A cultural perspective on Merovingian burial chronology and the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries in Maastricht
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Chapter 3
Cultural Categories of Objects, Their Circulation, and the Implications for Chronological Analysis

The previous chapter dealt with cultural categories of grave goods that were identified on the basis of the presumed connection between the deceased and their associated grave goods or the context from which the grave goods were selected. The interpretive models on the basis of which these cultural categories of grave goods were identified emphasise the ritual role of the funerary objects, but they also provide some suggestions regarding their ‘life’ before deposition with the dead. An insight into the variation of circulation processes of these objects is an essential addition to the chronological debate. This chapter therefore deals with cultural categories of objects, which will be identified on the basis of their specific circulation in society before their selection as burial objects. The rate of circulation is predominantly determined by the modes of object distribution and the decisions that are made regarding the transmission of objects after their acquisition and appropriation. The rich variety of material culture from early medieval cemeteries and the local to supra regional distribution patterns of the deposited object-types suggest that a complex system of various forms of distribution existed. However, as it was concluded in the previous chapter, for the past few decades the theoretical focus has been on the relation between ritual strategies and material culture in the funerary process. This was due to the nature of the archaeological evidence: the variety of early medieval objects has predominantly been found as burial objects. The role of material culture in the world of the living has consequently received little theoretical reflection, except for some specific and exclusive objects. This chapter will explore the statement that the remainder of the funerary objects were also subject to relatively complicated trajectories of circulation (exchange/distribution, acquisition, use and transmission) before they were deposited as grave goods.

Knowledge of the average rate of circulation of various object-types is mainly obtained through the analysis of the grave finds with chronological methods. The accuracy, however, of the created chronological sequences of early medieval graves and grave goods was questioned since it was argued that the possibility of deviant rates of circulation that are related to the cultural dimensions of early medieval life and the engagement of people with material culture should be considered (see Chapter 1). Various contexts of object acquisition, use and transmission influence the rate of object circulation, as will be discussed below. One of these contexts, a marriage and the customs (mutual obligations, gift exchange and right of succession) that surrounds it, has already been discussed extensively by textual historians of the early medieval period. This discussion, and especially the material component of the marriage customs, will serve as an example to illuminate the discrepancy between the cultural assumptions that underlie the short-phase model in the chronological debate of archaeologists and the examples in historical sources that provide suggestions for contexts of object exchange, acquisition and transmission.

The reliability of a chronological seriation depends on the least possible deviation between the ‘primary circulation period’ and the period in which objects were buried with the dead: the ‘primary

\[209\] Based on the assumption that objects were not produced for funerary practises, but had a ‘life’ before their deposition as grave goods.
circulation period’ needs to be represented in the funerary remains in order to obtain reliable chronological results. This is, in fact, one of the assumptions behind chronological methods with a statistical component. Various circulation trajectories can be categorised, which illustrate that deviant circulation processes are possible. The identification of the associated objects is in some instances straightforward and in other instances not so much. The objects of which the deviant circulation can be identified in the burial evidence without many problems are:

1. The very exclusive objects that are rare in the burial evidence and are presumed to be curated or passed on for a considerable time: The objects that functioned in the context of ceremonial gift exchange or ‘ceremonial heirlooms’.
2. The objects for which the primary circulation period had already ended for a considerable time: the so-called antiques, survivals, relics or Altstücke, from pre-Merovingian periods.
3. The objects from relatively distant regions, the so-called ‘exotics’, which were subject to various modes of distribution and consequently obtained a prolonged circulation before their final deposition as grave goods.

The objects that were subject to complex circulation, but whose prolonged or deviant circulation is more complicated to identify on the basis of the burial evidence alone are:

4. Various objects (from exclusive to mundane) that were to be passed on for some time before their deposition in a grave, but which are not discussed as such in early medieval archaeology. For now, they are identified as objects of various forms of exchange, as gifts and as heirlooms. However, their specific characteristics and the incentives for their curation and prolonged circulation will be explored in this chapter as an opposition to the general opinion that they are inalienable personal possessions.

These four cultural categories of objects are identified on the basis of their complicated circulation. The first three categories, however, are relatively unproblematic for chronological analysis on the basis of statistical methods: they can, for the majority, be identified on the basis of their specific characteristics. The first category refers to objects that are already repeatedly theorised as objects with a biography or inalienable objects in both archaeology and anthropology. The fourth category incorporates several cultural sub-categories of objects, although the complete list will not be established and discussed here in detail. This fourth category (with sub-categories) requires theorisation from an anthropological and historical perspective: the objects can be associated with various choices that relate to their exchange and transmission, but their variation in circulation is more difficult to identify in the burial evidence.

The statement that the majority of the Merovingian grave goods fall within this last category, and, as an implication of this statement, that especially the underrepresentation of reflection on the relation between people and the majority of the material culture from graves is the major shortcoming of the chronological debate, will be explored in this chapter. The objects of the second and third category are less difficult to identify in the burial evidence, but they also need to be placed in the discussion of variation in circulation processes. Theoretical thinking mainly focussed on the most exclusive objects and circulation in the upper strata of society. This discussion in early medieval archaeology, complemented with anthropological perspectives on the processes of exchange/distribution, acquisition and transmission and their relation to funerary practises, will introduce the backgrounds of prolonged circulation.

3.1 General outline of the function, maintenance and termination of prolonged circulation

Considering material culture as a component of social life underlines that objects have a role in the materialisation of various relations and implies that various processes of exchange and transmission existed. Such processes generally prolong the circulation of objects. The aim of this chapter is to provide examples of occasions in early medieval life that were formalised through the exchange and transmission of goods. Does the discussion of these examples offer sufficient evidence to replace the
category of inalienable personal property (which implies the absence of transmission) with a range of
cultural categories of objects on the basis of various circulation trajectories? How can these circulation
trajectories be identified? Should the persistent category of inalienable personal property be maintained,
but just as one in the list of other categories? Finally, what are the consequences of these conclusions
for the chronological debate?

3.1.1 Objects with a prolonged or complex circulation: Various sorts of circulation and
‘heirlooms’

Objects with a prolonged circulation have already been discussed in early medieval archaeology. Long-
life objects are generally considered to have accumulated a life history through their frequent exchange
and transmission or lengthy curation. The most exclusive early medieval objects, such as elaborately
decorated swords and scabbards, but also other weapons and some examples of jewellery, have been
discussed as objects with a biography in several studies. It is generally acknowledged that these
objects circulated through complicated cycles of ceremonial and reciprocal gift exchange as an important
component of an ‘elite lifestyle’, and as such, obtained a long-term circulation with associated meanings
or life histories. These objects are rather exclusive and scarce. The majority of the early medieval burial
objects are not that exclusive and archaeological evidence for the extended circulation of more mundane
objects also exists. These examples of objects with a prolonged circulation, however, are scarce in the
burial evidence. Their extended circulation is difficult to interpret in the same model of elite ceremonial
gift exchange. However, not much has been published on their role in society and funerary practises
other than that they were ‘heirlooms’.

The variety of objects from furnished burials cannot be sufficiently covered with the cultural
category of objects that were components of ceremonial gift exchange in the upper strata of society (one
might refer to them as ceremonial or collective heirlooms), the category of more mundane objects with
an obvious prolonged circulation (the scarce ‘heirlooms’ without any further specification of the social
group in which they were transmitted), and the category of objects which were assumed to have a
circulation of approximately one generation (inalienable personal property); it is suggested here that
these categories cover only a small selection of the burial objects. This chapter will explore whether the
majority of the material culture of the Merovingian period was subject to the processes of exchange and
transmission, which represents a cultural category of objects in between these three examples, and for
which, as a result, the variation of circulation periods is less obvious in the burial evidence. How should
this category be defined, what was the function of the objects for the social group in which they were
transmitted, what do the associated objects represent, and how can they be identified in the burial
record? A category is therefore proposed that may consist of various sorts of objects that are not
necessarily very exclusive or rare, but for which it was believed important to maintain their transmission
over generations in the social context of family groups. They are from now on referred to as ‘family’ or
‘private heirlooms’. This group of objects is perceived as a group that functioned differently than the
already extensively discussed swords, weapons and other exclusive objects that were part of ceremonial
gift exchange. They are obviously not the ‘inalienable personal possessions’, and it is presumed that
they are more present in the burial evidence than the scarce references to evidently old specimens
picture them to be.

At first sight, it seems that the identification of a category of objects from the funerary record
(objects that are not kept) of which it is presumed that their continuous transmission over several
generations was aimed at (objects that should be kept) does not correspond. Whether the burial of both

211 These examples are scarce and this observation seems to corroborate the commonly shared opinion that objects
were generally not subject to inheritance customs (see Chapter 1 and 4). The evidence for this opinion, however, can
be approached from a different perspective as this chapter will discuss.
212 Membership of a family group is considered to be of major importance in the early medieval period, and it is
assumed here that this awareness was an important incentive to create and transmit objects that represented the
‘family identity’. 
ceremonial and family heirlooms in early medieval times was experienced as a definite or negatively appreciated rupture with the existing line of transmission, as it would be interpreted from a modern perspective, can be questioned. The proposed addition of family heirlooms to the categorisation of objects on the basis of various forms of exchange and transmission in order to illustrate that the majority of the Merovingian burial objects experienced a prolonged circulation before their deposition is explored in this chapter. If a positive conclusion regarding the applicability of family heirlooms for the Merovingian period is reached, the incentives for both the continuous transmission and termination of this transmission and how this relates to funerary practises, will be discussed. For introduction and comparison, the general background of the continuous circulation and the end of circulation of the special objects of ceremonial gift exchange or collective heirlooms are examined from an archaeological and anthropological point of view.

3.1.2 General incentives for continuous and terminated transmission of ceremonial or collective heirlooms: Do they apply to the variety of heirlooms?

The life histories of objects and the role of such objects in society are discussed in both anthropological and early medieval archaeology. The discussions that relate to these often scarce and exclusive objects in both disciplines can be compared on a general level. The meaning of objects with a prolonged circulation is in anthropological literature often incorporated into discussions of alienable and inalienable wealth, power, the concept of the social life of objects and gift exchange-based societies. On the basis of a selection of anthropological literature, it can be concluded that the special objects that involve long-term transmission are generally referred to as collective heirlooms (of various social groups, including families) in the sense that they are identified as objectifications of ancestral and supernatural links which give the successive owners/caretakers a specific position in the constant manifestation of the individual or group in relation to others; the ancestral identity is considered a social and political force in the present. An important characteristic of these heirlooms is the strong ambition to keep them. Detachment from their origins/original owners should be avoided, which is sometimes expressed as the need to keep them out of circulation. The ability to keep the objects is regarded as the manifestation of "...the power to hold oneself or one's groups intact". Objects with a prolonged circulation are in a discussion of inheritance practices in families referred to as the objectifications of memories through an active process of forgetting and remembering in the process of socio-cultural practices that animate the objects and generate and transmit knowledge and value. They have a social value, which "...is not related solely to their intrinsic exotic worth, but also to the value that it has obtained over the years in relation to specific individuals, to families or to other social groupings". They are regularly displayed, mainly during ritualised events. Very special objects are individually named and their public display evokes associations of their accomplishments or line of successive 'owners'.

