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

Haperen, M.C. van

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Author: Haperen, M.C. van

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4. Interpretation

4.1 The basics

At the start of this PhD research, I asked myself these three questions:

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

2. What were the participants' motives for having grave reopenings?

3. What was the wider socio-cultural context of the interventions?

I would very much like to have a time machine and be able to travel back to the early medieval Low Countries to do ethnographic participating observation on the Merovingian cemeteries and see what the burial practice was actually like and ask the people about their perceptions of grave reopenings. Or maybe I wouldn't like to do that at all, because my modern cultural background means I am quite estranged from the dead and would be disgusted by the life and mortuary practices of early medieval people. In any case, such a time machine does not exist, so as ethnographers of the past we will have to make do with interpretations of the archaeological material discussed in the previous chapters and additional information from early medieval written sources.

The reasons for reopening graves may have been multiple and complex. In this chapter, I will delve into a few of the possible interpretations. Some of these may be true for at least some of the grave reopening cases. They may have overlapped or excluded one another. We will investigate and explore the possibilities. What follows will be an interpretive adventure. It will be grounded in the data as much as possible, but to some extent, it will also be a construct of imagination, as archaeological

interpretations usually are. First, I will give a short summary of the data and show how it ties in with the various possible interpretations, working from the themes addressed in the research questions: the identity of the diggers, the identity of the deceased, the participant's motives and the wider socio-cultural context. Then, I will select a few promising interpretations to elaborate on and explore in detail. The interpretations in this chapter are mostly oriented towards the material from the Low Countries, but since the grave reopenings in other areas of early medieval North-West Europe such as Anglo-Saxon Kent and German Bavaria are so similar, they may to some extent also apply there.

The identity of the diggers

From the early beginnings of the research into reopened graves, the grave reopeners' identities and social positions have been an important theme. It is also one of the more elusive aspects, as they did not leave any form of calling cards for us curious archaeologists to find. Fortunately, there are indications in the treatment of the graves that allow us to exclude a few possibilities.

All the sites in the research area held at least a few reopened graves, with an average of 41% reopened graves per cemetery. Similar numbers were found in the adjacent German Rhineland (Siegmund 1998: 237-238) and Bavaria (Zintl 2012: 306). The percentages found in Kent were lower, but still substantial with an average of 21% at the more heavily affected sites (Klevnäs 2013: 35). The fact that almost half of the Merovingian graves in the Low Countries were reopened, indicates that this was not an anomalous or exceptional practice. There is quite a lot of variation in the numbers of reopened graves between the cemeteries. In addition to changes in grave reopening customs over time, the variations in reopening percentages between cemeteries may be due to local preferences and manifestations of agency on the part of the participants, which are not evident from the archaeological material. Some of the reopenings took place inside or very close to settlements (Dommelen,

Oegstgeest, Wijchen, Lent-Lentseveld, Solleveld) and the burial communities usually do not seem to have taken any measures to protect graves from being reopened, such as covering them with a mound or a layer of stones. Reopenings may therefore have been a socially accepted practice that could very well have been carried out by members of the burial communities themselves. In any case proximity to a settlement, which would increase the chances of getting caught, does not seem to have been a deterrent for the grave reopeners. Another factor that is important for both the identities of the diggers and that of the deceased is the time that passed between the burial and reopening. In the Low Countries, approximately half of the reopenings seem to have taken place at a time when the wooden container was still intact. The other half was reopened after the container had collapsed and filled up with soil. According to Aspöck's scale (2005: 251-252; 2011: 302-306), this corresponds to half the graves being reopened within approximately one generation after burial and the other half being reopened more than a generation after the burial. In one case (Lent grave 16) it could even be demonstrated that the reopening was carried out while the body had not yet fully decomposed. As discussed in the previous chapter, such early reopenings have also been identified in other Merovingian cemeteries in North-West Europe, although they seem to have been comparatively rare. There may also have been more cases like this in the Netherlands and Belgian Flanders, but the lack of preserved skeletal remains prohibits us from detecting them. If the reopening took place within a few decades after burial, the diggers could probably still remember the deceased and the way he or she was buried, especially if they were part of the deceased's community or had attended the funeral in another capacity. On the other hand, if the reopening took place more than a generation after the funeral, it is less likely that the diggers had an active memory of the deceased and the way they were buried.

The identity of the deceased

Who were the people whose graves were reopened? Did the diggers simply open graves at random, or did they target particular types of graves and people? In all four cemeteries that were large enough to allow statistical analysis, graves with men's objects had significantly higher reopening percentages than graves with women's objects. The lowest reopening percentages were found in graves with neutral, non-gendered grave goods. Unfortunately, it was usually not possible to check whether graves with typical men's or women's grave goods actually contained the remains of biological men or women. This is problematic (Effros 2000; 2006: 212-214), but cannot be remedied due to the lack of skeletal material. The best we can do is assume that graves with weapons usually contained the remains of persons gendered as men (regardless of their biological sex) or at least meant to express aspects of male identity, while graves containing jewelry contained persons gendered as women, or at least meant to express aspects of female identity. Graves in which only 'neutral' objects were found, could have contained persons gendered as male, female or one or more additional genders, such as children who had not reached the age when they were identified as men or women. In any case, the diggers seem to have purposely targeted graves with gendered objects over graves with non-gendered objects and graves with typical men's objects over graves with women's objects. It seems that the graves of children, especially those of adolescents, were opened relatively infrequently, but they were not completely shunned by the reopeners. It is important to keep in mind that the selection of these graves does not necessarily indicate foreknowledge on the part of the diggers. They may have been able to identify men's, women's and children's graves with the help of grave markers or differences in the size of the graves' surface features. Even though almost no traces of grave markers were found in the research area, it seems likely that the burials were marked given the relatively low numbers of intercuts between graves, the ability of the diggers to select

graves with gender specific objects, and the precision with which reopening pits were dug. If the graves were indeed marked with detailed identifying features, the diggers may have been able to locate the graves of specific persons even if their foreknowledge was limited. Given the relatively low average numbers of grave goods found in intact graves compared to reopened graves, it seems likely that the diggers preferred to reopen more elaborately furnished graves over less well furnished ones. They may also have targeted graves with specific types of grave good sets, mainly weapons and jewelry. Simultaneously, the high numbers of objects found in reopened graves indicate that the diggers were not very systematic in collecting all the grave goods, which will be discussed in detail below. However, the differences in the average numbers of grave goods between intact and reopened graves are probably at least partially due to parallel changes in reopening frequency and the quantities of grave goods deposited over time. The diggers also seem to have preferred to reopen larger graves, which were usually more elaborately furnished, over smaller less well furnished ones. However, it is unclear whether the differences in size between the reopened and intact graves are a result of conscious choices on the part of the diggers or whether they are caused by parallel changes in reopening frequency and preferred grave pit and coffin size throughout the cemeteries' use periods. Nevertheless, the diggers may have had a preference for larger graves, which they may have been able to identify with the help of surface markers.

There is a lot of debate about the extent to which elements such as particular grave furnishings and a large or elaborately built grave can be used as indications of the ever-elusive 'identity' of deceased. I am hesitant to make elaborate interpretations in this respect. As will be discussed below, the reasons why an early medieval people were buried in particular ways could have had many different reasons, not all of which were probably related to their personal identity. The only thing we can say with some amount of certainty is that some de-

ceased were apparently seen as worthy or suitable to be buried in more materialistically elaborate ways than others. When it was time to select graves for reopenings, these elaborate graves and possibly the deceased buried in them seem to have been the most eligible. Gender also seems to have been an important factor for selecting particular graves. Ostensibly gendered graves were preferred over more neutrally furnished burials, and the diggers selected graves with typical men's objects over those containing typical women's objects.

The grave reopeners' motivations

The practice of reopening a grave

Some authors writing about reopened graves make observations about whether or not the affected graves were treated 'with respect' (Adler 1970: 138-147; Neugebauer 1991: 115; Codreanu-Windauer 1997: 28-34; Klevnäs 2013: 83-90). In the Low Countries there are a number of cases where the diggers caused seemingly disproportionate disturbances of a grave's contents. For instance in the Lent cemetery, most of the graves were probably reopened while there was still an open space inside the wooden container, so it would have been relatively easy for the diggers to select any items they may have wanted without disturbing the skeleton. The fact that the bones had nonetheless been rummaged substantially, suggests that the disturbances may have been deliberate. These marked disturbances are especially interesting since the graves in question still contained many grave goods, so it seems that few objects were removed during the reopenings. Some authors would argue that this was evidence of a disrespectful attitude on the part of the diggers. This is problematic because we do not know what constituted a respectful treatment of graves in the Merovingian period. Behaviors that appear disturbing or violent to us could have been both respectful or disrespectful depending on the intentions of the participants and the context in which they took place (Duncan 2005; Weiss-Krejci 2001: 775-778; Zintl 2012: 388; Gardela 2013: 107-108).

The experiences of the diggers as they dug down into the graves that were in varying states of decomposition are difficult to imagine. We have seen above that about half of the graves were reopened while the wooden containers were intact, and some even while the corpses were still partially articulated. In our society, only professional grave diggers are exposed to the sights, smells and sensations that accompany the reopening of such graves, and their experiences are far less sterile than that of an archaeological cemetery excavation, where most organic materials have usually been reduced to dust and only dry bones and metals remain. Most modern western people - including myself - are conditioned to feel that such experiences would be quite horrifying and should be avoided at all cost, especially where the graves of family and community members are concerned. Cross-culturally however, there is no evidence that this sentiment is universal (Huntington & Metcalf 1978; Bloch & Parry 1982; Kümmel 2009). In fact, even in modern Dutch society it has become customary for professional grave diggers to open and empty graves as soon as the rent for the spot is no longer paid, with a minimum period of only ten years. We will have to keep an open mind and not make assumptions about how early medieval grave reopeners felt when they dug their way into a burial (also see Tarlow 2000: 718-719).

Apart from a few exceptions, the graves in the research area were all opened in quite similar ways. The diggers made a pit, usually starting somewhere on top of the wooden container, and dug their way down into the grave. If the container was still intact, they would have needed to break into it or dig around it in order to remove its lid. In nearly all cases the reopening pits seem to have been dug directly over the area containing the coffin, indicating that the diggers probably knew the graves' locations and could estimate their general layout, probably because the graves were marked above ground or perhaps because they used probing tools. The reopening pits were often wider in the upper levels of the graves, becoming more narrow and focusing on a

specific area as they went down. There were no significant differences between the ways men's and women's graves were reopened. Most reopening pits reached down to the graves' bottoms, but there were a few cases of shallow pits that were limited to the grave fill's upper levels. Similar features were found by Zintl (2012: 337-338) in German Bavaria. Most graves seem to have been reopened only once with a single pit, but there are a few exceptions where multiple pits were documented. It was often unclear whether invention pits were backfilled after reopenings. Various practices concerning the backfilling of reopened graves may have existed side by side. The backfilling may have been done by the grave reopeners themselves, or by other people at a later time.

In a small number of reopened graves there was evidence for unusual practices. In grave 46 from the Lent cemetery, the deceased's cranium had been placed on the pelvis. In grave 39 the deceased's skull was missing entirely. Since no cut marks were found on the skulls or vertebrae, these skulls were probably moved during a reopening or by another series of events that gave people access to the decaying corpse. It is possible that the remains were kept above ground or given a preliminary cover in the grave until the skull could be removed and the grave pit backfilled. These graves fall in the range of what is often called 'deviant' (Thäte 2007: 267-272; Aspöck 2008; Reynolds 2009; Gardela 2013: 109-110, 120-121), except that in these cases the deviancy was created during a post-depositional intervention, rather than during the original burial. Similar practices have been observed across early medieval Europe and are often interpreted as the treatment of revenants or criminals (Lecouteux 1987: 180-181; Reynolds 2009; Gardela 2013; Gardela & Kajkowski 2013; Klevnäs 2016a). These interpretations will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Regular grave reopenings were not the only type of post-depositional intervention that took place at the cemeteries in the research area, although they were the most common one. There were also a substantial number of

intercuts between graves, and some additional burials added to existing graves. Additional burials did not only involve inhumations, but also cremations. Intercuts between graves were more common. In some cases, it was difficult to distinguish between additional burials and intercutting graves which had so much overlap that they were very similar to an additional burial. This suggests that early medieval people may not necessarily have drawn strict lines between the various types of post-depositional interventions defined in this study, but instead considered them more as different points in a continuum of practices. Some intercuts accessed the contents of the cut grave and could perhaps be considered a type of reopenings. In the case of two combined burial/reopenings in mound graves from the Bavarian cemetery of Harting-Katzenbühl, Zintl (2012: 334-337) wonders whether the diggers' most important motivation was the deposition of a new burial, or the reopening of the old one. Since all other similar graves in this cemetery had also been reopened, she argues that the reopening was the primary aim, and the additional burial was more like an afterthought. According to Zintl, the effort involved in reopening these mound graves may have been an additional stimulus for the diggers to combine the reopening with the deposition of a new burial.

