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

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1. Introduction

In Merovingian cemeteries all over North-West Europe archaeologists find graves that have been reopened after burial. Although the evidence is not always conclusive, the interventions often seem to have been carried out while the cemetery was still in use, possibly even by contemporaries of the deceased. The participants dug pits into the graves, rummaged through, displaced and/or fragmented some of the contents, and took out a selection of objects and perhaps also bones. Many other objects and bones were left behind.

1.1 Historiography

Reopened graves are usually viewed as 'disturbed' and unsuitable for use in the study of early medieval society. Certainly, the original contents of these graves are not intact, so they cannot be used in most mainstream artefact-oriented research. Over the years, the post-depositional interventions themselves have nevertheless received scholarly attention in the form of a colloquium organized by Jahnkuhn in 1977 (Jankuhn et al. 1978; Pauli 1981; Lorenz 1982), a number of articles (Koch 1973, 1974; Roth 1977; Dannhorn 1994; Beilner & Grupe 1996; Steuer 1998; Stork 2001) and contributions in various cemetery publications (Stoll 1939; Fremersdorf 1955; Sagí 1964; Christlein 1966; Müller 1976; Schneider 1983; Grünewald 1988; Knaut 1993). Although different nuances of opinion can be found in the interpretations of various authors, there was a general consensus that the grave reopenings were carried out by primarily economically motivated criminals or 'grave robbers' (Redlich 1948; Roth 1978; Pauli 1981; Grünewald 1988; Steuer 1998; Stork 2001). Extensive summaries of these and other publications can be found in Klevnäs (2013), which are not repeated here.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of studies about post-depositional interventions in early medieval graves (Aspöck 2005, 2011; Kümmel 2009; Van Haperen 2010; Klevnäs 2013; Zintl 2012; Noterman 2016, dissertation forthcoming). Apparently, the social sciences have come to a stage where disturbance and fragmentation are now interesting subjects for research. Since the publications appeared in quick succession, the literature does not yet show much debate between the various authors, but the interpretations do vary considerably. This chapter contains a discussion of these new publications, leading up to the research questions for the present study. Sections from this chapter were published in the proceedings of the Motifs Through the Ages conference series (Van Haperen 2016).

New studies

In 2009 the dissertation of Christoph Kümmel was published, which comprises a comparative study of the broad range of grave reopening types that have been described by archaeologists and ethnographers. His cases range from prehistory to the modern age, including a number of early medieval examples. Kümmel categorized a large variety of social contexts in which grave reopenings could take place, which he subsequently compared with actual cases of such practices found in historical written sources, ethnographic records in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), and reports of archaeological excavations. This categorization is displayed in table 1.1. The interventions are subdivided into progressively narrowing numbered categories (German: *Idealtypen*) according to the time that passed between burial and reopening, the ethnic origin and recorded or presumed motivations of the diggers and the juridical legitimacy of the intervention (Kümmel 2009). A comprehensive review of Kümmel's book was written by Zintl (2010).

Intra-ethnic intervention while cemetery is in use	Positive	Legitimate	Ia1	Ancestral cult; obtaining relics or magical objects; funerary rituals that include a reopening of the grave; reburial in another location
		Illegitimate	Ia2	Like Ia1, but unusual, negatively sanctioned or not socially accepted
	Negative	Legitimate	Ia3	Punishment or revenge; neutralizing dangerous dead (like revenants); desecrating the memory of the deceased
		Illegitimate	Ia4	Like Ia3, but unusual, negatively sanctioned or not socially accepted
	Economic (neutral)	Legitimate	Ia5	Obtaining grave goods or valuable relics for personal enrichment after completion of the funerary ritual/ as fragmentation that is part of the mortuary cycle/ when grave is reused
		Illegitimate	Ia6	Obtaining grave goods or valuable relics for personal enrichment as a crime of opportunity or in rare cases as systematic plundering
Extra-ethnic intervention while cemetery is in use	Positive	Legitimate	Ib1	Removal of relics or magic objects; worship of unknown dead (?)
		Illegitimate	Ib2	Like Ib1, but unusual, negatively sanctioned or not socially accepted
	Negative	Legitimate	Ib3	Revenge; vandalism; injuring an enemy's sense of piety; obtaining trophies; neutralizing dangerous dead (like revenants); desecrating the memory of the deceased
		Illegitimate	Ib4	Like Ib3, but unusual, negatively sanctioned or not socially accepted
	Economic (neutral)	Legitimate	Ib5	Obtaining grave goods or valuable relics for personal enrichment or curiosity, for instance during systematic plundering during war or when a cemetery has been given up
		Illegitimate	Ib6	Like Ib5, but unusual, negatively sanctioned or not socially accepted
Intra-ethnic intervention when cemetery is no longer in use	Positive	Legitimate	IIa1	Like Ia: reburial in another location (especially high status dead). The distance in time excludes funerary rituals. It is unclear to what extent the motives listed at Ia are relevant in this context
		Illegitimate	IIa2	Like Ia2, but sanctions may be lessened because of increased distance in time
	Negative	Legitimate	IIa3	Like Ia3, but it is unclear whether motives like punishment, revenge and fear of revenants are still relevant in this context
		Illegitimate	IIa4	Like Ia4, but sanctions may be lessened because of increased distance in time
	Economic (neutral)	Legitimate	IIa5	Like Ia5, but more easily accomplished because all restrictions are dissolved by the passing of time
		Illegitimate	IIa6	Like Ia6, but sanctions may be lessened because of increased distance in time
Extra-ethnic intervention when cemetery is no longer in use	Positive	Legitimate	IIb1	Like Ib1: possible worship of unknown dead and relics in the context of 'invented traditions'
		Illegitimate	IIb2	Like Ib2, but sanctions may be lessened because of increased distance in time
	Negative	Legitimate	IIb3	Like Ib3, but it is unlikely that the motivations listed would still hold much sway a long time after the funeral
		Illegitimate	IIb4	Like Ib4
	Economic (neutral)	Legitimate	IIb5	Like Ib5, but most motivations listed would not hold much sway a long time after the funeral. However, the effect of curiosity could increase (archaeological excavations are an example)
		Illegitimate	IIb6	Like Ib6, , but sanctions may be lessened because of increased distance in time

Table 1.1. English translation of Kümmel's table 3.13, showing all types of grave reopenings discussed in his study (after Kümmel 2009: 128).

