



Baron Franz Nopcsa.

## Nopcsa, Baron Franz (1877-1933)

by Linda Rapp

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Transylvanian paleontologist Baron Franz Nopcsa was a man ahead of his time in science. Making no effort to hide his homosexuality, he was often dismissed as "whacky" by other scientists, yet he made significant contributions to the fields of paleontology, geology, and evolutionary biology. He was also fascinated by the language and culture of Albania and aspired to become king of that country.

Franz Nopcsa von Felső-Szilvás, the scion of an aristocratic Hungarian family, was born at the family estate at Szacsal, Transylvania (now in Rumania) on May 3, 1877. A gifted student, he graduated from the prestigious Maria-Theresianum in 1897 and went on to enroll at the University of Vienna, where he specialized in paleontology.

Nopcsa's introduction to the science was fortuitous. His younger sister Ilona discovered some fossilized bones on the family land in 1895, and Nopcsa presented them to Professor Eduard Suess of the University of Vienna. Suess showed interest in excavating the site but subsequently changed his mind and told Nopcsa to do it himself. The young baron rose to the challenge. After analyzing the fossils, Nopcsa identified them as belonging to a new species of hadrosaurid in a paper given at the Vienna Academy of Science in 1899.

Nopcsa's presentation of the paper was all the more impressive for the fact that he was only in his second year as a student at the university, from which he graduated in 1904. Nopcsa went on to publish prolifically throughout his career, with more than 180 papers to his credit. The majority of these were on paleontology, but he also wrote about other topics, including archaeology, geology, ethnology, and geography.

Nopcsa was an innovative thinker about dinosaurs. "He was a paleobiologist rather than a paleontologist," states David Weishampel. "He wanted to attach some biology to the bones he had collected." In this, he diverged sharply from his predecessors in the field.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century had seen the "bone wars" in America, with Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope--professional rivals who thoroughly despised each other--competing to find and describe as many new species as quickly as possible. Their story is an odd combination of the genuinely devoted pursuit of paleontological studies and a rip-roaring tale of the Old West, replete with intrigue, clandestine operations, frantically paced (and consequently often destructive) excavations of each new discovery, and alleged fist fights between the rough-and-ready individuals employed by the two camps.

Nopcsa's public image was altogether different. Often attired in a sweeping black velvet cloak, he was every inch the elegant and rather exotic aristocrat. He could be temperamental as well, arrogant or irascible in his dealings with others. In addition, he made no apparent effort to hide his homosexuality. Because of this persona, combined with his theories, which were often out of the mainstream, people in the scientific community sometimes "thought he was just too whacky and brushed him aside," states Weishampel.

Nopcsa described a number of dinosaur species. He did considerable work on armored dinosaurs and argued

that based on their evolutionary history they ought to be classified together. In 1928 he proposed the name *Thyreophoridae* for them. The idea failed to receive support at the time, but studies done in the 1970s proved Nopcsa to have been correct. *Thyreophora* is now recognized in the modern taxonomic system known as cladistics.

Nopcsa's true fascination was not with the bones but rather with the living animals to whom they had belonged. He wanted to understand the world of the dinosaurs and how they lived in it--how they moved, how they fed, how they mated, how they raised their young.

His curiosity about the mating habits of dinosaurs led him to speculate about sexual dimorphism and the possibility that dinosaurs used display as a means of courtship. In 1929 he suggested that the cranial crests of certain hadrosaurs were secondary sexual characteristics, used by males to attract mates. The fossil evidence eventually showed that the presence or absence of a crest was related to the species rather than the sex of the individual, but the idea itself was important. Weishampel and Wolf-Ernst Reif note that "the practice of identifying sexes and growth series . . . has been fruitfully applied to several reptile groups in order to rectify taxonomic and paleoecological problems."

On the physiological level, he attempted to analyze what the musculature and nervous systems of dinosaurs must have been like. He also sought to understand their society, speculating, for example, that adults nurtured their offspring (as opposed to laying and then abandoning their eggs, in the manner of turtles), an idea that would not gain currency until many decades after his death, particularly following Jack Horner's 1978 discovery of *Maiasaura* ("the good mother" dinosaur) eggbeds that suggest through histological evidence that the nurturing patterns of dinosaurs were similar to those of modern birds.

Nopcsa's views on the parenting habits of pterosaurs (a different class from dinosaurs) led him to conclude that they were warm-blooded. In this idea he was far ahead of his time; endothermy in pterosaurs and dinosaurs was not seriously considered again until the 1970s.

Nopcsa also weighed in on the topic of the evolutionary relationship of birds to dinosaurs. He envisioned a "pro-avis"--a running predatory dinosaur that eventually evolved feathers and acquired the possibility of flight--as opposed to the prevailing theory that tree-dwellers evolved into gliders. The scientific community took little notice of his theory.

"The 'ground-up' idea wasn't thought about again until the 1960s," states Weishampel. Recent discoveries of feathered theropods (notably in China) have done much to confirm the evolutionary relationship between dinosaurs and birds, but they also suggest that the earliest feathered creatures may in fact have been tree-dwellers rather than land-based. Nevertheless, Weishampel credits Nopcsa for his intellectual curiosity: "Nopcsa was asking good questions, even if he didn't always get the answers right."

Among the fossils that Nopcsa studied were some that he discovered in 1914 at a site in the Siebenbürgen Island region of present-day Rumania. Many of the creatures were relatively small, leading Nopcsa to conclude that dwarfism was a characteristic of isolated populations. This idea was bolstered by the discovery of pygmy dinosaurs at a site in northern Germany in the early 2000s. In 2006, Weishampel and Rumanian colleagues were performing histological analyses of the Siebenbürgen material to determine whether the individuals found by Nopcsa were juveniles or, as they suspect, indeed very small adults.

