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An overlooked but invalid senior synonym of *Chamaeleo monachus* Gray, 1865 (Squamata: Chamaeleonidae)

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Abstract. We report on the discovery of a chamaeleonid type specimen in the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) collection: *Chamaeleon verrucosus* Blyth, 1853. This name is a senior synonym of *Chamaeleo monachus* Gray, 1865, and at the same time a junior homonym of *Chamaeleo verrucosus* Cuvier, 1829. We argue that in order to serve stability, Blyth's name should be regarded as a nomen oblitum.

Key words. Reptilia, Sauria, Chamaeleonidae, synonymy, homonymy; Socotra Island.

Arguably, the most important historical collection of herpetofauna from Asia is that of the Zoological Survey of India (hereafter, ZSI), with its headquarters in Calcutta (see Das et al. 1998, for a historical account of the institution). Being the inheritor of the zoological collections of the Museum of the Asiatic Society, and subsequently, the Indian Museum, the materials in the care of the ZSI date back to the early 1800s. Of numerous naturalists employed or associated in other ways with the Museum, perhaps the most remarkable was Edward Blyth (1810–1873), an English natural historian employed as the first curator between 1841–1863. Essentially a museum curator who did relatively little field work himself, Blyth encouraged members to collect zoological and palaeontological objects for the museum, and specimens started to arrive from every part of the British Indian Empire and far beyond, including the Middle East, Africa, North America, central Asia, Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, and eastern China.

Blyth (1853: 626) described “a species of *Chamaeleon* in the Society's old collection, the origin of which is unknown, but it would appear to be undescribed. It would seem to be most nearly affined to *C. cucullatus* Gray, and has the occipital flaps of both that species and *C. delepis* (sic!), Leach.

C. verrucosus, nobis. Body minutely tuberculated, with larger tubercles interspersed throughout. The latter are smaller and contrast less strongly on the limbs and tail, and are more thickly set upon the limbs. Ridges of the back and throat serrated, the tubercles becoming smaller towards and upon the tail. Beneath, the tail is smooth, though tending to exhibit a slight serrature towards its base. Superciliary ridges not uniting together, either before or behind; and a small medial occipital ridge continued to the base of two lateral flaps or lappets of skin. Colour of the specimen blanched; but there is a strongly marked black streak proceeding backwards from the axilla, and surmounted by a white streak, the two occupying the space which may be concealed behind the humerus. Length 11 3/4 in., of which the tail is 6 in. Hab. unknown.”

This description which we are reproducing here in full length (due to its limited availability in many libraries) has been overlooked by all subsequent workers, and the reference is therefore also lacking in the recent checklist by Klaver & Böhme (1997).

