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

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Conclusion to Part I

The burial evidence from the Merovingian period instigated the development of two scholarly debates from which it is concluded that they interacted only sporadically. Chronological research on the basis of grave goods has developed over a lengthy period into a debate that concentrates on the ultimate refinement of chronological types and phases. Currently, burial phases as short as 15 years are proposed, although it is observed that this degree of refinement does not enjoy general agreement. The interpretative debate on early medieval mortuary behaviour, which has shown considerable development over the last few decades, has not integrated reflections on Merovingian burial chronology, although it has also been modelled on the basis of the main archaeological evidence of this practise: the abundance and wide variety of grave goods that were deposited with the dead.

The meaning of the objects in the context of funerary rites was the main focal point in this debate. The two debates developed separately, but they can be compared by the absence of one domain of research: the role of material culture among the living, and thus the role of material culture (from which grave goods were eventually selected) outside the funerary context. The participants of the chronological debate rarely reflected on the concept of individual property and the related subjects of individuality and personhood, although they rely on the, often implicit, assumption that the grave goods were the inalienable personal possessions in the lives of the deceased. On the other hand, the interpretative debate of the last few decades in Merovingian mortuary archaeology has focused on the meaningful actions of the survivors in the ritual act of burial. This has resulted in a theoretical focus on the meaning of object deposition at the expense of the role of the rich corpus of material culture in situations prior to death and burial. Theorising on this aspect of early medieval life in particular is essential for the chronological debate, and it forms the discussion in Chapters 1 to 3 of this thesis in which a broader cultural perspective on Merovingian burial chronology, different from that which is currently practised, is proposed.

The general ‘cultural perspective’ of the majority of the researchers who have been involved in chronological analysis makes the assumption that the grave goods formed the inalienable personal belongings of the dead. The role of material culture in society is consequently perceived as relatively static and one-dimensional. Objects are received at a specific moment in life, are kept as inalienable personal possession, and finally, when death occurs, the owner is buried with his or her material life companions. That the majority of the participants of the chronological debate acknowledge this assumption was illustrated by citations of researchers who have a prominent position in the chronological debate, and it is further exemplified with the studies that form the basis of the chronological analysis of the grave goods from Maastricht (see Part II). Although this specific ‘cultural perspective’ is convincingly deconstructed by a number of early medieval archaeologists, another satisfactory explanation for furnished burial, which has gained comparable acceptance, was unable to replace it until now. It is often still a point of departure in chronological analysis, although not based on any solid arguments. This is probably due to the fact that another point of view would corrupt the chronological debate as it has been shaped. Actually, burial with personal possession is the only assumption that can underlie solid chronological schemes on the basis of resemblances in grave goods.
assemblages, especially involving short phases. A relatively rapid rate of circulation (of approximately one generation) of the objects would be represented in the burial evidence if people were buried with the possessions they acquired individually.

Some variables, however, which are also important from this traditional standpoint, are overlooked. Cultural aspects such as the age/stage in the life of object acquisition, the age at death and the prolonged circulation of objects influence the similarities between the final assemblages of grave goods and therefore on the chronological phases in which the graves should be dated. Steuer initiated this discussion of cultural variables and the problems of chronological research, but his point of view did not gain a prominent place in the chronological debate. On the basis of Steuer’s discussions, it was illustrated that not only can resembling assemblages date in different chronological phases, but also that dissimilar assemblages can date in the same chronological period. Although the examples that were used to demonstrate this are very modelled and hypothetical, they do raise the awareness that various cultural variables require consideration and that they can add a theoretical dimension to the chronological debate.

