

A. E. VAN GIFFEN

Noordhorn 14 March 1884 - Zwolle 31 May 1973

On May 31, 1973, Professor Albert Egges van Giffen died at the age of 89 years. For nearly 65 years he was active as an archeologist.

While he was still a biology student in 1908, he was asked by his teachers to supervise the excavation of the *terp* mound of Dorkwerd, a short distance from the town of Groningen. In those days *terp* earth was systematically dug away to be used as fertilizer. Among those who were concerned about the loss of data of scientific importance through these large scale quarrying operations were the *Centraal Bureau voor de kennis van de provincie Groningen en omgelegen streken*, a committee of learned men inside and outside the University, who were preoccupied with the history and geography of the province of Groningen. At that time, the committee had already a long tradition in the promotion of regional research. They now provided some money for Van Giffen. The members included a geologist, a zoologist, a historian, a classicist, and an agricultural specialist. They passed their knowledge on to Van Giffen and created a frame-work within which he could develop as an archeologist. Their disciplines determined the limits of Van Giffen's activities and competence, long after the borders of the province of Groningen became too narrow for him – which was very soon to be the case.

Van Giffen explored the adjacent *terp* districts in the province of Friesland and in Northern Germany, where he was guided by P. C. J. A. Boeles and H. Schütte respectively. His interest in the general background of the early human occupation of the clay marshes led him also to study the sandy *hinterland* of Drenthe and Westerwolde. There, too, many antiquities were being destroyed as a result of the reclamation and afforestation of the heathlands. Trackways in the raised bogs (Buinen, 1912), ancient fields and tumuli (e.g. Zeijen, 1917), megalithic tombs (first excavation at Havelte, 1918) and urn-fields (e.g. Wollinguizen, 1920) drew him into the field of prehistoric archeology.

In 1912 he went to Leiden as a keeper in the State Museum of Antiquities, but in 1917 he came back to work at the University of Groningen, supported by the newly founded *Vereniging voor Terpenonderzoek* (Society of Terp Research,

1916) and the *Drents Praehistorische Vereniging* (Prehistoric Society of Drenthe, 1913). His first excavation in his new position was that of the *terp* of Wierhuizen (1916-17). In 1920 the *Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut* was founded, with Van Giffen as its director.

In his work on sea level changes (first publication 1910) and raised bog formation (1915) Van Giffen functioned as a geologist; his doctoral thesis on the fauna of the *terpen* (1913) and his studies on the origin of the domestic dog (1915) are primarily zoological; in his interest for prehistoric fields, farm houses, ploughs and harvesting tools he shows his agricultural knowledge; in his excavations of Roman castella (e.g. Utrecht, 1929; Valkenburg, 1941) he moved into the field of classical archeology and ancient history; through his excavation of churches and monasteries (for example Smalle Ee, 1922; Aduard, 1939), historic town centres (Groningen, beginning in 1928), he got involved in the interpretation of historic documents.

