Press release | November 10, 2026

HUMAN ROOTS AWARD 2026

MONREPOS Archaeological Research Centre honours anthropologist Polly Wiessner with international research award

Neuwied / Mainz. The HUMAN ROOTS AWARD is being presented for the seventh time this year by the MONREPOS Archaeological Research Centre and Museum for Human Behavioural Evolution, an institution of the Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie (LEIZA) based in Mainz, Germany. This year's award goes to the American anthropologist Professor Dr Pauline 'Polly' Wiessner. The MONREPOS jury recognises her life's work, which encompasses numerous outstanding ethnological studies that have also made a substancial contribution to archaeological research. The HUMAN ROOTS AWARD is endowed with 10,000 Euros and honours scientists who have made significant contributions to the understanding of human behavioural evolution.

Born in 1947, Pauline 'Polly' Wiessner is one of the most distinguished social anthropologists and ethnoarchaeologists of her generation. Over several decades, she has conducted research among the Ju/'hoansi, an indigenous San group traditionally living in the Kalahari Desert in north-eastern Namibia and parts of Botswana. Among the Enga, an indigenous people of Papua New Guinea, she has studied rituals, exchange economies and warfare. Her work has made a major contribution to our understanding of how people in hunter-gatherer societies live together, establish social relationships, and share knowledge and resources. A central focus of her research is the question of how social relationships help people manage risks, form emotional bonds that go beyond purely practical considerations, and create shared social worlds through myths, music, dance and spiritual rituals. She also investigates how societies respond to changes in traditional cultural structures brought about by the influence of modern resources and technologies.

Polly Wiessner teaches and conducts research as a professor at the University of Utah and the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University, USA. From 1981 to 1996, she was a research associate at the Research Unit for Human Ethology at the Max Planck Institute for Behavioural Physiology in Seewiesen, near Starnberg, Germany. She is a member of the prestigious US National Academy of Sciences. Wiessner has published numerous articles and books on her research.

The HUMAN ROOTS AWARD – a prize for interdisciplinary research

The HUMAN ROOTS AWARD has been presented by the MONREPOS Archaeological Research Centre since 2017 and is now regarded as the "little Nobel Prize" of archaeology and human behavioural evolution. The aim of the award is to promote interdisciplinary scientific dialogue and raise public awareness of the relevance of findings from research into the evolution of humankind for the future of humanity.

"With the HUMAN ROOTS AWARD, we aim to build a bridge between the archaeology of human origins and other sciences," explains Professor Dr Sabine Gaudzinski-Windheuser, Head of MONREPOS and member of the award jury. "By linking the archaeological perspective on 'becoming human' with the humanistic agenda of 'being human,' we can sustainably shape 'remaining human' for our future."

Following the death of Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, one of the founding fathers of human ethology and patron of the first HUMAN ROOTS AWARD, the renowned evolutionary biologist and first prizewinner Richard Dawkins assumed the role of patron in 2018. Previous recipients include Steven Pinker and Robin Dunbar. In 2022, developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello was honoured. In 2024, Paola Villa is the first female archaeologist to receive this award. In 2025, the award was presented to the American anthropologist John D. Speth, one of the most influential researchers in the field of early human history.

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Press Photo



The American anthropologist Pauline 'Polly' Wiessner is the seventh recipient of the HUMAN ROOTS AWARD. This award recognises outstanding research achievements that contribute to our understanding of human behavioural evolution.
Credits: Wiessner / LEIZA

MONREPOS Archaeological Research Centre and Museum for Human Behavioural Evolution
MONREPOS is at the same time museum and research institute. It is a department of the Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie, based in Mainz, a Leibniz-Association research institute, located in the Monrepos stately home near Neuwied, where research has been conducted for more than 35 years. The research centre and museum is closely linked to the Pre- and Protohistoric Archaeology section at the Institute of Ancient Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz.

Our research focuses on the inheritance we carry within us, which is worth millions: Our human behaviour has evolved over more than 2.6 million years. This early human history spans the longest and defining period of our behavioural evolution that is central to our research at MONREPOS. Our archaeology thrives on working together, on questions, impulses, discussion. And, not least, on criticism and on tolerance. It needs people who are curious, creative and courageous whether these are scientists, pro bono helpers, media or visitors. MONREPOS sees itself as a platform for everyone who wishes to understand how we evolved and what unites us.

Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie | Leibniz Research Institute and Museum for Archaeology
As a Leibniz Research Institute and Museum for Archaeology, LEIZA studies humans and their development based on material remains that span three million years across time and space. The fundamental insights we gain improve our understanding of human behaviour, actions and the development of societies. In this way, LEIZA enriches our knowledge of humans from an archaeological perspective and creates essential foundations for reflecting on the present and shaping the future. With archaeology, LEIZA views human beings in context and shares the knowledge gained in international dialogue. LEIZA is active worldwide and has successfully and comprehensively conducted research in various regions of Africa, Asia and Europe. The unique concentration of archaeological, scientific, restoration and information technology expertise, combined with important workshops, laboratories and archives, makes it possible to conduct object-oriented research into the archaeology of the ancient world (Asia, Africa, Europe) from the beginnings of human history to modern times. As one of eight research museums in the Leibniz Association, LEIZA combines excellent science with exhibitions and, with its educational mission, is also a place for dialogue with the public.

Until its renaming on 1 January 2023, LEIZA was known internationally as the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum (RGZM), which was founded in Mainz in 1852 by resolution of the German Historical and Antiquities Societies. Since 2024, LEIZA is represented at four locations in Germany: Mainz, Neuwied, Mayen, and Schleswig. www.leiza.de

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