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In 2020, paleontologists described an ancient species, *Oculudentavis khaungrae*, based on a tiny skull trapped in a piece of Cretaceous-period amber from Myanmar. Several unusual features led to its identification as the smallest bird-like dinosaur on record, comparable to the smallest living hummingbirds. In a new paper published in the journal *Current Biology*, they describe a more complete specimen that demonstrates *Oculudentavis* is actually a bizarre lizard.

 An artist's impression of *Oculudentavis naga*, which was between 5 and 8 cm (2-3 inches) long, not including its tail. Image credit: Stephanie Abramowicz / Peretti Museum Foundation / Current Biology.

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The newly-identified reptile species, named *Oculudentavis naga*, is represented by a partial skeleton that includes a complete skull, exquisitely preserved in 99-million-year-old amber with visible scales and soft tissue.

Dr. Arnau Bolet from the University of Bristol

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analyze and compare each bone in the two specimens digitally, uncovering a number of physical characteristics that earmark the small animals as lizards.

“*Oculudentavis* is so strange, however, it was difficult to categorize without close examination of its features,” Dr. Bolet said.

“The specimen puzzled all of us at first because if it was a lizard, it was a highly unusual one.”

“From the moment we uploaded the first CT scan, everyone was brainstorming what it could be,” said Dr. Juan Diego Daza, a researcher at Sam Houston State University.

“In the end, a closer look and our analyses help us clarify its position.”

 CT scans of this fossilized *Oculudentavis naga* showcase the specimen’s scales, skin and soft tissue. Image credit: Stephanie Abramowicz / Peretti Museum Foundation / Current Biology.


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Major clues that the mystery animal was a lizard included the presence of scales; teeth attached directly to its jawbone, rather than nestled in sockets, as dinosaur teeth were; lizard-like eye structures and shoulder bones; and a hockey stick-shaped skull bone that is universally shared among scaled reptiles, also known as squamates.

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preservation.

Oculudentavis khaungraae's snout was squeezed into a narrower, more beaklike profile while *Oculudentavis naga*'s braincase — the part of the skull that encloses the brain — was compressed. The distortions highlighted birdlike features in one skull and lizard-like features in the other.

 Photograph, computed tomography scans and interpretive drawings of the *Oculudentavis khaungraae* specimen: (a) photograph of the amber piece with skull ventrolaterally exposed; scan (b) and drawing (c), left lateral view; scan (d) and drawing (e), rostral view; scan (f) and drawing (g), occipital view; scan (h) and drawing (i), dorsal view. Abbreviations: de – dentary, fr – frontal, hy - hyoid bone (or bones), jg – jugal, la – lacrimal, mx – maxilla, pa – parietal, pm – premaxilla, po – postorbital, qd – quadrate, sc - scleral ossicle, so – supraoccipital, sq – squamosal, th – teeth. Scale bars - 5 mm; longer scale bar below (b) applies to (b-i). Image credit: Xing et al, doi: 10.1038/s41586-020-2068-4.

Photograph, computed tomography scans and interpretive drawings of the *Oculudentavis khaungraae* specimen: (a) photograph of the amber piece with skull ventrolaterally exposed; scan (b) and drawing (c), left lateral view; scan (d) and drawing (e), rostral view; scan (f) and drawing (g), occipital view; scan (h) and drawing (i), dorsal view. Abbreviations: de – dentary, fr – frontal, hy – hyoid bone (or bones), jg – jugal, la – lacrimal, mx – maxilla, pa – parietal, pm – premaxilla, po – postorbital, qd –

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applies to (b-i). Image credit: Xing *et al*, doi: 10.1038/s41586-020-2068-4.

“Imagine taking a lizard and pinching its nose into a triangular shape. It would look a lot more like a bird,” said Dr. Edward Stanley, director of the Digital Discovery and Dissemination Laboratory at the Florida Museum of Natural History.

In the better-preserved specimen of *Oculudentavis naga*, the researchers were also able to identify a raised crest running down the top of the snout and a flap of loose skin under the chin that may have been inflated in display.

However, they came up short in their attempts to find *Oculudentavis*' exact position in the lizard family tree.

“It’s a really weird animal. It’s unlike any other lizard we have today. We think it represents a group of squamates we were not aware of,” Dr. Daza said.

Arnau Bolet *et al*. Unusual morphology in the mid-Cretaceous lizard *Oculudentavis*. *Current Biology*, published online June 14, 2021; doi: 10.1016/j.cub.2021.05.040

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 **Paul Wokem**

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