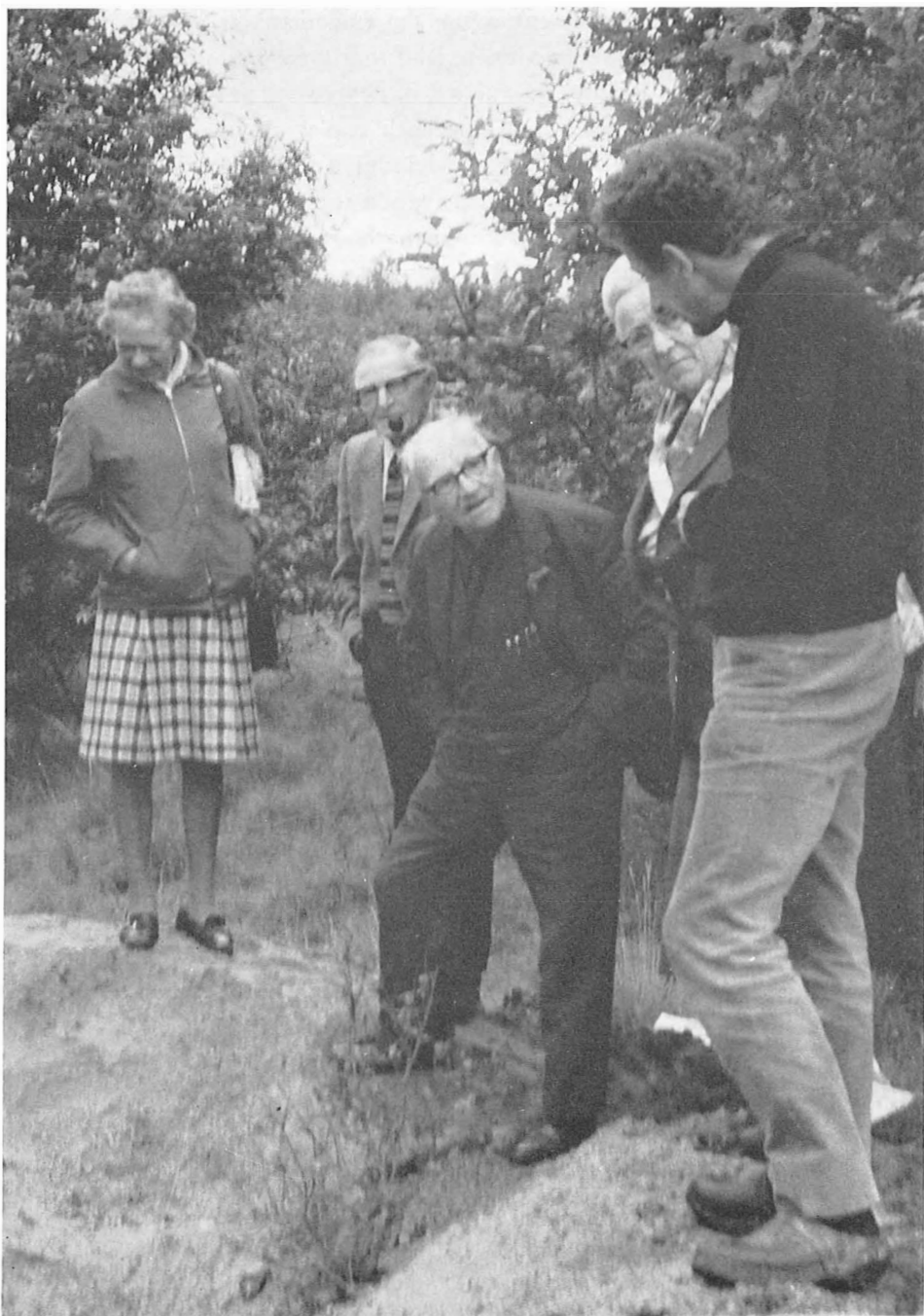
Van Giffen always tried to bring data from different disciplines in relation to each other and to archeological phenomena. He saw a connection between his study of the dog and the problem of the Indo-European languages. He brought the development of the *terpen* in relation to sea level changes. Differences in structure between Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows were according to him the result of changes in climate and vegetation. He saw in the burnt *Grubenhiitten* which he found at Ezinga the effect of the migration of Angles and Saxons.

These interdisciplinary activities were very stimulating and attracted attention from many sides. They certainly are a major facet of Van Giffen's personality as a scientific worker.

But apart from that, he also showed originality in the field of archeology in the strict sense. In the late twenties and early thirties he became known all over Europe because of his excavation techniques, which he applied with equal success to the *terp* mounds in the clay districts north of Groningen and to the burial mounds in the sandy uplands of Drenthe to the south.

Vertical sections through archeological objects had been drawn before by various people, and J. H. Holwerda had introduced in the Netherlands Schuchhardt's technique of the systematic stripping of large areas, so that post-holes etc. could be recognized. But the use of a combination of vertical (radial and tangential) and horizontal sections, systematically laid out, so as to produce a maximum of information on the three-dimensional inner structure of the archeological object, is Van Giffen's own contribution. Here he showed himself to be a pupil of his academic teacher, the famous plant anatomist J. M. Moll.

Everyone who, as a student of biology, has had to work with Moll's *Handboek der plantbeschrijving* as a manual for practical exercises in plant anatomy and morphology sees the origins not only of Van Giffen's excavation methods but also



On September 26, 1972, Prof. A. E. van Giffen visited for the last time an excavation of the Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut. It was the re-excavation of a barrow near Elp, Drenthe, which he had himself investigated 40 years before. Photo Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe (G. de Leeuw).

of his way of describing and inventorizing the find material. Eventually such methods would, according to Van Giffen, lead to a systematics of archeological units, much like plant taxonomy. In practice, he never went as far as that. But we recognize in his analytical-descriptive approach and wide field of interest the attitude of the biologist trained in the early decades of this century.

As a result of the application of his excavation techniques Van Giffen found in the *terp* of Ezinge (1923-1934) not only many house plans but also the lay-out of successive stages in the development of this village from the pre-Roman Iron Age up to the present day. Such a sequence had never been demonstrated outside the classical world. This project can be ranged among such classic excavations on the European continent as Köln-Lindenthal and Meiendorf. Complicated multiple-period barrows were unraveled by Van Giffen and he paid great attention to peripheral structures such as ring-ditches and post-circles, which nobody had ever looked for in such a systematic way. His book *Die Bauart der Einzelgräber* therefore received great attention (1930). And in the excavation of the Roman castellum of Valkenburg (1941) he added the systematic layer-wise stripping to his technical armoury with the result that detailed plans were obtained of the successive building stages and renovations of the walls, barracks and commander's houses.

For Van Giffen the environmental data to be obtained by an excavation were often just as important as the archeological data. When excavating barrows he always continued the sections out into the surrounding terrain, to study differences in soil profiles over, underneath and outside the barrows. In clay districts he studied the sedimentation conditions before and after the habitation. He was puzzled when he found Bronze Age barrows in West-Friesland at such a low level with regard to Ordnance Datum that later sediments should be expected over them, and left a manuscript unpublished because he could not find a satisfactory explanation for their absence. The systematic way Van Giffen used his excavation technique to collect environmental data distinguishes him from many contemporary archeologists. In this respect he set another methodological example.

