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OBITUARY

In memory of Bent Christensen (1930–2019)

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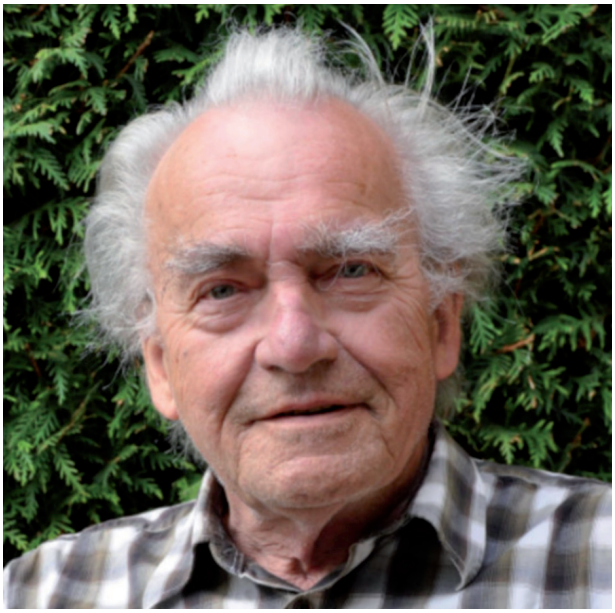
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This is an homage to Bent Christensen, taxonomist, cytologist, population geneticist of Enchytraeidae, the founding father of modern research on enchytraeids and, above all, a very fine person. It is not meant as a full *vita* of his rich academic life but rather focuses on his contributions to the knowledge of enchytraeid biology.

As a young scientist, aged 24, he joined C. Overgaard Nielsen who worked at the Mols Laboratory, a set of farmhouses in northern Denmark remodelled into scientific labs for ecological research, and surrounded by a rich and diverse landscape mosaic of meadows, forests, shrubs, swamps, brooks and beaches. The hilly area had been donated to the Natural History Museum of Århus by Ellen Dahl, the sister of „Out of Africa" - Karen Blixen, with the purpose of promoting research and the conservation of traditional Danish countryside. The „Molslaboratoriet" is still running and functional.

Together they studied the diversity of enchytraeid species in that area. At that time, Nielsen, nematologist by training, was already a renowned ecologist and





Left: Bent Christensen (courtesy of his family). **Right**: Bent Christensen in 2017, searching for *Enchytraeus capitatus* in decaying seaweed at Rungsted, north of Copenhagen; © R.M. Schmelz.

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Editor-in-Chief of the journal „Oikos“; his focus was quantitative ecology, whereas Christensen‘s interest was chromosomal genetics. However, they realized that a sound taxonomic framework was most needed, and so they worked together to produce - in a way out of necessity - the famous and seminal monograph on European enchytraeids (Nielsen & Christensen 1959), which came to be *the* standard reference for a whole generation of ecologists and taxonomists working with Enchytraeidae. Even nowadays, and after several taxonomical revisions which also affected species in the monograph, it is difficult to find a species list of enchytraeids that does *not* include the names Nielsen and Christensen; this ‚binomen‘, so to say, will stick to enchytraeid taxonomy for many years to come.

Seventy-five species were described and diagnosed in the monograph, 21 of them new to science; four new genera were erected as well. The detailed species diagnoses in the monograph were based on live microscopy, a technique that allowed the investigation of large numbers of specimens - always at hand in the rich Mols area - and a repeated testing of the characters to recognize the species; this is the reason, I believe, why this book actually worked. The monograph, together with two supplements published later (Nielsen & Christensen 1961, 1963) and also O‘Connor‘s (1955, 1962) simple and efficient extraction technique of worms from soil, fueled ecological research on enchytraeids in the following years.

The memorable story of the joint taxonomic adventure of Christensen and Nielsen into the world of enchytraeid species is covered in the introduction to the 1959 monograph. Chromosome counting, Christensen‘s specialty, was an integral part from the very beginning. It was considered to aid in solving taxonomical difficulties, but it soon unveiled new ones: the very first paper on that topic (Christensen & Nielsen 1955) already reported on instable and very high chromosome numbers in some species, suggesting parthenogenesis, and on different cytotypes (diploids and tetraploids) within a morphologically well-defined and sexually reproducing species, this being, by the way, the first account of cryptic species in enchytraeids. Subsequently, Christensen detected a large variety of odd reproduction types in enchytraeids, deviant from amphimictic sexuality: sub-amphimixis, pseudofertilization, different types of parthenogenesis, fragmentation, and he described the varied and often bizarre meiotic modifications to restore the original somatic chromosome numbers.

