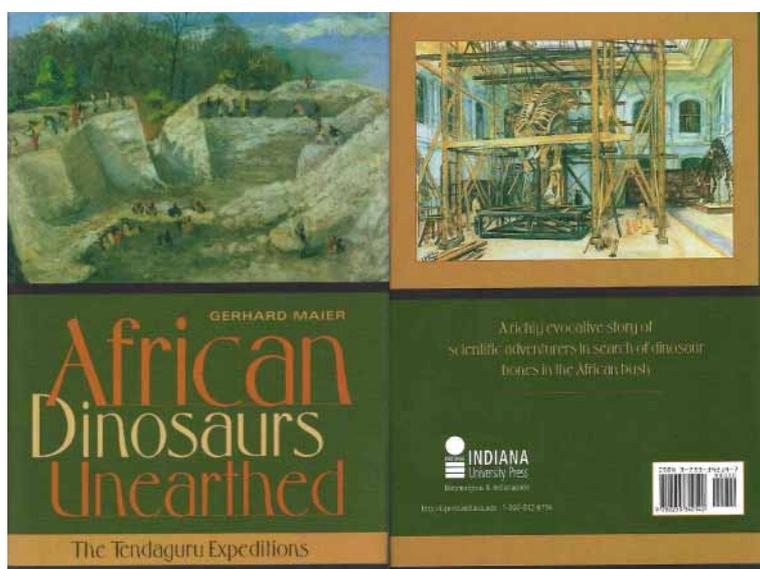


**Maier, G. 2003. African dinosaurs unearthed. The Tendaguru expeditions. – Bloomington, Indiana University Press**

Book review by I.J.J. Nieuwland



It is not always an undiluted pleasure to read the preface to a book. More often than not, it constitutes an all-too-obvious attempt on the part of an agent or publisher to increase sales by the recruitment of a 'big name'. Dale Russell's preface to Gerhard Maier's account of the various Tendaguru expeditions is the glorious exception. I may even go so far as to say that his two pages contain the best prose of the book, not only perfectly setting the stage for Maier's own account, but also putting the finger on some crucial context within which that tale is set.

This does not mean that Maier's account is inferior. But, by necessity, his emphasis is on completeness rather than on the narrative side. On the other hand, the history of the several Tendaguru excavations is a tantalising one and Maier takes full advantage of the numerous anecdotes attached to them. That he succeeds in doing so without losing sight of the broader picture of geopolitical developments or losing himself in minuscule detail is testimony to the comprehensiveness of this book.

About the first third of the book is taken up with the most significant part of the tale, the German expeditions to the 'steep hill' (or 'tendaguru' in the local tongue) in the southern coastal part of present-day Tanzania. This part is relatively well-known, for these excavations yielded the dinosaurs and other animals that feature so prominently in the collections of the Humboldt University's Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin. Hardly anyone that has ever read a book about dinosaurs will have missed a picture of the colossal *Brachiosaurus brancai* mount in the Museum's main hall.

That prominence was no coincidence. Like its archaeological counterpart, the Pergamon Museum, the Museum für Naturkunde was meant to represent the grandeur of the 'Vaterland', and to compete with similar institutions abroad, particularly those in England and the United States. As such, it was a typical extension of German colonial ambitions. A big museum needs big bones, and the Tendaguru quarry obligingly provided these (together with a *Diplodocus carnegiei* copy in plaster, a present from Andrew Carnegie to the German Emperor).

For its remainder, the book is forced to become somewhat schizoid, its attention divided between the fate of the fossils at Berlin and the events at Tendaguru after the ousting of the Germans from Tanganjika following military defeat in 1918.

The attention to the fossils is deserved since *Brachiosaurus* and his ilk were among those that survived two World Wars in the German capital. Unlike Stroemer's unfortunate Munich *Spinosaurus* that saw its end among the rubble of the Nazi empire (owing mainly to the Museum director's fatally disproving belief in Göring's claim that German cities would never be bombed), the Tendaguru bones were removed to safer quarters in the Museum's basement, and most of them survived there to remain the mainstay of the Museum's collection despite the partial destruction of the building itself (unfortunately, part of it is still in a sorry state, sixty years after the bombardment).

The fact that such events took place quite separately from what followed in Tanzania (as the territory was known after the British assumed control in 1919) itself, does not help in keeping the story organised. Applying a thematical rather than a chronological approach might have helped here. Not that the story is less interesting than

that of the one playing in Berlin; but apart from their mutual origin, they have very little in common. These, however, are very minor detractions from what is a very welcome attribution to the writing of the history of palaeontology.

More serious is that the author also seems undecided on what type of book he is actually writing. While a certain degree of jargon is perhaps inevitable in a story in which scientific effort plays such a distinguished role, it does not make it easier for a non-professional to follow the narrative. Referring to anatomical terms might be excusable, but providing a minimal explanation or even a glossary might have helped making layman understand the details in a book that is of interest also for students of German history, or the history of Tanzania. The fact that Maier seems to go for completeness when he speaks about finds, does not help to retain interest. That is a real pity, because although one would scarcely wish to know more about the Tendaguru quarry or its yield, it makes 'African dinosaurs unearthed' a stubborn read. However, despite these minor misgivings it remains a very welcome one. *Brachiosaurus* has become one of the icons of vertebrate palaeontology and although Maier could have progressed with a clearer focus, he offers grateful insights into how it came to be that way.

Maier, G. 2003. African dinosaurs unearthed. The Tendaguru expeditions. – Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 400 pp. ISBN 0-253-34214-7. Price \$ 49.95. Cloth.

Note: In the 1980s, a Swiss preparator, Urs Oberli, searched for this site in Tanzania. You can read his story in the forthcoming PalArch Foundation's Newsletter 1, no 3 (October 2004).