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

The archaeological remains of the Servatius complex (Maastricht) are for the majority the result of late Roman and early medieval funerary activities. The analysis of the topographical and temporal development of this complex on the basis of these remains was formulated as the initial research goal of the Servatius project. The physical anthropological research, the reconstruction of the horizontal and vertical development of the cemeteries and the individual grave structures was carried out in sub-projects, as was the chronological analysis of the grave goods. However, the accuracy of the chronological method of seriation, which is generally used to create chronological orderings of considerable numbers of grave goods, was questioned. The objections to this method eventually shaped the first part of this thesis in which a cultural perspective on the chronological analysis of Merovingian grave goods is introduced as an essential component of the chronological debate. The grave goods from Maastricht are published in the second part of this thesis in which the classification, distribution patterns and dating of the individual objects form the major discussion.

The content of the chronological debate is investigated through the comparison of the generally considered reliability of seriation as a chronological method, with the cultural assumptions of researchers involved with the burial chronology of the Merovingian period. Over the last few decades especially, the method of seriation has resulted in refined chronological schemes, which date graves in periods of 15 to 30 years. The meaning of these chronological results has been deconstructed on three levels. The chronological problems regarding the classifications used and the related analytical problems of the established circulation periods of these created types were discussed, as was the assumed chronological accuracy of seriated assemblages of grave goods. It was concluded that, in addition to the practical problems of seriation, the scholarly ambition for short chronological phases relies on a simplistic way of considering the material component of early medieval life, which can, in short, be defined as that the Merovingians buried the dead with their inalienable personal possessions, which were consequently not subject to practices of inheritance. The circulation of objects is therefore considered to be limited to one generation. This formation of an image is based on the persistent interpretative construction regarding the concept of personal possession. This construction is built on an incorrect interpretation of historical writings and the presumed historical reality of the obtained short chronological burial phases. It has resulted in the absence of a discussion that questions the multiple facets of the relation between material culture and persons. The concept of personal possession has therefore not been challenged and replaced with another model.

The legitimacy of the chronological debate for the future should not focus on the quest for chronological refinement, but rather on the addition and development of a cultural perspective regarding the use of grave goods and the consequences of these altered points of view for the performance of chronological research. The new essential points of discussion are the search for alternatives to the one-dimensional point of view that grave goods were the personal belongings of the deceased and the additional variety of circulation trajectories in the world of the living before their interment with the dead when other sorts of ‘possession’ are considered. The interpretative debate in early medieval mortuary archaeology, which developed separately from the chronological debate, is analysed on its contribution to these new discussions.

The research in these interpretative models of the last few decades has focused on the ritual choices of the survivors, which are generally considered to express social competition, the symbolic creation of suitable ancestors, the symbolic appropriation of rights of succession on land, and strategies of remembrance (which imply the complex process of forgetting and remembering). The models are identified as ‘mourner-centred models’; they are preoccupied with the motives of the burying group, and are a reaction to the forgone ‘dead-centred models’ in which the concept of inalienable personal possessions is one of the pillars. The reaction to the mourner-centred models can be collected as so-
called 'modern dead-centred models'; the active role of the deceased, the role of objects in the community before burial activities take place, and their influence on the outcome of funerary practices become discussion points again. The analysis of the models, which represent all interpretative directions in early medieval mortuary archaeology, served to identify various contexts from which objects could have been selected for funerary purposes.

The strong correlation between gender-specific objects (especially dress-related) and age at death (the graves of the elderly are more soberly furnished than those of adolescents or young adults) is a characteristic of the early medieval burial rite. It can be interpreted as an indication of the existence of intergenerational transmission and/or the existence of individual ambition for temporary personal display (individual alienable possession). Three cultural categories of grave goods have been identified on the basis of the context of possession from which they could have been selected: inalienable personal possession (although not explicitly mentioned, this category still plays an implicit role in a number of reasonings), alienable personal possession, and family possession. Visitors of the funeral can also donate gifts to the deceased, which forms the fourth cultural category of grave goods. The mourner-centred models imply that the ritual moment during which the meaning of objects transforms is more important than the context from which the objects were selected. They merely have to be suitable objects to achieve the goal. On the basis of this reasoning, the category of occasional objects was identified. The five categories do not exclude one another; rather, they serve to illustrate that the historical reality was more complicated than the exclusive image of inalienable personal possessions in the chronological debate.