Inalienable property that was transmitted from one generation to another in a specific social group is identified as corporate or collective property. Personal objects are considered to be alienable possessions, which means that they are individually acquired objects that are not linked to a collective

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213 An interesting discussion, related to this point of view, is introduced by van Haperen (2010). She suggests that the re-opening of graves within the period of a few generations after burial should not be seen as the retrieval of the valuables for economic purposes (grave robbery), but that other social processes provide a better explanation of these activities.

214 The starting point of this discussion is generally referred to as the work of Appadurai (1986: The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective) and, within this volume, Kopytoff (1986: The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as a process).

215 See Bazelmans (2000) for an overview of influential anthropological works with regard to ceremonial gift exchange, which also incorporate discussions of the concepts of alienability and inalienability.

216 From the vast corpus of works on this subject, the studies chosen are those of Weiner (1985), as she offers a general discussion of alienable and inalienable wealth, of Lilios (1999), since the described ethnographic examples form the basis for archaeological modelling, and Weiss (1997), who provides an ethnographic example of the meaning and transformation of object transmission through inheritance in the specific context of family groups.

217 Weiner 1985, 212.


221 Weiner 1985, 217.
identity. As a consequence, the ‘collective’ feels no need to keep them after the owner’s death.\textsuperscript{222} Within the discussed ethnographic examples of Lillios, a difference between personal property and collective property is identified, together with the different biographies of these two categories of objects after death of the owner or caretaker.\textsuperscript{223} It appears that the two categories of property (collective and individual), although they are defined differently for each ethnographic example, occur in all, but in a relatively differential degree, evolutionary states of social organisation (bands, tribes and chiefdoms). In societies where inherited rank does not exist, personal property is destroyed at death and rarely becomes collective or familial property by inheritance. In other organisations of society, collective property is more present. This means that more incentives exist to transform personal property into collective inalienable property.\textsuperscript{224}

This general outline of the anthropological discussion can be compared with the discussion of the objects of ceremonial exchange in the early medieval period on which, especially the reciprocal exchange between lords and followers (the social group of a Gefolgschaft), is theorised. They are generally discussed as exclusive objects, primarily swords and weapons, which served to shape and maintain identities and social relations in the aristocratic sphere. As such, they accumulated a set of associations and meanings in the course of their ‘life’ through their continuous exchange and use by consecutive owners or caretakers. An essential characteristic of this group of objects is that their exchange is related to mutual obligations between the participants, and that the object in question cannot be (symbolically) detached from the giver; it even occurs that the objects, after a considerable period, return to the giver or the descendants of the giver.\textsuperscript{225} The accumulated set of associations of these objects refers to their mystified origin (production), their original owner(s), their consecutive line of caretakers and to certain events in which they participated. It is also stated that these objects show analogies with the life of a person (birth, life and death) and that they have individuality (sometimes they are named, as it is known for some swords in the early medieval period\textsuperscript{226}) and power of their own. Such objects are generally considered to strengthen the status and power of a very restricted group of caretakers, but they were also necessary to constitute a person in successive life-cycle transformations.\textsuperscript{227}

It is noteworthy that the role of these exclusive objects as structuring elements of early medieval life (of men) and society are extensively discussed on a theoretical level. This contrasts other early medieval grave goods (of both men and women), which in fact form the majority of the burial evidence. It is for this reason that the role of object transmission in families will be explored in the following sections. Are the incentives for this transmission and the role of the objects in the creation of family identities comparable to the way ceremonial heirlooms and inalienable wealth functioned such as described in the anthropological and archaeological examples? First, also for reasons of comparison, the termination of the line of transmission for these exclusive objects will be examined in the context of these early medieval and anthropological examples.

The functions of ‘heirlooms’ prescribe that they are objects that should be kept. Furnished burials confront archaeologists with the intentional ‘destruction’ of objects with a relatively prolonged circulation. Examples of the destruction of ‘heirlooms’ can provide insights into the motivations for doing so, and more importantly, into how the burial of objects with a prolonged circulation can be understood. The intentional destruction of such objects must imply that profound changes in the situation in which the ‘heirloom’ had its role occurred. The destruction of such a valuable, however, can be perceived differently than its burial with the dead. As Weiner stressed, “…the burial of certain objects manifest

\begin{itemize}
\item Curasi et al. (2004) theorised on the incentives that transform individual possessions into inalienable family possessions.
\item Lillios 1999.
\item Lillios 1999, 240-251.
\item The detailed outline of these discussions can be found in Bazelmans (1996; 1999; 2000), Härke (2000) and Theuws/Alkemade (2000).
\item Bazelmans 1999, 151-152.
\item Bazelmans 2000, 353-371; Bazelmans 2002, 73, 78-81.
\end{itemize}
their ultimate inalienability”, although a problem arises: they can no longer be displayed publicly or inherited.228 The removal of heirlooms, either by intentional destruction or burial with the dead, is explicitly discussed by Lillios. She presented an evolutionary model for the creation, circulation and disposal of heirlooms in relation to the development and maintenance of hereditary rights on status and power, on the basis of ethnographic examples.229 In summary, Lillios states that the competition between systems of ascribed status (status attained by inheritance) and systems of achieved status (status attained by certain personal successes) in a society is the incentive for the creation, maintenance (transmission) and destruction or deposition of heirlooms. Heirlooms are regarded by Lillios as objectifications of memories that express the ancestral legitimation of the power of a group or individual. They are desired in a situation where a system of inherited rank is competing with an institutionalised system of achieved rank. With the rise of the success of inherited rank, a new ideology of inherited social difference had to be sustained. Hence, the possessions of a person were more likely to be inherited and become ‘symbols of ancestry’ than in a situation without inherited rank. If a system of inherited rank is firmly established, the need for the symbols of ancestry and power become less urgent, and heirlooms can be removed from circulation by, for example, their deposition in graves. However, if the institutionalised system of ascribed status (inherited status) is threatened by the rising status of persons with communally appreciated achievements, heirlooms as symbols of power can become important again.

Regarding the burial of the early medieval ceremonial heirlooms (the exclusive objects that were exchanged and transmitted as a component of an ‘elite life style’), it is stated that of all the swords/scabbards that were in circulation, only a selection ended their earthly circulation by deposition in a grave.230 Early medieval swords are known from both grave depositions and river depositions, although their circulation could also have ended otherwise.231 These relatively few swords were consciously taken out of circulation, which ended the accumulation of inherent associations and meanings, although they could survive in the memory of certain groups for some time.232 Some decades ago, Redlich tried to explain the rare occurrence of swords in early medieval graves in Frankish Gaul. The explanation was sought in the ownership of swords; they were owned by lords and given in ‘loan’ to their followers. Germanic law, according to Redlich, refers to the inalienable character of personal possession that had to be buried with the owner after death, which explains why few swords were deposited in graves.233 Härke describes that some weapons ended their circulation by ritual deposition whereas others remained in circulation as heirlooms.234 The deposition of weapons in graves is also explained against the background of the changing power positions of local aristocratic groups in the period during which Roman control diminished.235 Burials of men with swords transformed them into protective ancestors, which were required in this socio-political climate.236 The low number of weapons or sword burials suggests that an exchange system in which swords were ritually passed on existed during the same period in which they were sporadically buried; an exchange with the ancestral world was felt necessary for only a few of these men.237

The symbolic construction of ancestors should therefore not be regarded as an act that implied the destruction or loss of objects, but rather as the creation of ‘sacred heirlooms’. With regard to the burial of objects as a form of ancestral or sacred exchange, some resemblances can be discovered between the anthropological literature, which focuses on the effort generally made into keeping inalienable possessions for the collective, and the models of Halsall, Theuws and Williams in the previous

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228 Weiner 1985, 219.
229 Lillios 1999, 255-257, Fig. 1.
230 Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 464.
231 In a church treasury, or in the treasures of kings and aristocrats (Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 402).
232 Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 426.
233 Redlich 1948, 179.
234 Härke 2000, 381-386.
235 Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 402, 453.
236 Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 455, 466-467.
237 Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 461.
The analogies relate to the ancestral connotations, the objectifications of memories and the material display of power and status. In anthropological literature, the focus is on the exchange between the living, or the temporary extraction from circulation. This is significant for the creation, meaning, maintenance and function of ceremonial/collective heirlooms or inalienable possessions. In these archaeological models, the act of ritual object deposition in graves is described as an activity that creates a comparable state of being of the objects. This act can probably be compared to the desire to extract objects from circulation, such as discussed amongst anthropologists, in order to prevent alienation from their origins/owners/caretakers. Halsall focussed on the local instability of power positions and the message of the deposition of lavish grave goods to maintain or alter these positions by the burying group. This can be assumed to be a family or otherwise closely connected group for whom future power positions were at stake. The objects express status in relation to others. In other words, they represent the family identity, but are not ‘kept’ as tangible family property in the world of the living. The objectifications of ancestral links are an essential point in Theuws’ work. The objects that were buried with the dead became symbols of the ancestral legitimation of power and land ownership; the objects served to create an image (protection, claims on land) that matched with the required ancestor. This model was applied on a selection of early medieval graves, and did not have the ambition to interpret the general act of object deposition with the dead. It can be stated that these objects are the ultimate, inalienable (family) heirlooms; one might refer to them as ‘sacred heirlooms’. The models of Williams, which emphasise the strength of the process of active remembering, also need to be mentioned in this respect. The display of objects in funerary activities, as he extensively discussed, evokes a process of active forgetting and remembering in which the funerary objects form the material component.