Kümmel included a case study for each of the periods with which his book is concerned. His early medieval case consists of the reopened graves from the cemetery of Munzingen. In this cemetery a large number of graves were subjected to post-depositional interventions. He argues that the high percentage of reopened graves indicates that the removal of grave goods was perceived by the local population as a legitimate practice. Since some of the interventions were probably carried out when later burials were added to the graves, he concludes that they were likely carried out by members of the burial community. The fact that most intervention pits were placed in sections of the graves that usually contained grave goods, leads him to conclude that the motives of the perpetrators were economic, despite the fact that objects and fragments thereof were frequently left behind. He argues that if the removal of artefacts was indeed performed by the descendants of the deceased, this could be evidence of an eschatological scheme where the dead slowly fragmented and faded from memory, and only the material value of the objects in their graves remained of long term interest to the living (Kümmel 2009: 246-260).

In 2011 Edeltraud Aspöck published an article about the cemeteries of Brunn am Gebirge (Lower Austria) and Winnall II (southern England). The article is partially based on a previous German publication, which was one of the first to describe a detailed methodology for the study of interventions in Merovingian graves (Aspöck 2005). At Brunn am Gebirge graves and their contents appear to have been treated differently according to their state of decomposition. Because of this, Aspöck thinks people may have thought of the passage of the dead to another world or state of being as a process comprising various stages. A fully skeletonized corpse would have been a sign that the deceased had completed their passage. If so, the grave goods may have had a transient function as conspicuous display during the funeral, which made it acceptable to remove them at a later time, when the deceased's transformation had reached another stage (Aspöck 2011: 312-313). At Winnall II, most graves were reopened shortly after burial, before the corpse had decomposed. Since there was little evidence for the removal of grave goods, Aspöck concludes that the primary aim of the interventions in this case was manipulating the dead bodies. This behavior could either indicate a fear of revenants or a type of mortuary practice that required reopening of graves and manipulation of the corpse. She argues that burial and post-burial interventions should be studied as an ensemble so archaeologists can gain a more complete understanding of past funeral practices (Aspöck 2011: 318-319).

In 2013 Alison Klevnäs published her PhD thesis, which focused on reopened graves from early Anglo-Saxon Kent. The book also includes an extensive overview of the continental literature on early medieval interventions in graves. A small number of reopenings that show evidence of bodily mutilation or rearrangement of skeletal parts are interpreted as a reaction to fear of revenants. The disorderly state of most reopened graves leads Klevnäs to suggest that the perpetrators in her research area had little regard for the grave construction or the remains of the deceased. However, because of evidence for preferential removal of specific object-types such as brooches and swords, Klevnäs argues that straightforward personal enrichment cannot have been the perpetrators' primary aim. Instead, the participants wished to 'deprive the dead of symbolically significant objects', thereby damaging the prestige of the deceased's family or reducing the supernatural power of the dead (Klevnäs 2013: 83). In this interpretation, grave reopenings are a type of inter-community violence, an expression of festering conflicts within the local society. Klevnäs (2013: 83-90) suggests that these disputes should be seen against the backdrop of the seventh-century consolidation of elite and royal power in the Anglo-Saxon area and the transition from a dispersed rural society to an early state.

Stephanie Zintl has recently finished her PhD thesis on grave reopenings in early medieval German Bavaria (Zintl 2012). She questions

the traditional 'grave robbery' hypothesis, and argues instead that the grave reopenings were complementary to the funerary practices and were carried out by the burial community itself. There was no evidence for consistent removal of all valuable grave goods. The diggers rather seem to have targeted particular symbolically laden grave good types such as weapons and brooches, as they did in Kent. Zintl suggests that the reopenings may have meant to change the graves' layout and contents rather than just remove grave goods. This could have been a way to manipulate or constrain the graves' meanings and potency. According to this interpretation, post-depositional interventions were a tool with which people could control the real or symbolic power and social status of the dead and their descendants. Like Klevnäs, Zintl feels that such practices may have played a part in conflicts. However, since she believes graves were reopened by people from the burial community itself, she locates these among members or families within the burial communities rather than between larger rivalling factions. She suggests the subject of the disputes could have been of a socio-political nature, or have concerned ideas about proper mortuary practice. Grave reopenings may also have been a way for descendants of the deceased to control their own family's graves and the ways these represented the past (Zintl 2012).

While writing my Master's thesis about reopened Merovingian graves in 2009, I was unaware of this growing interest in the subject and naively thought that I was the only person working on it. I was very excited to discover the studies by Aspöck, Kümmel and Klevnäs, although by then I had finished my thesis and had prepared a shortened version for publication (van Haperen 2010). My thesis and the article that followed from it were very much a reaction to the traditional debate which, in my opinion, focused rather heavily on post-depositional interventions as disturbances or even desecrations of the burial context. I wished to show that a different interpretation was possible if the data were examined from another angle. To this end, I turned the evidence on its head and emphasized the aspects that were difficult to explain within the economic-criminal grave robbery hypothesis, especially the many objects and fragments thereof which were left behind in reopened graves. The high numbers of interventions and the fact that they had often taken place while the cemeteries were still in use, suggested to me that the burial community was involved. I therefore argued that post-depositional interventions could have been perceived as a generally positive medium that facilitated the interaction between the living and their deceased ancestors. Several ethnographic and historical analogies such as the medieval cult of saints' relics provided examples (Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Brown 1982; Geary 1986; 1994; Bloch 1988; Gell 1998; Weiss-Krejci 2005; Smith 2012).

Underlying assumptions

The studies described above, including my own, illustrate one of the main problems of archaeological interpretation. Our interpretations rely heavily on assumptions about the motivations of past peoples and about the ways particular types of behavior were perceived in previous historical periods. Below I will discuss the main assumptions that feature in these interpretations. A short sentence describing the assumptions are placed in italics above each section.

If artefacts were removed from the grave, it is likely that the participants were economically motivated.

It should not *a priori* be assumed that objects were taken from graves because of their material or economic value. The diggers could indeed have been economically motivated, but they could equally well have intended to obtain objects with magical properties, gather relics of their forbears (van Haperen 2010: 22-27), destroy the power and prestige of the deceased (Klevnäs 2013: 83), or accomplish some other entirely unfathomed purpose. Mortuary practices and the interaction with graves were probably connected with culturally specific emotions (Tarlow 2000: 718-719),

norms, values and beliefs that may have contributed to the meaning of grave reopenings and the value, or rather 'worth', ascribed to the objects that were taken.

If the grave was left in a disorderly state after the intervention, this indicates that the participants intended to disrespectfully damage the grave and the remains of deceased.

First, we should take care not to impose our concept of orderliness on the early medieval context. In the eyes of an archaeologist, who is accustomed to meticulous excavation techniques and professional orderliness, the work of early medieval diggers is apt to look disorderly. However, contemporaries need not have perceived these activities in the same negative light (Kümmel 2009: 37; Zintl 2012: 353). It is also important to note that in funerary contexts 'violence' is not limited to violation, but can also be employed as a means of venerating the dead, making it difficult to distinguish the two in archaeological data (Weiss-Kreici 2001, 2005; Duncan 2005; Gardeła 2013: 107-108).

