposited in the grave suggests that it was somehow regarded as the deceased’s possession”, “The material attributes of female identity appear to have been acquired at puberty”, or “Thus there were clear mores governing grave-goods deposition. These mores argue that roles based upon gender and position in the life-cycle were of paramount importance in contemporary social theory”.

These statements are confusing because they suggest that the possessions in life are the same as (a selection of) the items with which one is buried, which seems to contradict the identification of

112 Halsall 1996, 12-22.
113 The financial fines (wergild) that had been decreed by law to compensate (the victim and the family of the victim) for various personal injuries and of which the amount was related to various social groups such as age and gender groups. See Brather (2008, 268, Abb.11) for an overview.
114 Halsall 1996.
115 The correlations between grave goods and age in the graves of women and the explanations for the correlations are (on the basis of Halsall (1996, 12-22)):
   1. Women ‘received’ their full equipment of gender-specific items (decorative objects for dress and body) in adolescence (see Table 5). Gender roles were important to highlight or construct during burial rites.
   2. With a wergild of 600 solidi, which is three times as much as other members of society and which is explicitly related to their child-bearing capacity, it is argued that women of this age group were particularly important for the family.
   3. Both the visible life of a marriageable women and funerals are public in character; in both instances, dress and bodily adornment played an important role.
   4. After the marriageable and child-bearing status, women were ascribed a domestic status, which should, according to Halsall, be regarded as an important status considering the continuing custom of lavish burial, although with less jewellery (gender-specific artefacts) of women in the 20-40 age group. The importance of the women, however, should be sought more in the value she represents within a family, hence the lavish burials, although this also served to maintain the family status within the community.
   5. The change in grave goods deposition with females over 40 represents their declining domestic role, which was transferred to the children who were reaching majority. The jewellery was passed on to the next generation, and was therefore not buried with them.
117 Halsall 1996, 11.
‘active mourners’. According to this line of reasoning, Halsall’s theoretical position is that next to active grave goods provision by mourners, one is also buried with personal possession of which the acquisition and exquisiteness are related to stages in the lifecycle. The suggestion is that the lavishness of the burial also depends on the acquired personal property of the deceased. How a woman acquired her property and whether this was an individual process or whether the family was involved was not discussed. Halsall does mention that a link probably exists between the personal display in life and in death. His theoretical focal point, however, is on the competitive ambition of the survivors and the message that is conveyed by the temporary display of objects for the duration of the funerary rite. It is unclear in his line of reasoning whether the burial objects that served the competitive display were added to the assemblage of personal items, or whether the model is based on the transformation in meaning of these personal items during funerary practises. Is his line of reasoning in conflict, or are both burial with actively acquired personal possessions and competitive burial strategies applicable within the same interpretative model? Or should alternative interpretations of furnished burial be sought?

If the ‘full received equipment of gender-specific items’ was actually buried with the deceased, then the ‘temporary grammar of display’ would also relate to the lived life of the deceased, next to the aspirations of the survivors. Could the use of two burial strategies in one model be related to the problem that the concept of personal possessions in the Merovingian period is never fully explored? The concept of individuality was rather ‘passive’ in the early dead-centred models; in the mourner-centred models, it has not been a matter of discussion. The ‘social desired’ image of a person in order to pursue certain goals can be created during burial activities, but also during the course of life, in which the transition from one stage of being to another is surrounded by ceremonies that also included a material component. This means that the active strategy of (competitive) material display and the objects involved were not confined to burial practises, but also were, although probably differently, related to events before death.119 This is mentioned by Halsall when he refers to the public role of adolescent or ‘marriageable’ women by stressing their importance for future alliances with other families. These women would therefore “…appear in public to attract alliances with other families”, whereby emphasis is placed on their physical appearance (personal display).120 This reasoning appears to imply, although very generally, the practise of active strategies related to certain phases in a person’s life to achieve certain goals. The physical appearance, for example, the desired or required objects to obtain this physical appearance of the dressed body of a ‘marriageable’ woman can be actively formed and manipulated according to the goals of not only the family but also the individuals themselves. However, if material display and active strategies relate to stages in the lifecycle, what is the role of these objects in funerary activities? Do they express the same, or do their meanings transform? Furthermore, are certain objects added to the assemblage, which can be considered to serve the goals of the survivors more than the dress-related objects of women and men? Or should it be concluded that the age- and gender-related objects play an active role other than in burial-related strategies, and that they were deposited with the dead for other reasons than Hallsall suggests? For answers, some further thoughts on object acquisition and transmission need to be explored.

Three systems of object acquisition and transmission can apply when the acquisition and separation of objects are considered to be related to the lifecycle of persons (they do not exclude each other, but can coexist):

1. Individual acquisition, ownership, and subsequent burial with the acquired items (which implies the existence of genuine inalienable personal possessions), or

119 The emphasis on material culture in life in early medieval archaeology is also expressed by Theuws/Alkemade with a reference to bodily display as an element of an elite lifestyle (2000, 411-419) and with expressions such as “...that these objects point first and foremost to [...] actively taking part in societies meaningful relationships” (2000, 412) and Bazelmans (1996; 1999; 2000; 2002), who discussed the relation of lifecycle rituals with adorned bodily display. That persons were probably not buried with all their personal possessions but with their Festtagsausstattung or a selection of this costume is mentioned by Mehling (1998, 83, note 231).

120 Halsall 1996, 16.
2. Inheritance and transmission of family possessions of which each successive heir is the temporary caretaker, and has the responsibility of keeping the line of transmission intact, but who can also add items to the ‘family treasure’, or

3. Acquisition, temporary ownership, and eventual separation outside the structure of a family.

The first option is not supported by the schematic presentation of the burial evidence from the civitas of Metz (Table 5). If it was, then the full equipment of gender-related objects would also be regularly found in the graves of the elderly. This system of ‘inalienable personal possessions’ (individual acquisition and keeping) is, at least for the civitas of Metz, for now rejected as a general and persistent practise. The second and third options are supported by the burial evidence in Halsall’s research area, although it must be considered as indirect evidence. The results of his research can provide some insights into the cycles of object acquisition and subsequent transmission or alienation (Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>Acquisition of some objects; some are gender-related</td>
<td>Acquisition of some objects; some are gender-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-22</td>
<td>Acquisition of the full range of gender-related objects</td>
<td>Acquisition of some objects; some are gender-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-40</td>
<td>Transmission of some jewellery items to next generation</td>
<td>Acquisition of the full range of gender-related objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>Transmission of the rest of the jewellery items</td>
<td>Transmission of swords to next generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>Transmission of nearly all gender-related objects</td>
<td>Transmission of nearly all gender-related objects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. The relation between age and the acquisition and transmission of gender-related objects.

Derived from the correlations (Halsall, 1995, 1996) amongst age, gender and grave-goods assemblages in the cemeteries of modern Lorraine (see Table 5).

The correlations between age at death and the accompanying grave goods assemblages show that the most lavish burials were given to women between the ages of 14 and 22 and to men between the ages of 22 and 40 (Table 5). If these objects are interpreted as inherited possessions that served a function in the structure of a family, then women received the majority of their gender-specific items between the age of 14 and 22 (the period of marriage and childbirth) from the women of the generation before them. Men received their full ‘equipment’ of gender-related objects at a somewhat later age than women (Table 6).\(^{121}\) When getting older, both women and men tend to lose the full range of gender-specific objects, or more correctly, were no longer buried with these items. In fact, the burial evidence from the civitas of Metz seems to argue in favour of the practise of inheritance; it could be interpreted as if the gender-specific items were received at a specific age (becoming an adult, getting married, having children, i.e. entering another stage in life) and were transmitted to the next generation when the individuals reached the age to receive their ‘full equipment of gender-specific items’. Accepting the system of inheritance could offer an alternative or additional explanation for the reasons why the young dead were buried relatively lavishly. However, the deposition of these objects as grave goods terminates the line of inheritance, which can be regarded as a significant rupture in the transmission of a ‘family treasure’.

