A LITTLE SOMETHING ABOUT THE BAROSAURUS MOUNT IN AMNH

by Eugene S. Gaffney, Mar 2022

Norell, Dingus, and Gaffney (Natural History 12/91, p.36-41) is the best source for info on the *Barosaurus* mount and its reunification by Barnum Brown. My only disagreement with the article is that the mount was not proposed or created during lunches with Norell. As described in Dingus (1996), Dingus and Gaffney came up with the basic idea before Norell’s involvement. He wasn’t even hired yet. The rest of Norell et al (1991) is fine.

A professor of physics at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Dr John (Jack) S. McIntosh, actually was the primary source of information and inspiration about the AMNH *Barosaurus* skeleton. Jack was a great fan of sauropods and became the world’s expert on the group. I knew him from my own undergraduate days and when I succeeded Colbert as Curator of the AMNH fossil reptile collection in 1970, Jack gave me more information about the AMNH dinosaurs than anyone. Jack told me that we had one of the best sauropod skeletons known in our collection and that he thought it was the poorly known (in the literature) *Barosaurus*.

McIntosh told me that the *Barosaurus* neck and some other elements but not the whole AMNH skeleton, had been on exhibit in AMNH with the *Apatosaurus* during the 40s and early 50s. It was on exhibit up to the major renovation of the hall that it was in which became the “Early Dinosaur/Brontosaur/Jurassic Hall” when renovated by Colbert (opened in late 1950s?). The entire *Barosaurus* was put into the collection at that time. Photos of the hall from that time period, mostly taken to show the brontosaur, also show the *Barosaurus* neck mounted on plaster pedestals in the bottom of one of the long wall cases. Ironically, the skeletal elements of *Barosaurus* now on exhibit in the Saurischian Hall next to the *Apatosaurus*, are basically the same ones that had been on exhibit in the 1940s.

The mount had its origin as described in Dingus (1996, the most authoritative description of the AMNH vertebrate fossil project filling six halls with the world’s largest vertebrate fossil collection).

Specifically, the Greg Paul painting of a herd of sauropods being attacked by theropods inspired Gaffney to suggest the *Barosaurus* Group arrangement (Paul, G.S. 1987. The science and art of restoring the life appearance of dinosaurs and their relatives. Fig. 16, page 30. *In* Czerkas, S.J. and Olson, E.C., editors, 1987. *Dinosaurs past and present. Volume 2*. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 149 pages). The original suggestion of using a half dozen or more skeletal casts was deemed impractical, and the result consists of one erect *Barosaurus* adult and a juvenile presumed *Barosaurus* (based on a partial juvenile of something from Howe Quarry in AMNH and a partial juvenile of something at Dinosaur National Monument), being attacked by an *Allosaurus*. In contrast to the regular fossil hall exhibits, all the *Barosaur* Group skeletons are casts.

The pose, while later criticized by the usual suspects (including one of my own students, Paul Sereno), got the AMNH some priceless publicity and a great opportunity to emphasize that most “dinosaur paleobiology” was bullshit. Early on, we did ask Jack McIntosh what he thought about the pose and he gave an enthusiastic “YES, I do think it was possible.” So that was that. Much to my disgust, I had become an accomplice in the perpetuation of “dinosaur paleobiology.”

Additional Notes: L. Dingus, March 2022

1. The most important aspect, and one that often gets overlooked, is the role the mount played in setting the primary theme of the renovation: What can we know about extinct vertebrates vs. what can’t we know, given the nature of the fossils that are available. This was emphasized in the label that accompanied the mounts, which I’ll try to find the text for. Yes I agree completely. That was one of my big pushes too. The label has probably been removed along with a lot of the base….. There is a discussion regarding the reality of the pose at the end of the Nat Hist 12/91 article we might refer to. Even tho I don’t think either you or I got a chance to write any of that article, although Mark did get a lot of info for it from us. All the specific data in the article came from Jack and Brown records. You might ref your BB book here at some point.

2. Gene, please correct me if I’m wrong, but as I recall cast or sculpted bones of *Diplodocus* were used to fill in the missing elements of the *Barosaurus* adult and juvenile. I don’t recall any other taxon being utilized, but I may be incorrect. This is out of my memory banks now, I do know that McIntosh was the real advisor scientifically and he (and I and you?) went to Pete’s place at least twice (before the parking lot mounting party) to help with the restored elements during the casting. As you say Jack used the similar Diplodocus for restoration of the adult mount. I remember bringing up some material we had for him to use.

I may be wrong on this, but I think he actually identified the AMNH Howe Q juvenile as a Diplodocus. I was going to (in my foolish youth) describe that specimen as it has an excellent skull, and I did get the neck figured. I was going to coauthor it with him. But I went in other directions. In any case, everything I knew about it came from him.

I have no idea who inherited his volumes of notes on sauropods. I saw them once at Wesleyan. He had a history of every sauropod bone. He did a complete inventory of all AMNH Dinos. When I got an NSF grant to renovate the Dino collection (long before Mark) I used it. All that stuff I gave to Mark at some point.

But the current whereabouts of the McIntosh volumes I wouldn’t even know where to start. None of the supposed people who wanted to be a Jack protege and sauropod expert actually came close to Jack’s level. I don’t remember him saying what would be the final resting place of his work.

Our daughter, Karen, went to Wesleyan where Jack was, and met him few times.

3. We should double-check with Peter, but I’m pretty sure the budget for the project was $250,000. Cheap at the price.

4. We also commissioned a painting by John Gurche, which I suspect you’re familiar with. We can ref the cover of Nat Hist 12/91 for the painting.

Also we might put in a ref to the front page of the NY Newsday of Nov 29, 1991, (god those were the glory days) which had the Gurche painting and a great title: “ What’s wrong with this picture! Experts: Museum wrong, Barosaurus couldn’t stand up.” Sereno and others were quoted in it and you got some trustee phone calls? But it was rapidly apparent that we got publicity that you couldn’t buy. It was in German papers, Japanese papers, we got world famous without paying a cent.

5. In addition to the mounts, Peter took a “peel” of the ground surface at a site where he was doing fieldwork that serves as the base for the exhibit. I don’t recall where that site was, but I suspect Peter might. After driving around all day, Peter and I found an area I liked beside the road just outside the Ft Peck res/Lewis and Clark? wilderness area which we had some permits for. But the road area we picked was within the county highway property and they didn’t care what we did. The knob I picked is all Tullock. Peter and crew came back later without me and did the peels. I have a lot of photos of the place, marking out the margins etc, most of which went to Appelbaum.

6. My wife worked at AMNH and headed up the press and media coverage for the opening. If you’re interested, I can check with her to try and get a list of the more prominent outlets that covered it. Good idea. The above comments have some refs.

We should have some kind of more detailed story on the mount as Mark’s article is too self serving although the specimen facts are presumably correct. Your comments in your book are actually the best basic description of the mount as well as the whole exhibition program. Congratulations again.