

THEODOR NEAGU THE PATRIARCH OF ROMANIAN PALAEOLOGY

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Abstract. The paper synthetically presents the professional and scientific path of Theodor Neagu, an academic very much cherished by his students, a much appreciated scholar both in Romania and abroad and the most important founder of the Romanian school of micropaleontology. This article is also meant as a eulogy on the occasion of his turning 80s this year.

Keywords: Theodor Neagu, academician, palaeontologist, micropaleontology, Romania.

Rezumat. Theodor Neagu - patriarhul paleontologiei românești. Lucrarea prezintă sintetic parcursul profesional și științific al unui profesor iubit de studenți, al unui om de știință apreciat în țară și în străinătate, al celui mai important fondator al școlii românești de micropaleontologie - Theodor Neagu, și este un omagiu ocazionat de împlinirea vârstei de 80 de ani.

Cuvinte cheie: Theodor Neagu, academician, paleontolog, micropaleontologie, România.

Theodor Neagu was born in Giurgiu, on the 20th of September 1932.

While still a student at “Mihai Eminescu” high-school in Bucharest, the teacher Constantin Rădoi has remarked his propensity towards natural sciences and endeavoured to cultivate it, by lending him books and articles signed by Ion Simionescu and various other authors. At first, he wanted to become a forester. Another teacher, I. Gabrea, who had been transferred from the University, sent him to the academician Traian Săvulescu. Influenced by the latter, he decided to become a botanist, but then the teacher Rădoi led him towards Geology and Palaeontology. It is the field which will eventually prove to be his true calling and a steadfast passion during his entire career.

Between 1951 and 1955, Theodor Neagu attended the lectures of the Faculty of Geology - Geography within the University of Bucharest (Pl. I, photo 1). He graduated with merit, being the only student of his generation invited to join the teaching staff and become an academic. He was an exceptional student who had exceptional professors: Miltiade Filipescu, whose teaching assistant he was, and whom he greatly admired for the dedication he put in preparing his lectures, I. Z. Barbu, teaching the Micropaleontology course (while the young teaching assistant Th. Neagu was in charge of applied courses), or Emilia Saulea, Honorary Member of the Academy, the first woman palaeontologist in Romania and one of his role models, the one who revealed the beauty of Micropaleontology to him. He loved and respected his mentors, and later on, he displayed a series of portraits of his predecessors in the Department of Paleontology.

He ascended in the academic hierarchy, as a teaching assistant (1955-1956) (Pl. I, Photo 2), an assistant professor (1957-1966), a senior lecturer (1967-1968) and an associate professor (1969-1990). In 1972 he obtained the title of doctor docent. Despite his outstanding activity within the department, as well as his research papers published in the country and abroad, he obtained professorship only in 1990, when it was again possible for academics to obtain tuitions, with the removal of the blockage formerly imposed by “Cabinet 2” (namely, Elena Ceaușescu).

Very close to his students (Pl. I, Photo 3), open, dynamic, restless, always trying to explain further the scientific subjects, to prove and demonstrate, Professor Neagu had his own particular style, something that made him unique among the other educators. Course attendance was amazing, and he was followed willingly and passionately by the students, who felt that what he taught had been put in practice, personally experienced and assessed, and not just read in existing treatises. The practical work in laboratory was being conducted in a relaxed atmosphere. The professor was able to see who had genuine inclination for working with a microscope and who did not, therefore he assigned the tasks so as to avoid potential tensions. We sometimes had tests with all materials on the desk (textbooks, lab papers, seminary papers) and the allowance to consult them, because the Professor was against mechanical memorizing. He would explain at length why somebody made a mistake, and he would become really enthusiastic when a student happened to understand how things worked with the determination of species, and the discovery of those differentiating features, first intuited and then held up to closer scrutiny.

Virtually every graduate from the Faculty of Geology has the most beautiful recollections from the field trips organized by Prof. Neagu (Pl. I, Photos 4, 5). In 1984 I had my student summer training on the Dâmbovița Valley. As on every occasion, Prof. Neagu was the soul of the group (a pretty large one, around 120 students), presenting the field situation, explaining, demonstrating, everything in a very pleasant and youthful atmosphere. At a certain moment we were in the river bed, with just a weak stream of water over pebbles, because of a barrage cutting the river upstream. The entire group was in the middle of the river bed, on a pile of pebbles, from the top of which the professor was presenting some fossils. Soon, the water level started to rise, as the barrage had been opened. Little by little, it grew higher, so most of us crossed to the other side. Only the professor and a small group of students remained, who, too much engrossed in examining fossils, had not noticed the water. From now on, you had to get into the water in order to cross the river bed. The students took their shoes off and passed through the 20-30 cm water, but professor Neagu, after

some attempts to cross over, called to him a strong student who took him on his back, to everyone's amusement, of course.

