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Carlos Rusconi, a pioneer in paleontological knowledge and heritage protection in Mendoza Province, Argentina

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CARLOS RUSCONI, A PIONEER IN PALEONTOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND HERITAGE PROTECTION IN MENDOZA PROVINCE, ARGENTINA

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Abstract. The naturalist Carlos Rusconi firstly became in contact with important paleontologists such as Carlos Ameghino and Lucas Kraglievich in the Museum of Buenos Aires. Together with Lorenzo Parodi and Alfredo Castellanos, he formed an incipient group of vertebrate paleontologists. After the dispersion of this group at the end of 1930, Rusconi began to work at the Jardín Zoológico of Buenos Aires. Few years later, he was the Director of the provincial museum of Mendoza city, where he worked for 30 years. During this period, the Museo de Historia Natural of Mendoza experienced a great development, not only as an educational but also as a research institution. Rusconi recovered a significant paleontological collection mainly from Mendoza and close areas in the Cuyo Region. He reorganized the museum in different departments and started new inventory books. He published numerous articles on paleontology, among which those on Paleozoic trilobites and graptolites, Jurassic marine reptiles, and Triassic amphibians and fishes are greatly relevant. He defined a large number of new taxa, which are reflected in the numerous type materials stored at the museum. Rusconi worried about the paleontological heritage and even published a draft bill promoting a law to protect paleontological and archeological sites in Mendoza Province. The lack of provincial support to adequately maintain the museum and its collections led Rusconi to resign as Director in 1967. Despite his controversial personality and scientific isolation, Rusconi's legacy in paleontology cannot be denied or ignored, especially when dealing with the paleontological record of Mendoza.

Key words. Paleontology. History. Cuyo Region. Central-western Argentina.

Resumen. CARLOS RUSCONI, UN PIONERO EN EL CONOCIMIENTO PALEONTOLÓGICO Y LA PROTECCIÓN DEL PATRIMONIO EN LA PROVINCIA DE MENDOZA, ARGENTINA. El naturalista Carlos Rusconi tuvo contacto con importantes paleontólogos como Carlos Ameghino y Lucas Kraglievich en el Museo de Buenos Aires. Junto con Lorenzo Parodi y Alfredo Castellanos, formó un grupo incipiente de paleontólogos de vertebrados, pero se dispersó a finales de 1930 y Rusconi empezó a trabajar en el Jardín Zoológico de Buenos Aires. Pocos años después, le ofrecieron la dirección del Museo provincial de la ciudad de Mendoza, donde trabajó durante 30 años. El Museo de Historia Natural de Mendoza experimentó entonces un gran desarrollo, tanto a nivel educativo como de investigación. Rusconi formó una colección paleontológica significativa, principalmente de Mendoza y otras áreas cuyanas. Organizó el museo en distintos departamentos e inició nuevos libros de inventario. Publicó numerosos artículos sobre paleontología, entre los cuales destacan los dedicados a trilobites y graptolites paleozoicos, reptiles marinos jurásicos y peces y anfibios triásicos. Definió un gran número de taxones nuevos, lo cual se refleja en el gran número de materiales tipo incluidos en la colección. Rusconi se preocupó por el patrimonio paleontológico e, incluso, publicó un proyecto de ley para la protección de los yacimientos paleontológicos y arqueológicos de la provincia de Mendoza. La falta de apoyo provincial para mantener adecuadamente el museo y sus colecciones llevó a Rusconi a renunciar como director en 1967. A pesar de su personalidad controvertida y su aislamiento científico, el legado de Rusconi en la paleontología no se puede negar ni ignorar, especialmente en lo que concierne al registro paleontológico de Mendoza.

Palabras clave. Paleontología. Historia. Región de Cuyo. Centro-oeste argentino.

THIS CONTRIBUTION deals with the influence of the naturalist Carlos Rusconi in the development of Argentinean paleontology during a great part of the 20th century, especially in the Mendoza Province between 1937 and 1967.