This new field of research, opened and established by himself, was further pursued - now usually in cooperation with others - after being appointed Professor of Systematic Zoology at the University of Copenhagen, a position he held from 1967 to 2000. (Nielsen, by that time, had left enchytraeidology.) Christensen‘s cytological investigations reached out into reproductive biology, speciation, population ecology, and phylogeny - mostly of enchytraeids but also of other oligochaetes and other animal groups. Enzyme electrophoresis was soon added as a method and allowed further insights. To give just two examples: Different parthenogenetic cytotypes and genotypes of brackish-water *Lumbricillus lineatus* were found to prefer different subniches along an intertidal transect of the Baltic Sea (Christensen 1980b); genetically separate, they remained connected reproductively because only some of these cytotypes produced spermatozoa, which in this species are necessary to activate the parthenogenetic eggs. Also, the spatial distribution pattern of genetically different sexual and asexual clones of diploid and soil-dwelling *Buchholzia appendiculata* remained constant in a very small area over a period of 12 years, indicating a practical absence of dispersal activity (Christensen *et al.* 2002b).

Similar studies were carried out on selected species of isopods; this was a significant second line of research, documented in numerous publications, which cannot be honored here adequately.

Regarding enchytraeids, the majority of Christensen‘s findings are compiled in his „Annelida“ contributions to two book series on cytology and asexual reproduction (Christensen 1980a, 1994). Decades have passed since then, but these works are still worth studying, not only as a compendium on chromosome numbers in annelids but also because of the varied theoretical considerations on topics such as the interrelation of polyploidy and parthenogenesis or of cytogenetics and biogeography. In Christensen‘s writings the wider conceptual context is always present; he was anything but an ivory-tower specialist.

Later on, he was enthusiastic about the new prospects of DNA-sequencing and was the first to publish on the molecular phylogenetics of enchytraeids (Christensen & Glenner 2010). In a previous paper (Christensen & Theisen 1998), he demonstrated with DNA sequences that the oligochaete family Naididae is nested within the Tubificidae, a find that contributed to the eventual unification of these two mainly aquatic families (Erséus *et al.* 2002, 2008).

Christensen‘s attitude in science was remarkable in two ways: On the one hand, a complete freedom of thought and research direction, both driven by curiosity alone. He was always full of ideas and had plenty of research projects in mind, many of which did not materialize; but those that did have the stamp of originality. On the other hand, there was a complete absence of parochial pride, paired with extreme friendliness and helpfulness. Many of those who, from the 1960s on, would do research on enchytraeids, took their first steps under his guidance,

learning in his lab how to handle and to identify living enchytraeids (without smashing them at the outset): Matti Nurminen, Yoshio Nakamura, Brenda Healy, Klára Dózsa-Farkas, and possibly others I don‘t know of. He took great interest in the work of others and would readily help and give advice in any other field that had to do with these worms.

Bent was not a great socializer, scientific meetings saw him only sporadically. He did attend the 2nd International Symposium on Aquatic Oligochaeta (ISAO), held 1982 at Pallanza, Italy, and the 3rd International Symposium on Enchytraeidae (ISE), held at Osnabrück, Germany, in 1998. And he organized the 4th ISE two years later, inviting the community to spend a few days on the ‚sacred grounds‘ of the Mols Laboratory, where all had started.

Towards retirement and thereafter, Christensen returned to classical taxonomy, in a very fruitful cooperation with Klára Dózsa-Farkas. Together they worked intensively on the enchytraeid fauna of the Palearctic and the Nearctic tundra: they described altogether 14 new species of enchytraeids and rediscovered several of the ‚old‘ ones described by researchers a century ago and rarely ever found again. Further 18 new species from Alaska, fruit of their collaborative work, will be published soon (Dózsa-Farkas *et al.*, Zootaxa, in press). Species from other regions were covered as well: their last joint paper is on new enchytraeid taxa from Korea (Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas 2012); it was published more than half a century after Christensen‘s first step into the scientific public.

