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This presentation will introduce a new two-year project funded by Stiftelsen Marcus och Amalia Wallenbergs Minnesfond which will start in the department in January 2023. The project is part of a more extensive program of research for which we are seeking funding. We will present it in this wider research frame and hope for feedback on both the initial project and our future aims.

Collecting the dead: life course and kin relations in the transition to churchyard burial on Gotland (c. 950-1250 AD)

This project will carry out biomolecular analyses of human skeletal remains from conversion period burials on Gotland in order to understand the interplay of life courses and kin relations in decisions to adopt new Christian mortuary forms and locations. Over many decades, considerable numbers of furnished graves from the first phases of burial in consecrated ground have been unearthed on Gotland. These are almost unique survivals in Scandinavia and have the potential to provide a close-up picture of the early adopters of the new religion. However, until now the human remains have remained largely untouched in storage.

Yet these remains are our most direct connection to the individuals who lived and died during the conversion period. The conversion of Scandinavia has long been studied as a top-down process, led by the highest elites. In contrast, information from the burial record takes us straight to the individual decisions about adopting new rituals and displaying new beliefs made by kin and communities. When the first burials were made in Gotland's churchyards, many of the island's dead were still being buried in the ancestral cemeteries elsewhere in the landscape. Others were laid to rest in new sites without churches. This fragmentation of communities in death continued for many decades before all the baptised dead finally came to be collected in consecrated ground. But how was this fragmentation and collection negotiated? How did decisions about where to bury the dead play out in local communities? Who was chosen for burial in new and old sites?

The project will make use of a selection of innovative but increasingly widely deployed analytical techniques for recovering data on individuals' diets, mobility, and genetic relatedness. Specifically, carbon, nitrogen, and strontium stable isotopes from multi-tissue samples will be analysed to characterise diet and geographic location over life courses and aDNA will be compared to investigate genetic connections.