Grave goods and bones taken from graves were perceived as relics of the deceased.

This interpretation of former grave goods as relics assumes that early medieval people perceived their deceased ancestors as active entities who could manifest their presence and power through artefacts or bones taken from graves. This assumption relies heavily on an analogy with the contemporary cult of Christian saints' relics. There is little evidence, written or otherwise, that confirms the existence of similar beliefs concerning the secular ancestors. Moreover, the cult of saints' relics is a Christian phenomenon and it is uncertain whether similar beliefs and practices were prevalent among non-Christians. It may therefore be inappropriate to apply this interpretation to post-burial interventions from areas where people had not yet converted. This is further problematized by the fact that it is often unclear to what extent the various regions in the research area had been Christianized in a particular period, and how conversion to Christianity manifested itself in the behavior of the professed adherents (Treffort 1996; Effros 2002).

The written sources

Somewhat separated from the archaeological debate, historians have been discussing various types of grave reopenings found in the written sources. This section will therefore briefly examine to what extent these sources and the historians' work are relevant to the archaeological debate about post-depositional interventions in graves.

There are a number of early medieval narrative and legal sources concerning various types of grave reopenings. Archaeologists studying reopened graves often refer to legal texts that forbid the violation of graves and the despoliation of corpses, and threaten the perpetrators with severe penalties. There are also a small number of historical accounts of illicit interference with graves that have traditionally been used as sources for the study of the supposed grave robbers' motives and methods (Krüger 1978; Nehlsen 1978; Lafferty 2014). Possibly the most cited of these sources is Gregory of Tours' account of Guntramn Boso's attempt to have his retainers rob the richly furnished grave of a female relative in a *basilica* in Metz (*Libri Historiarum* X 8, 21 (Thorpe 1974)). Monks witnessed the event and reported it to king Childebert II. Boso's servants, fearing punishment, returned the grave goods to the altar of the church, took shelter there and confessed that they had committed the theft on their master's orders. Childebert subsequently charged Boso with grave robbery. Boso fled, but was nevertheless apprehended and executed two years later. Many authors have taken this anecdote at face value (Krüger 1978: 173-174; Effros 2002: 56; Lafferty 2014: 268), but in my opinion it is problematic and invites a number of questions. Why would a wealthy and influential man like Guntramn Boso rob a grave? It seems unlikely that he needed its contents so much that he was prepared to risk his life for them. We should also ask why he would choose a

relative's grave for his pursuits. The dead woman had probably been part of his immediate social circle. Many people in his acquaintance had witnessed the funeral and knew what artefacts had been put into her grave, which presumably made it difficult for him to use or sell them. He would have had to conceal the items, or have them melted and reforged. This tale may therefore be a partial fiction on Gregory's part. It is also possible that Childebert or another political enemy persuaded Boso's servants to implicate their master in the offence. Effros (*38th International Congress on Medieval Studies*, 2003) has pointed out that Childebert and the church also had a vested interes because they profited from the returned grave goods.

Despite what is often assumed, it is not self-evident that the practices described in these sources are the same as the archaeologically attested grave reopenings from rural cemeteries (Van Haperen 2010: 18). The discrepancies are most obvious in the case of the narrative sources, which deal only with interventions in individual graves of the Merovingian religious and secular elite that were located in churches; no mention is made of the numerous reopenings of the graves of ordinary people in rural cemeteries.

The references to grave disturbance in early medieval law do not contain information on the context in which such forbidden activities were expected to take place. It is difficult to determine whether they pertain to the grave reopenings observed by archaeologists. Frankish law suggests that only specific types of grave reopenings were forbidden. The *Lex Salica* orders the robbers to pay a compensation fee for the time that the grave goods were in their possession (*Pactus Legis Salicae* XVI, 10 (Fisher Drew 1991: 80)). It does not specify the compensation's recipients, but such fees usually went to the crime victim's relatives, as in a similar passage in Visigothic law, which stipulates that goods stolen from a grave should be returned to the deceased's family (*Lex Visigothorum* II.2, I. See Nehlsen 1978: 126-129; Effros 2002: 49-52; Zintl 2012: 365). These passages suggest that the law applies only to grave reopenings that were carried out without the consent of the deceased's family. Considering the fact that it would probably have been quite difficult for the perpetrators to conduct such interventions in secret (Van Haperen 2010: 13), it seems likely that the deceased's relatives were often involved, in which case the proceedings would have been considered legal. Alternatively, the apparent contradiction between the laws and the archaeological data may also reflect a conflict between the laws' authors and parts of the rural population. Lafferty (2014: 257-271) has recently argued that the increased number of laws against grave robbery in the early medieval period was inspired by the rise in post-depositional interventions in graves, both for plain material gain and for the gathering of saints' relics. For the archaeological part of his paper he unfortunately relies almost exclusively on the work of Roth (1978) and does not benefit from any of the newer archaeological studies on reopened graves by Aspöck, Kümmel, Klevnäs, or myself. Nevertheless, there could very well have been a link between the actual grave reopening activity observed by archaeologists and the efforts of the early medieval lawmakers. By bringing grave reopenings into the criminal sphere, the authorities may have attempted to control these practices. They may also have wanted to protect their rights over certain cemeteries, which may over time have increased in importance as an element in strategies for defining social positions (Theuws Vrijthof publication, forthcoming). If so, the laws should be considered ideological documents that reflect the lawmakers' attempts to increase their power over their territory and over the people living there. It is uncertain to what extent they succeeded in influencing the behavior of the population. In any case, the frequency with which graves were disturbed during most of this period suggests that, if such activities were forbidden, the laws' prohibitions and threats of punishment were largely ineffectual.

Illegal violation is not the only type of post-depositional intervention in graves that is found in the early medieval written sources.

