

NATIONAL MUSEUM FORUM

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NATIONAL MUSEUM FORUM is the general title of public lectures given at irregular intervals by eminent scientists on various topics. The first FORUM lecture was given on 9th March, 1978, by Mr Andrew Tracy on "African Music and its Origins", and the second was on 13th April, 1978, when Prof. S Rees Jones discussed "The Scientific Investigation of Paintings." The third FORUM lecture was delivered on 25th April, 1979, by Prof. James A Hopson of the University of Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A., and the subject of his talk was "The Behaviour of Dinosaurs."

At first glance it seems impossible to discuss behaviour in animals which have been extinct for at least 65 million years. However, Prof. Hopson pointed out that the soft organs, such as muscles (which are not fossilized), do shape the hard parts (bones) during the life of the animal, so that it can be inferred how the muscles operated. His lecture was mainly concerned with some bizarre structures found in Cretaceous dinosaurs (135-65 million years ago). He compared these with analogous structures in living reptiles, birds and mammals, and came up with a number of interesting theories to explain the head crests, frills, horns and plates found in different dinosaurs. It appears that though some of these might have been used purely for defence, the majority of structures had a reproductive connotation, e.g. to frighten off other males during the mating season and/or to impress the females. Prof. Hopson also pointed out that the dinosaurs were not really as dull-witted as people used to think - in fact, their brains were at least as large as those found in many modern reptiles and some even approached birds in this respect.

The audience was captivated by the shrewd detective work that had been carried out in order to supply satisfactory answers to the various problems and one had the distinct impression that these animals had suddenly become alive again. We thank Prof. Hopson for making the old bones rattle so well!

The third FORUM lecture was also the occasion when the two schoolboys of Ficksburg, Shaun (13) and Robert Lloyd (11), were each presented with a copy of M.A. Cluver's booklet, "Fossil Reptiles of the South African Karoo". In July last year the two boys discovered a fossil reptile near the Ficksburg municipal dam and immediately notified the Museum. The specimen, which proved to be quite rare, has since been taken out and is at present being prepared for display.

The National Museum would also like to thank Mr P B Reid and the Town Clerk of Ficksburg and his staff for all their assistance in removing the fossil from the site. ■



Prof. James A Hopson



Robert Lloyd receives his copy of "Fossil Reptiles" while Shaun looks on.