It seems as if the strength of the social processes that are involved with the preservation and display of heirlooms in the negotiation of status and power (the main characteristics of inalienable wealth in the anthropological examples) are, although differently, bound to funerary activities according to Halsall, Williams and Theuws. These burials are, in fact, the situations in which ‘heirlooms’ in the sense of the anthropological examples are created. They refer either to the existing or desired power of a family, or they create required memories of a collective past, and therefore current and future identities, and they symbolise ancestral links. These objects are the ultimate (sacred) heirlooms. Their burial represents the ultimate act of preservation: They are held apart from the world of the living, thus from people who can interfere in their obtained status of heirloom and what it represents. The possibility of losing the objects is diminished because they are out of circulation, but surviving as a memory. Burial is an alternative option for the creation of heirlooms. It is a symbolic empowerment of a family that creates a point of reference for future family members. However, is this how the majority of Merovingian burials should be understood?

The concept of inalienable property or wealth in anthropological studies and exclusive exchange in early medieval studies (ceremonial heirlooms) primarily served to discuss objects with a prolonged circulation as objects that distinguished social groups or individuals (whom should not be seen as individual owners, but more as consecutive caretakers238) from others; the keeping and the display of ‘heirlooms’ are consequently often related to group identities and the maintenance of (fragile) hereditary rights on power and status.239 The majority of Merovingian grave goods were in the traditional dead-centred models (see Chapter 2) considered to be inalienable personal possessions, which relate to the self-acquired or alienable personal property in the anthropological discussions. Hence, where anthropologists conceptualise personal possessions as alienable (from the ‘collective’), archaeologists conceptualized

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238 “Ownership is an alienable construct, entangled with rights to give and sell” (Curasi et al. 2004, 610).
239 Lillios 1999.
them as inalienable (from the individual). Both concepts, however, imply that the associated objects were not transmitted to the next generation. The opposition between exclusive ceremonial heirlooms and personal inalienable possession creates a problem for the early medieval period: It masks a category of objects in between, namely, the objects that were transmitted for other reasons than solely the maintenance or display of power positions.

The general point of departure regarding the circulation of objects is that the successful transmission of objects accompanied the transmission of group identities. It is stated that during the early medieval period this was of considerable importance for various social groups and networks, not only the elite networks. The moments of transmission are not extensively discussed, but some references to the material component of personal life cycle transformations point to the intergenerational transmission of group (family) possessions, especially at these events. The unexplored field of investigation for the early medieval period concerns what sorts of collectives other than elite bonds or Gefolgschafts can be identified in which the transmission of the object was considered equally important, the variety of incentives for continuous transmission, and how moments of transmission relate to a variety of personal life cycle transformations.

The category of family heirlooms is introduced in order to investigate other incentives for transmission that suit the explanation of the circulation of the majority of early medieval objects from graves. The main function of practises of inheritance within a family is to secure the family identity and ‘treasure’ by the transmission of family property. It can be assumed that the moments of transmission of family heirlooms is organised around events that relate to various stages in the life cycle of family members. This is an aspect of prolonged circulation that is not as much discussed for the lower strata of early medieval society and which also includes women as both the initiators of object transmission and receivers of objects. In her search for examples of items that are kept, Weiner refers to objects that are permanently kept out of circulation by rulers in order to keep them separate from ordinary people. These objects in particular attain a high degree of sacredness. These objects are closely connected to a ruling family, and can therefore be identified as family heirlooms. Families from the lower strata of society can identify with these rulers and associated objects. The ruling family has a responsibility towards the extended collective for the maintenance and rightful transmission of these special family heirlooms such as the regalia of kings and queens. However, even if such an extended responsibility is absent, the maintenance and rightful transmission of the ‘family treasure’, regardless of its contents, can be equally crucial for families who belong to other levels of society.

Summarising, three sorts of inalienable possessions can be distinguished on the basis of the anthropological and archaeological examples: sacred heirlooms, ceremonial heirlooms, and family heirlooms. The ceremonial and family heirlooms are subject to ambitions of transmission, which result in prolonged circulation. It is suggested that the transmission of family heirlooms from one generation to another is organised around transformations in the personal life cycles of family members. This serves to

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240 This discrepancy reflects the difference in the research data of early medieval archaeologists and sociologists/anthropologists: the appearance of the individual dead for early medieval archaeologist and the community for sociologists/anthropologists.
241 Exceptions are the application of anthropological accounts in early medieval archaeology of the exchange of objects in the context of life cycle rituals which, together with the associated objects, serve to compose and decompose persons (see Bazelmans 1996; 1999; 2000; 2002).
242 Nicolay (2005) discussed the material correlates of the life-cycle transformations of men who served in the Roman army, and made in this context a distinction between phases of military use and social use of military equipment. After serving their time, veterans could choose to return their equipment to the army or take it with them. Ritual deposition of (parts of) the equipment symbolised the transformation from soldier to civilian. The objects in graves that are associated with military service are, according to Nicolay, the personal possessions of the deceased which expressed his status as veteran (Nicolay 2005, 179-234). This specific account of life-cycle transformations and associated material culture, however, illustrated that the objects became personal memorabilia which only sporadically became heirlooms. The circulation of these military objects, as a consequence, is for the majority limited to one generation. This contradicts the account of family heirlooms which, as it will be argued further on in this thesis, are also thought to be connected to individual life-cycle transformations.
243 Various references in early medieval writings can be found that refer to the safeguarding of property and not to regulating their deposition with the dead, as Effros observed (Effros 2002a, 49).
244 Weiner 1985, 211.
safeguard family property and identity at all levels of society. The first two categories are extensively discussed, also in early medieval archaeology. The category of family heirlooms received less theoretical contemplation in early medieval archaeology. It is proposed here that a considerable number of the objects in Merovingian graves may have been subject to intergenerational transmission in families before their deposition.

The historians of the early medieval period discussed family property and the right of succession considerably, but they scarcely extended this discussion to material correlates, especially to those studied by archaeologists of the same period. Is it possible, with the help of the anthropological and historical discussions, to find a place for this category of objects in the interpretative debate in early medieval archaeology? How can the variation of the associated circulation trajectories be observed in the burial evidence? However, first: In which way should the objects with an obvious observable prolongation of circulation in the burial record, the pre-Merovingian antiques and the exotics, be placed against this discussion? Are they an addition to the list of the three sorts of heirlooms or should they be placed within one of these?

3.2 Complicated circulation, obvious archaeological evidence
The antiques from pre-Merovingian periods and relatively exclusive ‘exotics’ can be eliminated from chronological analysis without many problems; however, some complications must be considered. The discussion of their role in mortuary practices serves to illuminate that various processes of exchange, acquisition and transmission existed, and that the relation between the deceased and material culture can take different forms for various types of objects.

3.2.1 Antiques and exotics
Antiques in early medieval graves are the objects from pre-Merovingian periods; are they heirlooms, or should their acquisition and deposition be perceived as a different cultural process? Antiques were probably accidental finds or deliberately recovered from ancient sites and were, for a diversity of reasons, reused as grave goods in the Merovingian period. The majority are objects of the Roman period, although objects from other periods are also known, such as fragments of the so-called La-Tene bracelets that are regularly found in the graves of women as the contents of purses. The use of antiques in early medieval graves is a well-known and widespread phenomenon. Examples are the regular use of Roman beads and altered coins in strings of otherwise early medieval beads. With regard to dress-related objects, it was observed that they were used according to their original function, such as brooches, but they were also altered or carried, as some kind of token or amulet, in purses. Complete Roman pottery and glass vessels are relatively fragile, and their presence as complete or nearly complete specimens in graves could be an indication of two possible processes. Objects from Roman graves were reused in early medieval burials after they had been found by ‘accident’. However, the late Roman specimens from the fourth century could have also been curated for a considerable time and as such become objects with a ‘biography’, whether they functioned as heirlooms in a family unit or in another sphere that motivated their curation and transmission. A sharp dividing line between material culture of the late Roman period and the beginning of the early medieval period is impossible to draw. Therefore, the dating of the objects in relation to the date of the grave in which they were found is essential information for their identification as antiques according to the definition above (see the sections on pottery and glass in Part II of this thesis).

245 The relation between acquiring or receiving objects and various stages in the life cycle was discussed by Bazelmans (1999, 172–188), but this life cycle involved becoming a warrior. Various other life cycles and stages in the life cycle can be considered, which probably also had a material component.

246 Mehling 1998, 11. For a discussion of the pre-Merovingian antiques from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries, see the sections on pottery, glass, coins and beads in Part II of this thesis.
Old objects, mainly Roman, and their function and meaning in early medieval funerary contexts have been discussed, but less attention is paid to their role in the lives of their early medieval ‘owners’. Mehling gives a summary of the interpretations of antiques in early medieval graves over the last decades and concludes that they were generally handled as an isolated category of objects and that they are especially interpreted as objects with magical or amuletic qualities. The main questions posed in the works on antiques concern the different interpretations of their origin, their discovery or acquisition, their associated meanings, their association with certain social groups and the purpose of their final deposition as grave goods in the early medieval period. How do these objects relate to the cultural categories of grave goods as defined in the previous chapter and the sorts of heirlooms as listed above? Considering their acquisition, appropriation and associated meanings is one way of approaching these questions, as is some discussion on their meaning as reused objects in funerary contexts.

Antiques could have been found by accident as stray finds, but also through digging in the locations of ancient graves and settlements, of which the finds could have been accidental but also deliberately sought. Mehling also considers the acquisition of antiques by inheritance, gift exchange and commercial trade, although he regards the accidental and intentional finds the most convincing options. Eckhart and Williams reject (although not completely) the suggestion that these objects are heirlooms. They argue that if they were, objects from the fourth century would frequently appear in fifth-century graves and late Roman objects would be more commonly recovered than older Roman objects. However, for Anglo-Saxon Britain, this is not the case. The re-use of these objects appears in graves from the fifth to the seventh centuries. Mehling observed that antiques were already deposited in the fifth century, but that this was a frequent practise in the sixth century that diminished in the seventh century. The antiques are mainly from the Roman period. The late Roman antiques, according to Mehling, could have been acquired by inheritance, but archaeological and historical evidence is difficult to find and the transmission of antiques remains a questionable practise, except perhaps for some objects of extraordinary wealth.

The majority of the antiques, both in the Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian cemeteries, were found in the graves of children and adult women. Mehling showed that some of the antiques are gender-specific, such as beads, keys and fragments of bracelets, which were mainly found in the graves of women. Complete glass vessels, however, seem to be restricted to the graves of men. The analysis of their association with age groups showed that the majority of the antiques were found in the graves of children (0-12 years) and adults (20-40). In the group of children and adolescents (13-18/20), most of the antiques were found in the graves of women, thereafter (especially after the age of 35) antiques became more prominent in the graves of men. Mehling suggests that the antiques in the graves of early adult women may be related to the danger of dying in childbirth. Antiques may have been appreciated as amulets with protective capacities. The meaning of antiques for both the living and the dead, however, needs to be discussed more profoundly.