FIRST STEPS AS A PALEONTOLOGIST

Carlos Rusconi was born at the end of the 19th century (in 1898), within a family of low-income Italian immigrants. His first vocation was artistic, mainly focused on drawing and painting. His enrollment at the Academia de Bellas

Artes of Buenos Aires was denied because he did not finish elementary school. At the same time, reading the book *La antigüedad del hombre en el Plata* by Florentino Ameghino, arose his curiosity and interest in paleontology. In 1917, Rusconi arrived at the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural of Buenos Aires (now Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales "Bernardino Rivadavia"), to show what he believed to be some fossil bones, getting then his first interview with Carlos Ameghino, director of the museum at that time. In that opportunity, Ameghino explained to Rusconi that the bones belonged to living animals and showed him how to differentiate them from fossils. Sometime later, Rusconi carried some glyptodont remains recovered from "Loma de Chiclana", the present-day area of Chiclana and Mármol streets in Buenos Aires city (Rusconi, 1965, p. 119). This glyptodont specimen, which belonged to the genus *Neosclerocalyptus*, became then the first specimen of Rusconi's paleontological collection (Fig. 1.1), parallel to another collection of living vertebrates (Fig. 1.2) for comparison (following Carlos Ameghino's suggestion; Rusconi, 1965, p. 119–120).

Since then, Rusconi frequently visited the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural of Buenos Aires and later became adscript *ad honorem* at the Department of Paleontology, living off his job in sculpture atelier. Together with Lorenzo Parodi and Alfredo Castellanos, he formed an incipient group of vertebrate paleontologists under the direction of Carlos Ameghino (Fig. 2.1–2.2) and Lucas Kraglievich, with whom he was able to establish a personal friendship (Fig. 2.3). This close relationship is reflected on the fact that Rusconi kept some of Carlos Ameghino's field notebooks (and even of his brother Florentino), which have been preserved in his family home through time (Fig. 3).

In mid-1924, Carlos Ameghino resigned as the museum's director for health reasons. Later, in 1930,

Figure 1. First Rusconi's collections (modified from Mas Alós, 1967). **1,** Fossil specimens; **2,** Living vertebrate skulls.

Figure 2. 1, Carlos Rusconi and Carlos Ameghino (in 1931) (courtesy of Estela Rusconi); **2,** Postcard made by Carlos Rusconi with the photograph of Carlos Ameghino (courtesy of Estela Rusconi); **3,** Carlos Rusconi and Lucas Kraglievich (in 1930) (modified from Rusconi, 1957a, fig. 1).

Kraglievich permanently left the museum. Kraglievich's departure has been the subject of controversy among historians of Argentinean paleontology. Some authors associated his departure to the rivalry with the new director of the museum, Martín Doello Jurado, in the context of the political crisis that Argentina was going through in 1930, due to the military coup that led to the overthrow of Hipólito Yrigoyen (Reig, 1961), even being considered as an act of proscription (Pascual, 1961, p. 95). Other authors, instead, considered it was related to more personal circumstances beyond the historical framework, because in 1928, when Yrigoyen took over his second presidency, Kraglievich expected to be elected as director of the museum, but Doello Jurado was confirmed in his position. Years later, when the military coup took place and taking advantage of the political situation, a group of paleontologists including Rusconi sent a note to the military authorities making harsh charges against Doello Jurado and requesting the intervention of the museum. However, the note was rejected and Doello Jurado revoked the assignments of the members of this group (Tonni *et al.*, 2000). Rusconi interpreted this attitude as retaliation and, shortly after, wrote a note (Rusconi, 1930) with some reflections, such as the lack of institutional support to publish his contributions in the Anales del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural of Buenos Aires. Regardless of any interpretation, the group finally dismembered; Castellanos entered the Instituto de Fisiografía de la Universidad del Litoral (Rosario, Santa Fe Province), Parodi was incorporated to the Museo de La Plata, and Rusconi began to work at the Jardín Zoológico of Buenos Aires in 1932. These events constituted a hinge in the academic life of Rusconi.