He was the professor the most loved by the students of the 80s and ... he remained thus until today! He knew how to be demanding, but also how to be tolerant. He had great wisdom, a real treasure which he exploited so as to preserve the balance between the high level of academic exigencies and the requirements fitted to every student in particular. He had good people knowledge (he could "read" the students), from the very first glance, and he knew what to ask from each of them. Notwithstanding the openness and warmth he showed the students, especially during field trips, Professor Neagu enjoyed everyone's respect by his mere presence, by his demeanour of a dedicated professor and a strong character man.

Over the time I talked with many of the professor's former students, some of them already retired by now, others who had just graduated; every time Prof. Neagu's name was mentioned, first, the person would smile, then I would hear all sorts of exclamations: "Well, of all my teachers, with him I was in the best relations!", "He had such a wonderful style of explaining things!", "It was him who taught me that...", "We used to have an incredible time with him on field trips!", "he was the one who made me understand that...", "he was the first to open my eyes on..."

He has strived to guide those who were passionate about the discipline and truly wanted to go deeper into some aspects of Paleontology, he cultivated their talents, he explained and demonstrated to them what it meant to be involved in high level science, he opened new horizons for them, just like, years before, his own professors had done for him.

He enjoyed the respect and appreciation of the colleagues in the Department of Paleontology, which he has chaired for several years; his opinions were observed and cherished by colleagues. As Head of Department, he was worthy of the outstanding predecessors who had founded and previously led the Department.

In 1962, Theodor Neagu laid the foundation of the first micropaleontological collection (affiliated to the Paleontology Laboratory within the University of Bucharest). This was to become the very first collection of this type in Romania. Many can still remember how in the terrible days of the so-called "mineriad", the Professor appeared on TV with tears in his eyes, deploring the scattering of his precious collection. He managed to reorganize it, after years of hard work, so that this collection is today one of the treasures of the Museum affiliated to the Department of Paleontology within the Faculty of Geology.

He piously kept belongings of the former professors, speaking reverentially about their activity as educators, as founders of a school, about their scientific activity as well as their probity and passion for their work.

Sometimes he wears Gregoriu Ștefănescu's cap: he was the founder of the Department of Paleontology and Theodor Neagu feels a deep psychological connection to the man he has considered his mentor.

In 1965 he defended his doctoral thesis "Micropaleontological and stratigraphical study of the Upper Cretaceous deposits between the upper valleys of the Buzău and Râul Negru rivers (Eastern Carpathians)" rewarded by the Romanian Academy with the "Grigore Cobălcescu" prize.

In 1965-1966 he had a training stage in SUA, coordinated by professors R. C. Moore from Lawrence Kansas University and H. V. Andersen from Louisiana State University. In 1970 he attended for three months a postdoctoral program at the University of Frankfurt on Main. Despite his renewed efforts to explain to authorities of that time that micropalaeontology was a complex domain which required a constant updating of information, through experience exchanges with specialists from all over the world, he was not allowed to leave the country again until 1990.

In spite of all his trials and tribulations, Prof. Neagu has carried on with his research, both in the field and in his lab. He has undertaken geological research in all Romania, concretized in more than 100 scientific papers published in the country and abroad.

Among his scientific papers, an eminent place is detained by the two volumes of the Micropaleontology treatise, the first of this type in Romania, also quoted in the most important Treatise in the field, belonging to Loeblich and Tappan (SUA) in 1988.

Some of his most outstanding contributions are: „Monographie de la faune des foraminifères eocènes du couloir de Dâmbovicioara, de Codlea et des Monts Perșani (Couches de Carhaga)”, published in 1975, „Jurasicul și Cretacicul din Dobrogea centrală și de sud (paleontologie și stratigrafie)”, published in 1998. Another one worth mentioning is „Monografia faunei de foraminifere neocretace din culoarul Dâmbovicioarei”, where he elucidated a series of stratigraphical issues (1972).

Neagu was the first to discover the agglutinated foraminifera in the Upper Cretaceous clay in Sadova Valley and in the upper basin of the Buzau Valley („Studiul foraminiferelor aglutinate din argilele cretacice superioare de pe Valea Sadovei (Câmpulung Moldovenesc) și bazinul superior al Văii Buzăului”, 1962), where he identified an assemblage of deep water foraminifera. He is also the first to describe the agglutinated foraminifera of huge size in the flysch of Eastern Carpathians (Buzău - Valea Mare area) as well as some forms of Lower Cretaceous foraminifera in the corridor Dâmbovicioara, Codlea and Perșani Mountains.

