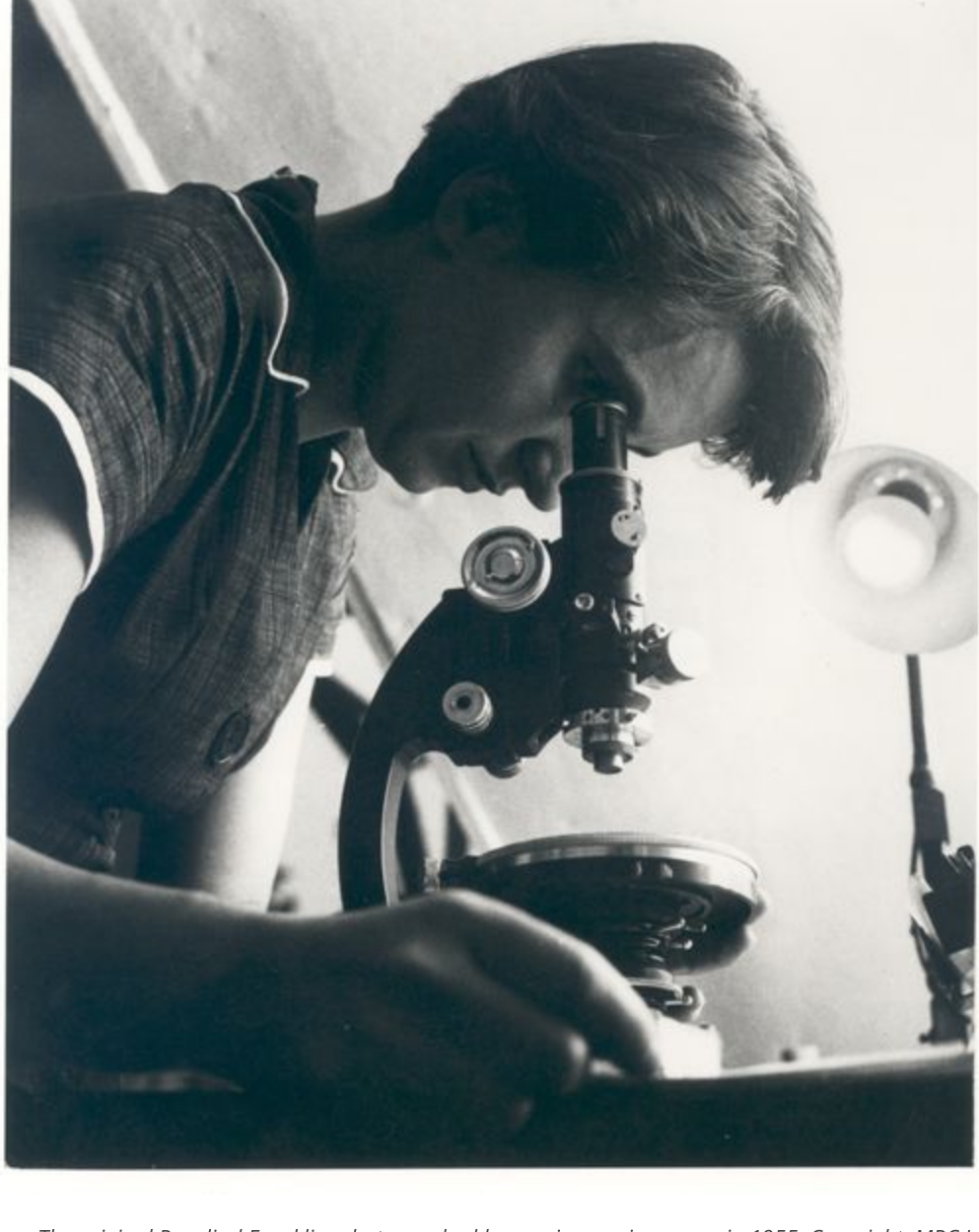


ExoMars rover to be named after scientist Rosalind Franklin



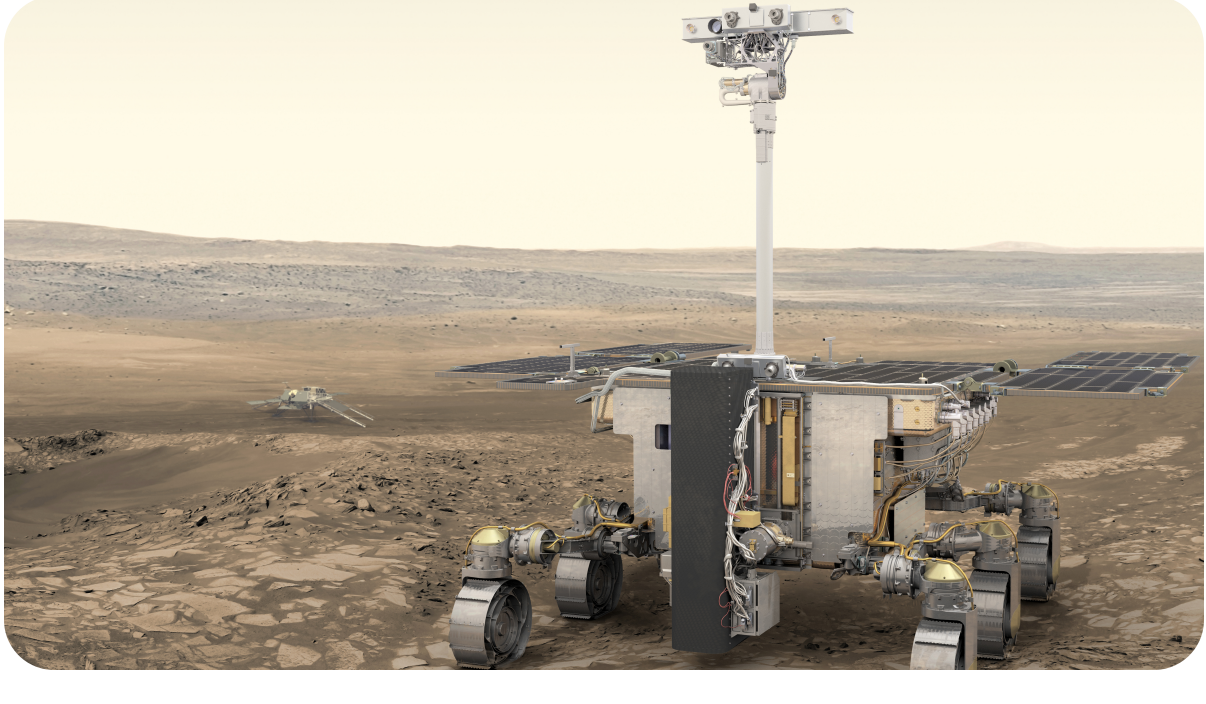
The original Rosalind Franklin, photographed here using a microscope in 1955. Copyright: MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology

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In 2021, a high-tech rover will land on Mars and begin exploring this strange world. Until now, the robot has been called the ExoMars rover, but a better name needed to be chosen! The UK Space Agency launched a competition to rename the rover, and before long 36,000 ideas had been suggested by people from all ESA Member State countries. A winner has been announced: Rosalind Franklin.

If that sounds like a person's name rather than a robot's, that is because it is! Rosalind Franklin was a British chemist and X-ray crystallographer (someone who uses light to study the structure of materials smaller than we can see). She helped us to understand that DNA – which has all the instructions that living things need to grow, reproduce, and function – is shaped like a double-helix. It is a tradition for ESA to name missions after great scientists, for example Newton, Planck, and Euclid.



The ExoMars rover is now named Rosalind Franklin! It will explore the Red Planet in 2021. Copyright: ESA/ATG medialab

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ESA's Director General is Jan Woerner. He explains, "This name reminds us that it is in the human genes to explore. Science is in our DNA, and in everything we do at ESA. Rosalind the rover captures this spirit and carries us all to the forefront of space exploration."

The name is well chosen, because the rover Rosalind Franklin will be searching for the building blocks of life on Mars. It is the first robot of its kind that can both roam around Mars, and also drill down to study samples two metres below the surface. This is exciting because Mars was home to liquid water a long time ago, but now has a dry surface with lots of harsh radiation from the Sun. If Mars has been home to simple forms of microbial life in its past – or maybe even still is today – then scientists believe that it is most likely to be found buried underground, where moisture may still exist, and the surface rock above can give protection from radiation.



The rover's name was announced at a special event. Can you spot Dr Alice Bunn, International Director of the UK Space Agency? Copyright: ESA - S. Corvaja

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This mission to Mars is very complex, so ESA teamed up with the Russian State Space Corporation, Roscosmos. By working together, the ExoMars mission has already put a spacecraft in orbit around Mars. Called the Trace Gas Orbiter, it will relay data from Rosalind Franklin back to Earth when the rover starts its exploration.

Imagine you could name an advanced robotic explorer. What would you call it, and what would its mission be?

Cool fact: ESA astronaut Tim Peake was present when the name was announced, and met the competition winners who chose it!



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