The main questions regarding this theoretical dimension concern whether inalienable personal possession is a concept that should be maintained for the Merovingian period and whether it is an acceptable model for the understanding of furnished burial. Considering grave goods as personal possessions implies that individuality was materialised and thus that a perception of individuality had a place in early medieval life. How people perceived themselves in relation to others and the world around them is a distinct discussion. However, it is one that cannot be avoided for the early medieval period if scholars, especially those who are involved in the chronological debate, persist in the conviction that personal possession was a major component of social life in the Merovingian period. The exploration of how personal possession is specified in the interpretative models in early medieval mortuary archaeology has resulted in the identification of various layers regarding individual ownership. Consequently, various connections between the dead and their grave goods and contexts from which grave goods are selected (cultural categories of grave goods) can be proposed.

The earliest interpretative models, in which furnished burial with inalienable personal possession was the main concept, are identified as dead-centred models: the status of the deceased made the grave what it was. The interpretative models thereafter, which were developed during the overall scholarly paradigm shifts, obviously rejected the foregoing models to such a degree that the concept of personal possession almost completely vanished as a relevant topic of research. These models are identified as mourner-centred models, as they focused predominantly on the agendas of the survivors. The dead and the influence of their lived-lives on burial performances became nearly insignificant components of the discussions. Consequently, the investigation of possession and individuality as components or early medieval life did not appear on the scholarly agenda. The reluctance for a thorough investigation of this concept is probably the reason why a one-dimensional vision of personal possession and burial practises can still be found as an implicit assumption in various chronological publications of Merovingian cemeteries.

Despite their common denominator, considerable differences can be observed between the mourner-centred models. The majority of these interpretative models focus on a selection of the burial evidence: either on one performance (giving to the dead), on one limited period (the fourth and fifth or the seventh century), on specific graves (burials of men in settlement grounds), or on a specific category of objects (weapons). However, some of the models offer concepts that provide a more general level of interpretation: they portray burials as strategies of remembrance, as rhetoric strategies that create a community of suitable ancestors, and burials as arenas for competitive display (strategies of power). The general ideas are that the meaning of material culture is transformed during burial activities, that grave goods did not reflect the identity of the deceased as a mirror of life, and although scarcely explicit, that the objects could have been a pragmatic choice of the burying group from the available material culture at that moment (the so-called occasional objects). No explicit thoughts regarding the role of the objects
in society before their interment with the dead can be found in the mourner-centred models. Insights into the variety and nature of these roles in the community of the living are, however, essential for the development of a more profound cultural perspective on burial chronology.

The modern dead-centred models provide some tools for the investigation of the material components of social life. These models are identified as dead-centred models not because they focus on the representation of the identity of the deceased, as the early dead-centred models predominantly did, but rather because they attempt to incorporate the individual as an active agent into social life and mortuary practices. Although this has not yet been comprehensively explored for the Merovingian period, it can be observed that not only the lived life of the deceased, but also the role of objects in early medieval society are becoming subjects of interest. Historians of the early medieval period already explored the many dimensions of social life, but they scarcely incorporated its material component into their research. The burial remains from the Merovingian period can become a rich source for the investigation of social life and its material component when it is accepted that grave goods have both a ‘dead-centred’ and a ‘mourner-centred’ component. The processes of production and distribution can be related to the active processes of object exchange, acquisition, transmission and disposal. This dimension of material culture from the Merovingian period complements the already elaborately shaped discussion of the final transformation of meanings of objects and their exchange with the supernatural world in the funerary context.

The analysis of the interpretative models, both the mourner-centred and modern dead-centred models, which cover nearly all the interpretative directions in Merovingian archaeology, have resulted in five cultural categories of grave goods. Furnished burials with a variety of objects have for a long time been explained by the deposition of inalienable personal possession. However, the many dimensions of the concept of individuality and personhood in the Merovingian period have not been thoroughly explored. Alienable personal possessions and temporary ownership of family possessions are therefore introduced as additional categories of personal possession. The category of gifts to the deceased relate to decisions made by mourners, as do the occasional objects that served various strategic performances of the survivors. The associations and meanings of the three categories of personal possessions were created and transformed through rhetoric strategies and the processes of active forgetting and remembering during the funerary rite. The role of these objects in society prior to their deposition with the dead requires further investigation for a better understanding of funerary practises and especially, as it was argued, for consistent chronological analysis.

