The concrete *Diplodocus* of Vernal

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**Abstract**

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# Introduction

*Diplodocus* is a sauropod dinosaur from the Late Jurassic of North America, found in the extensive Morrison Formation of the western states. Although larger and more complete sauropods are now known, *Diplodocus* was the first giant dinosaur known from a substantially complete skeleton: the Carnegie Museum’s iconic specimen CM 84 (Figure B). As explained below, casts of this important specimen were sent all around the globe, and as a result this individual became — and remains — the single best-known dinosaur in the world.

Among the many *Diplodocus* casts that have been mounted, many have been made in plaster, including all the oldest ones; and many have been made in modern lightweight materials such as water-expanded polyester (WEP). But one stands alone, having been cast in concrete by the Utah Field House museum in Vernal.

In this paper, we will summarise the history of the original Carnegie *Diplodocus*, discuss how the concrete cast came to be, and consider its legacy.

## Nomenclature

A distinction is made between molds and casts. A mold is a negative structure made from an original specimen (or, less commonly, a cast), in which the spaces inside the mold match the shapes of the original specimen. A cast is a positive structure, a copy made of a specimen made by filling a mold, and its shape matches that of the original specimen.

Vertebrae are designated as follows, for a vertebra at position *n* in a part of the spinal column: cervical vertebrae C*n*, dorsal vertebrae D*n*, and caudal vertebrae Ca*n*.

## Institutional abbreviations

* AMNH — American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York, USA.
* CM — Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.
* **UNUSED** HMNS — Houston Museum of Nature and Science, Houston, Texas, USA.
* **UNUSED** MB — Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Berlin, Germany; specimen numbers for fossil reptiles take the form MB.R.*nnnn*.
* **UNUSED** USNM – United States National Museum, Washington DC, USA.
* **UNUSED** YPM — Yale Peabody Museum, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

# Historical background

## The Carnegie *Diplodocus*

On 11 December 1898, the *New York Journal and Advertiser* published an illustrated article about giant dinosaurs (Anonymous 1898), depicting a “Brontosaurus giganteus” in bipedal posture, peering into the an 11th story window. In fact, the dinosaur depicted in this article, “Most colossal animal ever on Earth just found out west”, was extrapolated from a single femur, described as being eight feet long, but shown in a photograph as being the same height as an adult man. Nevertheless, industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was inspired by this article, and instructed the Pittsburgh museum that he founded and funded to obtain a giant dinosaur skeleton for exhibit. William J. Holland, director of the Carnegie Museum, used Carnegie’s money to hire experienced field palaeontologists away from other museums and sent them out to hunt sauropods.

On 4 July 1899 — Independence Day — Dr. Jacob L. Wortman, working for the Carnegie Museum, found the first bones of a largely complete sauropod specimen at Sheep Creek in Albany County, Wyoming. He and his team collected it across a period of several months (Hatcher 1901:3–4, Nieuwland 2019:44). This specimen was designated CM 84. It consisted of 14 cervical vertebrae C2–15 (although see Taylor 2022:8–11 on uncertainties about the neck material), all 10 dorsal vertebrae D1–10, sacrum, caudal vertebrae Ca1–12, 18 ribs, both sternal plates, left scapulocoracoid (not right as stated by Hatcher), almost complete pelvis, right femur, and two thin bones of uncertain identity which Hatcher thought might be clavicles (McIntosh 1981:20).

In 1900, Mr. Olof A. Peterson collected another, slightly smaller, specimen of the same species of sauropod from the same quarry (Hatcher 1901:3). This specimen was designated CM 94. It consisted of nine cervical vertebrae, nine dorsal vertebrae, sacrum, 39 caudal vertebrae, fragments of ribs, five chevrons, both sternal plates and scapulocoracoids, the complete pelvis, left femur, and right tibia, fibula, astralagus and pes (McIntosh 1981:20).

Both specimens were prepared out of their matrix by a team led by Mr. Arthur S. Coggleshall.

On 15 May 1901 (Niewland 2019:46), the classic description of both these specimens of *Diplodocus* was published (Hatcher 1901), written by John Bell Hatcher, the Carnegie Museum’s head of palaeontology. This monograph illustrated CM 84 in some detail and named it as the examplar of the new species *Diplodocus carnegii* in honour of the museum’s sponsor. The illustrations included a skeletal reconstruction of *Diplodocus* (Hatcher 1901:plate XIII; Figure A).

At the start of October 1902, King Edward VII of England paid a surprise visit to Carnegie at Skibo Castle in Scotland. Seeing a framed copy of the skeletal reconstruction of *Diplodocus*, he requested a specimen for the British Museum in London, England, of which he was a trustee (Nieuwland 2109:50). Carnegie, keen to gain favour with men of influence, happily promised to provide one as a gift, and on 2nd October wrote to Holland to ask him to excavate another *Diplodocus* for the British Museum.