Following this line of thought, the interment of these objects could suggest two things. First, it could suggest the diminished significance of the objects for the family. The objects became useless for certain

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\(^{121}\) This was also observed by Brather (2008, 264-266, Abb. 10, Tab. 5). Especially his conclusions, on the basis of the cemetery of Pleidelshelm, regarding the grave goods provision of the elderly are interesting. Women older than 60 were rarely buried with objects, whereas men still were.
established goals or they lost their effective symbolism. Secondly, it could point to the inability of the transmission of the objects to the next generation (no suitable heirs were available). Regarding the interment of objects as such, the burial with the full equipment of gender-related objects implies a much greater disassociation of the bereaved family from the quest for power than the competition for power. Empty or less furnished graves would be a sign of successful transmission of objects and a continuous competition for power, and lavish graves as sign of failure in doing so. It is argued that the regular composition of lavish graves is related to unstable socio-political times. The desire in such times to compete through lavish display contradicts the analysis of Lillios, who investigated the function of heirlooms in various forms of societal organisation. The ethnographic examples in her studies showed that when political positions are contested, people are more motivated to keep heirlooms in circulation, and vice versa, when socio-political situations are stable, there are more incentives to destroy (deposited) heirlooms. It can be reasoned, however, that when heirlooms fail their purpose in unstable political situations, this could also be an incentive for their disposal with the death. On the other hand, the basic question is whether heirlooms were selected as components of furnished burials. The discussion on heirlooms and inheritance has more aspects than suggested here, and will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

With regard to chronological analysis, it can be stated that the existence of a system of inheritance would strongly distort the chronological ordering of graves. A system of inheritance, however, does not initially correspond to the number of objects found in early medieval graves. The experienced importance of such a system would motivate the continuous transmission of objects, and it is unlikely that such a system applies to the full range of objects found in early medieval graves; rather, it probably only applies to a selection of the objects. Moreover, the full range of gender-related items can only be acquired in the system of inheritance if the previous generation transmits all of these items, which is not the case in the schematically presented burial evidence from the civitas of Metz. In addition, if the full equipment or certain objects were transmitted through inheritance, this would take at least two and up to four or five generations before they were deposited with the dead (a circulation of approximately 15 to 70 years is possible). The chronological studies until now reveal that this applies especially to 'common' objects such as knives and combs, and that dress-related objects in particular such as brooches involve a more restricted circulation period (although only a minority of the objects are confined to one chronological phase of 15 to 30 years). The practise of inheritance and the objects involved require further analysis and will be discussed in Chapter 3. It is probably more complicated than described above. A system of inheritance, however, is not the only option for the presented correlations between age groups and specific assemblages of grave goods, as well as the derived scheme of acquisition and transmission/loss.

It can also be suggested that the objects were acquired via means other than inheritance. Interesting for this line of reasoning is Treherne’s article on a socially distinct group of ‘warriors’ in Bronze-Age Europe. Although this ‘social group’ is identified only on the basis of burial remains ('warrior graves'), Treherne makes a distinction between life style and death style, both in which “...a specific form of masculine beauty unique to the warrior” is a central element on the basis of which personhood and male self-identity are discussed. Individual and personal display (as a lifestyle) became important aspects of individuals in a society that evolved over the fourth and third millennium BC. The results of these changes were archaeologically observed in the burial evidence over an extensive area in Europe. Despite the local variation in archaeological remains, “...the progressive articulation of various regions into large interactive networks...” is suggested. The control over circulation networks of especially prestige goods and practises (long-distance relations) were essential for the desired individual status (personal
display). For the death style (beauty in death), it is suggested that burials showed “…the body as the centre-piece of a signification system involving grave goods arranged around and upon it [...] designed to fix in the minds of the onlookers an image of the deceased’…”. Stress is placed on the importance of memories that were evoked during the short period of burial rites. However, the grave goods did not only receive their meaning during burial practises, but were also “meaningfully implicated in their contextual uses in everyday life”. The grave goods are references to feasts and reputations that were realised in life; they were not confined to mortuary practises.

In the early medieval burial record, it is possible to identify various ‘social groups’, amongst which are those based on gender and age (Table 5). It can be proposed that the groups of women in the age group of 14 to 22 and men in the age group of 22 to 40 show a ‘life style of individual personal display’, particularly in the sixth century. What is remarkable for early medieval material culture from graves is not only that it shows regional variation, but also that the grave contents over an extensive area in early medieval Europe can be identified as one ‘culture’. Moreover, nearly identical objects were found in regions far apart, and objects made of certain raw materials such as amethyst, rock crystal and garnets (which as raw materials can only be found in specific regions) were distributed over an extensive area. It can be assumed that individual personal display through dress and objects was related to exchange networks and depends on the extent one (or one’s family) had access to these networks. This success of this access is not necessarily restricted to the upper strata of society and to prestige goods, but can also be actively pursued by all members of society and can involve all sorts of objects. Individuals or families can be more or less successful. Assuming this, the research focus should not only be on the interpretation of the material display during mortuary practises, but also on why and in which way individuals (with the help of their family members) choose a lifestyle of personal display, how this lifestyle relates to various stages in life, if this image was continued in death, if this image in death involved all the objects that were acquired in life, and if objects were added to this burial assemblage in order to create an image.

Furthermore, it can be proposed that the success of personal display was related to success to the extent one had access to exchange networks. Given that a relatively large group of the elderly were not buried with these items, which was actually a positive argument in favour of the system of inheritance, it must be concluded that objects were not kept for the majority. It can also be suggested that the individual disposal of objects that was related to the entrance into another stage in the lifecycle did not always occur through inheritance, but also through the return of the objects to the network of object distribution from which they were also previously extracted. The question remains of why an individual was buried with the full range of gender-specific objects when he or she died at the age when personal display was at stake. It can be proposed that these objects were regarded as unsuccessful and did not serve the goals for which they were acquired; a successful lifestyle was not obtained because of an untimely death. A story of failure was attached to these objects, a negative biography of objects was created, with the consequence that they were extracted from circulation through burial. In this line of reasoning, the assemblage of acquired objects that served a certain lifestyle of personal display should not be designated as personal possessions or family possessions, but much more as ‘temporal possessions’ that served certain goals and of which one chooses to have temporary ownership. Although this line of reasoning is rather speculative, it provides an alternative for the static perception of the relation between grave goods and the deceased as inalienable personal possessions.

Elite networks of exchange and gift-giving in the early medieval period are repeatedly discussed. Such networks are described especially in a ritual sense for the social group of ‘warriors’ or

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126 Treherne 1995, 106-111.
127 Treherne 1995, 120.
129 The importance of objects in the lived lives of persons is already suggested in early medieval archaeology. See for example Theuws/Alkemade (2000, 411-413, 415-417), Bazelmans (2002, 73, 81), Brather (2008, 238-252), and Von Rummel (2008, 64): “…die hohe bedeutung von Kleidung als Ausdrucksmittel persönlicher Identitäten...”
'retainers' and lords. The available material culture known from early medieval graves, however, suggests that a wide variety of objects was exchanged, and that different sorts of exchange networks (gift exchange, commodity exchange, down-the-line exchange, long-distance trade, etc.) may have coexisted in which various social groups participated. The personal display expressed the access one had to these networks and offered individuals and social groups the possibility of constructing and maintaining social relations on various levels. It can, however, be suggested that the acquisition through exchange networks and through inheritance existed simultaneously. Some objects entered the system of inheritance, some did not, and some objects were probably selected at the moment of burial from family property, from the objects available through circulation at that specific moment (occasional objects), or were specifically acquired by the burial community to serve their ambitions. The objects in graves, and therefore the variation between the burials, can therefore also be an expression of the desired status (personal display) at certain stages of life and are not only an expression of competition during burial activities. It offers the possibility to relate exchange/distribution networks to the (individual) motivations of persons in their lived life and stages in the lifecycle, and not only to burials. This discussion elucidates that theorisation on the role of the objects in the construction of identities and relations is required for early medieval archaeology if the full extent of the role of these objects in funerary practices is to be understood. The exchange, appropriation and transmission of objects in the community of the living are the focal point in the next chapter.

Halsall’s model suggests four cultural categories of grave goods: inalienable personal possessions, alienable personal possessions (temporary possessions), family possessions, and occasional objects (actively chosen objects from the material culture available that suit the burial strategy). The cultural category of inalienable personal possession is rejected on the basis of this model because it implies the individual acquisition and keeping of objects until death. The burial evidence from the civitas of Metz does not subscribe the general occurrence of this practise, although this does not imply that this cultural category did not exist. Personal possession, however, is a concept with multiple layers that can be perceived from various perspectives. Therefore, the cultural category of temporal possessions (alienable personal possessions) is introduced. This category is related to the lifestyle or personal display of individuals in life, which express the access to various distribution networks. The deposition of these objects with the dead may also have been used to express achievements in life. As this assumes that the elderly were also buried with such objects, it was suggested, on the basis of the burial evidence from Lorraine, that the objects were returned to exchange networks after their use or buried with the individual when an untimely death occurred. This concept of temporal appropriation can be assumed to subscribe the presented correlations between age groups and assemblages of artefacts, although some further thinking on the reasons for acquisition and deposition is required. The hereditary system, which is also, although circumstantial, substantiated by the burial evidence, can be operative next to the acquisition through exchange networks. These conclusions do not correspond to the desire of archaeologists to create short chronological phases of graves on the basis of grave goods, as discussed in Chapter 1. The actively chosen grave goods or occasional objects can be extracted from the material culture in circulation. They may also have fewer consequences for the chronological phasing of graves on the basis of similarity. This category will be further explored in the following.

