PALÉONTOLOGIE

Paleontological collections in the making – an introduction to the special issue

Collections paléontologiques en développement – introduction au numéro spécial

IRINA PODGORNY[(1)], ÉRIC BUFFETAUT[(2)] & MARIA MARGARET LOPES[(3)]

[(1)]CONICET, Archivo Histórico del Museo de La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina - ipodgo@isis.unlp.edu.ar

[(2)]CNRS, UMR 8538, Laboratoire de Géologie de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure, PSL Research University, 24 rue Lhomond, 75231 Paris Cedex 05, France. Palaeontological Research and Education Centre, Maha Sarakham University, Maha Sarakham, Thailand - eric.buffetaut@sfr.fr

[(3)]Visiting professor, PPG Interunidades em Museologia, Museu da Arqueologia e Etnologia, Universidade de São Paulo, SP, Brazil - mariamargaretlopes@gmail.com

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This special issue of *Colligo* grew out of a conference session entitled "*How to build a paleontological collection: expeditions, excavations, exchanges*", held at the 5th International Paleontological Congress in Paris, France, in July 2018. In conceptualizing this issue, which includes two additional papers specially written for it, we benefited from the comments of fellow participants and audience members as well as of the advice of several colleagues.

The aim of this session was to explore how fossil collections have been built, from the early days of palaeontology to the present. Exchanges and sales of casts and duplicates, confiscations, especially in wartime, transportation of fossils from the field to the museum / laboratory, networks of fossil exchange as well as organization of fieldwork, "bone wars", marketing strategies connecting the collection and exhibition of dinosaurs with the request of more money for the development of palaeontology were some of the topics discussed in Paris (Tamborini, 2016; also Brinkman, 2010; Roberts, 2009). Our symposium was global in geographical scope, with special emphasis on international expeditions and exchanges. It covered all types of fossil collections and collectors, from plants to mega-mammals and dinosaurs, from provincial tax collectors and bakers to very well established professors in Paris and Buenos Aires.

When it comes to exploring the making of the nineteenth-century global world, museum collections have been studied as being crucial parts of Western centers of calculation in the sense of Bruno Latour. However, the landscape of nineteenth-century collections is certainly much wider, more nuanced and complex than the current historiography, centered on the metropolitan collections assembled by northern Europe's colonial powers, has suggested. As Pietro Corsi (2020: 1) recently wrote, "*Almost inevitably, successive generations of historians, together with national and international professional associations and journals, have established a variety of (often contradictory) criteria of relevance, lists of issues and actors worth spending time on. With notable exceptions, the study of actual practices of knowledge of the past has rarely attracted sustained attention.*" This issue addresses some of those neglected actors, events, contingencies, and spaces that shaped the practices of fossil collecting.

Museums and collections generated and channeled a flow of data, natural specimens and artifacts that through their relationship with people, travelled to diverse places, and in a variety of directions. This has often been overlooked, so that many important movements remain almost invisible. Against this background, the workshop suggested a change of perspective. Thus, for example, Podgorny's paper –centered on the brief existence of the Geological Society of Auvergne and the fossils from the Perrier Mountain in central France- suggests a change of perspective, proposing to explore those many collections that came to less central cities and institutions, which up to

now have largely remained out of historians' purview.

We wanted to explore the flow of data, namely bones, casts, fossil prints, etc., as well as the movements of humans and things, in order to problematize the traditional center/periphery bias of museum and collection studies. By juxtaposing alternative approaches we introduce previously understudied global narratives to shape future research agendas. Moreover, as some of the papers in this issue suggest, some museums actually acted as centers of fragmentation, confusion, and dispersion (Podgorny; Vanni *et al.*). In that sense, the papers here collected are a plea to listen to the testimonials of the historical actors that alerted of the dangers that the disorder created by the museums (which was the rule more than the exception) represented for the actual practice of many disciplines, including the practice of palaeontology, geology, and comparative anatomy (see for instance British egyptologist W. Flinders-Petrie's diagnosis of the museums in the 1900s as "*a cemetery of murdered evidence*", in Podgorny (2008), or Cuvier's complaints about the state of the Parisian collections around 1800 in Corsi 2020).

