

Two centuries of vertebrate paleontology at Utrecht University

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Nicolaas C. de Fremery (1770-1844), whose portrait can be seen in the portrait gallery in the Senate Hall of Utrecht University, was the first Utrecht professor who published a paper on a fossil find. It appeared in 1831 and described a partial skull with the left horn core of an aurochs (*Bos primigenius*). The find stirred a discussion about whether this fossil belonged to an animal that lived before or after the biblical flood. The solution came from a simple analysis of the locality: stratigraphy avant la lettre. De Fremery published a total of three papers on fossils and remained active until 1851.

The rest of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth can be ignored, but things changed with the appointment in 1948 of professor G.H.R. von Koenigswald (1902-1982) on the chair of stratigraphy/paleontology. Von Koenigswald was already famous for his discoveries in the 1930's of *Pithecanthropus* skulls on Java in the footsteps of Eugène Dubois, and of the first *Gigantopithecus* material in China. After he moved from Utrecht to Frankfurt in 1968, he left behind a flourishing vertebrate paleontology department with four full-time scientists, a preparator, an draftsman and many students and PhD students.

Even though a suite of budget cuts, reorganizations and removals severely diminished the staff and the infrastructure from the 1980's onward, a reduced number of dedicated scientists continued providing education and doing research, mostly on Cenozoic small mammals. In 2005, and through the intervention of the Hans de Bruijn Foundation, an extraordinary chair in Vertebrate Paleontology was established that was subsequently transformed into an ordinary one that remains until today. Acting chair is professor Anne Schulp who was appointed in 2019. The fields now covered vary from Triassic fishes to Cretaceous dinosaurs, Cenozoic mammals and the Pleistocene mammoth fauna.

The importance of the Utrecht VP group in the long run can best be measured by its scientific human 'offspring'. Many paleontologists who started their career in Utrecht as a student have become renowned specialists in such fields as fossil whales and the early evolution of cetaceans, paleoanthropology, island evolution, or general vertebrate paleontology.