



Commemoration of Fotis Kafatos by Nicole Le Douarin

Fotis Kafatos

Fotis Kafatos, the distinguished Greek biologist, passed away on November 18, 2017, in Heraklion, at the age of 77, after a long illness. He had a brilliant academic carrier in both the United States and in Europe where he became the founding President of a very important institution, the European Research Council, which had a remarkably positive influence on the development of Science on our continent.

Fotis was born in Heraklion. His father was an agricultural engineer. He graduated from the Lyceum Korais, in that city, and had the chance of moving to the United States thanks to a scholarship generously provided by a rich French philanthropist, Anne Gruner-Schlumberger, patron of arts and science, who was fond of Greece. He was also assisted by the Fulbright Programme and first studied at Cornell University.

He earned his PhD at Harvard in 1965 and, at 29 years of age, became the youngest professor appointed at this University.

Throughout his career, Fotis was one of the most prominent figures in biological sciences, through numerous important discoveries that had a huge impact on both fundamental and applied biology.

He started by working on the mechanisms of cellular differentiation leading to the formation of the eggs in insects. Later, his contributions concerned the field of genetics and genomics. He was one of the first to introduce molecular biology to the study of development by his discoveries on gene families such as the chorion gene families in both the silk moth and the fruit fly. He had a critical role in establishing complementary DNA ("cDNA") cloning, a technique that has been essential to modern molecular biology. His team was the first to clone an entire mammalian gene and to demonstrate that gene regulation sequences were the same in evolutionary distant animals. Later on, he became a key figure in insect genome sequencing programmes. He launched genome projects for the fruit fly and malaria-carrying mosquitos, a manifestation of his desire to link basic science and practical application.

His studies opened new horizons in developmental and evolutionary biology. Notable is Fotis Kafatos' involvement in bioinformatics, as early as the 1980s, long before it became common practice in the scientific community.

In addition to a constant dedication to his research, Fotis held several influential positions in European research and will be remembered as a remarkable science administrator at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg (Germany).

Kafatos is considered as the driving force behind the creation of the European Research Council (ERC) in Brussels of which he was the founding President. He was also the founder of the University of Crete where he created and directed the Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology.

Although he spent most time of his life away from Greece, the state of science in his native country remained one of his lifelong concerns. He had, for a while, part time chairs in Athens and later at the university of Crete.

At the end of his career, he became Professor of Immunogenetics at the Imperial College in London, where he was still focusing on the genomes of the insects vectors of malaria.

Fotis Kafatos was a visionary who was able to make his visions come true.