An interesting point made by Eckhardt and Williams is that the lack of a biography (‘objects without a past’) was an essential characteristic of antiques. Knowledge of their production, exchange and former social context is absent. These are considered to be important aspects of the early medieval heirlooms (see the section above). The only associations are the place and circumstances of their discovery. The find context (settlement, hoards, graves) is significant for their appreciation, and the event of uncovering such finds must have, according to Eckhardt and Williams, entered the collective

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248 Mehling 1998, 72-86.
249 Eckhardt/Williams 2003, 148, 155-156.
252 Mehling 1998, 82-84.
253 Eckhardt/Williams 2003, 160-161; Mehling 1998, 37-51. Mehling mentions some exceptions (Iversheim and Basel-Bernerring) where more men than women were buried with antiques.
255 Eckhart/Williams 2003, 159.
social history and influenced their use, meaning and deposition as grave goods.256 Eckhardt and Williams view the uncovering of ancient graves and sites in the context of socio-political and religious strategies; Mehling believes that the finds of antiquities were mainly unintentional.257 He therefore focuses more on the use of antiques, which may, according to him, vary from functional recycling to aesthetic and religious (amulets that protect) use. Although these are all interesting options, the relationship between age and gender and the sorts of antiques, in combination with their specific ‘non-biographical’ character, can offer some interesting insights if one acknowledges that these objects could have also served as the personal display of people in life.

The predominant association of antiques with girls and young adult women (20 and older), and with older adults and elderly men, as observed in the majority of the cemeteries that Mehling analysed, can provide some clues for their use in the lives of these people. It can be stated that on the basis of this information, the dress-related objects were not experienced as essentials for the personal display of women in the age group for which the display of the ‘full equipment of gender-related items’ was important. They were not incorporated into the collection of objects that were transmitted at important life cycle rituals. This suggests that when the acquisition of family heirlooms or a certain public display was less urgent, objects such as antiques were desired for some kind of individual appropriation for which ‘objects without a past’, as Eckhardt and Williams proposed, were desirable. It can, for now, be proposed that antiques were not associated with the personal life cycle transformations, and that fewer incentives existed for their transmission after their appropriation as antiques.258 Although these remarks are speculative, they indicate that it can be interesting to explore the relationship between certain categories of objects and stages in the life cycle of persons more profoundly. This subject requires further research, but it is suggested that careful administration and analysis of the antiques in graves, and the search for meaningful correlations of different sorts of antiques with gender and age groups are indispensable. The function of the antiques can, for a considerable number of objects, be extracted from their location within the graves. Are, for example, antique brooches used to replace a contemporaneous brooch, or is the item carried in a purse therefore signifying something different for the person in question? The connection between exotic objects and the person buried and/or the burial community raises a similar set of questions.

Both antiques from pre-Merovingian periods and objects that were regularly found in one region and appear in cemeteries in another somewhat distant region, could have been perceived as exotics. In addition, objects made of materials such as amber, amethyst, and garnet can be found in cemeteries at a considerable distance from the sources that provide these raw materials. For exotics, it can be assumed that a form of distribution/exchange was required in order for them to be deposited in graves located some distance from their original production site or natural source. These objects could have been circulating within the ‘new’ community for some time before their deposition in a grave, or they could have entered the local community during funerary activities, as a gift from a person who attended the funeral. They could also have entered the ‘new’ local community through import, with a travelling craftsman, or with a travelling member of the community who returned, or with new settlers.259 Two essential questions need to be asked. The first involves a discussion on the place of origin of the objects (see the section on belt parts in the discussion of the Vrijthof and Pandhof grave finds in Part II). The

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256 Eckhardt/Williams 2003, 158-160.
257 Mehling 1998; Eckhardt/Williams 2003, 144.
258 Eckhardt and Williams sought the reasons for burial with the dead in the construction and transformation of memories and identities of the deceased. According to Mehling, the antiques could have been personal belongings of the deceased, gifts to the deceased, or objects that were found during the digging of a grave that were then spontaneously deposited with the deceased. Also interesting is his remark that antiques, which were damaged or of small worth, were used to replace the (more appreciated) early medieval objects so that these could be kept by the living.
259 Isotope analysis provides interesting research possibilities with regard to this subject. The discussion on the distribution processes in relation to social relations and formalised acquisition processes is not only relevant for the explanation of objects with extended distribution patterns, but also for objects that know a more restricted or local distribution pattern. There are various processes of exchange and distribution. Isotope analysis can show if people had been mobile in the course of their life and how this correlates with specific objects.
second is how the different modes of exchange relate to the meaningful acquisition of objects in life. Two opposite and exclusive spheres of exchange are generally discussed: gift exchange and commodity exchange, although the existence of such a strict opposition is now regularly criticised. Huggett deals with imports in the early Anglo-Saxon economy in which the “...different mechanisms by which goods may be exchanged over long distances are examined”. Exotics can be easily identified, and their distorting effects in chronological analysis can be minimised. The cultural meaning of both antiques and exotics will be further explored in the section on nuptial gifts, which forms the basis for a model of continuity of transmission. Both exotics and antiques can have a place in this model, and thus the conclusion is that the pre-Merovingian antiques and exotics are artificial groups; they are regarded as a separate group by archaeologists on the basis of their exotic character, but their cultural meanings are not necessarily captured in this definition alone. Especially ‘exotics’ were involved in the complex processes of distribution, acquisition and transmission. On the other hand, it is suspected that the bulk of the early medieval grave goods were also involved in such processes (discussion below). This stands in contrast with the simple relationship between objects and their owners as it is imagined in chronological research. In order to illuminate this problem, the next section will deal with the concept of ‘normal circulation’, which will form an introduction, but also a contrast, to more complex models of exchange and transmission.

3.2.2 Normal circulation: Does it exist?
Normal circulation is a modelled concept, but it is exactly this concept that forms a sound basis for chronological methods such as seriation and the production of short chronological phases. The model applies to types of objects, not individual objects. A normal circulation period of an object type is generally represented as the so-called bell curve or battleship curve: a gradual increase in production and use that declines gradually after the peak is reached; the use of the object type can exist for a period after the production has ended (Fig. 8). The existence of such a normal circulation period of object-types and the absence of (extreme) deviant rates of circulation of individual objects is the ideal situation for chronological analysis (see Chapter 1).

![Figure 8. The representation of a normal production, distribution and circulation curve (the development of production and distribution over time).](image)

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260 Huggett 1988, 63. The different mechanisms mentioned are barter, gift exchange, marriage, warfare, alliance, diplomatic gifts, tribute, redistribution, peripatetic traders, prestige goods exchange, regularised long-distance trade and market exchange.

261 The creation of distribution maps of similar or nearly similar objects, but also of objects with the same source of raw material is the most fruitful exercise regarding this subject. The origins of production do not necessarily have to emerge from such a map, but a picture of the area of distribution and associated distribution/exchange networks become visible. The creation of such distribution maps is already common practise in early medieval archaeology, but the interpretation of the emerging patterns requires further elaboration. Although the distribution maps are based on burial evidence, the living were the agents who distributed the objects. Analysing various patterns of distribution is a gateway into the interactive world of material culture and the living.
The archaeological record is always a relatively distorted derivative of this normal curve, and the intentional deposition of objects in graves in particular distorts this picture (see Chapter 1 in which the distorting effects of the complex social processes between production and deposition of objects are discussed). Some situations cause normal circulation curves of object types to be represented in the burial evidence:

1. ‘Mass-production’ or the regulated production of objects, especially for funerary practices.
2. The existence of a ‘normal’ primary circulation period of objects for which two options for their deposition as grave goods can be considered:
   - The interred objects are extracted from the objects in their ‘normal’ primary circulation during the funerary process; these are the so-called occasional objects.
   - The interred objects are self-acquired from the material culture available not long before their interment with the deceased. A rapid replacement of objects in the course of life is a general practice (see the discussion of Siegmund’s cultural reasoning in Chapter 1).

The model of ‘normal’ circulation illustrates that the complexity of various exchange networks through which the objects were acquired and situations in which their transmission was aspired is more likely to represent cultural reality. The possibility of production for funerary purposes alone is for now dismissed as general practice. An indirect argument was discussed in Chapter 2: Several publications incorporate discussions on the importance of adorned bodily display in life, and moreover, more than a few historical sources refer to life events in which objects played an important role. Furthermore, anthropological studies reveal that exchange or transmission was a constituting element of society. The archaeologists who display an interest in the search for refined typo-chronologies assume that the relation between the majority of the material culture from graves and persons is relatively ‘simple’: (dress-related) objects are acquired, become personal property, and are finally buried with their owners. Considering the abundance of grave goods and their variety, from very mundane implements to sophisticated decorative items, and numerous accounts in anthropology and history of the social components of material culture, it seems plausible to assume that the objects from graves played a role amongst the living. It can for now be stated that the complex processes of production, distribution, acquisition, transmission and deposition are linked with the variety of early medieval material culture. Therefore, the notions of production for funerals and a rapid replacement of the majority of the objects in a person’s life are left behind, and the discussion will proceed with the occasions in early medieval life around which the exchange and transmission of goods was organised.

3.3 Complex circulation, obscure evidence: Family heirlooms or the exchange of objects between families and intergenerational transmission

The main incentives to suggest the existence of family heirlooms and to discuss them in relation to burial practises are first the observed, although not frequent, presence of old objects or Merovingian antiques (not the exclusive weapons, but less sophisticated objects) in younger graves. The opinion of several early medieval archaeologists that hereditary customs were not part of early medieval life, based on the early one-sided interpretation of the burial evidence (furnished burial implies the absence of hereditary customs), in relation to examples of contradicting burial evidence, was the second incentive. The inalienable character of individual possessions of men (Heergewäte: weapon gear) and women (Gerade: jewellery) has been widely embraced as one of the explanations for furnished burial in Merovingian times. These objects, according to a number of archaeologists, can never be transmitted.
through hereditary customs. Consequently, some of the personal property must have been obtained otherwise than by the right of succession. This reasoning, however, is based on false evidence and simplifies the meaning of material culture in early medieval life. This interpretative framework is by now generally discarded as an explanation for furnished burial.\textsuperscript{266} However, regarding burial objects as inalienable personal possessions is still rather persistent amongst archaeologists. Of all the (legal) sources from various parts of early medieval Europe, no explicit references to the inalienability of Heergewäte and Gerade can be found.\textsuperscript{267} These references are known from historical sources of a later date, but they appeared useful to understand furnished burial with dress-related items in the Merovingian period.

