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**NOTES ON THE SCIENTIFIC CAREER OF PROFESSOR  
DR. L. D. BRONGERSMA, COMPILED AT THE OCCASION  
OF HIS SIXTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY**

by

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For a large part the data in the present paper are based on manuscript notes in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie at Leiden, assembled by Brongersma himself; they form only a brief account of his scientific achievements. Efforts to completeness were only made in the composition of the List of Publications; here besides the scientific papers those with popular contents are listed. Thanks are due to Dr. W. Vervoort and to Dr. M. Boeseman for constructive remarks.

Leo Daniël Brongersma was born on May 17th, 1907, at Bloemendaal (province of North-Holland); here he attended elementary school, while he went to high school in the neighbouring town of Haarlem. From 1925 to 1931 he studied zoology, botany and geology at the Municipal University of Amsterdam, where he passed examinations (more or less comparable to B. Sc. and M. Sc.) in 1929 and 1931. In 1934 he obtained the degree of Doctor of Science (cum laude), after defending publicly his thesis "Contributions to Indo-Australian Herpetology". (On the same day, one hour earlier, his wife-to-be, Margaretha Sanders, took her doctor's degree at the same university (cum laude), after defending a thesis on a palaeozoological subject).

From September 1928 to October 1934 Brongersma was assistant at the Zoological Museum at Amsterdam; in 1932 he became curator of reptiles and amphibians at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie at Leiden. The great financial crisis of the early thirties made that this nomination could not be continued, but in 1933 he received a grant to remain working in this museum, whilst at the same time he kept the assistantship at the Zoological Museum at Amsterdam, and accepted an assistantship at the Dubois Palaeontological Collection at Leiden (a collection consisting of the fossil remains of mammals, reptiles, some birds and fishes, also some mollusks, collected by Professor Eug. Dubois in Java, Sumatra, and in the Siwaliks (India); it contains inter alia the first found remains of *Pithecanthropus erectus*, the Java Ape-Man). In 1933 he obtained a nomination as assistant at the Leiden Museum. Thus he had to divide his time over three

assistantships. After his marriage, in October 1934, he settled at Leiden and gave up the assistantship at Amsterdam.

In 1935 the Dubois Collection became incorporated in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, and in 1936 the two assistantships were merged into one curatorship. From 1936 to 1947 Brongersma was curator of the Leiden Museum, in charge of the collections of reptiles and amphibians and of the Dubois Collection. From 1948 to 1958 he was senior curator of the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, in 1950 he obtained the personal title of Deputy Director, and on May 1st, 1958, he became Director of the Leiden Museum.

Brongersma's teaching career at Leiden University started in 1938 with his admission as *Privaat-docent* (unsalaried lecturer) in Vertebrate Systematics; on this occasion he delivered a public lecture entitled "Het Belang van anatomisch Onderzoek voor de Systematiek" (The importance of anatomical research for systematics). In 1954 he was appointed Lecturer in Systematic Zoology, beginning his courses with a public lecture concerning "Zoologisch Onderzoek in Nieuw-Guinea" (Zoological Research in New Guinea). In 1964 he became Professor *extraordinarius* in Systematic Zoology. On this occasion he delivered an oration entitled "Qua patet Orbis" (as wide as the world stretches, the motto of the Marine Corps of the Netherlands). The oration deals with various peculiarities of turtles, and concludes with the remarks that as wide as the world stretches the turtles present us with problems, and that as wide as the world stretches attempts must be made towards a solution of these problems.

When at the end of World War II it was feared that the Zoological Museum at Buitenzorg, Java, might have badly suffered from the war, Brongersma was temporarily appointed director of that museum. To reach his destination it was necessary that he became militarized. And so, in October 1945, he received a temporary commission as Major in the Royal Netherlands East Indian Army, Reserve, Special Services. He made the voyage on the troopship "Nieuw Amsterdam", and disembarked at Port Dickson, Malaya, together with about 450 other militarized personnel, and after a short time he was appointed commanding officer of this detachment. In April 1946 he went on to Batavia, Java, where he learned that the pre-war head of the Zoological Museum at Buitenzorg, Dr. M. A. Liefstinck, had come safely through the war, and as there was no use of staying on in Java, he returned to the Netherlands in July 1946, where he resumed his duties in the museum.