The majority of references to such practices actually occur in accounts of the collecting and moving of saints' relics (usually referred to as 'elevation' and 'translation'). Krüger (1978: 178-184) was the first author to link these distinct types of historical post-depositional interventions to archaeological reopened graves. He argued that the moving of saints' relics should be considered an exceptional category of grave reopenings, one that should not be confused with 'normal' cases of robbery, although they were probably similar in practice. Perhaps the translation of saints' relics should not be considered exceptional, since accounts of these practices occur in the narrative sources far more frequently than stories about actual grave robbery. Saints' relics were usually moved by authorized means of transfer such as gift or purchase, but they could also be taken by theft. Such transfers were motivated not by the relics' material value, but by a desire to benefit from their divine potency (Geary 1986: 174-189). When we compare the treatment of saints' graves with archaeologically attested grave reopenings, some noteworthy similarities come to our attention, which will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

It is also very tempting to involve accounts from the Old Norse sagas into the discussion about early medieval graves. The lively and capturing image of grave reopenings presented there is unique for the medieval period. However, their use is problematic for obvious reasons. Among other things, they were written down centuries after the period they are thought to deal with. Although many modern

tion heavily informed by ethnographic analogies. Since methodology is not value-free, such an attitude also influences me to view and select data in a way that promotes social and symbolic types of interpretations, rather than rational economic ones. In the present study, I will attempt to give all interpretations an equal hearing and minimize preconceived bias or personal preference. To this end I have opted for a scenario-based approach. An inventory will be made of all the interpretations that have been suggested on the basis of existing scholars are optimistic about the extent to which they can be used to reconstruct real early medieval sentiments and worldviews (Hedeager 2011; Pollington 2011; Gardeła 2013, 2016), their relevance and validity for regions outside Scandinavia is limited at best. Similarly, early medieval accounts of grave reopenings from Anglo-Saxon England (Blair 2009; Klevnäs 2016a) may provide interesting analogies for the present study, but are probably not appropriate for direct interpretation of finds from the Low Countries. These sources will all be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

1.2 Approach and research questions

The historiography shows that the interpretations of early medieval reopened graves vary considerably. The growing scholarly attention to the subject in recent years has not led to consensus, but rather to a significant increase in the variation of opinions. As demonstrated above, the choice for a particular interpretation usually seems to be based on assumptions that are not grounded in the archaeological data. Therefore, the individual researchers' preference for a specific hypothesis is probably largely determined by cultural and educational background and personal character. My personal background includes anti-authoritarian upbringing and education in cultural anthropology. It is easy to see how this would predispose me to a somewhat wayward interpreta-

archaeological and historical knowledge about reopened graves and early medieval society. Examples from other societies that have been studied ethnographically will also be taken into cosideration. This inventory will serve as a frame of reference for formulating research questions and choosing which data are to be gathered. This choice of methodology was partly inspired by Leskovar's plea (2005) for the incorporation of multiple narratives in our texts so they will more honestly reflect the ambiguous nature of archaeological interpreta-

tion. It should therefore be emphasized that this thesis will not be a positivist exercise in formulating hypotheses which should subsequently be corroborated or falsified. It is an attempt to explore the merits and weaknesses of all possible interpretations with regard to their potential to account for the variation in the dataset.

It is important to keep in mind that grave reopenings took place in many different regions and during multiple phases of the Merovingian period. As Carr (1995: 107) points out in his thought-provoking, though not unproblematic cross-cultural study of funerary behavior, the ways in which social processes, philosophical-religious beliefs, environmental circumstances and the intent of individuals influence and manifest themselves in mortuary practices are complex and multivariate. Kümmel's (2009: 214) analysis of the cross-cultural HRAF dataset does indeed show that in most societies where grave reopenings are practiced, multiple motivations and varying degrees of legitimacy are documented for the interventions. In early medieval society, where people were apparently very much accustomed to reopening graves, interventions could have been carried out for a multitude of different reasons, which varied across time, space and social context. Graves may even have been reopened for more than one reason. As a result, reconstructing the circumstances in which reopenings may have taken place is far from straightforward. The research requires a methodology that can accommodate all these possibilities.

The interpretative scenarios of the various authors discussed in the historiography center while the cemetery was still in use and were carried out by the burial community themselves (2009: 211-212). A situation where the participants did not have personal relations with the dead or the burial community could come about if the graves were reopened by people from another community or cultural/ethnic group. Such a 'community' could for instance have been a local coresident group or a descent or kin group. This category partially overlaps with Kümmel's (2009: 123) distinction between intra- and extra-ethnic interventions, except that within an ethnic or cultural group, people can still be strangers to one another and interfere with the others' graves. The perpetrators could for instance be professional grave robbers, warriors raiding the cemetery during a time of armed conflict (Müller 1976: 125; Kümmel 2009: 128), or aristocrats who emptied the cemetery of their relocated dependents (Steuer 2001: 285-286).

If the reopening took place a long time after

around a number of research questions which will be discussed below. This section contains an inventory of all the hypothetical answers to these questions that can be extracted from the literature or conceived of on the basis of existing knowledge about reopened graves and early medieval society, the historical sources and the ethnographic record. This inventory forms a base for formulating data-oriented research questions and shaping a methodology for gathering data from the cemeteries in the research area. The inventory will not take the form of a table like Kümmel's, which is targeted to an introductory cross-cultural catalogue of grave reopenings. This type of categorization is not sufficiently sensitive to the context specific circumstances expected in the present study. Rather I will employ a scenario based approach, as discussed above.

What were the social roles of and relations between the persons participating in grave reopenings (including the diggers, the deceased and possible onlookers)?

Discussions about the identity of the people participating in grave reopenings usually center on the question whether or not they belonged to the community that buried its dead in the cemetery. This is an important question, since it would have made considerable difference to the social context and meaning of reopenings if the participants knew the deceased and his or her family. In the HRAF societies studied by Kümmel, the majority of the post-depositional interventions took place

burial, the participants would usually not have known the deceased personally. This corresponds to Kümmel's distinction between interventions that are chronologically close (*zeitnah*) or far (*zeitfern*) from the funeral. As Kümmel rightly points out, in the case of very high status deceased, the memory of the dead person can last significantly longer than for less famous people (2009: 122-124). If the participants did know the burial community and/or the dead person, this relation could be of a positive or negative nature. Positive relations include relatives or descendants of the deceased (Van Haperen 2010: 24-27), ritual specialists such as Christian priests or non-Christian religious practitioners and dedicated servants or slaves (Huntington/Metcalf 1979: 83). Negative relations could pertain to enemies of the deceased, their family or the burial community (Klevnäs 2013: 83), or to people who feared the supernatural power of the dead person (Grünewald 1988: 42-43; Klevnäs 2016a: 194-200). To answer this research question about the identity of the participants, it will be important to know how much time passed between the burial and reopening and to look for indications that the diggers were familiar with the grave's layout. In addition, the references to various types of post-depositional interventions in early medieval written sources can be of assistance.

What were the participants' motives for having grave reopenings?

Economic gain by obtaining the grave contents

The most common hypothesis in the traditional literature is that graves were reopened for economic gain. These interpretations usually focus on the material value of the artefacts in the grave, primarily those made of silver, gold or gemstone and to a lesser extent bronze, iron and glass (Werner 1953; Roth 1978; Grunewald 1988; Steuer 1998). The fate of the bones found to be missing from reopened graves has received very little attention in the debate. However, Kümmel (2009: 199, 204, 206) points out that the physical remains of the deceased could also have been of economic interest, as they could be sold as saints' relics or magical or medicinal substances.