Despite leaving the museum and working as part of the scientific team of Mastozoology at the Jardín Zoológico of Buenos Aires, Rusconi continued to dedicate to paleontological research, mostly Cenozoic mammals. Throughout the years, he self-taught several languages in order to be able to understand papers written by foreign paleontologists and created the journals Ameghinia (Fig. 4.1) and Boletín Paleontológico de Buenos Aires (Fig. 4.2) (Reig, 1961). Rusconi published articles related to paleontology, but also to archaeological and extant remains (*e.g.* Rusconi, 1927, 1928, 1929; Kraglievich & Rusconi, 1931). Among his most outstanding articles, he provided the first observations on the Villa Ballester site (*e.g.*, Rusconi, 1934a, 1934b) and geological data of Buenos Aires city (Rusconi, 1937).

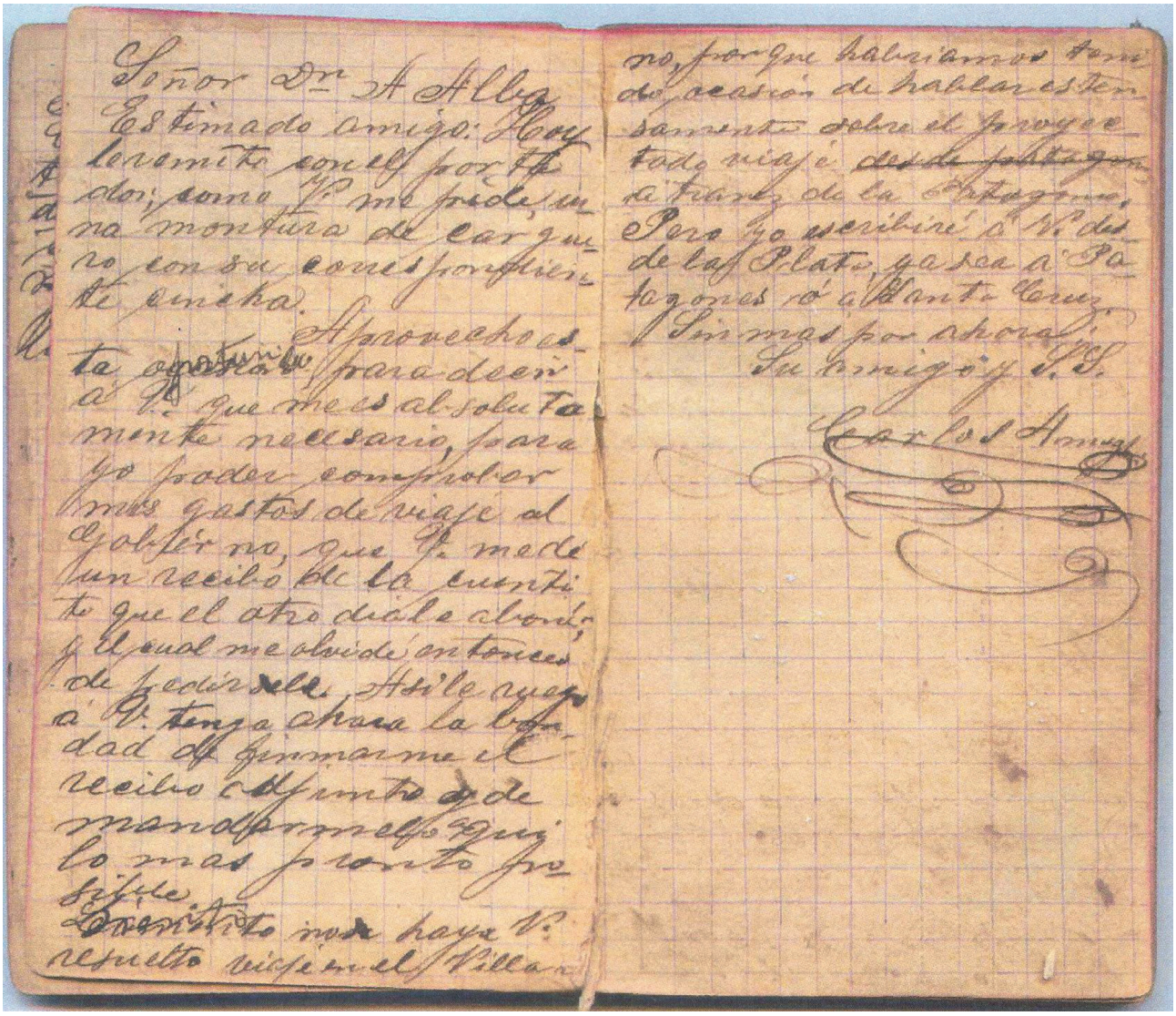

Figure 3. Pages of a notebook signed by Carlos Ameghino (courtesy of Estela Rusconi).

