
In memorial of Jordi Maria de Gibert Atienza



Jordi Maria de Gibert Atienza

Barcelona (21/03/1968) – Barcelona (23/09/2012)

At dawn on September 23, Jordi Maria de Gibert Atienza passed away at the age of 44, after suffering a massive heart attack. His unexpected death left all of us in his scientific and academic circles in a state of shock. Suddenly, we had lost a great person, a friend, a colleague, a geologist, a paleontologist and an ichnologist, a very good teacher and communicator.

Practical as we are, we have adopted a rule that everyone will have a long life up to old age. However, reality has its own rules, and it shows us too often that life is not governed by human desire. As paleontologists, we have death constantly present, and we study its processes. In theory we should be immune to it or, at least, more pragmatic about it. But the truth is that we are as outraged as the rest of the world when it affects us in such an irreverent way.

Born in March 1968, Jordi Maria always knew he wanted to be a paleontologist. In his youth he was an enthusiast of

minerals and fossils, a hobby he developed on short field trips and investigations. His first steps in the profession began in the Faculty of Geology of the Universitat de Barcelona in the 1986-87 academic year, and he eventually received his degree in Geology four years later.

Jordi Maria wanted to specialize in paleontology and, at that time, fossil trilobites were his main interest. I had been his teacher in different paleontology subjects, and his first idea was to begin his postgraduate training with a dissertation in this field. However, Jordi Maria had shown an interest in a wide range of geological and paleontological areas during his studies, which suggested a different approach. A combination of a good knowledge of sedimentology and paleontological skills was the key to the field of ichnology. And so, he was convinced of the virtues of this science, halfway between geology and biology.

In 1992 he defended the Master thesis entitled *Estructures de bioturbació en el Pliocè marí del Baix Llobregat*. The front cover of this thesis already demonstrated Jordi Maria's ability to relate science with apparently more banal questions. And thus, his work in ichnology began. During this period he moved repeatedly to Reading (England) to work under the supervision of the late Prof. Roland Goldring, who was in fact his true instructor in the world of ichnology.

In 1992 he was awarded a FPU grant and enrolled in the Earth Sciences PhD program at the Universitat de Barcelona. He obtained his PhD degree in January 1996 with the dissertation *Icnologia de les conques marines pliocenes del marge nord-occidental de la Mediterrània*. This was the first doctoral dissertation devoted exclusively to ichnology submitted in a Spanish university.

Soon after, he was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship from the Spanish Government for a two-year stay (January 1997 - December 1998) at the University of Utah (USA), under the supervision of Prof. A.A. Ekdale, who then became a true friend of Jordi Maria. This was a period of great personal and scientific growth for him. Once finished this grant period, Jordi Maria was offered the opportunity to continue there for another 5 months as Associate Professor and he was responsible for two undergraduate courses; Paleobiology and Fossils and Life History. An excellent experience for Jordi Maria, as he always recognized.

Back in Barcelona again, he entered the Universitat de Barcelona in late 1999 as associate teacher first, later assistant, lecturer, and finally as tenured professor (*profesor agregado*) in 2006, a position that he held until the day of his death.

During his almost 13 years of teaching at our university, Jordi Maria participated in different paleontology courses (undergraduate and graduate levels) and, for the last 4 years, he was in charge of the course on ichnology within the Biosedimentation module of the Master on Paleontology (UB-UAB). Meanwhile, he also participated actively in the teaching of an on-line general course entitled Getting to know Fossils, at the Universitat de Barcelona. However, the course that provided Jordi Maria best with the opportunity to develop himself as teacher was Geological Mapping. He was currently its coordinator, and he took part in the teaching.

He was no lover of bureaucracy, but it was not difficult to involve him as Secretary in our Geology Studies Council. Jordi Maria occupied this post at the moment of his death, and his dedication and resolution during the implementation of the EEES degree will be remembered.

As a research director, he guided some student degree projects and several master projects. He also oversaw the stay at the Universitat de Barcelona of Carlos Console, an Argentinian postdoctoral fellow, and he was currently co-directing the Master's research of Jorge Villegas-Martin, a Cuban ichnologist.