Additionally, the burial evidence in numerous examples can be interpreted as proof that something such as the transmission of ‘gender-related items’, or at least some of these items, to the next generation did occur. It is also suggested that incomplete sets of, for example, weapons provide indirect evidence for the practise of inheritance.\textsuperscript{268} Despite these observations, grave goods are still regularly considered personal objects of the deceased, especially in chronological studies. This is probably because a solid and encompassing alternative explanation for furnished burial did not replace the earlier conviction that was based on the alleged historical references. The general conclusion of archaeologists who focus on chronology remains that a prolonged circulation of objects that are known from graves scarcely occurred (see Chapter 1 and 4). Historical references, however, to the transmission of goods through hereditary customs exist,\textsuperscript{269} but these are rarely discussed in early medieval (burial) archaeology or related to burial practises. Was the use and appropriation of material culture in early medieval times separated in two different spheres of practise? Was a selection of goods subject to practises of inheritance, and was another selection (the objects that are abundantly found in the graves of this period) separated from these practises? Is this the image of the material component of early medieval life that should be maintained?

3.3.1. Mobilia and the organisation of inheritance practises

With regard to the early medieval burial evidence from the fifth to the eight centuries, it is tempting to relate the acquisition and transmission of the majority of dress-related objects and weapons to inheritance practises within families. The main reason is that these objects were buried with persons of specific age groups that are especially associated with marriage and reproduction and are relatively absent in the graves of the elderly. The act of transmission, however, is in contrast with the presumed inalienability of the personal items that were buried with the dead.\textsuperscript{270} Does this correlation between age groups and dress-related objects point to the conclusion that grave goods were subject to intergenerational transmission, or should it be interpreted otherwise?\textsuperscript{271} Is it a solution to consider these objects as inalienable from the (family) group for which an individual is the caretaker for a limited period and for which especially the moments of transmission to the next generation are crucial?\textsuperscript{272} However, why then were these objects buried with this specific caretaker? Should the conclusion be maintained that most of the moveable property was rarely subject to inheritance in the early medieval period? Indirect arguments against the existence of such practises are that if it was a common custom that

\textsuperscript{266} Jacob/Mirbeau-Gauvin 1980; James 1989, 34-35; Effros 2002a, 25-32; 2003, 76-79; Terrien 2007, 122-123.
\textsuperscript{267} Jacob/Mirbeau-Gauvin 1980, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{268} Härke 2000, 384.
\textsuperscript{269} La Rocca/Provero 2000, 232-233.
\textsuperscript{270} The correlation as demonstrated by Halsall in early medieval Lorraine (see Chapter 2) is demonstrated for several, but not every cemetery. Although other correlations have also been observed, for the majority of the cemeteries the relation between specific grave goods assemblages and age groups has not been investigated.
\textsuperscript{271} In Chapter 2 the option of temporary appropriation (alienable personal possession) of objects was proposed as an alternative. This remains very speculative, but it illuminates that the correlations do not, by definition, direct to the practises of inheritance. The burial evidence only offers indirect evidence for such interpretations.
\textsuperscript{272} It was already expressed by Effros (2002, 31, 43) that ‘inalienable’ property in early medieval times should be interpreted more as inalienable from the family circle than from the individual. Furthermore, a distinction between possession and ownership is useful. An object can be possessed by an individual, but does not necessarily have to be owned by him (Curasi et al. 2004, 610).
persisted over multiple generations\(^{273}\) and the main goal of such practises was to keep the objects in the situation where they functioned (in the family), the burial evidence would show less abundance and variety through time than it actually does.\(^{274}\) However, other situations can also be considered. On the basis of some accounts of possession (of elite members) in historical documents, it can be argued that women and men had not only one set of ‘gender-related items’, but multiple sets. The remainder of the sets could have been transmitted as family heirlooms, after the deceased was buried with one of them.\(^{275}\) Does it do justice to the burial objects in Merovingian graves to distinguish them from the practises of inheritance? The practise and function of inheritance in the early medieval period requires some exploration, especially regarding \textit{mobilia}.

The main evidence for the existence of inheritance practises or family heirlooms is written wills; their major function is to safeguard the possessions for the future.\(^{276}\) The Roman custom of writing down wills disappeared in the earliest phase of the early medieval period. This period is characterised as one of “…formation and experimentation related to efforts to perpetuate status through continuity of possession”.\(^{281}\) The Merovingian period hardly knew wills in their proper sense, and the few that did survive dealt mainly with the right of succession of landed property.\(^{278}\) Some exceptions that were also concerned with ‘items of adornment’ are named, but these wills were compiled by members of the upper strata of society.\(^{279}\) However, this does not imply that during this period other people than elite members were not concerned with safeguarding their moveable property for the future.\(^{280}\)

Next to wills, hereditary customs with regard to moveable property can be inferred from law codes. The investigation of the law codes of various Germanic groups (\textit{leges barbarorum}) in which the rules of inheritance are written down can shed some light on the context of use and the transmission of movables in the fifth, sixth and seventh century. For now, this will be illustrated with the example of one important occasion in life: the connection of a couple, and therefore two families, through marriage. This relationship is formalised, amongst other things, with the exchange of various goods of which the property rights and rights of succession are written down in the \textit{leges}. Whether these practices of inheritance in families involved, next to landed property and money, \textit{mobilia} such as have been discovered from graves, seems to be a logical assumption, although explicit references to the character of the transmitted goods are scarce. This assumption will be explored in the following section. The presumed personal and inalienable character of the grave sets that were especially formed by dress-related objects shall be tested in this discussion.

3.3.2 The regulated exchange and transmission of goods in the context of marriage

Several historians of the Early Middle Ages specifically focused on the rules and customs that surround marriage, and also incorporated anthropological perspectives on this meaningful union, which resulted in a discussion of especially the transactions and agreements between the two families from the bride and groom.\(^{281}\) The available law codes of the early middle ages, which are carefully analysed and compared regarding the structure of families, rules that surround betrothal, legal marriage and legal inheritance are those of the Lombards (seventh-eighth centuries), the Burgundians (fifth-sixth centuries), the Salian

\(^{273}\) It can also be suggested that the transmission of objects was a strategy in the Merovingian period that only worked for a relatively short period of time, thus persisted only over a limited number of generations.

\(^{274}\) The shift from burials with grave goods, which resulted in "...immaterial memory..." (the memory of, amongst other things, the grave goods, because no external sign of the dead was left) to "...leaving a permanent testimony of the dead with the aid of the written word" from the eighth century onwards changed the use of the items that were formerly placed in the grave. "They became precious gifts to the church or to family members, underlying the continuity of status and function of the family itself" (La Rocca/Provero 2000, 232).

\(^{275}\) La Rocca/Provero 2000, 249-259; Härke 2000, 384-386.

\(^{276}\) Although wills are also regarded as strategic devices and not always as "...death-bed dispositions of property" (Nelson 1995, 94-95).

\(^{277}\) La Rocca/Provero 2000, 229.

\(^{278}\) Nonn 1972. This article offers an overview of the written wills from the Merovingian period. It appears that the majority of them are concerned with the right of succession of landed property.


\(^{280}\) La Rocca/Provero 2000, 228.

Franks (fifth-sixth centuries) and the Visigoths (sixth-seventh-eighth centuries). These people lived or settled within the borders of the Roman Empire during the period in which Roman control ceased and was gradually replaced with another form of social organisation. Contact with the people who were familiar with literacy and legal practices was one of the main incentives to write down the laws that had already been practised for a considerable time. However, up to then, they were only memorised by a specific group of persons who spoke justice when necessary (called rachimburgi amongst the Franks).

As it will appear, agreements between families in the case of an upcoming marriage and inheritance rules were mainly concerned with the protection of occupied lands as family property. That the protection of other sorts of property was also believed necessary can, however, be assumed. It can also be claimed that in situations where families owned limited landed property, the expressions of status and identity and the practices of inheritance found a place in the possession and transmission of movables.

The discrepancies between the aforementioned law codes with respect to this subject are not the matter of debate here; they concern only details. The focus lies on all the lines of gift exchange and transmission that can occur, the goods involved, matters of rights on property and the rules or customs of inheritance. The core questions are whether mobilia were exchanged as nuptial goods, how these were initially acquired, whether they were appreciated as personal or family property, whether the rules of inheritance apply to these mobilia (which would extend their circulation period), and whether these customs would prevent them from being buried with the dead. Conversely, could the conclusion be that inheritance rules did apply to land and not to the majority of the mobilia, which explains why so many of them were deposited with the dead? Was the material component of social life as uncomplicated as some archaeologists suggest; someone receives his/her material equipment, keeps it as inalienable personal possession throughout his or her life and is consequently buried with it?

It can be stated that marriages are essential for families because these unions assure their continuation, and it is the general basic requirement for the reproduction of society. It also implies the continuation of life (children), and therefore marriage is a requirement to safeguard the transmission of both material (all sorts of goods and land) and immaterial (prestige, knowledge, reputation, status, etc.) capital. This contract between a man and a woman and between their families is generally surrounded with a ceremony that includes the exchange of goods. This exchange implies that the gifts had to be acquired or were already in possession of the gift givers, that the gifts were kept after giving, and that at a certain point a choice had to be made regarding their transmission. This was a crucial moment at which their circulation would either continue or end (Fig. 9). What were the decisive occasions when the proposed circle of acquisition, giving, keeping and transmission was either continued or disrupted? Who were the participants who made these decisions?

First, which persons were involved in the exchange of goods that accompanied a marriage? Four parties can be identified in the law codes: the groom-to-be, the bride-to-be, the father (representative of the family) of the bride, and the father (or family) of the groom. At the moment of betrothal, the groom-to-be makes a gift to the father of the bride-to-be, the so-called dos, wittimon, pretium or meta/metfio (bride price). This gift formed a contract that secured the individual’s commitment to the wedding. In some instances, it also served to compensate the family of the bride for their investment in

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282 Drew 1988. Drew translated these law codes and analysed them with regard to these specific subjects. Other codes from this period are those of the Alamanni, Ripuarian Franks, Bavarians and Anglo-Saxons.


284 Extensive lands were not available to every family. The division of land amongst heirs of small landowners would have disastrous economic consequences, and it can be assumed that other solutions were practised when situations of inheritance occurred. See also Steuer 1982, 103.


