



On the identity of Monsieur Dussumier's Dutch tortoise and the lectotype of *Testudo dussumieri* Gray, 1831

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Abstract

Although it was forgotten for over a century, the binomen *Testudo dussumieri* Gray, 1831, is an available name, and the specimen RMNH 3231 deposited in the natural history museum of Leiden – evidently one of the two original syntypes of *T. dussumieri* – has been designated as the lectotype of this taxon. Recently several authors have actively promoted this as the name-bearing type for the Aldabra tortoise, escalating debates in which this chelonian has been immersed for nearly two decades. This lectotype designation is highly significant to nomenclatural and taxonomic disputes regarding tortoises (Testudinidae), living and extinct, from the western Indian Ocean; and an attempt has been made in this paper to compile all information relevant to the lectotype as well as to better understand the history of the binomen applied to it. Several critical aspects of the history are uncertain and open to speculation. The provenance of RMNH 3231 is unknown and unlikely to be Aldabra Atoll; the specimen was most likely collected in the granitic Seychelles, between 1823 and 1829. The combination of estimated date and locality of collection raises the possibility that the lectotype is not an Aldabra tortoise, but rather an extinct taxon from the granitic Seychelles. It is concluded that RMNH 3231 is not a suitable name-bearing type for the Aldabra tortoise, and the continued use of the name *T. dussumieri* will cause persistent nomenclatural and taxonomic confusion and unending debate.

Key words: Aldabra tortoise, lectotype, prevailing name, Seychelles, *Testudo dussumieri*, *Testudo elephantina*, *Testudo gigantea*

Introduction

Monsieur Jean-Jacques Dussumier (1792–1883) from Bordeaux, France, was a master mariner and merchant-ship-owner; he was also an explorer, adventurer, and a prodigious collector. Between 1816 and 1840, Dussumier made numerous important zoological and botanical collections during his travels in the Indian Ocean and South China Seas. He obtained diverse organisms – plants, invertebrates, and vertebrates, some of which were brought back to France alive: “The list is so long that one cannot help being amazed at the multitude and variety of material collected by Dussumier – certainly enough to provide a lifetime occupation for several herpetologists, ichthyologists, malacologists, entomologists, etc.” (Arvy 1972: 264). His collecting in the western Indian Ocean apparently began with his fourth voyage (i.e., from some time after June 1823 until the French spring of 1825), included his fifth (1826–1827), sixth (December 1827–September 1830), and eleventh (1837–1839) trips, and continued at least until 1840 (Laissus 1973; Bour 2006a: 26; Matyot unpublished notes from collections and documents in the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle [MNHN]). The collections from various localities during the fourth trip included 22 reptiles preserved in alcohol and 13 live chelonians; collections from the sixth trip included eleven chelonians (Laissus 1973: 393 ff.; Bour 2006a: 26, 2006b: 22). Jean-Jacques Dussumier has been described as a selfless and industrious collector “trained to thought and concentration, who expresses himself concisely, noting all details of interest, leaving aside all superfluous phraseology and accomplishing his task apparently without effort” and “one of the greatest