Regal Kin of T. rex Turns Up in India

PALEONTOLOGY – The skeleton had moldered in a closet for nearly two decades. In August paleontologists Paul Sereno of the University of Chicago and Jeffrey Wilson of the University of Michigan announced they had unearthed a brand-new species of dinosaur from a jumbled collection of fossils stored in Jaipur, India. After sorting through hundreds of bones excavated by paleontologists Suresh Srivastava and Ashok Sahni during a 1983 expedition in the Narmada River valley in western India, Sereno and Wilson realized they were looking at the braincase, parts of a hip, a vertebra, and a tailbone of a distant cousin of Tyrannosaurus rex. They named the new species Rajasaurus narmadensis, which means a “regal dinosaur from the Narmada.”

The approximately 4-ton, 30-foot-long predator lived 67 million years ago during the end of the Cretaceous Period, an epoch marked by intense volcanic activity and the extinction of the dinosaurs. Its bones resemble parts of dinosaurs found in Madagascar, Africa, and South America. So what made these bones stand out as a new species? “The roof of the skull has a raised lip, an indication of a horn. We’re not sure of the exact shape of it, though it was probably a low, blunt horn,” says Wilson. “There is nothing else in the world like this.”

—Michael W. Robbins

The serrations along Rajasaurus narmadensis’s large, blade-shaped teeth suggest they were used to render the flesh of prey. The unusual crest on its head may have served as display or played some role in the battle for mates or territory.