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Three Bern researchers receive SNSF Consolidator Grants

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) awards three researchers from the University of Bern an SNSF Consolidator Grant each. The funded research projects address indeterminacy in the world, the response of forests to climate change impacts, and age and aging as a multi-layered social and cultural phenomenon in the Roman Empire.

Due to Switzerland's status as a non-associated third country in the Horizon Europe framework program, the SNSF launched the transitional measure "SNSF Consolidator Grants" on behalf of the federal government in 2022. This was aimed at scientists in Switzerland and abroad who wanted to conduct their research in Switzerland and consolidate their scientific independence.

Successful projects in the humanities and climate research

Three researchers at the University of Bern are receiving an SNSF Consolidator Grant 2023 in the current call for proposals: Prof. Dr. Vera Hoffmann-Kolss, Professor at the Institute of Philosophy, Dr. Christoph Schwörer, Paleoecologist at the Oeschger Centre for Climate Change Research and Institute of Plant Sciences, and Dr. Anna Usacheva, currently a member of the EX-PATRIA project at the University of Lille, who will carry out her research project at the Institute of Historical Theology at the University of Bern.

Hugues Abriel, Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation at the University of Bern, says: "There are two reasons to be delighted – we once again have successful applications for this important SNSF research grant, and two of them are from the humanities, which tend to be rarely selected."

More information about the individual research projects and researchers can be found on the following pages.

Wordly Indeterminacy

Prof. Dr. Vera Hoffmann-Kolss, Professor at the Institute of Philosophy, has received an SNSF Consolidator Grant of CHF 1.7 million for a five-year research project on wordly indeterminacy.

About the project:

The research project *Worldly Indeterminacy* investigates how political measures and interventions can be evaluated and how we can assign responsibility to agents when it is indeterminate what exactly they have caused or prevented. This form of indeterminacy can arise when actual scenarios are compared with hypothetical ones or when reflecting on the future. The project assumes that in such contexts there is often a residual indeterminacy that persists, regardless of how much we know about the relevant facts. The aim is to develop a theory of evaluative judgement and responsibility attribution that can cope with such worldly indeterminacy.

“Evaluating political measures and attributing responsibility under uncertainty is relevant to several issues of societal concern. For example, when considering the consequences of climate or environmental policies, or when debating what actions should be taken to prevent global pandemics or military crises, one needs to rely on theories of evaluative judgement and responsibility that work even when some scenarios are indeterminate,” says Vera Hoffmann-Kolss.

About Vera Hoffmann-Kolss:

Vera Hoffmann-Kolss is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bern. She studied philosophy, statistics, and psychology at the Universities of Bonn and Oxford and received her PhD in philosophy from the University of Bonn in 2010.

After a postdoctoral position at the University of Cologne and a visiting fellowship at Rutgers University, she joined the University of Bern in 2019. The focus of her current research is on causation, responsibility, and indeterminacy. She has been PI of several international collaborative research projects and has published a monograph and numerous journal articles on causation and other topics in metaphysics.

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Assessing past and future forest Responses to climate change Impacts using ancient DNA (ARlADNA)

Dr. Christoph Schwörer, Oeschger Centre for Climate Change Research and Institute of Plant Sciences, has received an SNSF Consolidator Grant of CHF 2.2 million for a five-year research project in the field of paleoecology.

About the project:

Climate change and biodiversity crises are major environmental challenges. The *ARlADNA* project aims to find out whether and how plants have been able to adapt to rapid climate warming in the past. This should lead to a better understanding of how ecosystems react to climate change and help to develop new management strategies.

The project analyzes the transition from the last ice age to the current interglacial period. The analysis focuses on ancient plant material that is up to 14,000 years old and has been preserved on the bottom of lakes in the European Alps. By extracting the genetic information of these plant remains, it will be possible to track the expansion of forests in the Alps, reconstruct changes in genetic diversity and check whether trees have been able to adapt to rapid climate warming. The project aims to contribute to the protection of multi-level biodiversity and to the preservation of fragile Alpine ecosystems and their services for future generations.

“Ongoing and future climate change will lead to the large-scale reorganization of many ecosystems and associated services that threaten the livelihood and well-being of billions of people. To make accurate projections of future ecosystem trajectories and develop management strategies that can maintain ecosystem services, long-term records documenting ecosystem responses to past environmental changes are urgently needed,” says Schwörer about his project.

About Christoph Schwörer:

Dr. Christoph Schwörer is a paleoecologist and is interested in long-term vegetation dynamics and the impacts of global change. He studied environmental science at ETH Zurich before receiving his doctorate in climate sciences from the University of Bern in 2013. In his doctoral thesis, which was funded by the Bretscher Foundation, he analyzed pollen and macrofossils from a lake in the Bernese Alps in order to reconstruct 11,000 years of mountain vegetation dynamics in response to climatic changes and human influences. After a two-year postdoctoral position at the University of Oregon in Eugene, USA, he returned to the Paleoecology Section at the University of Bern in 2016, where he became group leader in 2019. In his research group, he combines novel paleogenetic approaches with state-of-the-art paleoecological methods and dynamic vegetation modeling.

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Aging and Old age in the 4th to 6th cent. Roman Empire: Religious, Legal, Social and Physical Dimensions (RomAge)

Dr. Anna Usacheva, currently a postdoctoral researcher in the EX-PATRIA project at the University of Lille, has received an SNSF Consolidator Grant of CHF 1.75 million for a five-year project in the field of historical theology and will carry out her research project at the Institute of Historical Theology at the University of Bern.

About the project:

The *RomAge* project aims to investigate aging as a multifaceted socio-cultural phenomenon. One particular focus is on the transformative socio-cultural influence of the spread of Christianity.

RomAge will examine how the ascendancy of the Christian Church as an formidable social entity, with its distinct legislation, societal norms, ethical principles, authoritative figures, and symbolic representations, moulded perceptions of aging and old age across diverse genders and social strata of the Roman Empire. The research will include an array of textual and material sources, medical and legal literature, church normative documents and epigraphic data in Greek and Latin, as well as various visual materials.

Anna Usacheva commented on the project: “The University of Bern offers an excellent academic environment for *RomAge* due to the specific research profile and exceptional expertise of the Institute of Historical Theology.”

About Anna Usacheva:

Dr. Anna Usacheva obtained her doctoral degree in Classical and Byzantine Philology from Lomonosov Moscow State University in 2011. Following that, she taught Ancient Greek, Latin languages, literature, and the philosophy of Late Antiquity at St. Tikhon University in Moscow. In 2015, she secured Marie Skłodowska-Curie funding at Aarhus University. Her research resulted in the monograph *Knowledge, Language, and Intellection from Origen to Gregory Nazianzen* (2017, Peter Lang). In 2018, she received a Core Fellowship from the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, where her study focused on the treatise *De Natura Hominis* by Nemesius of Emesa. In 2019, she founded a new academic peer-reviewed series entitled *Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology* (Brill).

From 2020 until 2023, she served as a senior researcher and the Vice-Leader of the Project *Authorial Publication in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* at the University of Helsinki. From 2023 until 2025, as a member of the EX-PATRIA project at the University of Lille, she is working on the influence of ecclesiastical propaganda on the migration behaviour and social attitudes of the Romans toward their Sassanid neighbours.

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