

Discovery of the first theropod dinosaur tracks in the Lower Albian lacustrine facies of Central Tunisian Atlas

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Recent geological investigations undertaken within a National Project framework involving the University, ETAP and ONM on the Cretaceous series of central Tunisian Atlas have led to a detailed facies mapping of the Aptian-Albian series from Gafsa to Kasserine areas. In Jebel Koumine (Kasserine region) the continental facies, which represents the equivalent of the well-known Kebar Formation, have been recently dated as Lower Albian thanks to the presence of diagnostic fauna and flora (TRABELSI et al., 2016). These continental facies resting over the shallow marine Aptian carbonate platform of the Orbata Formation comprise at their base a distinct sedimentary interval made up of whitish, laminated and fine grained limestones deposited in a lacustrine environment (NASRI et al., in progress). Within this facies belt we have identified theropod dinosaur tracks for the first time. Two track morphotypes were identified on the same bedding surface. The larger track shows an enlarged proximal (metatarsal pads) area corresponding most likely to the Early Cretaceous ichnogenus *Irenesauripus* (preliminary interpretation). This specimen is also morphologically close to *Kayentapus* and *Eubrontes* ichnogenera. These tracks constitute the northernmost witnesses of the dinosaurs ever described in the Tunisian Atlas and can be correlated to the well preserved and documented dinosaur bones from fluvial sandstones of the Chenini Formation outcropping in the Saharan Platform 300 km south of our study area.

This new important discovery (ongoing research) rekindles the debate on the northern limit of the Albian continental facies and boosts the research in order to revise the paleogeography of Tunisia during the Early Albian, considered as lacking overall central Tunisia in most previous stratigraphic works.

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