



Felix Cornu (1882–1909): Staggering Career of a Mineralogist, the Founder of Colloidal Chemistry in Geology

*1882 Praha – †1909 Leoben

Native to Prague, Felix Cornu (*Dec. 26, 1882) was coming from the family of a professor of Roman philosophy Julius Cornu at the university in Prague, who was of Swiss origin.

As a boy, F. Cornu was brought up in the family of his mother's grandfather A. Klukauf at Stadice in the České středohoří Mts. He completed his studies at the secondary grammar school in Prague in 1902, after moving of his family to Litoměřice. He got addressed by mineralogy already in his young age by the grand-grandfather's collection of minerals and by the charming environment of the České středohoří Mts. His fortunate decision to take up mineralogy was also encouraged by the counsellor J. Frieser, his neighbour in Litoměřice, mineral connoisseur and collector, and the president of the supreme court. In the course of his studies at the secondary grammar school, F. Cornu grew from a mineral lover and collector to an outstanding expert, a scientist having his own laboratory and performing extensive mineral trading, with wide professional contacts including international ones. The scientific background was lying in his contacts with Prof. A. Pelikan in Prague. A better prepared student for university education could be hardly thought of.

F. Cornu graduated in Vienna, where he was attracted by the renowned names of professors like G. Tschermak, F. Becke and others, excellent laboratory equipment, libraries as well as the Mineralogical Society bringing together mineralogists of the same deep interests. Being motivated by this creative environment, he received his doctorate in philosophy within only four years (1907). Later, he worked as a demonstrator for Prof. F. Becke (also a native to Prague) and soon obtained the position of an assistant at the Montanische Hochschule university in Leoben. In the same year, he became a private associate professor in mineralogy, petrography and geology of mineral deposits. He was systematically visiting and studying important mineralogical sites in Europe: Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, and also participated in the expedition to the Faeroe Islands. He was, however, always returning to the hub of safety and concentrated interest – to the region of his beloved České středohoří Mts. Here, he systematically studied the phonolite laccolith of Mariánská hora Hill in Ústí nad Labem, its xenoliths and vesicle-filling minerals, with special reference to zeolite occurrences. Cornu named the garnet hydrogrossular from this locality hibschite to commemorate his model professional and human – Prof. J.E. Hibsche from Děčín. Based on his research of zeolites from the České středohoří Mts., he specified the rule governing the increasing proportion of water in zeolites with decreasing temperature of their crystallization, later called the Reuss–Cornu Rule.

Cornu was rapidly becoming scientifically mature, concentrating on a field newly implemented into mineralogy – the field of non-crystalline (amorphous) minerals. This gave rise to a newly developing area – colloidal chemistry. With his pioneering study of gels and their role in the natural circulation, Cornu became the founder of the discipline of colloidal geochemistry (Gelgeographie) with significant application especially in pedology.

F. Cornu was publishing one paper after another. In only 7 years, he became the author of more than 60 scientific studies. He was, however, completely exhausted by the strenuous mental work and died unexpectedly on September 23, 1909 in Leoben. The factor contributing to his passing away was his overworking, combined with the fateful life problems of a young heart. The tragedy occurred at the time of incipient public appreciation of scientific merits of this – only 27 years old – scientist by the offer of professorship at the university of Czernowitz or even at Leoben.

The memorial book published by his grieved mother (1923) about her unforgettable son and scientist became a mere subtle reminder of the existence of this sensitive young man and his exceptional work. Let us depart from Felix Cornu with our remembering of the eternal, steady, inexorable course of natural processes *Panta rhei*, which was so deeply understood by Cornu himself in particular.

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