

Baron Nopsca : Paleontologist Extraordinary.

Amongst the several interesting characters discussed by Edwin Colbert in his Men and Dinosaurs (1968) is Franz Baron Nopsca von Felso-Szilvas (1877-1933).

Nopsca was a member of a noble Transylvanian family (as also was Count Dracula!). Fluent in several languages, he had equally wide interests, writing not only on fossil reptiles but also on geology, archaeology, ethnology and the geography of Albania, a country in which he had a life-long interest. His first paper on dinosaurs, written during his first year at university, was an excellent effort for one so young and led him to say to Louis Dollo, a paleontologist with an international reputation "Is it not marvellous that I, so young a man, have written such an excellent memoir?"

Over a period of twenty five years, Nopsca published on all aspects of the dinosaurs and he became an authority on the group.

In Transylvania before World War 1 Nopsca lived the life of a baronial lord with peasants bowing low before him as he drove by in his carriage.



Nopsca in Albanian costume
(and well armed)

His fascination with Albania manifested itself at an early age. He made several journeys through the country and learnt the dialects. In 1913 he proposed to the authorities that he lead a filibustering expedition to establish himself as ruler of the country and pictured himself as riding down the main street of Tirana on a white horse. Once he was king, he would marry the daughter of an American millionaire - any millionaire; they all had daughters eager to marry kings - thus providing himself and the kingdom with ample funds

During the First World War Nopsca, wearing the rough garb of a Romanian peasant and with long and shaggy hair, lived the dangerous life of a spy. After the war, as a nobleman on the losing side, his estates were confiscated. He was appointed president of the Hungarian Geological Survey but antagonized his colleagues and finally left in a

rage and set off on a three-thousand-mile trip through Italy on a motorcycle, with his Albanian friend and secretary, Bajazid, as pillion rider.

On a visit to Hungary after the war Nopsca was attacked by peasants wielding cudgels and pitchforks and was left with a fractured skull, an injury that accentuated his existing mental peculiarities.

Nopsca's secretary, Bajazid, was also his lover. Indeed Nopsca maintained two Albanian homosexual boy friends. In his lucid periods he directed his brilliant mind to research on dinosaurs and to his other interests. At other times his life was one of bizare extremes.

It all ended on 25 April 1933. He gave Bajazid a cup of tea laced with sleeping powder and then shot him in the head. Next he placed the muzzle of the pistol in his own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Alan Mason

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Absent-minded Professors

Stories of absent-minded professors are not unusual in the geological fraternity. Here are two examples :

Professor L.A.Cotton, Professor of Geology at Sydney University, during his term as President of the Royal Society of New South Wales, was keen to boost attendance at the traditional monthly dinners. He telephoned members on the day to remind them. He had a good response, so went home happy that he had done a good job. At about 9.00 pm he suddenly realised that he should have been there also.

- from The Memoirs of Professor Alan Voisey

and Professor Walter Bucher of Columbia University and one of the leading structural geologists of his time -

A car pool was organised by some of the Columbia professors with various members taking turns driving. It was the duty of the driver for the day to pick up the other members of the pool. One day it was Walter Bucher's turn to drive, so he dutifully made the rounds and picked up his fellow passengers. Then he drove to his own house and stopped, much to the puzzlement of the other people in the car, and finally began to honk his horn. Suddenly, to everybody's amazement, it became evident that Bucher was stopping to pick himself up.

- from Digging into the Past (Edwin Colbert)