Other surprising finds from the research area were the concentrations of human bones found outside typical grave contexts. In the area of the Oegstgeest settlement a large number of disarticulated human bones was found in various contexts across the site, mainly in the fills of gullies and ditches. The majority of these scattered finds were long bones and skull fragments. It seems that the inhabitants may have selectively gathered and deposited bones from the extremities and the skull. The most striking example is the pit containing a star-shaped formation comprising the long bones of at least two individuals. Adjacent to this pit lay a second pit with selected bone fragments belonging to a minimum of six individuals. All bones of which the sex could be determined, belonged to men. These finds are an indication for selective collecting and depositing of

human bone, either from graves or from other sources. The finds from the Meuse river near the town of Kessel are another example of early medieval human bones found outside a typical funerary context. The bones were not eroded, so this was probably an original deposition site. The site had a long multi-period use, from the Late Iron Age to the High Middle Ages. Of the sexed bones, 75% were male and 25% were female. The finds did not show a preference for bones from particular parts of the body, suggesting that whole bodies may have been deposited here. A similar site may have been located near Roermond. Such river deposits may also have been one of the locations where objects and bones from reopened graves were taken to. These human bone deposits and the reopened graves share a few noteworthy corresponding features. The most striking is their apparent focus on the remains of men. Grave reopenings took place more often in graves containing typical men's objects, and men's bones formed the majority of the bones found in the deposits. This could be an indication that the bones found in the deposits did indeed originate from reopened graves, or that the bone deposits and grave reopenings were influenced by the same or a similar worldviews and social practices.

The handling of objects

Much of the discussion about reopened graves focusses on which objects may have been removed, as this is often taken as one of the best indicators of the diggers' aims (Roth 1978: 69-70, 73; Zintl 2012: 339-355; Kleynäs 2013: 72-74). Given the information about bone deposits above, it would also be worthwhile to do a detailed study of which bones are usually missing from reopened graves. Unfortunately the poor bone preservation in most cemeteries included in this thesis did not allow for such an analysis.

The reopened graves in the research area contained relatively large numbers of objects compared to the graves that had remained intact. This is surprising, especially in the light of the hypothesis that removing objects was one of the main reasons for reopening graves.

There are various possible explanations for phenomenon. It may have resulted from preferences on the part of the diggers to reopen more elaborately furnished graves, as was also hypothesized for Bavaria and Kent. Alternatively, the diggers may in some cases have added objects to the graves when they reopened them. Interestingly, despite their apparent focus on the 'richer' graves, the diggers were not very systematic in removing all the grave goods, even though most of them lay within reach of the reopening pits, often in the open space of an intact wooden container. This suggests that materialistic motivations were not the diggers' primary concern. However, objects could also have been left behind accidentally because they were overlooked, especially if the wooden container had collapsed, or if the diggers had to work in the secrecy of night as is traditionally assumed (Werner 1953: 7; Fremersdorf 1955: 29; Roth 1977: 289; Klevnäs 2013: 144).

Despite the elaborate statistical comparison between the objects found in reopened and intact graves, it was difficult to reconstruct which types of grave goods may have been removed by the diggers. Klevnäs (2013: 70-71) and Zintl (2012: 347-348) argue that the grave reopeners in Kent and Bavaria targeted *spathas* and *seaxes* in men's graves and brooches in women's graves. This may also have been the case in the Low Countries, as these object types are relatively rare in the research area. The few brooches found largely originate from intact graves, indicating that the diggers tended to remove them from reopened graves when they had the opportunity. Shields, or at least shield bosses, were probably also often taken as is attested by the finds of rivets and sheet metal with mineralized wood in reopened graves. Arrowheads and lance heads on the other hand, were often left behind even though many lay within reach of the reopening pits. The grave reopeners may have been more interested in weapons of war such as swords and shields than in weapons typically used for hunting, such as lance heads and arrowheads. Theuws (2009) has argued that lances and other hunting equipment as

grave goods symbolized claims on land and the victory over death. This may have been a reason why these objects were more often left behind in the grave, as opposed to swords which rather seem to have been associated with positions of authority in the community. The larger amounts of metal present in the swords may also have made them more attractive. Belt fittings were often left behind in reopened graves, but the diggers probably also removed some, as can be seen from the incomplete belt sets found in a number of reopened graves. The people reopening graves most likely knew that these fittings were part of sets and usually lay in close proximity to one another. When parts of these sets are left behind, it is suggestive of a deliberate choice on the part of the diggers.

In addition to brooches, the diggers seem to have removed a wide range of objects from women's graves. Various typical women's grave goods were rarely found in the research area, especially bracelets, finger rings, earrings, belt pendants and keys. As with the swords, it is unclear whether their absence is an indication that these objects were targeted, or whether they were just never deposited in graves to begin with. The diggers certainly took many beads, as is indicated by the fact that in nearly all cemeteries the average numbers of beads in reopened graves are much lower than those in the intact graves. However, substantial numbers of beads were still left behind, so they were not systematically removing all of them. The so called 'gender neutral' grave goods, such as knives and pottery vessels were usually found in higher numbers in the intact graves, indicating that they may also have been removed during reopenings. There is some variation between the cemeteries which may reflect the preferences of local grave reopening participants, but the differences could also have resulted from changes in the grave good deposition custom and the grave reopening rates over time.

When looking at which *materials* were taken from reopened graves, there is so much variation between the cemeteries that it is almost impossible to discern a pattern. The materials

most often found were iron, copper alloy, pottery and glass. They occurred in varying amounts in both intact and reopened graves. Relatively few precious metals were found in the cemeteries from the research area. Perhaps these materials were not often deposited as grave goods, but they may also have been systematically targeted by the diggers. It seems that objects of all substances were probably eligible to be taken from the grave or left behind. The graves originally probably also contained many materials such as textile and wood that started to decompose soon after deposition. In unfavorable soil conditions, bone, shell and ivory also did not survive for a long time. However, depending on the time that passed between burials and grave reopenings, some of these materials could still have been available to the grave reopeners. Apart from glass, gold and gemstones, most materials would have emerged from the grave in various stages of corrosion or decomposition, which meant that the objects could not be used for their original purposes. At most, they could have served as memorabilia or in some cases as a source of raw material to be re-used in another object.

The objects found in reopened graves were often broken, with part of the fragments missing. Reopened graves contained many more indeterminate fragments than the intact graves and recognizable objects from the reopened graves generally showed lower percentages of completeness, indicating that the objects were indeed often broken during the reopenings rather than during the funeral. This damage and fragmentation may to some extent have been accidental, resulting from actions that were necessary to reopen the graves. However, since several examples of objects show signs of what was probably intentional damage, it seems likely that at least some of the fragmented objects were broken on purpose, suggesting that fragmentation may have played a role in the reopening practice. The missing fragments may simply have been scattered on the cemetery's surface, but it is also possible that the diggers took them away from the site.

Wider socio-cultural context

To place the grave reopenings in their socio-cultural context, we need to know when they took place. Together, the cemeteries in the dataset span the entire Merovingian period. The earliest datable grave reopening in the research area took place in Wijchen grave 185 and can be dated to 400-485. This may be an exceptional case, since other datable grave reopenings from this cemetery and others all dated after 500/550. This near absence of early reopenings could be due to the general lack of early graves in the research area. On the other hand, it is also possible that the data accurately reflect historical reality and grave reopenings really were mostly a late sixth and seventh century phenomenon.

Some regions in the research area were probably inhabited continuously from the beginning of the Merovingian period or even before, through to the end of the period and into the Carolingian era. This is also reflected in the long use periods of some of the cemeteries, especially Wijchen in the central Netherlands and Broechem in modern day Flanders. The southern Netherlands were re-inhabited only in the sixth century, after having been abandoned in the late Roman period. The cemeteries in this region have corresponding later starting dates (Verwers 1978; Theuws 2008; Theuws & Van Haperen 2012: 163; De Haas & Theuws 2013: 166).

Most cemeteries in the research area seem to have been definitively abandoned before the second half of the eighth century, with some perhaps continuing until the end of that century. By association the years 750-800 are taken as the hypothetical end date of the grave reopenings that took place there. However, the real end date of the reopenings is unclear and could lie some years before or many years after 800. In theory, they may have continued well into the Carolingian period, at least until the graves were no longer recognizable. It is also possible that the grave reopenings stopped before the burials on the cemeteries came to an end. This may for instance have been the case in Posterholt and Bergeijk, where few to none of the graves from the last phase were

affected by post-depositional interventions. In Posterholt however, it is also possible that all the reopenings took place around the end of the seventh and in the eighth century, which would mean that they could have been carried out by the generation whose own intact graves form the cemetery's end phase. The same could be true for Meerveldhoven. As in other regions, there was unfortunately insufficient dating evidence from the research area to define distinct phases of grave reopenings. Most, if not all, reopenings in the dataset date to the Merovingian period, but there were not enough datable reopenings to divide them into meaningful subcategories. The majority of the reopenings in the research area probably took place in the sixth and especially seventh century, with a few early cases in the fifth and a number of late cases in the eighth century. During the Merovingian period, most people in the Low Countries lived in small settlements comprising a low number of farmhouses surrounded by yards and outbuildings. Most communities were probably organized around kinship relations. For instance the Dommelen settlement consisted of four farmyards, while the nearby settlement of Geldrop had eight (Theuws 2008). There were a few larger centers such as Maastricht, but all the cemeteries in the dataset were located in rural areas. The settlements were bound together by the loose socio-political structure of Merovingian-period kingdoms (Wood 1994: 60-62). The effects of royal juridical power were probably limited, especially on sites that were not near important political and economic centers. It is for instance unclear whether the Frankish laws on grave robbery were known in these communities and if they were known, to what extent they were enforced.

Economy, conflict or peace

The views on the role of grave reopenings in early medieval society vary greatly. Many scholars see grave reopenings simply as a means to regain some of the wealth invested in the lavish and costly burial practices. This interpretation is to some extent contradicted by the ideological and symbolic aspects of

these practices that have begun to become apparent in the recent research, such as the preferential targeting of certain types of graves and grave goods while other graves and grave goods seem to have been deliberately left untouched, despite including valuable materials. The apparent inadequacies of the materialistic interpretations have led some specialists to argue for a more socio-culturally driven context for grave reopenings. Some scholars argued that grave reopenings could have been carried out *in situations* of war or conflict. Grave reopenings conducted by war bands have for instance been suggested by Müller (1976: 125), Pauli (1981: 475) and Kümmel (2009: 128, 212-213). This particular scenario does not seem to apply to the cemeteries studied here, as the graves were usually not opened simultaneously as would happen during large raids. The hypothesis suggested by Steuer (2001: 285–286), that grave reopenings were carried out by aristocrats on the cemeteries of their relocated dependents also does not apply to the material from the Low Countries, as most graves were reopened while the cemeteries were still in use. Nevertheless, grave reopenings could have been used as a socio-political weapon in smaller scale conflicts in and between burial communities, as is for instance suggested by Klevnäs (2013: 83) who hypothesized that grave reopenings are a type of inter-community violence, expressing festering conflicts within the local society. Alternatively, grave reopenings could have played a part in the formation of social cohesion. I have for instance previously suggested that grave reopenings could have served to bring together members of the burial community and the deceased's kin group in celebrations of ancestral power and fractal personhood (Van Haperen 2013). The motives for having grave reopenings may have been similar to those for having lavish burials in the first place. Here we could think of options such as relieving of stress created by the death (Halsall 1995: 253-261), strategies for remembering and forgetting the dead (Williams 2003, 2005, 2006), a rhetorical strategy of the burying group to create and recreate central norms,

ideas and values; and to present themselves and their dead to an audience of outsiders (Theuws 2009), emotional responses of the survivors (Tarlow 2000, 2012), etc. These considerations may also help to explain the local variations in grave reopening intensity. Factors such as lack or superfluity of wealth, differing levels of social stress, local traditions and the agency of the community could all have contributed to a lower or higher frequency of reopenings. Reopenings may have offered an opportunity to focus on the grave one more time, expose its contents, bring back memories, create new ones and gather memorabilia or relics. All these interpretations will be elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

Christianization

It has been suggested that grave reopenings may have been carried out with Christian religious motivations in mind because the traditional Merovingian grave furnishings lost their meaning after Christianization and thus became available for removal (Roth 1977: 290; Koch 1996: 737). This was countered by Young (1977) and Effros (2002: 47, 61; 2003: 86–88) who showed that grave good deposition was also practised by Christians. Alternatively, grave reopeners may have attempted retroactive Christianization of their pagan ancestors (Geary 1994: 36–39; Theuws 1999: 346–347; Marti 2000: 44–45; Van Haperen 2010: 26). There is little to no evidence for either of these hypotheses in the material from the Low Countries. This is in part because religious convictions and motivations are notoriously difficult to trace archaeologically. We do not know whether or to what extent the people from the burial communities considered themselves or were considered by others as Christians. Nor do we know how the beginnings of Christianization manifested itself in their behavior. Apart from a few coins with crosses on them, which may in some cases have been deposited in the deceased's mouth as a Charon's obol (Härke 2014: 49–50), overt religious symbols seem to be largely lacking from the cemeteries in the research area. If the funerary practices incorporated religious ele-

ments – Christian or otherwise – these did not leave many archaeological traces, or at least, these are not easily recognized by archaeologists. Similarly, grave reopenings also did not have any clearly recognizable religious characteristics. There is no evidence that the diggers preferentially left behind, removed, or deposited objects with Christian symbolism. There are also no indications for *translatio* of grave contents from rural cemeteries to churchyards, but given the bad preservation of bone and the lack of well-preserved churchyard cemeteries in the research area, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence in this case.

Grave reopenings could have been a means of 'retroactive Christianization'. An example of this could be the deposition of Christian symbols, such as gold-foil crosses or coins, in reopened graves (Van Haperen 2010: 26). These practices are a potential example of the performative power of grave reopenings: by artefactually representing the deceased as Christians, they were posthumously converted. The concept of retroactive Christianization was introduced by Geary, who used it 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). It is not difficult to see how these churches may have served as performative material representations of the pagan ancestors' conversion to Christianity. Building a church on top of the graves of the dead was not the only way of making them into Christians: one could also reopen their graves and transfer their relics to a church elsewhere, as the Danish king Harald Bluetooth did with the remains of his pagan parents after he had converted to Christianity. He dug up the bones of his mother and father from their grave mound and reburied them in a church that he had built in the vicinity (Geary 1994: 38; also see Eckhardt & Williams 2003: 144). Theuws (1999: 346–347) argues that similar concerns may have motivated grave reopenings in rural Merovingian cemeteries. The remains taken from the graves involved would then have been reburied in newly founded nearby

churchyards. Some grave reopenings in the Low Countries may indeed have aimed at retro-actively converting pagan ancestors. However, as has been shown above these practices could have had many other possible meanings and purposes, so it would be unjustified to assume Christianization was always a relevant factor.

