

IN MEMORIAM LEO DANIEL BRONGERSMA (1907-1994)

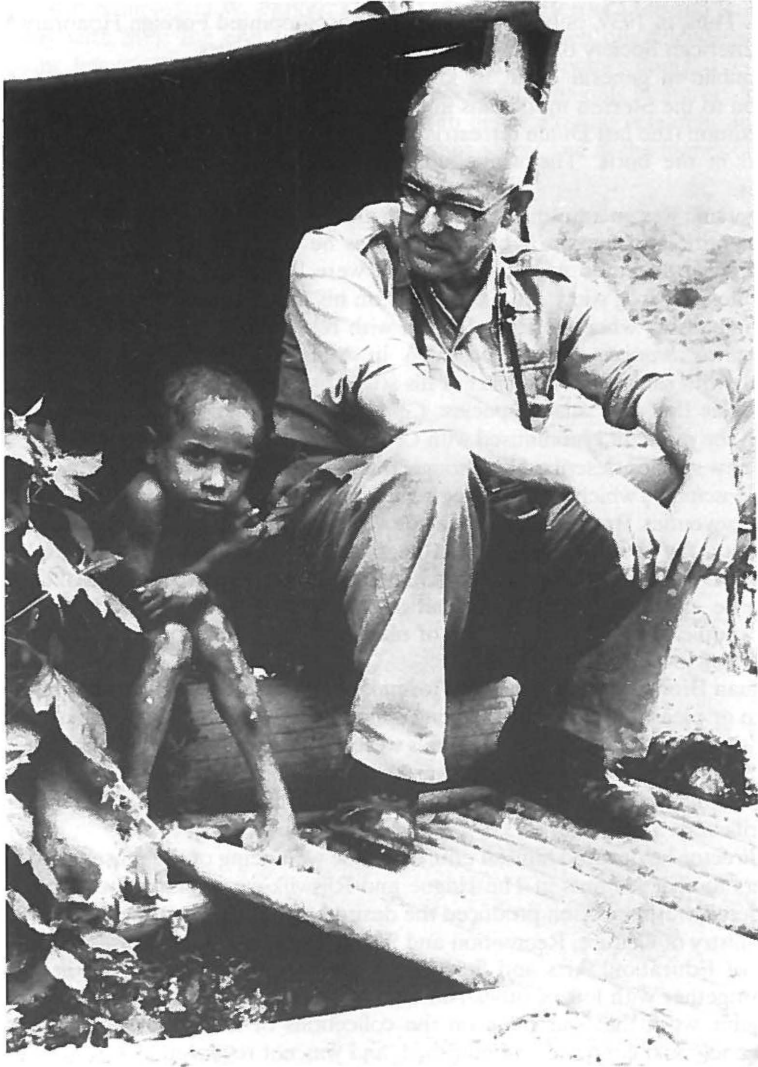
By: Dr. M.S. Hoogmoed. Head, Department of Vertebrates. National Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 9517, NL-2300 AA Leiden, The Netherlands.

English translation by Astrid Gomes; English corrections by Kevin Hingley.

* * *

On July 24th 1994 Prof. Dr. Leo Daniël Brongersma - mentor of the Dutch and European herpetologists - died at the age of 87. Brongersma studied biology in Amsterdam and he took his first steps in the field of herpetology under the guidance of the Amsterdam Professor J.K. de Jong, with whom he dissected a *Varanus komodoensis* that had died in Artis Zoo. This resulted in his first scientific publication at the age of 20. From 1928 to 1934 Brongersma worked as an assistant at the Zoological Museum in Amsterdam. From 1932 onwards, with a short break in 1933, he worked at the National Museum for Natural History in Leiden. Until 1958 he was curator of *Reptilia* and *Amphibia*, from 1936 to 1947 he was also curator of the collection of pleistocene Javanese fossils (collection 'Dubois'). From 1958 until his retirement in 1972 he was director of this establishment. After his retirement Brongersma held the directorship of the National Museum of Geology and Mineralogy for another 4 years.