Although a shift away from the hard-core mourner-centred models can be observed, the role, and therefore the circulation of the grave objects in the world of the living, has only scarcely been investigated. Essential for the continuation of the chronological debate is whether the variety of contexts of possession also implies a variety of circulation periods.

The average circulation period of object types is generally extracted from the chronological analysis of grave good assemblages. It was, however, reasoned that the chronological accuracy of these results can be questioned when the role of objects in the world of the living is considered more complicated than inalienable personal possession. The circulation of objects therefore requires a theoretical approach. Regarding the role of material culture as multi-layered implies that objects could change from 'owner' and therefore could remain in circulation longer than one generation. The variability of prolonged circulation is analysed in relation to the various contexts of possession. The focus is on the incentives that lead to prolonged circulation, which includes not only the backgrounds of production and distribution, but also the processes of acquisition, appropriation, exchange and transmission.

The circulation of exclusive objects in early medieval elite networks of exchange has already been introduced in several studies. On the basis this discussion and a perspective from anthropological literature on the background of prolonged circulation and deposition, the categories of 'ceremonial heirlooms' and 'sacred heirlooms' could be formulated as relevant categories for the early medieval period. The ceremonial heirlooms in particular illustrate that material culture is connected to the maintenance and transformation of social networks, and as such, is subject to prolonged circulation prior to deposition in graves. However, this category does not cover the complete repertoire of Merovingian grave goods. It is proposed that the ambition to exchange and transmit objects to the next generation was not only applicable to the most exclusive objects in the elite networks of especially men, but also to other strata of society and to women as active participants in various networks. These assumptions result in acknowledging the existence of the prolonged but also variable circulation of objects, an image that is opposite to the one created in the chronological debate. The question remains whether this image of consistent prolonged circulation relates to the objects that were deposited in graves, or whether these objects relate to the construction of suitable ancestors. As such, they are occasional objects that become 'sacred heirlooms', but are not necessarily subject to the ambitions of regular object transmission before deposition.
The introduction of the category of ‘family heirlooms’ as a component of early medieval life served to discuss the existence of regular and variable object circulation in all strata of society. This category contradicts the general point of view in the chronological debate that grave goods were not part of a system of inheritance. Marriage was chosen as an example of a moment in family life that, nearly universally, is formalised and accompanied by the donation, exchange and transmission of objects. Selections of these objects are stated to be family heirlooms or family heirlooms to be. How can the trajectories of the bridal couple’s received objects be defined?

The formal early medieval wedding is extensively discussed on the basis of historical writings, especially law codes. Not only is the agreement of betrothal and marriage described, but also the related changes in social status and property rights of the people involved. The general lines of exchange are those from the groom-to-be to the father of the bride-to-be (dowry), from the father (family) of the bride to the bride (dowry and/or entitled part of the inheritance), and from the groom to the bride after the wedding night (morning gift). Numerous rightful lines of succession are written down in case the untimely death of one of the spouses occurs. Some possessions return to the family of descendant, some possessions go to the children, and some are bestowed to the surviving spouse. It can be assumed that some of the goods that are exchanged in the context of marriage are considered family property that requires continuous transmission. The specific content of the goods in each line of exchange and transmission remains obscure, but the texts generally refer to land, cattle, furniture, slaves and/or money. Explicit references to mobilia, as encountered in Merovingian graves, are scarce.

Despite the absence of these explicit references, the historical writings (wills are an additional source) illustrate that inheritance was a familiar concept in early medieval society. Other writings such as the libelli dotis, however, show that specific objects such as the ones from early medieval graves were exchanged as a dowry and morning gift. It requires further reasoning to answer the question of whether these references make it possible to consider the regular intergenerational transmission of the objects that were deposited in graves.

The sketch of exchange and the rights of possession and succession makes it presumable that not only was land subject to continuous transmission, but that people also had an ambition to contain movables for future generations. Both the scarce occurrences of explicit references to inheritance rules and mobilia and the age-related object deposition require an exploration of the mechanisms of transmission that are not explicitly mentioned in historical writings as regulated customs because they are more closely related to the private sphere of success and failure.