131 Distribution patterns of grave finds are available, and these distribution maps offer multiple possibilities to explore exchange networks on a theoretical level. Conceptualising exchange networks and the role of individuals and various social groups other than aristocrats in these networks has rarely been a subject of research.  
132 The question remains of how the pattern of the seventh century can be explained; does the organisation of lifecycle stages and the acquisition of appropriate objects change, or do the goals pursued at burial change? Important changes in the civitas of Metz in the seventh century are the transition from large cemeteries to more numerous and smaller cemeteries. Variability in grave goods diminishes and is replaced by more standardisation in the choice of the associated items in relation to gender and age; gender and age are less often ‘constructed’ by artefacts during burial practices. The decorative display shifts from ‘female’ items to ‘masculine’ items (some objects such as plate buckles became extensively decorated). Furthermore, the burials of women show objects (plate buckles and knives) that were specific for the graves of men in the sixth century (Halsall, 1996).
2.3 Rhetoric strategies and the use of grave goods: The symbolic construction of ancestors and claims on land

That funerals are events that create possibilities for rhetoric strategies and that at least some aspects of the archaeological remains of graves are a product of these strategies is an explicit theoretical position in the work of Theuws. This position implies that the choice of grave goods, or at least a selection of them, relied on the pursued goals of the burial community/family of the deceased, which leads to the identification of his interpretative models based on this specific point of view as ‘mourner-centred’. Although all mourner-centred approaches imply certain rhetoric strategies, the definition of the burial strategies is what differentiates the models such as those from Halsall and Theuws. In Theuws’ models, they are considered to serve the symbolic construction of ancestors, which suited newly formed identities and which legitimised claims on (newly occupied) land. The remark is made that the creation of ancestors was the main objective of the funerary custom of furnished burial throughout the Merovingian period. The interpretative models in which this theoretical position is the point of departure are based on a selection of the burial evidence; fourth- and fifth-century ‘weapon’ graves and farmyard burials of the seventh century. Next to the identification of cultural categories of grave goods and the nature of the connection between the deceased and their grave goods, it is also interesting to explore whether the formulated theoretical position applies to early medieval burials in other contexts and whether it excludes the other cultural categories of grave goods identified in the previous section. By emphasising the rhetorical strategies, a distance is taken from the traditional ethnic interpretation models, but also from the more recent models, which, according to Theuws, focus strongly on socio-political incentives (political events and power crises) but neglect the ideological component of society.

The article ‘Grave goods, ethnicity, and the rhetoric of burial rites in Late Antique northern Gaul’ aims at an alternative interpretation of the so-called ‘weapon graves’ of the fourth and early fifth centuries in Northern Gaul. The deposition of ‘weapons’ in graves of the fourth century is a new element of the burial rite, which already started changing in the second century and is related to “...changing ritual repertoires in changing societies”. The fourth century in Northern Gaul can be characterised as a period in which ‘cultures mixed’. According to Theuws, this resulted in a situation in which both groups and individuals found themselves in a position that made it necessary to reflect on a new situation, which eventually led to a “...merging of ideas and mentalities...”, of which, amongst other archaeological evidence, the ‘weapon’ graves were the result. The deposition of ‘weapons’ in graves of the fourth century was traditionally considered evidence of the ethnic identity of the deceased, and the proposed alternative interpretation is that the “...new ritual repertoires served to create and give meaning to new identities”. The analysis of the fourth-century ‘weapon graves’ showed that the majority contained axes, lances and/or bows and arrows (more than half consist of only an axe), and that towards the end of the fourth and first half of the fifth century, this repertoire was expanded to include swords and shields. In order to offer an alternative interpretation for these graves, two paths of analysis are considered to be important.

In short, this is first the analysis of the burial rites in their social context by defining the triangular relationship amongst the authors of the ritual, the protagonist of the ritual (the dead), and the audience present, in which the identification of the political and ideological agendas of the authors of the rituals (the burying group) are considered to be an important aspect. These agendas are, amongst other things, expressed in the furnished graves. The rhetoric of material culture and the (adorned) body in

132 Theuws 2009, 297-301.
133 Theuws 1999,; 2009.
136 Theuws 2009.
138 Theuws 2009, 288.
140 Theuws 2009, 297-301.
Funerary contexts must consequently be included in the analysis. The major line of thought is that the funerary objects and the adorned body (visible for the burial audience) suit the expectations of the burying group for the newly created ancestor “...in relation to the norms, values and ideas...” important at that moment. The political and ideological agendas can vary depending on region and period. In order to explain changes in burial rites, the social practises of the time and the definition of concepts, ideas, values and norms need to be defined. Theuws argues for the “...definition of concepts central to the world view of social groups...”, and considers this different from the short-term social practises such as in Halsall’s model (instable political situation and social stress).

Secondly, the separate analysis of each type of ‘weapon’ in burials of the fourth century in combination with the location of the burials offers an insight into the “...total range of uses and meanings...”. The aforementioned categories of ‘weapons’ have multiple meanings or associations of which the association with hunting and the clearing of land are considered important for their use in funerary performances. Hunting was an important aristocratic activity (elite lifestyle), and the rhetoric of the reference to hunting activities during mortuary practises has to be considered an expression of the capacity to control especially new types of claims on lands (outside the existing villa system) and thereby the legitimation of authority. The association of axes with the clearing of land has the same rhetoric; it is the capacity to organise and control the landscape. The observed changes in ‘weapon’ graves in the late fourth and fifth century (fewer weapon graves and differential sets of weapons, including swords and shields) are explained by changing needs pursued by changing rhetoric; protectoral capacities became an important element for the new ancestors.

One of the main focal points in the article on the changes in settlement patterns and burial grounds in the late Merovingian period (650-750) in the southern part of the Netherlands concerns the interpretation of the seventh-century burials in farmyards. The late Merovingian period is considered to be the decisive phase in the development of the settlement organisation in the so-called Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region. The colonisation of the sand plateaus of this region started in approximately the mid-sixth century and resulted in a pattern of dispersed farmyards with a central cemetery on each sand plateau that, on average, served two to three families (phase 1: 550-650). The cemeteries of this first phase were, according to Theuws, a “...crucial element in defining the local co-resident group...”, which colonised this region and the “...creation of a common cemetery would be an important symbolic strategy to define new interdependencies among the occupants of a local sand plateau...”. This pattern of dispersed farmsteads changed into a landscape in which new larger ‘nucleated settlements’ can also be found. These settlements consisted of three to five farmsteads with graves of some of the habitants located within the boundaries of the farmyard. The central cemeteries of the previous phase were also still in use at this time (phase 2: 650-725/50).

The burials of two generations can be identified in the nucleated farmyards of phase 2: the earliest burial generation is characterised by chamber graves, an N-S orientation of the graves, and grave goods such as weapons and elaborate belt sets. The burials of the next generation are characterised by smaller graves, dug close to each other, with a W-E orientation and with fewer and less elaborate grave goods. It is a result of these graves of the first generation that Theuws proposed an interpretative model, especially for the selected grave goods. On the basis of the finds in the earliest graves, it is claimed that at least some of these new nucleated settlements were occupied by newcomers, and not necessarily by the descendants of the occupants of the previous settlement phase of dispersed farmsteads. The main argument is that the elaborate finds from these graves know their

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141 Theuws 2009, 294-295.
142 Theuws 2009, 295-296.
143 Theuws 2009, 296.
144 Theuws 2009, 301.
145 Theuws 2009, 301-309.
147 Theuws 1999, 343-344.
main archaeological distribution pattern in the lower Moselle area, the middle Rhine area, the middle Meuse area, and southern Germany. It is concluded that the occupants of the sand plateaus in the Maas-Demer-Scheldt region, who buried some of their dead with these finds, were newcomers from the south (although not necessarily from southern Germany).148

The farmyard burials are peculiar because they did not occur in the settlement phase before 650, and only sporadically after the end of the seventh century. The lavish burials are in Theuws’ view related to the occupation of the nucleated settlements by newcomers. The lavish burials of men, for example, in these newly found farmyards are interpreted as a strategy to “…create a new ancestral order in a situation where new claims on the land had to be substantiated in a symbolic sense” by the newcomers in this already inhabited region.149 The other members of the community were interred elsewhere.150 The grave of a ‘founding father’ is attributed protectoral capacities and legitimates the newly claimed rights on land. Theuws states that the men buried in these ‘founding father’ graves were not necessarily the heads of the family at the time of colonisation by which it becomes especially clear that the theoretical standpoint is that burials are symbolic creations.151 Although the entire field of associated meanings for the elaborate belts and weapons in the seventh-century farmyard burials are not discussed, it can be stated that, in light of the above discussed model of the fourth- and fifth-century graves, these objects were chosen because they were considered suitable for the creation of a specific ancestor (claims on land were made permanent and protectoral capacities were expressed). What, however, can these two models reveal about the relation between the deceased and their grave goods on a general level? How do these models apply to the whole variety of early medieval burials, and do they exclude Halsall’s interpretative model?