4.2 Ancestors and relics

In my master thesis which was later published in the journal *Medieval and Modern Matters* (Van Haperen 2010), I developed the interpretation that early medieval grave reopenings were a form of relic cult for ancestors, similar to the cult of saints' relics which also developed in this period. This chapter will be based on that interpretation and my ideas about its implications for early medieval personhood that were published in the proceedings of the *Internationales Sachsensymposium 2011* (Van Haperen 2013). This interpretive scenario assumes that grave reopenings were carried out by people from the burial community itself, if not the deceased's immediate kin, and served an important role in social life and people's relationship with the ancestors.

Saints and ancestors

The elevations or translations of saints' relics are some of the more common types of grave reopenings described in the early medieval written sources. Krüger was the first author to connect the accounts in these sources to the post-depositional interventions observed by archaeologists. He argued that the moving of saints' relics were an exceptional category of reopenings which should not be confused with 'normal' reopenings which he interpreted as materialistic grave robbery, even though the two were probably similar in practice (Krüger 1978: 178-184). The gathering of saints' relics and regular grave reopenings indeed have some noteworthy similarities. Saints' relics fall into two rough categories: primary relics, which are saints' corpses or parts thereof; and contact relics, which are objects that came into contact with the saints' bodies, either while

they were still alive or after their death (Bonser 1962: 234). In addition to saints' relics, there is also another subset of relics consisting of items associated with stories from the bible, such as twigs from the tree under which the shepherds were resting when the angel appeared to them to inform them of Jesus' birth (Smith 2012: 148-149). In the early period of relic veneration, contact relics were the most prevalent. Primary corporeal relics became popular later, when the Roman and Jewish taboos on touching the remains of the dead had lost their power (Brown 1981: 6-11; Smith 2012: 149-150). In the Low Countries we have solid evidence for the removal of grave goods from reopened graves. The reopening pits focused mostly on the space around the deceased's body and the objects that were in contact with it. Due to the lack of well-preserved bone material, it is unclear whether the diggers also took bones. The possible removal of bones has not been given much systematic attention in other studies either, because it is often assumed that missing bones were simply discarded by the diggers (Zintl 2012: 352-253; Klevnäs 2013: 52). However, the finds of bones in non-funerary contexts such as the pits and ditches in Oegstgeest and the river deposits near Kessel indicate that early medieval people did indeed collect and transport human bones, either from reopened graves or from other sources. It is nevertheless possible that grave reopenings - similar to early saints' relic cults - often focused on the objects associated with the deceased, rather than on their bones.

What are the origins of the grave reopening phenomenon? Geary (1994: 41-44) notes that although saints' cults could be found throughout the Christian world, it was only in the West that the worship centered largely on the physical remains of the holy. He accentuates several similarities between Merovingian funerary customs and later relic cults, including the articulation of the deceased's personality through artefacts and the continued attention to the dead, which centered on their graves. He also notes that the eighth century - the period in which the transfer and relocation of

corporeal relics became common in the West – was also the time when many traditional Merovingian cemeteries were finally abandoned. He therefore suggests that the elaborate concern for the physical remains of the saints was partly inspired by preoccupations with the bodies of important dead people in Merovingian society. This was not so much a continuation of old beliefs about death as a formalized acknowledgement of the place of the dead in society and their influence on the fate of the living. However, Geary has some reservations about his own hypothesis:

‘Granted, the explicit meaning of these saints’ tombs and of the intermediary role of saints in Christian tradition was certainly not the same in the eighth century as it had been for important burials in the fifth. Many practices of the later period, such as the division and transfer of relics and the particular form taken by their cult, had greatly evolved under the influence of Romano-Christian traditions. Unlike early Franks, whose tombs were intended to be inviolate, bishops might well be exhumed at the time of an official elevation and establishment of a cult, and their insignia could attest their status for future generations.’ (Geary 1994: 43-44)

No doubt Romano-Christian traditions contributed substantially to medieval relic cults. However, it should by now be clear that early medieval graves – ‘Frankish’ or otherwise – were by no means inviolate, nor were they likely intended to be. Important tombs of the fifth-century and especially of the sixth- and seventh-century dead were often reopened. At these events the grave goods and bones they contained could become a focus of renewed attention, not unlike the remains of bishops at an elevation. This does not mean that early medieval grave reopenings in rural cemeteries were simply saints’ translations *avant la lettre*, but the evidence discussed here does show that the two may to some extent have had similar characteristics, including their physical origins in the grave and their socio-religious role as a medium by which contact with the dead could be maintained. The practice of grave reopenings and the collecting of saints’ relics may therefore have originated from a shared reser-

voir of worldviews and socio-cultural values. If so, the attention to the physical remains of the dead was not an exclusively Romano-Christian invention, nor was it necessarily reserved for religious leaders, as is for instance assumed by Schmitt (1998: 30-31). I would like to argue that the practice of grave reopenings – of both saints and non-saints – originated from the general population of early medieval North-West Europe and was not initiated by Episcopal authorities.

For later periods we have written evidence that similar practices were also performed on the bodies of the secular elite. The first references to such activities in the written sources occur in the ninth century and continue far into the post-medieval period. The embalming, evisceration, excarnation and division of high status dead people often resulted from a desire to transport their remains over long distances. Such methods also allowed the burial community to distribute parts of the deceased’s body over several desirable burial locations. In this way, like distributed saints’ relics, the remains of these worldly leaders could reach a wider audience and gain more prestige by being present and accessible at multiple locations (Weiss-Krejci 2005: 158-168). Similar mechanisms may have operated in the context of early medieval grave reopenings in rural cemeteries.

Enemy ancestors – Klevnäs’ interpretation

Klevnäs (2013: 83, 2015: 168) gives quite a different perspective on the ancestral aspect of reopened graves. She argues 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. These destructive reopenings could have served to damage the prestige generated by the grave furnishings, and destroy the ancestors’ perceived supernatural ability to protect their living relatives. These activities could 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. In this view, grave reopenings are an

expression of festering conflicts in the community or between communities. Klevnäs suggests that these disputes could be seen as part of the bigger picture of seventh century consolidation of elite and royal power by a limited number of decent groups. It is certainly possible that graves were not only reopened by family members of the deceased, but also by hostile groups aiming to damage their enemies' prestige or relation to their ancestors. In my opinion, it is unlikely that all grave reopenings in the Low Countries can be accounted for with this interpretation. The sheer number of them (more than 40% of the graves in the dataset were probably affected), seems to negate the possibility that these were all hostile attacks on graves, especially since they usually seem to have occurred spread over a long span of time, rather than in single events. In Kent, where fewer graves were affected, this interpretation may have a little more foothold. However, given the general similarities of grave reopenings in Kent and the remainder of Europe, they may have originated from similar, rather than from different intentions and were thus probably non-hostile. The apparent violent or disorderly nature of most reopenings is not a contradiction here, as ethnographic, historical and archaeological examples show that violent types of behavior are compatible both with veneration and desecration (Duncan 2005; Weiss-Krejci 2001: 775-778; Zintl 2012: 388; Gardela 2013: 107-108). Also, the emotional connotations of such practices are culturally constituted rather than universal (Tarlow 2000: 718-719). Klevnäs herself (2016b: 468) has recently argued for Viking Age burials in Scandinavia, that the violence involved in reopenings may have served to emphasise the difficulty of bringing the grave occupant's ownership of the grave goods to an end and passing them on to a new owner. In my opinion, this could also have been the case for the violently reopened Merovingian burials in this study. These alternative interpretations leave open the possibility that hostile and non-hostile grave reopenings were carried out in similar ways, and are thus indistinguishable in the archaeological material. If that was the

case, there may be a percentage of hostile reopenings hidden in the dataset.

The transformation of the deceased

In many societies the funeral customs are not centered on a single event, but entail a long sequence of what I have chosen to call consecutive mortuary practices (Van Haperen 2010: 7). The extended nature of these death-related activities reveals that, from a social perspective, death does not occur at a single moment and is not the 'passage of a line without thickness' (Bloch 1988: 11), but is in fact a gradual transformative process that may be perceived to start before, after or upon biological death and can continue for years after the corpse has been disposed of. This principle is especially evident in societies that are accustomed to giving their dead an entire second funeral. During such ceremonies, the grave is reopened and the deceased's remains are retrieved and subsequently redeposited at a new location. Such series of consecutive mortuary practices usually conform to van Gennep's (1960) tripartite structure of rites of passage – separation, liminality, incorporation – which transform a person's social status. When a person is perceived to die, they enter a liminal state. They are no longer alive, but until the end of the mortuary cycle, they are not yet socially dead either. Many peoples who perform a second funeral for their dead symbolically equate the deceased's liminal status with the putrefaction of the corpse. Under such circumstances, the body's decomposition needs to have come to an end, leaving only dry bones, before the deceased can properly enter his new state as a dead ancestor. At the end of the period that is perceived necessary for putrefaction, the remains are taken from their temporary repository and a ceremony is held that formally instates the deceased among the ancestors (Huntington & Metcalf 1979: 53-67). Ceremonial elaborations such as these can be interpreted as a social strategy by which death is controlled and the community's dead are transformed into a positive, beneficial force (Bloch & Parry 1982: 13; Williams 2010: 68-72).

Like these ethnographic examples of second funerals, early medieval grave reopenings may have been instrumental to the transformation of liminal and potentially harmful dead into beneficial ancestors. This falls in line with Theuws' (1999, 2009) ideas about the symbolic construction of ancestors in early medieval society. The process of decomposition in early medieval graves was not limited to the corpse, but also involved the grave goods and the graves' structural features. The perceived transformation of the deceased may therefore also have encompassed these elements. The ways various types of objects were transformed by their stay in the grave differed depending on the materials of which they were made. The more inert items made of glass, gold or gemstones may have carried connotations of the timeless, eternal and imperishable, while those that underwent drastic changes such as wood, leather and iron were possibly more associated with the temporary, death, transformation and the life cycle.

At the moment of burial, the deceased's body and most of the grave goods were usually hidden from view in a closed coffin. Some of the smaller grave goods were often concealed in a pouch. The corrosion layer on the front side of iron dress items not infrequently contains mineralized textile, indicating that they (and possibly also the corpse) may have been wrapped in a shroud or some other type of covering (Williams 2006: 51-52; Brandenburg 2016). Some reserve is required however, since artefacts may have tumbled over as a result of the decomposition processes in the grave, causing them to be found front-side down on textiles that did not originally cover them. Even when the corpse was buried without such wrappings, it would eventually have been hidden from sight when the grave was backfilled. It appears, however, that the burying group usually chose to emphasize this process by enveloping the body and the grave goods in one or multiple containers before burying them. This treatment calls to mind Alfred Gell's (1998: 146) suggestion that 'wrapping' can be a way of creating a body for otherwise invisible spiritual social actors. The

grave pit, coffin, shroud and other wrappings deliberately hid the putrefying corpse from view and may have been perceived to aid the construction of a new physical form – a 'body' – that suited the deceased's liminal status and anticipated their final transformation into an ancestor (also see Smal forthcoming). The artefacts enclosed in the wrappings may have been used to symbolically specify the identity and social roles that the future ancestor was expected to have, as is suggested by Theuws (2009) for fifth-century weapon graves that may have been used to create ancestors with protective powers. Early medieval written sources show that 'binding', which could be seen as a variation of wrapping, played an important part in heathen religion, and in healing practices and magic charms that persisted after the onset of Christianization (Pollington 2011: 379-384).

Most grave reopenings seem to have taken place at a time when the perishable substances in the grave had started to decompose or had fully decayed. The deceased's bones were revealed by the putrefaction of the corpse and the artefacts associated with it were laid bare by the decomposition of the various perishable containers in the grave. This process may have had added significance for early medieval people, who had little knowledge of the chemical and biological processes involved in the decay and 'disappearance' of the wrappings in which they buried their dead. In an article on cremation rites in early medieval Britain, Williams (2004: 274) argues that such developments may have been perceived as a manifestation of the continuing agency and volition of the deceased. The final stage of this process, when the transformation of the objects was complete, may in particular instances have been emphasized by the reopening of the grave and revealing the ancestor's new 'body' of bones and artefacts their transformed state. Ethnographic studies demonstrate that in addition to second funerals, cremation is also a practice that can be used to emphasize the transformation of the dead into ancestors. In some societies, the two practices are combined so the second funeral is actually a cremation

(Huntington & Metcalf 1979: 92-83). In other cultures cremation takes place immediately after death so there is only one funeral and the transformation of the deceased takes place right away. From this perspective, cremation and grave reopenings could be seen as funerary 'twins'. It is worthy of note that nearly all the cemeteries in the research area contained both reopened inhumation graves and contemporary cremation burials.