This specific investigation was initiated with the identification of cultural categories of objects with prolonged circulation on the basis of various processes of exchange, acquisition and transmission. These cultural categories of objects provide insights into the variation in the circulation of objects in Merovingian society, and they contribute to a cultural perspective on burial chronology. The elite bonds of lords and followers were substantiated not only through the reciprocal exchange of swords, but also other weapons and other exclusives; this resulted in a prolonged and meaningful circulation of these objects. They are identified in this thesis as the first cultural category of objects on the basis of exchange and transmission and are referred to as ‘ceremonial heirlooms’. Early medieval society did not only consist of elite networks, and it is also presumed that the social relations in the lower strata had a material correlate, which are translated in this thesis to other cultural categories of objects on the basis of prolonged circulation.

The majority of the furnished burials from the Merovingian period are peculiar and interesting from a modern point of view, but they do not display the wealth that was encountered in, for example, the graves of Merovingian kings and queens or other members of the upper class. Although these persons had a public role and their public appearance and way of doing things affected others, it can be assumed that in high society other ambitions and incentives regarding the continuity of object transmission (and thus prolonged circulation) played a role. In this thesis, the focus is on the customs of the lower strata, of which the majority of the graves from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries are the
archaeological remains. Identifying various social groups and their associated customs of object transmission is an interesting addition to the field of research in Merovingian archaeology. Textual historians of the early medieval period thoroughly investigated the social group of families and the related subject of betrothal and marriage, which was surrounded with regulated customs that prescribed mutual obligations containing a material component. The account of the exchange and transmission of objects in the context of marriage arrangements serves to illustrate an alternative point of view for the static concept of inalienable personal possession. The existence of a cultural category of objects such as ‘family heirlooms’ was explored in this context.

The occasion of a marriage is for all strata in society an important device for social reproduction. A union through marriage is universally surrounded by the exchange of goods (immovables, movables, money), and it can be supposed that this was also the norm in the early medieval period. Historians explored the institution of early medieval marriage extensively on the basis of law codes in particular. The *leges barbarorum* describe the construction of a legal marriage, the exchange of goods that formalise and symbolise the ‘transaction’, and the rights of succession of the marriage connected spouses and their (legal) children. Explicit references to movables such as the objects that are known from graves are scarce in the legal texts: the exchanged goods seem to have involved land, money, cattle, slaves and household goods. These goods can be named the ‘economic capital or economic heirlooms’ of a family: inheritance rules served to safeguard these economic resources for the future line of a family and to secure the economic subsistence of a woman in the case of the untimely death of her husband. Although explicit references are scarce, it can be assumed that a selection of movables formed part of this ‘economic capital’, which was transmitted as economic wealth to the next generation, although probably not all of the movables.

It is suggested that the wide variety of Merovingian grave objects is not covered by the categories of ‘ceremonial heirlooms’ and ‘economic family heirlooms’. Another sort of object transmission can exist outside the context of formal regulation. This is probably the reason why explicit references to the right of succession of movables are not a vast component of historical sources such as law codes. Merovingian society was a non-egalitarian society in which family groups constituted important social units. It is proposed that a collective such as a family group had the ambition to maintain their group identity. Therefore, it was not only necessary to transmit economic wealth, but also a ‘family identity’ (the complete aggregate of status, prestige, accomplishments, the memory of a shared past, etc., which distinguished them from other families) through a mechanism that might be referred to as ‘cultural transmission’. This is a form of transmission that is reinforced by appropriate objects. This material correlate is elucidated by the term ‘objectified cultural capital’, and it forms the third cultural category of objects on the basis of the proposed model of ambition for continuous transmission.

