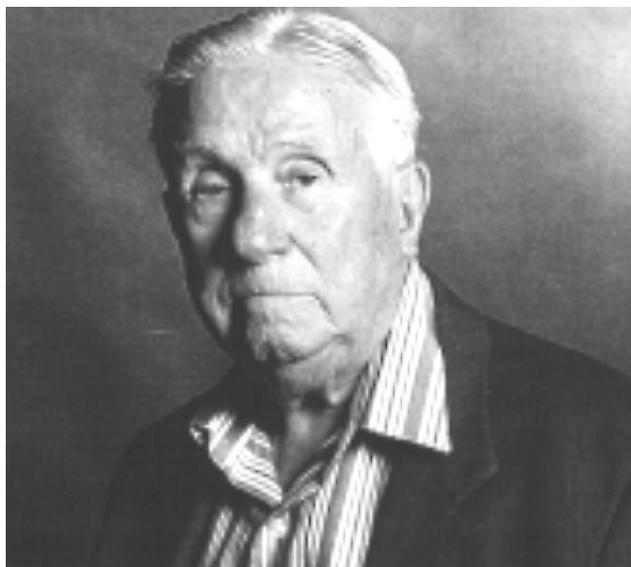


OBITUARY



Picture from the Archives of the "Museu Geologic del Seminari" (Barcelona)

Josep Fernández de Villalta i Comella

Barcelona 1913 - 2003

Professor Josep Fernández de Villalta died in Barcelona on 4th July 2003, aged 90. His contribution to Spanish palaeontology was significant and covered a vast range of subjects. With his death, the scientist community loses one of the most prominent members of a generation of distinguished palaeontologists who carried out valuable research in the difficult years after the civil war in Spain (1936-1939).

He graduated in Natural Sciences at the University of Barcelona in 1934 and obtained his PhD from the University of Madrid in 1950. He taught for many years at secondary schools and from 1957 to 1971 held a number of courses on Paleontology, Geological History and Quaternary Geology at the University of Barcelona. He joined the Jaume Almera Institute of Earth Sciences, which forms part of the CSIC (Spanish Research Council), in 1971 and stayed there until his retirement as Research Professor in 1983.

Professor Villalta was an eminent palaeontologist who collaborated with other internationally renowned Spanish geologists and palaeontologists such as Noel Llopis, Miquel Crusafont, Jaume Truyols and Lluís Via. Moreover, Villalta maintained close links with a number of regional geologists, who derived considerable benefit from his expert knowledge of fossils. He also exerted a dynamic influence on many young geologists and palaeontologists, both amateur and professional.

He published his first papers on the Triassic and Neogene invertebrate and vertebrate fossil faunas in the NE Spain before the civil war. In due course he undertook, together with Dr. Miquel Crusafont, research into the Tertiary fossil mammals faunas of Spain with especial emphasis on the Miocene assemblages. The fossil mammal rich basins in NE and Central Spain (Vallès-Penedès, Calatayud-Teruel, Madrid, Duero, etc.) constituted the subject of almost 80 pioneering publications by the Crusafont-Villalta-Truyols team. This significantly improved the knowledge of the fossil mammal records of Western Eurasia. This research was accomplished in contact with some of the most distinguished palaeomammalogists in Europe and North America, who very soon recognised the importance and quality of the discovery and description of these new mammal assemblages. These international links gave rise to the International Courses on Paleontology at Sabadell (Spain). These courses were organised by Professor Crusafont and were attended by prominent paleontologists from many countries and generated a renewed interest in the subject, which was especially significant given the years of isolation of the Spanish research community. In the period between the fifties and his retirement, Prof. Villalta maintained a keen interest in Pliocene and Quaternary fossil mammal faunas in Spain, a field in which he collaborated closely with other groups of geologists and archaeologists.

He also carried out research on cenozoic (mainly neogene but also on paleogene) molluscs and plants. He was especially interested in the Triassic record and contributed together with Dr. Lluís Via to the study and preservation of the Triassic "Lägerstätte" in Montral - Alcover (NE Spain). This locality yielded an extraordinarily well preserved invertebrate and vertebrate (fishes and reptiles) palaeobiota. One of the most remarkable findings was an articulated skeleton of *Cosesaurus aviceps*, a new reptile reported by Dr. Villalta and the French palaeontologist, François Ellenberger.

Dr. Villalta assembled a large collection of plant, invertebrate and vertebrate fossils ranging from the Paleozoic to the Quaternary. In 1983 he gave most of the material to the "Museu de Geologia de Barcelona" whereas the part of his collection dealing with the fossil mammals of the Miocene was later deposited in the "Institut de Paleontologia Miquel Crusafont" in Sabadell. This important scientific heritage would thus be preserved for posterity.

Apart from his valuable contribution to Palaeontology in Spain, Villalta enjoyed a wide range of hobbies including history, collecting butterflies and numismatics. Professor Villalta had a friendly and open personality and a great sense of humour. He will long be remembered with affection and gratitude by his friends, colleagues and students.