

SCIENCE

T. rex or not T. rex? Debate over skeleton on sale for \$20m

Some experts believe the dinosaur has been incorrectly identified, while others decry fossil being sold to a private owner

• NEW



Chomper is a sizable beast, but only about half the size of a fully grown T. rex

DAVID AARON

As a piece of home decor, the fossil known as Chomper would certainly make a statement.

The 67 million-year-old dinosaur is being offered for sale in London for \$20 million, with the vendor describing it as a juvenile *Tyrannosaurus rex*, arguably the most formidable predator to have stalked the Earth.

However, two questions hover over Chomper's exquisitely preserved skeleton. Firstly, is it really a *T. rex*? Secondly, is it about to vanish into the private gallery of an ultra-rich collector, depriving scientists of the chance to study it?

As soon as the bones were unearthed by a team of commercial fossil hunters in the hills of Montana five years ago, debate raged. Measuring around six metres from snout to tail, Chomper is huge — but only about half the length of an adult *T. rex*.

Some experts argued that it was actually a lesser-known, and possibly less marketable, species known as *Nanotyrannus*.

Dr Nick Longrich, from University of Bath, argued in a study published earlier this month that similar skeletons were clearly *Nanotyrannus* and not immature examples of *T. rex*. “In the same way that kittens look like cats and puppies look like dogs, the juveniles of different tyrannosaurs are distinctive,” he said. “And a *Nanotyrannus* just doesn’t look anything like a *T. rex*.”

Even the biggest *T. rex* has shorter arms and smaller claws than *Nanotyrannus*, he said, explaining that the bones do not typically shrink with age. “This was an animal where the arms were actually pretty formidable weapons,” he added.



According to Dr Nick Longrich, the arms of the dinosaur mark it out as *Nanotyrannus*
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“It’s really just a completely different animal — small, fast, agile. *T. rex* relied on size and strength, but this animal relied on speed.”

Pete Larson, a fossil expert, put forward a similar argument on a TV documentary made when Chomper was excavated. It was “a wonderful fossil ... a once-in-ten-lifetimes find”, Larson said, but he did not think it was a *T. rex*.

“You have a group of scientists that say it’s a juvenile *T. rex* and you have a group of scientists that say it’s a *Nanotyrannus*,” he told the New York Times in a separate interview. “So they’ll go with the one that makes more money.”

Professor Thomas Carr, from Carthage College, disagrees. He believes that the sellers are describing Chomper correctly but he is opposed to it being sold on the open market, because important fossils are increasingly disappearing into the vaults of tycoons.

Juvenile specimens are especially rare, he said. “Such a fossil should never be offered on the open market because it could be utterly lost to private ownership.”

The super-wealthy have been intrigued by dinosaurs since at least the Gilded Age of the 19th century, when JP Morgan, John D Rockefeller and other American tycoons funded fossil digs. More recently, celebrities have tussled over them. Nicholas Cage outbid Leonardo DiCaprio for a skull of *Tyrannosaurus bataar*— another *T. rex* relative — at a Beverly Hills auction in 2007.



Chomper is a particularly well-preserved specimen, which experts fear will land in a private collection

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Carr argues that since then, auctioneers have increased their focus on marketing fossils as trophy assets. A *T. rex* skeleton called Trinity, made from the bones of three separate creatures and the first auctioned in Europe, sold for \$6.1 million last summer. The buyer's identity remains secret. In 2020, a buyer paid a record-breaking \$31.8 million for another *T. rex*, known as Stan. Eighteen months later it emerged that the skeleton was heading to Abu Dhabi to go on display in a new natural history museum, opening next year.

“Dinosaur fossils, especially those of *T. rex*, are sold for unreasonable sums of money that museums and other public trusts often simply cannot afford, and so we see the continued haemorrhage of dinosaur fossils into private ownership,” Carr said. “It’s an unacceptable situation because the fossils are the data, and we need high sample sizes — 75 to 100 skeletons — to nail down such straightforward things as, for example, sexual dimorphism.”

Professor Steve Brusatte, of the University of Edinburgh, said he could not offer an opinion on whether Chomper was a *Nanotyrannus*, having not studied the skeleton. But he said: “I think the weight of current evidence is in favour of these smaller tyrannosaurs being teenage *T. rex* rather than a separate species, but new fossils could change my opinion.”

He agreed that “it would be a great shame if this skeleton ended up in the hands of an oligarch and not in a museum where it could be conserved, studied and put on display to inspire kids and families”.

He added: “I always hope for the best. In the late 1990s a famous *T. rex* known as Sue went up for auction and it found its way to the Field Museum in Chicago, near by to where I grew up. Visiting that museum and gawking over that fossil were so instrumental in me becoming a palaeontologist. With hindsight, I shudder to think how my life would have been different if that skeleton was purchased by some rich guy and not my local museum.”

Salomon Aaron, director of the David Aaron gallery, which is selling Chomper, said: “Based on our research and consultation with palaeontologists, we decided to describe Chomper as a juvenile *T. rex*. But I do not believe the attribution has an impact on price because in either respect it is a magnificently complete, beautifully preserved and extremely rare specimen.”

He said the gallery had a “strong preference” for the specimen to be bought by a museum, adding: “We hope the private collectors we cultivate will become patrons of science museums.”