Just as the decomposition of the grave's contents and its subsequent reopening disassemble the deceased's corpse and grave goods into dry bones, corroded materials and soil; cremation transforms the body into a series of components that include bones, melted artefact fragments, ash and smoke. Williams (2004: 274-277; 2010: 72-76) argues that these components could be used to construct a new body that was appropriate to the deceased's new transformed ancestral identity. However, while decomposition in the grave was an extremely lengthy process, cremation could bring about the transformation of the deceased's corpse in a number of hours. In addition, it would have provided an impressive, though to modern Western eyes perhaps rather gruesome spectacle. Apart from producing fumes and fluids, the corpse may have emitted various noises and displayed movement. Williams therefore proposes that burning the corpse may have been perceived as a way of bringing the deceased's remains back to life. Although both its procedures and time-scale differed considerably from grave reopening practices, cremation may have facilitated analogous transformations of the dead. It is therefore interesting to note that the cremation graves in the research area often contained only part of the deceased's remains and far fewer grave goods than are found in cremation burials. Perhaps some of these items were deliberately separated from the remainder of the cremated material, and kept above ground as mementos or 'relics' of the deceased. The possible uses for such relics will be discussed in more detail below. There was no evidence for reopenings of the cremation graves in the research area, but this may not be an accurate

reflection of past reality. Cremation graves were usually more shallow and therefore more susceptible to later disturbance than inhumation graves, so it was often impossible to tell whether they had been reopened in ancient times.

Early medieval ancestor concepts

The evidence for actual ancestor beliefs in early medieval North-West Europe is somewhat scarce, but not absent. Very little is preserved of early medieval world views from the Low Countries, so most knowledge about these practices has to be imported from the surrounding areas. The southern Netherlands and Belgium had belonged to the Roman Empire and now belonged to the Frankish kings, who had converted to Christianity. The northern and central Netherlands above the former Limes were part of the 'Frisian' area, ruled by heathen rulers. It is unclear in what way these political boundaries influenced the culture and beliefs of the inhabitants. It seems that the Low Countries were a melting pool of Roman, Frankish, Saxon, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian influences. In addition, people in this region probably had their own indigenous traditions, but the evidence for these is almost exclusively archaeological, as few written sources from the region have been passed down. Part of the population may have identified as Christians, but in the absence of churches or priests, the ways they practiced their Christianity was probably not very formalized. Other people probably still adhered to the elder gods and heathen religious practices. In any case, the heathen traditions were long from gone, and probably exerted their influence on the habitus of all but the most learned and dedicated Christians. As stated above, I am inclined to think that the origins of the grave reopening practice lies in these traditions.

One of the few sources telling of ancestor beliefs in the Low Countries is the *Vita Wulframni*, in which the Frisian king Radbod is on the verge of being baptized, but refuses when bishop Wulfram tells him that he will not see his pagan forefathers in the Christian

heaven because they were not baptized. When Radbod hears this, he withdraws his foot from the baptismal font and states that he will not go to heaven without the company of his predecessors (Meens 2015: 579). The historical accuracy of this anecdote is disputed among historians, but persuasive arguments have been made that it may be based on true events, or at least reflect prevalent concerns from the phase of early Christianization, which in this case were the 740's AD. Meens (2015) shows convincingly that the fate of unbaptized forefathers was indeed a subject of interest in this period, and is discussed in somewhat masked terms in a number of other sources about missionary work. Attempts at 'retroactive Christianization' by finding ways to have pagan forebears buried in consecrated churches is another indication that early medieval people under Frankish influence valued their ancestors (Geary 1994: 36–39; Meens 2015: 586, 588). These concerns may also be reflected in the desire to adhere to traditional burial practices after Christianization, as can be deduced from a letter by Pope Gregory III to the missionary Boniface which seems to deal among other things with the desire of newly converted Christians to continue burying their deceased with grave goods. Gregory condones this only if the deceased were real Christians, not pagans (Meens 2015: 583).

The evidence for heathen worldviews from the Low Countries is scarce, so here we will have to look at studies from other parts of North-West Europe. This is not ideal since beliefs probably varied considerably between regions, but studies do show some over-arching themes. Recently a lot of new work has been done on heathen religions in the Anglo-Saxon area (Carver 2010; Pollington 2011), which is what I will mostly draw on here. Apart from geographical proximity, we can assume cultural influence and exchange between the Anglo-Saxon region and the research area that makes it likely that somewhat similar worldviews were prevalent here, especially along the Dutch and Belgian coast and river areas. From ethnography we know that cross-culturally, religions that include ancestor beliefs often

feature a strong connection between the living and the dead. The ancestors are often considered more important than higher gods since they are perceived to have a stronger influence on everyday life. Relationships with the ancestral spirits usually involve a mixture of sentiments, including love, respect and fear. The ancestors demand constant attention from their descendants and depending on the circumstances, they can be both benevolent and malicious. In societies with such a worldview, the living and the dead are entwined in an ongoing cycle of mutual dependency and care (Sanmark 2010: 160; Gräslund 1994: 17). In Anglo-Saxon England, the line between gods and ancestors seems to have been somewhat blurry. A lot of importance was placed on genealogies and the role of 'men of old' in Anglo-Saxon and other early medieval historical tales, myths and legends. The god Woden appears as a mythical forbear on many early medieval genealogical kings' lists (Pollington 2011: 78–79). In his book on Anglo-Saxon heathen religion, Pollington argues that:

'Given that the *Æsir* included among their numbers persons who were not gods, and that the Goths regarded their exulted ancestors as *semideos* 'half-gods', it seems evident (as Lindow argued for the *Æsir*) that the Anglo-Saxon *ese* were not all gods, and that residence in the hall of the slain was open to human heroes. The conversion from 'hero' to 'leader' to 'ancestor' was part of the process by which new cults arose. It follows that the conversion process – the deification – was encapsulated in the funerary rites which managed the transition from this world to the Otherworld, and that the particular customs used to dispose of the body would determine the status of the deceased.' (Pollington 2011: 97)

Bazelmans (1999: 114–116) formulates a similar hypothesis in his analysis of the *Beowulf* when he argues that the funeral rituals described in the poem had in the pre-Christian era been a means of transforming dead kings into ancestors. In the *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon sources, there is much more emphasis on ancestry through fathers than through mothers. If men were indeed considered to be

more important as ancestors than women, this could explain the higher numbers of reopened graves with men's objects compared to those with women's objects that were found in the research area. The relatively low percentage of reopened children's graves also fits well with the idea that grave reopenings focused on important ancestors. Children would usually not have had the social standing or life history that would predispose them to becoming a powerful ancestor. The funerals in the rural communities whose cemeteries are studied in this thesis were less lavish than those of the kings in *Beowulf*, but they could nevertheless have served in similar ways to transform local important men and women into ancestors. The belief in ancestors was probably linked to specific concepts about the 'soul', or what persisted of humans after their body died and decomposed. Here too, evidence is limited but there are a few indications in the sources that the pre-Christian religions in Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England included ideas about souls. The plural is deliberate here, as people seem to have thought of non-corporeal element of a person to consist of multiple components, which as Sanmark (2010: 160-161) points out is not unusual for so-called 'indigenous religions'. The evidence for a pluralistic soul is strongest in the Norse sources. A number of different 'souls' have been identified. The *hugr*, which can be translated as 'soul', 'thought' or 'mind' could be controlled by the person and could leave the body. The *hamr* was the physical form that the *hugr* took when shapeshifting and travelling outside the body. Shapeshifting into the form of a bird or other animal enabled the *hugr* to enter the other-world and visit the spirits and ancestors. Another type of soul, the *fylgja* was a kind of spirit-helper, actively following the person. After death, it could have its own independent existence. Interestingly, *fylgjur* (the plural of *fylgja*) belonged to a family line and could be inherited. They may therefore have been a type of ancestor or an aspect of ancestral presence. Lastly, the *hamingjur* was the 'soul' or non-corporeal element which represented a person's luck. Like the *fylgja*, it could be

passed on to another person after death and usually stayed within the same family. Similar pluralistic concepts of the soul were probably prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon area, but the sources are less clear on what the exact characteristics of the constituents may have been. It is usually assumed they were analogous to those found in Scandinavia (Lecouteux 1987: 203-226; Sanmark 2010: 161-163; Pollington 2011: 369). With the onset of Christianization, these ideas about the soul were converted to the Christian concept of a single soul which departed from the body at death with the last breath (Sanmark 2010: 174-175), but it seems likely that heathen notions of the soul lingered for some time in the early medieval cultural-religious melting pot.

It can be surmised that early medieval people in Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England and probably all over North-West Europe valued their ancestors and may have attributed to them divine powers to influence the condition of the living. Pollington (2011: 92) even draws grave reopenings into his argument by noting that they were linked by Welch (2007: 222-223) to offerings for the ancestors after a barrow's closure and may have involved 'retrieving weapons and other items with strong dynastic associations'. The potency and ancestral associations of heathen grave goods could have been part of the reason why Pope Gregory disapproved of grave good deposition in the burials of non-Christians. He may have aimed to prohibit the empowerment of heathen ancestors. Perhaps we could even see the saints as the post-Christianization successors to the heathen ancestors' social and spiritual role, or at least as partaking of the same flow of power from the dead to the living. Like the ancestors, saints were deceased humans who resided with or were part of the divine, and could serve as channels of cosmic power between the world of men and the otherworld, which in the Christian worldview was heaven. On the other hand, ancestor veneration could have been of a more secular nature. In the words of Pollington (2011: 447): 'It seems from the evidence that Anglo-Saxons revered their dead kinsmen and maintained them in the hosting and gift-

giving culture of the living by including gifts of food among the grave goods. [...] The impetus for ancestor-worship among the Anglo-Saxons may have been nothing more than a strong bond between kinsmen which could outlast and overcome death.' On the other hand, this apparent secular nature could well be a result of the secularization of heathen ancestor tales that took place after the onset of Christianization, as Bazelmans (1999: 10) has suggested for the *Beowulf*.

Varying timescales

Grave reopenings themselves were not all uniform in practice or timescale. As we have seen, approximately half of the grave reopenings took place while the wooden containers were still intact, most likely within one generation of the funeral. This meant that the people involved could potentially still remember the deceased and the way they were buried. The other half of the reopenings occurred after the wooden containers had collapsed, probably more than a generation after burial, when precise knowledge of the deceased and the funeral was probably lost. This dichotomy is most likely an oversimplification of the actual variation in grave reopening practices and similar activities. It is, however, one of the most obvious, and probably one of the most fundamental distinctions between the various types of practices concealed in the archaeological remains of reopened graves. The following sections will therefore follow two trails or scenarios that separate and reunite at distinct points in the process of interpretation. Scenario 1 is concerned with the transformation of the recent dead, whose graves were reopened shortly after burial. Reopenings of this type would have brought back powerful, emotionally charged memories of the funeral as people came into direct contact with the transformed remains of their dead relatives and fellow community members. Williams (2004: 178) develops a similar perspective for the post-cremation handling of the deceased's burned remains. Although the people reopening the grave now formed new relations with the dead, they could partially build on their previ-

ous connections with them. Scenario 2, on the other hand, deals with the reopening of the graves of potential ancestors who had died a long time ago. The people who had known them personally were themselves dead, and what they had been like in life and how they had been buried was largely forgotten. When their graves were reopened, the prime element was therefore not recognition, as in scenario 1, but discovery and surprise. The living had no previous acquaintance with these dead and may have needed to form new relationships with them, depending on whether or not they considered them to still be part of the community.

The cultural biography of relics

This section deals with the fate of the artefacts and human remains that were taken from reopened graves. This general category of things from graves will be designated as relics of the deceased, in the same way as the dead bodies of holy people and the artefacts that came into contact with them are referred to as saints' relics. The word 'relic' is used in similar ways in ethnographic literature to designate remains of the deceased that are kept by the living and receive continued attention (for instance Habermas 2001: 10800). The use of this expression does not necessarily imply that remains taken from reopened graves were treated similar to those of saints. The term merely expresses the hypothesis that objects and bones from graves were perceived as a specific category of things that were not necessarily interchangeable with those of a different provenance.

Between the moment an artefact is created and the moment it is finally discarded, it may be used in many contexts and acquire various meanings. As a result, two identical golden necklace pendants may have had different meanings because one had once been buried in a grave while the other had not. Kopytoff has shown how such processes can be studied on the basis of the cultural biographies of artefacts. Such a biography presents an object 'as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and

reclassified into culturally constituted categories' (Kopytoff 1986: 68). Such culturally specific meanings and categories are difficult to study archaeologically, since we cannot ask early medieval people how they perceived and classified the world around them. We can however construct partially hypothetical models of specific objects' use lives that take into account the social and technological circumstances as they are attested in the archaeological record and historical sources from a particular period and region. I will use this method to investigate the contexts in which relics from reopened graves could have been used, the associations they may have had and the social roles they may have fulfilled.