With this special issue, we aim at furthering our understanding of the diverse ways in which these collections connected places and people in most unexpected ways, generating new sociabilities. This issue thus focuses on collections in the so-called peripheries: the colonial and post-colonial territories of South America, Indochina, and the Indian Ocean, (Angst & Buffetaut; Buffetaut; Lopes; Hansen; Vanni *et al.*, Waligora; Forel) and the European provinces (Podgorny; Vanni *et al.*). It highlights how these collections, through their relationship with people, travelled and connected the world from the nineteenth up to the twentieth century, creating networks that were not necessarily centralized around either the European metropolises or the respective national museums. (Angst & Buffetaut; Waligora; see also Caciagli, and Ferrari, 2009). We deemed it worthwhile, to study these collections and the sociabilities that go with them beyond the metropolis.

Ways to build a paleontological collection include fossil collecting, sometimes in the course of expeditions to remote parts of the world (Forel), which may involve individual field work as well as large-scale excavations, the funding of which (by institutions, patrons, private means etc.) needs further consideration. The papers by Margaret Lopes, Irina Podgorny, and Mariana Waligora included in the issue, show how fossil collecting was also a collateral result of mining and/or surveying for oil and coal.

A point worth investigating was how some well-known nineteenth-century palaeontologists used the sale of fossil specimens to fund their fieldwork, careers or even their every-day life and survival: that was the case of the Ameghino brothers (mentioned by Virginia Vanni *et al.*), Auguste Bravard (Podgorny) and Santiago Roth (Hansen). Another significant way of building and increasing fossil collections, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was through exchange and/or purchase of fossils, either between institutions or between individual palaeontologists or fossil dealers, the topic of Hansen's paper, which shows the different actors and mechanisms that are behind the Danish South American fossil mammal collections.

We propose exploring the many factors behind the making of nineteenth-century paleontological collections in non-metropolitan settings. By highlighting the varied trajectories of people and objects travelling between the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe, the papers look closely at the sundry traditions and routes, which contributed to the shaping of collections (Waligora; Angst & Buffetaut; Hansen; Buffetaut; Forel). This includes investigating provincial and university museums, from monumental to one-room displays, from commercial or private endeavours to state-run sites (Hansen; Vanni *et al.*). By discussing this diversity, the papers united in this issue revise the idea of the collections as a mere by-product of colonialism and imperialism. Thus, focusing on how collections were constructed "on the move", Hansen, Vianni and Buffetaut discuss how, for instance, South American fossil mammal collections in European museums, were closely connected to the biographies of specific individuals who acted independently from the centralized and colonial logic of states.

The papers discuss how practices of fossil collecting reflected political agendas closely linked to various colonial endeavors as well as other political projects (Lopes; Forel). However, they also problematize the agency of those individuals who appealed to those agendas, combining the promise of new knowledge with the opportunity for self-promotion (Buffetaut; Pod-

gorny). Why should a tax collector in the middle of Auvergne or the French and Danish residents in Argentina and Brazil, collect fossil bones? Why should they invest in books, mules, and time to classify and ship these collections? Studies on specific items, such as *Glossopteris* collections, Brazilian fossil plants and mammals, and Dodo bones will further these questions, in particular adding to the workshop's main objective to also shed light on collector's stakes in acquiring and displaying these objects.

People collect things but collections bring people together (Rudwick 1997). Finally, we want to illuminate how collecting connected people around objects, crossing borders of all kinds: national, local, disciplinary, theoretical. In this vein, the papers published here (Angst & Buffetaut; Buffetaut; Vanni *et al.*; Hansen; Forel; Podgorny) discuss those hubs where such encounters happened and how knowledge production was linked with sociabilities of different kinds (Richard, 2016). Hence, they pay attention to the events that define sociability, such as gifts, theft, donations, and exchange, as well as to the institutions, activities and professions that they generated, such as scientific societies, excursions, and exchange markets (Lopes & Matos, 2015).

By researching different provincial settings as well as their intertwining, we suggest to enlarge the attention of global historians towards specific localities which – looked at more closely – might turn out to be rather translocal as they had been shaped by multiple global entanglements, too (Waligora; Forel). In this sense, we also intend to use microhistorical approaches that might help us conceptualize new ways of writing global history beyond the metropolis (Podgorny) but also to shed light on the collections our museums exhibit and keep. All in all, we underscore the necessity of a more nuanced apprehension of what the global world of the nineteenth and early tewentieth centuries was all about especially when it comes to the history of palaeontology. Focusing on palaeontological collections and sociabilities and connecting bones with archival documentation we intend to further our understanding of the reflexive potential that this history involves.

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