At the beginning of his career Brongersma studied several groups of animals from all corners of the world, and he described several new species, especially lizards and snakes, but also a frog. He never really made a profound study of salamanders and he never published anything about this group anyway. Soon he focused his attention on the herpetofauna of the former Dutch East Indies, and the doctoral thesis he defended (cum laude) on September 19th 1934 dealt with the reptiles of this area, which can be seen as a supplement and an addition to the classics that N. de Rooij published in 1915 and 1917. Shortly after taking his Ph.D. his attentions were mainly focused on the anatomy of snakes, and his public lecture with which he established himself as a private lecturer in 1938 was therefore titled 'The importance of anatomical research to systematics'. In 1954 he was appointed lecturer of Systematic Zoology, after which his appointment to extraordinary professor followed in 1964. During that period his attention was focused on yet another part of herpetology, and since 1960 he occupied himself almost exclusively with turtles. The problem that intrigued him were the originally tropical turtles which nevertheless regularly washed ashore on European coastlines, dead or alive. Thanks to a meticulous research of literature and all sorts of archives in the most diverse places in Europe, he managed to make an almost complete listing of all turtles that had been reported in literature starting from the year 1230. Besides reporting these findings he tried to find an explanation for the way some of these species landed up here. The fact that his wife (Margaretha Sanders) was an oceanographer was a great help. Even after his retirement Brongersma continued his scientific research and publications up until right before his death. All in all he was active as a herpetologist for 65 years and during that time over 200 scientific publications appeared from his hand. The number of taxa he described is close to 36, while 13 taxa of reptiles and amphibians, 13 other animals and two plants were named after him. He was an honorary member of several foreign



societies. Thus, in 1939, only 32 years old, he was appointed Foreign Honorary Member of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists.

The public in general came to know Brongersma as the leader of the scientific expedition to the Sterren mountains in New Guinea in 1959. An extensive report about this expedition (the last Dutch terrestrial expedition organised on such a large scale) can be found in the book 'The white heart of New Guinea', which appeared in many languages.

Brongersma was an amusing talker, which also manifested itself in his lectures. Besides actual scientific information about Vertebrates he could tell vividly about the culinary values of several treated animals. But there were limits; he did not eat animals lower than reptiles. So, frog's legs did not appear on his menu. He could vividly tell about his 'auto-cannibalism', whereby he had eaten with relish one of his so-called 'godchildren' *Python curtus brongersmai* on occasion in Malaya. Brongersma occupied himself intensively with snakes for only part of his scientific career. Already in 1928 Brongersma described his first new snake species: *Calamaria doerianense* and *Calamaria javanica lineata*, at the moment synonymised with *Calamaria lowi gimletti* and *Calamaria lowi lowi*. The last new species described by Brongersma was *Denisonia boschmai* (now *Rhinoplocephalus boschmai*) which he described together with Mrs. Knaap-van Meeuwen in 1964. Until the seventies Brongersma was a fervent smoker of roll-ups, he could almost be drawn with a fag in his mouth. After a heart attack he stopped smoking from one day to the next. During expeditions to New Guinea Brongersma discovered an alternative use for cigarette ends. The tobacco was put in the mouth of live snakes, which were thus killed in a quick way by an overdose of nicotine. Then they could be prepared in the usual way for museum purposes.

As a man Brongersma was just and formal, but warm and easy to know, always ready for a joke or pleasantries. When drinking spirits he used to say with a wink that he tried to attain the same state which our animals were in, to be precise for 100% saturated with alcohol. Because preserved animals were not perishable any more alcohol had to be healthy! To banish any wrong impressions I would like to state that Brongersma only took spirits very moderately.

As a director he devoted himself entirely to the well-being of the museum and its staff. His letters to civil servants in The Hague and Rijswijk were famous/notorious for their lengthy detail, but they often produced the desired result. As the museum in 1965 - when a new Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work was formed - was taken from the Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences, it came to resort under the newly formed Ministry together with lots of other National Museums. Owing to Brongersma's efforts, the scientific work that was done on the collections of the museum was regarded as essential and could continue undiminished, and was not regarded as superfluous luxury. Besides, he always made himself strong for the development of an exhibition that was accessible to the public, but unfortunately he could not live to see the realisation of this (1997).

On October 13th 1983 Brongersma was appointed Honorary Member of the Dutch Snake Society (which in the meantime has evolved to become the European Snake Society). This appointment was greatly appreciated by him. Although he did not visit meetings of the Society he followed the development of the Society and the magazine *Litteratura Serpentina* with interest.

Brongersma's death leaves an emptiness behind in the National Museum for Natural History that cannot be replaced. He was an oracle on the history of the museum, especially the herpetological collection which I gladly and often visited. That opportunity does not exist anymore. Also, one of the last remaining contemporaries of G.A.

Boulenger, K.P. Schmidt, H.W. Parker, Doris M. Cochran, Bertha Lutz and R. Mertens passed away with him; the end of a remarkable era in which our knowledge of the herpetofauna has made great progress, partly due to Brongersma's doing.

When Brongersma died the European Snake Society lost its only Honorary Member. The name Brongersma shall continue to live on in herpetological research, due to the many publications of his name that are of everlasting value, and in the names of species named after him.