As a scientist and person, Bent Christensen was unprejudiced, benevolent, independent, hard-working and easy-going at the same time. From the very little I know about his academic life at the University of Copenhagen, he shaped the department where he was working and was loved and respected. He wrote a popular science book on „The Evolution of Animals: From Flagellates to Humans“ (Christensen *et al.* 1997, in Danish). In 2017, he invited my family to spend a few days at his place. For my children he came to be the prototype of a scientist: cheerful and friendly, curious, a bit absent-minded, and always with a witty smile under his bushy, untamed eyebrows. Of course, we went out to visit localities where he had found interesting species decades ago. Klára Dózsa-Farkas says, reflecting on their long-standing collaboration and having experienced Christensen’s hospitality in Denmark, that she has never known a finer person or friend - both personally and professionally - as Bent Christensen, and is happy to have worked with him.

Bent Christensen described and erected six new genera and 59 new species of enchytraeids (77 with the inclusion of the Alaskan species, to be published). Six species and one genus of Enchytraeidae have been named in his honor. The following list of references is meant to be complete regarding enchytraeids, but I may have missed some contributions of Christensen in the other fields. More information on his academic life can be found under https://biografiskleksikon.lex.dk/Bent_Christensen_-_zoolog (accessed 02-11-2026).

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Cognettia Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Enchylea Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Enchytronia Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Globulidrilus Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2012
Hemifridericia Nielsen & Christensen, 1959

Achaeta aberrans Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Achaeta affinis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Achaeta bulbosa Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Achaeta danica Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Achaeta macrocyta Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Achaeta parva Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Achaeta pigmentosa Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2007
Achaeta unibulba Graefe, Dózsa-Farkas & Christensen, 2005
Achaeta vesiculata Nielsen & Christensen, 1959*
Bryodrilus archipelagicus Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2006
Bryodrilus librus (Nielsen & Christensen, 1959)
Bryodrilus tunicatus Dózsa-Farkas & Christensen, 2002
Buchholzia simplex Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Cernosvitoviella carpatica Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Cognettia bisetosa Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Cognettia quadrosetosa Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Enchylea heteroducta Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Enchytraeus bigeminus Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Enchytraeus coronatus Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Enchytraeus globuliferus Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Enchytraeus irregularis Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Enchytraeus lacteus Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Enchytraeus minutus Nielsen & Christensen, 1961**
Enchytronia annulata Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Enchytronia parva Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Euenchytraeus piperi (Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999)
Fridericia alata Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Fridericia baskini Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Fridericia bulboides Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Fridericia regularis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Fridericia seoraksani Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2012
Fridericia singula Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Globulidrilus helgei Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2012
Hemienchytraeus bifurcatus Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Hemifridericia bivesiculata Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2005
Hemifridericia parva Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Henlea adiverticulata Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Henlea conchifera Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Henlea jutlandica Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Henlea similis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Lumbricillus buelowi Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Lumbricillus kaloensis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Lumbricillus knoellneri Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Lumbricillus lineatus avesiculatus Christensen & O'Connor, 1958
Marionina appendiculata Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Marionina clavata Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Marionina communis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Marionina filiformis Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Marionina nordica Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Marionina preclitellochaeta Nielsen & Christensen, 1963
Marionina simillima Nielsen & Christensen, 1959
Marionina sjaelandica Nielsen & Christensen, 1961
Marionina vesiculata Nielsen & Christensen 1959
Mesenchytraeus longiductus Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 2012
Mesenchytraeus melanocephalus Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Mesenchytraeus sveni Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Mesenchytraeus torbeni Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999
Oconnorella macrobulbi (Christensen & Dózsa-Farkas, 1999)
Oconnorella tubifera (Nielsen & Christensen, 1959)

* see Schmelz & Collado (2010) for its relationship with *Achaeta bohemica* (Vejdovský)
** now *Enchytraeus christenseni* Dózsa-Farkas, 1992 because of homonymy

Enchytraeid genera and species named in honour of Bent Christensen

Christensenidrilus Dózsa-Farkas & Convey, 1998

Achaeta christenseni Prabhoo, 1966
Cernosvitoviella christenseni Dash, 1970
Enchytraeus christenseni Dósza-Farkas, 1992
Enchytronia christenseni Dósza-Farkas, 1970
Fridericia benti Schmelz, 2002
Paralumbricillus christenseni (Tynen, 1966)