In Kümmel's classification, economic gain as a motivation for grave reopenings is found in the categories 5 and 6 (Ia5, Ia6, Ib5, Ib6, IIa5, IIa6, IIb5, IIb6), which are represented in 15 of the 60 societies from the HRAF Probability Sample (Kümmel 2009: 209-225). When ethnographic or historical sources report the removal of objects without explicit mention of the motivation for these activities, Kümmel has a tendency to assign these cases to economic/neutral categories, even though other motivations could have been equally relevant. The reuse and secondary use of graves is also included as an economic motive, so careful reading is required to find the cases where there is actual economic gain from the removal of objects. Many of the historically documented grave reopenings discussed by Kümmel were apparently also motivated by economic gain. The prime example of this type of practice is found in Egypt, where written sources from the period of the New Kingdom recount the existence of professional grave robbers, who earned a living by illegally opening graves to convert the contents into merchandize (Kümmel 2009, 190-194).

The fact that reopened Merovingian graves often contain a considerable amount of objects has been a particular matter of concern among the adherents of the economic hypothesis. If the diggers went through the trouble of exposing the graves' contents, why did they not take everything? It is often assumed that grave reopenings were illegal and therefore the diggers had to work fast and in the secrecy of night, so limited visibility caused objects to be left behind unnoticed (Fremersdorf 1955: 29; Roth 1977: 289). It has also been argued that certain types of objects were taboo and therefore could not be taken from the grave (Koch 1974; Roth 1978: 67-71).

However, the removal of objects for economic reasons need not have been an illegal practice. Aspöck (2005: 264; 2011: 312-313) has argued for the cemetery of Brunn am Gebirge that the grave goods may have had a transient

function as conspicuous display during the funeral, so it was acceptable to remove them at a later time. Kars (2011: 42-44, 65-66, 82) has suggested that the deposition of objects as grave goods may have been a means of dealing with inalienable family property when the person who had kept the object, the 'temporary caretaker', died before an opportunity arose to pass it on to an heir. If this interpretation is correct, it may have been possible for the family to retrieve some of the grave's contents at a later time, for instance when an appropriate heir had come of age to assume responsibility for keeping the objects. Kümmel mentions that among the Chippewa, it is generally accepted to open the grave to add new objects and remove old ones (2009: 327). The Tobriand Islanders remove the deceased's jewelry when bodies are exhumed for reburial (Kümmel 2009: 219).

When considering economic gain as a motive for post-depositional interventions, it is important to take into account the state of the potentially valuable materials that were taken from the grave. Depending on the soil conditions, glass beads, gemstones and gold may emerge in pristine condition. Materials prone to corrosion, such as iron, bronze and silver would certainly be affected by the conditions in the grave, especially if they were exposed to the liquids released by the decomposing corpse (Gillard et al. 1994; Klevnäs 2013: 46). In order to derive economic benefit from these materials, the participants would have needed to employ the expertise and equipment of a smith (Grünewald 1988: 40).

Use of objects and bones from graves for magical, medical and symbolic purposes

The removal of objects (grave goods or human remains) from graves need not have been motivated by economic gain. The objects may have been coveted because of their perceived magical or medicinal potency in addition to, or instead of their material value. Kümmel places this type of motivation in his subtypes 1 and 2 (IIa1, IIa2, IIb1, IIb2, IIa1, IIa2, IIb1, IIb2), which also includes ancestor cult and relic worship (Kümmel 2009: 128). I prefer to separate the two, since in ancestor and relic cult, the artefacts and bones are worshipped because they provide a connection to an invisible powerful entity, and are part of a religious world-view. On the other hand, objects employed for magical or medical purposes are used because they themselves are believed to hold a certain potency that is not necessarily related to an external entity. Undeniably though, the dividing line between magic or medicine and religious practice is fuzzy at best. Saint's relics for instance, were frequently used for the treatment of ailments in ways that cannot always be distinguished from non-religious medicinal practices (Flint 1991: 5-6; Kieckhefer 1994). Flint (1991: 215-216, 228-231) discusses several mentions of magic using human bone in the written sources. Several early medieval law codes contain strictures against necromancy, including the use of human bone for magical ends. Visigothic law distinguishes between grave robbery for personal enrichment and grave reopenings performed with magical ends (*Lex Visigothorum* II.2, I.). Magical acts are also frequently described as taking place on or near a grave. Thompson (2004: 94-96) discusses references to corpse-divination in the Anglo-Saxon law codes and charms relating to pregnancy and birth that involve graves. In one charm the grave is stepped over, in another charm soil is taken from a child's burial.

Preventing negative influence from the dead on the living

Some scholars have argued that grave reopenings were aimed at neutralizing the alleged negative influence of the dead. An example of this type of interpretation can be found in Grünewald's (1988: 42-43) discussion of reopened graves in the cemetery of Unterthürheim. He argues that while the materialistic motivations of grave disturbance are evident from the fact that the participants removed valuable artefacts from the grave, these practices also had an ideological component. Certain items buried with the dead, such as fibulae and decorated belts, may have functioned as amulets. When buried with a dead person,

they could create a *lebende Leichnam* (living corpse), which was a potential threat to the living. Disturbing and removing part of the deceased's remains and grave goods would then be a way of undoing these powers and rendering the dead agent harmless (also see Knaut 1993: 37; Aspöck 2005: 262; Klevnäs 2013: 77-80, 2016: 194-200).

This type of motivation for reopening graves corresponds to Kümmel's (2009: 128) 'negative' subtypes 3 and 4 (Ia3, Ia4, IIa3, IIa4 and to a lesser extent Ib3, Ib4, IIb3, IIb4). Kümmel discusses the historiography of this interpretation in detail and states that the concepts of *Totenfurcht* (fear of the dead) and the *lebende Leichnam* or *Wiedergänger* (one who walks again) first appeared in the German archaeological discourse during the first half of the twentieth century. These notions developed from the theory that before the introduction of the Christian concept of the soul, people in proto-historic Europe believed that the dead continued to exist in corporeal form and had the same needs and legal rights as living corporeal subjects. In various scholarly disciplines, the term '*lebende Leichnam*' came to be used for diverse types of corporeal manifestations of the dead. In archaeology, it signified a dead person physically subsisting in the grave, inhabiting it as a home. Researchers deduced that the elaborate furnishings found in some graves would have accommodated the physical needs of the 'living' dead person. Scholars reasoned that the combined belief in living corpses and the fear of the dead would have led people to try and protect themselves from the dead persons' negative influence. Many archaeologists still habitually refer to the fear of living corpses to account for various deviant mortuary practices, despite general consensus in the theoretical discourse that there is no basis for assuming a universal fear of the living dead among pre-Christian societies (Kümmel 2009: 45-50). Separate from the German debate, somewhat similar ideas about revenant deceased also developed among Anglo-Saxon scholars (Klevnäs 2016a). These ideas are relatively well grounded in historical scholarship as some evidence for such fears can for instance be found in written sources from medieval England and in the Old Norse sagas (Beck 1978; Gardeła 2013: 100-107; Klevnäs 2013: 80-81). As mentioned above, the extent to which these sources can be used for research into the early medieval period outside England and Scandinavia is questionable, but even in the least favorable view, they can nevertheless serve as historical analogies. Archaeological evidence for measures against revenants in reopened graves could for instance take the form of intentional displacement of the skull or other bones, fixation of the corpse or skeleton in the grave with stones, ropes or nails, and excessive damage to the grave's contents (Klevnäs 2013: 77-79, 2016: 194-197).