In fact, the lived life of the deceased and the relation between the deceased and the grave goods, both in life and in death, play an insignificant role in both models. Consequently, not much can be learned about the circulation trajectories of the discussed objects, their function in society and the practise of object acquisition in life. This becomes especially obvious in the model of the seventh-century farmyard burials in which it was stated that the actual person buried did not necessarily have to be the head of the family, but rather that a burial with lavish goods was merely a symbolic creation of a ‘founding father’. The self-addressed question of whether “…the persons in whose graves these objects were deposited moved from one region to the other or whether only the objects had moved…” seems to contradict this statement.152 With regard to the circulation of these specific objects, the questions that need to be asked are whether only one person (the head of the family?) had access to this circuit, whether one can speak of access to an international circuit when the newcomers are considered to have come from the south, whether these objects are not merely family possessions that travelled with the migrating families, or whether these objects were actually obtained by locals of the Maas-Demer-Scheldt region. In light of the creation of a new ancestral order by which newly occupied land is claimed, it seems plausible to assume that these objects were part of family property that moved with the colonising family from the south. The question of whether they were deliberately obtained to suit a burial rite by which a new ancestral order was created in a new environment cannot be answered. However, it can be assumed that these objects were in circulation for a considerable time before their deposition with the dead. The interpretative model for the weapon graves of the fourth and early fifth century elaborates on the same concept. In this model, however, some remarks are made on the actual person buried: it is one of the constituents of the triangular relationship (dead, survivors, audience). How the dead relate to the objects chosen on behalf of the rhetoric of the burials and how they relate to the survivors is, however, not a subject that is further analysed. The model of weapon graves, however,

149 Theuws 1999, 344.
150 Besides the burials of males with weapons and elaborate belts dating in the period of 650-670/80, the farmyard burials also consisted of the furnished graves of women and the less furnished of empty graves of the next generation.
151 Theuws 1999, 343-344.
152 Theuws 1999, 342.
does refer to objects as expressions of an elite lifestyle, but those who bury the dead with these objects do not have to be elite members; they can merely copy an elite lifestyle. Although the associations of the ‘weapons’ as objects that functioned in (daily) practises are discussed, the focus is on the rhetorical significance of these associations in the funerary rite.

Whether the objects were related to the person buried is not considered a relevant aspect of the debate. Therefore, the conclusions about the connection between grave good and the deceased on the basis of these models must be that the objects that were considered appropriate for a specific burial could have been selected from different contexts (personal property, family property, material culture in circulation at the moment of death, etc.), although these contexts are not a matter of discussion. How the role and circulation of these objects in society relate to their role in funerary contexts is not discussed. The withdrawal from the traditional ethnic interpretation models resulted in a focus on objects that were chosen for rhetoric strategies in the context of burials; the deposition of personal property in graves is not a matter of debate in Theuws’ line of argument. In fact, the models express that the connection between the dead and grave goods was of minor importance in early medieval funerary rites. However, it should be noted that although these strategies are beneficial for the initiators of the funerary activities, the objects, which were transformed into ritually significant objects, played a role in social life prior to their deposition with the dead. It is concluded that one cultural category of grave goods can be identified on the basis of these models: objects that were chosen from objects in circulation at the time of burial, for example, occasional objects that do not necessarily have to be connected to the life of the deceased. With regard to the chronological debate, these models suggest that the funerary objects can be selected both from material culture in their primary circulation or their prolonged circulation.

The models of Theuws and Halsall show agreement with respect to the emphasis placed on the rhetoric of the temporal display of objects, but they diverge in the presumed incentives for the performed strategies and the nature of the provoked associations. If competition for local power existed, as Halsall claims, there should be an indication of more really lavish burials, it is reasoned. The small number of lavish burials is explained by the restricted need to create graves of founding fathers or of ancestors with specific characteristics. However, Theuws did not consider the age at death of the men buried with ‘weapons’ and the farmyard burials (for which information was probably not available). If a strong correlation exists between the age of the deceased and the ‘weapon’ burials in fourth-century Northern Gaul and the farmyard burials of the seventh century, the (material) identity of the persons themselves most likely complemented the discussed rhetoric of the burial rite, and should receive more analytical thought.

The contribution of the two interpretative models to the chronological debate can be sought in the attempts to disclose a material category such as weapons into their constituting elements (axes, lances, shields, etc.) and find for each of them the relevant or significant correlations and associative meanings. These associative meanings are thought to have had meaning in burial events, but they can also shed some light on how these objects were appreciated in life. Moreover, the importance of the identification of the local socio-political context at the time of the burials and the way in which these were interpreted by the social groups of that moment in order to create (new) identities is proven to be an essential component of burial analysis. Obviously the function of the funerary objects in society prior to their deposition as grave goods is an almost untouched subject in the models. The associations of individual sorts of ‘weapons’ (axe, lance, and arrow and bow) refer to their use in daily practises, but they are mainly discussed in the context of funerals. Extending the discussion with the circulation and meaning of the objects in society before their deposition could complement the image and meaning of objects in funerary practises.

153 It is argued that not all of the described ‘weapon’ graves can be identified as lavish.
2.4 Grave goods as gifts to the deceased

King discusses gift exchange in the funerary context of the fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon world and claims that by then it is likely that donating gifts to the deceased was “…a relatively common component of the burial ritual”. King’s interest in the exploration of this subject results from his fundamental question of whether the general assumption that grave goods were merely personal possessions (factual or symbolically presented as such by the survivors) is correct. The act of giving during funerary activities is considered to be of major importance for the effects it had on the social relations between the burying group and the giver. King’s theoretical position is that donating to the deceased was an element in the (re)production of social relations in order to deal with social disruption (death) as an effective strategy in the unstable socio-political circumstances in early Anglo-Saxon England. Gifts in this sense, although officially donated to the dead, should be regarded as gifts to the survivors by which the social relationship between giver and mourners is defined as either the redemption of earlier received gifts or as a strategy to enforce a counter gift (the general acknowledged principle of appropriate giving in gift exchange cycles). The act of appropriate giving (immediate intent and effect) is for King the relevant analytical tool. He thereby dismisses the need for decoding symbolic messages of the temporary display of funerary objects, which is an important analytical element in the majority of the mourner-centred models. In this way, what the graves show is ‘…an archaeological record of reproductive exchange’. Taking it further, King suggests that a ‘rich’ grave could point to the identification of this burial as one member of a group who is positioned at the centre of a socially productive exchange network, which was suggested to be essential for the formation of regional identities in early Anglo-Saxon England. The changes that can be observed in the funerary remains of the seventh and eighth centuries can be explained by changes in gift exchange networks. All of these combined remarks strongly suggest a socio-political element in the act of giving in which both the donator(s) and the survivors are the actors, and King’s interpretative model is consequently identified as mourner-centred. The role of the lived life of the deceased is underexposed in this model in favour of the focus on the relation between givers and survivors as symbolic receivers. One goal in King’s article is to identify whether gifts to the deceased were incidences or whether it was a widespread practise so that a case can be made for mortuary gift-giving as a socially reproductive practise. King’s article continues with the demonstration of a methodology to find evidence for gifts in graves. The objects used to dress the body and other ‘personal’ items such as shields and spears in ‘standard positions’ are, for the purpose of the discussion, regarded as personal possessions. Six categories of evidence for gift-giving to the deceased are identified.

These are first the presence of incongruous possessions. They show no obvious connection with the buried and are the possessions of others. This evidence is found in the presence of objects in graves of foetuses and neonates (two months or younger) and in the presence of knives and other sharp objects in the graves of infants and very young children. For both instances it is believed implausible that the interred items are the personal possessions of the young dead. Secondly, the presence of duplicated artefacts suggests the presence of gifts, especially when found at different locations in the grave. The presence of two similar objects in one grave at different locations suggests that they can be considered different cultural categories of objects: personal possessions and gifts. This argument is based on the assumption that personal possessions involve a regular deposition pattern. Most of the objects have a limited range of usual locations in the grave. Thirdly, the location of grave goods on top or outside the coffin can be considered to be an indication of gifts. As a fourth indication of gifts, the inclusion of unburnt artefacts in cremation burials are discussed from which it can be concluded that

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154 King 2004, 231.
157 King 2004, 217.
158 King 2004, 218.
159 King 2004, 221.
161 King 2004, 217.
giving occurred at both cremation and inhumation rites. The fifth argument concerns the presence of upper-fill finds, finds located higher than the rest of the objects. These finds were donated after the actual burial took place. King interprets these finds as gifts from people who reached their destination later, people who needed more time to arrive at the burial.\footnote{The problem of distinguishing between stray finds and intentional placements is sufficiently discussed by King. Pottery sherds that were found in the upper fill are not included as evidence, although Hulls et al. (1984, 7) argue that finds of sherds and other broken objects in the fill possibly indicate intentionality.} The final argument deals with indications for gift wraps such as the deposition of objects in a bucket, textile, wood or leather remains. They can be regarded as evidence of funerary gifts, although King rightly mentions that this kind of evidence is open to a variety of interpretations.

