

FORUM

SELYS' LEGIONS ...

INTRODUCTION

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In his paper on damselflies in amber, Bechly (1998) argued that the long-standing practice of regarding the "Légions" of Edmond de Sélys Longchamps as the basis from which to derive a number of family-group names under Sélys' authorship, is invalid. As an example, he cites the case of Légion Euphaea, and rejects the family-group name Euphaeidae in favour of Epallagidae.

This position elicited a number of reactions, and it soon appeared that two "schools of thought" face each other: one favours a strictly formal interpretation of the provisions of the Code of Zoological Nomenclature (but see the provisions of the fourth edition of 1999) in considering the légions as equivalent to generic designations, another one that argues that the légions are both suprageneric designations, and fulfill the requirements of the Code by inference. It follows that the name of Sélys should be attached to the modern family-group names derived from them.

In the next few pages, both points of view will be exposed in detail, by Günther Bechly and by John Trueman.

Here, and by way of introduction, I offer some background on Sélys' thinking.

Sélys' system of the Odonata

A convenient point to start is the *Monographie des Caloptérygines* of 1854, co-authored by Sélys and Hermann Hagen. It is one of Sélys early major works, and one in which the use of the concept of "légions" is prominent, but it is also clear that he never substantially changed his position. Almost forty years later, he still refers to the same "légions" (e.g. Sélys, 1889).

What should we understand by this term? From the start, it is of interest to attract attention to a discrepancy in Sélys' use of the term as compared to mainstream taxonomy. In fact, he inverted the meaning of the categories "legion" and "tribus" (Table 1), a legio being situated between subordinal and superfamily rank, and a tribus between subfamily and generic rank (Poche, 1911, 1912; Handlirsch, 1925).

With this adjustment in mind, his system was fully consistent, however, even if a certain diffidence for using higher hierarchical categories was apparent. Thus, he considered the Odonata as a suborder of the Orthoptera, composed of two “tribes”, the Anisoptera and the Zygoptera. But tribe Zygoptera was believed to be represented by only a single family, the Agrionidae, with two subfamilies, the Agrioninae and Calopteryginae. Having thus used up the suffix —inae at a level that would currently be ranked at that of a superfamily or infra-order, Sélys clearly ran out of latinized endings, and resorted to clarifying his taxonomic intentions in French. As can be seen from the analytical tables in the *Monographie des Caloptérygines*, he had some problems in “cramming” his numerous below-family categories under suitable names. He used modern generic notation as well for sub-genus (corresponding to most modern genera), as for genus (corresponding to anything from genus to family), and for légion (corresponding to today’s families and even superfamilies). In fact, he used four categories between species and legion: the species-group, subgenus, genus and cohorts (another category that, in mainstream taxonomic hierarchies, is situated at the suprafamily level). To distinguish supra-generic from generic categories, he used the French plural (thus, légion *des Calopteryx*, as opposed to genre *Calopteryx*). He could of course have used an ending in —ini, but his purpose was clarity and consistency, and his French-language system provided this to perfection.

Table 1. Taxonomic hierarchy system, with approximate equivalences indicated and discrepancies in use of terms highlighted.

According to Handlirsch, 1925	According to Sélys & Hagen (1854)
Superordo	
Ordo	Ordo
Subordo	Subordo (Odonata)
Infraordo	
Superlegio	
Legio	Tribus (Anisoptera and Zygoptera)
Sublegio	
Supercohors	
Cohors	
Subcohors	
Superfamilia	
Familia	Familia (Agrionidae)
Subfamilia	Subfamilia (Agrioninae and Calopteryginae)
Supertribus	Divisio
	Subdivisio
	Sectio
Tribus	Legio
Subtribus	Cohors
Supergenus	Genus
Genus	Subgenus
Subgenus	Species-group

Hereafter, John Trueman and Gunther Bechly agree on at least this point: nomenclatorial rules simply did not exist in the days of Sélys and Hagen, and therefore it would be unfair on our account to hold any non-conformity with present-day rules against them. That this is about the only point on which both agree perhaps only reflects that the code of zoological nomenclature is a valuable yet imperfect and evolving instrument. In fact, at the time this text was about to go to press, the fourth edition of the International Code on Zoological Nomenclature (1999) was published. It now contains several clarifications regarding the validity of family-group names which are likely to settle the dispute. In particular, article 11.7.2 (p. 13) explicitly accepts vernacular names (an example of a French term for family is given) as valid family-group names, provided they have been widely accepted as the valid name for a given family and they were published before 1900. I have little doubt that this applies to the case of Sélys' legions...

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