There are also various mentions of interventions aimed to neutralize dangerous dead persons in the ethnographic record. The Taiwanese Hokkien habitually change the location of buried ancestors to change their influence on the living (Kümmel 2009: 337). In the Philippines, graves are sometimes opened to adjust the furnishings of a deceased ancestor if it is believed they are causing illness among the living because they are uncomfortable in the grave (verbal communication by Titia Schippers who did ethnographic fieldwork in this region).

Graves desecrated by hostile groups to take revenge or injure the socio-political standing of the burial community

Klevnäs (2013: 83) proposed that the grave reopenings in her research area were performed by enemies of the deceased's family, who aimed to deprive the dead of symbolically significant objects. Depending on the perceived function of the grave, this destructive method of reopenings could have served to damage the prestige generated by the grave furnishings and destroy the dead ancestor's supernatural ability to protect living descendants. These activities would have aimed at injuring the social standing and political power of the deceased's family. Revenge on the burial community may have been an additional motivation. Such destructive post-depositional interventions could perhaps have

occurred during feuds between families or in times of war. Grave reopenings conducted by war bands have for instance been suggested by Müller (1976: 125) and Pauli (1981: 475). Hostile intentions on the part of the diggers could have manifested themselves in a markedly disrespectful treatment of the grave and its contents. However, as discussed above, it is difficult to estimate whether particular behaviors would always have been considered disrespectful by early medieval burial communities (Weiss-Kreici 2001, 2005; Duncan 2005; Gardeła 2013: 107-108). In Kümmel's classification, this type of motivation falls in the 'negative' subcategories 3 and 4 (Ia3, Ia4, IIa3, IIa4 and in less likely cases Ib3, Ib4, IIb3, IIb4), that also include the precautions against revenants discussed above. Such motivations are relatively rare in his cross-cultural dataset (Kümmel 2009: 128, 212-213).

Marking discontinuity of the deceased's relations

Theuws has suggested that grave reopenings could have been a means of marking the discontinuity of decent lines or affinal relations (Theuws forthcoming). If the marriage ties between two families were terminated, the graves of the persons who had previously embodied these relations would have been disturbed or emptied. The same could have happened to the graves of ancestors who's lines of decent were no longer productive or who had founded settlements that ceased to prosper. When studying a cemetery, it could therefore be worthwhile to see whether reopened graves are found in small grave groups with a short life span, or in larger groups with a longer period of use. It seems no similar motivations or activities were recorded in Kümmel's cross-cultural dataset.

Collecting relics of the dead

As I suggested previously (Van Haperen 2010: 22-27), grave reopenings could have been a means of obtaining relics of ancestors, similar to the way people would gather saints' relics from the tombs of holy persons. The remains taken from reopened graves may have been treated as relics in the traditional sense of the word, being enshrined in special vessels that people kept in the house or in small portable containers that could be worn on the body. Effros (2002: 158-160) has suggested various types of objects found in Merovingian graves may possibly have served as relic containers. Caring for the relics of ancestors in this way could have been a means of ensuring their good will, obliging them to reciprocate by ensuring the prosperity of their descendants. The remains taken from the grave would have allowed the ancestors to be physically present among their living descendants, and participate in the activities that took place there. In Kümmel's cross-cultural dataset ancestor veneration and the removal of relics are among the most common motives for grave reopenings. They are classified as subtype 1 (legitimate) or 2 (illegitimate). The removal of relics often occurs in combination with the performance of second funeral and reburial of the remains (Kümmel 2009: 214-217). Alternatively, if graves were reopened a long time after burial, the interventions could have been a means of appropriating ancestors and asserting descent from the deceased. Such practices could have been part of strategies to claim land or substantiate political power (Van Haperen 2010: 24-26). The remains could also have been incorporated into utensils and other newly made objects, which subsequently carried the ancestor's presence, as is for instance suggested by Gansum (2004), who thinks that human bone from Iron Age Scandinavian graves could have been converted to coal and used to temper iron for sword-making. This interpretation is somewhat problematic for the Merovingian area, since there is only limited evidence for ancestor beliefs in North-West Europe.

Conducting a second funeral

In numerous societies, grave reopenings are an essential, even mandatory, part of the mortuary practices. In these cases, the burial community often celebrates an entire second funeral, which may be even more elaborate and costly than the festivities that accompanied the

initial burial. The first anthropologist to discuss these practices in detail was Herz, who argued that the treatment of the deceased's body reflected beliefs about the soul. He showed that people who perform grave reopenings and second funerals usually perceive the transformation or passage of the dead as a slow and gradual process or spiritual journey (Herz 1960). This theory was later taken up and elaborated on by other scholars (Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Bloch 1988). Between the moment of burial and the reopening of the grave the dead person is believed to be in a transitory state, no longer alive but also not yet 'properly' dead. After the corpse has decomposed and only dry bones remain, the remains need to be retrieved from the grave and taken through a final ceremony before the deceased can become a beneficial ancestor and enter the realm of the dead. By manipulating the remains of the dead, the living can influence the state of the ancestor's spiritual being.

Grave reopenings motivated by a desire to aid the soul or non-corporeal presence of the deceased in its transformation are categorized in Kümmel's subtypes Ia1 and Ia2. Prolonged mortuary practices of this type were the most frequently found motivation for post-depositional interventions in his cross-cultural dataset (Kümmel 2009: 216). However, the question remains whether this type of motivation was also prevalent in the Early Middle Ages, and if it was, how it manifested itself. Evidence for true reburials of human remains are rare, but it is possible that the standard grave reopenings found in many cemeteries also had connotations of consecutive funerary rites. If early medieval people did indeed see death as a transformative process, this transformation could have been observed in and confirmed by the physical changes of the materials in the grave, including the deceased's body, the wooden coffin, textile clothes and shrouds and grave goods partially or entirely made of organic materials (Van Haperen 2010: 20-21).