When a grave was reopened, some or even most of its contents was usually left behind or even purposely redeposited when the diggers refilled their pit. A selection of relics – artefacts and possibly also bones – were taken out, presumably to be employed in later activities. The possible applications fall into two broad categories: use in a recognizable, original or slightly refurbished form, and use in a modified or even recycled, largely unrecognizable form. In their original form, these remains could have served as relics in the traditional sense of the word. They may have been enshrined in special containers that the descendants of the deceased kept in the house or in a special building, where they became the subject of cult practices. The living may also have carried fragments of them in small portable containers, for instance as apotropaic amulets, instruments for divination or mementos of the deceased. See Effros (2002: 158-160) for various types of possible relic containers found in Merovingian graves and Smith (2012: 154-157) for portable reliquaries in various forms that were used to carry saints' relics. Eckhart and Williams (2003: 150) discuss the possible use of Roman antiques from graves for apotropaic purposes and divination. Williams (2003: 111, 2004: 281-282) suggests artefacts and bones from Anglo-Saxon cremations may have served as mementos of the deceased. Conversely, relics may also have been employed in more practical ways. This is most

obvious in the case of artefacts made of precious metal, glass and pottery. Many could probably still be used as they had been before their deposition in the grave, although they may have required cleaning and refurbishing. Their known provenance may, however, have ensured that such 'practical' uses were not devoid of symbolic meaning. Hence, the employment of these objects could have had special significance in certain contexts and may have been restricted to specific functions, including ceremonial ones. Alternatively, relics could have been reused in such a way that they were no longer immediately recognizable. Artefacts, especially those made of metal, could have been recycled, either by disassembling them and reusing their parts in new items, or by melting them down and re forging the material thus obtained. Chemical analysis of early Anglo-Saxon copper alloy objects has shown that they were often made from recycled Roman artefacts (Eckhardt, Williams 2003: 155). It has been argued that such practices could have been meant to hide the objects' provenance (Grünwald 1988: 40), but they could also have been meant to deliberately and openly incorporate relics into new artefacts, which thereby also carried the physical and metaphorical presence of the ancestors. Like artefacts that were left in their original, recognizable form, objects made from recycled relics may have had symbolic associations that predisposed them for use in specific contexts, thus creating links with the past and the world of the dead (Williams 2006: 41). The deceased's bones may have been 'recycled' in similar ways. Hypothetically, they could for instance have been ground up for use in potions, ointments and other medicinal or magical concoctions. Such powders could also have been used in the manufacture of artefacts. The Scandinavian lay of *Weland* reports that the legendary smith made human remains into jewelry. Williams suggests that ash from Anglo-Saxon cremations may have been used to carbonize the iron that was used to make swords (Williams 2005: 266). Even though these activities would render the deceased's remains unrecognizable, such practices would

probably have referred explicitly to their former state, and may have endowed the new objects with a special symbolism and potency. Early medieval people deliberately created mnemonic links with the real or imagined past by for instance reusing the remains of old buildings and sites occupied in previous periods (De Haas 2010). In this way they portrayed themselves as legitimate successors to this past, strengthening their claims to power. Artefacts may similarly have evoked memories of eras gone by, either because their form and decoration recalled specific myths or because people remembered the way they had circulated within and between various communities. Particular artefacts were therefore associated with series of famed living and dead social actors, important historical events and faraway places (Williams 2005: 265-268, 2006: 40). The category of objects with 'special' biographies may also have included relics from reopened graves, which could have had an intermediary position between the physical and conceptual worlds of the living and the dead. Their continued use would then reflect a desire to construct material links between contemporary and future society and renowned people and events from the past, while their deposition in new graves could have been a way to connect the recent dead with previous generations of ancestors. These processes may however have functioned differently for ancestors in scenario 1 than for those in scenario 2. Like the former deeds of the deceased, the biographies of relics taken from reopened graves in scenario 1 would still be remembered. The time they spent in the grave added to the rest of their history, which, as we have seen above, would continue in various ways after they were taken from the grave. Their later use was probably often determined by the fact that they came from a grave. Firstly because they needed cleaning and refurbishing before they would be suitable for use (if they ever actually returned to practical use) and secondly because their residence with the dead had altered their symbolic associations. Among other things, these objects could have served as mementos of the de-

ceased, recalling memories of their deeds (Williams 2003: 111, 2004: 281-282), and facilitating the continued presence of the dead among the living. Since these ancestors had probably been part of the community for a long time, their identities and relations with the living continued to develop under the influence of events that occurred after their graves had been reopened.

In scenario 2, the relics could not serve as mementos of the dead and their deeds, since these were no longer remembered. Eckhardt and Williams have proposed that objects without a known biography may have had special meanings precisely because of their unknown provenance. Artefacts that are transported through space or time may take on new functions and meanings when they are appropriated in another social context. Their unknown origins make them especially suitable to play a role in defining relations between the society where they reside and other times and places (Eckhardt & Williams 2003: 142-144). The applicability of this hypothesis to relics from reopened graves requires some scrutiny, since their provenance was not a complete mystery: they were found in the specific and very recognizable context of a grave. These deposits would be very similar to those of the recent dead in scenario 1, so such finds would have appeared rather familiar and could easily have been appropriated as the remains of long-departed ancestors. The fact that the exact identity of these ancestors was not known need not have been a problem. These dead could simply have been regarded as part of the community's large number of long deceased and now anonymous ancestors. Alternatively, personality could have been constructed for them in the context of the reopening and the ensuing events. An analogy for the latter process can be found in the appropriation of imported saints' relics. From an archaeological perspective, it is important to realize that saints' relics were not necessarily the material remnants of actual holy people: they were human physical remains and artefacts kept in special containers in special places, around which a particular kind of story was construct-

ed. Their doubtful provenance was irrelevant to those who believed in their efficacy, because the way they were materially and conceptually framed identified them as true relics. They confirmed their working relationship with their respective saint and with God by the miracles they facilitated on a regular basis (Geary 1986: 186-187; Smith 2003: 189-201). Similarly, in scenario 2 the identities of ancestors and their relations with the living may have been constructed primarily by the way their remains were engaged in social activity after their graves had been reopened and by the way they were perceived to manifest themselves in their new capacity.

The fact that reopenings detached the relics from their original context need not have impaired their efficacy for materially expressing the deceased's continuing active existence, but may actually have strengthened it. Brown has argued that particularly the separation of saints' relics from their physical association with the grave and the corpse made them such effective vehicles for controlling the power of death. 'For how better to suppress the fact of death, than to remove part of the dead from its original context in the all too cluttered grave? How better to symbolize the abolition of time in such dead, than to add to that an indeterminacy of space?' (Brown 1982: 78). The capacity of relics to turn the dead into a beneficial force was maximized by detaching relics from their direct association with physical putrefaction. 'For what was being brought were tiny fragments around which the associations of a very special kind of death could cluster undisturbed.' (Brown 1982: 79).

Implications for early medieval personhood

As I suggested in my paper for the *Internationales Sachsensymposium 2011* (Van Haperen 2013), the interpretation presented above may have significant implications for the study of early medieval personhood. Archaeologists commonly think of early medieval persons as individuals. It has been pointed out however, that individualism is a specifically modern Western form of personhood and that

past persons need not have identified as individuals (Thomas 2004: 136-137; Fowler 2004: 8). This view has been negated somewhat by scholars who emphasized that even in cultures that do not share modern Western society's focus on individualism, persons nevertheless experience a certain amount of individuality or consciousness of being an autonomous person, and can therefore appropriately be called individuals (Knapp & Van Dommelen 2008). While there are thus no great objections to the use of this term in the general archaeological literature, in discussions on personhood it may cause confusion if 'individual' is used interchangeably with 'person', so in this section of the text the term 'individual' is used exclusively to refer to the concept of the autonomous indivisible person as it is found in modern Western culture. As in the previous section, we will start with a short introduction about saints' relics and then proceed to the reopened graves from rural cemeteries.

Saints' relics were usually not complete bodies or complete objects, but consisted of small pieces or fragments. Common types of relics were: a single bone or body part of a saint, a strand of hair, a drop of blood, a piece of the saint's clothes, an object that touched the saint's body, or even a stone or some dirt from the saint's grave. Often, there were a great number of relics of the same saint, which were distributed over many places (Brown 1982; Angenendt 1997; Smith 2012). We could therefore say that saints were not individuals, in the sense that both their spiritual presence and their physical remains were not kept whole and undivided, but on the contrary, were very much split up and distributed over multiple locations. In the words of the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), the saints were 'distributed persons'.

In his last book, Gell develops the concept of the distributed person. He starts with some observations about the inhabitants of Tahiti, who use images of their god Oro to bring about his presence among people. The images are usually kept carefully wrapped, since people believe that they are dangerous to behold.

Gell (1998: 109-114) argues that while the image is concealed, the god himself is kept safely away from people. His power is left in the control of the priests, to be periodically renewed when the wrapping is opened and the feathers it contains are distributed among community leaders. The distribution of the feathers is perceived as the distribution of the power and presence of the god. This example shows that the presence of a person - their personhood - does not necessarily reside in an intact, undivided and autonomous form. In fact, a person's presence or personhood can be distributed over multiple places, objects and substances.

The medieval cult of saint's relics is a prime example. The presence and power of a saint can simultaneously manifest itself through many different distributed body parts and objects, such as the mentioned clothes, utensils, stones and dirt from the grave. It therefore seems that early medieval persons were not necessarily autonomous and undivided individuals. Rather, their presence and power could be divided into objects and distributed over various places. This also resonates in the three qualities of relics listed by Smith: incompleteness, indeterminacy and portability. Relics are usually not a person's whole body, they are by definition fragmented left-overs (*reliquiae* in Latin). They are detached from their original context, and thereby deprived of a self-evident identity or individuality. Importantly, their detachment and small size also make them portable and easy to transport from one place to another (Smith 2012: 150-158). The saints had died and gone to God, but their physical remains and the artefacts they had touched remained on earth. By enshrining these relics in specially constructed containers (cloth wrappings, reliquaries, altars, churches), devotees could gain access to and control over their powers.

This new perspective can lead us to a number of interesting ideas about grave goods and grave reopenings. Theuws (2009) argues that the grave good deposition could have been a means of imparting particular qualities to an ancestor. The deposition of weapons in the

grave could for instance help to create a protecting ancestor. If this is correct, one could argue that the weapons became an element of the ancestor's personhood. Part of the ancestor's presence and protective power could now be found in the weapons, just like a saint's power could be found in a stone from the saint's grave. When the weapons (or other grave goods and human remains) were removed from the grave, these objects and thereby the presence and power of the ancestor was distributed over various places and contexts. Some remained in the grave, while others were taken out. It is obviously difficult to know what happened to the objects that were taken, but like saint's relics, they may have been divided over various places and among the descendants of the deceased. In this way deceased ancestors could be present and powerful in many different places. They became distributed persons.

This interpretation of the social function of grave reopenings can be taken one step further. Contrary to the funerals, which usually have to be performed within a few days after a death, grave reopenings 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 that are performed immediately after death (Huntington & Metcalf 1979). Furthermore, the time that passed between the burial and the reopening would have allowed the deceased's family to accumulate resources and prepare a more elaborate feast than what could be afforded during the first funeral. Miles (1965) for instance, has documented this type of practice among the Ngadyu-Dayak of Borneo. In this way, grave reopenings may have served to bring together the members of the deceased's kin group, 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 various levels or dimensions of a society's concept of the person are visible simultaneously

(Fowler 2004: 48-51, 68). In the present case, the discernible levels might be the kin group as a whole, the direct blood relatives and affines of the deceased and the dead person him- or herself. In systems of fractal personhood each level, large or small, is seen as similar or even equivalent in nature to the other levels. Thus the remains of the deceased, revealed in the reopened grave, could have been perceived to represent the whole kin group. In fact, even single grave goods or bones could have been treated as persons with a power and volition of their own. This discussion of fractal personhood resonates the hypothesis put forward by Bazelmans (1999: 114) in his discussion of the *Beowulf* that a king is constituted as an ancestor by his people, who are represented by his independent, adult warrior-followers. The *Beowulf* also strongly reflects concepts of relational personhood, as the poem's characters are usually referred to with the relation they have to other persons. They are hardly ever just themselves, but rather always someone's son or daughter, father, brother, wife or widow, follower or king (Bazelmans 1999: 123-124).

Aspects of fractal personhood can also be observed for saints' relics, which are treated both as parts of holiness linked to God, representations of Christianity, parts of the saint's body, and as singular entities that have a 'personal' power to act independently. Each element in such a fractal is both a person in itself, and a representation of the larger whole. Thus, if reopenings in rural cemeteries would have involved the redistribution of some of the materials taken from the grave among the participants in the meeting, this could in fact have been viewed as a distribution of the power of the joined kin group to each single member, subgroup or nuclear family.

Reopening graves and distributing the relics of the deceased is not the only way the presence of the community's dead could have been established in a number of places. In his study of a number of cemeteries from early medieval Maastricht, Panhuysen (2005: 282-283) found that they did not present a cross-section of the mortality in the local population, but

contained disproportionate numbers of people from particular sexes and age groups. He therefore suggests that there may have been a system of complementary cemeteries in and around Maastricht, which meant that people from a single community or family could be buried at different sites according to their perceived social category and the related preferences of the burying group. This tendency to distribute the community's dead over several burial locations may have reached a height in the seventh century, when grave reopenings probably also became more frequent. In a treatise on distinct types of burial grounds in the Meuse–Demer–Scheldt region, Theuws notes that seventh-century communities developed various types of burial grounds, which included the old cemeteries that had come into use when the area was first colonized, small farmyard cemeteries within the settlement and churchyards near newly founded episcopal buildings. In addition, they may have transported some of their dead to cemeteries outside the region, for instance to important cult centers or to other cemeteries that were related to their kin group. The author argues that these different burial locations were related to the burying communities' strategies of self-definition. Farmyard burial may have emphasized the importance of the co-resident group and supported claims on the land and farmstead. The old cemeteries stood for the local communities, whose significance was changing because they were gradually being integrated into large estates as part of the reorganization under the Pippinids, which were symbolized by the new churches and the churchyards associated with them (Theuws 1999: 345-346). Burying the bodies of community members at different locations was only one way of distributing the presence of the dead over a number of locations. Reopening graves and removing objects and possibly bones from them may have been another. In the words of Theuws (1999: 347): '[...] the robbing of graves seems to be part of a complex process of reshuffling old and new dead over different burial grounds in order to create a new encompassing order that is both social

and spiritual in character.’ Like farmyard burial, grave reopenings and the subsequent distribution and redeposition of the deceased’s relics may also have been used to substantiate claims on land and property. See Theuws (2009) for other possible early medieval strategies of claiming land in mortuary practices. The idea that the land where the ancestors are buried is their descendants’ property can be found worldwide. In the Philippines, for instance, 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, who did ethnographic fieldwork in this region).

