



Bert Boekschoten: a biographical sketch

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An encounter with geology

In 1942, close to his home in Hilversum, Bert Boekschoten for the first time found a fossil: a piece of flint with bryozoans. His uncle, who was an enthusiastic amateur collector, put him in touch with the well-known Dutch collector Van der Lijn to explain what he had found; thus, Bert's interest in paleontology was born.

He started collecting himself; as a young boy he used to cycle to Winterswijk, in the eastern part of the Netherlands, which is quite a distance from Hilversum, to collect fossils in the Miocene outcrops. Because his interest in geology and paleontology went further than merely collecting, he took up a study in geology at Utrecht University in 1952. Among his teachers were the eminent paleontologist Prof. Von Koenigswald, a specialist in fossil hominids, and micropaleontologist prof. Drooger. During the first years of his study, Bert astonished his fellow students with his almost encyclopedic knowledge of fossils; one of the things that later on made his classes and excursions a special experience. As a student he began to develop his wide interest in many aspects of paleontology. Being originally interested in invertebrates and molluscs in particular, Bert published several papers on molluscs from Dutch deposits, the first in 1954 (no. 1 in the bibliography at the end of the present contribution), when he was in the second year of his study.

In 1959, he moved to Groningen University, to work at the Geological Institute led by the famous Dutch geologist Prof. Kuenen and later by Prof. Van Straaten. Teaching paleontology to geological and biological students was his main task in this small institute.

Wide interests

Bert's research in Groningen was devoted to forams, but his wide interests made him explore more aspects of paleontology and geology. Besides work on molluscs from several localities throughout the Netherlands and Europe [6, 8, 18, 19, 30, 34], he was one of the first, together with Dr Paul Sondaar, to study the small elephants, rhinos and deer and the giant mice of Crete, Cyprus and the Balearics and the phenomenon of dwarfism of large animals and gigantism of small species, which is typical of island faunas [15, 20, 31]. He also published on the geology of Crete [4, 7, 9, 26, 36].

Bert also maintained his interest in the geology and paleontology of the Netherlands. He wrote on several aspects of Tertiary and Quaternary geology and paleontology [12, 17, 24] and published an updated version of P.J. van der Lijn's *Keienboek* [32] in 1973; this book still serves as a collector's guide to erratics from the Netherlands. In the meantime he continued working on forams, and in 1969 he published his PhD thesis on the Foraminifera from a boring in northern Germany [23].

A special field of interest was actuopaleontology: the study of recent biological phenomena, together with their fossil counterparts, in order to get a better understanding of the fossil record. In this line, Bert began to study ichnofossils, traces of organisms that were left on and in the substrate that these organisms lived on or in. In 1966 and 1967, he published some influential papers on traces that were left on shells by recent organisms and, in the light of this study, similar fossil traces [14, 18]. He would stay involved in trace-fossil research much longer [25, 37, 51]. As an actuopaleontologist he expanded his field into the study of reefs and corals. He joined several expeditions to Indonesia (the Snellius II and post Snellius II



Figure 1. Bert Boekschoten during a field excursion in 1975. Courtesy of Mr Herman Sips.

expedition), the CAN CAP expeditions of the Natural History Museum in Leiden to the Atlantic Ocean, and an expedition to the Seychelles to study recent coral reefs and to integrate his findings with research on fossil material (papers on fossil and recent corals and reefs; [39 and onwards]). In 1988 Bert, together with two colleagues, published the discovery, near Grythytan in Sweden, of stromatolite structures that represent the oldest traces of life in Europe [56].

Besides paleontology, Bert Boekschoten is interested in aspects of archeology, which resulted in a publication [5] on an archeological investigation on Crete. In his later career, he acted at several occasions as supervisor for PhD students at the Archeological Institute of Groningen University. He was at the time involved in research in archaeozoology, a.o. on mites, fish remains and mammal remains from archeological sites. The main supervision of this research was done by Dr A. Clason of the Archeological Institute.

Teaching career

In 1967, Bert Boekschoten was appointed *privaat docent* (unsalaried university lecturer) in paleontology at the Groningen University. In 1974, he became *lector* (lecturer) in paleontology [35], in which position he

organized many excursions and fieldworks, which were very popular among his students (Figure 1). In 1980 this position was upgraded to a professorship. He was a supervisor of PhD research on a variety of subjects, such as the study of whelk shells from the North Sea, paleobiology of favositid corals, biology of globigerinid foraminifers and its paleobiologic implications, the reefs of Curaçao and Bonaire and the phylogeny of Mesozoic fishes. At present, he is a supervisor of several PhD studies on a variety of paleontological subjects and is involved in the study of mesozoic vertebrates.

Bert stayed at Groningen University till 1986, when the Geological Institute, due to a reorganisation of the study of geology in the Netherlands, was forced to close its doors. This was also the unfortunate end of the small, successful, and – among students of biology, popular – paleontological department and an illustration of the difficult position of paleontology at Dutch universities. He kept his position as professor of paleontology at Groningen University, however, for one day a week. He continued his work with the Marine Geology Group at the Institute of Earth Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. There he was mainly involved in teaching paleontology for undergraduate and graduate students. At the time of his retirement, he was the last professor of general paleontology in the



Figure 2. Bert Boekschoten during a field excursion in 1999. Courtesy of Mr Jan Delvigne.

Netherlands; now, after his retirement, there is no chair in general paleontology in the Netherlands anymore.

Among students, Bert is well-known for his lively lectures and practical instruction, illustrated with beautiful slides and sometimes hilarious anecdotes from the field of paleontology. Bert always shows an infectious enthusiasm for paleontology and he is a master in transferring his enthusiasm to his students. He sees himself as someone who has to show how beautiful fossils and paleontology are and who has to teach how important they are to understand not only the history of life on earth but also the processes that are still going on. He wants to give his students the opportunity to work with fossils and he is always able to invent original subjects and problems to study. From his students he expects enthusiasm, dedication and originality and the ability to carry out research independently. His field excursions throughout Europe were always very popular among students, not in the least because Bert loves to combine the pleasure of

paleontology by day with the pleasure of good food and wine and cultural events by night.

Communicating earth sciences

Bert was, until 1999, a long serving member of the editorial board of the Dutch geological journal *Geologie en Mijnbouw*. He was one of the initiators of *Biochron*, a permanent exposition on earth science and paleontology in Emmen Zoo. He is not only active among professionals in the field of paleontology but is also well-known among Dutch amateur paleontologists [65]. Bert is always willing to make his knowledge and expertise available to others. He has been a long-term member of the advisory board of *Grondboor & Hamer*, the journal of the *Nederlandse Geologische Vereniging* (the society for Dutch amateur geologists and paleontologists). He regularly published popular accounts on geological and paleontological matters in *Grondboor & Hamer* and is always helpful when people need his advice on paleontological questions.

Although Bert Boekschoten has retired, he remains active in paleontology (Figure 2). He is still teaching and involved in research and several PhD students are working under his supervision. Dutch paleontology will continue to benefit from his enthusiasm and originality.

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