In late December 1902, when Carnegie had returned to Pittsburgh, Holland explained that finding a comparable specimen was unlikely, and would be expensive even if luck was on their side. He was able to persuade Carnegie that a cast of their existing specimen would be a more practical gift (Nieuwland 2019:58). Holland arranged the details in correspondence with E. Ray Lankester, his counterpart at the British Museum (Natural History).

To defray the high cost of producing the cast, Holland suggested that the molds could be used to create multiple casts which Carnegie could gift to other heads of state — and idea that appealed greatly to Carnegie.

Starting in 1903 and running through into 1904, the Carnegie Museum made molds of the *Diplodocus* bones, and the first set of casts from these molds. (Some bones had to be sculpted, because the originals were either absent or in too poor a condition for the molding process.) The work was led by Arthur Coggeshall, the chief preparator of fossils at the Carnegie museum, who was also in charge of designing the armature to carry the cast bones. A crew of Italian plasterers led by Serafino Agostini was employed, thanks to their expertise in casting artworks and Agostini’s experience at the AMNH (Nieuwland 2019:71).

In late June of 1904, the cast created for the British Museum was temporarily mounted as a trial at the Pittsburgh Exposition Society Hall — see photograph in Nieuwland 2019:figure 3.1. The skeleton was shown to an invited party on 29th June, then to the public on the 30th, before being disassembled again on the 2nd July. On the very next day, Hatcher died of typhoid fever at only 42 years of age — but he had at least seen the skeleton that he had described in its mounted state before his death (Holland 1906:226). The Carnegie Museum’s *Diplodocus* cast was therefore (albeit briefly) the first mounted sauropod in the world, six months ahead of the AMNH’s composite *Brontosaurus*, AMNH 460, which was to be unveiled on 16th February 1905 (Brinkman 2010:104).

The casts were shipped from Pittsburgh on 3rd December 1904 and arrived safely at the British Museum on 11 January 1905.

By February 1905, not only were the molds and the BMNH cast complete, but four additional sets of cast elements had been made, all at a total cost of $8,558 (Nieuwland 2019:75). This cost did not include that of shipping and mounting the casts, which was typically rather more expensive than their production had been.

Just before 1pm on 12th May 1905, the first mount that had been cast from the Carnegie molds was unveiled at the BMNH — see photograph in Nieuwland 2019:figure 3.3. In fact the material for the mount had been completed as early as October the previous year, but the mounting and public unveiling was delayed until spring of 1905 in the hope that more of London’s dignitaries could be present. The king himself, disappointingly to Lankester and Carnegie, did not attend. However, the events attracted a great deal of press coverage, not only in London and Pittsburgh but across Britain and America, and even in Canada and Australia. The next day, the exhibit was opened to the general public, and attracted the largest crowds that had ever attended the museum (Holland 1906:264).

After Hatcher’s death, Holland had succeeded him as the scientific leader of the work on *Diplodocus*, even though his principal field of study was lepidoptery. In 1906, his monograph on *Diplodocus* osteology (Holland 1906) was published, using two new specimens to expand on Hatcher’s (1901) description with more detail especially on the skull, atlas, tail, sternal plates and supposed clavicles.

1907, April: The actual fossils (and some sculpted elements) are mounted at the Carnegie Museum.

1908: further casts are erected in Berlin, Germany; and Paris, France. The Berlin cast sparks a debate about posture (Hay 1908, Tornier 1909, Hay 1910, Holland 1910).

1909: the last two casts of the original batch are mounted in Vienna, Austria; and Bologna, Italy.

1909-1910: five further casts are made from the molds

1910: a cast is mounted in St. Petersburgh (now Leningrad), Russia. Discuss posture.

1912: another cast is mounted in La Plata, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

1913: another cast is mounted in Madrid, Spain.

1914: The Great War breaks out, ending Carnegie's arbitration campaign that was the main reason for donating casts, and reducing the pace of creating new casts.

1917 at the latest: the molds went into storage and are not used again, according to Untermann (1959:364).

1919: Carnegie dies, leaving no permanent endowment for vertebrate palaeontology at the Carnegie Museum (Brinkman 2010:109), plunging the department into financial difficulty.

1932: the penultimate cast is mounted in Mexico (with missing/damaged parts produced and added in 1931/2), funded in part by Carnegie’s widow Louise.

1934: the final cast is sent to Munich, but never mounted.

## The Field Museum in Vernal

1948, October 29: The Utah Field House museum opens in Vernal.

1952: Vernal native J. LeRoy Kay, Carnegie's curator of vertebrate paleontology, gifts the original molds to the Field House. They arrive on or shortly before 7 August (Untermann 1952). By this time, they were "deteriorating" (Gangewere 1999:17), "almost unusable" (Nieuwland 2019:251) and "in pretty bad shape" (Ken Carpenter, pers. comm. 2022).

