

## Anniversary

# National Museum of Natural History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences celebrates its 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary



The building of the National Museum of Natural History at BAS.



Joint Bulgarian-Macedonian palaeontological excavations near Dolni Disan, Negotino (North Macedonia) in a field with animal fossils coeval to the first potential hominin, the *Graecopithecus*.

## A history of one hundred and thirty years...

Is this a long or a short lifetime for a museum in the modern history of Bulgaria? The National Museum of Natural History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences is not only the oldest museum in Bulgaria. It is the oldest and richest natural science museum on the Balkan Peninsula. Its leading role in the domain of natural sciences is due not only to its history of long standing but to the efforts and love of its founders for science and Nature.

Prince Ferdinand started the Museum in 1889 under the name Royal Prince's Natural History Museum, and initially it put on display only Prince Ferdinand's personal collections of birds, mammals and butterflies. Subsequently, the personal collections of Princess Clementina and King Boris III were also added to it and thus the Museum obtained the biggest "royal collection" of natural science exhibits.

In the first years of its existence, special credits go to the Royal Physician Dr Paul Leverkühn. Besides his medical practice, he was a well-known ornithologist. As first Curator of the Museum, Dr Leverkühn organized the first museum display in 14 exhibition halls on two floors. An old building, located in the same place as the present Museum is, housed the exhibition, which was opened for visitors in 1907. The



The new display of minerals in the Genesis of Minerals Hall. Albit geodes are put for the first time on display. They illustrate the processes of rock and mineral formation in the Earth crust.

same year witnessed the publication of the first and only complete catalogue of the collections, which listed several thousand exhibits at that time.

Prior to World War One, the Museum collections were enriched mainly by foreign contributions donated or purchased by prominent foreign collectors and travelers: Count Amédée Alléon, Emil Holub, Stewart Baker, Josef Haberhauer, Julius Milde, etc. In the following decades, the Museum comprised almost all private collections of animals and plants, as well as the collections of the first Bulgarian geologists, botanists and zoologists: Nikola Nedelkov, Petar Chorbadzhiev, Dimitar Yoakimov, Ivan Neichev, Ivan Urumov and Anani Yavashev; of Professor Georgi Zlatarski and Rafail Popov.

Academician Ivan Buresh, an eminent Bulgarian zoologist, headed the Museum from 1914 to 1959. Under the name of Royal Museum, it paved the road for the Royal Natural Science Institutes created in 1918. In order to enrich its collections, expeditions were sent to all Bulgarian mountains and to the neighbouring Balkan states. Many new animal and plant species were discovered. The Museum became the main centre of scientific research in the line of natural sciences in Bulgaria. It started the publication of its own journal, which quickly won respect in the scientific circles.

After World War Two, the Museum building was restored after the damages inflicted during the air raids on Sofia and the new display opened for visitors in 1948. Renamed the Natural Science Museum then, it was the first institution that became part of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences after its reorganization in 1947. Based on the Museum's collections, three new academic institutes were established in the same year: Zoological, Botanical and Geological.

In 1974, Academician Ivan Kostov became Director of the Museum. His unconditional authority and tireless efforts contributed much to prompting the then Council of Ministers to issue a decision on the strength of which the Museum became an independent scientific unit of national standing. Ever since the Museum has been carrying its present name. Subsequently, its display expanded to 16 exhibition halls, with new arrangement for minerals, rocks, fossils and plants, and very modern arrangement of animals. A new library and a new journal of the Museum saw light. In 1990, a Paleontological Museum was set in Asenovgrad as a branch unit of the Natural Science Museum.

Today, the National Museum of Natural History is the richest museum of natural sciences on the Balkan Peninsula and owns about half a million animals, plant and mineral exhibits.



Diorama *Five Million Years Ago* (10 × 3 m) prepared by experts of the Natural Science Museum jointly with the Simeon Stoilov Studio as a tourist attraction within the Palaentological Museum's display *A Pliocene Park near Dorkovo Village*, Rakitovo Municipality (Bulgaria).

The Museum arranges displays on four floors in 16 halls. The exhibits are placed in a close to their natural environment and are in excellent condition. The collections, which have been compiled in the course of more than one hundred years, comprise 460 mammal species, more than 1990 bird species, hundreds of thousands of insects and invertebrates. The Museum houses one of the rich European collections of reptiles and amphibians and about one-quarter of the world's various kinds of minerals. It has a particularly rich collection of the cave fauna in Bulgaria and other countries, with many species missing in other museums in the world. The collections are enriched by collection activities in the country, expeditions or exchange with kindred institutions abroad, by donations, purchase of private collections, and with confiscated entire collections or single samples by the Customs Office. The Museum has four scientific departments: Invertebrates, Vertebrates, Palaeontology and Mineralogy, and Botany.

The ambitions of the Museum's team are to secure presently new premises for laboratories, a conference hall, new depots, and a recreation hall. An Evolution Hall is in the process of setting, so as to

present life in ancient times and its evolution in the Bulgarian lands, the Balkans and Europe, starting with the Bulgarian dinosaurs, via the giants of the Paleogene, Hippurion fauna, the first hominins, and Glacial Age to contemporary Nature, and depletion of the latter by human activities.

In recent years, the Museum is attracting the youngest visitors with merry games and interesting lessons, intended to bring the children closer to science and show them how important it is to love and protect Nature.

Dear Colleagues,  
Please, accept our best wishes for further creative successes and new creative ideas, which will help you retain and advance your important role in science and education.

**by Dimitar Ivanov**

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