

Translated excerpt

Vitali Konstantinov
Wenn nicht die Menschen

Kunstanstifter Verlag, Mannheim 2026
ISBN 978-3-948-74322-2

pp. 13-24

Vitali Konstantinov
What if humans hadn't done it...

Translated by Anna Sanner



WHAT IF THE DINOS...

For about two hundred million years, dinosaurs dominated our planet. Who has not heard of T-rex, stegosaurus, brontosaurus, and all the rest of them? On the other hand, we do not actually know that much about these creatures and their day and age. In fact, it is nothing short of a miracle that any of their petrified remains have outlasted them long enough to be found millions of years later by paleontologists today. Most of the dino world has probably disappeared without a trace, and a lot of our ideas about it are no more than speculation, gathered from putting together tiny snippets of knowledge in our quest to see the bigger picture.

What did the dinos look like? At first, we imagined roaring, green-scaled giant lizards, later it became fashionable to depict all dinos as colorful humongous roosters with funny hairstyles, cockscombs, turkey caruncles, and tufts of feathers. After all, birds are their only descendants.

It is generally assumed that dinosaurs were not the brightest fires on the planet. Some of them, however, may have been more intelligent than others. Like the theropods, a certain group of carnivores. Using only two of their legs to walk freed up their front claws. Also, their wrists were extremely mobile, making them well-suited to grabbing and handling objects rather dexterously, and probably enabling some of their later descendants to fly.

Just like humans, a certain group of medium-sized theropods called troodonts or stenonychosauruses, were warm-blooded omnivores about two meters tall that lived in groups, teamed up with their partner to take care of their offspring, and had extremely mobile hands. Troodonts may have worn a colorful coat of feathers resembling that of a parrot and are thought to have been roughly as intelligent as dogs.

One of the conditions for intelligence is brain size. The decisive factor is the brain-mass to body-weight ratio. Simply put: If two animals have the same-sized brain, the smaller one is probably smarter.

Measuring troodont skulls has revealed that their brain-to-body size ratio was much higher than that of other dinosaurs, and increased steadily as they evolved. Who knows – if troodont had kept evolving, its brain may have developed into something resembling a human brain.

If the major natural disaster that wiped out the dinosaurs 66 million years ago hadn't happened, all kinds of dinos – ginormous ones and tiny ones, grass-eating and meat-eating ones – would continue to populate our land and seas. So, quite possibly intelligent, feathered reptiles would rule the earth today.

What if the theropods had survived a few million years longer? Would they have ended up building cities and spaceships, or keeping other dinos as pets? What would they look like today?

The idea of a dino civilization has been capturing people's imagination for a long time. We see intelligent dinosaurs in movies, TV dramas, novels, comics, illustrations, and even scientific articles. Most of them are based on two-legged, medium-sized dinosaurs like ornitholestes, dromaeosaurus or the ever-popular stenonychosaurus aka troodon. A lot of speculation was triggered by the work of paleontologist Dale Russel. In 1982, Russel suspected that stenonychosaurus could have evolved into an intelligent creature with a human-like physique. He even had a life-sized model built of such a dinosaur. But basically, troodon got to keep the tail and typical body posture of a theropod. Neither would have been an obstacle to developing intelligence. No need for butt cheeks. But then again, who knows?

WHAT IF THE OCTOPUSES...

Many mollusks like snails, shells, pearly nautiluses, and cephalopods have been around for 500 million years, surviving continental drift, global disasters, climate change, and mass extinction. The ancestor of the modern octopus lived 328 million years ago and, like his descendants, held up well without a protective shell.

Octopuses have large, complex brains, good eyes, three hearts, and eight highly mobile, sensitive, sucker-studded arms, each of them equipped with its very own brain, making them virtually independent.

To communicate messages, octopuses use gestures and color-changing cells they can control very accurately to change colors and patterns on their skin at great speed, rendering them nearly invisible in any surroundings, and enabling them to send each other instant color messages. Basically, they're fitted with a full-body display!

[speech bubble:] Whoa! These makos are quick! I'll get to the next reef in the smack of a sucker!

Octopuses are strange ancient creatures. In terms of evolution, they may be millions of years away from us, but they are highly intelligent, and very curious! They solve complex tasks, play, communicate, use tools, build hideaways and houses. Sometimes, they use fish for hunting like humans use dogs, employ poisonous jellyfish tentacles as weapons, and ride on the backs of mako sharks or sea turtles when they feel too lazy to propel themselves forward.

Most octopuses live a solitary life and don't get very old. They do not teach their offspring anything. Most baby octopuses are swept far away by sea currents right after they hatch, and forced to get by on their own under completely new conditions. Getting off to such a start definitely requires some intelligence. Luckily, they can count on their complex nervous system and incredible problem-solving skills to help them out.

[speech bubble:] Wow, we're getting swept away! That's fascinating!

The medium-sized veined octopus uses coconut shells to build hideaways. Displaying great planning skills, it gathers and carefully stacks them up in a safe place until danger strikes. The slightly larger Sydney octopus brings about significant changes in its surroundings by constructing dwellings from shells and sand. Settlements of ten to fifteen animals have been discovered near the East Coast of Australia. These octopuses guard their quarters carefully, chasing away intruders, and bringing home shells and crabs for dinner whose shells they use to further fortify their property.

[speech bubbles:] How about a little fish? – Wow! Is that for me?

The larger Pacific striped octopus is even more sophisticated. Living slightly longer, it breeds several times throughout its life and employs highly unorthodox hunting methods. Striped octopuses live in colonies of up to forty animals and treat each other nicely, going as far as sharing their food with friends and lovers. Which seems like a good start for a friendly society.

Octopuses have been around for so long, they may well have built a civilization and lost it again without our knowledge. The excavations humans have made to this day are far from revealing everything that happened in the past, and no more than 0.001 per cent of the deep sea, which is roughly the size of Luxemburg, has been researched. Surely, octopuses can survive a little longer, until humans disappear and make space for them again...

Octopuses have no problem when it comes to intelligence, hands to work with, tools, communication, housing, and probably even *theory of mind*. Only fire won't work underwater. But maybe they'll discover something else? After all they already have jet propulsion systems. Like space rockets! The oceans have the tide and the surf, waves, wind, and volcanoes – all of which hold great energy. Deep sea crabs are already using the heat emanating from hydrothermal vents to speed up the development of their eggs! A lot of sea creatures have unusual properties like bioluminescence, and senses enabling them to perceive hydraulic shocks, or the earth's magnetic field. Surely, they could build on that...

Maybe smart octopods will end up cultivating glowing jellyfish for lighting, and breeding sharks for highspeed transport, opting for biotechnology straight away, rather than burning old stuff like us. Like humans exploiting the deep sea for food and crude oil, octopuses may learn to come on land by flooding the coast or building canals.