1957: The Utah Field House's concrete cast is created, and mounted outdoors (Gangewere 1999:17). This is the last time the original molds are used. “The molds finally fell apart because of old age soon after it was made” (Sussaman 1988).

1950s or 1960s: The Field House posted a notice in the SVP news bulletin offering the plaster molds to whoever wanted them (Ken Carpenter, pers. comm., 2022), but there seem to have been no takers.

1960s: the original molds are thrown away by Carnegie Museum (Ilja Nieuwland, pers. comm., 2022). So the invitation that concludes Untermann (1959:369), "Does anyone wish to cast the twelfth?" seems to have gone unanswered.

1979: The British Museum’s cast of the Carnegie *Diplodocus* is moved from the Hall of Reptiles (now the insect exhibit) to the main atrium, where it remained until removed in 2018 to make space for corporate events.

## The lightweight cast in Vernal

1988, January: plans are made to have a lightweight indoor replica of the Field House concrete cast created by the Las Vegas Museum, but these plans fall through.

1989, April: Jim Madsen of Dinolab is contacted to make new plans for creating a replica from the concrete cast

1989, June 30 onwards: Dinolab repaired the deteriorated concrete cast, stabilizing, restoring and sealing the bones. Jim Madsen of Dinolab made new molds from the repaired concrete Diplodocus, using them to create a new lightweight indoor Diplodocus cast for the Field House, from WEP (water-expanded polyester), and reserving the right to make up to 20 additional casts (Madsen et al. 1989)

1991, not later than June 30: Dinolab is contracted to deliver the indoor mount (Madsen et al. 1989) — but I don't know when it actually arrived. It was mounted above the admission counter at the front of the Field House lobby (Ken Carpenter, pers. comm. 2022).

1991?: When the concrete specimen was returned to the Field House, it was in bad shape and went into storage rather than being remounted.

## Further uses of the molds

XXX Some time subsequent to 1989: Jack McIntosh arranges a deal between Dinolab and RCI whereby the Dinolab creates casts of the Diplodocus elements needed to make up the missing part of the AMNH Barosaurus mount. See Gordy (1991), Norell et al. (1991), Dingus (1996:20–29).

Subsequent years: further casts are made from the Dinolab molds, including one in the Las Vegas Natural History Museum and one in the Houston Natural History Museum.

## The fate of the concrete *Diplodocus*

2004: The Field House moves to a new building, and the WEP cast is remounted in the entry hall.

2012: The collections are moved from the old Field House building to the new one, but there is no space for the concrete cast.

2013: The concrete cast is sent to Utah State University Eastern Prehistoric Museum on effectively permanent loan, and to be repaired. It was intended to be mounted outside a new museum in Price, but this museum was never built and the cast remains in storage on the Utah State University Eastern campus.

2019: Dinolab storage in Ogden, Utah, is scheduled for demolition. The Diplodocus molds that were taken from the concrete cast are moved to RCI, where they are kept in storage: some in good condition, some in rough shape. These are probably the only Carnegie Diplodocus molds in the world.

XXX “After the tour, in all likelihood the plaster dinosaur will meet an inglorious end in the basement of the museum; meanwhile, there has been talk of a more weather-resistant cast gracing the garden in front of the museum. And yes, that would mean that in this case, a cast is to be recast. What that means for “authenticity” or “relevance” is anybody’s guess.” (Nieuwland 2019:4).

# Discussion

XXX Photographs of the concrete *Diplodocus* can be found at the J. Willard Marriott Digital Library of the University of Utah: <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/>

# Acknowledgements

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# Figure Captions

**Figure A.** John Bell Hatcher’s reconstruction of the skeleton of *Diplodocus* (Hatcher 1901:plate XIII). Andrew Carnegie has a framed print of this reconstruction at his home at Skibo Castle, and it was seeing this that provoked King Edward VII of England to ask Carnegie for a Diplodocus for the British Museum — a request that led ultimately to the creation of the concrete *Diplodocus* of Vernal. Hatcher’s reconstruction, now over 120 years old, mostly holds up well: only the forefeet, which were unknown to Hatcher, are badly wrong., with splayed fingers rather then vertical arcade of metacarpals that is now known to make up the sauropod manus. The dragging posture of the tail is also wrong: sauropod tails were held above ground level, and the base of the tail should be distinctly inclined upwards from the sacrum rather than downwards as here. The low posture of the neck illustrated by Hatcher was probably not habitual, but certainly could be attained in order to drink.

**Figure B.** The *Diplodocus carnegii* holotype CM 84 as it is today: the original fossil material mounted in the public gallery of the Carnegie Museum. Head, neck, torso and forelimb in left lateral view, with *Homo sapiens* Michael P. Taylor for scale. Photograph by Mathew J. Wedel.