Over the last four years, his great personal scientific project was the supervision of the doctoral thesis of Zain Beláustegui, who was his first PhD student. They soon established a good working relationship and understood each other perfectly, coming to form a dream team in science, or almost. When I had to take over from Jordi Maria for the completion of the thesis, most of the research was well finished and ready for the dissertation. Jordi Maria missed seeing the result of their work by only a few months, and this is something we will always regret. He would have been really proud of Zain.

Jordi Maria published around 80 scientific papers (48 of which in SCI journals), and 16 book chapters. Among his most significant contributions, it is worth noting the new ichnogenus *Sinusichnus* and the new ichnospecies *Sinusichnus sinuosus*, described in the Mediterranean Pliocene (Gibert, 1996); the naming of the new ethological category *Fixichnia* (Gibert et al., 2004), or the new ichnospecies *Trypanites ionasi*, which led to the description of the first fossil evidence of worms capable of feeding on the bones of dead whales, sunk in the seafloor (Muñiz et al., 2010). Currently, his scientific interests were addressed

to the study of animal behavior related to bioturbation and its application to the interpretation of the ichnological record, as well as to theoretical aspects of evolutionary paleoecology.

He participated in many congresses and workshops, with a total of 99 contributions (oral presentations, posters and invited conferences). He took also part in the organizing committees of four meetings: the Third International Bioerosion Workshop (Barcelona, 2000), the Second International Meeting on Taphonomy and fossilization - TAPHOS'05 (Barcelona, 2005), the Workshop on Crustacean Bioturbation - Fossil and Recent (Lepe, Huelva, 2010) from which he was the main promoter, and the XXVII Jornadas de la Sociedad Española de Paleontología (Sabadell, 2011). Less than a month before his decease, Jordi Maria presented in Canada, with his usual enthusiasm, the willingness to organize the next International Congress on Ichnology (Ichnia, 2016) in Barcelona.

Jordi Maria's commitment to the world of science was not limited to research. Among other activities, he was scientific adviser to the Museum of Science of Barcelona (CosmoCaixa) (2000-06), treasurer of the Spanish Society of Paleontology (2005-11), co-founder and treasurer of the International Ichnological Association (IIA) (2005-12), member of the Institute for Research of Biodiversity (IRBio) of the Universitat de Barcelona, and Earth Sciences coordination adjunct of the National Agency of Evaluation and Prospective (ANEP) of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (2010-12). He was part of the editorial board of several scientific journals: *Bulletin of the Catalan Institute of Natural History* (since 2000), *Geologica Acta* (associate editor 2004-09, and editor since 2010) and *Ichnos* (since 2005). Rarely did he refuse to act as reviewer for scientific publications; on the contrary, Jordi became deeply involved with each of the many requests that he received.

But Jordi Maria was a restless character and used to go a little beyond. In 2000 he created and managed the distribution list *Skolithos*, which over the years has become the main tool of communication between ichnologists worldwide. In 2007 he invented the great *Ichnovoices* project and in 2012 – due to his worries about the speed at which science is currently developing and the excessive importance given to publish in an indexed journal - he wanted to take a step forward in the popularization of his science “for all ages” by starting the blog *Infaunal Epiphany*. He only got to publish eight entries, but they allow us the opportunity to see briefly his special approach to those scientific aspects that he worked on.

Jordi Maria was enthusiastic about his work, in the field, in the lab and in the classroom. He had reached a

mature scientific level which promised an exciting future. He became implied with students and colleagues. He had friends around the world, physical and virtual, and in very different contexts. Jordi Maria was a fine observer of life, eclectic and well read, a polyglot, a curious reader and traveller, and he loved getting into lively discussions about many topics: science, teaching, music, sports, politics. Sometimes he was right, sometimes not. But often something positive arose from a talk with him. Above all else, he loved his mother, his family, and his wife Inma; they had many life projects planned, now unfortunately interrupted.

Jordi Maria was more than a colleague or a friend for those who had the fortune to meet and work with him.

Many people have left evidence of their condolences, either through messages to the family or colleagues, or through the social networks of which Jordi Maria was a big fan. Of the many beautiful sentences that were written, I am borrowing that of M. Verde: “Goodbye Jordi, I met you only a few times, but one thing is for sure. You left the best track a man can leave behind, to make happy those close to you.”

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