4.3 Value and economy

The previous section discussed the hypothesis that grave reopenings were events for celebrating the ancestors, collecting relics and emphasizing the burial community’s fractal personhood. This is a very involved interpretation that makes a quite lot of assumptions about early medieval culture and social life in the Low Countries and beyond. When presenting this interpretation at conferences, I inevitably get asked whether grave reopenings could not ‘simply’ have been materialistically motivated. I understand where these questions come from. Why make up elaborate stories about ancestors and rituals, when a simple practical interpretation seems to suffice? What’s more logical than saying the grave reopeners removed objects because they wanted to benefit from their material value. The many objects left behind in reopened graves could simply have been overlooked in the messy environment of the overturned graves, especially if the diggers were in a hurry had to conduct their business and had to work under the cover of darkness (Fremersdorf 1955: 29; Roth 1977: 289; Klevnäs 2013: 66). They do not have to mean that the diggers were not materialistically motivated. In this section I will dive deep into the economic argument, evaluating to what extent it really makes sense and coming

to terms with its potential for shedding light on the grave reopening phenomenon. In this section I will use the word value in a purely materialistic sense. The cultural and social aspects of an object’s significance will be called ‘worth’, inspired by Bazelmans’ (1999) discussion of *Beowulf*.

Material value – only half of the story

One of the first issues that arises when discussing economic or materialistic motivations for grave reopenings is the value of the goods that were taken from the grave. In the previous chapters we saw that while all types of objects were probably eligible to be taken, the diggers may have targeted swords and seaxes; various kinds of women’s dress accessories, especially beads and brooches; and possibly also a varying array of utensils, such as small knives and pottery. The materials taken from reopened graves included all those commonly retrieved by archaeologists: iron, copper alloys, silver, gold, gemstone pottery and glass.

The provenance of objects taken from graves must often have been clearly visible as such because their physical appearance changed profoundly during their stay in the grave. However, there was probably quite a lot of variation in how this influenced their material value. These transformations are summarized in table 4.3.1. Organic materials such as textile, leather, wood and also human skin and flesh were susceptible to decomposition. Their color, texture and general appearance would start to change almost as soon as they entered the grave and were subjected to the humid conditions created by the process of decay in and around the deceased’s body. Some of these materials deteriorate faster than others – leather and wood especially may hold out quite some time – but all would probably decompose within approximately 10 to 35 years (Aspöck 2005: 251–252, 2011: 302–306). Metals such as iron, copper alloys and silver would not decompose, but they would soon corrode under the influence of humidity, which would also change their color, texture and – especially in the case of iron – their

shape. Only glass, gold, stones and gems would have emerged virtually unchanged, as they still often do at archaeological excavations over a thousand years later. They would have needed only a little cleaning and perhaps minor refurbishing before they could potentially be worn, used, given away or sold in the same ways as they had been before their deposition in the grave. Pottery vessels too, if they had not been broken, could probably be cleaned and made usable again, if only for reuse in another grave. Some authors suggest that the pottery, glass and metal vessels from graves would have been perceived as too badly contaminated to be used again for everyday purposes (Grünewald 1988: 37; Klevnäs 2013: 28). This could be true, but it is important to keep in mind that early medieval people did not have modern hygiene knowledge. If they did perceive objects from graves as ‘contaminated’, this contamination may have extended not only to pottery vessels but also other object categories, limiting the ways in which they could be used. Depending on the local soil conditions, human and animal bone and shells could also be in the category of inert materials. Objects and materials whose appearance changed (decayed, corroded) in the grave were probably valued differently than those that were relatively inert, not only in the sense of their raw material monetary value, but possibly also in the symbolic sense of the a dead person becoming an ancestor, as discussed in the previous section.

Objects of various materials would have been so extensively damaged by even a relatively short stay in the moist environment of the grave, that they would be unsuitable for normal use or exchange when they were taken out. This was not only the case for organic materials such as textile and wood, but also for most of the metal. Iron especially is very susceptible to corrosion. A study by Gillard et al. (1994) has shown that within a month to a year, iron objects can rust to such an extent that textiles become embedded in the corrosion layer. As argued by Klevnäs (2013: 46), corrosion may have been kept at bay longer when objects were coated in grease, or were

kept in a greased container, such as a sword in a scabbard. If so, the relatively good preservation of spatha’s and seaxes may have been one of the reasons that grave reopeners targeted these items over other large metal objects such as lance heads. Other metals such as silver and copper alloys may have taken slightly longer to corrode, but would also sustain considerable damage from being in the grave for a few years. Corrosion would render metal objects unsuitable for normal use and thereby also influence their value as exchangeable items. They could however have been melted down and used as raw material (Zintl 2012: 58-59).

Textile, leather, wood, human flesh	Changes immediately, decomposes within a number of years
Iron, copper alloys, silver	Corrodes within a year
Glass, pottery, gold, stones and gems, (bones)	Stays unchanged (bones may decay)

Table 4.3.1 Changes in various categories of materials after they are placed in a grave

Often ‘value’ is discussed merely as an expression of objects’ raw monetary or material revenue. In my opinion however, it is unlikely that the diggers were only interested in the simple resale price or raw material value of the things they took from the graves. This is supported by the fact that specific types of graves were preferentially reopened and particular object types were selectively taken or left behind. Firstly, at least in the cases that took place within one generation of the funeral (which are approximately half of the reopenings in the research area) the diggers could probably remember the deceased and had memories and emotional connections with them. As discussed above, they may have been either family or fellow community members of the deceased or, as Klevnäs (2013: 83) suggests, they could have belonged to enemy groups. Even if the participants had no memo-

ries or emotional connections to the deceased, for instance because a long time passed between the burial and the reopening, they must still have been aware that these were objects from *graves*. If they were digging in the family plot, these were the graves of their own ancestors; or if they had no connection to the cemetery, they were reopening the graves of unknown dead. Objects from graves may have been perceived as special, powerful and even dangerous. Grünewald (1988: 40) argues that objects from graves would often have been recognizable to people from the burial community who had seen the funeral and knew with what objects the dead person had been buried. He suggests that the diggers may have needed the skill of a smith too melt the objects and reforge them into a new form before they were able to benefit from their material value. This is a possibility, especially if the objects were obtained without the deceased's family's consent or if they were perceived as dangerously contaminated. However, it is equally possible that the known provenance of former grave goods would have given them a special potential that increased their perceived worth, adding a dimension beyond the plain value of the raw material or that of a similar object that had not spent time in a grave. If so, the corroded and damaged state of some of these objects could have made them *more* economically valuable rather than less, since it made them recognizable as former grave goods. It seems likely that the meaning and value of former grave goods was also influenced – if not largely determined – by the reason the objects were deposited in the grave in the first place. Unfortunately early medieval grave good deposition has been the subject of a debate even more extensive than that on grave reopenings, and as yet, no consensus has been reached. Härke (2014) recently summarized the past and present theories about early medieval grave good deposition. The interpretations of grave goods he lists include: equipment for the deceased's journey to the afterlife and the afterlife itself; inalienable personal property of the deceased that had to be buried with them; collective inalienable possessions of the de-

ceased's family stored away in the grave; grave goods as direct reflections of the deceased's identity and social standing; objects as metaphors for the deceased's life and biography; conspicuous consumption and display (potlatch) by the deceased's family; gifts from the mourners to the deceased; gifts to a deity, like a Charon's Penny; remains of funerary feasting; disposal of spiritually polluted items; apotropaic functions such as preventing the dead from walking; and lastly, getting rid of objects that would inconveniently remind people of the deceased. Härke (2014: 54) states that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive and may all have been true for at least some grave goods in various geographical regions and social contexts during some phases of the early medieval period. These interpretations raise many issues that could be relevant for the value, meanings and uses of objects taken from reopened graves. For instance, grave goods that were deposited as equipment for the deceased's journey to the afterlife would no longer be needed after the transitory period had passed (for instance after the body had skeletonized), making it acceptable to remove them from the grave. Similarly, if the grave goods were considered the collective inalienable property of the deceased's family, relatives may have had the right to retrieve them. Kars suggests that deposition in a grave may have been a way to preserve collective inalienable family property when no suitable living caretaker was available to hold onto an object. Such objects may later have been retrieved, for instance when an appropriate caretaker had come of age (Kars 2013: 101). On the other hand, items that were the inalienable *personal* property of the deceased or that were gifts to a deity or had an apotropaic function to keep the dead from walking, may more often have been left behind when graves were reopened.

Klevnäs has recently formulated her own view on grave goods as inalienable property, related to her hypothesis that in the Anglo-Saxon territory grave reopenings were attacks on the ancestors of enemy groups. She argues for two categories of inalienable property. Firstly, a

kind of collective inalienable objects such as swords and brooches which played an important role in gift exchange and inter-generational inheritance. These were to some extent considered inalienable, but not to such a degree that they could not be taken from reopened graves. Secondly, she argues for a type 'personal' inalienable objects, such as knives and necklace beads, which were so bound up with their owners that it was not acceptable to take them away after death, even for hostile grave reopeners (Klevnäs 2015: 175-179). Klevnäs' paper raises many interesting and valid points about early medieval ownership, the meanings and functions of various types of grave goods and the distinctions she draws between various types of inalienable property. However, I am not convinced by her interpretation of the archaeological data, especially her suggestion that certain types of objects were never taken from reopened graves. In the Low Countries there certainly do not seem to have been any taboos on the removal of particular grave good types, although some objects were left behind more often than others. In Klevnäs' own research area Anglo-Saxon Kent, the practice may have been different, but as discussed above, without statistical comparisons of the numbers of objects found in reopened and intact graves, we cannot be certain; especially for beads, which occur in graves in such large numbers that some could easily be taken, while many others were left behind. On the subject of beads, Klevnäs also somewhat contradicts herself by saying that these objects were often exchanged as gifts and handed down to the next generation, but also suggesting that they were so inextricably connected to their owners that they could not be removed from graves. From a more positive point of view, if the grave goods were meant to show off the social status of the deceased and the family by means of conspicuous consumption and display, reopenings could have been a way of focusing on their wealth one more time. As was argued in the section on personhood, reopenings may have been elaborately planned events to which many people were invited. When the grave

was reopened, its lavish contents could be displayed one more time, and specific items or fragments could be distributed among the attendees as mementos. If the mourners had contributed grave goods or other resources to the funeral, the reopening could even have been an opportunity for the deceased's family to reciprocate these gifts. On the other hand, if grave goods had been deposited as a means of getting rid of objects that would inconveniently remind people of the deceased, fragmenting them during a reopening could have been a means of completing the process of forgetting. If certain grave goods were deposited in the grave because they were perceived to have been polluted by belonging to or coming into contact with the deceased, that could have given them a special kind of potency and value. Aspöck notes that in the Early Middle Ages bones of the dead, and objects that came into contact with them, were sought after as magical substances, especially if they originated from criminals (Aspöck 2005: 227-228). For instance, the star shaped formation and other bone deposits from Oegstgeest may – among other possibilities – have been the result of such magical practices. Amuletic functions could have been another potential magical use for objects taken from graves.

If the objects were perceived as ancestral relics or heirlooms, as was argued in the previous section, that may also have contributed to their value. Geary (1986) describes a lively exchange-economy for saints' relics, which included gifting, selling and stealing. Smith (2012: 156) says about Christian saints' relics that 'They turned the events of Christian history and legend into tiny movable objects that could be touched, kissed, carried around, possessed, stolen, bequeathed and counted. They might also be collected – or subdivided for sharing'. Similarly, objects from reopened graves may have been perceived as materializations of both the ancestors themselves and the burial community's past, which could be engaged in various acts of keeping and exchange. If on the other hand – as Klevnäs argues – grave reopenings were carried out by hostile groups, objects from reopened graves may

have served as a type of trophies, valuable as proof of the grave reopeners' prowess and success in attacking the graves of their enemies. Similarly, if the dead themselves were considered hostile, as is for instance the case in some of the written sources from medieval England and in the Icelandic sagas (Beck 1978; Gardela 2013: 100-107; Klevnäs 2013: 80-81), objects taken from the grave could be trophies of the heroic struggle against the deceased.

Note that the category of 'objects' in these contexts is not necessarily restricted to grave goods, but could also have included bones and even dirt or stones from the grave. In cemeteries where both grave goods and bones are found to be missing from reopened graves, the authors often assume that the grave goods were taken for their value, while the bones were discarded (For instance Zintl 2012: 252; Klevnäs 2013: 52). This was not necessarily the case in the Low Countries, as is apparent from the finds of deliberate deposits of human bone in non-funerary contexts in Oegstgeest, Kessel and possibly other sites. Bones may even had monetary value, as was also the case in for early medieval saints' relics (Geary 1986: 184-186).