During several years Brongersma organized faunistical research by the museum's staff in the province of Limburg (the southernmost part of the Netherlands); this also included the acquisition of grants from industry. Reviews of the progress of this research appeared in 1950 and in 1958.

About 1950 Brongersma started organizing a collecting trip to Netherlands New Guinea; it took nearly two years to collect the funds for a six months' visit to New Guinea. In January 1952 he departed, making the voyage in an amphibious Catalina flying boat of the Royal Netherlands Navy. For about six months he travelled in New Guinea, together with the technical assistant W. J. Roosdorp. Wherever the Catalinas could take him he went, from Biak I. to the Wissel Lakes in the Central Highlands, to Sorong, Fakfak, Kaimana, Merauke, Hollandia, Misool I., Salawatti I., Mapia Atoll, etc. The return voyage was also made by flying boat.

In 1954 and 1955 the second voyage to New Guinea took place; this time the outward voyage was made in H. Neth. M. destroyer "Piet Hein". On this trip he was joined in New Guinea by two curators of the Leiden Museum, Dr. L. B. Holthuis and Dr. M. Boeseman, and again many places were visited, inter alia Hollandia and Lake Sentani (where ten feet long sawfishes were collected), Lake Jamoer (where fresh-water sharks were obtained), Tanah Merah on the Digoel River, etc.

A third short trip to New Guinea was made in 1956 together with Commander (Air) G. F. Venema, R. Neth. N., in preparation of the scientific expedition to the Mountains of the Stars; this time the outward voyage was made in an amphibious Martin Mariner flying boat. During this trip Biak, Hollandia and Merauke were visited.

The fourth voyage to New Guinea took place in 1959, when Brongersma was the general and scientific leader of the expedition to the Mountains of the Stars, whilst Commander (now Captain (Air)) G. F. Venema, R. Neth. N., was the technical leader. The expedition, with a staff of 15 scientists and assistants, a medical team of three, a marine and a police detachment, explored the then unknown area of the Mountains of the Stars in the central part of New Guinea's mountain range, close to the Papuan border. For a period of six months the members of the expedition carried out anthropological, ethnological, linguistic, geological, botanical and zoological explorations, that brought forward a wealth of new scientific information. Large zoological collections were made by Brongersma himself as well as by the curator Dr. W. Vervoort and the technical assistants C. van Heijningen and J. J. Staats, all from the Leiden Museum.

Highlights of the expedition were the climbing of the Mount Juliana summit by the geologists Dr. H. Th. Verstappen and Ing. A. E. Escher, in company of Surgeon-Lieut. M. O. Tissing, the sergeant of the marines J. A. de Wijn and the cinematographer J. ter Laag, and the break-through from the south to the north coast of New Guinea by a party under the direction of the geologist Dr. Chr. B. Bär and the District Officer G. H. Dasselaar.

The expedition got a tremendous publicity in the Netherlands, ran into serious financial difficulties but came to a successful end thanks to the (financial) intervention of Mr. C. Verolme, ship-builder. The scientific results of the expedition have partly been published, partly they are in the form of collections that are still being studied.

With G. F. Venema as joint author, Brongersma in 1960 wrote a book, "Het Witte Hart van Nieuw-Guinea", dealing with the success (and the unavoidable misfortunes) of the expedition, profusely illustrated with plates of inland scenery and of the native inhabitants. Within the period of three months a second impression of this book appeared. Moreover, it was translated, with different titles, into Norwegian, German, Danish, Swedish, French, and English (two editions, the one published in London, the other in New York, both bearing the title "To the Mountains of the Stars").

Many other voyages to distant countries may be here briefly mentioned.

Together with his wife, and several other Dutch biologists, Brongersma travelled through the Union of South Africa in 1938.

Brongersma visited Thailand in 1957 (Pacific Science Congress at Bangkok, with an excursion to North Thailand). In 1958 he attended the Birth Centenary Celebration of Jagadish Chandra Bose at Calcutta; in the same year he took part, at Singapore, in the Centenary and Bicentenary Commemoration of A. R. Wallace, Charles Darwin, and Linnaeus; he also visited Pahang and Kuala Lumpur in Malaya. (In the previous year he had been present at the Bicentenary Commemoration of Linnaeus at Uppsala). He visited Libya and Tunisia in 1961, Egypt and Nubia in 1962, and Morocco in 1964.