The concepts of ‘objectified cultural capital’ (Bourdieu) and ‘cultural transmission’ suit the illustration of private and not regulated mechanisms of intergenerational transmission. Important assumptions in this line of reasoning are, first, that the family group and belonging to such a group was of paramount importance in the Merovingian period, and second, that a social group such as a family had the ambition to transfer a certain immaterial group identity to the future, a transference that also involved a material correlate. The physical transmission of family ‘treasure’ (family heirlooms) was connected to the transmission of the specific group values and identities at specific moments. The importance of ‘correct’ transmission is what makes this moment crucial and potentially dangerous. It becomes effective when it accompanies meaningful moments of the individual life cycle such as a marriage, which at the same time represents the transformation of the family group.

This characterisation of transmission is in accordance with the correlation between certain grave goods and age groups. This correlation suggests a certain organisation of object transmission. However, it also indicates that there were moments of termination or interruption of transmission through deposition in graves. It is stated that the majority of the grave goods had a place in the mechanisms of continuous intergenerational transmission. In addition to the formalised exchange of goods during wedding ceremonies, one can also think of other moments of transformation that represent suitable occasions for intergenerational transmission. However, they were more closely related to the private family sphere and consequently are not registered in abundance in historical writings. These are then
other mechanisms and lines of exchange than those of the exclusive objects in the elite networks of predominantly men. This model also includes the intergenerational transmission of numerous sorts of objects between women and between members of other social strata than the elite.

This discussion illustrates the complexity of the possible existence of variable and prolonged object circulation. This contradicts the concept of inalienable personal possession, which stands at the basis of the majority of the chronological research. However, it also offers an additional image of the prolonged circulation of only the most exclusive objects in the elite networks of exchange. Why objects that functioned in a system of continuous intergenerational object transmission were eventually deposited in graves remains open for debate, but it probably relates to the dangerous moments of actual object transmission. The correlation between age and grave goods suggests that this transmission was organised around the life cycle rituals through which each family member had to pass. The possession of objects should not be perceived as personal possession, but merely as a temporary treasury of family possessions for which each successive individual holds the responsibility for correct and effective transmission to the next generation. Given that untimely death endangers this transmission, the (temporal) deposition in graves could be an appropriate solution to this problem.

The question of why objects were buried with the dead probably leads to numerous answers. The aim of this discussion is to illustrate that grave goods can also be studied as objects that shaped the lives and social relations in the world of the living before they were selected as grave goods and their associated meanings transformed in the funerary process. The discussion shows that the relation between people and objects is more complicated than the participants of the chronological debate envisioned, and that this complexity results in prolonged and variable circulation trajectories. Making this variability visible adds a theoretical dimension to chronological analysis, which legitimizes the place of chronological discussions on future research agendas. Seriation as a chronological method can be maintained, but the quest for refinement should be abandoned. The need for the chronological phasing of graves should not be the primary research goal. Rather, the variability of object circulation and the search for explanations of this variability, in other words, the development of an extended cultural perspective that forms the basis of Merovingian burial chronology, requires further discussion.

The relation of this perspective with the publication of the grave goods from Maastricht in Part II is expressed with the variable circulation that can be observed in a number of graves. It appears that the period covered by complete assemblages exceeds much more than one generation; it even appears that this period comprises approximately 100 to 200 years. This does not necessarily represent the actual periods of combined circulation, but does demonstrate that prolonged circulation can occur. This observation can also be made in numerous publications of early medieval cemeteries in which short chronological phases are the aim. The cultural assumptions of the researchers are, apart from the discussion of the methodological foundations of the studies used for the analysis of the grave goods from Maastricht, also considered. In their opinion, as already generally discussed in Part I, the circulation of objects is limited to approximately one generation. Given that their work focuses on the dating of graves in short phases, they often overlooked the circulation variability that can occur in one single grave. Transferring the focus in chronological studies to this variability offers the possibility to explore concepts such as intergenerational transmission in the context of family structures and transformations as a component of early medieval life. The chronological debate requires a theoretical approach that must be shaped in research that questions the role of material culture not only in funerary contexts, but also in the world of the living.