Why a purely materialistic interpretation does not work

The previous section explored the potential value and worth of objects from reopened graves, and showed that these may have been much more complex than a simple resale price for well-preserved objects or the cost of raw material for damaged and corroded objects. However as was discussed above, reopened graves themselves also yield much evidence that suggests the diggers were not just aiming to maximize the monetary profit that could be gained by systematically collecting all the graves' objects. Although there is some evidence that the diggers targeted well-furnished graves over less well-furnished ones, they were not systematically removing all objects of value, nor were they exclusively targeting rich graves. This is also apparent in regions outside the Low Countries. For instance in the ceme-

tery of Burgweinting-Ost which was studied by Zintl, the majority of the graves were reopened, despite the fact that they were probably quite poorly furnished (Zintl 2012: 323). The high percentages of reopened graves in many cemeteries and the difficulties of hiding reopenings both during and after the act make it unlikely that this was a secretive practice. Therefore, the remaining objects were probably not all overlooked by hurrying diggers who had to work in the dark of night. This holds true both for the Low Countries and for German Bavaria (Zintl 2012: 337). The fact that large metal objects such as lance heads and belt plates were often left behind shows that mining for raw metal was usually not the diggers' primary aim. They may have targeted small valuable items such as precious metal jewelry, but these items seem to have been relatively rare in most cemeteries, so they could not have been the main reason for opening most graves. The idea that precious metals and gemstones were the digger's primary aim is also negated by the fact that the diggers seem to have preferred men's graves over women's graves, even though the latter usually contained more jewelry. Zintl makes the point that glass beads would have been ideal 'grave robber' loot, since they were small, easy to clean, and not very recognizable (Zintl 2012: 244-245). While it is clear that many beads were taken from the reopened graves both in Bavaria and in the Low Countries, the diggers were by no means systematic in removing all of them. Rather, they seem to have taken small numbers of specific objects and object types, indicating that they were driven by other purposes than a simple desire for material wealth. In addition, the materialistic grave robbery hypothesis seems to originate from an overly pessimistic view of the wealth available in early medieval rural society. There is no evidence for a shortage of metals and other raw materials in the Merovingian period (Roth 1978: 67; Steuer 1998: 520; Theuws 2014). Rather, there seems to have been a ready supply of new items, which makes it unlikely that there was a pressure on people to start ransacking graves, purely out of poverty.

Gifts from the ancestors

An alternative way to look at the economics of grave reopenings, is from the perspective of the deceased. This section is once again based on my previous work (Van Haperen 2010: 27-28). Grave reopenings could have been perceived as an opportunity to engage the ancestors in a gift exchange. This interpretation only makes sense if we accept that early medieval people perceived their dead ancestors as active actors who were engaged in or even constituted by exchanges of goods, as was proposed above.

In his article on the various types of early medieval weapon exchanges, Härke (2000: 390) suggests that the custom of grave good deposition was a means of taking artefacts out of circulation, after which they had to be replaced by producing new ones and looting others from neighboring communities or from graves. However, since it has been demonstrated that grave reopenings were probably more than simple cases of materialistically motivated robbery, it might be better to consider the deposition and subsequent removal of objects from graves as potential occasions for exchange, not fundamentally unlike other types of early medieval artefact circulation. The dead would often keep the items given to them during the funeral, but when their graves were reopened they could also return them or pass them on to a new owner, either willingly or unwillingly under force or coercion.

An example of such an exchange can perhaps be found in Paul the Deacon's account of how Gisilpert entered the tomb of Alboin and took his sword and some of his other grave goods. Krüger (1978: 176-177) cites this as one of the few references to grave robbery in the narrative sources. Geary (1994: 49, 64-65) proposes a different interpretation. He places this tale in a long tradition of grave reopenings from the Icelandic sagas which has parallels in ancient Greek and Roman sources. In these tales, grave reopenings are portrayed as a way of entering the world of the dead to contact the person buried in the grave and obtain some of his grave goods (by either gift or theft). Such exchanges with the dead were not

just motivated by a desire to obtain their property. The items taken from the grave were representations, or even containers, of the deceased's power. Their exchange therefore involved not only the items themselves, but also their dead owner's authority and strength. The sagas do not come from the Merovingian world and should therefore not be used uncritically to aid the interpretation of Merovingian material. However, the similarity between the Icelandic myths and the tale of Alboin does suggest some cultural continuity, or at least resemblance of meaning and social context, to justify this interpretation. Geary emphasizes that in the Early Middle Ages, exchanges of property were an important way of creating and confirming kinship ties, especially those between a predecessor and heir. We may therefore consider the exchange of artefacts as performances of power transfer and the creation of kinship ties. By opening Alboin's grave and taking/receiving his sword, Gisilpert attempted to represent himself as, and thereby to become, Alboin's successor.

The hypothesis that grave reopenings were meant to establish relations of kinship or mutual dependence with the deceased by taking or receiving some of their relics from the grave has a number of interesting consequences for the way we interpret these practices. If they were exchanges in the proper sense of the word, the deceased subsequently had the right to expect a counter-gift (Mauss 1954). These gifts could have taken various material forms – such as depositions of new artefacts in graves to replace those that were taken – or non-material forms, such as continued attention to grave sites and the relics taken from them. In fact, grave reopenings in themselves could also have been a form of service to the dead, as in the Philippines where graves are sometimes opened in order to add extra blankets if the community has reason to suspect that the deceased is uncomfortable (personal communication from Titia Schippers).

The deposition of objects into reopened graves is not something that has received a lot of attention in the debate because direct evidence for such practices is very scarce. Nevertheless,

the comparatively high numbers of objects found in reopened graves do allow for the possibility that objects were not just removed, but also deposited during reopenings. Physical property was only one of the things that could be exchanged in early medieval society, and gifts of service or mutual assistance may have been equally important, both in the interaction between the living themselves and between the living and the dead. In Christian communities, for instance, the dead (particularly the saints) were expected to contribute to the well-being of the living by aiding their dealings with God and promoting the productivity of their agricultural efforts. In return, the living offered them services in the form of prayers for their well-being, the regular pronunciation of their names and the continued memory of their deeds (Geary 1994: 90, 171). By this veneration of and service to the dead, the living community earned the right to expect the constant protection and assistance of the dead, thus completing the Maussian cycle of gift, acceptance and counter-gift.

The purpose and meaning of these exchanges between the living and the dead may have differed between grave reopenings that were performed while the deceased was still remembered (scenario 1), and those that took place after the deceased's identity was forgotten (scenario 2). In scenario 1, the living retained memories of their interaction with the ancestors when they were still alive and of the way they were buried. Exchanges conducted in the context of the reopening may therefore have been perceived to reaffirm relations that had been formed during life or during the funeral. Ties of mutual dependence and kinship were made to continue beyond death, sustaining the presence of the dead in the community of the living. It is likely, however, that these relations also gained new dimensions of meaning in the mortuary context. In scenario 2, the living had no former relationship with the dead – at least none that they explicitly remembered. Relations between the living community and these alien and possibly even hostile dead may need to have been initiated and maintained by the exchanges con-

ducted during and after their graves were reopened. Under such circumstances, establishing an exchange may have been of even greater importance than it was in scenario 1, since there may have been a need to appease them before they could be appropriated as ancestors. The exchange of gifts may therefore have been an important means of incorporating them into the community. Alternatively, grave reopenings of long departed ancestors could have been a way for the burial community to reappropriate the power contained in the now anonymized grave goods. In his analysis of the *Beowulf*, Bazelmans suggests that treasure and hoards, especially objects like swords, armor and jewelry, are connected to life and fertility and to the constitution of personal worth and image. After death, an ancestor's worth – constituted in objects and wealth – is first retained in the memories of his kin and retainers, but within a generation or two, the ancestor's identity and achievements are slowly forgotten, and the worth (wealth) becomes anonymized, and begins to constitute the worth of the following generations (Bazelmans 1999: 160-165, 190-191). If we apply this mode of thinking to grave goods and grave reopenings, the selective removal of certain types of grave goods could have been a method for regaining some of the worth that was stored away in old ancestral graves. A similar line of reasoning was recently proposed by Platenkamp (2016: 178-179). He argues that the deposition of valuable items ('money') in the ground renders them socially dead. There can be many reasons why people would choose to ritually kill money or treasure. The cases discussed by Platenkamp all involve a disturbance in the community's social structure, like conflicts and animosity or incest. Recuperating the treasure and effectively rescuing it from social oblivion by reinserting it into circulation can be perceived as a heroic deed. Platenkamp uses the example of Beowulf who rescues treasures from Grendel's mother and the dragon, but it is possible that similar motivations played a part in grave reopening in the research area.

Grave reopenings and the ritual economy

In the above I have argued that while economic and materialistic considerations were almost certainly part of the reason why early medieval people chose to reopen the graves of their dead, such motivations were probably much more varied and complex than a straightforward desire to benefit from the resale price or raw material value of the objects found. The differentiation between material value and social worth may not only be relevant to grave reopenings, but also to the early medieval economy in general. Recently, Carver (2015) has suggested that the economy in the early medieval period was not necessarily driven by a desire for trade and material gains in themselves, but rather by the need for materials and objects that could serve to fulfil symbolic or practical roles in the ritual practices of persons and communities. He argues that early medieval economies were driven by ideological needs:

‘Some required wealth to be deposited in graves, others induced gold to be thrown into lakes, others persuaded people who valued their souls to convey their wealth into the hands of spiritual consortia (for example the Christian monastery). It would not be legitimate to regard these ways of using goods as ineffective [...]. The premise here is that through most of the period 400-800, material wealth is largely the detritus of an ideological programme rather than a tale of economic evolution.’ (Carver 2015: 1-2)

We can find an example of the needs that lay at the basis of this ‘ritual economy’ in Bazelmans’ treatise on the *Beowulf*. He states that early medieval persons were dependent on relationships with other people and supernatural entities. These relationships were essential for the development of the person through the life cycle from child to youth, adult, elder and eventually ancestor. The exchange of gifts plays a determining role in this process. The successive transformations have to be effected by bringing together various constituting elements, some of which were probably objects. By exchanging gifts people were able to activate various relationships within the human

world, and with supernatural entities (Bazelmans 1999: 9). In this view, economic activities such as obtaining, keeping and exchanging objects were an indispensable part of the constitution of early medieval persons, ensuring the continuity of the social order and maintaining beneficial relations with the otherworld. Theuws (2014) has argued convincingly that this ‘ritual economy’ did not just facilitate the demands of elite persons like those in the *Beowulf*, but also – or even mostly – the needs of farmers in rural settlements. These rural inhabitants employed the objects they obtained in the performance of life cycle rituals such as coming of age ceremonies, marriage and funerals, as is evidenced by the large amounts of precious objects found in rural cemeteries.

4.4 The dangerous dead

Early medieval ideas about death and the afterlife may not only have included good powerful dead, like benevolent saints and ancestors, but also rather more ill-intentioned deceased, against whom measures needed to be taken to safeguard the living from their malevolent influence. For convenience, I will call these dangerous entities revenants or unquiet dead, without making a priori assumptions about in what ways they may have been thought to manifest themselves or affect the living. Since very little is known of concepts of the dangerous dead in the early medieval Low Countries, this chapter cites early and later medieval and even post-medieval examples from Germany, Britain and Scandinavia. Coming from such culturally and chronologically diverse and distant regions, these sources should largely be seen as inspiring analogies rather than direct bases for interpretation.

Deviant burials

The fear of revenant dead has traditionally been associated with so called ‘deviant’ or atypical, non-normative burials; graves that differ from normative burials. Their abnormalities can be diverse, from unusual grave goods and differences in the graves’ orienta-

tion to mutilations of the corpse. These variations came about through a varied range of processes and motivations, of which the fear of unquiet dead was only one. We must also take into account that there is considerable local and regional variation in what can be considered 'deviant' and in the meanings of particular forms of deviancy (Thäte 2007: 267-272; Aspöck 2008; Gardęła 2013: 109-110, 120-121). In this section I will focus on forms of atypical burial that can arguably be associated with necrophobia, specifically the fear of revenants. Other circumstances in which non-normative burial in various forms might take place include sacrifice, murder, suicide, war and massacres, judicial violence, and disease epidemics such as the plague (Reynolds 2009: 40-52; Gardęła & Kajkowski 2013). Deviant burials as a category are problematic because deviancy can only be established in relation to the local or regional funerary norm, and even then it is difficult to establish what does and does not fall within the normal range (Aspöck 2008; Gardęła 2013; Gardęła & Kajkowski 2013). Thäte was one of the first to note that 'deviants' are usually buried in regular cemeteries among the 'normative' graves. This signals that they were perceived as part of society and not seen as outcasts who had to be buried in separate cemeteries (Thäte 2007: 272). The interpretation of deviant burials is not clear-cut. Fear of the dead – especially the revenant dead – is often referred to, as is judicial violence. In the case of judicial violence, the burial's deviancy may have been considered a form of punishment, or may in some cases even be related to the cause of death, as in the case of decapitation. Actions that were presumably taken out of fear for revenants often involve some kind of fixation to prevent risky dead from rising from their graves. Both these interpretations are relatively well grounded in historical and archaeological evidence, as will be discussed in more detail below (Lecouteux 1987: 180-181; Reynolds 2009; Gardęła 2013; Gardęła & Kajkowski 2013; Klevnäs 2016a). In his study of archaeological evidence from the Anglo-Saxon area, Reynolds (2009: 61-95)

focused on characteristics such as decapitation and amputation of limbs, stones placed on top of the body, burial in prone position, and restraining the corpse by tying up the limbs. These practices are closely paralleled by methods for restraining the dead that are described in the early stories about revenants from Scandinavia, Britain and Germany, especially the focus on heads, including decapitation and rearrangement of skulls. Other practices described in the written sources, such as removal of the heart, are more difficult to recognize archaeologically. Some stories recount bodies being burnt or thrown into rivers. The damage to legs and feet that is found in some atypical burials is not mentioned specifically in most written sources, but it could nevertheless be related to a desire to prevent the dead from rising and 'walking again' (Lecouteux 1987: 31-35; Blair 2009: 546; Gardęła 2013: 112; Klevnäs 2016a: 197).