Regarding a selection of interred objects as gifts to the deceased by persons who are not part of the burying group implies that these objects had no association with the deceased person during his or her life. A sharp distinction was made between gifts and personal possessions, but, especially in light of the above discussed models, this binary opposition seems somewhat simplistic. Gifts can also be placed in the grave by the close mourners, and in this sense, they could be objects that were added to the assemblage for certain rhetoric strategies rather than the gifts of funeral attendees from far away. The question of whether personal possessions were in fact interred with the deceased is not explored from a theoretical perspective, it is merely assumed. Furthermore, the focus on gifts from relatively remote individuals or groups blurs the active role of the burial community in the selection of grave goods. King surpasses the possibility of other interpretations regarding grave goods selection, which seems to be a shortcoming and an overly simplistic representation of human behaviour.

The active role of people from a greater distance and their participation in the reproduction of social relations, however, is important to consider.\footnote{This could be the case for ‘important’ burials such as the burial of Childeric, which is known to have contained objects that came from regions at a considerable distance from Tournai. However, not all the ‘exotics’ are necessarily gifts from visitors.} However, it is only the result of socio-political and economic motivations? It can be imagined that it was the giver’s wish to express the real or desired relationship with the deceased publicly, or that the reinforcement, maintenance or renewal of alliances with the burying group was the aim. The active role of funeral attendees should not be overlooked, but should this role only be considered for ‘important’ burials? The practise of giving to the dead could very well have been part of less ‘important’ burials and could have involved less lavish objects, although the act of giving was probably less prominent in these cases.

King’s methodology offers a classification for irregular depositions, but it should be questioned whether such objects are always gifts. Objects found at ‘gift locations’ could have been placed there as a result of various burial strategies. Giving objects to the deceased can add up to the final assemblage of grave goods and does not reject the existence of other cultural categories of grave goods. For now, it is sufficient to be alerted that the construction of the grave good assemblages and the position of objects in and around the grave may be indications of ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ grave goods. However, whether primary grave goods and secondary grave goods relate successively to personal possession and gifts should be explored further.

\subsection*{2.5 The use of grave goods as a technology of remembrance}

Social or collective memory is a concept discussed at length in disciplines outside archaeology.\footnote{Halbwachs (1925) introduced the concept of collective memory.} Elaborating on this concept, which is multi-layered and therefore open to variable definitions and interpretations of how it works and how it is materialised, would go too far; it suffices for this chapter to introduce social or collective memory in the archaeological discipline as the active and ongoing process of a social group in order to (re)construct and maintain the memory of their shared past in a certain way. It was a daily process, although it can be imagined that collective memories were especially negotiated, transmitted and materialised in the context of (ritualised) public events. This section will
focus on the application of this concept in early medieval mortuary archaeology and how the connection between grave goods and the deceased can be seen from this point of view.

General insights into the commemorative function of funerary artefacts in the early medieval period can, for example, be found in the work of Halsall, Härke and Effros; it is not an unusual thought in early medieval archaeology that effort was exerted in the creation of a memory, especially during the event of a burial. The temporal visibility of funerary objects (as opposed to the longer-lasting visibility of above-ground grave markers) for the burial audience and the collective knowledge of this audience for the rightful understanding of the intended message of the material display are essential for their points of view. Williams takes this subject further by producing a comprehensive amount of work that deals with early medieval funerary rites, both inhumation and cremation, in Anglo-Saxon England, in which mortuary practises as technologies of remembrance are the main hypothesis in the search for a "...new explicit theory for early medieval mortuary archaeology centring on death as a context for commemoration". Williams considers the production and reproduction of social memory a central theme that incorporates and connects research topics, which, according to him, should shape the current theoretical debate on early medieval mortuary archaeology. Williams also claims that the meaning of the temporal display of grave goods is translated into an overemphasis on the socio-political strategies of the living. Instead, he believes that the definition of the relation between the living and the dead through the mnemonic agency of material culture (encompassing, next to objects, the dead body, burial structures, monuments and the landscape) offers an alternative approach to the understanding of mortuary practises. Williams’ theoretical position can best be framed by his interpretation of what social memory is.

The process of social memorisation, according to Williams, is "...the selective remembering and the active forgetting of the past [...] and is therefore inherently selective, active and performative in nature..." Memories can be preserved, created and transformed and are therefore never stable but are constructions that suit the situation at hand and "...secure and express the perceived rights, aspirations and identities". According to him, interpreting the burial evidence as such is underrepresented in early medieval mortuary archaeology, despite it being a suitable approach to study both the uniformity and variability, but also the chronological changes in the burial evidence. It serves greater ideological goals than the temporary display of objects in, for example, Halsall’s model. Although the commemoration is collective in nature and serves greater goals than the remembrance of the individual, the shifting life biography of the deceased is also an integral part of the mnemonic process. In this process of complex interactions between the living and the dead and the transformation and selective remembrance of the social person, aspects are both deliberately remembered and forgotten in order to create an ancestral identity that was distinct from the deceased’s identity in life. Williams’ interpretative models from this perspective can be identified as mainly mourner-centred.

The commemorative function of material culture is placed against the background of a changing society in Anglo-Saxon England. Williams claims that what was remembered is difficult to perceive for archaeologists, but that the performative and materialised process of remembrance can be investigated. This can best be illustrated by his examples of an elaborately furnished seventh-century grave of a woman and the mnemonic role of specific artefacts: brooches and weapons in inhumation rites. Through these examples, a case is made to consider grave goods, especially according to their location in the grave and the similarities and variation between individual burials, as objects that served the construction of social memory. The example of the "...wealthiest and most complex female grave ever
uncovered in the history of British archaeology” is used to contextualise his viewpoints.\textsuperscript{172} For Williams, the objects found in the grave can have meanings and associations on their own (expressing status, wealth, age, and gender, being personal possessions or family possessions, being gifts from the funeral attendees, being heirlooms or objects with biographies), although the assemblage as a whole is to be understood as a powerful statement to be remembered by the audience present at the burial. This example illuminates the different contexts from which grave goods could have been selected and the divergent trajectories of circulation they may have had, but stops at this point. The nature of the relation between the dead and their specific sorts of grave goods remains unidentified. The reason is probably because this is difficult to investigate in Williams’ opinion, and in his discussions, the statement of the funerary activities are the major point of discussion. To explore this subject further, the specific deposition of brooches and weapons as grave goods in inhumation graves and their relation with the dead, living and memory construction are analysed.\textsuperscript{173}

Opposing the hypothesis that grave goods are a direct reflection of a person’s social identity, Williams suggests “…that grave goods have a range of mnemonic roles”. In addition, for both brooches and weapons, an interpretation of the identified burial patterns is offered to explore the “…relationship between [these artefacts] and the mortuary construction of social memory and identity” in which the focus lies on the active process of remembering and forgetting in order “…to create a memorable image of the dead”, but also to remember the previous burials in a certain way.\textsuperscript{174} The key concept in these two case studies may be identified as the presumed existence of a ‘common formula’ according to which funerary practices may have been performed and the possibility for the burial community to re-enact or reject this formula. Re-enactment and rejection provide the opportunity to reproduce and alter the collective memory during every burial. In the cemetery of Berinsfield, a variety of brooch types was identified.\textsuperscript{175} Brooches can be considered, according to Williams, an important component of furnished burial; they were probably significant for the identities of the dead and the social group of the mourners. Despite the observed variability, a common formula regarding the location of these objects in the grave can be identified. Williams interprets these subtle differences as the result of intentional acts. He concludes that each burial was a performance on its own that underlined both differences and similarities with previous burials that were still remembered.\textsuperscript{176} Deviant graves show that some adult women were denied a burial with brooches. These are regarded by Williams as individuals who were “…not afforded a role in image production” for several reasons.\textsuperscript{177}

