



POPULARISING PALAEOANTHROPOLOGY

Current and Historical Perspectives
Artis Library of the University of
Amsterdam, 30-31 May 2018
<http://www.poppalaeo.com/>

Popularising Palaeontology, Workshop 3: Representations

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Artis Library - University of Amsterdam, 30-31 May 2018

Venue: Artis Library of the University of Amsterdam
Plantage Middenlaan 45-45A
1018 DC Amsterdam, the Netherlands



This workshop – organized in collaboration with the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands - will examine persistences and changes in the presentation of palaeontological science in the public arena, and the (potential and real) tension between the desire to interest the public on the one hand, while maintaining scientific authority and nuance on the other. We will think about some of the major stereotypes, cultural references and images associated with palaeontology, and how these have interacted with palaeontology's position in wider public discourse and the practices of palaeontological science.

Key themes and questions will include:

- Why have been the main motifs and tropes in public discussions of the practices and institutions of palaeontological science, and the figure of the palaeontologist? In what ways have palaeontologists sought to take advantage of this, and how have they contested it?
- What have been the most significant changes in the ways the life of the past has been presented to public audiences? What have been the most significant continuities? And in what ways have the various actors (scientists, museum professionals, communicators, artists and members of the public) influenced them?
- How have particular palaeontological representations been received and interpreted by public audiences, and how has this fed back into scientific conceptualizations and practices?

Wednesday, May 30

12.00 Room opens

12.30 *Word of welcome*

Hans Mulder, Artis Library

12.45 *Introduction PopPaleo*

Chris Manias, King's College London

13.00 *Selling urban palaeontology*

Jelle Reumer, Utrecht University

14.00 Session 1: Communication

14.00 *About Trix*

Anne Schulp, Naturalis

14.30 Coffee

15.00 *Dinosaur Discoveries in the News*

Heinrich Mallison, Museum für
Naturkunde Berlin

**15.30 *Palaeontology Exhibits as
Cultural Heritage***

Nikolaus Bernau, Berliner Zeitung /
Technical University Berlin

**16.00 *Science Communication:
a Glimpse from the Field***

Machteld Maris, Royal Netherlands
Academy of Sciences

16.30 *Comment and reflection*

Raf de Bont, Maastricht University

19.00 Conference Dinner

Thursday, May 31

10.00 Room opens

10.30 Session 2: Representation

**10.30 *Fossils and the Age of the Earth
in the 18th Century***

Matthijs Boom, Univ. of Amsterdam

**11.00 *The People's Pithecanthropus.
Human fossils and Dutch and
Indonesian identity***

Fenneke Sysling, Utrecht University

**11.30 *Size Matters! The Mobilization
and Demonstration of Objects,
Images and Power***

Mareike Vennen, TU Berlin

12.00 Lunch break

13.30 Session 3: Depiction

**13.30 *Marie Hubrecht and "Lost Worlds"
as an Educational Project***

Dicky van der Zalm, J. Smit College
Amsterdam

**14.00 *Skeletons in the Closet at the
Museum of Natural Sciences
of Belgium: how Ego Obstructed
Scientific Progress***

Sandra Cordier, Ghent

**14.30 *O.C. Marsh's Depictions
of Dinosaurs***

Paul Brinkman, North Carolina
Museum of Natural Sciences

15.00 Coffee break and final words
by the organisers

**16.00 *Closing Lecture: London's
Crystal Park Dinosaurs***

Joe Cain (University College London)

17.15 Drinks reception at Reinwardt
Academy

From the beginnings of research into the earth's deep history in the late-eighteenth century, extinct animals, lost worlds, narratives of life's history and accounts of palaeontological discovery have exerted a strong hold over public audiences, and been depicted across a range of media. The 'spectacular' side of the field – particularly dinosaurs, adventurous fieldwork and human origins – has long been presented as an important gateway into wider interest in science. The practices of palaeontological research, mixing geology, comparative anatomy and evolutionary biology with artistic and imaginative reconstructions of extinct organisms and lineages, also offer important perspectives on the relations between different sciences, and between science and art. And the diversity of prehistoric life, and the large-scale changes across geological history, have been an important means of shifting understandings of ecology, evolution and biodiversity since the nineteenth century.

This network aims to look at these issues and link synergistic trends in the humanities and sciences. In the history and sociology of science, the study of popular science is a dynamic field, moving beyond simplistic ideas of dissemination from 'high' scientific to 'low' popular contexts to more complex models based on coproduction and circulation between the 'public' and the 'scientific.' In these works, the history of geology and palaeontology – conceptually revolutionary sciences of great appeal to public audiences – have been crucial case-studies. In the evolutionary and earth sciences themselves, public engagement (often in a highly historically-informed manner) has also been a major preoccupation, and palaeontologists and geologists have pioneered innovative new methods of collaborative public engagement, open access publishing, and online dissemination. However, despite the obvious thematic and practical overlaps between these developments, they have occurred quite separately from one another.

Over a series of workshops and public engagement events, we will bring together an international group of humanities and social sciences scholars, scientists, museum professionals, artists, and participants from the cultural sector to reflect on these trends and build future collaborations. Mixing theoretical and practical discussions on the public circulation of scientific ideas, we will investigate the importance of palaeontological concepts in the modern world, while also developing new understandings and methods for science communication more generally.

