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Paleontology

The Lost Dinosaurs of Egypt

The *Lost Dinosaurs of Egypt* was written by William Nothdurft and Josh Smith. Nothdurft is billed as “author, coauthor, or ghostwriter of nearly a dozen books”. Smith is an ex army paleontologist with his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and at the time of printing an assistant professor at Washington University. The book charts the field search for Dinosaurs in the western desert of Egypt. The team is searching for the remains of creatures that died 95 million years ago , near the beginning of the Late Cretaceous period, was discovered in 1911, destroyed in 1944, and forgotten until the dawn of the new millennium.

The book starts out, typical of its genre, describing the life (or rather the end of the life) of an immense creature forgotten to science. Several scenarios are played out all ending in the demise of this great beast. The animal’s corpse is swallowed by the earth and over the years lies waiting for someone to bring it to light again. Enter Ernst Freiherr Stromer von Reichenbach. In January 1911 this young German scientist is one of (if not the) first paleontologist to reach the Bahariya Depression in Egypt’s western desert. Stromer is looking for fossil evidence of early mammals. Unfortunately the rocks Stromer will study turn out to be nearly 100 million years old, far to old to provide the evidence he is searching for. But, on the floor of the depression, through systematic research and German efficiency Stromer will find the remains of four dinosaurs entirely new to science, as well as scores of other specimens.

In 1944 the Royal Air Force (RAF) is trying desperately to drive the final nail into the coffin of the Nazis in Germany. There are arguments within the ranks of the best targets and areas that bombs will do the most infrastructural damage. Munich, it was decided, would do the most good to her majesties army if it were reduced to ashes. Munich was at the very end of the RAF's fighter and bombers fuel range and everything would have to go perfectly to carry off this decisive attack. There were specific targets in Munich, the railway hub, the Nazi birthplace headquarters, and the like, but there are always civilian casualties in war. Incendiary bombs would destroy everything in their wake. The most unfortunate collateral damage was a building nearly the size of an entire city block called the Alte Akademie. In 1944 the Akademie was the home for the Bavarian State Collection of Paleontology and Historical Geology noted as "one of Germany's and the world's most respected centers of scientific research". Shortly after midnight on April 25, 1944 one of the RAF's bombs went through the Akademie's roof and set the whole building ablaze. Stromer's work was destroyed and his name would sink into the hollows of history.

In January 2000, Eighty-nine years to the day (Jan. 11th) after Stromer descended into the Bahariya someone else would do the same. This time it was an American Graduate Student at the Univeristy of Pennsylvania named Josh Smith. With fellow paleontologist, his advisor and a team of geologist, Smith would try to restore Stromer's name and findings to the annals of the scientific community. After weeks of pounding sand and rocks no trace of Stromer's four "new" species was ever spotted. The team did however find evidence of one of the largest animals to ever walk the Earth. The huge saurapod humerus would make news around the world and the name of the behemoth

would be a lasting Tribute to the man that opened up the Bahariya Oasis in Egypt:

Paralititan stromeri.

The team of geologist had their own project. They set about studying the strata of the Bahariya and trying to ascertain the climate and geography of the area 90-100 million years ago. The head geologist, Ken Lacovara, knew there was an inter seaway through the region and that the area they were studying would have been on the coast. That seaway, called the Tethys Sea, had to explain the types of depositional strata that he and his colleague were finding. In the layers there was missing sand, and the sequence of what they had found was upside down. Luckily he had vacationed in the Ten Thousand Islands area of Florida. Reflecting on what he knew of that present day locality he started to overlay it onto Bahariya stratigraphy and then place it all back some 99 million years ago. When the *Paralititan* had been alive the area that is now western Egyptian desert had been an intertidal forest, a mangrove swamp. The mangrove hypothesis answered all the problems that Lacovara couldn't. It explained the expanding islands even in the face of rising sea level, and it explained the lack of beach or barrier island sand in the strata.

This also answered the question of what the *Paralititan* would have eaten to sustain its large appetite. With that question answered and the discovery of the *Paralititan* itself, it answered one of Stromer's riddles. Stromer never could figure out what the four carnivores he had discovered would have eaten in the area during the Late Cretaceous. Finding more than one "super-predator" in an area where no herbivores were found was an odd puzzle indeed. A team of interdisciplinary scientists finally discovered what made the Bahariya tick 100 million years ago. The *Paralititan* that Smith's team found in 2000 would have munched and stripped the mangrove leaves that grew close to

the shore, while the *Spinosaurus* or the *Carcharodontosaurus* waited for the prime moment to attack the titan.

Even with the success of the 2000 expedition, with Stromer getting recognition and so many questions about the are answered, one can only think what questions could have been answered and what other questions could have been raised by the study of the samples that Stromer had so carefully collected and returned to Munich from the 100 million year old tombs in Egypt. They died millions of years ago in just the right conditions for fossilization to occur, lay undisturbed for 100 million years as the earth that swallowed them slowly retreated and exposed their bones, they were carefully catalogued, packaged and shipped from Egypt to Munich, further studied and set up in the Akademie, only to be obliterated by a man made weapon in 1945. The story of the bones is as fascinating as the people that unearth them