

EDITORIAL

FOSSILS AND COMPASSION

In the world of paleontology, few names evoke more derision than that of Johann Bartholomew Adam Beringer. Nevertheless, this learned man, who lived in the 18th century, had impressive credentials. He was dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Würzburg in Germany, chief physician to the prince-bishop of the town, as well as chief physician of the Julian Hospital. He had broad interests, was an indefatigable scholar, lectured on a variety of subjects, and wrote several volumes including one entitled *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis*, which propelled him into infamy. This interesting treatise described special stones that had been collected in the field, including many fossils as well as other meaningful finds which often ended up in his personal collection. In his book were descriptions of peculiar stones with representations of birds, bees, flowers, spiders, Hebrew alphabet characters, the moon, stars, and the rising sun.

Beringer discussed at length various ideas regarding the possible origin of these special stones, and felt that they probably represented some kind of natural phenomenon. He especially denied that they could have been artificial or some form of “modern art.”

Popular history recounts that shortly after the publication of his book in 1726, he was collecting in his favorite locality on Mount Eivlstadt, near Würzburg, when he discovered a stone with his own name carved on it. The horrified Beringer then realized that he was the victim of a cruel hoax and that a number of the special stones he had described in his book were nothing else but fabrications by some imposter who had hidden them in his collecting area. The tragic accounts usually report that some of his students had purposefully tricked him, and the hapless and mortified Beringer ruined himself financially trying to buy back all the copies of his book that had already been sold. Shortly after that, he became so discouraged that he died of chagrin. The trick had worked too well.

Beringer has become a symbol of the gullible, and, too often in academic circles, an object of humorous mockery. His other volumes are of little interest, but extant copies of his book on stones are highly valued among bibliophiles and command a very respectable price. Some of the fabricated stones, or “Lugensteine” (lying stones), as they became known, are still in existence and of considerable value.

In reality, part of the derision bestowed on Beringer is apocryphal. Documents discovered in Würzburg in 1935 and studied several years later show that the popular accounts are somewhat erroneous.¹ His students did not plan the clandestine operation that tricked him into embarrassment. Instead, the culprits were two jealous colleagues at the University of Würzburg: J. Ignatz Roderick, a professor of geography, and Georg von Eckhart, a librarian. Soon

after the publication of his *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis*, Beringer took these two individuals to court to preserve his honor, and they were appropriately punished. Beringer did not die of chagrin, but lived for some 14 years after the discovery of the cruel prank and maintained professional status at least during part of that time. Likewise the account of his having found a rock with his own name on it has never been substantiated.

From what remains of the story, it appears that Beringer exercised poor judgment, at least by comparison with 20th-century thought patterns. One must remember that the Beringer incident took place in the early 18th century, when a variety of basic philosophical ideologies were competing, and the world of intellectual ideas was in great turmoil.

Clearly Beringer is not unique in the misidentification of fossils. As one small example, the venerable *Treatise on Invertebrate Paleontology*² lists some 50 published descriptions of “fossil organisms” originally identified as coral, algae, fungi, sponges, snails, etc., that are most likely of non-biological origin. They appear to be produced by unusual depositional events in sediment, drag marks, precipitation, or the reorganization of minerals after sediment deposition.

Some aspects of paleontology are highly interpretive because they deal with a past that is difficult to verify. They are thus vulnerable to misconceptions. Needless to say, the study of fossils is not the only area of inquiry prone to error. There are many other disciplines that are more or less subjective and face the same problem.

While errors such as those made by Beringer must never be condoned, we do not have the right to exaggerate the errors of others and make our fellow human beings a laughingstock. More compassion towards Beringer would have prevented the cruel tricks played on him and would have reduced the unwarranted denigration of his infamous book.

We all make mistakes. Recognition of this should produce a compassionate attitude towards the errors of others and towards views that differ from ours. Such an attitude fosters both accuracy and the understanding of alternative viewpoints.

“Treat men exactly as you would like them to treat you.”³

Ariel A. Roth

ENDNOTES

1. Details of this peculiar incident, as well as transcripts of pertinent court proceedings, are given in: Jann ME, Woolf DJ. 1963. *The lying stones of Dr. Johann Bartholomew Adam Beringer*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
2. *Treatise on Invertebrate Paleontology*. 1962. Part W: *Miscellanea*, p W232-238. Geological Society of America and University of Kansas Press.
3. *Jesus Christ in Luke 6:31*. J. B. Phillips revised translation. 1972. *The New Testament in modern English*. NY: The Macmillan Company.