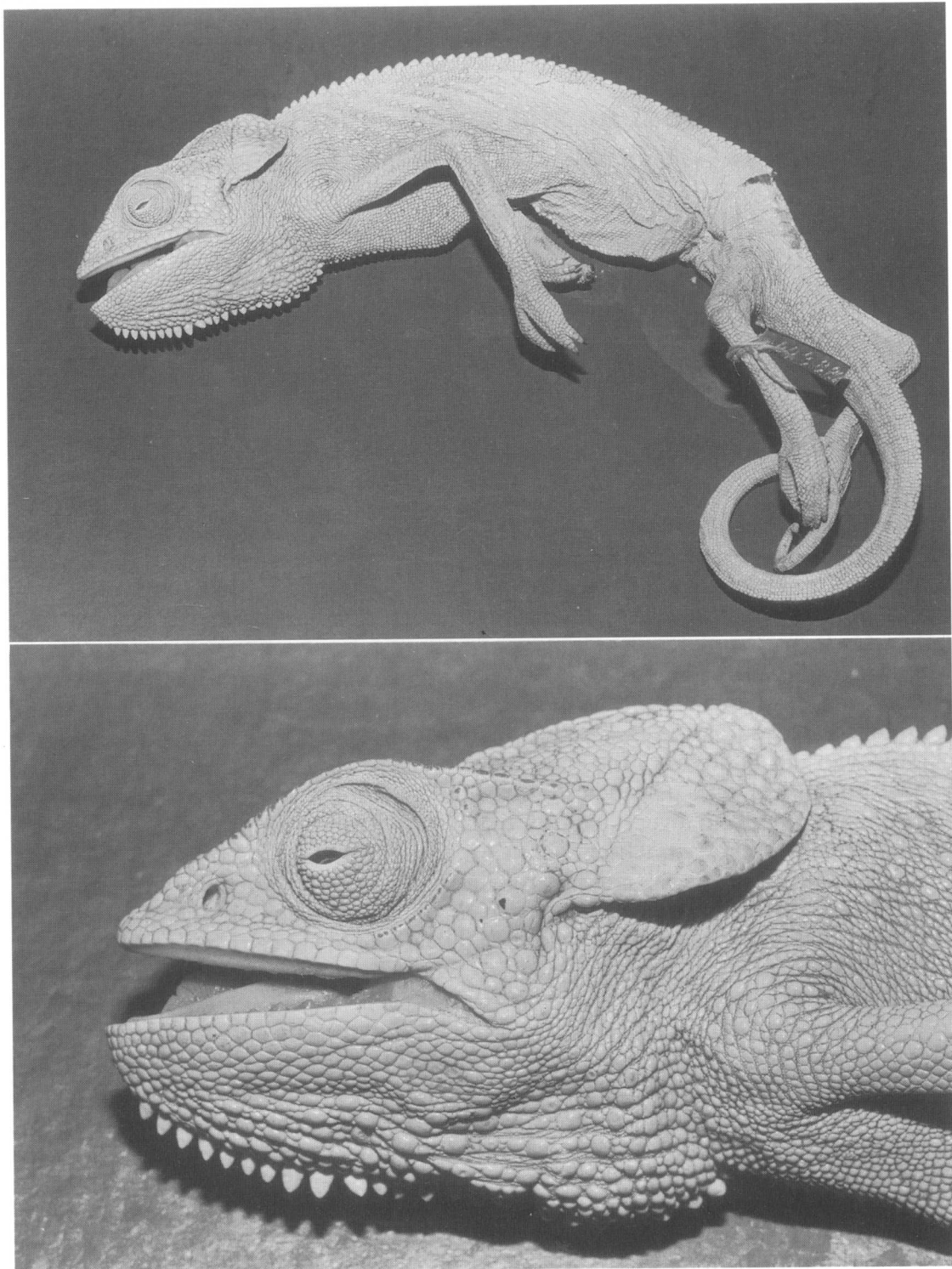


Fig. 1. Holotype (ZSI 6839) of *Chamaeleon verrucosus* Blyth, 1853. Lateral view of entire specimen (above) and of head (below).

The combination of characters given in the original description allows to assume that neither a Madagascan nor a mainland African species is concerned. Thanks to the recovery of the holotype (ZSI 6839, snout-vent length of 139.5 mm, a tail length of 154.9 mm, a head width of 18.7 mm: Fig. 1) by the second author, it became possible to support this assumption and to verify the identity of Blyth's name. It actually refers to the only chamaeleonid species inhabiting Socotra Island (Republic of Yemen, although originally believed to be Madagascan by Gray [1865: 470], i.e. the endemic *Chamaeleo monachus* Gray, 1865 based on the specimen BM 1946.8.21.98 (Fig. 2)] (cf. Klaver & Böhme 1997: 35).

Fortunately, this does not constitute any nomenclatural threat to *C. monachus* Gray, 1865: *Chamaeleon verrucosus* Blyth, 1853 is a junior primary homonym of *Chamaeleo verrucosus* Cuvier, 1829 which refers to a Madagascan species now termed *Furcifer verrucosus* (Cuvier, 1829) (see Klaver & Böhme 1986: 59, 1997: 21). Accordingly, Blyth's name of 1853 is invalid and consequently, there is no need to replace the junior homonym of *C. verrucosus* Cuvier, 1829 by a nomen novum. The latter name has been in extensive use since its first erection, e.g. Boettger (1877: 39), Blanford (1881: 464), Boulenger (1887: 451, 1903: 87), Mocquard (1893: 6, 1894: 114), Werner (1902: 344, 1911: 14), Steindachner (1903: 14), Hillenius (1959: 52), Mertens (1966: 20), Klaver (1977: 184, 1981: 43), Klaver & Böhme (1986: 59, 1997: 35), and Showler (1994: 10, 1996: 185).



Fig. 2. Holotype (BM 1946.8.21.98) of *Chamaeleo monachus* Gray, 1865. Drawing from the original description: Gray 1865.

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