ARRIVAL TO MENDOZA

Having become a renowned naturalist, Rusconi was contacted at the end of 1936 by the authorities of the Mendoza Province (central-western Argentina) with the proposal to take over the direction of the local museum. So, Rusconi arrived to Mendoza city in January 1937, giving place to a long *bonanza* for this museum. One of the first changes he carried out was the name of the institution. Firstly known as Museo Central (or General) Regional (in 1911) and later Museo Educacional and Museo Juan Cornelio Moyano (in 1925), Rusconi established the name Museo de Historia Natural "Juan Cornelio Moyano" in 1937 (*e.g.*, Coleman, 1929; Rusconi, 1957b). In 1975, it took the present name Museo de Ciencias Naturales y Antropológicas "Juan Cornelio Moyano" (formally abbreviated as MCNAM) by resolution of the local government.

Rusconi also began to reorganize the institution into different departments, according to each specialty. One of these was the Paleontological Department, and he started to keep fossil data in three inventory books: Paleoinvertebrates, Paleovertebrates, and Paleobotany.

Along the 30 years at the museum, Rusconi traveled throughout different Argentinean provinces (particularly Mendoza; Fig. 5) and other countries like Chile and Uruguay,

Figure 4. 1, Front page of a volume of Ameghinia; **2,** First page of Rusconi's article in the Boletín Paleontológico de Buenos Aires.

collecting not only fossils but also archaeological artifacts, anthropological and ethnographical data. He stored a huge number of specimens and produced numerous publications. Among his non-paleontological contributions, the four voluminous books dedicated to native populations of Mendoza in pre and post-colonial times stand out (Rusconi, 1961, 1962a, 1962b, 1962c).

Concerning paleontology, Rusconi authored numerous new taxa, leading to a high number of type specimens at the MCNAM collections (see Cerdeño, 2005 for a summary—only some of the listed types therein do not correspond to Rusconi's authorship—). Most of the type materials published by Rusconi (486 holotypes and 220 paratypes) correspond to many groups of invertebrates (Cerdeño, 2005). They belong to brachiopods, bivalves, conchostracans, trilobites, graptolites, and others (*e.g.*, Rusconi, 1945, 1949a, 1952, among many others; see further references

Figure 5. Carlos Rusconi during fieldwork in La Colonia area (Junín, Mendoza, in1939) (courtesy of **MCNAM**).

in Cerdeño, 2005). Among the vertebrates (*i.e.*, fishes, amphibians, reptiles—including an ichnofossil—, and mammals), 33 holotypes (Fig. 6.1–6.2) and two paratypes were located after revising the museum paleontological collections, while another 20 could not be found (Cerdeño, 2005). However, three of these were later (2002 and 2006) recovered from other institutions; two of them corresponded to Rusconi's specimens (see Agnolín & Pais, 2006 for *Cunampaia simplex* Rusconi, 1946a, and Lorente *et al.*, 2014 for *Allalmeia atalaensis* Rusconi, 1946b), while the third recovered holotype was not described by him (*Adiantoides leali* Simpson *et al.*, 1962; see Cerdeño, 2005, p. 12). Finally, six type specimens correspond to fossil plants (Rusconi, 1948, 1950, 1951, 1954, 1955a, 1955b) from different localities near Mendoza city, all assigned to Algae of Cambrian, Ordovician, or Silurian ages; only one of the paleobotanical types was not found within the collection (Cerdeño, 2005, p. 54).

As he previously did in Buenos Aires, Rusconi created a new journal, Revista del Museo de Historia Natural of Mendoza, where almost all published papers were of his own authorship. The journal was published between 1947 and 1967, comprising 19 volumes. He even published a draft bill promoting a law to protect paleontological and archeological sites in Mendoza (Rusconi, 1964).