Nopcsa's atypical approach to paleontology led him to undertake the study of geology, on which he published more than two dozen articles. He took a special interest in tectonics.

Nopcsa was a firm believer in interdisciplinary studies. In 1928, at the opening of the Paläontologische Gesellschaft conference in Budapest, he delivered a strong exhortation against narrow specialization as an

obstacle to an integrated view of science. Since Nopcsa was gravely ill at the time and feared that he would not be able to continue to work, Weishampel and Reif see the paper as Nopcsa's expression of his own "intellectual legacy."

Nopcsa certainly practiced what he preached. His final paper, published posthumously in 1934, according to Weishampel and Reif, "developed a unified picture of global tectonics and paleogeography which he used as the basis for discussion of the paleobiography of fossil reptiles and *Stegocephalia*."

Nopcsa was fascinated not only by natural science but also by the culture of Albania. He became a leading Albanologist, publishing more than fifty papers on a variety of topics related to the country, including geology, geography, history, and ethnology.

Nopcsa made his first of many trips to Albania in 1903. He later recounted that, on his entry into the northern mountains, he was greeted by a gunshot, with the bullet passing through his hat but not wounding him. Undeterred by the incident or the generally lawless reputation of the Albanians, he persevered in his exploration of the country and its culture.

Nopcsa cut a dashing and aristocratic figure in European capitals, but on his frequent trips to Albania he wore traditional native garb and let his hair grow long. He immersed himself in the culture and learned several dialects of the language.

Nopcsa came to have a great admiration for the spirit of the mountain tribes, who continually put up resistance against the Turks, centuries-long occupiers of the region. Nopcsa gave speeches in favor of rebellion and smuggled weapons to the Albanians to aid the cause.

In 1912 Albania, as part of a Balkan alliance, succeeded in expelling the Turks and declared its independence. The Albanian throne was vacant, however, and in order to secure the recognition of the nation by other European countries, the Albanian Congress of Trieste was convened in 1913 to choose a nobleman to become king.

Nopcsa attended the congress as an interested party and took an active role. At one point, he wrote in his memoirs, he "mounted the podium and held a spontaneous speech in Albanian," adding--undoubtedly correctly--"I don't think that many a central European would be in a position to repeat that feat."

Once the congress was underway and no clear favorite for the throne had emerged, Nopcsa declared himself willing to become King of Albania. In addition to speaking the language, he had strong ties to the Gheg people of the north, although this was a double-edged sword since they were the historical rivals of the southern Tosks.

Nopcsa proposed an unusual solution to Albania's economic crisis, namely marriage to the daughter of an American millionaire who would presumably be generous in augmenting the Albanian treasury. "Once a reigning European monarch," he wrote, "I would have no difficulty coming up with an American heiress aspiring to royalty, a step which under other circumstances I would have been loath to take."

He did not seem to have any particular candidate in mind for Queen of Albania, but, in any event, he was not required to make the sacrifice. He "grew disgusted a few weeks later and withdrew" his bid for the monarchy, at which he never truly had a realistic chance. The European powers installed a minor German prince, Wilhelm von Weid, who was deposed and expelled from the country after about six months.

Despite his disappointment, Nopcsa remained devoted to Albania. During World War I he was the leader of a military company of Albanian volunteers. He also went undercover as a spy for Austria-Hungary.

At the war's conclusion Transylvania was ceded to Rumania, costing Nopcsa his castle and its lands. When he attempted to return to his family estate to reclaim it, he was accosted by thugs and left for dead. He survived the attack and continued his scientific pursuits in spite of his declining fortunes.

The Hungarian government made Nopcsa the head of its Geological Survey in 1925. He came to the job with many creative ideas but was temperamentally unsuited to the strictures of life in a bureaucratic organization and quit in frustration in 1929.

A motorcycle enthusiast, Nopcsa embarked on a journey through Italy. In his sidecar was his longtime lover and secretary, an Albanian man named Bayazid Doda. The pair covered some 3,500 miles before falling short of money and returning to Vienna, where they lived together until 1933.

On April twenty-fifth of that year Nopcsa drugged Doda's tea and fatally shot him, after which he took his own life.

In a letter left for the police, he explained that his decision to commit suicide was the result of a nervous breakdown. He also stated, "The reason that I shot my longtime friend and secretary, Mr. Bayazid Elmas Doda, in his sleep without his suspecting at all is that I did not wish to leave him behind sick, in misery, and without a penny because he would have suffered too much."

Nopcsa left the Albanological portion of his papers to fellow scholar Norbert Jokl, asking that he call upon Austrian Count Paul Teleki to arrange for their publication. Teleki was unable to finance the project, and when Jokl was murdered by the Nazis in 1942, the documents went to the Manuscript Division of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Nopcsa's paleontological manuscripts went to the British Museum.

Ignored for decades, Nopcsa's writings have been the subject of renewed interest in recent years.

Popularizing books about paleontology generally give scant attention to Nopcsa and concentrate on portraying him as one of the most colorful of the "dinosaur hunters."

Weishampel and Reif, however, offer a more sober and objective view of his important contributions to science: "Nopcsa's studies in tectonic geology, evolutionary biology, paleobiogeography, and sexual dimorphism prove his ability to intelligently discover problems and solve them in remarkable ways."

They add: "Nopcsa was one of the first great theorists in vertebrate paleontology and made many noteworthy theoretical contributions in geology and evolutionary biology . . . . Nopcsa is perhaps the best remembered for campaigning for a new eclectic and synthetic intellectual behavior."

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