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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

Gigantic Dinosaur, ‘Titanosaur,’ Going on Display at American Museum of Natural History

Believed to have weighed some 70 tons, it is among the largest dinosaurs ever discovered



An excavation team member is dwarfed by a bone of the gigantic dinosaur, which was discovered in Argentina. *PHOTO: DR. ALEJANDRO OTERO*

Andy Battaglia

Jan. 13, 2016 6:34 p.m. ET

Move over, T. rex and Barosaurus. There is a new prehistoric giant in town, set to be unveiled this week at the American Museum of Natural History.

The creature, known as the Titanosaur, goes on public view Friday. The biggest dinosaur ever exhibited at the museum and among the largest ever discovered, it stretches 122 feet long and will rise nearly 20 feet to reach the ceiling. It is believed to have weighed, when walking the Earth roughly 100 million years ago, some 70 tons—as heavy as at least

10 African elephants.

Exhibited alongside the cast-model skeleton will be some of the best-preserved bones from the Titanosaur's recent discovery, including its nearly 8-foot-long thigh bone.

"Everything was extremely large," said Diego Pol, one of the paleontologists who excavated the previously unknown dinosaur in Argentina in 2014. "After a few days working, we realized it was huge."

The Titanosaur's initial discovery began with a call from a farmer who thought he had found fossils in a remote desert region of Argentine Patagonia, in the southernmost reaches of South America. A quick survey by Mr. Pol and colleagues from the Museo Paleontológico Egidio Feruglio in the city of Trelew suggested it might be a significant find.

"Sometimes there's a piece that doesn't lead to anything," Mr. Pol said, "and sometimes you are lucky and find a fantastic set of bones."

José Luis Carballido, another paleontologist on the excavation team, said it took some time for the dinosaur to reveal its full glory.

"The first visit was exciting when we discovered the femur," he said, referring to its formidable thigh bone, "but it was the second or third visit that we really knew the importance of the discovery."

The more than 200 fossils exhumed from the site come from a species not previously known, Mr. Pol said, and provide clues about the existence of a creature among the biggest ever found.

The dinosaur is so new, it doesn't have an official name.

The term "titanosaur" actually refers to a group of giant dinosaurs of similar make and size, according to Don Phillips, president of the New York Paleontological Society and a lecturer at New York University.

"These are your classic long-necked, long-tailed, really big dinosaurs," Mr. Phillips said. "They are the largest land animals that ever lived."

Titanosaurs are thought to have been herbivores, feasting on plants. "They were probably not much of a threat if you lived back then," Mr. Phillips added, "unless you got stepped on by one."



The cast-model skeleton of the Titanosaur stretches 122 feet long. *PHOTO: DENIS FINNIN/AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY*

Currently, the Argentine paleontologists are awaiting word about the publication of a scientific paper already submitted, the acceptance of which would establish an official name and log the discovery in the dinosaur record.

“If the name goes out before the paper, then the name becomes invalid,” said Mr. Pol. “Those are the rules of zoological nomenclature.”

Whatever the name, the skeletal model newly installed at the museum will introduce the creature to an audience beyond dinosaur experts.

The work to make that happen was described by Mr. Pol as a fruitful collaboration between scientists at the Trelew-based museum and a team at the American Museum of Natural History, along with a Canadian company, Research Casting International, revered for its model-making.

The skeleton’s “bones” took their shape from plaster casts of the originals and by newer technological means such as scanning and 3-D printing, Mr. Pol said.

To fill missing parts of the puzzle, pieces were created using the evidence at hand—such as a skull designed in part from a single remaining tooth.

The Titanosaur model benefited from the unusually large sample of well-preserved bones, scientists said.

“It’s really cool to see them because they’re this beautiful color, this deep maroon with

pinks and grays,” said Mick Ellison, senior principal artist for the paleontology department at the museum. “And they’re huge, of course.”

The Titanosaur will be shown in a walking pose with its neck more horizontal than vertical, Mr. Pol said. He called it “the least controversial [pose] possible,” referring to one of the many open questions related to making and shaping a beast that has been extinct for millions of years.

Physical limitations played a part, as well: “The animal is so gigantic that if we had put the neck going up,” he said, “it wouldn’t fit.”

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In fact, it still doesn’t. In addition to grazing the gallery’s ceilings, the museum’s newest prehistoric inhabitant will poke its head and neck out of the fourth-floor hall toward the elevators, providing visitors with an arresting introduction to the larger skeleton.

“When you see a femur or a vertebra in a museum, of course the bones are really big,” said Mr. Carballido, on the phone from Argentina before another trip out into the field. “But when you see the animal with a complete skeleton, you realize how amazing the dinosaur was.”

For Mr. Pol, currently a guest researcher at the University of Chicago, the Titanosaur’s unveiling is something of a homecoming. He worked at the museum while getting his Ph.D. in New York and remains a research associate there a decade later.

“For us,” he said, “it’s really big.”