Scientists Confirm Mistake
'New' Dinosaur a Combination of 2 Mismatched Fossils

A model of an *Archaeoraptor lianoningensis* shows a fierce, turkey-sized animal armed with claws and teeth. A panel headed by Hans-Dieter Sues reported that this specimen is made up of parts from at least two different animals. (Louis Mazzatenta/NGS/AP)

By Randolph E. Schmid
The Associated Press

W A S H I N G T O N, April 7 — Six months after proclaiming a newly discovered fossil to be a possible link between dinosaurs and birds, the National Geographic Society has confirmed that the find is really a composite of at least two different animals.

The specimen, called *Archaeoraptor*, was unveiled in October by paleontologists who said they believed it was a key species in the transition from dinosaurs to birds.

That analysis was later questioned by Chinese paleontologist Xu Xing, and National Geographic convened a panel of scientists to study the question. Their findings were released Thursday.

The panel headed by Hans-Dieter Sues of the Royal Ontario Museum reported that the specimen is indeed made up of parts from at least two different animals.

Skull and Front Legs Are New

Scientists have plenty of other evidence that birds descended from small, meat-eating dinosaurs, however, and the new report does not change that.

As for *Archaeoraptor*, the panel concluded that the skull, trunk, shoulder and forelimbs of the specimen do represent a species new to science. They said this new find may have implications for the early evolution of birds, but so far its relationship to other primitive birds has not been determined.

The tail, on the other hand, belongs to a small predatory dinosaur known as a dromaeosaur, they concluded. The left and right upper leg bone — femur — go together, as do the other leg bones, but these bones may represent a combination of several animals, the panel said.

The Chinese scientist had raised questions about the find after finding the supposed tail of *Archaeoraptor* matched the tail of a small dinosaur from the same type of rock where *Archaeoraptor* had been found. Xu Xing attended the session where the panel studied the fossil.

Fossils Mismatched When Smuggled

Besides Sues, other panel members were James Clark of George Washington University, Catherine Foster of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Mark Norell of the American Museum of National History in New York and Storrs Olson of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington. The results were announced by Stephen Czerkas of the Dinosaur Museum in Blanding, Utah, who had originally obtained the fossil at a gem and mineral show in Utah.

It was originally found in China and Xu noted that when pieces are stolen and smuggled out, sometimes blocks of fossils are matched together mistakenly.

When it was unveiled at a news conference last October, *Archaeoraptor liaoningensis,* which lived 120 million to 140 million years ago, stirred interest because the fossil bones made it appear that it would have been able to fly.

National Geographic editor Bill Allen said the magazine has asked a writer to look into the whole sequence of events involving the fossil. He expects to publish a story on it in the fall.

“I hope people are going to view what we do here in the overall context,” Allen said, “so that the one aberration is not going to damage our reputation in the long run."