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In touch with the dead : early medieval grave reopenings in the Low Countries

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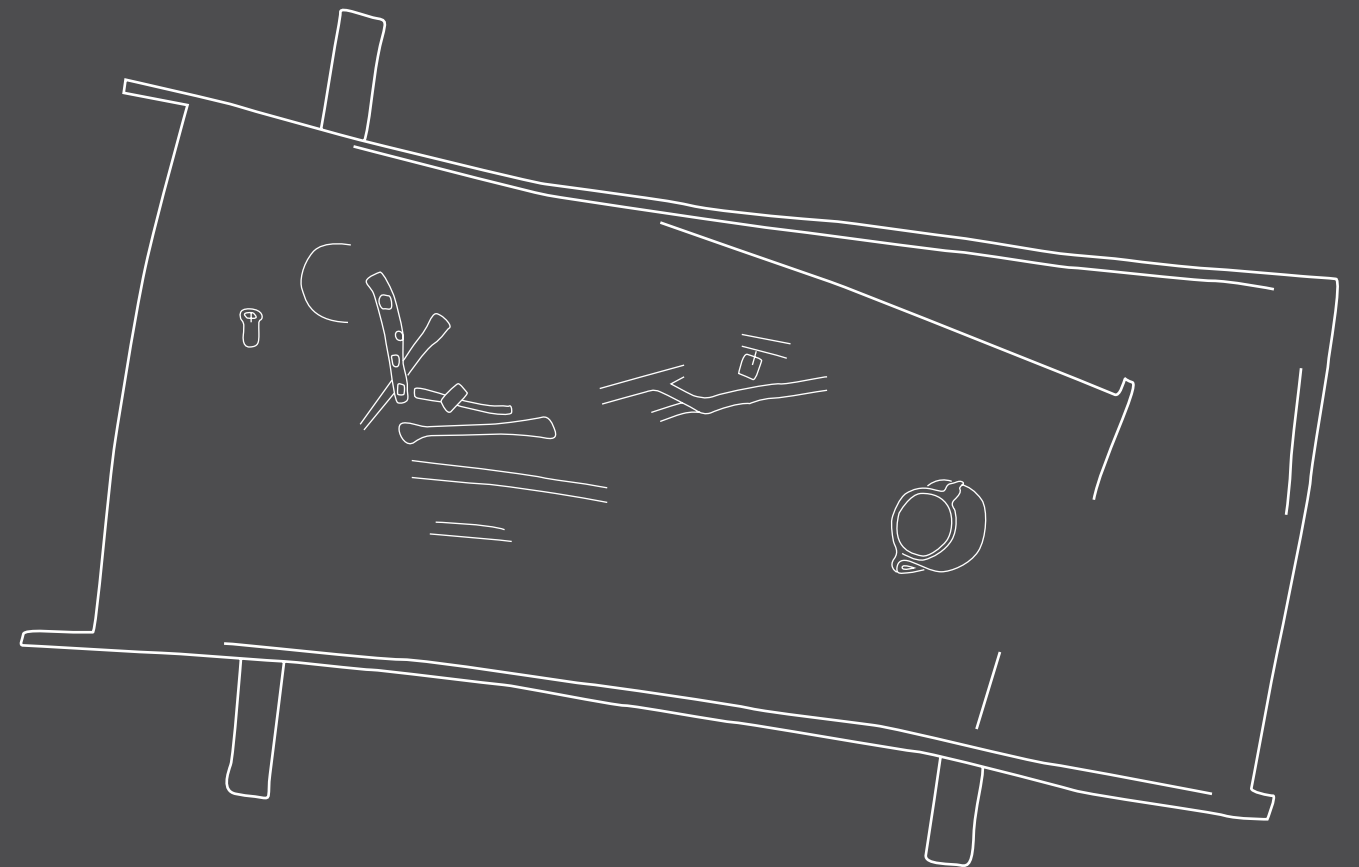
Early medieval interactions with the dead did not stop after the funeral. The graves were often reopened at a later time to examine and manipulate their contents. Archaeologists frequently interpret this phenomena as grave robbery, an economically motivated criminal practice. But many aspects of the graves in question do not align with this hypothesis. Martine van Haperen studied over 1300 graves from 11 cemeteries in the Netherlands and Belgium with surprising results. It became clear that the diggers left many objects behind in the reopening pits and prioritized men's graves even though these contained fewer valuable materials. Instead, they focused on removing object types with crucial symbolic roles in the funerary ritual and early medieval society at large. The high percentage of reopened graves (41%) suggests this was a socially accepted practice. Van Haperen therefore argues that reopenings were part of the normal interactions between the living and the dead, for instance in the form of an ancestor relic cult and as a way of dealing with unquiet dead.

In Touch with the Dead

van Haperen

In Touch with the Dead

Early Medieval Grave Reopenings in the Low Countries



Martine van Haperen