

09 OCTOBER 2026

15:00 - 20:15 EEST

A day of ancient biomolecules

International Symposium

2026 Kafatos lecture by

Nobel Laureate **Svante Pääbo**

Venue: Auditorium of the Innovation
and Advanced Education Hub

Foundation for Research and
Technology Hellas, Heraklion, Crete



About the Ancient DNA Laboratory at IMBB-FORTH

Ancient DNA (aDNA) is a novel method to investigate the past by directly accessing the genetic material of ancient humans, plants, animals, and microbes. Since the first ancient human genome was completed in 2010, researchers around the world have amassed thousands more. Studying these genomes has revolutionized our ability to ask and answer questions about the past –from our deeper history and the interactions with extinct archaic humans, to human migrations, the organization of societies, diseases, genetic adaptations and interactions with the living world. Ultimately, by acting as a microscope on a previously invisible world, aDNA has opened new ways of reflecting on our cultural heritage and our genomic future.

Building on a long track record in genomic analysis, **the Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology (IMBB)** at the **Foundation for Research and Technology, Hellas (FORTH)** recognized early on how impactful aDNA would become to modern science. In 2016, under the auspices of the Prefecture of Crete, the Ancient DNA Laboratory was established with state-of-the-art standards within FORTH's research ecosystem and constitutes national infrastructure within the **Hellas-CH (Cultural Heritage) program of the National Roadmap for Research Infrastructures**. Its research is funded through competitive national and European programs, while it sustains strategic collaborations with the **Greek Ministry of Culture**.

As the first and only facility of its kind in Greece, the Ancient DNA Laboratory at IMBB-FORTH is tasked with driving innovative research that crosses the boundaries between genomic and archaeological sciences in Greece. In line with FORTH's strategy of achieving high scientific impact and extroversion, IMBB appointed **Dr. Eirini Skourtanioti** as Head of the Laboratory in 2026. Dr. Skourtanioti is a specialist in archaeogenetics, trained in world-leading laboratories in ancient genomics where she led pioneering research on the population history of prehistoric Mediterranean societies.

To celebrate the 10-year journey of the Ancient DNA Laboratory and its new chapter, IMBB-FORTH is hosting this special event dedicated to ancient biomolecules. The program features **Nobel Laureate Svante Pääbo**, widely recognized as the father of the field, delivering the **2026 Kafatos Lecture**, alongside presentations from leading international researchers.

Program

15:00 - 18:00

IMBB International Symposium “Unfolding our history through ancient biomolecules”

15:00 – 15:10

Welcome

IMBB Director, John Vontas

Symposium moderator, **Nena Galanidou**, University of Crete

15:10 – 15:50

Eirini Skourtanioti

“Lives across the Aegean: new perspectives through the lens of archaeogenomics”

15:50 – 16:30

Mehmet Somel

“Gender roles in Neolithic Societies: insights from material culture and ancient genomes”

16:30 – 17:10

Pontus Skoglund

“Ancient Genome Evolution: our best friends, our worst enemies and us”

17:10 – 17:50

Katerina Douka

“The Changing Face of Human Evolution: What ancient proteins can tell”

18:00 – 19:00

Coffee and refreshments

19:00 – 19:10

2026 Kafatos Lecture Word of welcome

EMBL Head of Alumni Relations, Mehrnoosh Rayner

FORTH president, Vassilis Charmandaris | EMBL Council

delegate and former IMBB Director, Nektarios Tavernarakis

19:10 – 19:15

Introduction

Head of EMBL Genome Biology, Eileen Furlong

19:15 - 19:45

2026 Kafatos Lecture by Nobel Laureate Svante Pääbo

A Neanderthal Perspective on Human Origins and Health:

“How Ancient DNA is Revealing New Insights into Disease and Biology”

19:45 – 20:15

Q&A with Svante Pääbo

Moderated by EMBL Head of Science Education and Public Engagement Briony Jackson

20:15

Food, drinks and music

*All times local time

About the **speakers**



Eirini Skourtanioti is Group Leader at the Ancient DNA Laboratory at IMBB FORTH, as well as associated researcher at the Francis Crick Institute in London. She specialized in archaeogenetics at the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. Following her PhD in 2022 she did postdoctoral work at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig and the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. Her research integrates genomic with archaeological evidence to reconstruct the history of human populations, including aspects such as past health, host genetics and social organization in the Mediterranean, Asia and the British Isles.



Mehmet Somel is a Professor of Biology at Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara. Following PhD research at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and postdocs at CAS Shanghai and UC Berkeley, Mehmet established a research group in Ankara in 2013, and has been co-leading the METU/Hacettepe ancient DNA team. Mehmet's work covers the intersection of evolutionary biology, population genetics, and archaeology, and has contributed to our understanding of Anatolian population history and the social dynamics of prehistoric societies.



Katerina Douka is an Associate Professor of Archaeological Science at the University of Vienna where she leads the Paleoproteomics Laboratory, specializing in biomolecular methods like radiocarbon dating and ZooMS. Previously a Group Leader at the Max Planck Institute, she earned her PhD at the University of Oxford. Her ERC-funded FINDER project advanced collagen fingerprinting to identify hominin fossils in northern Eurasia. She now leads the ERC project Rift-to-Rim, expanding palaeoproteomic and archaeological research across Africa and Oceania, two key regions of modern human evolution.



Pontus Skoglund is Senior Group Leader and Associate Research Director at the Francis Crick Institute, where he founded the UK's first high throughput ancient DNA laboratory. He earned his PhD in evolutionary genetics at Uppsala University and conducted postdoctoral research with David Reich at Harvard Medical School. His research has illuminated major prehistoric and historic population movements and the evolution of humans, animals, and pathogens. He is a Wellcome Trust Investigator and recipient of the ERC Consolidator Grant CERBEROS, which investigates the origins of dogs and the genomic processes underlying their domestication.

Svante Pääbo



Svante Pääbo is a Swedish evolutionary geneticist whose pioneering work gave rise to the field of paleogenomics: the study of ancient DNA to shed light on the evolution of humans and other organisms. As Director at the **Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology** in Leipzig, he led the Neanderthal Genome Project, which achieved the first sequencing of a Neanderthal genome and revealed that Neanderthals and modern humans interbred. His team later discovered a previously unknown hominin, the Denisovans, through DNA extracted from a small bone fragment found in Siberia.

For his discoveries concerning the genomes of extinct hominins and their influence on modern humans, Pääbo received the **2022 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine**. His work continues to reshape our understanding of what makes us uniquely human, and how the legacy of our extinct relatives lives on within our DNA.

J Kafatos



**Kafatos lecture
register here**



**Unfolding our history
Symposium register here**