

## Miklós Kretzoi, 1907–2005

*Eoanthropus dawsoni*, *Hesperopithecus haroldcookii*, *Pithecanthropus erectus*, and *Australopithecus africanus* were all candidates for the earliest human ancestors when Miklós Kretzoi began publishing scholarly papers on vertebrate paleontology in 1927. During the course of his illustrious career he would publish numerous papers on topics in vertebrate paleontology and paleolithic archeology. Not included in the 120 of his papers listed in the Bibliography of Fossil Vertebrates online data base are Kretzoi's monographs on *Vértészölös* and *Rudabánya*, as well as several key papers, including the influential 1976 Nature paper on "*Rudapithecus*," suggesting that his total output may well have totaled 150 or more publications. As one of his colleagues told me, no one knows exactly how many papers he published.

Miklós Kretzoi, who died in his 99th year on March 15th, 2005, was, for most of the twentieth century, an influential participant in the development of paleoanthropology and vertebrate paleontology. Born on February 9, 1907, in Budapest, Kretzoi grew up in a milieu of the Austro-Hungarian empire that stressed the values of a broad-based education, travel, languages, and scholarship. During his youth Kretzoi mastered Hungarian (a feat unto itself—they have a different word for everything!) and German (his first language); later in life he came to speak perfectly fluently in Italian, French, English, Russian and, I think, Esperanto.

Kretzoi attended Pázmány Péter University in Budapest, graduating with a degree in geology in 1929. He worked as a volunteer in the Geological Institute of Hungary (the oldest of its kind in Eastern Europe, and the repository of most of the geological and paleontological specimens and samples from Hungary). In 1933 he

took a job as a geologist and geophysicist with the Hungarian-American Oil Company. He remained there until the beginning of the war, when he moved to the National Museum of Hungary. There, he headed the departments of Mineralogy and Paleontology. Kretzoi moved from the National Museum back to the Geological Institute in 1950, where he remained until 1970, including a stint as director from 1956–1957. In 1970 he moved to Kossuth Lajos University in Debrecen, Hungary, where he was chair of the departments of Zoology and Anthropology. He retired in 1974. His research activity continued well beyond his retirement, however, as indicated by the publication of numerous papers on Miocene hominoids, as well as monographs on *Vértészölös*, *Rudabánya*, and a massive compendium listing all published mammal genera.

I do not know how many nomina Kretzoi established, but it is a large number. While many paleontologists considered him to be an excessive splitter, many of his proposed taxa remain in use, and he was meticulous in the application of the rules of taxonomic nomenclature. Nearly all of his proposed nomina remain valid, if not in current use. Kretzoi was a legendary paleontologist, publishing on micromammals, carnivores, primates, ungulates, proboscideans, cetaceans, trace fossils (footprints), birds, and others. He was especially interested in carnivores and micromammals, and established many nomina for these groups. He was also deeply interested in global paleontology and published many papers introducing paleontologists to North American, Asian, and African vertebrate paleontology for the first time in Hungarian.

I met Kretzoi in 1981. I had permission to describe catarrhine phalanges from *Rudabánya* and made my way to

Hungary, still across the Iron Curtain, the way all other graduate students did, with multiple visas, lots of passport controls, routine police checks, and almost no money, staying in a fairly grubby student hostel. Within a few days of working in his apartment, he invited me to stay with him and his wife, Marika. During my stay, Kretzoi schooled me in his ideas of hominoid evolution, and although I share few of his views, I was amazed by the breadth and depth of his knowledge and experience. We gossiped about his pals in the field who were still around at the time but are all gone now: Simpson, Mayr, Romer, Kürten, Hürzeler, Crusafont, Thenius, Zapfe, and Hooijer. He also spoke of others whom he had known, among them Gregory, Hrdlička, Leakey, von Koenigswald, and Lewis. It was an amazing connection between the past and the present of vertebrate paleontology.

I stayed there for two weeks and was able to collect as much data as I needed and to make replicas of everything of interest to me. When I got tired of looking at fossils, I read early editions of Cuvier, Buffon, Huxley, and Darwin in Kretzoi's spectacular library. I will never forget this act of astonishing generosity. When I returned with my wife two years later, he put us up again for another two weeks, while I studied the craniodental material. On leaving this last time, Professor Kretzoi urged me to call him by the name by which he was known universally within the community of Hungarian science, Miklós-bácsi, which, roughly translated, is Uncle Miklós.