The subtle differences between graves with brooches are regarded by Williams as intentional. However, the discussion of weapon deposition mentions that these subtle differences can also be the consequence of “…vagaries of personal memory, oral tradition and the consensus that was reached over what occurred in earlier funerals”. Trends construct the common formula rather than explicit and ‘hard-and-fast’ rules.\textsuperscript{178} However, Williams suggests that each burial included two elements: image production and image reproduction.\textsuperscript{179} The difference between brooches and weapons, according to Williams, is that brooches are involved with the preparation of the body, whereas weapons are placed around the body and should therefore be “…regarded more as ‘gifts’ added during the composition of the grave…”.\textsuperscript{180} Mainly on the basis of a series of earlier studies on the circulation of weapons, Williams refers to this category of material culture as objects with extended biographies that were accumulated before their deposition. Nonetheless, he mainly concentrates on how they evoked memories in the act of ritual display during funerals. Different weapon combinations, for example, communicate subtle differences in

\textsuperscript{172} Williams 2006, 27.
\textsuperscript{173} Williams 2006, 46-62, 78.
\textsuperscript{174} Williams 2006, 46, 78.
\textsuperscript{175} Williams used the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Berinsfield (Oxfordshire) as burial evidence because of the relatively comprehensive skeletal, contextual and spatial information it provides.
\textsuperscript{176} Williams 2006, 52-53.
\textsuperscript{177} Williams 2006, 55.
\textsuperscript{178} Williams 2006, 61.
\textsuperscript{179} Williams 2006, 62.
\textsuperscript{180} Williams 2006, 59.
social identities. Only a minority of the burials show a very distinct appearance from the common formula, and the evidence for the mortuary construction of social memory must, for the greater part, be sought in the subtle differences between graves, which can, at first sight, be identified as similar. These analyses of brooches and weapons focussed on the creation of memories of individuals, although pattern reproduction also served some greater communal goals. The general goals are assumed to '...sustain the mortuary tradition and create links between the living, the recently dead and possibly concepts of ancestry and ancestors through the use of grave goods in the funeral'.\(^{181}\) Regarding these conclusions, no clear-cut conclusions about the process of grave goods selection, their connection to the deceased, and their role in the community before their deposition as grave goods can be drawn. In short, the creation of memories is regarded as a rather manipulative act by which it can be concluded that Williams considers the grave goods more as objects that were strategically selected by the mourners, although he does not regard the burial of personal possessions as impossible. Objects, not even dress-related ones, were not necessarily connected to the dead, but could have been so.

Williams' theoretical concept can, especially regarding the nature of the aspirations of the burial community, be compared to Theuws' models. Whereas Williams made an effort to create a model that relates to the various sets of graves goods over the course of time, the advantage of Theuws' model is that the reasons for the choice of specific objects (axes, lances, arrows) are more specifically explained. Both researchers tried to capture burials as strategies that reproduce the collective experience of the community. In which way can the material components of such considerations be integrated in the chronological debate? It can be concluded that burial strategies, such as active remembering and forgetting, are likely to apply to the entire set of objects, but that the objects were chosen from various contexts. Active strategies were certainly an important component of rituals. However, they focus on transformation, and not on how the objects expressed identities before their transformation. Williams does mention the mnemonic meanings that distinct objects may have had as a result of their exchange, curation, treatment, use in daily life and in connection with the body. He also mentions that considering this variability in meaning is essential for the study of early medieval mortuary practices.\(^{182}\) How this can be explored, however, was a not a subject of debate in his models. Williams incorporated the role of the life biography of the deceased into his theory, although still as an abstraction, and as an identity that was transformed during burial practises. Mentioning this aspect, however, can be seen as the first sign that the life of the dead and the role of objects in society, aspects that were neglected in mourner-centred models, become of interest in the modern dead-centred models.

2.6 The agency of the dead and the living

Agency as a theoretical concept has a prominent position in archaeological thinking.\(^{183}\) In short, it deals with the ability of individuals to purposefully act within the experienced constraints of societal structures.\(^{184}\) The ongoing debate on the degree of freedom, possibilities and consciousness of individuals in relation to these constraints is framed in the so-called agency-structure debate.\(^{185}\) Agency theory includes a wide variety of definitions and applications in archaeology, and a clear consensus does not exist.\(^{186}\) It has been argued that agency theory should not be regarded as a theory, but merely as a coordinating concept and a basic principle for the development of a variety of theories that can be named otherwise.\(^{187}\) The common purpose of archaeologists using human-based agency theory is

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\(^{181}\) Williams 2006, 62.

\(^{182}\) Williams 2006, 39-42.

\(^{183}\) See for example Dobres/Robb (2000) and Gardner (2004).

\(^{184}\) The works of Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) are considered to form the foundation of agency theory in the social sciences.

\(^{185}\) Gillespie 2001, 74. The link between actors and the structure of society was first explored by Giddens (1984) and was denominated as structuration theory.

\(^{186}\) See Dobres/Robb (2000, 3) and Dornan (2002) for an evaluation of agency theory in archaeology.

\(^{187}\) Dornan 2002, 304 (especially elucidated by her citation of Ortner).
“...putting people back into the past”.\textsuperscript{188} Despite the variation in definition and application, some central concerns can be formulated for archaeologists.

The main challenge is to deal with the concept of individuality and its relation to society in the context of the study of archaeological remains and/or historical sources. Agency theory can be considered to form a bridge between the archaeological theories that focus on society and those that focus on individuals.\textsuperscript{189} Both the definition of agency and the concept of the individual are a matter of debate in archaeology, and for each model in which these concepts are incorporated, it needs to be identified how they are perceived and what the limitations of the available datasets are.\textsuperscript{190} Although individuality remains a difficult concept for archaeologists, for the analysis of funerary remains, agency theory has the advantage of bringing the lived life of the deceased and the choices mourners make in relation to this individual back into the analytical awareness, aspects that are almost avoided in the mourner-centred models, as discussed above. In these mourner-centred models, agency can mainly be understood as the collective motivations of the initiators of burials; the agency of individuals, or, archaeologically more appropriate, the concepts of personhood or identity, and how they relate to conservatism and change in burial activities are rarely discussed. This is mainly due to the analytical focus on the burial community as a group with certain goals and aspirations. Grave goods are forced into the understanding of funerary practises as ritualised communal activities. However, grave goods did not occur out of nothing at the moment a group member passed away; they meant something in the daily life of the community and individuals. How the variety of early medieval funerary objects materialised relationships in society outside the funerary context and how they relate to the deceased in question, have consequently, with a few exceptions such as the circulation of weaponry,\textsuperscript{191} rarely been discussed until now. Nonetheless, the specific burial evidence (individual graves with a variety of associated objects) seems to offer possibilities for this line of research.

An explicit attempt towards the incorporation of agency theory in early medieval mortuary archaeology can be found in two interpretative models. Thinking on the active relations between the dead, material culture and the living found its entrance in the work of Williams and Cannon, although they elaborate on the concept of agency differently. How can their theoretical position towards the selection of funerary objects be identified, and how do these two models identify the relation between objects and the dead? Do these models actually add a new dimension to the interpretative debate in early medieval mortuary archaeology?

Cannon is known for his work on mortuary analysis and has applied his ideas on gender-based agency on, amongst other examples, the Anglo-Saxon burial evidence.\textsuperscript{192} Cannon defines agency as "...the socio-culturally mediated but individually motivated capacity to act purposefully in such a way as to create archaeologically discernable change in prevailing modes of mortuary practise", although it can also refer to "...actions that maintain prevailing practise or to actions that bring about unintended consequences..."\textsuperscript{193} Cannon, in his analysis of chronological changes regarding the burials of men and women in a variety of historically and archaeologically known mortuary practises, focuses on the agency of women and especially on "...a deliberate creation of variation perceived as beneficial to the responsible agent".\textsuperscript{194} According to Cannon, the role of individual agents (women) as conscious "initiators of change" in mortuary customs is related to the role of female individuals, who are capable of setting fashion trends in motion, but the women who follow these trends also come into scope. Although

\textsuperscript{188} Robb 2001; Knapp/van Dommelen 2008, 15.
\textsuperscript{189} Gillespie 2001, 73-75.
\textsuperscript{190} It is obvious that the individual, acting, and societal structure are all complicated concepts that are, especially in the context of agency theory, extensively discussed (for this discussion in the archaeological context, see Dornan (2002), Gardner (2004) and Knapp/van Dommelen (2008). This discussion will not be repeated, as a consensus will never be reached; for now, the use of agency theory in two models in early medieval mortuary archaeology is explored.
\textsuperscript{192} Cannon 2005, 41-65. The other case studies involve the burial evidence from Victorian England, the Seneca of New York State (sixteenth and seventeenth century), and early Bronze Age Central Europe and Denmark. For the first two examples, complementary historical sources were available.
\textsuperscript{193} Cannon 2005, 41-42.
\textsuperscript{194} Cannon 2005, 41-42.
no strong case can be made, as discussed below, that these women were (partially) responsible for their own funerals, the suggestion of this possibility and the attention that is paid to the role of personal display in life, which is of influence on the material display in death, are the main reasons to identify this model as a modern dead-centred approach. The role of the survivors in funerary practices is not dismissed. However, both the dead and the concept of individuality (opposed to the socio-political agendas of social groups) are introduced in early medieval mortuary archaeology through this article. A shift away from the focus on a group of survivors as the main designers of the material component of burials can be observed.