Deviant reopenings

In some cases, the treatment of the human remains in reopened graves was very similar to the manipulations of the body typically associated with deviant burials, which were carried out *peri-mortem* or during the funeral. In a recent paper, Klevnäs has drawn attention to the fact that contrary to what is often thought, the evidence from reopened graves shows that manipulations of the body could take place long after burial, even after the body had skeletonized (Klevnäs 2016a: 198-199). An unknown percentage of cases interpreted as deviant burials may in fact result from post-depositional interventions that were not recognized as such. This may occur when there is no visible reopening pit or due to a lack of osteological and taphonomic knowledge on the part of the excavators. Interestingly, manipulations carried out during post-depositional interventions accord well with the written sources about measures taken against revenants, which are usually carried out some time after burial when the dead are found to be unquiet (Lecouteux 1987: 180-181; Gardęła 2013; Klevnäs 2016a). In the Low Countries there are very few graves

where bone material was sufficiently well preserved to allow recognition of atypical burials. There are however a few interesting exceptions, some of which probably acquired their unusual appearance during a reopening, rather than during the original deposition. In this section I will focus on atypical burials which may only have become atypical after they underwent a post-depositional intervention. In the cemetery of Lent-Lentseveld three graves showed evidence of post-depositional skull manipulation. In grave 46 the deceased's cranium had been placed on the pelvis. There were no cut marks on the skull and the vertebra and mandible were left in *in situ*, indicating that the cranium was moved after the tissues connecting it to the mandible had decomposed. Apart from the displaced cranium, the skeleton showed no indications that it had been disturbed after the onset of decomposition. In grave 39 the skull was missing entirely. It had probably been removed during a later reopening, when the corpse's soft tissues were gone. Lent grave 15 contained the remains of a six year old child that had been curled up into a bundle. The child's skull was found a few centimeters above the rest of the body, separated from it by a layer of clay. Once again there were no indications of a forceful *peri-mortem* decapitation, indicating that the soft tissues had at least partially decomposed before the skull was separated from the body. It seems likely that these skull manipulations took place during post-depositional interventions. However, since the excavators did not note any traces of reopening cuts, the bodies may alternatively have been stored above ground or given a preliminary cover in the grave until the skull could be moved and the grave pit backfilled. The other cemeteries in the region did not reveal such typical examples of skull manipulation as were found in Lent. This could however very well be due to lack of preserved bone. The numbers of post-depositional skull manipulations found by Aspöck, Klevnäs and Zintl for their respective research areas certainly suggest that there may have been many more (Aspöck 2005, 2011; Zintl 2012: 354-

355; Klevnäs 2013: 77-79). There were nevertheless a few other cases of graves that could be described as 'deviant'. Grave 2013-01 from Oegstgeest, contained the remains of a man who appears to have been buried prone in a rather small pit. The front side of his body, including the arm and leg bones, showed signs of burning as if the body was partially cremated while in a crouched position. This was probably a primary deposition, not a body that was first buried elsewhere, dug up and redeposited. Burning of the corpse was one the revenant measures described in the historical sources, although it usually involved a full cremation rather than a partial scorching (Blair 2009: 550; Gardela 2013: 102-104). Most other cemeteries in the dataset yielded varying numbers of cremation graves. These are rather too numerous to be considered truly 'deviant', so they may not be associated with measures taken against revenants. In the intervention cut of grave 58 from the Posterholt cemetery a dog's jawbone was found, which could have been deposited there during the reopening. Its inclusion in the fill may have been accidental, but there are indications from Scandinavia that the deposition of possible musical instruments made from animal jaw bones (usually pig) was associated with the fear of the dead (Gardela 2013: 113-114). An empty grave could also be an indication that the dead person's remains was taken out and reburied or cremated/destroyed to prevent them from haunting the living (Gardela 2011: 383-384, 2013: 104). The lack of preserved bone in the research area makes it difficult to recognize graves without bodies in them, but we may have an example of such a practice in Bergeijk grave 35, where the diggers seem to have taken out the entire coffin from the grave. These finds converge with the observations of Klevnäs and Zintl that there is a small number of cases, both from the Anglo-Saxon area and from continental North-West Europe, in which human remains in reopened graves were clearly treated in purposeful ways that are similar to behaviors which are associated with the fear of revenants in the written sources. In some of these cases, the manipula-

tion of the body or bones may have been the main goal of the reopening. The actions of the reopeners often focused on the deceased's skull, but there are also cases where the legs or feet were targeted.

Apotropaic objects

It is often suggested that particular types of grave goods, especially those that do not seem to have had a 'practical' purpose, such as shells, stones, animal teeth etc. may have been used as amulets to ward off evil influences. In the case of dangerous dead, they may also have served to keep revenants from haunting the living (Zeiten: 1997; Härke 2014: 51). However, the function of such objects is not evident from the material itself. If we do not know what their meaning or purpose was, that is not a sufficient justification for relegating them to the category of 'amulets'. We need actual proof that some object types may have served apotropaic functions. Unfortunately, written evidence about amulets is scarce and objects could have had multiple functions. Beads, animal bones or shells may in some cases have served as amulets, while in others they could have been keepsakes, food remains or decorations (Pollington 2011: 264-365). The graves from the Low Countries that are under consideration in this study have revealed very few items that could unambiguously be classed as potential amulets.

Härke suggests that specific anti-revenant amulets may have included incomplete or broken objects, or objects which look out of place in the context of a particular grave (Härke 2014: 51). Fragmentation of grave goods may therefore have had an apotropaic function to ward off the dangerous influence of the dead. The reopened graves in the research area contained many more fragmented objects than the intact graves. This fragmentation may to some extent have been accidental, resulting from actions that were necessary to reopen the graves. However, there are several examples of objects that seem to show signs of intentional damage, such as the distributed fragmented pottery vessels from Bergeijk and Posterholt. The Posterholt cemetery also

yielded a broken belt plate with an impact fracture. In the Bergeijk cemetery several fragmented weapons were found, including a lance head and two possible swords. It seems likely that at least some of these fragmented objects were broken intentionally. In Bavaria and Kent, Zintl (2012: 342, 354) and Klevnäs (2013: 67) also found many objects that had probably been fragmented during grave reopenings. Among other possibilities, this practice of fragmentation may have been perceived as a way to neutralize the dead person's dangerous powers.

Fearing the dangerous dead

Medieval written sources reveal two main reasons why early medieval people may have thought their deceased community members were liable to become dangerous revenants. Firstly, fears of the dead walking again could arise if the person had an unusual character or profession, or possessed supernatural powers. Blacksmiths, shamans, shape shifters and witches are mentioned as prominent suspects. Secondly, so called 'bad death' was a prime factor. If for instance, a person passed away in anger or unexpectedly died in their sleep and left behind unfinished business, family members sometimes feared their return as an animated corpse (Lecouteux 1987: 171-172; Gardela 2013: 100-105). The corpses of executed murderers were also apt to trigger concerns about revenancy. They combined the factors 'bad death' and unusual personal character, especially if the murderer had used magic or had been otherwise supernaturally powerful (Gardela 2013: 105-107, 118). Revenants were perceived to be a danger to the community because they could for instance injure and kill people, cause disease epidemics, destroy houses or other property and kill livestock (Lecouteux 1987: 112-170; Blair 2009: 546-548; Gardela 2013: 100-107; Klevnäs 2016a: 195).

Klevnäs notes that the post-depositional manipulations in her research area could take place quite some time after the burial, in some cases years later, as is indicated by the state of decomposition of the graves and bodies at the

time of the reopening. This leads her to argue that such manipulations were less related to perceived risk of revenancy associated with specific dead persons, and more to the state of relationships within the living community. She suggests that reopening graves may have given the perpetrators power over the dead, and by association also over their relatives and others associated with the disgraced corpse. If so, allegations of a dead person walking again could reflect conflicts with living family members, similar to the power play seen by anthropologists in the case of witchcraft accusations. If not related to community conflicts, revenant accusations could also have been a response to a crisis in the community, such as a disease epidemic (Klevnäs 2016a: 199-200). The written sources mention two main ways in which the dead could become dangerous and begin to haunt the living. The dead person himself could continue to occupy his body and become restless. Alternatively, the deceased's body or likeness could be occupied by a demon or other evil force. Another possibility found mostly in clerical sources is that an evil entity such as the devil conjures up an illusion of dead person's likeness, without actually turning the deceased into a revenant. This latter option may be a clerical rationalization of pre-Christian beliefs, and need not reflect actual ideas about revenants (Lecouteux 1987: 62-63; Blair 2009: 548-549). Lecouteux (1987: 224-226) argues for Scandinavian revenants described in the sagas that they were often a manifestation of the deceased's *hamr* or *hugr* souls, rather than the actual corpse come to life. The *hamr* and *hugr* were anchored in the body, which meant that destroying the corpse was an effective way of breaking these agents' power. He is of the opinion that similar concepts of the soul and revenants may also have been present in other parts of North-West Europe.

There is quite some variation in the details of revenant stories between the different regions of North-West Europe. For instance, Anglo-Saxon and medieval English tales about the haunting dead lack the element of the struggle or fight with the dead person in their grave

which is found in many Icelandic sagas. Instead, when people go to reopen the offending deceased's grave, the corpses lie inanimate, even if there are signs of supernatural activity such as a blood stained face or objects that have mysteriously moved. The stories do however have elements in common, especially references to manipulation and mutilation of the unquiet corpse, including such acts as displacing the head, removing body parts and burning the remains (Blair 2009; Gardela 2013; Klevnäs 2016a: 194-195).

As was already mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, the fear of haunting revenants is not the only motivation that can be found in the written sources for reopening graves and manipulating corpses. The *translatio* of saints' relics could also involve removal of part of the remains from a grave (Bonser 1962: 234; Brown 1981: 6-11; Smith 2012: 149-150), as could certain practices performed on the bodies of the elite when they died far away from home or when their remains were to be divided over multiple burial sites (Weiss-Krejci 2001, 2005). From the seventh century onwards the written sources mention cases where body parts, especially skulls, were removed to deposit them in coveted or honored locations, often *ad sanctos* in churches. This makes clear that the absence of a skull is not necessarily indicative of punishment or disrespect for the deceased but could reflect the desire that they should receive, at least in part, burial in an advantageous location (Halsall 1995: 160-162, 272; Effros 2006: 218). Gardela (2013: 107-108) mentions similar positive motivations for some cases from the Scandinavian area. Rather than originating from fear or contempt for the dead, violent practices may occasionally have been a way of showing respect and affection. For instance, in the *Hálfðanar saga Svarta* the body of King Hálfðan was split into four parts because multiple communities wanted to benefit from his benevolent presence. As mentioned above, Klevnäs (2016b: 468) has suggested for Viking Age burials in Scandinavia that the violence involved in reopenings may have served to emphasise the difficulty of bringing the grave occupant's ownership of the grave goods to an end

and passing them on to a new owner. The reopening and manipulation of graves and the remains they contained may also have played a part in divination practices. There are indications for beliefs about corpses being reanimated by the living for purposes of divination. Ealfric complains in the tenth or eleventh century that people go to graves or cross-roads to summon the dead, who appear as a likeness of their former selves, presumably to ask about the future. These references suggest that there could be traces of necromantic practices in early medieval cemeteries, at least in the Anglo-Saxon area (Blair 2009: 548; Klevnäs 2016a: 196). Pollington (2011: 66, 110) suggests that opening a grave could have been a way to enter the otherworld in which the dead person resided. Similarly, watery sites were long perceived as places where people could access the otherworld. Deliberate deposition of objects in such places may have been an attempt to turn their supernatural powers to benefit the practitioner. This could explain the depositions of objects and human bone found in the Meuse at Kessel and Roermond, and at the coastal settlement of Oegstgeest. Semple (2010: 31-32) argues that depositions in watery areas may have been used to facilitate the periodic appropriation of access points to rivers, pools and marshes. Alternatively, they could also have been related to decision-making, oath-taking and boundary disputes. It is equally possible that such deposits were associated with safe passage across liminal or supernaturally charged locations, made at the onset of a journey or on a safe return. Deposits of knives and weapons especially may have had connotations of closing off the supernatural dimension of a place, making it safe for passage. Lund (2010: 50-52, 60) suggests that deposition in wet areas could also have been a way to 'keep' or alternatively dispose of supernaturally powerful, socially charged or taboo items that could not be destroyed.

Were only some of the dead dangerous?

In her recent paper, Klevnäs (2016a: 178-179) holds to the view that post-burial interven-

tions involving body manipulation constituted a separate type of practice from reopenings that were aimed at removing grave goods. However, she does seem to leave some room for a continuum of practices, including both 'regular' grave reopenings and interventions that involved deliberate manipulations of the deceased's remains:

'Burials reopened for bodily manipulation have so far been treated as their own category. However one of the effects of drawing attention to this particular post-burial practice is to call into question the relationships between different forms of post-burial interventions, and further to the conventionally accepted interpretations of certain more widely seen types. [...] At the broadest level, it is likely that we should be prepared to envisage more, and more different kinds, of peri-burial activity in early medieval cemeteries than is generally discussed.' (Klevnäs 2016a: 200-201)

I wholeheartedly agree with this point of view and would like to take it a little further. Every dead person and every grave may have carried some amount of danger and risk of negative influences, which had to be negated through the burial practice. The ancestors were powerful, and could therefore be dangerous if their needs were not satisfactorily met. Whether the deceased's potential for good or evil was fulfilled depended on local circumstances such as their life, occurrences surrounding the death and burial, and probably also the prosperity of the heirs and social relations within the community. These situations were probably surrounded by an air of ambivalence, as was suggested by Gardela (2011) for certain Viking Age burials in Scandinavia. Practices carried out during both burials and reopenings likely aimed at managing the perceived risks involved in dealing with death, promoting a desirable outcome and setting up protective measures in the case the dead turned the wrong way.