The research undertaken in the lab and in the field has brought him another great satisfaction, that of having discovered new taxa, such as two new foraminifera families: *Chrisalinidae* and *Kaminskiidae*, 45 types and 190 new species of foraminifera, 5 new species of molluscs and brachiopods, thus ensuring that his name will be inscribed in the gallery of the most prolific Romanian palaeontologists.

His activity in Romania was remarkable, but his scientific papers have also made him famous abroad. In 1962 he was elected a member of the Polish Geological Society based in Cracow; in September 1967 he took part in the 10th

European Colloquium of Micropaleontology in Poland; in September 1975 he was an organizer and a participant in the 14th Colloquium of Micropaleontology in Bucharest; in 1975 he became a member of the International Commission of stratigraphy; in 1980 he joined the research group Mid-Cretaceous Events, guided by IUGS-UNESCO; between the years 1965-1980 he has been the correspondent for Romania of the prestigious American journal „Micropaleontology”; in May 1990 he participated at the reunion IGCP - project 262, Cracow and the Conference WAF for agglutinates in flysch facies; in September 1993 he participated at the 4th International Conference WAF (Cracow).

He experienced considerable satisfaction in his scientific activity in 1993, when he was elected a correspondent member of the Romanian Academy (Pl. I, Photo 6). In 2001 he became a full member of the Academy, which represented the utmost recognition of scientific merits, the fulfilment of a research activity spanning over five decades. His reception speech, entitled “The Paleontological Foundations of Geology and Biology”, given on the 24th of May 2007, was organized in two parts: an introduction, where he evoked his great predecessors, Gregoriu Ștefănescu, Sabba Ștefănescu și Ion Simionescu, and a main part, where the speaker presented, at large and in a well-documented manner, the input of palaeontology and micropaleontology in terms of the evolution of earth and natural sciences. When responding to his speech, academician Mircea Săndulescu, president of the Geonomic Sciences, argued that Acad. Theodor Neagu was “one of the most important, if not the most important founding father of the Romanian school of micropaleontology”, with contributions that were “seminal for experts in Romania and of the international community, who has already acknowledged the value of his work”. As they even collaborated for a while, Acad. Mircea Săndulescu characterized him as “a partner with positive thinking, exasperatingly thorough, desperately tolerant and... scientifically pestiferous.”

Within the Academy he worked for the Commission of Natural Monuments, bringing his contribution to the elaboration of documents and normative acts in reference to nature monuments in Romania. He also played an important part in what turned out to be a world premiere: the establishment of a Museum of Sandstone Concretions in Costești (Vâlcea County), the first of its kind in the world.

I was amazed, in my student years by the professor’s competence in the field of zoology. At a certain point, inside a scientific circle, Professor Vasile Mutihac was presenting the geology of a region in Romania; among the slides he was running, there were some with butterflies. Professor Neagu, sitting on the chair right behind me, started mentioning the scientific names for each of them, which made the entire audience exchange admiring glances among them.

I could not possibly finish Theodor Neagu’s portrait without mentioning that he is a practicing believer, a man who all his life has practiced high-level science while being convinced that the salvation of the soul is in God’s hands and not in the detailed analysis of matter. I once watched Prof. Neagu as a special guest on a cultural show broadcasted by Trinitas, the television of the Romanian Patriarchate. The discussion concerned the connections between science and religion and I was deeply impressed by his firm support of the faith, by his conviction that God is the Creator of all that is, and the argument regarding the limits of science. After that, I happened to see him at the liturgical service on Sunday, at “Saint Nicholas” Church in Bucharest, thus proving that his faith is supported by facts and actual worship, not just words.

Now, when he is turning 80s, being very much admired and loved by all his students and colleagues, we wish Prof. Theodor Neagu to accomplish all his scientific projects and to continue being the Patriarch of Romanian Paleontology.

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PLATE I: Photos from Prof. Theodor Neagu's personal archive
PLANȘA I: Fotografii din arhiva personală a prof. Theodor Neagu



Photo 1. Theodor Neagu as a student in his third year (1953).
Foto 1. Theodor Neagu student în anul III (1953).



Photo 2. Theodor Neagu as a young assistant professor (1956).
Foto 2. Theodor Neagu tânăr asistent (1956).



Photo 3. Among students - New Year's Eve 1964/1965.
Foto 3. În mijlocul studenților - revelion studențesc 1964/1965.



Photo 4. Geological field trip at Luna de Sus (7 mai 1974).
Foto 4. Practică geologică la Luna de Sus (7 mai 1974).



Photo 5. At the barrage Vidraru (April 13th 1984).
Foto 5. La barajul Vidraru (13 aprilie 1984).



Photo 6. As an Academician (December 1993).
Foto 6. Academician (decembrie 1993).