Van Giffen trained skilled technical assistants and with the aid of them he could increase the number and enlarge the size of his excavations. When possible, he used internees, prisoners, *etc.* Also he succeeded in getting large state grants for using unemployed labour in the time of the big economic crisis before World War II. At Ezinge he employed hundreds of workmen at one time.

But at other sites too, he could with little money achieve a completeness of excavation plans which at the time was rare. As an example I mention the Vledder urnfield (excavated in 1937). Van Giffen was also a pioneer in large-scale settlement excavations in the sandy uplands of Drenthe, such as Zeijen (1934). Here,

he opened up a field of research which continues to be fruitful today.

As a result of Van Giffen's work the northern provinces of the Netherlands are now provided with an exceptionally dense network of well-documented excavations. Elsewhere in the Netherlands his digging activities were of a more incidental nature but no less important as foundation for future research. Some early examples are the flint mines of Rijckholt (1923) in Limburg, the river marsh settlement (*woerd*) of Ressen (1927) in Gelderland, the Neolithic settlement traces of Zandwerven (1929) and the Bronze Age barrows of Wervershoof (1942) in North Holland, the urn-field of Best (1934) and the barrows at Hoge Mierde (1934) in North Brabant.

His zeal to apply rigorous excavation methods and to collect environmental data was sometimes counterbalanced by a diminished interest in the traditional objects of archeological research, the actual finds. His attention to detail in the mapping of the features is not matched in all his excavations by the same degree of meticulousness in the recording of the finds from these features. Possibly this was a reaction against the one-sidedness of those colleagues who were only concerned about finds. One can also note a curious contrast between Van Giffen's claim of technical perfection during the excavation and the lack of consistency he showed in the interpretation of the obtained stratigraphical data in some of his published reports.

Van Giffen's *forte* was always the demonstration of new possibilities. Many of the colleagues from countries abroad who came under his influence in the early thirties have already passed away, and a third generation may easily overlook how great Van Giffen's contribution in reality was. They may only know his many excavation reports and be confronted with his interpretations, many of which will now appear to them to be out-dated. Van Giffen was doubtless a very productive excavator, but it would be completely wrong to see his merits as limited to that aspect of his field work.

Van Giffen was also quick to grasp the potentialities of new scientific methods. He was highly impressed by the early pollen work of K. Bertsch in the Federsee bogs, and introduced pollen analysis as a specialism at his own Institute, so that a higher degree of integration of the botanical and archeological work became possible. His efforts to promote dendrochronology had little effect, but he was very successful in stimulating the late Hessel de Vries to work on the C14 method. Van Giffen paid the first investments for the installation of a C14 apparatus at the physics laboratory. The improvements made by De Vries stand at the beginning of the successful world-wide application of this new dating method to archeology, which has changed the aspect of prehistoric archeology in such a revolutionary way, as may appear from some of the contributions in this volume of *Palaeohistoria*.

A review of Van Giffen's work must always be incomplete. A few more things, however, should certainly be mentioned. With many colleagues he shared an interest in the intriguing megalithic burial mounds, and he produced an impressive volume on the Dutch tombs (1925-1927), in which he described all of them in a most detailed way and he was entrusted with the inspectorship over these monuments until his death. Their correct scenic setting was a big concern for him, and he personally took care of the trees and shrubs to be planted around them.

Van Giffen had a great interest in the Early Medieval period, including the Migration Period. He excavated cemeteries (for example Godlinze, 1919) and settlements (as early as 1921 at Schipborg) and was an active member of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Sachsenforschung*.

Finally, mention must be made of his many excavations abroad, such as a Copper Age cemetery (Bodrogkeresztur, 1921) and a Bronze Age tell (Toszeg, 1928) in Hungary, *terps* in Germany (1929), a stone circle (Ballinoe, 1937) in Ireland, a gallery grave (Trégastel, 1939) and a Bronze Age tumulus (Lannion, 1939) in Brittany.

Van Giffen was an incredibly hard and busy worker, who could do with a few hours of sleep per night throughout his life. At one time he occupied six different official posts. At least the same number of professional archeologists in the Netherlands can now consider him as their predecessor. If anything, this shows how productive Van Giffen's life has also been outside the strict scientific field to which we limit ourselves here.

But since continuity is essential in practising science, we must say a final word on Van Giffen as a teacher. In that quality his strength were the personal contacts with his pupils in the field and on the way to the field. His enthusiasm was overwhelming and irresistible. He took the time to explain every detail to them, he drew them into the daily problems of his own work. He listened to them and entrusted them with very responsible tasks in much the same way as he himself once had been as a student.

The biographical notes and bibliography which follow may complete the picture of the life and work of this unique personality.

H. T. Waterbolk