Grave reopenings often serve important social functions, independent of whether the people performing them have beliefs about the soul that demand redeposition of the remains of the dead. Contrary to the funeral that usually has to be performed within a few days after death, post-depositional interventions can be planned long in advance, allowing people who live far away to be invited and attend the event. Ethnographically documented second funerals are often celebrated far more elaborately and are attended by a larger audience than the ceremonies performed immediately after death (Huntington & Metcalf 1979). Also, the time that passes between the burial and the reopening could have allowed the dead person's family to save up resources, make the necessary exchanges and prepare a more elaborate feast than what could be afforded during the first funeral. Miles (1965) has documented this type of procedure among the Ngadyu-Dayak of Borneo.

Grave reopenings may have served to bring together the members of the deceased's kin and descent groups, including those who lived in distant places. Authors writing on the archaeology of personhood have shown that such gatherings were often demonstrations of fractal personhood, where all levels or dimensions of a society's concept of the person are visible simultaneously (Fowler 2004: 48-51, 68). The body of the deceased, revealed in the reopened grave could have been perceived to represent the whole kin group. If the reopening involved the redistribution of some of the materials from the grave among the participants, this could in fact have been viewed as a distribution of the power of the joined kin group to each individual member or subgroup/nuclear family (Van Haperen 2013).

Moving the deceased's remains to a location near their living relations

From the Carolingian and Ottonian period onwards, there are documented cases of graves of elite persons that were reopened in order to move the deceased to another burial location. These incidents occur for instance if a person dies far away from home. The body is buried in a temporary grave and retrieved when it has skeletonized and therefore easier to transport.

In some cases, relocation of the body, or part of it, was also a means of settling disputes over the correct place of burial (Weiss-Krejcí 2005).
Grave reopenings aiming to move buried human remains to another location (German: *Umbettung*) were also found in the HRAF dataset. They fall into Kümmel's subtypes Ia1, Ia2, IIa1 and IIa2. The exact motivations for the relocation of the deceased in the dataset vary. The Khasi repatriate dead community members who died and were buried away from home. The Iroquois (German: *Irokesen*) and Azande will dig up the remains of their dead relatives when they move to a new settlement. The Aschanti regularly move the bones of their kings to keep them safe from grave robbers (Kümmel 2009: 214-217, 327-335). In the Philippines, people will sometimes attempt to solve landownership disputes by taking the remains of dead forbears from their graves and reburying them at the boundaries of the contested area (Personal communication from Titia Schippers). All motives for relocating a burial that are listed above could be relevant for the early medieval period. In addition, it has been suggested that Merovingian cemeteries were used in complementary ways, which meant that a single family or burial community could choose to distribute its dead over various types of cemeteries that may have been shared by multiple communities or families. The choice to bury a person in a particular cemetery was inspired by a combination of custom and social strategy (Theuws 1999: 345-346; Panhuysen 2005: 282-283). This complementarity of cemeteries need not have been limited to burials of newly deceased persons, but could also have involved human remains taken from reopened graves (Theuws 1999: 347; Van Haperen 2010: 25-26).

Retroactive Christianization

Grave reopenings could have been a means of 'retroactive Christianization'. The concept of retroactive Christianization was first developed by Geary to account for eighth-century churches that were built on top of the richly furnished graves of fifth-century (and therefore probably pagan) dead, who were thereby made into Christians (Geary 1994: 36-39). In the case of grave reopenings, retroactive Christianization could perhaps be achieved by the deposition of Christian symbols such as gold-foil crosses or coins with a cross motif in the grave (Van Haperen 2010: 26). Alternatively the remains of the dead could be taken from the grave and transferred to a church or churchyard (Theuws 1999: 346-347). Theuws labels this phenomenon 'posthumous Christianization', but since Geary previously described similar practices under the heading 'retroactive Christianization', I have chosen retain his designation.

Adding materials to the grave

Graves may have been reopened in order to place additional items into them. The most obvious example is the burial of an entire second corpse in an existing grave. However, artefacts and disarticulated human or animal bones could also have been added to the graves' fill during reopenings. In a grave from the Merovingian cemetery of Pleidelsheim, Koch (1991: 215) noted a coin that may have been deposited when the grave was reopened, since it post-dated the remainder of the grave furniture by a century. In the cemeteries of Deersheim and Eching-Viecht, animal remains and stone piles had been included in the fill of some reopening pits (Schneider 1983: 126-127; Dannhorn 1994: 299). Such items may have been placed in the grave for the benefit of the deceased. Alternatively, residence in the grave may have endowed the objects with symbolism or supernatural potency. Adding materials to graves as a reason for grave reopenings is not explicitly mentioned in Kümmel's classification even though there is at least one example of such practices in the HRAF dataset. Among the Chippewa, it is generally accepted to open the grave to add new objects and remove old ones (Kümmel 2009: 327). Depending on whether such activities had a 'positive' or 'negative' motivation, such actions would fit in Kümmel's types 1 and 2 or 3 and 4.

Reopening the grave to prepare it for a new occupant

Graves could be reopened to deposit another corpse in them.[1] Kümmel classifies such motivations in his 'economic/neutral' subtypes Ia5 and IIa5 (Kümmel 2009: 128). If a grave was reopened for a second burial, the remains of the original occupant could be left intact, moved aside, or removed from the grave altogether. Graves could also be partially reopened when they are cut by another newly dug grave. The course of action taken in these cases would depend on the intentions of the participants. If they wanted the new dead person to be associated with the older corpse, as for instance in a family tomb, they would probably leave the original deposit intact or move it aside, to make room for the new body. If their main aim was to provide the new corpse with a prestigious burial location or grave container (such as a sarcophagus), they were probably more likely to remove the remains of the previous burial entirely.

What was the socio-cultural context of the interventions?

The study of the socio-cultural context of interventions is closely related to the enquiry into the motives of the participants that was discussed above. For instance, if the diggers primarily removed metal artefacts, this would indicate an entirely different context than if they mostly intended to manipulate the grave construction or the remains of the deceased. The identity of the participants is of equal importance, since interventions committed by the deceased's kin would have had a different context than those performed by outsiders. This research question is therefore the most speculative of all, since it builds on previous speculations about the identity of the perpetrators and their motives.

In the older literature, the discussion on the socio-cultural context of grave reopenings usually centered on the question whether the interventions were legally or socially sanctioned (Redlich 1948; Nehlsen 1978). This question cannot be answered by a simple yes or no, since within a society there can be different opinions on what is unlawful behavior. As was also mentioned in the section on historical sources, the elite may find certain practices unacceptable and criminal, notwithstanding the fact that (or even because) they are common practice among other classes. In addition, a practice may be acceptable when performed by particular people in a specified social context, while it is perceived as reprehensible when it occurs in another context with other participants. It may be more appropriate to investigate the total social frame or context in which post-depositional interventions took place. Traditionally, it is often assumed that the reopenings were carried out in the dead of night, by a small number of partners in crime, working as fast as they could, constantly afraid of getting caught. However, the reopening of a grave could also have been a joyous occasion, even more elaborate than the funeral and attended by all but the most distant relatives of the deceased, celebrating the birth of a new ancestor.

