

Medieval people reopened graves to honour family

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

According to archaeologists, a reopened grave usually indicates grave robbery. Martine van Haperen, however, draws a different conclusion. Mediaeval people presumably reopened graves to strengthen the ties with their family ancestors: they would take objects with a strong symbolic significance. Van Haperen even acted as a detective and reconstructed

the contents of such a robbed grave. She will defend her doctoral thesis on Tuesday 16 May at Leiden University. Her research was funded from the NWO programme PhDs in the Humanities.

In the early Middle Ages (450 - 800 AD), dead people were often buried with valuable items such as jewellery, weapons and earthenware pots. Martine van Haperen discovered that the people who reopened the graves certainly did not take everything. They mainly took the objects with an important symbolic significance, such as swords and shields from the male graves and jewellery from female graves. These were possibly viewed as the carriers of mythical and ancestral powers.

The archaeologist from Leiden University investigated more than 1300 graves from 11 mediaeval cemeteries in the Netherlands and Belgium. More than 40 percent of the graves had been reopened. According to Van Haperen, this probably happened when the cemeteries were still in use and in half of the cases, this was even within a single generation after the funeral.

How was she able to reconstruct what had been taken? 'I compared the content of the reopened graves with that of intact graves. Furthermore, the reopened graves often contained remainders of broken objects that had been taken. I was able to determine the original content of the graves, in part, thanks to these remains.'

Male graves were reopened the most

The graves were probably marked above ground, so that people knew who lay where. It is striking that mainly male graves were reopened, even though these contained relatively less valuable materials, such as jewellery made from precious metals. Graves that contained solely 'neutral gifts', such as pots and knives, were opened the least. In the English County of Kent and the German state of Bavaria, comparable

differences between male and female graves were observed.

These exhumations were probably performed for a variety of reasons, says Van Haperen. Legal documents from the period state severe punishments for grave robbery. However, in view of the high percentage of graves reopened and the selective approach of the diggers, it is unlikely that this was always viewed as robbery. Van Haperen: 'The reopening of a grave was possibly often a communal ritual in which people came together at the [grave](#), recalled memories and collected memorabilia or relics.'

The reopening of graves could have been a form of ancestor worship as well. Various historic documents reveal that people in the early Middle Ages considered the lineage via the paternal line to be particularly important. 'This could explain why graves with typically male objects were reopened more often. Then the diggers could strengthen their power position as legitimate heirs.'

In her [doctoral thesis](#), Van Haperen makes recommendations for archaeological practice and future excavations. The idea of fellow archaeologists that 'disrupted' graves are less valuable for research means that, up until now, many of these graves have not been well documented. In some cases, the disruption has not even been safeguarded due to a rigorous restoration of broken objects. Van Haperen: 'The reopening of graves played an important part in the way people dealt with the dead. Such graves therefore deserve extra attention.'

More information: In touch with the dead. A study of early medieval reopened graves. www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-projects/i/08/8108.html

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