fossil studies

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Book Review

Book Review: Schwermann, A.; Sachs, S. *Die Welt der Plesiosaurier. Paläontologische Abenteur*; Knüppe, J., Illus.; LWL—Museum für Naturkunde: Münster, Germany, 2026; ISBN: 978-3-912101-02-7

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In the early days of palaeontological science, plesiosaurs were stars of the prehistoric world. After Mary Anning's initial discovery of a fairly complete skeleton at Lyme Regis in 1823 and its subsequent description as *Plesiosaurus* by Henry De la Beche and William Conybeare, scientists and the general public alike were struck by the bizarre appearance of these extinct marine reptiles, which were compared to 'a snake threaded through the trunk of a turtle'. Early 'palaeoartists' were fond of depicting fights between the plesiosaur and its supposed arch-enemy, the ichthyosaur—an epic battle that became a highlight of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth.* Since then, of course, as far as 'fossil monsters' are concerned, dinosaurs have taken centre stage in the public imagination, to some extent pushing marine reptiles into the background. However, plesiosaurs retain a fascination of their own, and it is difficult to imagine a popular book about extinct reptiles without at least a mention of them.

This beautifully produced book invites the reader to rediscover plesiosaurs in an original and appealing way. The starting point is the authors' first-hand experience of research on actual plesiosaur fossils, namely rather remarkable finds made over more than a century in Westphalia, a historical region of the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen in north-western Germany. The plesiosaur record from Westphalia is remarkable in that it covers a significant part of the evolutionary history of this group of marine reptiles, from the Late Triassic *Rhaeticosaurus mertensi* to the Early Jurassic *Arminisaurus schuberti* and *Westphaliasaurus simonsensii* and the Early Cretaceous *Brancasaurus brancai*. These 'Westphalian Four' have been considered significant enough to be chosen as 'Fossils of the Year 2026' by the German Palaeontological Society, and indeed they nicely illustrate key stages in the evolution of the group and its adaptations to various aquatic environments and lifestyles. They form the background for a thorough but highly readable review of what is currently known about plesiosaurs and their phylogeny and anatomy, with welcome excursions into broader topics such as how tetrapods returned to the marine environment, early interpretations of fossils, or the various organisms whose fossils can be found together with those of plesiosaurs. The history of plesiosaur research takes up a significant part of the book, with really enjoyable sections about the palaeontologists who described Westphalian specimens. While Ernst Koken (1860–1912) and Theodor Wegner (1880–1934) fit the traditional image of the serious German scientist rather well, Hermann Landois (1835–1905) was clearly a more excentric character, who was not only a professor at the University of Münster, but also, for a time, a Catholic priest, until he was suspended because of his unusual lifestyle. Besides describing plesiosaurs, he also published on such

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improbable topics as *The hare in the Holy Scriptures*, and had the interesting habit of drinking bottled beer with his pet monkey.

The book's subtitle is 'Palaeontological adventure'. At first sight, the subdued landscapes of Westphalia may not seem to be the best place to visit in search of adventure. One would rather think of the Gobi desert or Patagonia. However, the authors have perfectly understood what palaeontological adventure really means. Both Achim Schwermann and Sven Sachs work at museums in Germany (Münster and Bielefeld), and they have first-hand experience of what the work of a palaeontologist really is, from excavations in sometimes slightly difficult weather, to preparation of specimens, mounting skeletons for exhibition and, of course, the exacting process of scientific study. Their book reflects this day-to-day work in the field and laboratory, with which the public may not be very familiar, but which can be as exciting as any expedition to the ends of the earth, because it is, first and foremost, an adventure of the mind. One of the really pleasant aspects of the book is this ability to convey the real pleasure and excitement of scientific research.

The book is profusely illustrated with photographs of fossils and localities, palaeogeographical maps, and evolutionary diagrams. Particularly noteworthy are the illustrations by Joschua Knüppe, whose line drawings and colour reconstructions of plesiosaurs and other extinct animals are both scientifically accurate and artistically original and pleasant. His interpretation of plesiosaurs as sleek, somewhat seal-like animals, beautifully adapted to their marine environment, contrasts with older reconstructions which showed them with unlikely snake-like necks, and certainly fits current knowledge much better.

This nice book is aimed at a fairly broad readership and is generally free from technical jargon. It will nevertheless be of interest to professional palaeontologists as well, and it includes a 14-page-long bibliography which can serve as an excellent starting point for further research on plesiosaurs. The authors and the artist should be congratulated for this beautiful, well-researched and truly appealing book.

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