286 See Reynolds (2001) for a detailed discussion of the comparisons of various law codes regarding betrothal and marriage, and Hen (1995) for an account of the Merovingian marriage as an example of one of the personal life cycle transformations in this period.

287 The following account is composed on the basis of Drew’s analysis of the aforementioned law codes (Drew, 1988, IV-VIII).
her and for the loss of the father’s mundium (the exercise of legal representation) over the bride-to-be (and consequently the loss of the control over her future children and property). The father of the bride obligated himself, with the acceptance of these gifts, to give the girl away for marriage on the agreed date. If the marriage did not take place within two years after the betrothal, the groom-to-be had to pay compensation and the dos was kept by the father (family) of the bride. The father gave the dos, or part of the dos together with his own gift, also referred to as faderfio, nuptiale pretium, or donation nuptualis, to his daughter when the wedding took place. The actual type of gift is unclear; it could have consisted of family possessions to which the bride was entitled as a legitimate heir, or a compensation for her loss of the right of inheritance, but it could also have been a gift to the couple in order to secure their economic independency. The Visigothic bride, as an exception, received no gift from the father. This was compensated by the fact that she would always be a lawful heir of her parents/family, even after her marriage. In the analysis of the Burgundian marriage, it is mentioned that the gift of the father was ‘real or personal property’, and that the bride price was paid in money.288

Next to these exchanges, there is also the gift presented from the groom to the bride after the wedding night, the so-called morgengabe or morgengaba. In Burgundian law, it is mentioned that the groom decided on the magnitude of this gift and that it, together with the gift of the father, formed the ‘ornaments’ of the woman. This became her separate property which she could dispose of freely.289 The wedding ceremony is in fact the transfer of the mundium from the father to the husband (and his family) of his daughter. Most of the laws mention that the possessions of a woman were administered by her husband, but for the three sorts of possessions, the dos, the faderfio and the morgengabe, different rules apply. These came into scope when the marriage bond came to an end by either an untimely death of one of the spouses or by divorce. Who is the rightful owner of the goods, or who are the rightful heirs?

Inheritance rules in the Merovingian period appear to owe their existence mainly to the desire to regulate the inheritance of landed property; they mainly prescribe the line of legitimate heirs. References are infrequently made to the independent property of women, which in Lombard law, is explicitly mentioned to be the metfio, faderfio and morgengabe. However, whether this concerns objects as they are encountered in the graves of this period, and whether inheritance rules apply to these movables, is unclear.290 Only in Burgundian law is explicit reference made to ornaments and clothes as the private possessions of a married woman. These were passed on to daughters after her death when no will was made to decide otherwise, or to the sons when female heirs were absent.291 In Frankish law, it was recorded that the gifts from the husband and the father of the bride remained her property. The husband had no right to use these gifts for his own benefit, and they were passed on to her children after her death. However, the gifts are referred to as gifts of money.292 The other rules of inheritance in Frankish law explicitly refer to the transmission of family land.293 Only the Visigothic wife administered her own property. Furthermore, in Lombard law, the girl/woman was not allowed to alienate her movables without the approval of the one who held her mundium.294 Hence, differences, although not profound, with regard to the property rights of women and the line of legitimate heirs, can be found in the discussed laws. It can be stated that inheritance was a component of life in Merovingian times. The specific content of the property and how specific goods relate to the dos, faderfio and morgengabe remains substantially obscure. Can it be assumed that the movables, such as the dress-related objects from graves, formed part of the property to which the right of succession applied?

In Drew’s analysis of the law codes regarding inheritance practices, it becomes clear that no explicit references are made to specific objects. Occasionally furniture such as the bed are mentioned,

288 Drew 1988, V, 8.
290 Drew 1988, IV, 61, 64.
292 Drew 1988, VI, 5.
293 Drew 1988, VI, 6.
but for the majority, explicit references concern money, slaves, cattle and land. Implicit references that could point to *mobilia* are references such as ‘the ornaments of a woman’ and ‘personal/separate property’, from which it might be concluded that various objects, other than the ones explicitly mentioned, were involved. Santinelli, however, is of help here. She listed two sources in which the matrimonial exchange of jewellery from husband to wife was explicitly mentioned. These concern the *dos ex marito* in the *libelli dotis*. The objects mentioned are bracelets, gold earrings, finger rings, jewellery, dresses/garments, gold and silver jewellery, and not further specified, gold and silver.\(^{295}\)

Although this is not hard evidence that the same sort of objects formed part of the matrimonial gifts in the remainder of Merovingian Gaul, it is reasonable to assume that at least a selection of the objects that are found in graves throughout Merovingian Gaul could have been involved in matrimonial exchange. The gift of such objects disappears, at least in the sources mentioned, in the ninth century.\(^{296}\)

After that, the majority of the gifts in the *libelli doti* consist of land, which is more effective in the provision of an economic existence and economic security for the future. It seems that in the ninth century the *morgengabe* was replaced by the *dos* (the marriage gift from the husband to wife), which had to consist of both moveables and land.\(^{297}\) Perhaps it is expressed that the majority of the gifts, especially for the aristocrats, consisted increasingly of land than moveables after the Merovingian period.

Of importance here, however, is that the portables that were explicitly (in these sources) exchanged as components of matrimonial customs are the same sort of objects that were also deposited in graves in the Merovingian period. By the time such gifts disappeared, furnished burial, as it had been practised in the Merovingian period, also disappeared. Does this observation point to an interpretation of burial with personal possession? Again, it must be stated that the concept of personal possession should probably be perceived differently than as passive ownership. Although a connection between individuals and objects existed, people were probably aware of the fact that certain objects had the possibility to transcend their own lifetime. This may have been an incentive to search for ways of regulated or appropriate transmission to safeguard the objects for the future. In order to shed light on whether objects that are for archaeologists predominantly know as grave goods could have been subject to various forms of exchange and that the continuity of transmission can possibly be imagined for the Merovingian period, the next sections will deal with the acquisition and transmission of nuptial gifts as an example.

### 3.3.3 Marriage gifts as examples of continuous object transmission

The question not yet addressed is how the goods that were given as *dos*, *faderfio* or *morgengabe* were initially acquired by the givers. Were they bought, were they already family heirlooms, or did something else occur? The abundance of objects in graves, from various parts of the Merovingian world, makes it plausible to suspect that vibrant networks of distribution/exchange, over both short and long distances, were operating. It can be imagined that grooms-to-be or their families were forced to actively seek access to these networks for the provision of brides and their families with gifts (Fig. 9). The custom of materialising the nuptial agreements was probably one of many forces behind the continuing and widespread existence of distribution/exchange networks of a variety of objects.

The ownership of the matrimonial goods that were gifted to women changed not only upon their death, but also during their life. Given that no explicit references are made to *mobilia* and what happens with them in the course of the receiver’s life (in the following examples, women are the receivers), a list of options, composed on the basis of the inheritance rules analysed by Drew in a selection of the law codes, is proposed. After the premature death of her husband, a woman could be obligated to return a selection of the gifts to the family of her late husband in order to pay off the *mundium* that was

\[^{295}\] Santinelli 2002, 260-261, *Tableau* 1. The texts in which these objects are mentioned are the *Formulaire d’Angers* (end of the sixth and seventh century) and the *Formulaire de Tours* (middle of the eighth century).


\[^{297}\] Nelson 1995, 85-86, note 13. She makes the remark that in the Carolingian period the difference between *morgengabe* (for the heirs of the bride) and *dos* (for the heirs of the groom) was still made by the Saliens and the Ottonians.
transferred to them (Fig. 9. The gifts return to their origins). Part of the goods, which for the majority of the law codes were considered to be her private or separate property, stayed with her. It can be assumed that this property, at least for some part, consisted of (valuable) objects such as Santinelli observed on the basis of the libelli dotis. Given that goods were given to the bride to secure her economic position after the death of her husband, it can be suggested that the decision to return the objects to the network of exchange/distribution (possibly in exchange for money?), was an option. If this was common practise, a continuous circulation of objects existed. These options apply to the situation in which the woman survived her husband. After her death, however, it had to be decided what happened to her 'property'. Therefore, the third line of transmission is the one through inheritance. In the law codes analysed by Drew, inheritance rules apply to the nuptial gifts made to the bride, although it remains obscure whether they also applied to other goods than acquired land. The rightful heirs could be the parents, children, or other relatives up to the seventh degree. These three options for transmission result in a continuity of exchange and transmission. However, the objects known from the graves of women cannot be overlooked. Were these the objects that were once acquired as marriage gifts or in their life as married women? Or do these objects stand apart from the objects that were subject to the practices of exchange and inheritance? At least a selection of the marriage gifts or goods that were received at other occasions in life most likely became deposited in graves. The final questions are why this alternative was chosen, why they were turned into grave goods and not transmitted, and whether they had already been transmitted for a considerable time. Some solutions will follow below.

![Diagram of Networks of Distribution/Exchange](image)

**Figure 9.** The continuous circle of the transmission of objects and options for their removal.

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298 This is extremely speculative, although it can be considered as an option and does not have to be an anonymous act such as it would be in modern commodity exchange.

299 Ethnographic examples are available for this specific practise. A present-day example is the abundance of silver ornaments of women in Oman. The ornaments are received as bride price from the husband’s family. They become the bride’s personal property, which she is allowed to sell in times of need. Therefore, these objects are not supposed to be extracted from the family heirlooms of the groom’s family; they were commissioned by a silversmith (Mols 2009, 135). Such objects can be identified as ‘alienable personal possessions’ (see Chapter 2).

300 It can be assumed that the right of succession of landed property applied only to the more fortunate, and that the transmission of property in the lower echelons of society only concerned the mobilia.
First, one of the main conclusions of this discussion, in which marriage served as an example of a moment in which goods were exchanged and transmitted, is that material culture is an important component of social life, also in early medieval life. The inalienability of individual property is a rather elementary concept on the basis of which the role of objects such as dress-related items in early medieval life can be perceived. Consequently, it is not a sufficient explanation for the burial of these objects with the dead. The concept of a family group was more important than the concept of individuality in early medieval life. It is therefore stated that the individual acquisition and ownership of possessions was of minor importance compared to the responsibility for family property. Specific moments in the personal life cycle, not only marriage, served as occasions to transmit parts of the family treasure to the next generation. Although historical sources were dismissed as proof of the individual ownership of objects, it is still a very persistent way of considering grave goods. It can be concluded that various moments of exchange and transmission can be conceived, and that these trajectories question the static picture of newly produced material equipment, which remained in the possession of their receivers for an ‘eternity’. Given that the inheritance rules in law codes do not explicitly differentiate between the goods (land, cattle, slaves, contents of the house and movables) and do not clarify whether the dos, faderfio or morgengabe consisted of movables, the proposed continuity of transmission is based on indirect evidence. It can be stated that the inheritance rules were mainly geared to regulate land ownership, especially for the families who owned considerable acreage, and not to the transmission of mobilia. Some reasons can probably be conceived as to why the legal ownership of movables and the right of succession had no explicit place in the law codes. The question of why numerous objects furnished the burials in the Merovingian world remains a difficult one to answer. On the basis of the proposed continuity of intergenerational transmission in family groups, the most obvious conclusion for the object deposition with the dead is that no legal heirs were available. However, if legal heirs were to be found up to the seventh degree of relatives, as it was written down in the law codes, this seems rather unlikely. Could other incentives have existed for the transmission of movables than solely their transference to the next generation in order to keep them as family wealth?