We will reflect on the role that popular engagement plays within scientific research, whether this be to gain funds and resources, develop theories and conduct debates, or promote particular messages, while evaluating the reasons for the appeal (or lack of appeal) of particular aspects of palaeontology among particular audiences. We will also think about how palaeontological outreach can develop in the future, whether through reaching new audiences, developing new techniques of public engagement, and through reconsidering the ways in which palaeontological narratives can contribute to wider public debates. In doing so, we will build collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, develop new perspectives on science communication, and assess the importance of palaeontological ideas for wider debates on nature, evolution and the environment.

Workshop 1: Explorations

King's College London, September 2016

The first workshop brought together historians of science, palaeontologists, artists, museum professionals and science communicators to discuss how the deep history of life have been communicated to publics historically and currently. In doing so, we thought about how interdisciplinary engagement and discussion of this area could work, reflected on how popular conceptions feed into scientific research, and discussed the impact this has had upon changing ideas of animals, the environment and evolution.

Over the two days, we discussed questions like:

- How have issues of media profile and celebrity affected palaeontological research and its public presentation?
- How have scientific debates, theories and controversies interacted with popularization efforts and public understandings?
- Why have dinosaurs become so iconic in popular images of palaeontology, when did this happen, and what role have they played in public imaginations?
- How and why have palaeontologists presented new or unfamiliar organisms to the public, and what factors have affected the level of engagement with them

Workshop 2: Agendas

King's College London, December 2017

This workshop focussed on the agendas motivating the popularization of palaeontological research by scientists, and the reasons for interest in palaeontological subjects among the public. It examined the synergies and tensions between these sets of interests, and how particular audiences are either privileged or excluded in these processes. In addition, we discussed the challenges of palaeontological outreach, some of the pressures around it, and the frequent conflict between different goals and interests.

Some of the key questions were:

- Why popularize palaeontology at all? What have been the difference
- motives and agendas for this, and how have they affected popularization efforts?
- How has the public position of palaeontological research affected scientific research and scientific careers? What are the potential costs and risks of making palaeontology a 'popular' science?
- What audiences have traditionally been interested in palaeontology, and why? What audiences should we try to reach with palaeontological outreach today, and how?

Workshop 4: Debates

King's College London , December 2018

This workshop will examine how the public discussion of palaeontological ideas has connected with wider debates on scientific, social and cultural issues, ranging from evolution, 'progress,' nature, biodiversity, and spectacle. It will interrogate the wider ideological and cultural traditions around the public discussion of palaeontological research, and how old stereotypes and new narratives have developed.

Particularly important questions will be:

- Which cultural and ideological positions have historically used palaeontological research and narratives? How has this changed and shifted overtime?
- How long-standing have particular cultural stereotypes been in the presentation of life's history, particularly those based on 'progress' and 'improvement'? Why have these been so difficult to overcome?
- How can palaeontology interact with current issues and concerns over conservation, biodiversity, and environmental change? How effective can this be? Is this even desirable?

Workshop 5: Objects

North Carolina Museum of natural Sciences (Raleigh, NC), Spring 2019

This workshop – to be organized in collaboration with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences - will examine how particular palaeontological objects have been presented and discussed in public contexts, whether these be organisms, periods, specimens, institutions like museums and research laboratories, and individual palaeontologists. In doing so, it will encourage reflections on how particular things have either been the focus of public discussion or been occluded in these processes.

Some potential questions will be:

- Which organisms, periods, institutions and styles of work have been most prominent in public presentations of palaeontological research, and why has this been?
- Which organisms, periods, institutions and styles of work have been less prominent, and why? Has this always been the case?
- What techniques have been used to attempt to overcome these challenges?

London, September 2019

The final workshop will examine issues of genre and media, focussing on particular types of media used for the representation of palaeontological themes (such as film, documentaries, exhibition displays, newspaper stories, books, novels, and lectures), and the role that the media has had in conditioning the interaction between scientists and publics.

We will be engaging with questions like:

- Which media have been most significant in shaping public notions of palaeontology? How has this changed overtime?
- What considerations have palaeontologists and science communicators made when adapting their work to particular forms of media?
- How have media institutions used palaeontological research, and how have they interacted with palaeontologists?
- How do ideas and messages move across different genres and media, and what shifts occur in them as they do so?

Support

The first two workshops were generously funded by King's College London, and the activities for 2018 and 2019 will be funded through an International Research Network Grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (ref: AH/R007411/1).

This third workshop is organised in collaboration with the the Huygens Institute of the History of the Netherlands, a subsidiary of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The network is run by **Dr. Chris Manias** (King's College London) as Principal Investigator and Prof. Joe Cain (University College London) as Co-Investigator, with Dr. Ilja Nieuwland (Huygens Institute) coordinating the meeting in Amsterdam and Dr. Paul Brinkman (North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences) coordinating the meeting in Raleigh.

The public events will all be free and open to ticketed members of the public. Due to space constraints, attendance at the workshops will be limited to speakers and a small number of invited additional participants - please get in touch if you would like to take part in any of these. The talks at the workshops will all be uploaded to this website as audio and video, and participants will produce blogposts on the issues raised and discussed. As well as the workshops and public engagement events, we are also aiming to produce an open access collection reflecting on and summarizing the main results of the network and its discussions.

Contact

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Cover image

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