

The 150th birthday of dinosaur discovery in Switzerland — A story about a space cowboy from the Jura Mountains

Barbara DEN BROK¹, Christian MEYER² & Basil THÜRING²

¹ *Museum.BL, Zeughausplatz 28, 4410 Liestal, Switzerland, e-mail: barbara.denbrok@bksd.bl.ch*; ² *Naturhistorisches Museum Basel, Augustinergasse 2, 4001 Basel, Switzerland*

Amanz Gressly (1814-1865), a Swiss geologist, established many principles of modern stratigraphy. He was the pioneer who first distinguished “facies fossils” from “index” or “zone fossils” and he introduced the term facies in modern geology.

In a letter, dated September the 3rd 1856, to Ludwig Rütimeyer, director of the Natural History Museum Basel, Gressly announced the discovery of “bones of a gigantic reptile” on the bank of the river Ergolz near Niederschönthal (Canton Baselland). Rütimeyer sketched several bones, wrote on the figures “Belodon” in pencil and later in ink “Gresslyosaurus”. This letter marks the first discovery of a dinosaur in Switzerland. As always, Gressly was short of money and sold the bones to the naturalist and politician Peter Merian for about 150 Swiss francs, who donated them to the Natural History Museum Basel.

Born as the son of the founder of the glass industry in Bärschwil, Gressly was introduced to palaeontology by a close friend the later priest and naturalist J.B. Schmidlin. Later he worked as a freelancer and therefore he can be called one of the

first “independent” engineering geologists. For example, Gressly made expertises for the planned railway tunnels through the Swiss Jura Mountain. He sold single fossils or collections to various Natural History Museums gathered during his fieldtrips. Gressly also worked for Louis Agassiz, the founder of Harvard.

Amanz Gressly was a shy man, but was a multilinguist, apart from Latin, French and German, he spoke also Syrian, Greek and Spanish. During his studies in the Jura Mountains, he lived many months alone, sometimes in caves, before he returned to civilization. Especially one person, probably his “girl friend” and her father looked after him and gave him new clothes before leaving for a meeting. There are many songs in his honour and one of them deals with him as “Gressly the savage” because most of the people did not estimate a person who used the same clothes several days and nights without changing. Gressly died 1865 in an asylum for the demented near Bern and was buried in Solothurn. Already in 1860 he wrote the inscription for his own gravestone.

Gresslius interiit lapidum consumptus amore,
Undique collectis non fuit hausta fames,
Ponimus hunc saxum! Mehercle totus opertus
Gresslius hoc tumulo nunc satefactus erit.