3.4 Cultural transmission as the incentive for the continuity of object transmission and possible reasons for terminating this continuity

Land was obviously an economic resource (although land ownership also symbolises wealth and status), for which there were strong motivations to transmit this property to the next generation as family wealth, and probably also some of the movables. Regulated inheritance safeguarded economic resources for the family. However, should all the mobilia be interpreted as such? Movables may have been appreciated as economic resources or symbolised economic wealth. The burial of movables that represented economic resources is difficult to understand. It can be suggested that copiously furnished burial was the display of an ‘abundance’ of wealth: if the survivors kept the valuables, it could raise suspicions about the need to keep them, which could be interpreted as a sign of economic weakness. This is probably one of the elements that resulted in the richly furnished burials of aristocrats, although the burial of these objects can also be a ‘theatrical performance’; the economic need for the objects is concealed by performing a proper, or perhaps extraordinary, burial. After some time, the objects could be retrieved again from the grave (Figure 9). However, these explanations are very speculative and also present a very economic perspective on the material component of life and the burial of these objects. Can the act of burial with objects also be a clue to consider movables as something other than economic provisions?

Next to symbols of economic prosperity, they can also be the symbols of something else, which will be illustrated here with the help of the, already for many purposes applied, concept of ‘objectified...

301 Jacob/Mirbeau-Gauvin 1980, 8; Le Jan 1995.
302 See the work of Van Haperen (2010) in which the many dimensions of the re-opening of graves (formerly referred to as grave robbery), other than the traditional economic dimension, in the Merovingian period itself are discussed.
cultural capital\textsuperscript{303} of a family, combined with the related concept of 'cultural transmission'.\textsuperscript{304} Every detail of the concept of 'cultural capital', as it was developed in sociology to analyse modern, Western society, cannot be applied to ancient societies. Nonetheless, its specific interpretation and alteration in combination with the backgrounds of cultural transmission offer an alternative perspective on some aspects of the acquisition, appropriation, use and transmission of objects in the Merovingian period.

Essential in both concepts are social distinction (reinforced by objects) and the ambition to transfer knowledge, accomplishments, prestige, etc. (family culture or identity) to the next generation at certain effective moments: it is proposed here that the life cycle transitions of family members are suitable events for cultural transmission.

Since objects that symbolise the cultural capital of a family served to communicate identity, status and prestige, their alienation from the family would be prevented and moments of rightful transmission were crucial. The variety of portables from Merovingian graves were suitable to form the objectified cultural capital of a family; they could be displayed, they could be vehicles of various meanings, they expressed a family identity, they were part of a material 'tradition' that was understood by other families, and they therefore served to visualise and negotiate family identities (which also includes economic, social and political status/power). The safeguarding of the cultural capital (family heirlooms) was more subject to private family motivations and success. Consequently, the law did not encompass regulations with regard to the transmission of these *mobilia*. Their maintenance and transmission as symbols of the cultural capital of a family was a private, although very important and at specific moments publicly displayed, family matter. The transmission of such objects, however, poses problems. It is acknowledged that especially "...the moment of intergenerational transmission, when a group passes an object forward, is dangerous".\textsuperscript{305} It is proposed that the transmission of such objects was motivated by the desire to maintain, display, and transmit the family identity, and it expresses the desire to keep the group intact in the future. The question remains as to what were the moments of transmission in the early medieval period. Marriage was discussed as an important moment in the life cycle of individuals, and it was accompanied by the exchange and transmission of specific goods. Other moments in the life cycle development of family members were most likely also appropriate event during which movables were transmitted to the next generation.

A new line of research regarding material culture from graves could comprise the study of the range of objects that structured family identities and the lives of their members. Important aspects are the intergenerational transmissions of a variety of objects that relate to women and those that relate to

\textsuperscript{303} Cultural capital is a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), which served to explain how class society (in the modern Western world) is maintained, and especially how the highest classes strive for continuous social and cultural exclusion. Cultural capital consists of three interrelated categories: embodied cultural capital, institutionalised cultural capital and objectified cultural capital. Specific tangible objects objectify the cultural capital of a social group. The concept of cultural capital cannot be applied in every detail on an ancient society such as the Merovingian, but it does illuminate that social groups have a group identity (cultural capital) for which the ambition exists to maintain it, and thus to transmit it to the group members of the next generation. This intergenerational transmission of cultural capital is accompanied by suitable objects that represent the group identity. The ambition for intergenerational transmission is referred to here as 'cultural transmission'. The moments of transmission involve not only the transmission of objects, but also the complete corpus of cultural capital (knowledge, behaviours, etc.). The next generation has to 'understand' the relation between the group identity and the associated objects, which makes the moments of transmission dangerous. It is expressed that "The cultural capital objectified in material objects...is transmissible in its materiality" and, "...but what is transmissible is legal ownership and not (or not necessarily) what constitutes the precondition for specific appropriation, namely, the possession of the means of 'consuming'..." the specific objects (Bourdieu 1986, 50).

The key questions for the early medieval period regarding cultural capital and transmission are: Which social groups were important, how was their group identity expressed, how was this materialised with specific objects, and around which events was cultural transmission organised? The remainder of this chapter deals with the social group of families and especially with the transmission of the objectified cultural capital of a family: the family heirlooms.

\textsuperscript{304} The concept of cultural transmission has been used especially in scholarly research of evolutionary behavioural change (a good example is the sub-discipline of evolutionary anthropology). In this thesis, the concept is used to explore the intergenerational transmission in family groups over a relatively short period. The focus is on the desire of a family group to keep its identity intact for which intergenerational cultural transmission can be identified as a suitable mechanism. This can be exemplified with citations of Mesoudi (2008), who discussed cultural transmission as a mechanism to explain archaeological data. Cultural transmission according to him is: "the process by which information is passed by means of social learning from individual to individual", and, to illuminate the role of objects in this process, "Culturally transmitted information may be stored [...] in artifacts" (Mesoudi 2008, 91).

\textsuperscript{305} Curasi et al. 2004, 610.
men, as well as the variety of moments of acquisition and transmission that are related to other moments in the life cycle than marriage, which, as discussed above, had a considerable ‘economic’ component. This discussion of the material component of cultural intergenerational transmission (family heirlooms) captures the range of objects of both men and women, which do not necessarily have to be the exclusive objects that were discussed in relation to the so-called ceremonial heirlooms.

A string of beads, for example, predominantly associated with women, can be a composite of antiques from the Roman period, a range of glass beads of different colours and shapes, beads made of natural materials such as amber, amethyst and rock crystal from remote areas (exotics), and they can also include various pendants of precious metal attached to them. In addition, early medieval ‘antique beads’ (objects with a prolonged circulation) occur in strings of beads. Beads can be part of a string, but they can also be sewn onto a cloth or kept as an assemblage in a purse or box. An assemblage of beads has a composite character; effort can be put into the accumulation of the ensemble, but an ensemble can also be redivided into individual beads/pendants. Consequently, they can represent the (components of) people who transmitted or exchanged them. For some archaeological examples, it is argued that individual beads from graves are evidence of them being ‘objects with biographies’ attached to the string to which they previously belonged. Especially the beads of a natural substance can be compared to their experienced mythical origin, which was often ascribed to swords in the early medieval period (see the discussion on ceremonial heirlooms) because they are from a distant and probably unknown provenance. The integrated relics from the Roman period, both beads and coins, can also have these characteristics. All these characteristics are suitable for them to form the cultural capital of a family. They can be easily displayed at appropriate moments, parts of them can be transmitted at appropriate moments, and others can be kept. A string of beads, based on the burial evidence, is predominantly associated with the burials of women, and are most regular for the finds in the graves of children. All these arguments make it a plausible category of objects that suit the intergenerational transmission of gender-related items in a family related to various moments in the life cycle, not only to marriage, for which each subsequent caretaker is responsible. It is proposed that the majority of Merovingian grave goods knew continuity in transmission for which the incentive was to pass on the symbols of a family identity.

Objects with a prolonged circulation that have accumulated meanings and symbolism and are associated with early medieval women have rarely been investigated. The same can be said about the more mundane objects that are ‘masculine’. In the legal codes, references to these objects can rarely be found. These objects could have been symbols of a family identity for which the transmission is important for the preservation of this identity and of which the acquisition and transmission is organised around various moments in the life cycle. The transmission and acquisition at these moments is discussed in early medieval archaeology for members of the aristocracy, especially the young men who became warriors. The exchange of goods in relation to life cycle rituals is in this sphere discussed as acquisition moments that composed the receiving person, and perhaps decomposed the giver. This could at the same time symbolise the appropriate cultural transmission of family treasure and identity. It is clear that such customs are not explicitly mentioned in law codes. The question remains as to why these movables, which formed the cultural capital of families, were buried with the dead. Two options are proposed here, but both require further investigation. The first deals with the absence of appropriate heirs, and the second with the decline of effective symbolism.

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306 It is mentioned that woman were important actors regarding the transmission of movables to the next generation within the family (See for example Herlihy 1995, 84-49 who investigates the role of women in the context of families and therefore considers “... the role of women in passing property down the generations, through inheritance customs and marriage settlements”).


309 It can be interesting to investigate whether not a string as ensemble, but specific types of beads show a correlation with certain age groups.