These three cultural categories of objects (ceremonial heirlooms, ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ family heirlooms) based on exchange and transmission show that the connection between objects and people was not as simple as the participants of the chronological debate pictured it: as inalienable personal property that was buried with the owners after their death. This conclusion, however, leaves one fundamental question open for debate: Why were objects that were subject to an ambition for intergenerational transmission buried with the dead? Their deposition with the dead terminated (at least temporarily) the line of transmission as it had existed previously. Several options for the burial of heirlooms in graves can be proposed.

Objects that formed economic resources are the least likely to be buried with the dead, and this is most likely the category that is the least represented in the burial evidence compared to the other two categories. Successful cultural transmission involves not only the ritual transmission of objects (the right moment of transmission), but also the rightful appropriation of the associated meanings. The moment of transmission is therefore a dangerous one. It is an option to consider the deposition of objects in graves as the absence of possibilities for the successful cultural transmission of both ‘ceremonial heirlooms’ and
‘cultural family heirlooms’. Successful cultural transmission in families was framed in the various life cycle transformations of the family members. The burial of objects can, from this point of view, be interpreted as the impossibility to transmit the objects to the next generation. The correlations between grave goods and age offer, with this point of departure, possibilities to investigate personal life cycle developments in early medieval society. Additionally, it can be imagined that in a rapidly changing socio-political climate, as in the period between the fourth and eight centuries, effective material symbolism probably changed equally rapidly, and that burial was a solution for an appropriate disposal of these objects. However, this option is rather speculative.

Nonetheless, both options illustrate that family heirlooms were partly composed of a family’s objectified cultural capital for which the ambition existed to keep them in circulation through a mechanism of intergenerational cultural transmission. Death occurred at a young age relatively frequently, which made continuous successful cultural transmission difficult. This actuality results in various circulation periods for comparable objects. It is proposed that the ambition for the rightful transmission of the exclusive objects of elite bonding (ceremonial heirlooms) was more persistent, and that their prolonged circulation probably considerably exceeded those of family heirlooms, although this statement requires further thought. The consequences are that for the majority of the early medieval grave goods, a prolonged circulation of approximately two to four generations occurred. However, this circulation period varied considerably for comparable objects, which makes chronological analysis on the basis of similarity problematic.

Solutions for the understanding of furnished burials will always be proposed. The line of reasoning in this thesis aims to show that the chronology of grave goods relies much more on the discussion of their use in the community of the living than on the discussion of their meaning as funerary objects alone. If the complexity of the materialisation of social life is acknowledged as a general component of early medieval life, then the underlying assumption that the similarity of grave goods assemblages is a sound basis for ongoing chronological refinement requires reconsideration.

The grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries in Maastricht (the Netherlands) were only scarcely published up to now. Some decisions had to be made regarding their contribution to the chronological reconstruction of the Servatius complex. Viewing the majority of the grave goods as the inalienable personal belongings of the dead implies that their circulation does not exceed much more than a generation. Personal belonging as a concept is much more layered if the acquisition, appropriation, use and transmission of objects are considered. Personal property does not refer solely to personal inalienable ownership, but more to temporary ownership. Individuals are consecutive caretakers of family property, and they have a responsibility for the continuity of the line of intergenerational cultural transmission. The consecutive transformations in the personal life-cycles of family members were probably the appropriate moments of intergenerational cultural transmission. A (considerable) selection of the burial objects from the Merovingian period can be seen as a material correlate of this cultural transmission.

The focus on burial phases, which are in some instances limited to a period of 15 years, disguises the variation in circulation that can be present in one grave. The conclusions for the chronological debate are that it is more interesting to explore this variability and that it is hazardous to restrict burials to short chronological phases on the basis of their similarities. Especially insights into various circulation processes and their backgrounds should be considered as the major contribution of chronological research to the interpretative debate: the analysis of the variation in circulation offers another perspective on social life, and consequently a cultural perspective on burial chronology. This variation in individual graves, in contrast to the presentation of the restricted phases of burials, will be illustrated in Part II, in which the finds from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries are also published.