In 1963 Brongersma attended the International Congress of Zoology at Washington, D. C., and afterwards visited Curaçao, Bonaire and Suriname. In 1966 he took part in a Symposium on Poisonous Animals, held at São Paulo, Brazil; on his return voyage he visited the Canary Islands. In 1967 he visited the Azores and Madeira, and in 1969 he made a second voyage to the United States, studying material in different parts of the country.

For scientific purposes Brongersma in the course of time also visited

all the countries of Western Europe; it does not seem necessary to give here a detailed account of these visits.

Though Brongersma's scientific work mainly concentrates on the classification and the distribution of reptiles and amphibians, with important contributions to the anatomy of snakes, his curatorship of the Dubois Collection led him to study also recent and fossil mammals. In 1935 appeared his paper on fossil and recent cats, in which, among other things, he came to the conclusion that the fossils *Felis groeneveldtii* Dubois (= *Felis trinilensis* Dubois), *Felis oxygnatha* Dubois, *Feliopsis palaeojavanica* Stemme and *Felis tigris soloensis* Von Koenigswald are specifically identical with the recent tiger, *Panthera tigris* (Linnaeus), and that the fossil *Felis microgale* Dubois is identical with the recent *Prionailurus bengalensis* (Kerr). In the following years some more papers on Mammalia appeared, partly dealing with recent animals, partly with fossils.

On a previous page it has been mentioned that Brongersma's public lecture of 1938 dealt with the importance of anatomical research for systematics. In this lecture he noted as an example that the snakes *Acrochordus* and *Chersydrus* are known to have a well-developed tracheal lung, whilst he had found that in *Xenodermus* (generally regarded as closely allied to the other two genera) this organ is reduced to a narrow strip of lung tissue, the differences indicating that the relationship is highly problematical. In 1949 and following years Brongersma published a series of papers dealing with the anatomy of snakes, paying special attention to the circulatory and the respiratory systems.

After several years of painstakingly searching of the literature, and the examination of numerous specimens in many institutions, mainly in Western Europe, leading to the publication of several shorter papers, Brongersma published in 1972 his magnum opus entitled "European Atlantic Turtles". Besides numerous original data, new to science, he extensively covered the information on European turtles provided by previous authors in about a thousand publications. The problems involved were, to use his own words, mainly: 1, from where do they come, and how do they get there; 2, what causes a turtle to leave a region with a suitable climate to go to an area where the climatic circumstances make survival for any length of time and breeding impossible; 3, how long does it take a turtle to complete the trip to Europe; 4, is this journey always one from which no return is possible? Though the final answer to these questions, as was to be expected, could not be attained,

several hypotheses sustained by considerable evidence could be discussed. Furthermore, extensive information on the biology of the species, e.g., growth, food, enemies, etc., was provided.

As a reward for Brongersma's success as the scientific leader of the New Guinea Expedition in 1959, H. M. the Queen bestowed upon him the honour of Officer in the Order of Orange and Nassau. For the same reason the Royal Netherlands Geographical Society awarded him the "Professor P. J. Veth Medal".

On account of the outstanding qualities of his scientific results, Brongersma was appointed a member of several scientific societies, namely:

Member of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences) at Amsterdam,

Member of the Hollandse Maatschappij der Wetenschappen (Holland Society of Sciences) at Haarlem,

Advisory Member of the Maatschappij voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek in de Tropen (Netherlands Association for Scientific Research in the Tropics),

Corresponding Member of the Zoological Society of London,

Honorary Fellow of the Zoological Society of Calcutta,

Honorary Fellow of the Academy of Zoology at Agra, India,

Honorary Foreign Member of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists,

Honorary Fellow of the Herpetologists' League,

Member of the Sea Turtle Group of the Survival Service Commission.

Brongersma takes part in the activities of several committees. To give a few examples it may be mentioned that he is Member of the Advisory Committee for the Netherlands Natural History Museums, Member of the Netherlands Committee for International Nature Conservation, and Member of the Netherlands Committee of the International Council of Bird Protection. He served for some years as secretary and member of the council of the Netherlands Zoological Society.



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