310 See, for example, the various moments in the life of a woman in present-day Oman: From birth on, she receives jewellery at various ages (Mols 2007, 140-142)

Successful cultural transmission is endangered when appropriate caretakers are not yet available. This is especially the case when the untimely death of an important temporary caretaker of family capital occurred. The child of a woman in her twenties, for example, may be too young to be an appropriate heir, or a child (such as the burials of children with string of beads might express) may have been too young for the appropriate transmission of the beads that were appropriate acquisitions for her age. The burial of these objects may prevent the alienation of the cultural capital from a family at a moment when the successful transmission was in actual danger. The absence of responsible caretakers could explain why young women and men were buried with the wide variety of objects found in graves. The actual transmission of the objects to legitimate heirs was probably not at stake, but the accompanying aggregate of knowledge that they symbolise was because suitable moments to transmit their movables had not yet occurred. In this case, the eventual re-opening of the graves could point to the postponed transmission of the cultural capital. Empty graves of persons in this age group could consequently be an indication of successful transmission. However, another option can also be considered.

It can be imagined that symbolism lost its effects as rapidly as the changes that occurred in the local socio-political environment. The appropriate heirs required different symbols to distinguish themselves from others, but transforming the objects into economic resources could still be loaded with negative associations. Therefore, their burial with the current caretakers was chosen as the best option, rather than their transmission to the next generation. The objects that lost their effective symbolism were kept until death. However, this remains rather speculative, and the reasons why people were buried with objects remain open for discussion, since this is probably the most challenging question for early medieval archaeologists. Regarding the funerary objects not only as grave goods with a ritual meaning but also as components of social life prior to deposition offers the opportunity to investigate a variety of aspects of social life.

This means that the concepts of inheritance and personal property are usable in the context of object transmission and burial. However, they are not merely terms, but rather concepts with multiple layers that require further exploration of what they really meant during the Merovingian period. Personal property was more closely associated with temporary ownership. The acquisition of this ‘property’ was related to the life cycle developments of family members. It was also accompanied by a responsibility for the future preservation of a family identity, and therefore with the responsibility for the successive transmission at the right moment again. Inheritance was not only a custom used to protect economic capital; something else was at stake, exemplified here by the concept of cultural capital and cultural transmission within families.

If cultural transmission was organised around life cycle transformations, which implied active transmission or receiving, it could mean that the line of transmission was terminated with an untimely death. Therefore, the line of transmission of certain sorts of movables may not persist over an equally long period of time as the very exclusive ceremonial heirlooms or economic resources such as land. Very old objects rarely appear in the Merovingian burial evidence, but the continuity of transmission, as described above, could have comprised less time: perhaps two to four generations (approximately one hundred years). In the Merovingian period, a period of approximately three hundred years, lively circles of acquisition and transmission may have existed. This presents a picture that differs from the static representation of inalienable personal property, which is still in common use amongst the archaeologists who are engaged with chronology. It is not suggested here that a final image of the role of material culture in Merovingian society is constructed, or that the final solution for furnished burial is offered. The discussion merely serves to illustrate that the relation amongst individuals, social groups and material culture was a complicated matter in Merovingian times, not only for the aristocratic members of a

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312 Härke 2000, 390.
313 Despite the fact that it was observed for these heirlooms that, although appreciated as objects with a life history, their origins could not be traced back more than two generations (Bazelmans 2000, 371).
Gefolgschaft, for example. It illustrates that this subject offers interesting research possibilities when the wide range of objects that are known from funerary contexts are used to discuss social life outside this context. Focussing on transmission as a crucial act in the reproduction of families and therefore society implies that moments of transmission were important and thus also dangerous. Furthermore, it illustrates that the continuity of circulation was subject to a variety of situations, and that the circulation of various objects could have been prolonged for more than one generation.

3.5 Conclusion: Cultural categories of objects on the basis of exchange and transmission and the consequences for chronology

Two spheres of exchange that resulted in prolonged circulation in the early medieval period were first identified in this chapter: the first applies to the ceremonial and reciprocal exchange of exclusive objects that materialised the alliances between elite members (they are here referred to as ceremonial heirlooms), the second to exchange between and in families, which formalised nuptial agreements and in which men were the initiators/givers and women were predominantly considered receivers (the objects materialise bonds that have an ‘economic’ character; the transmission of a selection of the objects (or land) secure family wealth/property for the future and secure the economic position of future widows). A third sphere of exchange was proposed, namely, the cultural intergenerational transmission of movables in families for whom the initiators and receivers can be both men and women, and which were primarily not related to safeguarding economic wealth (although the objects may symbolise status). Although this cultural transmission may have been organised around marriages, other moments in the life cycle also offer these opportunities. The fact that the transmission of gifts from mothers to daughters or mother-in-laws to young brides, or from fathers to their sons, was not mentioned as generally regulated customs in early medieval law texts does not mean that it did not exist. It is proposed that the transmission of the majority of the portables was more a matter of private decisions, not governed by explicit rules of inheritance; that they were less associated with ‘economic’ provisions, such as at least a part or majority of the dos, faderfio and morgengabe, and the safeguarding of economic wealth. They were probably more closely related to the transmission of objects that symbolised family identities (Table 7). Identifying movables as objects that were subject to a form of cultural transmission, as opposed to only safeguarding economic wealth, explains why property rules are rare in the law codes with regard to mobilia; general regulation would be ineffective or inappropriate if their transmission was perceived as a custom that relates to life cycle rituals and was subject to the private choices of families.

The fourth sphere of exchange is the transmission of objects to the ancestors (sacred heirlooms). However, this specific form of exchange falls outside the reasoning in this chapter because it does not contribute to the discussion of continuous transmission amongst the living and therefore prolonged circulation.

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Table 7. The cultural categories of grave goods and the objects they incorporate, the burial strategies that transform the object associations, and the ultimate remembrance of the grave.
The discussion in this chapter of various forms of exchange and transmission elucidates that the variability of movables known from graves was more often subject to prolonged circulation trajectories than generally assumed. On the basis of the frequent occurrence of various objects in graves, it can generally be stated that people in the Merovingian period found themselves in situations in which the option for interment with a wide variety of objects with the dead was normal in contrast to other periods. Their identification as inalienable personal property made archaeologists assume that a simple trajectory of individual acquisition, appropriation, keeping and eventual burial with their owners represented the material component of early medieval life, which is a rather static and one-dimensional representation. Furthermore, a complementary point of view that divides material culture into objects for which transmission was a general practise and in objects that were inalienable personal property seems an artificial solution. It was suggested that the family identity had a higher priority than an individual identity. The moments of cultural transmission were organised around the life cycle transformations of individuals, but these individual transformations were imbedded in the transformation of the family as a whole.

Although the concept of inalienable personal possession proved to be rather persistent, in various chronological analyses of cemeteries (see Part II), it is observed that a considerable amount of the object types were deposited during a period that lasted more than one generation. Even though modern chronology claims that graves can be dated to relatively short phases, the established circulation periods of only a selection of the grave goods are restricted to such short time periods. The dating of graves to restricted chronological phases obscures the various circulation periods of the object types. This chapter argues that a least a selection of the grave goods functioned in a system of cultural transmission in families. A transmission that, however, did not last for centuries such as the continuous transmission of the most exclusive objects, regalia, etc. could last. It involved objects that were not very exclusive or scarce. Cultural intergenerational transmission had variable outcomes and resulted in a variety of relatively prolonged circulation for comparable objects. The variability in circulation is thus also considerably obscured by statistical methods that are based on object types, rather than individual objects. The conclusion is that the practise of the regularly occurring transmission of objects is nearly impossible to extract from the burial evidence; both arguments for and against can be defended, but the discussion of exchange and transmission of goods between and in families showed that cultural reality was considerably complicated. Accepting this point of view, however, has consequences for chronological analysis. If the regular existence of such practises is accepted as a component of early medieval life, then certain observed anomalies such as extensively furnished graves of the elderly, but also of the very young, require consideration.

Theorising on object circulation in the early medieval period is an essential component of the chronological debate and offers various research directions to explore early medieval life in the context before burial. The relation between material culture and social groups outside the funerary context is rarely investigated and only with regard to a selection, that is, the most exclusive objects. Therefore, in contrast to the categorisation of cultural categories of grave goods in Chapter 2, this chapter aims to list (although not a comprehensive one) the cultural categories of objects on the basis of their role amongst the living, especially on the basis of exchange and transmission. Archaeologists who study Merovingian mortuary practises are confronted with the intentional, although it may be temporarily, ending of the circulation of objects. One of the most intriguing questions relates to the motivations that made people bury a wide variety of objects with the dead. It is sometimes stated, on a general level, that the rare presence of objects in graves points to active hereditary processes, and conversely, that an abundance of grave goods suggests that such processes were not a common practise. This statement is probably related to a modern perception of heirlooms. The interment of objects with the dead from a modern viewpoint equals their ‘destruction’. It expresses that there was no need to keep the objects in the existing situation, whereas heirlooms, in their broadest meaning, are associated with the act of continuation, both of the objects themselves and their associations. Therefore, the ambition to keep collective or ceremonial heirlooms in circulation may have persisted over a longer time than for family
heirlooms. The family heirlooms, as discussed in this chapter, apply to the widest variety of material culture, not only to the very exclusive objects, and an abundance of such objects of cultural intergenerational transmission would make the aim for short chronological phases considerably problematic.

This chapter mainly dealt with hypothetical variations in the rates of circulation, although detailed models in relation to specific sorts of objects were not provided. The aim of the discussion was not to cover all the modes of exchange and transmission, but rather to illustrate that the simple representation of the relation between objects and people, constructed by the archaeologists involved in chronological analysis on the basis of the burial evidence, is one-sided and can be considered more complicated. In other words, it is contested that the individual appropriation and maintaining was the only relation between people and objects such as weapons and dress-related items. Given that the material culture is rich and diverse, the related processes of production, distribution, acquisition, exchange, use, keeping, transmission and disposal are also comparably rich and diverse. Understanding the material culture of the living is an underrepresented subject of research in early medieval archaeology, but it is necessary if one wants to understand the role of ritualised events such as burials in which these objects played a relatively active role. For that reason, this chapter did not focus on providing a comprehensive image of the cultural categories of objects on the basis of circulation, but rather on the complexity and variety of spheres in which material culture served certain goals. An extensive list of cultural categories of objects on the basis of transmission can be obtained by theorising on the materialisation of the various stages of the life cycle of both men and women, not only regarding marriage, as in this chapter, combined with theorising on incentives for both the continuity and disruption of transmission. The circulation periods of objects are only known from the chronological analysis of burial evidence. Part II of this thesis will show how researchers perceive the circulation periods of object types in a selection of these studies (selected on the basis of their suitability for the analysis of the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries in Maastricht), how this relates to the foregoing discussion in this thesis, and how the available knowledge of the circulation periods of object types should be valued on their contribution to the analysis of the grave goods from a cultural perspective.