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Deciphered Secrets from Early Medieval Burial Grounds

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What can human bones reveal about people who lived more than 1,200 years ago? At the Natural History Museum Vienna, the new special exhibition GENchangers: Deciphered Secrets from Early Medieval Burial Grounds offers a fascinating answer, bringing together genetic research, archaeology, anthropology and history to reconstruct the lives of communities during one of Europe's most transformative periods.

Running from 14 October 2026 to 26 July 2027, the exhibition draws on the findings of HistoGenes, an international research project funded by the European Research Council. Researchers analysed almost 8.000 burials dating from AD 400 to 900, creating an unprecedented opportunity to investigate family relationships, migration and social structures across early medieval Central Europe. The project brings together an international team led by historian Walter Pohl of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, alongside researchers including geneticist Johannes Krause of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig.

At the heart of the exhibition are two cemeteries in Leobersdorf and Mödling, south of Vienna. Through genetic data combined with archaeological discoveries and anthropological analysis, researchers have reconstructed family trees spanning as many as six generations. These findings transform anonymous graves into evidence of real relationships, revealing who was related, who had children together and who was buried alongside whom. Particularly intriguing is the evidence suggesting that women frequently moved away from the communities where their descendants were later identified.

The exhibition presents these complex findings through a central interactive installation, surrounded by eight thematic stations exploring subjects including childhood, nutrition, health, mobility and material culture. Original artefacts, reconstructed objects and hands-on activities allow visitors to engage directly with the methods researchers use to investigate the past. Rather than simply presenting conclusions, GENchangers demonstrates how scientific knowledge is produced.

This is what makes GENchangers particularly compelling. By combining scientific precision with accessible presentation, the exhibition moves beyond the familiar narratives of migrating peoples and political upheaval to explore the lives of ordinary individuals and families. It reveals a past shaped not only by conquest and migration, but also by settlement, integration and changing generations.

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For anyone interested in history, archaeology or the science of human identity, GENchangers offers an illuminating perspective on how interdisciplinary research can fundamentally reshape our understanding of the past.

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