Rusconi had a long-term collaborator at the museum, Professor Manuel Tellechea, who often travelled with him, mainly focused on collecting rocks and minerals, but also fossils. Part of the material collected remained at the museum, but another part constituted his private collection. The latter was only recently (in 2006) stored at the MCNAM (Devincenzi, 2017).

During the late 1960s, Rusconi failed in getting greater support from provincial authorities to maintain the museum and he finally resigned as Director in 1968. He died in Mendoza in 1969.

RUSCONI'S LEGACY

Carlos Rusconi changed the educational profile of the museum towards a research center, trying to emulate those in La Plata, Buenos Aires, and Rosario, where paleontological research was concentrated at that epoch with paleontologists such as Ángel Cabrera, Mathilde Dolgopol, Alejandro Bordas, Noemi Cattoi, and Alfredo Castellanos (Pascual, 1961, p. 97).

Concerning vertebrates, Rusconi began to study groups other than mammals, contrary to what he mainly had done in Buenos Aires. In this sense, as Cabrera did in the Museo de La Plata (Pascual, 1961), Rusconi contributed to the knowledge of the paleoherpetological fauna of Mendoza, which was mostly unknown at that time (summarized data in Cerdeño *et al.*, 2022). In turn, as expressed by Riccardi (1981, 2005), Rusconi deserves a particular acknowledgment for his studies on paleoinvertebrates between 1947

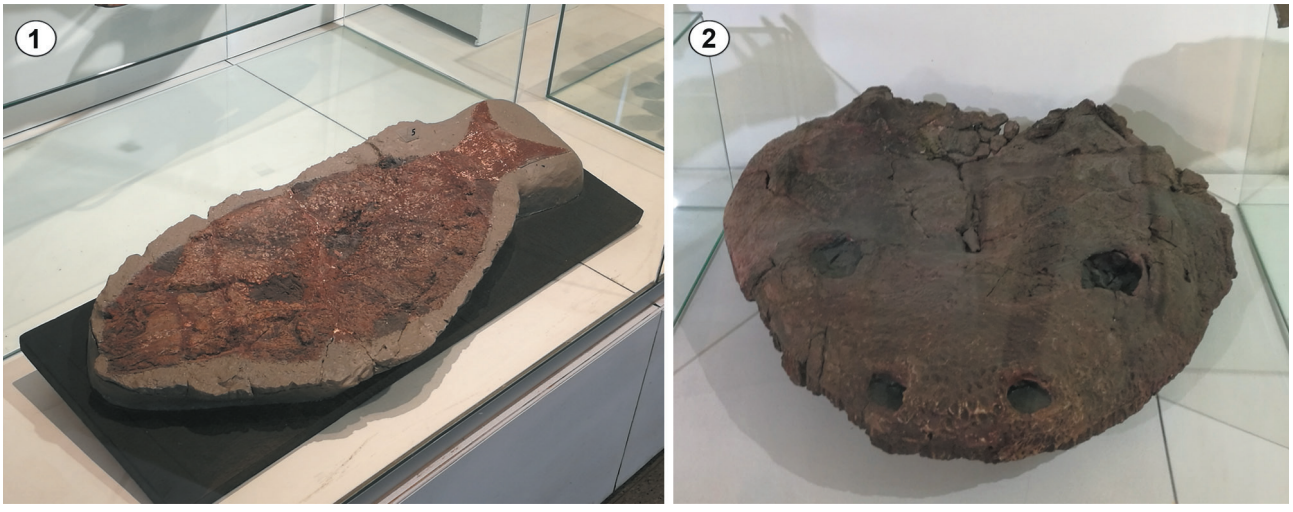

Figure 6. Specimens from the Triassic of Mendoza described by Rusconi, exhibited at the **MCNAM**. **1,** ***Challaia magna*** Rusconi, 1949c, holotype **MCNAM-PV 2790**, fish; **2,** ***Pelorocephalus tenax*** (Rusconi, 1949b), holotype **MCNAM-PV 2752**, amphibian, articulated skull and mandible.

and 1955, an epoch in which the publications on this wide group of organisms had greatly decreased in Argentina, mainly when Joaquín Frenguelli moved away from the Museo de La Plata (Riccardi, 1981, p. 20). Finally, with respect to paleobotany, his contributions were scarce: the petrified forests of Mendoza and the described taxa of Algae mentioned above (see Cerdeño, 2005 and Devincenzi, 2014 for a summary and references therein).

