Familiar Fossils

Dinosaur Duo: Banjo and Matilda

Banjo is *Australovenator wintonensis*, a small meat-eating dinosaur called a theropod. Matilda is *Diamantinasaurus matildae*, a small herbivorous dinosaur called a sauropod. You would not really expect them to be a couple, and in life, they weren’t. But this unlikely couple, or rather their remains, were fished out of an Australian billabong (oxbow lake) 98-100 million years ago after they breathed their last. The Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum of Natural History and Queensland Museum worked together on this project. Queensland Museum’s geoscientists Dr Scott Hocknull and Dr Alex Cook were involved in the discoveries.

*Australovenator* comes from the Latin words ‘Austral’ meaning from the south, ‘venator’ meaning hunter. So Banjo is ‘Southern hunter of Winton.’

Matilda got her name from the word Diamantina, which refers to the Diamantina River that runs close to the place where she was excavated. The word ‘sauros’ is Greek for lizard. Her nickname Matilda, pays homage to “Waltzing Matilda” which is one of Australia’s National songs. The wealth of meaning in the names Banjo and *Australovenator wintonensis* become clearer when it is known that Waltzing Matilda was written by Banjo Patterson in 1895. Patterson not only wrote the song when he was in Winton, a town in Queensland, Australia but the *Diamantinasaurus* fossil has been found here too.

The Winton Formation is a rich hunting ground for dinosaur fossils. It is the site of a spectacular dinosaur stampede called Winton Trackway. At least 160 individual dinosaurs left 3000 footprints here for posterity.

Banjo: Banjo’s story goes back about thirty years when a dinosaur bone was discovered in 1981. It was thought to be the anklebone of a Jurassic theropod called *Allosaurus*. Now, after three decades it is being stated that it belongs to the *Australovenator* called Banjo. Its nearest relatives were the Japanese *Fukiraptor* and *Neovenator* from England.

Banjo is the most complete meat-eating dinosaur skeleton found as yet, in all of Australia although not all parts of the skeleton have been found. What has been found includes, nine serrated teeth, left lower jaw, some ribs, parts of hind legs and some fingers and toes. Banjo is about 5 metres long, standing 1.5 metres tall at the hip and in life would have weighed about 500 kg. “The cheetah of his time, Banjo was light and agile,” says Scott Hocknull who laid the *Allosaurus/Australovenator* controversy to rest. “He could run down most prey with ease over open ground. His most distinguishing feature was three large slashing claws on each hand. Unlike some theropods that have small arms (think T. rex), Banjo was different; his arms were a primary weapon....He’s Australia’s answer to Velociraptor, but many times bigger and more terrifying.”

Matilda: Matilda, on the other hand, represents a terrestrial, solid and robust animal that was most likely a hippo-like species. It was a titanosaur; one of the largest animals ever to walk on Earth. These were a group of sauropods common to the now-discontinuous regions that were once part of Gondwana or the massive mother continent. Matilda is about 15 m long and stands about 2.5 m tall at the hip. In a model reconstructed from the partial remains that have been excavated, Matilda is shown to have bony osteoderms in the skin. However, no osteoderms have yet been recovered from the site.

It is speculated that Banjo and Matilda may have been predator and prey...and that Banjo came to a sticky end when he jumped into the billabong to attack Matilda. As Hocknell put it, “It’s phenomenal to find two dinosaurs in the same site. There’s a bit of a mystery around why they were both there. Maybe they both drowned or perhaps the herbivore was stuck in the mud and it attracted the predator to its death.” It is obvious; Banjo did not know that he had to look before he leapt.