On a more general level, we might ask what were the circumstances that led to the rise in grave reopenings in the early medieval period. Steuer (2001: 285-286) suggests that seventh-century aristocratic landlords may have been responsible for the possible increase in grave disturbances in this period. They expanded their control over rural areas and forced the people who lived there to move to new settlements. From their new locations, they could no longer protect the old cemeteries, which subsequently lay open to exploitation by the

[1] This practice is very common in modern Dutch cemeteries. Once the family stops paying rent for the grave, the remains of the deceased are removed to a communal deposit. In heavily populated areas like the city of Amsterdam, inhumation graves are only temporary memorials that usually exist for no more than the minimum renting period of ten years after the funeral (information given by the director of the Oosterbegraafplaats and personal communications from people whose deceased loved ones were buried in this cemetery).

landlords and their dependents. It has also been claimed that grave disturbance was committed by families who could not afford continually to bury their dead with valuable grave goods, and therefore began 'recycling' artefacts from older graves (Steuer 1998: 520). Some authors proposed that economic strain was brought on by a general shortage of precious metals resulting from the collapse of the Roman trade networks and the increasing tendency of the early medieval Church and aristocracy to control the distribution of these materials. The decreased availability of precious metals would have brought on the rise of grave reopenings often observed in cemeteries from this period (Werner 1953: 7; Pauli 1981: 473-474). However, the existence of such a shortage has not been proven (Roth 1978: 67; Steuer 1998: 520). Klevnäs (2013: 83-90) links the rise of grave reopenings in Anglo-Saxon England to early state formation and the resulting conflicts between socio-political factions, which she argues manifested themselves in violence on the graves of enemy groups.

Several authors have argued for a progressive devaluation of the symbolic or religious significance of the grave good custom in the seventh century. This development eventually resulted in a change of perception that made it unnecessary for these artefacts to remain in the grave indefinitely. A number of reasons for this supposed devaluation have been put forward. Redlich (1948: 77) maintained that it was caused by seventh-century changes in inheritance law, which no longer required the deceased's property to be buried in the grave. There is little evidence, however, that such a law existed. Moreover, this hypothesis makes the unjustified assumption that all grave goods were former possessions of the deceased (Effros 2003: 76-79).

Roth and Koch have argued that the devaluation resulted from the expansion of Christianity, because the 'pagan' custom of grave good deposition lost its function when people accepted Christian concepts of the afterlife in which the dead did not require material things (Roth 1977: 290; Koch 1996: 737). Effros protests that the grave good custom was not unequivocally related to pagan beliefs about the afterlife and was also practiced by Christians, as is attested by, for instance, richly furnished burials in churches (Effros 2002: 47, 61; 2003: 86-88; see also Steuer 1998: 519). Instead she relates the decreasing importance of the grave good custom to a changing focus in the commemoration of the dead from temporary conspicuous consumption to more permanent display in the form of funerary monuments and masses performed for the dead. The change of focus away from grave goods would have made it more acceptable to remove objects from old burials, thus bringing on an increase in grave reopenings (Effros 2002: 57; 2006 : 219).

It seems likely that the rise in post-burial interventions was indeed related to large scale changes in religion (Paxton 1990; Treffort 1996), mortuary behavior (Effros 2002; 2003) and the social order (Theuws 1999), although the processes involved may have been much more complex than what has been proposed in the literature up to this point. As already stated, since very little is said about reopened graves in the written sources that are our main point of access for studying these developments, it is difficult to formulate and study hypotheses surrounding this theme.

A related issue that has also received little attention in the literature is the ways in which objects (including bones) taken from graves were used after the intervention. Sometimes they may have been redeposited in other graves, in other cases they could have had uses similar to those before burial or have been reworked into new objects. In all these cases, the fact that the objects had been buried in a grave may have had consequences for the contexts in which they could be used. Either because they were perceived as relics associated with the deceased (as argued in Van Haperen 2010: 22-24) or because they could not be displayed in public because that would expose the people who used them as 'grave robbers' (Grünewald 1988: 40). Apart from these 'practical' uses, the objects could also have become center pieces of ritual activities and/or

magic practices.[2] Lastly, they could also simply have been discarded or destroyed. Interestingly, this option is often brought forward when talking about skeletal remains missing from graves, but almost never suggested when there is evidence for removal of artefacts.
To gain insight into the socio-cultural context of post-burial interventions, we will have to track their chronological development, chart local and regional variations of prevalence within the research area and compare it with other areas. The distribution in time and space can then be correlated to our knowledge of the socio-cultural developments. Comparisons between the cemeteries can yield insights into the intra-regional and local variation in grave reopening practices, which most likely correlates closely to local and regional socio-cultural processes. The percentages of graves with interventions can for instance be an indication of whether the interventions were an ordinary or rather exceptional practice. If a large number of graves were reopened while the cemetery was still in use, this could indicate that post-depositional interventions were socially acceptable. However, this does not imply that a smaller percentage of reopened graves cannot be taken as evidence that the interventions were a violation of law or custom. They may simply result from rare or exceptional circumstances.

Practical research questions
Based on the discussion above I formulated these practical research questions to guide me through the next chapters, from the methodology to the gathering of data and finally the interpretation of the results.

1. *How much time passed between burial and post-burial interventions (relative date)?*
2. *When did the interventions take place (absolute date)?*
3. *Are there indications that the diggers were familiar with the grave's layout?*
4. *How was the grave treated after the intervention (examine intervention pit's fill)?*
5. *Did the diggers target specific sections of the grave?*
6. *Did the diggers target specific types of graves (grave construction, gender etc.)?*
7. *Did the diggers target specific object types and skeletal remains? Is there evidence for a taboo on the removal of certain objects?*
8. *Is there evidence for purposeful fragmentation of grave goods, grave constructions or bones?*
9. *Is there evidence for the reuse of objects taken from reopened graves, such as deposition in other graves, settlement finds, references in written sources (necromancy, saints relics etc.)?*
10. *What is the relation between reopened graves and other consecutive mortuary practices, such as intercuts and periodical mortuary feasting?*
11. *Which complete objects remained in reopened graves?*
12. *What is the inter- and intraregional variation in reopening practices?*

[2] See Brück (1999) for some thoughts about the theoretical distinction between ritual and practical activities.