According to Cannon, fashion is a structuring element in burial practices in which individual expressions can be observed. This opinion implies that individual agents can be held responsible for the creation and transformation of patterns of mortuary treatment. This perspective relates to the search for women as initiators of change. Fashion undergoes different stages in which the styles of objects and clothing change; the process of fashion is therefore regarded as a useful interpretative tool for the explanation of variability and change in mortuary practices. In the development of fashion, certain individuals take the lead (the so-called fashion-conscious individuals), and these individuals should be identified as the responsible agents for continuity and change in mortuary customs. The social standing of these individuals can be read from the degree to which their choice of fashion is followed. In an earlier article, Cannon described the archaeological visibility of cycles of mortuary change in relation to the adaptation of exclusive expressions. To identify the individuals responsible for the process of change, Cannon states that an "examination of differential rates of change in practice among identifiable groups, such as those based on gender" is required. This methodological principle is, next to other examples of burial practices, applied to the Anglo-Saxon burial evidence.

This burial evidence, as Cannon describes, does not represent 'ideal archaeological contexts' for the application of his model. This makes it difficult to establish the rate of changes between the burials of men and women. The burials of the historical examples show differences between the burials of men and women. However, these differences are rather an elaboration of the funerary objects. In Anglo-Saxon burials they form different sets of objects. The agency of women in these historical examples can be described as a result of the 'fashion consciousness' of women and their desire to mark or furnish the graves of men according to what is considered 'fashionable'. After some time, the men follow the practises of women from which it is concluded that the women did set an example for their own burials. The grave goods in the burials of women and men of Anglo-Saxon England, however, also served the construction of cultural gender; men and women have distinct sets of grave goods.

To identify 'gender-based agency' in archaeological contexts such as Anglo-Saxon England, manipulation of the approach such as followed for the burials from Victorian England and the Seneca cemeteries is required. The agency of women cannot be observed in the Anglo-Saxon burial evidence, as it can in the changing burial practices of these two examples. A different kind of gender-based agency for this specific mortuary practice is therefore proposed by Cannon. He thinks that women may be responsible for "...their own material representation in life as much as in death". Although the survivors are always the ones who make the final decisions about the objects that are interred, it can be suggested that if they had to choose from the items that were associated with the deceased in life, the agency to change burial fashions is within the power of the deceased as much as that of the survivors, if not more. This argument is based on the correlation of the most elaborately furnished graves with the age category of 20 to 40, which, according to Cannon, implies that these objects were the personal

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195 Cannon used the identification of the stages, as proposed by Sproles (1985, 56). The stages are defined as: introduction, leadership in adoption, increasing social visibility, conformity within and across social groups, social saturation, decline and obsolescence.


197 The ideal archaeological context for the application of Cannon’s model would be burials that are well dated according to a refined chronology, consistently sexed by biological indicators, and show clear evidence of differential mortuary treatment for women and men. It is clear that these requirements are not met for the Anglo-Saxon burial evidence, neither are they for the early medieval burial evidence on the continent.

198 Cannon 2005, 57.
possessions (because it points towards a system of inheritance) of the deceased.\textsuperscript{199} The changes in grave goods provision can be sought in the ability of women to add new items to their inherited possessions.\textsuperscript{200}

Cannon’s remark on the importance of the material representation in life supports the suggested option that the lifestyle (personal display) of individuals was an essential element of social life, as discussed above.\textsuperscript{201} Again, the important questions that need to be answered are: who are the responsible agents who influenced a certain public appearance, why changes in these appearances occurred, and what are the reasons for one to be buried with the set of objects that served their personal display in life? From Cannon’s line of reasoning, it can be extracted that burial with personal possessions was the consequence of an absence of heirs. This subject will be explored further in Chapter 3. However, regarding funerary objects or a selection of them as elements of personal display in the life of various actors, opens new research perspectives on the function of material culture in social life in which agency theory can be a useful analytical tool.

Regardless of these conclusions, it should be questioned whether ‘fashion as a process’ is a useful concept to explain change in early medieval burial practises.\textsuperscript{202} Is the explanation that new practises are a result of the initiatives of fashion leaders and became widespread thereafter sufficient? Cannon does not elaborate on the concept of fashion, which appears to be a modern concept behind which different theoretical positions on production processes, modes of distribution, the mutual influence of groups and individuals, marketing and communication strategies, etc. can be considered. Although the burial evidence does show the introduction, rise in popularity and subsequent disappearance of objects and combinations thereof, it is difficult to apply a modern concept such as ‘fashion’ to the early medieval period, and as a consequence, define the initiators of change in burial practises as ‘fashion-conscious individuals’. It can be argued, as Cannon does, that women were more active in the way objects were appropriated and used as prestige markers in society,\textsuperscript{203} but to relate this to a ‘greater awareness of prestige forms’ and fashion-conscious individuals is merely an observation of the existence of opportunistic actors, rather than an explanation of variation and change. Moreover, the importance of stages in the lifecycle of persons and the way in which the transition from one to another was materialised become underexposed in a fashion-conscious world, as is the need to sustain and transmit material symbols of age, stage in the lifecycle, gender, access to exchange networks, status, prestige, etc.

Williams introduced the mnemonic agency of the dead body and bones into the analysis of mortuary practises in early medieval England, especially in relation to cremation rites.\textsuperscript{204} This work can be seen as the instigation of the shift from the mourner-centred interpretative framework (“…mortuary practises as a field of discourse for the living…”), to models that combine the agency of both the dead and the living.\textsuperscript{205} Williams critique on the mourner-centred models is that the role of the dead and the dead body in relation to survivors and material culture is considerably neglected. According to Williams, the dead body has the possibility to “…affect the actions and perceptions of the living”, and as such, becomes “…a focus for personhood and remembrance…”\textsuperscript{206} Williams also refers to the influence the living can have on the way in which they are treated in death (through instructions or financial provisions). Regardless, the focus in his work lies on the agency of the corporeality of the deceased and

\textsuperscript{199} Cannon 2005, 61. Personal possession does not have to equal family possession (inheritance), as argued in the discussion of Halsall’s model. In fact, in the traditional models, personal possessions are considered to be inalienable personal possessions, not family possessions.

\textsuperscript{200} Cannon 2005, 61.

\textsuperscript{201} See note 128.

\textsuperscript{202} In fact, Siegmund also uses rapidly changing fashion and fashion consciousness as an explanation for the ‘observed’ change in burial assemblages (see Chapter 1). However, it should be questioned whether fashion consciousness is a valid explanation for change in early medieval society.

\textsuperscript{203} In early medieval archaeology, this appropriation of prestige markers is especially related to men (lords and warriors).

\textsuperscript{204} Williams 2004b.

\textsuperscript{205} Williams 2004b, 264, 266.

\textsuperscript{206} Williams 2004b, 264.
its associated artefacts, structures and places in relation to the agency of the living. The dead body, in Williams’ line of argumentation, can best be understood as an ‘object’ with a biography, which has the ability to influence the way in which it is treated and experienced by the memories it evokes during its transformation in burial rites. This transformation of the body is especially apparent in the process of cremation. This article mainly concentrates on the dead body, although some opinions about the relation between the dead and material culture are expressed. Williams thinks that the selection of artefacts served the construction of a temporary and idealised image of the dead. It does offer some insights into the way the lived life of the deceased plays a role in funerary practises, but the subject of how the funerary objects connect with the dead is not further discussed. Although the lived life of the deceased is considered a subject of research, the analytical focus is still very much on the experiences in the context of, in this case, cremations. Williams’ model can be considered a transitional one between the mourner-centred and modern dead-centred approaches.

Williams and Cannon approached the concept of agency differently. In Cannon’s model, it can be identified as human-based agency, whereas in Williams’ model, it is object-based agency. They both make an effort to move beyond the mourner-centred approaches by trying to incorporate the lived lives of the dead into the debate. The perspective of Cannon was that the material display in life has its effects on the material display in funerary activities; Williams concentrates more on the construction of memories of the deceased during funerary activities. Although this will be a manipulated or idealised image, the achievements of the deceased in his life will certainly have an influence on the construction of these memories. Agency theory offers possibilities to explore the relation amongst material culture, individuals and social groups in the community of the living. However, for early medieval archaeology, this is only possible when material culture from graves is considered an integral part of social life and not only as objects that functioned in the context of funerals. Modern dead-centred models focus more on society and its constituents (the relation between actors and material culture) and not exclusively on burial practises, as is foremost the case in the mourner-centred models. This, however, can be investigated from various perspectives which are not yet explored to their full extent.