The research activities in the museum of Mendoza stopped when Rusconi resigned, as he never trained disciples and worked without collaborative links with the most important scientific centers in the country (Reig, 1961). Some of his colleagues criticized some aspects of his scientific methodology as a result of his isolation, which, according to Pascual (1961), was driven by the criticism received to some of his papers. He was also criticized for his strong personalism that, among other facts, did not allow other authors to publish in the Revista del Museo de Historia Natural of Mendoza. Consequently, the period of splendor of the institution unfortunately ended and fell into disgrace. Rusconi stood out for his tireless work but also for his controversial personality. Prestigious paleontologists left their acknowledgement in the golden book of the museum (Fig. 7.1–7.3).

Rusconi was recognized as a great popularizer scientist. He published two interesting books. One deals with the animal life at the end of Tertiary in Buenos Aires (Rusconi, 1933), which is considered by Martinelli *et al.* (2020) as one of the icons of the popularization of paleontology in Argentina. The second book focused on extinct animals from

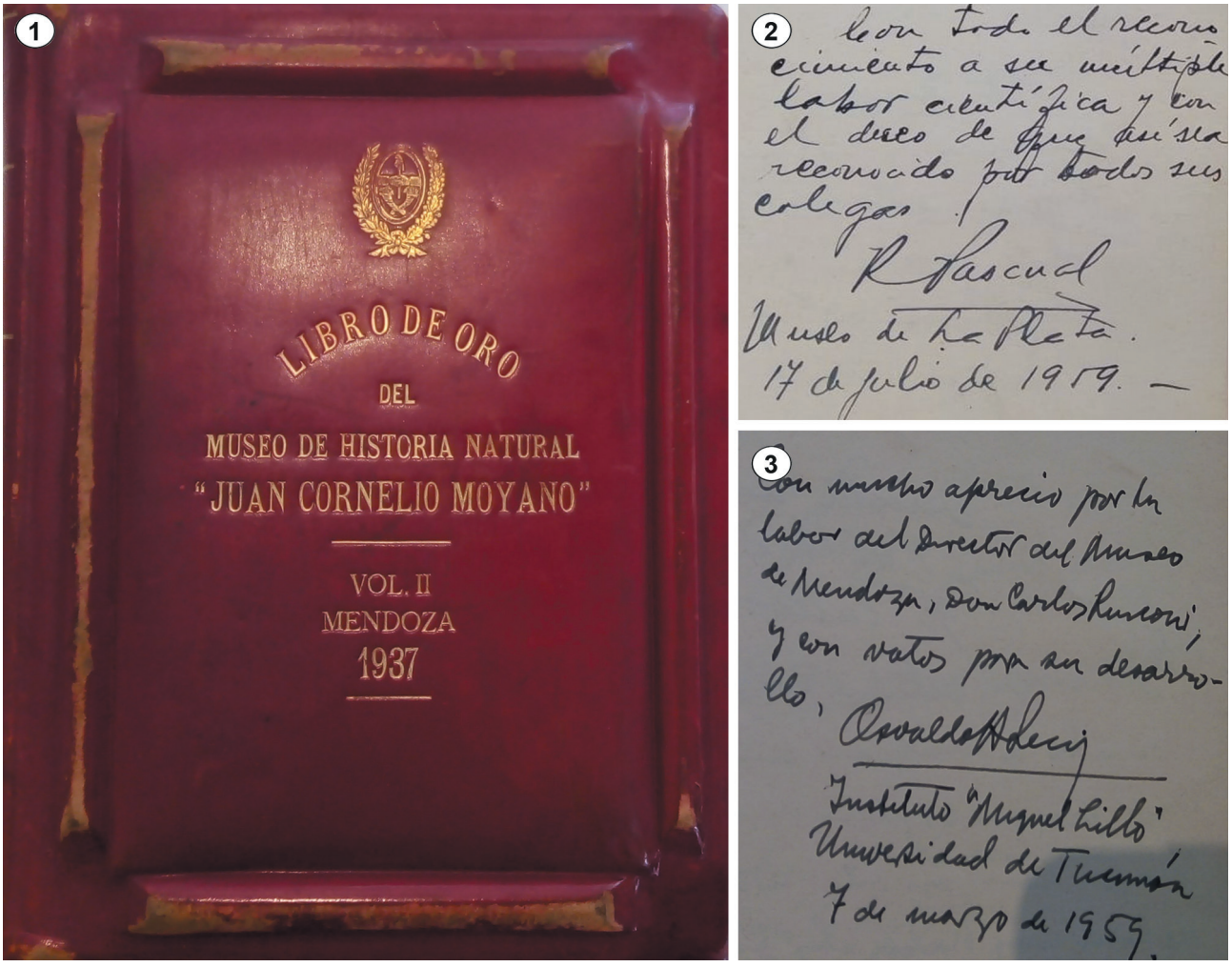