After the mid-1980s, access to the *Rudabánya* primate fossils became more difficult. Kretzoi decided that the material had to be fully published before he would provide access to anyone else. In the field today this is

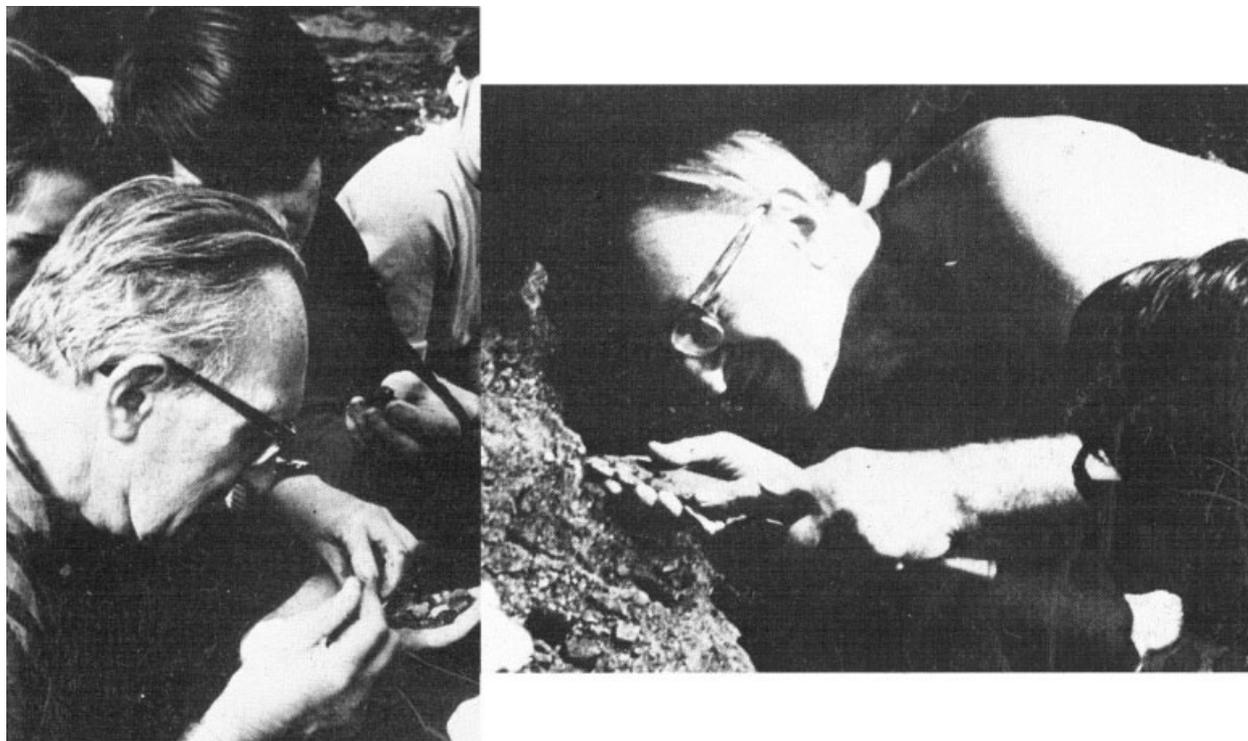


Figure 1. Miklós Kretzoi excavating at Rudabánya. Left, examining small fossils; Right, excavating at the R. II locality. Courtesy of L. Kordos.

routine, but at the time Kretzoi became isolated as a result of this decision. Kretzoi had the fossils deposited in the Hungarian National Museum, which houses many Hungarian archeological and historic treasures. This was a political move, as he had close friends who could assure the security of the fossils until he could publish them. My friend and collaborator László Kordos and I were stuck in the middle, both of us wanting to continue his work at Rudabánya (Fig. 1), and this distanced us from Kretzoi, who came to view us as rivals.

In 2002 a monograph finally appeared and in early 2004 a brief exhibit was presented at the Hungarian National Museum, the opening of which Kretzoi attended. Officially, the terms of the agreement to keep the fossils under wraps had been met, and over the summer of 2004 I was able to see the fossils I had first examined

more than 20 years earlier in the Kretzoi's apartment. They are in perfect condition, though in need of more elaborate and careful curation. While at the Museum, I phoned Miklós bácsi to thank him for permission to see the fossils, which he had granted personally. We did not speak directly, but only through the curator, and I never knew if that really was because, as he claimed, his hearing had declined to the point where he could not understand English on the phone.

Kretzoi had an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of vertebrate paleontology and the history of paleontological nomenclature. His monograph on Rudabánya, though dated with regard to the interpretation of the primates, is an invaluable resource for hominoid taxonomists. The list of hominoid nomina is well worth the price of the book, and his introductory chapter on the history of homi-

noid paleontology, in which one can feel the presence of his contemporaries, is priceless.

Miklós Kretzoi will be remembered as a member of the vanguard of modern vertebrate paleontology, whose best-known practitioners in the English speaking world are, perhaps, Simpson and Romer, but which includes a pantheon of researchers of which Kretzoi was a member, who brought vertebrate paleontology into the twenty-first century.

David R. Begun

Department of Anthropology, University  
of Toronto  
100 St. George Street,  
Toronto, ON.  
M5S 3G3

Email: begun@chass.utoronto.ca

© 2005 Wiley-Liss, Inc.  
Published online in Wiley InterScience  
(www.interscience.wiley.com).  
DOI 10.1002/evan.20072