2.7 Conclusion: Five cultural categories of grave goods and their consequences for chronological analysis

The early medieval funerary rite can, as a result of the above performed model analysis, be characterised as an active process in which past, present and future meet, and whereby the survivors, funeral participants, the dead and material culture actively interact. It appears that the majority of the interpretative models focus on the future aspirations of the mourners. With regard to the burial remains, a shift in analytical position from the unambiguous relation between grave goods and the deceased (grave goods are the deceased) to the ritual significance of grave goods and the transformation of their associated meanings during rhetoric strategies and/or processes of active remembering and forgetting was observed in the interpretative debate. A trend towards the contextualisation of grave goods can also be observed. Aspects such as grave structures and the location of cemeteries, as well as the changing (local) socio-political backgrounds of the time, became integrated into early medieval mortuary archaeology. Recently, again an interpretative shift, but now from the focus on the socio-political and ideological agendas of the burial community towards the incorporation of concepts of agency and personhood, applied both to the survivors and the dead, can be observed. Through this shift, not only the ritual role of objects and the intentions of the survivors (expressed aspirations) are considered important characteristics of the funerary process, but also the lived lives of the dead and aspects of the shared past of the community become of interest. These viewpoints especially open a path to discuss the role of objects not only in the funerary process, but also in society prior to the ritualised context of

207 Williams 2004b, 265-267.
funerals. Both the early dead-centred and mourner-centred approaches did not explore the role of material culture in life. This was not explored in the traditional dead-centred models because the general conviction was that burial objects were the inalienable personal belongings of the dead. This implies a static relation between persons and material culture, and not by the mourner-centred models because the concept of burial with personal possessions was considered outdated and did not seem to offer more analytical possibilities than the one-dimensional reconstructions of societies. The analytical expansion of the debate was sought in considering burials as arenas for rhetoric strategies and the strategies of active forgetting and remembering. It can be concluded, however, that for chronological analysis, not so much the meaning of material culture in the context of mortuary practices is of interest, but rather the way objects functioned in society before their transformation and deposition as grave goods. The way objects materialised various social relations prior to their deposition offers insights into the relatively complex trajectories of circulation. The nature of the archaeological evidence (the broad variety of early medieval objects is archaeologically most prominently available as burial evidence) directed the analytical discussion of the last few decades towards the ritual meaning of objects in the context of funerals. It can be assumed, however, that the objects found in graves played a prominent role in social life outside the contexts of funerals, as much as they had in the funerary context. The mourner-centred models, however, concentrated mainly on the transformative nature of burials. Funerary rituals are of major importance for a community in terms of social reproduction and transformation. Nonetheless, it can be questioned whether the majority of the visible archaeological remains, and especially the objects that relate to the dressed body, played such a prominent role in these ritual processes, as suggested in the interpretative models of the last few decades. How objects constructed and materialised identities and social relations in other contexts outside the funerary rite is rarely discussed for most sorts of objects. The discussion of the models serves to illuminate the interpretative shift over the last few decades, but mainly to investigate the connection between the grave goods and the deceased, of which the result is framed in a list of five categories of grave goods.

These five cultural categories of grave goods are: alienable personal possessions, inalienable personal possessions, family possessions, gifts to the deceased, and occasional objects (selected from the available material culture in circulation at the time of death and burial). These categories do not have to exclude one another; they can all be represented in a single grave. The identification of these categories serves to elucidate the connection (or absence of connection) between the dead and their grave goods and offers some insights into the role of these objects in society before they entered the transformative funerary rite. The traditional models considered grave goods to be personal possessions, which resulted in a relatively static view of ancient society. The mourner-centred models were a reaction to the flaws of this interpretative construct. Consequently, the concept of personal possession was removed from the analytical discussion, although in some of these models, a selection of the grave goods is implicitly considered to be personally connected to the deceased. The strongest argument for the deposition of personal possessions can be found in the correlation between certain assemblages of grave goods and age groups. From this association, it was concluded that material display served some goals in the lives of the deceased, and that it is possible that this association was maintained in the grave. Whether these objects were perceived as ‘personal possessions’ in Merovingian times remains open for debate, as does the question of why these possessions were deposited in graves. However, a connection between the dead and especially dress-related objects is reconsidered as an option. The consequences for chronological research depend on the way ‘personal possessions’ are conceptualised in the early medieval period. Three options (which do not necessarily exclude one another) and their specific chronological consequences can be considered. The distorting influence of burial with genuine inalienable personal possession is minimal when the set of objects was collected throughout a lifetime and when the collection represents this time dimension. This category of inflexible inalienable personal possession was dismissed on the basis of the burial evidence from the civitas of Metz. The burial evidence from other regions can reveal different images, which underlines the importance of investigating the correlations between age groups and assemblages of objects for each cemetery.
separately. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. However, considering the assemblage of grave goods that served the material display of persons during important stages in the lifecycle more as family possessions of which subsequent persons could have been the responsible caretakers seems more appropriate than regarding these objects as inalienable personal possessions. The practise of inheritance seems to be substantiated by the burial evidence in Halsall’s model. It remains questionable how many generations were involved in the transmission of family possession, and why this line was terminated by deposition in a grave. If this line of transmission of comparable objects was terminated at different points in time, a serious chronological distortion results. Family possessions can remain in circulation over two generations (approximately 30 to 40 years), and possibly even longer. It is possible, however, that the practise of inheritance applies only to a selection of objects, rather than the entire assemblage of objects that served the ‘material display of a person’. Next to this consideration, certain other important questions require reflection. When and why did this practise of inheritance start? What was the incentive for the transmission of family possessions, and for how many generations did it fulfil the goals? Why were heirlooms deposited in graves? These questions will be explored in the next chapter.

Temporary individual ownership (alienable personal possession) has a more alienable nature than the consecutive temporary ownership of family possessions. This cultural category is not explicitly discussed in the models. Nonetheless, some remarks and thoughts suggest the possibility of such a category and serve to illustrate that the material component of early medieval life can be far more complicated than suggested by archaeologists for the majority of the material culture from this period. It is an interesting option to view the deposition of assemblages in graves as the materialisation of a lifestyle that expressed, amongst other things, the access one had to exchange networks, and it can also help to perceive why and how the distribution of the wide variety of objects was organised throughout Merovingian Europe. Perhaps an active circuit of exchange provided such items, or people travelled to search for these objects themselves; these remain points of discussion. It may explain, however, why objects from relatively distant regions were deposited in graves and what the incentives were for the existence of such an exchange circuit (which not only existed for the most exclusive objects discussed in the models of elite gift exchange). Considering the relation between material display as a lifestyle and various exchange networks offers interesting analytical possibilities for the active role of individuals, social groups and the distribution, exchange and transmission of material culture in society apart from funerary practises, although the majority of early medieval material culture was found as grave goods. However, the basic question remains unanswered: Why were objects that materialised identities and social relations buried with the dead? This will also be discussed in the next chapter. Next to these three categories of ‘possession’, two other cultural categories of grave goods were extracted from the models. These are the gifts from funeral attendees and the objects that were selected from the available objects at the moment of death and burial, the so-called occasional objects. When these objects are extracted from objects in their primary circulation, chronological distortion is reduced. The probability of the last option is also further explored in the next chapter.

This chapter discussed the binary opposition between grave goods as personal possessions (passive) and grave goods as strategic objects (active), concluding after the analysis of various interpretative models, by stating that such a binary interpretation of grave goods provision probably does not correspond with the cultural reality of the early medieval period and that a range of other categorisations in-between these two existed. The nature of the archaeological evidence directed the interpretative models to overemphasise the ritual meaning of grave goods during mortuary practises. Without dismissing the importance of the funerary ritual process and the active participation of survivors and material culture in this process, the grave goods appear to have played a more prominent role in life than can be extracted from the mourner-centred models. Various reasons may explain why the objects

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208 See Effros (2002, 43) who argued that family or collective property is a more appropriate concept for the Merovingian period than individual property, which has been the interpretative concept for a long time.
of the living were buried with the dead. However, the material component of the social interactions between the living becomes underrepresented when these objects are analysed solely in the context of funerary rites. Regarding early medieval objects from graves as elements of an actively pursued lifestyle and materialisations of various social relations opens up various analytical opportunities for early medieval social life outside the funerary context, although on the basis of funerary objects. This focus especially serves the chronological debate; the accurateness of (short-phase) chronologies depends much more on knowledge of the circulation processes of these specific objects, and far less on knowledge of their ritual meaning in funerary rites. This suggests that the circulation of objects in relation to the lifecycle of individuals but also as materialisations of social relations before their selection and deposition as grave goods is an addition to both interpretative debate and the chronological debate. It is a discussion that connects both debates, as the next chapter will discuss.