Figure 7. 1, *Libro de Oro* (golden book) of the Museo de Historia Natural "Juan Cornelio Moyano" (currently **MCNAM**) from 1937; **2–3,** acknowledgement notes in 1959 by researchers Rosendo Pascual and Osvaldo Reig.

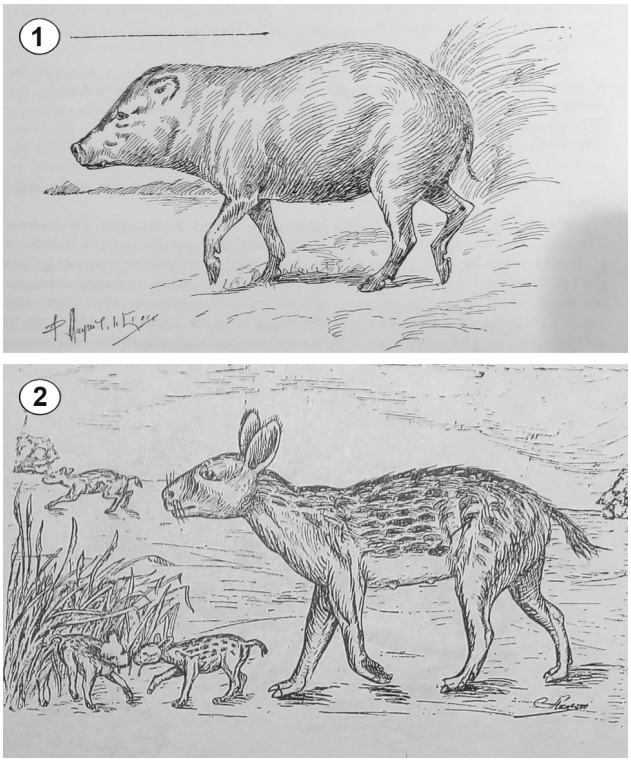

Figure 8. 1, Illustration of ***Catagonus metropolitanus*** by Paul Magne de la Croix (modified from Rusconi, 1967, fig. 267); **2,** Illustration of ***Paedotherium imperforatum*** by Carlos Rusconi (modified from Rusconi, 1967, fig. 248).

Mendoza in particular, and Argentina in general (Rusconi, 1967), illustrated by the French artist Paul Magne de la Croix and by himself (Fig. 8.1–8.2), thus expressing his artistic profile (Martinelli & Forasiepi, 2008; Martinelli *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, it is important to highlight that organizing the MCNAM collections between 2000 and 2004 allowed the revision in subsequent years of many specimens by different specialists, particularly those formerly studied by Rusconi. For example, graptolites were revised by Toro & Brussa (2001, 2007); trilobites by Bordonaro & Fojo (2011) and Tortello (2014); fishes by López Arbarello *et al.* (2010); amphibians and reptiles by Desojo *et al.* (2002), Marsicano *et al.* (2004), Herrera *et al.* (2015), and Fernández *et al.* (2019), among others (see Cerdeño *et al.*, 2022 for a summary); and mammals by López (2008) and Lorente *et al.* (2014).

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